



# WE HAVE TO BREAK BOURGEOIS RIGHT

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A CONVERSATION WITH ALAIN BADIOU



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ALAIN BADIOU

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In June 2017, Alain Badiou was invited by the “Conséquences” seminar to give a lecture with the title “What does a politics outside the state involve?” The written text was subsequently published by Fayard. Three comrades spoke with him in a preparatory discussion for this lecture; the following text is a partial transcription.

Taking stock of the uprisings of recent years on a world scale (from Greece to Egypt, as well as France), Badiou observed that a stumbling block everywhere is the absence of a strategic hypothesis on the question of the state, capable of overcoming the impasse of the electoral process and its promises that are always disappointed. From twentieth-century history as well as from his own experience as a militant, he asserted the need to think anew about the problem of power, insofar as this is a question of confronting the destruction of “bourgeois right”<sup>1</sup>—the fundamental principle of the property order governing our societies, which all indications suggest will not tolerate being “pushed aside, submerged, buried, or given an easy death.”

It is only if we manage to unblock this question that the movements we see all around us will be able to envisage the conditions for a true victory.

**Alain Badiou:** I have said that politics cannot be reduced to the question of power. But at the end of the day, something that lies at the heart of the dominant order must be broken. It has to be broken because it cannot tolerate being pushed aside, or drowned, or buried, or given an easy death. Let's face it, the established power system in our societies possesses a fierce will to hold on, whatever the circumstances. We're not dealing with slackers here. Those who think that capitalism is already at the end of its tether are seriously mistaken.

**Interviewer:** But this vision of the conquest of power will have to be different from those that determined the previous sequence...

**AB:** Yes, that's true, but that doesn't mean we don't already have to reflect on what it might involve. Because at the end of the day, it has an internal presence in the general consciousness. If the effect of not copying the primordial insurrectionism of the last century, or anything like that, is that we don't bother about it at all, the result is that in a way we accept being incorporated in the dominant political figure. So there's an antagonistic element, which can't be purely tactical. Yes, there's an antagonism when the cops arrive, okay. But that's a defensive tactic, a partial or symbolic offensive. However, here too the question of what proposal we have as regards the central question... I don't believe it is possible to maintain as a doctrine that the seizure of power doesn't matter.

**I:** But this antagonism, then, a strategic and not just a tactical one, what form could it take?

**AB:** Strategically I don't know, I'm just saying that I don't think we can put forward the doctrine that we don't care about taking power. I don't think you can maintain this without taking considerable political risks, from the point of view of developing a new way of thinking about politics. But there's no reason why I should be able to answer this today [laughs]! Even at the time when there was a formalized theory of insurrection, revolution, the overthrow of state power and so on, if you look at the concrete process, this was actually discovered day by day. The October Revolution was a day-by-day process... But here we're talking about the presence or

otherwise of this issue in people's minds and in discussing perspectives for the next stage.

**I:** This question of taking power is certainly quite intense in your texts, we could take several examples. You said somewhere that it must be linked more to circumstances than to political principle, that it can no longer be the regulatory horizon...

**AB:** Yes, I don't think it can be the regulatory horizon.

**I:** But we can't evacuate it either...

**AB:** It's still far too unclear for that. You ask anyone today: "Well, then, what is your path to taking state power?"... Even the most flamboyant insurrectionists, even the Invisible Committee in *The Coming Insurrection*... whereas in their *Now* you no longer see any insurrection, that's very striking.

**I:** Because in *To Our Friends* they say it came and it wasn't the revolution. The insurrection came and in the end it wasn't the revolution.

**AB:** That's it.

**I:** So there is a problem between insurrection and revolution that is not very clear...

**AB:** True. Even in their reflections on what happened in Greece, it's very striking with Invisible Committee: they practically state that a victory was a defeat. Almost like that. When they analyse the general system of insurrections in Athens, in Greece, etc., before Tsipras, they actually present it as an enigma: how is it that we were finally defeated when we were victorious? So that's what you were saying: it is possible to be victorious in an insurrection but defeated in terms of revolution [laughs]. So I think we have to discuss all these questions. That's what I mean, it's very simple. I don't think we can let this question disappear from the general consciousness of those who are militants in the movement, occupants of a site or

square and so on.

