

Concerning the COVID-19 Event

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on Alain Badiou's surprisingly moderate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is shown that his dismissal of the virus as a familiar problem best dealt with by bureaucratic managers stems from an overly idealist approach to one of his key philosophical topics: the event.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19, Alain Badiou, event, speculative realism, Manuel DeLanda, Michael Fried

Of the numerous recent articles on the COVID-19 pandemic written by prominent philosophers, the one by Alain Badiou stands out for its spirit of pragmatic restraint.¹ The reader is surprised to find Badiou, the revolutionary Maoist, taking the side of managerial democratic centrism against radical pretensions as to the impact of the virus. The philosopher even defends “the unfortunate [French President Emmanuel] Macron, who is simply doing . . . his job as head of state” and disdains those who “make a hue and cry about the founding event of an unprecedented revolution.” If we were to make an informed guess at the author of such phrases, the normally fire-breathing Badiou is one of the last people who would come to mind. Later in the article, he makes an additional effort to downplay the novelty of our current situation:

What's more, the true name of the ongoing epidemic should suggest that in a sense we are dealing with “nothing new under the contemporary sun.” This true name is SARS 2, that is “Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2,” a name that signals the “second time” of this identification, after the SARS 1 epidemic, which spread around the world in Spring 2003. . . . It is clear then that the current epidemic is by no means the emergence of something radically new or unprecedented.

Here he is not so convincing. The reference to 2003, of course, is to the SARS epidemic that killed nearly 800 people in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore,

and Canada. Tragic and worrisome though it was, the SARS-1 scare cannot sustain even loose comparison with the current pestilence. COVID-19 has spread to every country on earth, and by the time these words are published will have killed more than one million people worldwide, with over 250,000 dead in the United States alone. The novel coronavirus has caused enormous upheaval in the education, health, hospitality, and travel sectors, and has further polarized an already sharply divided American polity. To claim that COVID-19 is nothing new under the sun—I do not take Badiou’s scare quotes seriously—simply because a related coronavirus already appeared in 2003 is a bit like saying that the atomic bomb in Hiroshima was nothing new, given that massive firebombings had already occurred in Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo.

The reason for this disagreement, of course, is that Badiou is rather demanding in his standards for what counts as an “event.”² Badiou’s concept of amorous events goes well beyond both legal matrimony and sexual passion, requiring a total change in one’s mode of being no matter the consequences. As for the artistic event, nothing will do in twentieth-century music but high atonal serialism, and one gets the sense that even in that group only Anton Webern is rigorous enough to please Badiou. Mainstream musical fashion is summarily dismissed: “Today, the music-world is negatively defined. The classical subject and its romantic avatars are entirely saturated, and it is not the plurality of ‘musics’—folklore, classicism, pop, exoticism, jazz and baroque reaction all in the same festive bag—which will be able to resuscitate them.”³ Even Igor Stravinsky is held at arm’s length as too conservative. Perhaps most emblematically, Badiou permits no political event unless it somehow partakes of “the communist invariant,” which he means in an uncompromising sense that includes both Mao’s Cultural Revolution and ancient Chinese Legalism.⁴ This is one problem with Badiou’s dismissal of the eventual character of COVID-19. He creates such a dualism between mediocre “situations” and consummate revolutionary upheaval that no room is left for otherwise impressive meso-events that cut deeply into history without redeeming the uncounted masses and doling out suitable doses of revolutionary terror. The American Revolution certainly would not fit the bill, and neither would the Roman destruction of Carthage, the appearance of Viking longboats, or perhaps even the invention of the printing press. Thus we can see that COVID-19 is in good company among all those phenomena that Badiou excludes from true eventhood.

Another issue is well worth noting, though it may seem to be of lesser relevance to the present article. It has not gone unnoticed that there is a pronounced idealist streak to Badiou’s philosophy. Even the two Speculative Realists who are intellectually closest to Badiou have said as much. Ray Brassier laments as follows: “[for Badiou] the Big Bang, the Cambrian explosion, and the death of the sun remain mere hiccups in the way of the world, in which he has little or no interest.”⁵ Meanwhile, Quentin Meillassoux makes the following concession: “there is in

[*Logics of Worlds*] no example of purely ‘natural’ events, radically foreign to every human intervention, to every subjective intervention in general. For example, there is in Badiou no description of the evolutionary emergence of species in terms of events—no evental Darwinism.”⁶ The reason this aspect of Badiou seems less relevant here is that we are interested in the 2019 emergence of the novel coronavirus not so much as a virological event occurring outside human awareness, but in the human disaster resulting from it. Yet it remains true that for Badiou there is no event without human fidelity to it, and while this marks an important extension of the tradition he valuably terms “anti-philosophical,” any realist would require that we give the event a certain minimal autonomy from the subject even when the event in question—such as the current pandemic—requires human involvement.⁷

