

Tending for Necessity: Reclaiming feminism on the left

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Abstract: In light of the feminist response to the presidential victory of Donald Trump, this piece draws upon the work of critical left thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Nancy Fraser and Fredric Jameson in order to advocate a future for feminism that is based on the radical left. Taking inspiration from Fredric Jameson's suggestion that History is marked by "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" this piece argues for a feminism that does not individualise or commodify people's relationships with Necessity, but that has as one of its central tenets a collective caring and tending for those inescapable aspects of living. This does not require a move away from contemporary feminist concerns regarding signification and language. How Necessity is brought (if only partially) into signification and collectively tended for, now constitute vital points of discussion in a left politics that feminists have little choice but to engage with.

Key words: Feminism, Necessity, Marxism, reproduction.

In the days that immediately followed the election of Donald Trump, long trusted feminist friends of mine praised Angela Merkel for her response to the new president elect. In her press conference the German Chancellor spoke of Germany and the USA as “bound together” by the values of “democracy, freedom, respect of law”, and she added to this list “respect of people regardless of their origin, the colour of their skin, their religion, gender, sexual orientation or their political beliefs.”¹ It was on the “basis of these values”, she said, that she would “work closely with the future president of the U.S., Donald Trump.” My friends were critical of the austerity politics of Angela Merkel (and for me her unrelenting stance against Greek debt epitomised this). Yet they saw in Merkel, I think, a European leader whom they felt would stand against racism, sexism and homophobia. They spoke of her stance on European migration, and in relation to Berlusconi, as examples of that.²

In light of there being so many devastating aspects of the US election result I didn't initially understand why the words of my friends, in relation to Merkel, unsettled me so much. It was only later, as I let the election news ‘sink in’, that I began to get a sense of the extent to which some of the most powerful and untiring proponents of neoliberalism are now seen, in international political terms, as the ‘soft option’. Given a choice between on the one hand neoliberalism and on the other the variety of tendencies towards fascism that appear to be gaining momentum around the world today, neoliberalism may indeed start to seem more attractive. And as Alain Badiou noted, as part of his response to the election results: “all political oligarchy is less horrible than new fascism, so I understand perfectly that at the end we prefer Hillary Clinton”.³

The ‘new social movements’ of the late 20th century — the civil rights movements, second wave feminism for example — were radical, and profoundly so, in their challenging and disruption of deep rooted socio-cultural norms and of the economic entrenchment of such prejudice. Yet as is now well documented and in the deftest of subsumption manoeuvres, capitalism has also proved adept at claiming many of the aspirations and demands of those movements.⁴ The way in which some of the most unrelenting proponents of neoliberalism have, in light of the US elections, been able to present themselves as at the forefront of feminism, and of struggles for racial and sexual equality, indicates something of the extent of this. Indeed, references to race and gender by the likes of Angela Merkel and Hilary Clinton, can be read as powerful legitimators of the politics of a neoliberalism that has systematically prioritised the interests of financial capital over those of vast swathes of the world's population. As Nancy Fraser points out, such a politics may have improved living conditions for some women and for some marginalised groups.⁵ Yet in the US, for example, black and Hispanic populations, and women, continue to have poverty levels above the average,⁶

and wage stagnation for all but a very few has contributed to an exacerbation of inequality across the board.⁷ In the words of Badiou:

We must know that today 264 persons have as their property the equivalent of 3 billion other people. It's much more than in the primitive existence of monarchy and so on. Inequality today is much more important than in every other situation in the history of human beings.⁸

In such a context, Nancy Fraser argues that politics cannot simply be interpreted as a matter of taking sides with Clinton or Trump, but rather requires careful consideration of the conditions that have supported the likes of Trump to emerge and rise.⁹ And Badiou makes a related point when he says of the acknowledged differences between Hillary Clinton and Trump: “we cannot forget that in some sense this difference is inside the same world”.¹⁰

