

# BADIOU & ŽIŽEK

Philosophy in the Present



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Philosophy  
in the Present

ALAIN BADIOU and SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Edited by Peter Engelmann

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polity

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## Editor's Preface

The former French President François Mitterrand was known for inviting philosophers to the Elysée during his period in office in order to discuss political and social questions. He thus positioned himself in a long tradition in which enlightened power sought to come closer to the philosophers and to draw legitimacy from this proximity. We do not know whether or not these meetings influenced Mitterrand's political decisions, but at least he has remained in our memory as an intellectual president.

Whether their advice is earnestly sought or they are only used as decoration or intellectual cover, in reality the invited intellectuals usually don't come out of such performances particularly well. Nevertheless, being invited to the tables of power seems to exercise a great attraction for them.

The times when what philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir or Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault or Jean-François Lyotard had to say about contemporary events, or the suggestions they would make for the improvement of things, were regarded as important, belong to the past. Today, even the impersonators of philosophers who displaced philosophers in the 1970s have themselves been replaced by entertainers and models, by footballers and boxers.

We might therefore be tempted to speak of a golden age when the opinion of philosophers still seemed to count; but were they really better times?

It was not after all very long ago that we talked about what the role of the philosopher Karl Marx had been in the totalitarian regime of

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the Soviet bloc. Wasn't the mass murder Pol Pot an intellectual educated in Paris? How many people were humiliated, expelled and murdered during the Chinese Cultural Revolution?

The question that governs this book, whether the philosopher should take part in contemporary events and comment on them, is the question regarding the role of intellectuals in our society, treated in a philosophically specific fashion. It no longer suffices to answer that the philosophers should not only interpret the world, but rather change it.

The answer to this question today must take into account two extremes. On the one hand, the participation of intellectuals in the crimes of the twentieth century weighs heavily on the self-understanding of this social group, at least insofar as it maintains a practical memory of history. On the other hand, we could ask ourselves if we really get a good deal if we let models, presenters, sportspeople and similar groups occupy the position of the intellectual in our contemporary media society.

The answers of the Parisian philosopher Alain Badiou and the Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek during their discussion of this theme in Vienna 2004 turned out to be more modest and more sceptical than one might perhaps expect from philosophers. Instead of taking refuge in an old glory that has long since become historically obsolete, they try instead to recall the specific quality of philosophical thought and derive their answers from that.

Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have known and esteemed one another for a long time. Slavoj Žižek was continually proposing Alain Badiou for the Passagen publishing programme. Badiou, for his part, has been helping to translate Žižek's work into French. Both know what the other will say and how he will argue, at least in

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broad outlines. They are not in agreement about important philosophical concepts and notions, as they affirm once again in this discussion. That is the case regarding their concepts of event and the Real, but also for their understanding of the role of the imaginary or of politics. On the other hand, they agree that philosophical engagement must result out of the specificity of philosophical thought and should also establish its limits in this sense.

We owe the idea of this book to the initiative of François Laquieze, the former director of the French Cultural Institute in Vienna, who invited Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek to Vienna for a public discussion. His partner in this initiative was Vincenc Rajšp, director of the Slovenian Scientific Institute in Vienna. The only specification was the theme; everything else was open to discussion, which was moderated by the Viennese journalist Claus Philipp.

During his time in Vienna, François Laquieze provided much stimulus to the exchange between French and German-language culture, and imparted a new vitality to the Institut Français of Vienna that is still observable in the city today. Above all, he was not afraid to complement the usual programme of cultural institutes with substantial contributions of contemporary thought and philosophy. We are in his debt.

We have avoided polishing the texts for publication. We consciously wanted to maintain the spontaneous character and not to distort the spoken word into a systematically grounded and articulated thought-structure. The book should, rather, stimulate contradiction, thought and further reading.

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Perhaps Žižek is right that philosophy is not a dialogue.  
Philosophical discussion is nevertheless always stimulating, as the  
presentation and now this book demonstrate.

PETER ENGELMANN

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## Thinking the Event

ALAIN BADIOU

Tonight, we are asking ourselves: to what extent does philosophy intervene in the present, in historical and political questions? And in the end, what is the nature of this intervention? Why should the philosopher be called to intervene in questions regarding the present? We - Slavoj Žižek and I - are going to introduce this problem, and then discuss it. We are in agreement on many things, so we can't promise you a bloody battle. But we'll see what we can do.