I will give a rather Chinese definition of this: at one point or another, bourgeois right must be broken, that's it. In other words, the right of ownership, at the end of the day. Bourgeois right must be broken one way or another. It's not true that it will vanish by itself, not at all. And this doesn't mean that's what you have to prepare for, that's where you have to concentrate all your forces, things of that kind, that wouldn't make sense... but I don't think we should evacuate this question from the debate, including in concrete situations: that is to say in reference to the situation, to failures, to successes. And here we need to analyse the fragments of experience we have, whether the forms taken by strikes, the occupation of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the front of the march in the demonstrations against the labour law, or the occupation of squares... all that is still a set of actual situations, collective, animated, militant situations, where we cannot be satisfied with saying: "It was good but it's over."

**I:** When we take stock of the Arab Spring on the one hand or the struggles in Greece and Spain on the other, we can see that they were blocked over the issue of state power, since in Spain and Greece there has been an electoral recuperation of the movement...

**AB:** Yes, typical!

**I:** Whereas in the countries of the South, in Egypt you had a putsch, and in Syria, Libya, Yemen it's civil wars (Tunisia narrowly avoided one with the negotiation between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounès). So there is still something not thought through in the relationship to the state within this revolutionary wave—unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. In Ukraine too there was the start of a civil movement, rather vague, at the very beginning of the Maidan, which lasted a week, and already by the end of the week the parties of the right and far right came and said: "Aha, you don't have a project? We do have a project, this project is Europeanism and Ukrainian nationalism", in the face of a crowd that, from criticizing corruption, could have, at the very beginning, perhaps gone to the left...

So this unconsidered relationship to the state is not only a problem of politics, political philosophy and so on, it really is the contemporary



problem. Because when the Tunisians said “Out with them all!” they had a negative definition of what they wanted. So what do you think would be the conditions for thinking about this new relationship to the state? We are certainly not going to define it right now, but there may be conditions for its representation.

**AV:** Yes, my first feeling is that the question must be properly addressed. And the second is that we can see very clearly in all the examples you cite that this is played out in a dialectical swing between negativity and affirmation. In other words, paradoxically, the anti-state tradition that we inherit is a negative tradition, that is, destroying the state and so on. In a way, I adopt this myself. Breaking bourgeois right, all that is negative. But in a concrete situation it is always positive proposals that are the driving force and that have been lacking.

Because in the end, even in the greatest movements of occupation of squares there comes a moment when it is very hard to avoid accepting the electoral proposal: it happened in Greece, it happened in Egypt... If we look at Egyptian history: everyone was committed to the electoral proposal, and it was the Muslim Brotherhood that won the bet, and then the Muslim Brotherhood in effect authorized the military coup. As far as Podemos and Syriza are concerned, they themselves brought the movement into the electoral game.

But the electoral proposal is intrinsically damaging, that is to say, today we know that elections are basically counter-revolutionary operators. I experienced this once and for all in May 68. A movement, the biggest there had ever been in this country, as a civil movement if I may say so, red flags everywhere, all the factories on strike... and then there were the elections, and a two-thirds majority for the Gaullist reaction! After that, of course, it went on, but under different conditions. So it's true that the question of what contemporary proposal, starting from mass actions, possibly very substantial ones, can pose the question of state power in a more than purely symbolic fashion, and what relationship there is between that and the heritage in this matter—which is, until further notice, the Leninist one (there is no other: what do we do with the Leninist heritage on this particular point?)—this is a question that needs to be unblocked. I myself feel

in a blockage, I'm not above it, not at all. Thinking itself is in a blockage on this. So we should try to at least unblock thinking.

**I:** All the more so as for years you have been formulating the need for a post-Leninist strategy, particularly on the question of state power.

**AB:** Exactly. Because the Leninist strategy was actually a classic insurrectionist strategy, which acquired the militarized means for its victory. And that meant militarizing the political organization itself. That is to say, making it function basically as a military organization. What did that lead to? At the end of the day, to a state that was itself militarized in its modes of operation. We can't repeat that. If we look now at the Maoist process, it was completely different, it was the very opposite: a thirty-year process, with a people's army and so on. But Mao clearly stated the conditions for this: the immensity of China, the fact that the state power left uncovered entire zones that could be occupied, therefore a zone that was at the same time a political school, and a real army that was not the militarization of the party but rather an army in the traditional sense of the term, a "people's army." In short, the lessons inherited from twentieth-century tradition on this point are not usable as such. In a country like ours we're not going to surround the cities from the countryside [laughs]!