For Fraser “those conditions” include what she notes Sanders referred to as “the rigged economy”: an economy that for around three decades has been systematically and politically supported in “redistributing wealth and income upward on a massive scale”, exacerbating inequality, raising household debt, and increasing employment precarity.¹¹ In short, she suggests, there has been a “strategy” of “conniving to mute the whole problematic of redistribution while loudly engaging that of recognition”. It is a strategy that may have worked “surprisingly well” through the years of neoliberal hegemony. “But” she argues “now the lid is off. And what has emerged is a populist rage...”¹² In Badiou’s words, emerged is a “new fascism”.¹³ And the newness is not least because now, as opposed to in the 1930s, Trump and the like are “without alas their strong enemies of the 30s”, by which Badiou is speaking of “the communist parties”.¹⁴ Indeed, the years of neoliberal hegemony from the 1980s onwards, an era in which the politics of feminism and micropolitics apparently thrived and became mainstreamed even, was also one in which — following the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War — the left increasingly recoiled and capitalism was declared the only option.¹⁵

And so in this context, when we think about the possible shapes of feminism into the future, it is insufficient to talk of feminism/s that advocate recognition and acceptance of difference, although those aspects remain profoundly important.¹⁶ Needed now, and perhaps more than ever, are the development of radical alternatives to the ways in which feminism has been framed in the main political and academic spaces of recent decades. This is not to deny that through the years of post-structural and/or postmodern predominance, intensely important political insights were made: bodies were

acknowledged as sites of power; the personal was claimed as political; the term 'woman' was acknowledged as masking racist, heteronormative assumptions; metanarratives were pushed to their (not very tenable) limits; and language was attributed with a power that had previously been unthinkable (probably). Important contributions, to say the least. They were also contributions that can, and indeed were, read as speaking intimately of, if not entirely for, the historical terrain from which they emerged: that which Fredric Jameson, following the periodisation of Ernest Mandel, refers to as "late capitalism".¹⁷ According to such a thesis, after the Second World War a highly technologised capital expanded (in far from uniform ways), creating new markets and drawing hugely diverse populations as well as intensely intimate aspects of human experience into its folds; generating and proliferating through spaces of hyper-reality for which traditional explanatory methods appeared grossly ill-equipped to grasp. In such a context postmodernism could be read as the dominant "cultural logic"¹⁸ through which generations of feminists projected their realities of difference, diversity, pastiche, from the material conditions in which their words were possible (and that they also attempted to exceed). And those communist parties that Badiou notes marked the terrain of the 1930s, were seen in this context to harbour the vestiges of incredulous meta-narrative. Yet at the same time the iron hand of the market went frequently unquestioned, and it was suggested that the 'end of history' (perhaps one of the most inadvertent and masked assumptions of meta-narrative?) had arrived.¹⁹

As Fraser suggests of this era, the politics of 'recognition' were foregrounded as those of 'redistribution' faded (were pushed even) into the background²⁰: discredited as old-fashioned, totalitarian, doctrinaire. Put slightly differently, as the discursive turn took a hold on intellectual thought, political struggles around signification and 'who counts' came to predominate, and struggles relating to what has in the Marxist tradition been called 'Necessity' were seen to wane. Yet there is also an argument to be made that as swathes of the world's population (not least women and those involved in subsistence farming) were drawn — often at wages well below the norm — into precarious labour markets, their entering into commodity relations cannot be adequately described as 'choice', nor simply in terms of claims for representation and inclusion. Whatever talk of post- or transhumanism, the fact that people need sufficient food and warmth to survive has not yet been circumvented. It may not be possible to accurately describe Necessity, to bring its viscosity and materiality into language. Yet even in a highly technologised, discursive society — one seemingly without metanarratives — there is something unrepenting, unassailable and persistent about Necessity (and about its binding with and of possibility).