There is a first, false idea that needs to be set aside, which is that the philosopher can talk about everything. This idea is exemplified by the TV philosopher: he talks about society's problems, the problems of the present, and so on. Why is this idea false? Because the philosopher constructs his own problems, he is an inventor of problems, which is to say he is not someone who can be asked on television, night after night, what he thinks about what's going on. A genuine philosopher is someone who decides on his own account what the important problems are, someone who proposes new problems for everyone. Philosophy is first and foremost this: the invention of new problems.

It follows that the philosopher intervenes when in the situation - whether historical, political, artistic, amorous, scientific ... - there are things that appear to him as signs, signs that it is necessary to invent a new problem. That's the point, the philosopher intervenes when he finds, in the present, the signs that point to the need for a new problem, a new invention. The question then becomes: on what conditions does the philosopher find, in the situation, the signs for a new problem, for a new thought? It is with regard to this point, and

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in order to lay out the grounds for our discussion, that I want to introduce the expression 'philosophical situation'. All sorts of things happen in the world, but not all of them are situations for philosophy, philosophical situations. So I would like us to ask the following question: what is a situation that is really a situation for philosophy, a situation for philosophical thought? I am going to offer you three examples, three examples of philosophical situations, in order to give you some grasp of what I am referring to.

The first example is already, if I can put it like this, philosophically formatted. It can be found in Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*. This dialogue presents the extremely brutal encounter between Socrates and Calicles. This encounter creates a philosophical situation, which, moreover, is set out in an entirely theatrical fashion. Why? Because the thought of Socrates and that of Calicles share no common measure, they are totally foreign to one another. The discussion between Calicles and Socrates is written by Plato so as to make us understand what it means for there to be two different kinds of thought which, like the diagonal and the side of a square, remain incommensurable. This discussion amounts to a relation between two terms devoid of any relation. Calicles argues that might is right, that the happy man is a tyrant - the one who prevails over others through cunning and violence. Socrates on the contrary maintains that the true man, who is the same as the happy man, is the Just, in the philosophical sense of the term. Between justice as violence and justice as thought there is no simple opposition, of the kind that could be dealt with by means of arguments covered by a common norm. There is a lack of any real relation. Therefore the discussion is not a discussion; it is a confrontation. And what becomes clear to any reader of the text is not that one interlocutor will convince the other, but that there will be a victor and a vanquished. This is after all what explains why Socrates' methods in third dialogue are hardly

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fairer than those of Callicles. Wanting the ends means wanting the means, and it is a matter of winning, especially of winning in the eyes of the young men who witness the scene.

In the end, Callicles is defeated. He doesn't acknowledge defeat, but shuts up and remains in his corner. Note that he is the vanquished in a dialogue staged by Plato. This is probably one of the rare occurrences when someone like Callicles is the vanquished. Such are the joys of the theatre.

Faced with this situation, what is philosophy? The sole task of philosophy is to show that we must choose. We must choose between these two types of thought. We must decide whether we want to be on the side of Socrates or on the side of Callicles. In this example, philosophy confronts thinking as choice, thinking as decision. Its proper task is to elucidate choice. So that we can say the following: a philosophical situation consists in the moment when a choice is elucidated. A choice of existence or a choice of thought.

Second example: the death of the mathematician Archimedes. Archimedes is one of the greatest minds ever known to humanity. To this day, we are taken aback by his mathematical texts. He has already reflected on the infinite, and had practically invented infinitesimal calculus twenty centuries before Newton. He was an exceptional genius.

Archimedes was a Greek from Sicily. When Sicily was invaded and occupied by the Romans, he took part in the resistance, inventing new war machines - but the Romans eventually prevailed.

