If there is a crisis of Marxism, it is the crisis of a politics, of a politics for communism, what we call, strictly speaking, Marxist politics.2

Marxist origins and post-Marxist chimeras

Much of today’s radical political theory is the offspring of a crooked dialectic of defeat and reinvention. Many of the defining traits of recent theoretical writings on the Left are obscured if we fail to address how they emerged out of a reckoning with the failure or distortion of Marxist politics, and, moreover, if we disregard the extent to which they often retain an underlying if ambiguous commitment to the Marxist impulse whence they arose. The manner of taking leave from the organisational and theoretical tenets of Marxism, in whatever guise, can speak volumes about the present resources and limitations of contributions to political thought that drew initial sustenance from it. This is certainly the case with the work of Alain Badiou, whose complex relationship

1 An earlier version of this essay appeared in the Belgrade journal Prelom. I thank Ozren Pupovac and the editors for the initial stimulus to formulate these arguments, and for their comradeship.

2 Sandevince 1984c, p. 10.
to his own Maoist militancy and to Marxist theory has recently become the
object of rich and detailed investigations, above all in several essays by Bruno
Bosteels. Bosteels’s characterisation of Badiou’s approach in terms of ‘post-
Maoism’ already suggests that Badiou’s intellectual biography stands at a
considerable remove from the entire ‘post-Marxist’ tendency, chiefly encapsu-
lated in Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, and persuasively
dismantled in Ellen Meiksins Wood’s The Retreat from Class. Having said that,
the effects of a common ‘poststructuralist’ theoretical conjuncture, along with
a departure from a Hegelian-Marxist preoccupation with dialectics and social
ontology, might lead one to suspect that ‘the theoretical edifices of Laclau and
Badiou are united by a deep homology’. This ‘deep homology’ – which Slavoj
Žižek identifies in the notion of a contingent, subjective rupture of ontological
closure (or of any totality) – is nevertheless offset by a fundamental diver-
gence, to the extent that ultimately, Badiou’s

‘post-Marxism’ has nothing whatsoever to do with the fashionable
deconstructionist dismissal of the alleged Marxist ‘essentialism’; on the
contrary, he is unique in radically rejecting the deconstructionist doxa as a
new form of pseudo-thought, as a contemporary version of sophism.

Rather than either homology, or frontal opposition, it might be more precise
then to argue that Badiou’s post-Maoism and the post-Marxism of Laclau and
his ilk intersect in manners that generate a kind of ‘family resemblance’, but
that, when push comes to shove, they are incommensurable, born of diver-
gent assessments of the end or crisis of Marxism. Their theoretical trajectories
connect many of the same dots but the resulting pictures differ radically. In
order better to delineate the specific difference of Badiou’s project, and of the
problems that spurred it on, this chapter will examine the period between the
highest speculative product of Badiou’s heterodox Maoism, Théorie du sujet
(1982), and the cornerstone of his mature work, L’Être et l’événement (1988),
in particular the book Peut-on penser la politique?, published in 1985, which is
to say contemporaneously with Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemony. I claim that

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3 Bosteels 2005a. Bosteels’s acute analyses of Badiou’s political thought will soon
be brought together in the book Badiou and Politics. See also Badiou’s comments on
5 Žižek 1999, p. 172.
6 Žižek 1998.