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# **Book Review**

## **ALFRANCEMAGNE**

a review of

**Badiou and the German Tradition**

**of Philosophy | Jan Völker, ed.**

**(Bloomsbury, 2019)**

**Reviewed by Marcus Quent**

1. “Which French philosopher does not dream of transfixing German thoughts, of capturing them?” asks Alain Badiou in his foreword to the German translation of his book *Conditions*. If one wishes to reflect the relationship evoked in the title of the anthology edited by Jan Völker – the link between the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou and the German tradition of philosophy as a whole – this question seems revealing. Firstly, on the level of affect and desire, it indicates an underlying tension animating the relationship between both terms: namely, a tension between admiration and rebellion, attraction and resistance. German philosophy is implicitly identified and recognized as a point of reference for every possible contemporary philosophical project, while it is addressed at once as a counterpart rousing an urge stimulated by every form of authority: the urge to beat it at its own game through a cunning chess move.

Thus, it is “German” thoughts fascinating the French philosopher; and it is the spell they exert upon him that stimulates his desire; a desire not simply to break

through the spell or to escape it, but to make these “German” thoughts one's own while precisely standing under their spell – that is, to appropriate them in a kind of thievish act. Within the realm of philosophy, theft does not imply mere imitation, copy or plagiarism, but rather requires the highest level of accuracy and ingenuity. It is a matter of allowing oneself to be sufficiently absorbed in reconstructing a thought so as to fully stand under its spell, while at once gaining the capacity to use it freely, to turn it around in such a way that, ultimately, it does not recognize itself any more. For Badiou, the challenge of German philosophy lies in a process of working through that changes what has been called “German philosophy” in the first place. It is a supreme form of theft only achieved by original philosophical thought.

In examining Badiou's relationship to the “German tradition of philosophy”, it is not only worthwhile exploring the manifest references to philosophical concepts and positions in his work stemming from this tradition. Rather, considering marginal remarks occasionally made by Badiou in connection with German translations of his works proves to be insightful, too; particularly with regards to the peculiarities of the German language, the problem of translation, and the French relationship to German-language philosophy in general. Based on these remarks, two aspects can be identified which represent a non-philosophical surplus of a philosophical problem.

“For a French philosopher, it is always at once a *reward*, a *surprise* and a *test* when one of his books is translated into German. [...] A French philosopher feels, as it were, knighted by history, when his thinking returns to him in this simultaneously cumbersome, peremptory and subtle language.” Firstly, in the face of this philosophical tradition, Badiou's expression of honor renders itself as ambivalent. German philosophy is recognized as the decisive philosophical point of reference, yet there is a struggle against it as a form of irrevocable authority. The appreciation for the contribution of German authors to the history of philosophy is repeatedly connected to the importance of the German language in the development of philosophical ideas.

Philosophical concepts and ideas developed in German, the German tradition of philosophy, “German thoughts” – all of them represent the father figure of a philosopher defining himself as “neoclassical”, at once constantly pondering the “actuality of philosophy”, understood by him as an “intervention” in the present. It is a point of orientation and reference, marking a lineage. In parallel, it secretly nurtures the dream of thwarting family relationships, overthrowing authorities, undermining the father, subverting and transforming him. With regards to Badiou, this particularly

pertains to an opposition to the primacy of language and expression for the development of philosophical thought. It is well known that Badiou admits a certain borrowing of philosophical speech and text from art, but ultimately, he wants to reject all forms of language-bound nature of thinking.

Secondly, Badiou associates the operation of theft and reversal, appropriation and reformulation, indeed of the bewitching of “German thoughts”, with a work that is strictly speaking non-philosophical and that points to a political outside of philosophy. Badiou describes his theft of “German thought” as a “preliminary” work: It is intended to prepare a merger of France and Germany. The aim of this merger is to “put an end to the configurations called ‘France’ and ‘Germany’, which are burdened by too much history and too many misdeeds, and to immediately build a common country as ex-French and ex-German”. *Alfrancemagne* is Badiou’s fantasy name for this curious union of both countries, repeatedly advertised by him. This new country, *Alfrancemagne*, would “be a highly remarkable popular and intellectual invention, much better than that fragile and servile Europe, manipulated by capital, of which no one has ever assumed that it could inspire any philosophy, and which has more to do with that cave from which one has to find one’s way out”.

Five years later, in a public conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy, Badiou begins by referring again to his political vision:

I would like to remind you that I have long been a personal advocate of the merger of France and Germany. I am not a great supporter of Europe. What is this Europe, without Russia, without Turkey, constricted into a defensive and less creative relationship with its past imperial greatness? No, what I want is the merger of France and Germany. A single country, a single federal state, two dominant languages, that would be absolutely possible. France is a country too old, crushed by its history, as wilted as it is pretentious, with no reason to be so. And Germany is a country full of uncertainty. It does not know what it is, it is desperately searching, and it has always been. If we bring France and Germany together, we will put an end to old France, and we will give Germany a true youth. What will philosophy be in this context? Well, it will really become French-German. And that will perhaps be its most glorious epoch. That is my myth of the present.”

The relationship of Badiou to the German tradition of philosophy must be read against the background of such statements.

2. The volume edited by Jan Völker, *Badiou and the German Tradition of Philosophy*, is the result of an international conference on the philosopher's work, "The Presence of Philosophy. Crossing the French-German Border" at the Berlin University of Arts in 2016. It comprises eleven articles, including the lecture "Beyond Negative Dialectics", which Badiou delivered at the conference. The three-hour conversation between Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, also present, has been published separately and is available in several languages. *Badiou and the German Tradition of Philosophy* is one of the most inspiring anthologies on the thinker in question. That it stands out from other anthologies on Badiou's work is mainly due to the fact that most of the contributions succeed in transferring comparisons between different approaches (e.g. Badiou and Kant, Badiou and Marx, Badiou and Heidegger) and detailed studies of the conceptual apparatus, which often dominate author- and work-centered research volumes, into a broader perspective, in which the speculative moment is accentuated.

