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Brexit and the Tautology of Being

The former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Theresa May, will be remembered for very little. Perhaps the most outstanding element in her political discourse was the slogan: ‘Brexit means Brexit’.¹ This phrase has produced a great deal of mirth among British liberals, due to its alleged conceptual emptiness. Not for the first time, I disagree with them. Personally, I think that *Brexit means Brexit* is the most coherent political concept that May articulated during her entire period of government. It’s certainly better than her other famous phrase: ‘We want a red, white and blue Brexit.’² It is clear that what May meant, when she stated that *Brexit means Brexit*, was that the Tories were going to go ahead with Britain’s exit from the European Union come what may, a promise (which remains unrealised) that helped them win the general election of 2017, albeit without an absolute majority. From my point of view, however, the phrase is important for another reason: it evokes an important theoretical principle, which could be called *the tautology of being*. What do I mean by this?

In order to understand this idea, I believe we should start with what in philosophy is called an *Event*. How should this concept be defined? For my money, the most comprehensive and rigorous definition of it can be found in the work of Alain Badiou.³ For Badiou, an Event is something that comes to supplement what he calls a *Situation*, which he defines in terms of an operation that collects and ‘counts’ a certain set of multiples, thus producing a figure that he calls the *One*. Badiou will add that a Situation implies the presence of a *State*. The State, according to him, is an attempt to consolidate a Situation by distinguishing the multiples that it already includes from those that it might include in the future. Indirectly, however, this process produces a third category of multiple, which, although it is included in a Situation, cannot be said to ‘belong’ to it. This third

¹ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-brexit-means-brexit-conservative-leadership-no-attempt-remain-inside-eu-leave-europe-a7130596.html

² www.bbc.com/news/av/38223990/theresa-may-we-want-a-red-white-and-blue-brexit

³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, Continuum, London 2005.

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category is what Badiou calls a *singularity*. He also calls it ‘the evental site’, in the sense that it constitutes a terrain upon which an Event may be constructed. However, the fact that an Event *may* be erected on the ground of a singular multiple does not mean that it *will* be. A subjective *decision* must also intercede, a decision on whether the multiple in question truly constitutes a singularity or not. To put it in terms of Badiou’s ‘mathematical ontology’, such a process involves deciding that a set can belong to itself, an operation that is prohibited in standard set theory. This, then, is what I call the tautology of being: it means that there not only exists, in the midst of a Situation, a singular multiple, but also that – in violation of all previous norms – it can be identified as such, thus producing an Event. I believe that Theresa May’s tautology can be interpreted in the same way. *Brexit means Brexit* affirms the very existence of something un-toward. Can we therefore deduce that Brexit is an Event, in the sense of Badiou? Badiou himself would say not. Why?

It should be remembered that Badiou connects a State of the Situation with the political State in the traditional sense. Indeed, this is why he imported the word State into his ontology in the first place. Given, then, that an Event is a kind of multiple that only exists by subtracting itself (Badiou’s term) from the State of the Situation, this implies that no element that has been produced in the ambit of a political State – which corresponds to a State of the Situation – can truly be considered an Event. This explains the extreme radicalism of Badiou’s political positions: according to him, all politics necessarily takes place at a distance from the State. Hence since Brexit was something that was convoked by the British State, it cannot in any sense be considered an Event, according to Badiou’s theoretical argument. I have a discrepancy with this conclusion, however. I believe that the Brexit can indeed be called an Event, even, up to a certain point, within the theoretical framework set out by Badiou. How so? If one wants to extend the concept of the Event (yet without compromising its singularity), it seems to me to be quite clear what one must do. One must delink the State of the Situation from the political State. In other words, one must separate Badiou’s philosophical theory from his (minimal) social theory. I even believe that Badiou himself does this, in certain symptomatic moments. For example, he uses the political metaphor of the State to talk about moments of relative stability that are found in the other ‘conditions’ of philosophy that he has identified: art, science and love, even though it should be obvious that, in theoretical terms, these areas have nothing to do with politics. Would it really be so easy, however, to separate

the two ontologies? I think it would. In fact, I think that a similar manoeuvre has already been carried out in the work of Jacques Rancière. How does Rancière analyse the political panorama?

