

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Four, Number One

On Practicing Theory: Some Remarks on Adrian Johnston's *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*

Fabio Vighi – Cardiff University, UK

In his impressive new book *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009), Adrian Johnston surveys the notion of radical change as it intersects the fields of philosophy and politics in the works of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with Badiou and the second with Žižek. Each part contains two chapters, whose task is to focus on the concepts of the event and the act respectively in order to unravel their potential for a transformative politics. One immediately evident strength of the book is the pervasiveness of the comparative dimension, i.e. the fact that the axis Badiou-Žižek is never abandoned: one thinker's stance is consistently measured against the other's. What is thereby affirmed is the necessity of an enquiry into concepts that are crucial for the two philosophers' *common* aspiration to re-politicise theory. Further to its core parts, Johnston's book presents two appendixes. The first is a reply to Žižek's reading of Chapter 1 of the book ('Badiou: Notes From an Ongoing Debate'). The second is a long text by Slavoj Žižek himself who answers two questions raised by Johnston in a recent interview. If there is a minor structural glitch to this volume, it is its being largely based on modified versions of previously published materials, which is conducive to the odd repetition and inconsistency.

In this book, as in previous ones, Johnston proves to be a human encyclopaedia of Žižekian (and here also Badiouian) literature. He is simply brilliant at gathering evidence for

philosophical statements which, taken out of context, often appear ambiguous. Whilst asking exegetic questions about the extent of Badiou's and Žižek's indebtedness to Lacan and other thinkers, he meticulously traces the genealogy of the key notions at stake. Furthermore, his explanatory skills are sophisticated and thought-provoking in their own right. Indeed, Johnston poses all the *right*, i.e. disturbing, questions to Badiou's and Žižek's speculative systems. Early evidence for this can be found in one of the epigraphs he uses for his 'Preface', which is taken from Lenin's 1901 pamphlet 'Where to Begin'; its final part reads: 'We must go our own way, and we must steadfastly carry on our regular work, and the less our reliance on the unexpected, the less the chance of being caught unawares by any "historic turns"'. The emphasis on avoiding the 'reliance on the unexpected' is central to Johnston's critique of the emancipatory potential in both Badiou's and Žižek's politics. In what follows I shall briefly explore the key aspects of Johnston's analysis while focusing especially on his assessment of Žižek.

1.

To start with, Johnston claims that the significance of these two philosophers' political commitments, in an age when revolutionary politics has lost its appeal, can be grasped via a return to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. The "weak messianism" encompassed by those famous theses originates in the orientation towards a future event, unforeseen and "miraculous", that might trigger a retroactive redemption of history's "lost causes". It is this finely nuanced messianism that is so dominant a feature in both Badiou's notion of the event and Žižek's notion of the act. If the death-knell for dialectical materialism has long sounded, making confidence in achieving global classless society through class struggle hopelessly obsolete, then Benjamin might help to strike a balance between old dialectical temptations and renewed hopes of redemption, in so far as they remain dependent on retroactive powers of 'unpredictable futurity' (xvii). While Johnston, as he shows in other parts of his book, remains sceptical about the political import of an "*après-coup* politics", at the same time he is adamant that Hegelo-Marxist dialectics are well and truly defunct. Here perhaps we encounter the first point of contention: in fully endorsing the move away from the utopian goal of traditional Marxism-Leninism, with its emphasis on the sublating movement of class struggle eventually leading to the ideal communist society, is Johnston not over-hastily abandoning the political potential of dialectics tout court?