And so I am suggesting a need to return to, to normalise and regenerate, what might be referred to as the ‘politics of Necessity’. In this regard I draw inspiration from the work of Fredric Jameson, in which he identifies “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity”²¹ as the theme (the organising principle perhaps) through which the urgency and materiality of very different historical moments can be grasped. In the marxist tradition that struggle has tended to be defined as, in some cases reduced to, class struggle. And certainly it’s possible to see how women entering the labour market in large numbers towards the end of the 20th century was integral to the recalibration of class relations on a global scale. Just as importantly, however, feminists have added to and challenged the singular conflation of Necessity with production. In an analytical and political move that extends the parameters of possibility for any radical left movement, the work of *reproduction* is, and indeed I argue must be, identified as Necessity also. It may not be the defining characteristic of women to reproduce, nor the destiny of individual women to do so (and it is to the credit of feminists that that is now widely understood). Yet without the work of reproduction (both ‘biological’ and ‘social’) neither capitalism nor any other social system (or radical political movement for that matter) may continue for much duration. Necessary; but also frequently unpaid, unspoken and disavowed.

Nancy Fraser²² has recently argued that crises of care and reproduction are as intrinsic to capitalism as the crises of production and capital of which Marx spoke: the logic of accumulation inherently impinges upon the capacities of people (primarily women) to carry out the care needed for people, and the system itself, to remain durable. As women in advanced capitalist contexts increasingly prioritise economic productivity (and their own material circumstances may be such that they have to), their (largely unpaid) caring and reproductive labours are often passed on, ‘contracted out’, to lower-paid workers frequently from poorer areas and more deprived socio-economic groups (often also women).²³ Key aspects of this were highlighted recently by childcare workers in Australia as they took strike action over very low rates of pay.²⁴ Gesturing towards the contradictions and tendency to crisis inherent in the situation, a trade union spokesperson noted that these workers, who care for and educate the adults of the future, often find that “when it comes to having their own family or making choices about buying a house or where they want to live, they can’t afford to stay in the sector”.²⁵

Over recent years it became possible for people living in parts of the western world to pay women in more economically and structurally disadvantaged countries to grow and birth babies for them. The industry of global surrogacy is one of the ways in which some of the world’s more affluent individuals and couples have been able to grasp at freedom — *their* freedom

— from the vagaries and unpredictabilities of Necessity (the Necessity that science denotes in terms of ‘biological reproduction’). There are arguments for emphasising the agency of surrogate mothers in this context,²⁶ and surrogate mothers can indeed be read as ‘wresting freedom’ from their own material Necessities through the selling of reproductive labour. Yet as women often speak of working as surrogates in order to provide financially for their own children, from whom they may be separated for the duration of the pregnancy, I’m left wondering who carries out the unpaid reproductive work that would otherwise fall to those women during that time.²⁷

The predicaments of ‘care chains’²⁸ may vary in time and place, but they are not entirely new. The biological infants of wet nurses in Victorian England did not always thrive, and some died, whilst their mothers nursed the infants of affluent families. In the words of Fildes: “In effect, wealthy parents frequently ‘bought’ the life of their infant for the life of another.”²⁹

Individuals have for years struggled to wrest their freedoms from the terrain of Necessity that swathes of neoliberal policy have treacherously shaped and entrenched. Perceiving struggles with and against Necessity as individual struggles (or as the struggles of individual families) is part of the legacy of those decades, and of much longer. A tendency also emerged through the years of neoliberal dominance for the politics of language and signification to gain primacy over that which I am choosing to call the politics of Necessity.³⁰ And certainly, there can be no single definition or understanding of Necessity. Politics comes to life in part through the ways in which such a realm might be made sense of and brought (if not entirely) into signification. Yet perhaps it is also through insisting that there is collective tending — caring — for the materiality that escapes such talk that new political potential might now lie. Indeed, some degree of ‘collective tending’ for Necessity currently occurs, not least through the links of global chains of care and labour. Yet such traces of ‘collectivity’ are also haunted by contradiction: ‘individuals’ and ‘families’ struggling for survival and freedom, apparently joined less by relationships of communality than by those of exploitation and hierarchy.