Rancière, like Badiou, holds that politics entails the production of a singularity, which he believes will find itself in absolute ‘disagreement’ (his term) with a certain *plenum* social.⁴ The antagonism that Rancière conceives of, at this level, is between what he calls *politics* and *the police*. Couldn’t the second of these terms – the police – be considered to be a State in the traditionally political sense, of the kind that had already been denounced by Badiou? Rancière is somewhat ambiguous on the matter, although I would say that in general terms, he does not see it in that way. To put it in Heideggerian terms, the exact ‘ontic’ form that this ‘ontological’ category will assume in his work is never entirely specified. I think that a key factor here is that Rancière believes that the proper name of the subject of politics – understood as a force that is opposed to the police – is *the people*. This term is important because it constitutes an absolutely void theoretical category, which allows Rancière to connect it subsequently to concrete political elements that are completely different from one other, and some of which might even constitute segments of what is traditionally called the State. For example, he speaks at a certain point about ‘citizens, workers, women, proletarians’.⁵ In contrast, Badiou believes that there is only one real emancipatory political subject in action today: the proletariat. This reflects the fact that, for him, there only exists one type of political State in the current Situation, which is that of capitalism. Here another question arises, however. If Rancière is more in line with our theoretical position at this level, then why don’t we just use his work in order to contemplate Brexit, and do without that of Badiou?

I don’t wish to ignore Badiou because I think that there are some nuances in his work that are extremely useful and which cannot be found in Rancière. Which ones? First, I think it’s important that Badiou views the Event in terms of a decision with regard to a social antagonism. I believe this is especially useful if, for example, one wants to discuss *sovereignty*, which I would define in the same

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1999.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

way (a definition that would clearly be influenced by the work of Carl Schmitt).⁶ I think that sovereignty in this sense is a crucial aspect of the Brexit debate. The second thing that Badiou's project allows us to do, I think, is to contemplate what a subjective adherence to the void of a Situation would look like. This is a key dimension of the Event, and Badiou opposes it to an adherence to the plenitude of a Situation, which would be precisely the function of the State (according to Badiou) or – better – the police (according to Rancière). In fact, Badiou develops a whole theory of this point; he believes that if a subject adheres to a plenitude after glimpsing the void, this is the most regressive form politics that can exist.⁷ I believe that this theory allows us to consider a new form of (void) patriotism that is relevant to politics today and which can be distinguished from, for example, a certain (plenus) xenophobia, which would constitute a perversion of the former. Once again, I think these factors are also extremely relevant to Brexit. Returning to Rancière, I would say that there is a further absence in his work: he refuses to use the word *populism*. I consider this term important because I think it represents the (philosophical) ideology that corresponds to the aforementioned *people*, which, as I pointed out, should probably be considered the privileged subject of politics. Why does Rancière reject the word? He does so because he believes that it is automatically pejorative, in the political context in which we find ourselves today, above all in Europe.⁸ I would accept this point. However, I believe that populism can continue to be of use in our analysis, and also in our praxis. If it is true that I prefer to see things in terms of populism, however, and taking into account that Rancière does not accept the term, why don't I simply refer to the work of those authors who have embraced it openly? Here I have Laclau and Mouffe in mind. ¿What relevance might their work have, in this context?

154

The difference between the theoretical work of Rancière and Badiou on the one hand, and Laclau and Mouffe on the other, is that the former do not deploy the theory of hegemony, whilst the latter do. Might this concept help us to think about Brexit? After all, if Brexit were considered a hegemonic process, we could

⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology – Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, University of Chicago, Chicago 2005. See also, Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, University of Chicago, Chicago 2007, p. 49.

⁷ See: Alain Badiou, *Ethics – An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Verso, London 2001.