**I:** Precisely: but what do you think then of two movements that are also intermediate in this sense and affected the whole history of the 2011 movement? I'm thinking of the Zapatistas and the Kurds, who are quite familiar with the Leninist example, even the Maoist example, since a certain number of the Zapatista founders were Maoists?

**AB:** Yes, absolutely, others too, by the way...

**I:** The Kurds too, who have tried to develop something intermediate (itself problematic) between a kind of popular democracy, with village communes etc., and the military question, because they both have armies. The Zapatista army is defensive, but it is still an army, and the Kurds don't talk about it...

**AB:** Yes, I was very sensitive to and interested in the Zapatista experience, especially the idea that “we have an army but it’s not to be used,” that if they don’t attack us, we’re not going to deploy it, at least not right away. In fact, despite everything, the Zapatistas did not really succeed in their marches on Mexico City; those were episodes that did not really work, which is also interesting to note. But I saw the Zapatistas as a principle of zonal occupation, so to speak, with basically a defensive/offensive instrument, available for both purposes if need be, to protect the territory but perhaps for something more. But when they tried the “something more,” it didn’t work.

More generally, I think we’re not completely up to speed on this issue of the dialectic between defensive and offensive. Basically, the capacity of a certain defensive organization, an occupation, the creation of even a small, partially free zone, a political place etc.—that happens, it exists, it’s possible, it can be held for a while... even on a large scale like the Zapatistas. But there comes a moment when the dynamics of all this demand its being taken one step further. And it is this point that remains obscure: what can exercise a real constraint on the state? Not simply a localized, even lasting embarrassment, but a constraint on the state that would force a real change in it?

The Kurds are different because they are now in a context of generalized war. There obviously things are changing. We should nevertheless recognize that until now even insurrectionary victories have always taken place in the context of a war. So in a context where the adversary is actually weakened because they are dealing with external contradictions. That too is a problem: can the revolution win if the contradictions among the enemies have not developed to their highest form, do we have to wait for the next war...? We will of course answer no; for a start, waiting is never a directive, no one actually waits. But we can see the complexity of the problems, for example the very relevant examples you give. The Kurds have the peculiarity of also being in a national reference that they control, so to speak—they control this because it is not nationalistic. The PKK tries to be a non-nationalist nationalist party...

**I:** So do the Zapatistas.

**AB:** Yes, that's right. Besides, the Zapatistas rely on a non-nationalist indigenous identity. Not of course a tribal one. But it's not absent. Whereas in our case we don't have many resources of that kind [laughs].

**I:** All the more so because those who tried to use this method in Europe—we can think of Northern Ireland or the Basque country—met with a terrible repression, comparable in a way to the Algerian War, that is to say, Belfast was basically emptied out to capture the IRA and in particular its most revolutionary tendency. And from the moment that there is a separation between this militarized minority and the people, the masses, we get into a terrorist dead end and all that.

**AB:** Absolutely.

**I:** In Europe, the balance sheet of these two movements makes us understand that this strategy is not possible anyway, given the conditions...

**AB:** I don't think we can go much further at the level where we are now, given the fact that all the recent examples (without even getting into historical analysis) show that a point is reached where things are at a standstill over the question of the state. Obviously there will always be discussions about whether things couldn't have been different, whether it's a first lesson and so on: Trotskyists will say it's like 1905 compared to 1917, Maoists will say it's the beginning of a long march—we have our metaphors ready [laughs]!

All the movements, the Arab one but also in Greece and Spain, made a great impression on me, of course. Something was really happening, you can't deny it, something was happening on a large scale. And it seems to me that we are not in a position today to immediately draw clear positive lessons from it. The case of Egypt is striking: the fact that the whole thing finally went round in a circle, with return to military dictatorship as the outcome of the situation, is very striking. What happened? At what point did it get so out of control? In fact, in my opinion, the ruin started when it entered the electoral process. The electoral process has shown its damaging relevance in almost all of these situations. Because it is the electoral process that, at a given moment, presents itself as if it were a proposal for

a change in the state. Which it is not, of course. Which it never is. No one has ever changed the state by elections, it's never happened in world history. You don't change a state through elections, you don't change a state in depth, that's not true.