Let’s begin with this second point, the minimal autonomy of events from the human subject. It is rarely noticed that human beings can have two different roles with respect to any event, and only sometimes do we play both roles simultaneously. In one sense, we are the *beholders* of events, as when Michael Fried speaks of an eighteenth-century French painting as deliberately fending off the beholder by depicting the figures in these paintings as intensely absorbed in whatever it is they are doing.⁸ In another sense we can be the *ingredients* of an event without necessarily beholding it. To speak of Fried once more, he is well aware that the anti-theatrical detachment of pictorial figures from their beholder is a “supreme fiction,” given that there is no painting without someone to look at it, even if it only be artists themselves. A simpler way to make the point is to say that events can occur without the awareness of anyone, contra Badiou’s assertion that a faithful political subject must be well aware that what is happening marks a dramatic rupture of the situation. Now, I fully agree with Brassier and Meillassoux that recent Continental philosophy has had too little to say about events lying entirely outside the sphere of givenness to human beings, and that Badiou remains largely confined to this anti-realist dogma. But even if we limit ourselves to considering events like COVID-19, which by definition *require* a human ingredient, it is still necessary to stress the gap between what an event is doing to humans and what they consciously notice about it. For Badiou, those who experience an event without full fidelity to it are actually not experiencing that event at all; in a sense, there is no event without someone being loyal to it.

Instead, I will make the opposite claim: the more transparently an event seems to be understood, the less likely that it is a real event. A certain degree of bafflement generally falls over those who have just been brushed by an event. One thinks of Ernest Rutherford’s shock at the deflection of particles from a previously unsuspected atomic nucleus, or even of Georg Cantor—one of Badiou’s own heroes—with his “I see it, but I don’t believe it” after his discovery of transfinite numbers. A genuine event in the human sphere must be characterized by a certain gap between human participation in it and human understanding of it. While the

gap may not be permanent, is seven or eight years of struggle for understanding too much to ask? With respect to COVID-19, while the new virus was quickly identified, we are still far from grasping the exact nature of this disease and the ways in which it will likely transform the recent civilization we knew through the end of 2019.

Let's turn in closing to the aforementioned weakness of Badiou's theory in dealing with events that amount to anything less than radical upheaval. Manuel DeLanda is fond of opposing both the micro-reduction of society to its smallest actors and the macro-reduction of society to sweeping structural explanations, so as to focus instead on the "meso-level" of society, including such weighty if non-ultimate forces as sub-national institutions.⁹ Consider such entities as the United States Federal Reserve Bank, Harvard University, or the Dutch East India Company (VOC for short); I have written an entire book on the VOC myself.¹⁰ It is likely that COVID-19 itself will turn out to be one of these meso-institutions in human society, lingering as a serious seasonal illness, and thereby triggering phenomena that may have happened anyway though less quickly and decisively. There may be an end to in-person university curricula, for instance, or perhaps to physical money due to the obvious downside of its well-established filthiness. Trends of this sort will be too minimal to interest a self-proclaimed "militant" like Badiou; those impressed by the magnitude of such large but sub-revolutionary changes will look to the militant like mediocrities too easily impressed by just moving the furniture around, even as Capital continues to rot our souls and pillage the planet. Militants will look down on the meso-theorists with a certain degree of scorn, secure in their moral and intellectual superiority. But is this really because they are militants, too uncompromising to accept half-measures? Or is it not instead because they are philosophical *idealists*, overestimating the power of the human mind to make a clean sweep not only of the sum total of human history (this is the part that bothers conservatives), but also of the sum total of social objects to whose functions and interactions our intellects are never quite equal. The fact that COVID-19 will not cause political revolution does not make it just another mediocre happening that changes nothing. Instead, like all important events, it will probably shuffle the arrangements of various key human institutions, while all the attention goes to the two or three it destroys and the three or four it creates. The philosophical problem with militants is not their militancy, but their idealism.

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NOTES

1. Badiou, "On the Epidemic Situation."
2. Badiou, *Being and Event*.
3. Badiou, *Logic of Worlds*, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 78, Table 1.2.
5. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 114. For further discussion see Harman, *Speculative Realism*, chap. 1.
6. Meillassoux, "Decision and Undecidability," 27. For further discussion, see Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 121–22.
7. For one example, see Badiou, *Lacan*.
8. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*. For a critical appreciation of Fried's theory of absorption and theatricality, see Harman, *Art and Objects*.
9. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*.
10. Harman, *Immaterialism*.

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