It cannot by definition be the task of an individual to ascertain the coordinates that more equitable collective tending/s for Necessity might take: these will necessarily be shared, and ongoing, undertakings. But as the work of Silvia Federici suggests, there are any number of antecedents and examples that might be drawn upon for learning and inspiration.³¹ In the latter decades of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, the ‘materialist feminists’ in the USA called for a redesigning of society along spatial, as well as economic, grounds to facilitate the collectivisation of childcare and domestic and other work.³² Federici notes that in 1980s Peru and Chile, when inflation reached unruly

heights, women responded by establishing the ‘ola communes’ or ‘common kitchens’.³³ I find myself wondering what it might mean for people, across genders, to embark upon such projects in different socio-political contexts. Bolsheviks such as Alexandra Kollontai advocated the importance of measures such as “collective housekeeping” and “public restaurants” in addition to other aspects of collective ownership.³⁴

Kinship relations, networks and care that extend well beyond the confines of the nuclear family are also integral to different indigenous cultures, as is care of land.³⁵ In such contexts “caring labours” can be understood not simply in relation to (and against) contemporary capitalism, but as sites of “decolonizing resistance”.³⁶ At a time when there are unprecedented levels of technological know-how, as well as generations of indigenous knowledge and of (re)productive experience, political discussions around the possible coordinates of more collective ‘tendings for Necessity’ may hold the potential to move in a host of new and radical directions.

I started thinking about writing this piece on the day after the US presidential elections, and within days of Trump’s inauguration he signed papers to end federal contributions towards international NGOs that provide family planning initiatives including abortion or information about abortion.³⁷ Such measures will not only put women’s lives in danger.³⁸ They can also be expected to increase the unpaid reproductive responsibilities and labours of women who already carry much of the weight of global and social Necessity. Millions of women across the world have recently taken to the streets in opposition to the inauguration of the new president. These protests were a moving demonstration of international solidarity, and an indictment of the misogyny, assumptions of white supremacy, homophobia, anti-environmentalism (I could go on) of the new president. Yet as I scrolled through the photographs of the demonstrations on my newsfeed I glimpsed a placard upon which were written the words: “A woman’s place is the board room”. And I found myself feeling uneasy (again): revisiting feelings not dissimilar to those that I had a few months ago when I listened to Angela Merkel acknowledging the new president elect at her press conference.

The convergence of big business, of corporate boardrooms, of a financial elite, with the arguments and rhetoric of feminism, has been documented as one of the most disarming aspects of politics of recent decades - not least because it has lent a legitimacy, a credibility even, to a global capitalism that, as Badiou notes, has exacerbated inequalities on a seemingly unprecedented scale. Yet recent years have also seen a number of projects aspiring (despite their limit

points) for more collective and equitable ways of managing and organising in relation to material Necessity: Podemos and Syriza can be seen as part of this. Some might add Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders to the list.³⁹ In an era in which data projection and data management have reached unprecedented levels of sophistication, the potential for a new era of collective economic planning — one that is not based upon profit — is beginning to animate left thought again.⁴⁰ As such projects emerge and experiment with new forms and coordinates, my suggestion is that feminists need to be getting involved where most inspired, learning from and with such movements, expanding the parameters of debate and possibility.

We may differ on what it means to collectivise our relationships with Necessity, and even on what is meant by Necessity. In a nod towards the work of Lacan, and towards the insights of Adorno and Horkheimer, I anticipate the need for conversations on the left around those elements — maybe we could call them creative excesses — that may escape (and necessarily so) being collectively tended for. Yet in my more optimistic moments, I hope that such discussions and differences will constitute the very life-blood of a politics that feminists now have little alternative but to engage with.

