

Critical Response

I

To Preface the Response to the ‘Criticism’ of Ricardo Nirenberg and David Nirenberg

Alain Badiou

Translated by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens

A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens respond with perfect precision and polite irony to the conjoined attack on my philosophical construction by Ricardo Nirenberg and David Nirenberg. I have nothing to add to this response, all the more definitive for being clear, informed, calm, and independent, whereas the polemic opened by the Nirenbergs is obscure, ignorant, and impassioned and depends from one end to the other on political convictions that, contrary to my own, remain concealed.

I want only to testify to my astonishment when I read the article by my adversaries. I was well disposed at the beginning. Often in fact my enemies—who are very numerous—totally ignore the mathematical and logical apparatus used in my philosophical constructions. They content themselves with a vague trial, ideological in the bad sense of the term. In place of arguing, they stick to opinions. In this sense, they fall far short of the exigencies of philosophy. I was therefore happy that these new criticisms apply their action on the terrain of conceptual rationality, including its formal supports.

But what a disappointment!

I will keep myself here, before letting my Australian friends speak, to two remarks that, in themselves alone, have turned me away from any true interest in this muddled attack from which I expected a lot:

1. The blatant insufficiency, to my great regret, of the purely mathemat-

ical competence of my critics. One can at a pinch pass over the beginner's errors, putting them down to aristocratic carelessness. It is already very unfortunate that my adversaries constantly confound—before blaming me for their confusion—mathematical notions as precisely different as sets, ordinals, and numbers. But the crucial point is obviously that the construction of Paul Cohen's generic extensions, the keystone of my entire apparatus concerning truths, is not in any way *mathematically* understood by my critics. They imagine that the introduction of a generic element into a model of set theory aims only at conserving the ordinals. But, dear friends, the force of a generic extension is to obtain models that validate propositions *other* than those that validate the ground model and not to conserve the same semantics! For this, it is *necessary* that what supplements the ground model is generic and therefore, in a precise sense, not constructible on the basis of that model. Otherwise one remains in the same semantics. It is precisely this characteristic, at once supplementary and nonconstructible, that makes the generic the formal schema of truths; they are added to the situation without being able to be directly deduced from it, and their deployment thus unveils unknown possibilities of the primitive situation. This attests that they aim at, in the situation, *what the language of this situation cannot separate in it before the supplementation*. This is why I call truths generic procedures. This definition can be contested, but you've still got to understand the formalism. Beyond the careless mistakes—too many, all the same—this miscomprehension of Cohen's mathematical concepts bars my critics from being what they pretend: guys who go to the heart of philosophical questions. They too, alas, are only ideologues.

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2. A constant confusion dominates their thought concerning philosophical propositions, which are nonetheless very simple. The most blatant is to allege that for me the notions of being, set, and objects correspond to each other, notions that I distinguish with maximum clarity throughout my work. Whence the repeated ‘objections’ on the part of my critics, which I should say are—there’s no other word—stupid. How can university scholars consider as a serious critique remarks of this kind: in the world, there are things like rabbits or amorous jealousies that do not resemble sets? Can they believe that I don’t know similar truisms? Would they dare to say that there is in the nature of things, like stars and comets, what does not resemble equations of celestial mechanics? In the same way, it is tiresome to hear said that I ‘deduce’ politics from ontology, whereas, contra Heidegger notably, I never cease to specify that these are perfectly disjoint domains. Another example: I have taken great pains to show that an event is in principle unfounded (since it precisely cannot be founded in the situation for which it is an event). As a result, a law of multiplicities (the axiom of foundation) is abolished by the event. My critics, however, act, first, as if I had not taken account of this abolition and, second, as if I did not know that there is contingency (whereas the event, precisely, in particular because unfounded, is massively contingent). Third, they do not hesitate to say that I deduce the Subject from the axioms of set theory, whereas the Subject is precisely separated from the laws of being by the abyss of the event. They ‘deduce’ from these three gross errors of reading (or nonreading?) that I confuse contingency and necessity and that I am therefore an enemy of human freedom. Me, whose whole philosophy desires precisely, by introducing chance at the heart of the theory of truths, to render ‘infinitely’ possible the creative capacity of human beings to become Subjects!

Let’s say it straight out: so much thoughtlessness is discouraging.