At the beginning of the Roman occupation, Archimedes resumed his activities. He was in the habit of drawing geometric figures on the sand. One day, as he sits thinking at the sea's edge, reflecting on the complicated figures he'd drawn on the shore, a Roman soldier

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arrives, a sort of courier, telling him that the Roman General Marcellus wishes to see him. The Romans were very curious about Greek scientists, a little like the CEO of a multinational cosmetics corporation might be curious about a philosopher of renown. So, General Marcellus wants to see Archimedes. Between us, I don't think we can imagine that General Marcellus was well up on mathematics. Simply, and this curiosity is a credit to him, he wanted to see what an insurgent of Archimedes' calibre was like. Whence the courier sent to the shore. But Archimedes doesn't budge. The soldier repeats: 'General Marcellus wishes to see you.' Archimedes still doesn't reply. The Roman soldier, who probably didn't have any great interest in mathematics either, doesn't understand how someone can ignore an order from General Marcellus. 'Archimedes! The General wishes to see you!' Archimedes barely looks up, and says to the soldier: 'Let me finish my demonstration.' And the soldier retorts: 'But Marcellus wants to see you! What do I care about your demonstration!' Without answering, Archimedes resumes his calculations. After a certain time, the soldier, by now absolutely furious, draws his sword and strikes him. Archimedes falls dead. His body effaces the geometrical figure in the sand.

Why is this a philosophical situation? Because it shows that between the right of the state and creative thought, especially the pure ontological thought embodied in mathematics, there is no common measure, no real discussion. In the end, power is violence, while the only constraints creative thought recognizes are its own immanent rules. When it comes to the law of his thought, Archimedes remains outside of the action of power. The temporality proper to the demonstration cannot integrate the urgent summons of military victors. That is why violence is eventually wrought, testifying that there is no common measure and no common chronology between the power of one side and the truths of the other. Truths as creation.



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Let's recall in passing that during the US army's occupation of the suburbs of Vienna, at the end of the Second World War, a GI killed, obviously without recognizing who he was, the greatest musical genius of the time, the composer Anton Webern.

An accident. An accidental philosophical situation.

We can say that between power and truths there is a distance: the distance between Marcellus and Archimedes. A distance which the courier - no doubt an obtuse but disciplined soldier - does not manage to cross. Philosophy's mission is here to shed light on this distance. It must reflect upon and think a distance without measure, or a distance whose measure philosophy itself must invent.

First definition of the philosophical situation: clarify the choice, the decision. Second definition of the philosophical situation: clarify the distance between power and truths.

My third example is a film. It is an astonishing film by the Japanese director Mizoguchi, entitled *The Crucified Lovers*. Without a doubt, it is one of the most beautiful films ever made about love. The plot can be easily summarized. The film is set in Japan's classical era, the visual qualities of which, especially when it comes to black and white, appear inexhaustible. A young woman is married to the owner of a small workshop, an honest man of comfortable means, but whom she neither loves nor desires. Enter a young man, one of her husband's employees, with whom she falls in love. But in this classical period, whose woman Mizoguchi celebrated both in their endurance and their misfortune, adultery is punished by death: the culprits must be crucified. The two lovers end up fleeing to the countryside. The sequence which depicts their flight into the forest, into the world of paths, cabins, lakes and boats, is truly extraordinary. Love, prey to its own power over this hunted and harassed couple, is enveloped in a nature as opaque as it is poetic.

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All the while, the honest husband tries to protect the runaways. Husbands have the duty to denounce adulterers, they abhor the idea of turning into their accomplices. Nevertheless, the husband - and this is proof indeed that he genuinely loves his wife - tries to gain time. He pretends that his wife has left for the provinces, to see some relatives ... A good, honest husband - really. A truly admirable character. But all the same, the lovers are denounced, captured, and taken to their torture.

There follow the film's final images, which constitute a new instance of the philosophical situation. The two lovers are tied back-to-back on a mule. The shot frames this image of the two bound lovers going to their atrocious death; both seem enraptured, but devoid of pathos: on their faces there is simply the hint of a smile, a kind of withdrawal into the smile. The word 'smile' here is only an approximation. Their faces reveal that the man and the woman exist entirely in their love. But the film's thought, embodied in the infinitely nuanced black and white of the faces, has nothing to do with the romantic idea of the fusion of love and death. These 'crucified loves' never desired to die. The shot says the very opposite: love is what resists death.

At a conference held at the Fémis, Deleuze, quoting Malraux, once said that art is what resists death. Well, in these magnificent shots, Mizoguchi's art not only resists death but leads us to think that love too resists death. This creates a complicity between love and art - one which in a sense we've always known about.