Johnston's general argument here is that the two contemporary thinkers under his critical scrutiny are situated midway between inflexible Marxist orthodoxy and flexible revisionism (xxiv). We thus contend with two philosophers 'doing what philosophy has done best since Socrates: daring to raise questions about the existing order of things, to interrogate the status quo' (xxiv). In this respect, one should wholeheartedly endorse

Johnston's claim, linked to another quote from Lenin (*What is To Be Done?*), that 'organizing without relation to theorizing is worse than pointless' (xxiv). His approach to Badiou and Žižek is indeed based on the axiom that theory is absolutely indispensable if we are to retain a modicum of hope in radical change: reading Badiou and Žižek means holding faith in the transformative powers issuing from philosophy. However, as Johnston points out, we are dealing with a philosophy that 'will have mattered' (xxiv), in other words a subtly creative mode of thinking whose generative effects will only become apparent indirectly and retroactively, from a future viewpoint already destabilised by history's unpredictable "events". What seems to emerge here is, effectively, Johnston's reliance on the same speculative wisdom highlighted as central to both Badiou's and Žižek's political philosophies, i.e. an "*après-coup* politics".

On the one hand Johnston holds that the political philosophies of the two thinkers will at some unpredictable point come in handy (this being his book's wager); on the other hand he states that the central critical thesis of his enquiry into the "transformative" notions of the event and the act is that these notions risk 'discouraging in advance' the transformative politics 'they so ardently desire' (xxviii). How to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory claims? More precisely: is Johnston, in his critique, not following the same argumentative line effectively prescribed by Badiou and Žižek, in as much as they tell us something like "we know and can unveil for you what's wrong with today's world, but please don't ask us what needs to be done now, since our politics are tied to the unpredictability of a future event/act"? As we shall see, Johnston is fully aware of this potential contradiction and tackles it directly in the course of his book.

But let us briefly expand on the above key point. The moment we accept the idea that the act (or the event) emerges *ex-nihilo*, out of nowhere in the ontic field and independently of our conscious interventions, we are obliged to rely on a theory that speculates on the necessity to intervene politically after the f(act). The risk, to put it bluntly, is that we get stuck in a somewhat fetishistic use of critical theory that, while referring to its own transformative potential, it links that potential solely to the questions it raises vis-à-vis the symptomatic points of the existing ideological constellations it disturbs. There is no doubt that this task should be treasured as the epochal contribution of both Badiou's and Žižek's philosophies. At the same time, however, it is perhaps worth asking if, given the apocalyptic scenarios that are looming large on the horizon, the time has not come to "dare again" in directly short-circuiting the ontic and the ontological, i.e. the historical situation and a theory that might operate at the level of what in Freudian psychoanalysis is known as "creative sublimation". Although any such theory would be foolish to seek a direct practical implementation, it will nevertheless constitute the necessary foundations of any "organising", in the proper Leninist sense.

2.

Let us take two central critical points argued by Johnston. First, the criticism of Žižek's stance on ideology which emerges from Chapter 3, entitled 'The Cynic's Fetish: Žižek and the Dynamics of Belief'. Half-way through this chapter, after carefully delineating Žižek's notion of fetishistic disavowal in connection with ideological belief (or ideological fantasy), he asks: 'how can people be cured of commodity fetishism? All anti-capitalist modes of praxis should conduct themselves as responses to the challenge of this vexing difficulty. Discerning the means by which to bring about this cure is precisely what must be done today' (101). In the next section of the same chapter, Johnston shrewdly suggests that Žižek's blend of pessimism and optimism regarding the current constellation could be pinned down precisely as an instance of fetishistic disavowal, i.e. as a way for him to be 'a nonbeliever in the capitalist system' (109). If this was the case, Žižek would rely on the fetishistic combination of Marx's critique of capitalism and Lacan's theorisation of the act in order to perpetuate his cynicism. Chapter 3 ends with the following line: 'the danger is that the very analyses developed by Žižek in his assault upon late-capitalist ideology might serve to facilitate the sustenance of the cynical distance whose underlying complicity with the current state of affairs he describes so well' (126). As an inevitable consequence of this reasoning, Johnston is puzzled as to the legitimacy of Žižek's Marxist legacy. The fact that Žižek's theory of fetishistic disavowal can be turned against himself can only lead to such disillusionment.