Utopia tends to evade our grasps, and importantly so. Yet I find myself thinking that if the anxieties, threats and burdens of Necessity did not individually haunt so many of the world's people, the possibilities and diversities that could open-up in relation to gender, sexuality and relationships with others, might potentially exceed even the most progressive of today's celebrations of difference. Unlike those flimsy pieces of paper that tend to get lost when a commodity is bought, there are no guarantees. And perhaps that is to be embraced. Feminists need to be beginning to imagine different, *very different*, futures to those commonly presented today.⁴¹ Struggles for gender inclusion, acceptance and diversity cannot be reduced to struggles for a more collective 'tending-for' Necessity. But perhaps now, more than ever, we separate them at our peril.

1 Angela Merkel, online video presented in Allegretti, A., *Angela Merkel issues not-so-subtle warning to Donald Trump after his presidential win*, 11 Nov 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/angela-merkel-germany-donald-trump-us-election-warning_uk_582313c5e4b020461a1e8713

2 See, for example, Haroon Siddique (21 May 2014) 'Jeremy Paxman stuns Silvio Berlusconi with Angela Merkel insult allegation', *The Guardian*, Accessed <https://>

www.theguardian.com/media/2014/may/21/jeremy-paxman-stuns-silvio-berlusconi-angela-merkel-insult-allegation See also, Alison Smale and Steven Erlanger, "As Obama Exits World Stage, Angela Merkel May Be the Liberal West's Last Defender," *New York Times*, Nov 12, 2016. Accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/europe/germany-merkel-trump-election.html?_r=0

- 3 That was, however, far from 'the end' of Badiou's argument. Alain Badiou, "Reflections on the recent election," Verso, 15 Nov 2016. Accessed at <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election>
- 4 Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history," *New Left Review* 56/2 (2009): 97-116; Anna Fielder, "Feminism and Marxism (and more) in Contemporary Radical Left Politics", *Counterfutures*, 2 (2016): 21-60
- 5 In the words of Nancy Fraser, the neoliberal project "hegemonic since the 1970s, brought not only a near-meltdown of the global financial system, an exacerbation of global warming, and a massive rise in inequality and precarity, as I already said, but also some gains for women and minorities, although many of the latter are more symbolic than material for all but the professional-managerial classes and far less substantial than the gains that an egalitarian social order would deliver." Nancy Fraser and Andrew Arato, "American elections: a dialogue on the left between Arato and Fraser", *Public Seminar*, Sept 26 2016, Accessed <http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/09/american-elections-a-dialogue-on-the-left/#.WIQSzlwkOWd>
- 6 See, for example, US Census Bureau statistics as presented in Institute for Research on Poverty, "Who is Poor", University of Wisconsin-Madison. Accessed January 29, 2017. <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/faqs/faq3.htm>
- 7 Josh Bivens, Elise Gould, Lawrence Mishel and Heidi Shierholz, *Raising America's Pay*, Washington DC, 4 June 2014, accessed May 11 2016, <http://www.epi.org/publication/raising-americas-pay/>. See also: Josh Bivens and Lawrence Mishel, "Understanding the Historic Divergence Between Productivity and a Typical Worker's Pay", *Economic Policy Institute*, Washington DC, 2 Sept 2015. Accessed May 11 2016. <http://www.epi.org/publication/understanding-the-historic-divergence-between-productivity-and-a-typical-workers-pay-why-it-matters-and-why-its-real/>
- 8 Alain Badiou, op cit.
- 9 According to Nancy Fraser "it is the prospects opened by this overall situation, and not the options now on offer by the two-party system, that should be the starting point for efforts to define a new left politics." Nancy Fraser in Nancy Fraser and Andrew Arato, "American elections: a dialogue on the left between Arato and Fraser", *Public Seminar*, Sept 26 2016, Accessed <http://>