What I here name the 'smile' of the lovers, for a lack of a better word, is a philosophical situation. Why? Because in it we once again encounter something incommensurable, a relation without relation. Between the event of love (the turning upside down of existence) and the ordinary rules of live (the laws of the city, the laws of

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marriage) there is no common measure. What will philosophy tell us then? It will tell us that 'we must think the event'. We must think the exception. We must know what we have to say about what is not ordinary. We must think the transformation of life.

We can now sum up the tasks of philosophy with regard to situations.

First, to throw light on the fundamental choices of thought. 'In the last instance' (as Althusser would say) such choices are always between what is interested and what is disinterested.

Second, to throw light on the distance between thinking and power, between truths and the state. To measure this distance. To know whether or not it can be crossed.

Third, to throw light on the value of exception. The value of the event. The value of the break. And to do this against the continuity of life, against social conservatism.

These are the three great tasks of philosophy: to deal with choice, with distance and with the exception - at least if philosophy is to count for something in life, to be something other than an academic discipline.

At a deeper level, we can say that philosophy, faced with circumstances, looks for the link between three types of situation: the link between choice, distance and the exception. I argue that a philosophical concept, in the sense that Deleuze speaks of it, which is to say as a creation - is always what knots together a problem of choice (or decision), a problem of distance (or gap), and a problem of the exception (or event).

The most profound philosophical concepts tell us something like this: 'If you want your life to have some meaning, you must accept

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the event, you must remain at a distance from power, and you must be firm in your decision.' This is the story that philosophy is always telling us, under many different guises: to be in the exception, in the sense of the event, to keep one's distance from power, and to accept the consequences of a decision, however remote and difficult they may prove.

Understood in this way, and only in this way, philosophy really is that which helps existence to be changed.

Ever since Rimbaud, everyone repeats that 'the true life is absent'. Philosophy is not worth an hour's effort if it is not based on the idea that the true life is present. With regard to circumstances, the true life is present in the choice, in distance and in the event.

Nevertheless, on the side of circumstances, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are forced to make a selection in order to attain the thought of the true life. This selection is founded, as we have said, on the criterion of incommensurability.

What unites our three examples is the fact that they are founded on a relation between heterogeneous terms: Callicles and Socrates, the Roman soldier and Archimedes, the lovers and society.

The philosophical relationship to the situation stages the impossible relation, which takes the form of a story. We are told about the discussion between Callicles and Socrates, we are told about the murder of Archimedes, about the story of the crucified lovers. So, we hear the tale of a relation. But the story shows that this relation is not a relation, that it is the negation of relation. So that ultimately what we are told about is a break: a break of the established natural and social bond. But of course, in order to narrate a break, you first need to narrate a relation. But in the end, the story is the story of a break. Between Callicles and Socrates, one must choose. It will be

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necessary to break absolutely with one of the two. Similarly, if you side with Archimedes, you can no longer side with Marcellus. And if you follow the lovers in their journey to its very end, never again will you side with the conjugal rule.

So we can say that philosophy, which is the thought, not of what there is, but of what is not what there is (not of contracts, but of contracts broken), is exclusively interested in relations that are not relations.

Plato once said that philosophy is an awakening. And he knew perfectly well that awakening implies a difficult break with sleep. For Plato already, and for all time, philosophy is the seizure by thought of what breaks with the sleep of thought.

So it is legitimate to think that each time there is a paradoxical relation, that is, a relation which is not a relation, a situation of rupture, then philosophy can take place.

I insist on this point: it is not because there is 'something' that there is philosophy. Philosophy is not at all a reflection on anything whatsoever. There is philosophy, and there can be philosophy, because there are paradoxical relations, because there are breaks, decisions, distances, events.

We can throw some further light on this with examples which are neither legends, like the death of Archimedes, nor literary constructions, like the figure of Callicles, nor filmic poems, like the tale of the Japanese lovers. Let's take some good, simple contemporary examples. A negative one and a positive one.

