
Book Reviews

Badiou, Balibar and Rancière – Re-thinking Emancipation

Nick Hewlett

Continuum, London and New York, 2000, 179pp., £ 70.00, ISBN: 978-0826498618

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The sub-title of this book is re-thinking emancipation and it's a fair description of what the book is about and how it sees its task. The idioms of emancipation with which it deals are different from what has gone before. They articulate revisionary emancipatory projects. Nick Hewlett has done an admirable job of shedding historical light on these theorists so that we can, as Collingwood would have said, re-think their theories in the light of the intellectual and political contexts in which they were conceived. Hewlett is a sure-footed guide amidst the labyrinths of Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism and the political pathways of the French revolutionary tradition. He is also a perceptive commentator on the more recent consensoid politicking for the center ground in French politics that reinforces popular apathy and yet here and there stirs the echoes of emancipation that reverberate in these theories of Badiou, Balibar and Rancière.

Hewlett combines clear-headed analysis of ideas with a refreshingly lucid writing style and a continuous concern to be critical, asking pertinent questions about the relevance and plausibility of the theories that he analyzes. He is a sympathetic critic who makes clear how these thinkers are keeping revolutionary and emancipatory traditions alive in a time of cultural conformity, observing the intricate ways in which they challenge the *status quo*, asking questions of individual and collective subjects. He admires the way they challenge the rhetoric and forms of contemporary liberal democracy, but, insistently, he asks incisive questions about how these theorists situate their emancipatory subjects and observes their awkward silences on questions of political economy.

All of the thinkers are identified as moving on from the intricate structuralism of Althusser, as reacting against the prolix apolitical discourse of postmodernism and as constituting a radical alternative to the emerging new forms of French liberalism. May 1968 functions as a significant historical event and productive revolutionary image of emancipatory possibilities for all these theorists and for their contextual understanding. Its sudden irruption and express disregard for traditional forces of the right and left render it a symbol



of the possibilities for emancipation that are entertained in these theories. Badiou is praised for his resuscitation of the political subject, dramatically enacted in May 1968. The event for Badiou is shown to depend upon the subjectivity of agents that is so underplayed in Althusser. Events in love, art and politics must be recognized and developed by the fidelity that agents show them. Irruptive political events sustained by political subjects are crucial to the achievement of freedom. Hewlett recognizes the force of Badiou's notion of an event but also observes the paradox that its radical removal from structural determination entails that its irruption is a shot in the dark as far as political actors are concerned. It is neither to be prepared for nor its prospects considered in advance and has nothing to do with conventional forms of politics.

Rancière is likewise seen as reacting against Althusserian structuralism and its elitist reading of political and ideological developments. Rancière is recognized to be affirming relentlessly the actual equality of the poor. The sense in which most radicals aim to realize equality is, for Rancière, already to accept the inequality of misperceiving actual existing equality. Hewlett notes how Rancière sidelines top-down talk of what equality should involve, to celebrate the reality of actual people, who are seen as subjects who must take power. He proposes no agenda for action because an agenda would be preconceived and derogate from the power of the people. Hewlett sees it as both positive and negative that Rancière's notion of democracy has nothing to do with conventional forms of representation politics and its police activities. Balibar is presented as differing from Rancière and Badiou in offering more detail on the contemporary political situation and more analysis of what might be done than the other two theorists. His willingness to engage with contemporary practice and institutions is, for Hewlett, of a piece with his invocation of the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* in that it is symptomatic of a compromise with liberal democracy. While Balibar is seen to have relevant and helpful things to say about European citizenship and immigration, these subjects are not seen to be treated in a radical manner.

Hewlett has written a good book. He has persuaded me to take these French theorists seriously as contemporary radicals, who challenge the *status quo* in interesting ways that offer resistance to the boxing of thought in so many schools of contemporary political philosophy. Where post-structuralists lose their political way amidst a tangle of complex arguments, these theorists take on the political and argue for emancipation. Rancière is surely right to point to fundamental ways in which ordinary people are not heard or included in the polity. The latest round of political disaffection, which might offer sustenance to the extreme right, needs to be countered by all of us recognizing how many people are unseen and unheard politically. Likewise, endless thought experiments to underpin various forms of egalitarian argument tend to undermine contact with real people. Badiou makes us realize that however much we might plan



emancipation or even a renewal of social democracy, events will take us by surprise. It helps to appreciate how in many ways political events are gambles that depend on how they are handled – resistance to the Nazis might not have worked out, or might have worked out differently if faith had been kept in a more radical post-war agenda. Hewlett is surely right, though, to point to the gaps and problems in the radical agenda of these theorists. He asks hard questions about their relevance to contemporary politics, but in a sympathetic spirit and in a lucid manner, which makes this book more than an insider's guide to radical discourse; it says something about the contemporary French and Western context in which radical thought operates.

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Time and World Politics

Kimberly Hutchings

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Hutchings provides a timely analysis of the relationship between time and International Relations. Time, Hutchings argues, has become increasingly prominent to the discipline of International Relations in the post-Cold War era: 'the themes of temporality and history have come centre stage in debates about world politics in International Relations since the end of the Cold War' (p. 14). The passing of the Cold War saw the emergence of a new time and new world order. This raised questions about the direction of time. Was time moving toward a progressive end point? Was world political time destined to become a continual 'clash of civilizations'? Were there spectres haunting the present and the future? These are just three of the most prominent theories that were put forward about where time was heading in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Hutchings' book is particularly timely, because now,