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- 10 Alain Badiou, op cit.
- 11 Nancy Fraser in Nancy Fraser and Andrew Arato, (op cit).
- 12 Nancy Fraser in Nancy Fraser and Andrew Arato (op cit).
- 13 Badiou (November 15 2016) refers to the emergence of a “democratic fascism”, that operates “inside the democratic plane, inside the democratic apparatus” whilst “play[ing] something different”.
- 14 Alain Badiou, op cit.
- 15 See Badiou (ibid) on the idea that global capitalism is not necessary positively embraced, but since the 1980s has been framed as the only option.
- 16 See, for example, Fraser, N. “From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a ‘post-socialist’ age”, *New Left Review* 1/212 (July-August 1995)
- 17 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1991
- 18 Fredric Jameson, ibid.
- 19 Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 1989 (16) (pp.3-18).
- 20 Nancy Fraser, N. “From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a ‘post-socialist’ age”, *New Left Review* 1/212 (July-August 1995)
- 21 In making this point Jameson is drawing very directly on the work of Karl Marx. Fredric Jameson, *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act*, Cornell University Press, 1981, p.19.
- 22 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review*, 100 (2016: 99-117)
- 23 See, also, Arlie R. Hochschild, “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value” in Hutton, W. and Giddens, A. (eds) *On The Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, Vintage, 2001 (pp.130-146).
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- 26 For discussions of agency in relation to global surrogacy, see Daisy Deomampo, 'Transnational Surrogacy in India: Interrogating Power and Women's Agency'. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34, no. 3 (11 December 2013): 167-88. <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz:9443/article/530611>. See also Panitch, Vida. 'Global Surrogacy: Exploitation to Empowerment'. *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no. 3 (1 December 2013): 329-43. doi:10.1080/17449626.2013.818390.
- 27 In the work of Pande (2009) one of the research participants, Rita, speaks of her husband having to look after her children whilst she is in the surrogacy hostel. However, other studies mention that a considerable proportion of surrogate mothers are single parents (see, for example, Deomampo, 2013, p167). As legislation is put forward that makes commercial surrogacy more difficult or illegal in some countries (India and Thailand appearing as recent examples), questions are also raised regarding the extent to which commercial surrogacy will cross new geopolitical boundaries and/or perhaps go increasingly underground. See, for example, Haaij (2016).
- 28 Arlie Russell Hochschild is the oft cited founder of the term 'global care chains'. See, for example, Arlie R. Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value" in Hutton, W. and Giddens, A. (eds) *On The Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, Vintage, 2001 (pp.130-146).
- 29 Valerie Fildes, *Wet nursing: A history from antiquity to the present*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, p.193.
- 30 This is an argument that draws closely upon Nancy Fraser's work. See, for example, Fraser, N. "From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age", *New Left Review*, 1/212 (July-August 1995: pp.68-93) and Fraser, N. "Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history," *New Left Review* 56/2 (2009): 97-116.
- 31 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*, PM Press, CA, 2012: pp.142-148
- 32 Dolores Hayden. *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A history of feminist designs for American homes, neighbourhoods and cities*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press (1981),

See, for example, pp.17-21.

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- 35 See, for example, Rebecca Hall, 'Caring Labours as Decolonizing Resistance'. *Studies in Social Justice* 10, no. 2 (19 December 2016): 220-37.
- 36 Rebecca Hall, *ibid.*
- 37 BBC News, "Trump executive order reverses foreign abortion policy", 23 Jan 2017. Accessed <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38724063>
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- 39 Nancy Fraser in Nancy Fraser and Andrew Arato, "American elections: a dialogue on the left between Arato and Fraser", *Public Seminar*, Sept 26 2016, Accessed <http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/09/american-elections-a-dialogue-on-the-left/#.WIQSzlwkOWd>
- 40 See, for example, *The Return of Economic Planning* conference, to be held in Auckland, 1-3/12/2017, co-hosted by ESRA (Economic and Social Research Aotearoa). Venue to be confirmed.
- 41 In this I am inspired by the words of Alain Badiou: "we must propose a political orientation which goes beyond the world as it is, even if it is, at the beginning, in a not completely clear manner. When we begin something, we have not the complete development of that thing. But we must begin. We must begin, which is the point. After Trump, we must begin." Badiou, A. "Reflections on the recent election", Verso, 15 Nov 2016, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election>

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