The concept of tradition is used here less in the sense of a historical inventory or a cultural entity than as a process of transmission, creation, and transfer of philosophical problems. In his introductory remarks to the volume, Völker refers to the concept of tradition as "indication of a problem", i.e. the process of a passing-on in thought. Tradition in this sense is still in conjunction with proper names, but they do not function as signs of personal, cultural and national identities anymore. The concept of tradition, as problematic as it may be in itself, refers to a principal historical dimension of philosophy in the sense of a transmission of problems and conflicts, whereby continuity and discontinuity enter into a complex relationship. Thus, Völker is following up on an understanding of the historical dimension of philosophy Badiou formulated similarly in the aforementioned conversation with Nancy: "I think that philosophy exists in a discontinuous way. What exists are philosophical moments. In any case, the idea of continuity, of tradition, is an academic idea [...]. There are discontinuous philosophical moments, and they can be found in history." In terms of philosophy, tradition raises the problem of the *continuity of discontinuities*, so to speak.

Accordingly, in this context, the "German" and the "French" in philosophy are not to be understood as a collection of identifiable features or set of characteristics, but rather serve to mark a discontinuous moment and constellation in the process of thinking. "German" and "French" are used as naming characteristics in thought, but not as adjectives indicating a national affiliation, they rather function as markers of

singular philosophical-historical moments. They are concerned with singular moments and incisions in the history of philosophy, which are always connected to proper names, but in general have more to do with the transmission and translation of thoughts than with personal and group identities. But perhaps it is also due to this attempt to use adjectives like “French” and “German” and concepts as “tradition” and “canon” in a distanced and strictly inner-philosophical way, that Badiou's desire, quoted at the beginning, for a theft and appropriation of “German thoughts”, which should “prepare” a political merger of both states France and Germany, is strangely absent in the contributions of the volume?

In its arrangement of the various contributions, the volume proceeds chronologically: It starts with a contribution by Rado Riha on hidden Kantian elements in Badiou, followed by a first dense block on Hegel and Badiou including three contributions by Dominik Finkelde, Frank Ruda and Jan Völker. Svenja Bromberg and Justin Clemens each contribute a text on Marx and Heidegger, which, however, represents rather sideshows in this volume. The second focus is formed by the four following texts by Alexander García Düttmann, Christoph Menke, Jelica Šumič and Rok Benčin, dealing with Adorno, or rather the philosophical challenge that the name Adorno represents for the philosophical project of Badiou.

Ruda's and Völker's contributions each attempt in their own way, with a broadened perspective, to unfold Badiou's philosophical project as a continuation, actualization and renewal of German Idealism: Ruda experiments with the idea that after the publication of the third and last part of Badiou's main work, *The Immanence of Truths*, we can now finally see that there is already a book called *The Immanence of Truths* written by Hegel. Völker, on the other hand, in a meticulous and precise conceptual work, develops the large-scale thesis that Badiou's thinking constitutes a “torsion” of German Idealism. As in this instance, contributions to the volume are powerful whenever they succeed in transferring a certainly necessary and preparatory technical analysis and comparative interpretation of concepts to the level of speculative thought.

The dual focus on Hegel and Adorno makes it clear that the discussion of the “German tradition of philosophy” here is essentially a discussion of the philosophical tradition of German Idealism. The connection between “German thought”, which the French philosopher dreams to capture and captivate, is thus here above all the problematically twisted connection associated with the term *dialectics*. Because the problem of dialectics is essentially accompanied by a dispute over the status of negation in thought, it is only consistent that Adorno appears to some extent as a

philosophical rival, given that Badiou's project, as Völker suggests, must be understood as a "torsion of German idealism". This rivalry gets unfolded in depth by Christoph Menke (with regard to determinate negation) and Alexander Garcia Düttmann (with regard to the problem of practice). Düttmann and Menke do not reject Badiou's project from their position closer to Adorno, but rather, in all sympathy, they problematize and question it; while, in contrast, Jelica Šumič and Rok Benčin seem more concerned with balancing and approximating both authors in their readings of aesthetics. The thought to be captivated, the thought to be captured, is thus at the core of *negation*.

Badiou himself regards Adorno neither as part of what he calls the "German moment" of philosophy situated in the 19th century, nor of what he calls the "German-French" moment situated in the 20th century inspired mainly by readings of Heidegger. Much more, Adorno indicates an outside figure or position, from which a competing balance sheet of this "German moment" of philosophy is developed. Badiou's examination of Adorno's work, quite unlike his reading of Hegel, is not actually a profound one, but rather marks a strategic decision, arising from his philosophical project. After the end of the 20th century, there are perhaps two essential approaches competing with each other, each casting a spell over "German thoughts": a "negative dialectics" and an "affirmative dialectics". With regards to this quarrel, in the most powerful and inspiring moments of this volume, points of contact and blind spots of both "torsions" of dialectics come into view.

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In our time, the unmarked medium in which the French-German border crossing, the French-German exchange takes place, is English language. Today, what enables and promotes every kind of border crossing, but suspends and hinders it at the same moment, is a universal Anglo-American scientific space-time, a unified global linguistic space in which all spaces are embedded, that surrounds and interacts with all possible spaces. What does it mean that a contemplation about relations and references of French and German philosophy takes place in English, that it is organized and published in English? Will the new *Alfrancemagne* end up being a country in which there are not "two dominant languages" but in which the official language is still English?