So this is how things appear, and basically where we're at is: rejection of the electoral process, and the need to immediately invent a different form of relationship with the state that would continue the actual movement. It's a bit like the feeling I had in June 68. We could shout "Elections, trap for fools!" It was as true as could be, except that this truth was of no use to us. Admittedly, a lot of young people did not go and vote, but we faced an overwhelming reactionary majority, and afterwards we just had to resume the political process and fight on a different basis. At that time it was "creating a new party", etc., but it was still discontinuous from what we could imagine as the potential of the movement itself.

**I:** Knowing that this movement still had fairly far-reaching consequences over several years.

**AB:** Yes, it created a new militancy. And this new militancy took very diverse forms—in particular new social paths, connections between people who were not connected... I have absolutely fascinating memories of this, that's not the problem—but these forms were always governed by the idea of creating a new organization. So the old pattern. Well, the Leninist schema.

**I:** It's an issue that remains relevant even in the current situation.

**AB:** Yes, it remains relevant, but the problem is not to repeat it. Because it didn't work out either. And the best proof is that what definitively buried it was once again the electoral proposal: Mitterrand. That is to say, the electoral proposal of an alliance that historically harked back to the Popular Front between the Communists and the Socialists. Well, a lot of people had already given up, they were quite happy to be offered this set-up... [laughs].

**I:** We can also think of the Italian example of the 1970s, where there were experiments with forms of organization that could not be reduced to traditional paradigms, such as “areas of autonomy.”

**AB:** Yes, I would also include that in the figure of new forms of organization. I’m not saying that we simply repeated earlier patterns in this period. Because even in those organizational forms I was able to conceive, as a Maoist, it was not at all a repetition of the Leninist party or figures of that kind.<sup>2</sup> It was actually much closer to a discipline of standing as close as possible to what the mass movement could become or could be. Of course there were variations on that discipline and so on.

In retrospect, I think that what dominated in this period, I agree with you, was the expression “organization”, but absolutely a new type of organization. Those who purely and simply repeated the old patterns were in a minority, in any case they were not the people who had the most interesting experiences. But that said, it didn’t even have the potential to slow or halt the counter-revolution of the 1980s. Obviously I’m older than you, and I always feel like a killjoy [laughs]. But there is one thing that had an extraordinary effect on me: the imposition and the violence of the restoration from the 1980s, the counter-revolutionary, ideological, theoretical restoration, etc. [laughs]. You’re fortunate, maybe you’re at the beginning of a new cycle. I believe so, even if it’s difficult.

**I:** A more anecdotal question, since you mention your militant years in the post-68 period. Which of all the leftist groups of that time had the most successful security service?

**AB:** It depends on what function was attributed to the security service. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire was the strongest in defensive terms. The Ligue was good at protecting a demonstration. Sometimes we hid behind them ourselves [laughs]. It’s true, there were more of them, etc. [laughs]. On the other hand, if it was a question of striking blows, of attacking, the Gauche Prolétarienne<sup>3</sup> was the best, but it was soon dissolved. After that, what remained was much of a muchness...

You know I loved it, the fight with the cops. I was in charge of the UCFML’s military commission, I wrote entire texts arguing that we al-

ways had to be in a position to inflict a double hit on the cops and not just one, so I set up staggered lines of Molotov cocktail throwers, I'm very familiar with all that. And I experienced the real satisfaction when, for example, a line of cops scattered—it's a kind of allegory of something [laughs]. All that to tell you that I'm not at all allergic to that kind of thing.

**I:** I didn't doubt it!

**AB:** That can get around [laughs]... I'm not a non-violent person, absolutely not. I've practised all this and I think it's perfectly normal for young people to try it, to absorb it, to know that they can do it. You have to learn not to be afraid of the police, but to despise them, and at the same time protect yourself from them, etc.—that's not the problem. The problem is much more considerable: it is to know what kind of constraint can be exercised on the state at the general level...

## Notes

This interview was conducted on 30 May 2017. We have sought to preserve as far as possible the oral tone of the exchanges.

- 1 The concept of “bourgeois right,” canonically formulated by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, was taken up by Mao Zedong in the context of the Cultural Revolution, a key reference for Badiou. —Translator.
- 2 Badiou was a leading member of the UCFML (Union des Communistes de France Marxist-Léninistes) from its creation in 1969 until its dissolution in the early 1980s.
- 3 The largest French Maoist organization, created in the wake of May 68, dissolved in 1973. See *Les nouveaux partisans: Histoire de la gauche prolétarienne*, Éditions Al Dante, 2015.









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