Another philosophical concept thoroughly scrutinised by Johnston and common to both Badiou and Žižek is that of subtraction. The overall verdict here is that, although Žižek's version of subtraction might appear more useful than the Badiouian one in respect of a factually grounded political programme, ultimately his recent call for inaction is equivalent to a politics that is dead on arrival. The conclusion of Chapter 4 ('From the Spectacular Act to the Vanishing Act'), suggests that Žižek's practice of subtraction might be a case of what Lacan called a vanishing act *qua* act proper: 'a modest but nonetheless revolutionary vanishing act as an auto-erasing moment that generates true change precisely through quietly receding into the background. And Žižek himself, in his practice, provides an exemplary example of just this sort of vanishing analytic act' (159). Like the Lacanian analyst, Johnston argues, Žižek's refusal to put forward a concrete proposal for a (future) non-capitalist politics creates the conditions for his transferential partners (his audience) to come up with their own (revolutionary) fictions. Ingenious as this reading may be, its theoretical self-referentiality (the idea that Žižek's theory is aimed at creating the conditions for its own external fulfilment) risks obfuscating what in my opinion is truly at stake in Žižek, i.e. the necessity of the dialectical move from subtraction (the required disconnection from the capitalist discourse) to a creative theoretical intervention that dares to try to reconfigure the social space.

3.

Throughout his book Johnston concerns himself with “pre-evental politics”. One must engage in practical actions and yet be ready for the “big act”; what this means is that ‘the practitioner of a politics of minimal differences be prepared to leap (often as a sort of leap of faith) from theoretical assessment to practical intervention when the opening for revolutionarily forcing through a “premature” system destabilizing dysfunction seems suddenly to present itself’ (165). Žižek, Johnston claims, has now abandoned his early emphasis on the Lacanian act and admitted the necessity for a “pre-evental discipline of time” (Johnston’s own definition). He has moved away ‘from a celebration of the act as an unforeseen, out-of-nowhere miracle’ and has embraced a more ‘sober and atheistic Marxist-Leninist understanding of effective revolutionary interventions as non-miraculous points of culmination condensing a combination of preceding arduous intellectual and practical work with the unpredictable workings of intra-situational chance and contingencies’ (167). However, to what extent does this prescriptive kind of politics finely balanced between theory and practice address the real problem with Žižek?

To conclude, then, my main reservations apropos Johnston’s analysis of Žižek’s politics can be summed up with the following question: what if Johnston, taking as his central political reference the quandary of the act, accords too much importance to the old dilemma of the gap between theory and practice – and consequently to the difference between action and act? What if this is by definition a false problem? We should first acknowledge, with Johnston, that Žižek contends that the dichotomy between theory and practice is unbridgeable, it requires a *salto mortale* which cannot be theorised (included in theory) in advance. Similarly, the difference between a conscious, strategic political action and the “madness” of the act cannot be discerned by theory, it remains available only to those who are engaged in a given practical project. However, I would argue that what is at stake in Žižek’s theoretical edifice is something different, often unacknowledged by Žižek himself, in as much as it concerns theory and not its relation to practice. That is to say, it concerns the necessity for theory to accomplish an act that is internal to theory itself, namely an act of creative sublimation which confronts the constitutive deadlock of knowledge.

The argument that the creative moment must await the “liberation of thought” through successful subtraction, or the unpredictable explosion of an event which is always at least minimally detached from its registration in a meaningful knowledge, is ultimately self-defeating for at least two reasons: 1) the state of subtraction is increasingly immanent to our social experience – there are millions of people who are literally disconnected from the capitalist logic of production and consumption, not only outside but also, increasingly, inside Empire; in other words, the future has already arrived 2) by definition, a political theory that

does not include “seeds of the future” by defying the material and ideological framework from which it speaks, cannot even dream to connect with empirical reality in the struggle for radical emancipation. The only chance emancipatory thought has to survive when deprived of its last pockets of active resistance is to perform a short-circuit between its subtraction and its radical re-invention: the urge to subtract, or the necessity of the act/event, must coincide with a creative, even visionary drive which dares to “think (what from our perspective seems) the impossible”.