⁸ Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi Huberman, Sadri Khiari, Jacques Rancière, *What is a People?*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013, pp. 101–105.

perhaps conceive of it as something more politically complex, which might be fruitful in itself. For example, one might conclude that Brexit doesn't only include emancipatory elements – as any Event must – but also repressive (or 'transformist', to use the Gramscian jargon associated with the theory of hegemony) ones, and perhaps such a mixture would provide a more 'realistic' view of the issue. I believe, however, that the theory of hegemony is *too* realistic at this level. What do I mean by this? Essentially, I think that hegemony is good at describing the dispersion of elements in an already-existing social field, but at the cost of diluting its dimension of singularity, which is what I consider to be its essential aspect. What are the theoretical factors that lead me to this conclusion? I believe that in the end, Laclau and Mouffe are not able, within the scope of their theory, to decide between antagonism in the singular and antagonisms in the plural, and this inevitably undermines the importance of the first. As they themselves say: 'Until now, when we have spoken about antagonism, we have kept it in the singular in order to simplify our argument. But it is clear that antagonism does not necessarily emerge at a single point: any position in a system of differences, insofar as it is negated, can become the locus of an antagonism. Hence, there is a variety of possible antagonisms in the social, many of them in opposition to each other.'⁹ Now on the one hand, this argument could be seen as a useful deconstruction of the 'exclusive singularity' that one finds in projects such as that of Badiou. On the other, it seems to me to be highly politically problematic. Why?

If we want to understand the problem, I think it is necessary to focus on the ambiguous status of the term 'the social' that is referred to in the previous quotation. If it is true, as Laclau and Mouffe have argued on other occasions, that the absolute limit of this social is a singular antagonism, then how can they argue that within the social itself there exist other singular antagonisms? Wouldn't this imply that within the social, understood as the limit of all objectivity, there are other socials, other limits of all objectivity? This would surely be absurd. To put it in other terms, antagonism cannot be and not be at the same time the absolute limit of all objectivity (Russell's paradox haunts us here). A supporter of the theory of hegemony would surely say that this is not truly a problem at all, since the kind of difference that is to be found in a 'system of differences' – an

⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy – Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London 1985, p. 131.

aspect that was also mentioned in the comment by Laclau and Mouffe – is distinct from that which is found in an antagonism *strict sensu*, which constitutes the limit of difference as such. I totally accept this point. But this is not what Laclau and Mouffe are claiming. They are actually arguing that both types of difference can be considered *antagonisms*. I would of course accept that there exist distinct modalities of difference; however, there cannot exist distinct modalities of *antagonism*. If that were the case, then the category itself would collapse. I think that this ambiguity is what makes it impossible to think the sheer singularity of an antagonism from the perspective of hegemony. Essentially, in the latter theory, singularity is mixed, in an indiscernible way, with plurality. I should perhaps add something here. This conclusion does not imply that for a thinker like Rancière, for example – who I believe is able to think through all the consequences of the category of singularity –, there do not exist different political antagonisms. There certainly do, and I have already given examples of them in his work. What it does mean, however, is that such antagonisms do not refer to the same ‘social’ (in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe). In truth, what Rancière appears to show us is that there are as many social fields as there are social antagonisms, without any possibility of a ‘transcendental’ combination of either. Nevertheless, and despite the problems that I see with the category of hegemony, I do indeed believe that Laclau and Mouffe should be commended for insisting on the possibility of a populist movement, now understood in terms of a subject who is able to militate in relation to a singular antagonism.

In conclusion, I believe that it is a ‘populist’ theory – to use the term of Laclau and Mouffe –, of the type proposed by Rancière – *qua* ‘ontological’ radicalisation of the theory of Badiou –, which allows us to conclude that Brexit is a singular, and therefore an emancipatory, Event within the British political Situation. As I have explained, this Event is based on a sovereign decision regarding an antagonism, and whilst there exists the possibility that this decision could subsequently be perverted, thus producing a xenophobic reaction, I do not believe that this ‘perversion’ is part of the original ontological horizon of this decision (which is what the theory of hegemony would have to assume). To put it in the terms of a lesser theorist, Theresa May, I think we can indeed conclude that *Brexit means Brexit*.