My negative example is very simple. It concerns the reason why philosophers in general do not have anything interesting to say about electoral choices. Consider the usual situation of standard parliamentarianism. When you are confronted with electoral choices

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under standard parliamentarianism, you don't really possess any of the criteria that justify and legitimate the intervention of philosophy. I am not saying that one shouldn't be interested in these situations. I am simply saying that one cannot be interested in them in a philosophical manner. When the philosopher offers his views about these matters, he is an ordinary citizen, nothing more: he does not speak from a position of genuine philosophical consistency. So, why are things like this? Basically, because in standard parliamentarianism, in its usual functioning, the majority and the opposition are commensurable. There is obviously a common measure between the majority and the opposition, which means you do not have the paradoxical relation. You have differences, naturally, but these differences do not amount to a paradoxical relationship; on the contrary, they constitute a regular, law-governed relationship. This is easily grasped: since sooner or later (this is what is referred to as 'democratic alternation') the opposition will replace the majority, or take its place, it is indeed necessary for there to be a common measure between the two. If you don't have a common measure, you will not be able to substitute the one with the other. So the terms are commensurable, and to the extent that they are commensurable you do not have the situation of radical exception. What's more, you do not have a truly radical choice: the decision is a decision between nuances, between small differences - as you know. Elections are generally decided by the small group of the hesitant, those who do not possess a stable, pre-formed opinion. People who have a genuine commitment constitute fixed blocs; then there is a small group of people in what is called the centre, who sometimes go one way, sometimes the other. And you can see why a decision taken by people whose principal characteristic is hesitation is a very particular decision; it is not a decision taken by decisive people, it is a decision of the undecided, or of those who have not decided and

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who will then decide for reasons of opportunity, or last-minute reasons. So the function of choice in its true breadth is absent. There is proximity, rather than distance. The election does not create a gap, it is the rule, it creates the realization of the rule. Finally, you do not have the hypothesis of a veritable event, you do not have the feeling of exception, because you are instead in the presence of the feeling of the institution, of the regular functioning of institutions. But there is obviously a fundamental tension between institution and exception. So the question of elections for the philosopher is a typical matter of opinion, which is to say that it doesn't have to do with the incommensurable, with radical choice, distance or exception. As a phenomenon of opinion, it does not constitute a sign for the creation of new problems.

My positive example concerns the necessity of an intervention faced with the American war against Iraq. In the case of the American war against Iraq, unlike in parliamentary elections, all the criteria are brought together. *First*, there is something incommensurable in a very simple sense: between American power, on the one hand, and the Iraqi state, on the other, there is no common measure. It's not like France and Germany during the war of 1914-18. In the war of 1914-18 there was a common measure between France and Germany, which is precisely why you could have a world war. Between the United States and Iraq there is no common measure of any kind. This absence of common measure is what lent all its significance to the whole business of 'weapons of mass destruction', because American and British propaganda about weapons of mass destruction sought to make people believe that there was a common measure. If Saddam Hussein effectively had atomic, chemical and biological weapons at his disposal, then you would have something that legitimated the intervention, in the sense of a common measure between American power and Iraq. You wouldn't be dealing with a

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war of aggression of the very strong against the very weak, but with legitimate defence against a measurable threat. The fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction makes patently clear what everyone already knew: that in this matter, there was no common measure. *Second*, you have the absolute necessity of a choice. This is the kind of situation in which it is not clear how one could be something other than either for or against this war. This obligation to choose is what gave the demonstrations and mobilizations against the war their breadth. *Third*, you have a distance from power: the popular demonstrations against the war create an important subjective gap with regard to the hegemonic power of the United States. Finally, you have, perhaps, the opening of a new situation marked, among other things, by the importance of these demonstrations, but also by new possibilities of common understanding and action between France and Germany.

Finally, with regard to what is happening, you must first of all ask: 'Is there a relation that is not a relation? Are there incommensurable elements?' If the answer is positive, you must draw the consequences: there is a choice, there is a distance, there is an exception. And on these bases, you can pass from the mere consideration of opinion to the philosophical situation. In these conditions, we can give meaning to philosophical commitment. This commitment creates its own conviction on the terrain of philosophy, making use of philosophical criteria.

I insist on the singularity of philosophical commitment. We must absolutely distinguish philosophy from politics. There are political commitments that are illuminated by philosophy, or even made necessary by philosophy, but philosophy and politics are distinct. Politics aims at the transformation of collective situations, while philosophy seeks to propose new problems for everyone. And this proposition concerning new philosophical problems constitutes an



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