

Dear editors,

I'm writing to make two points about the *Demarcations* article on Alain Badiou – one critical point, one a suggestion for future articles.

Overall, I agreed with the article. More than agreed, I thought it was timely, correct, and I was blown away by the scope and depth of analysis of Badiou's political project. But I thought the tone was a bit unbalanced. Badiou is a philosopher of world stature who has stubbornly – and even courageously – defended the Cultural Revolution. He's done this at a time when those who defend the Cultural Revolution are treated with the same scorn and contempt that is heaped (deservedly) on Holocaust deniers. And I believe he has played a significant role in opening up a space (at least in Western academic circles) for discussion of the Cultural Revolution and the nature of revolutionary communism. This should have been acknowledged and given some weight.

It is true, as the article shows in detail, that his defense of the Cultural Revolution distorts the aims, methods and theory of Mao and the revolutionaries grouped around him, who fought and in many cases died to defend socialism in China and to find a way to move it forward towards the goal of world-wide communism. It is also true that Badiou's "idea of communism" is no communism at all, but rather a return to the bourgeois democratic ideals of the 18th century – ideas that were radical in their time, but whose time has long since passed. This "looking backwards" is part of a widespread trend that has followed upon the defeat of the first wave of communist revolution, and Badiou's role in not only spearheading this trend but cloaking its reactionary nature by trying to give it the name "communism" deserved every line of the critique it was subjected to in your article. But I believe the critique would have been better received if it had come with a more balanced view of Badiou's impact on the current political climate.

My second point is that I would like to see more about Badiou's use of set theory in future articles in *Demarcations*. I think it was correct to avoid this in the first *Demarcations* article, not only because the article was already approaching book length, but because to add a discussion on set theory would have confused the nature of the article. Badiou's political project is clear – and in my view clearly wrong – and it deserved to be treated on its own. A discussion of Badiou's use of set theory would be on the cutting edge of contemporary philosophy. Of its nature it would be speculative and more prone to error – but also, because of this, it could be very productive in the struggle to get an ever deeper understanding of materialism and dialectics.

Badiou's use of set theory is closely tied to his understanding of the main struggle of the Cultural Revolution in the area of philosophy: the struggle between the reactionary line of "two combines into one" and the revolutionary line of "one divides into two". The thesis that he derives from this, that "the one is not", which is the starting point for his use of set theory, is also tied in with the struggle to separate out the idealism and teleology of Hegel's philosophical system from its revolutionary dialectical kernel, a process begun by Marx and Engels, but continuing on through Lenin, Mao, Avakian, and in the academic arena, through Badiou's philosophical mentor, Louis Althusser. I think it would be exciting to see a series of articles dealing with this from a revolutionary communist perspective. My own opinion is that Badiou's use of set theory is

interesting and even exciting, but ultimately disappointing. I would welcome a chance to explain why.

A reader

A Response from the Editors

Thank you for your letter and thoughtful comments.

We welcome – and would consider for publication – a commentary or review on Badiou’s philosophy that touches on the themes you mention. Philosophy has been an integral aspect of communist theory and science since their inception, and profoundly intertwined with junctures and developments – both advances and retreats – in the ideological and political sphere. Our inaugural issue featured a major article called "Crises in Physics," Crises in Philosophy and Politics by Bob Avakian.

In what follows, we address your “critical point” that the polemic against the political philosophy of Alain Badiou that appeared in the inaugural issue of *Demarcations*, Alain Badiou's "Politics of Emancipation": A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World by Raymond Lotta, Nayi Duniya, and K. J. A. lacks “a more balanced view of Badiou’s impact on the current political climate.”

Many have raised similar questions and doubts, and we want to take this opportunity of your letter to address this issue. As stated in the polemic, Badiou is popularly perceived – especially in progressive and radical circles – as a radical and courageous thinker putting forth and nurturing tender shoots of communism in a hostile, sometimes virulently, anti-communist world. So why this polemic – isn’t Alain Badiou helping revolutionary communism – even if indirectly?

The answer is no, and we say this for three interrelated reasons.

First, as you recognize, Badiou defends and upholds NOT the Cultural Revolution as it was, but as he reads, recasts, and redefines it. Badiou sees the Cultural Revolution as a mass democratic upsurge that Mao initially directed against the leading position of the communist party in the revolutionary state. You speak correctly of Badiou’s distortion of Mao’s “aims, methods and theory.” This stems from and is consistent with a framework which rejects – as oppressive – what Badiou and others term the “party-state”: proletarian revolutionary state power as a transition to communism, with the institutionalized leading role of the party through the whole process.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) sought to prevent capitalist restoration and to advance revolutionary China on the socialist road – as a means of and with the conscious goal of transforming the party, the masses, and all aspects of society (economy, culture, social relations, world outlook, education, etc.) in the process. But through Badiou’s prism, the GPCR is reduced, distorted, and redefined as a popular movement – not against those high-ranking elements of state and party that sought to take China down the capitalist road – but against the "party-state" itself, that is, against the leading role of the vanguard party in socialist society. In this re-telling,

Mao ultimately thwarted the mass movement, and the Cultural Revolution came to defeat when the institutions of party-state asserted their dominance.

At a time when anti-communism is concentrated in the verdict that the “party-state” has been – and is – an oppressive bureaucratic-authoritarian power over the masses, rather than one of emancipation, Badiou merely reinforces this verdict. This is both fundamentally untrue and very harmful, because, as shown in the polemic against Badiou, without the “party-state”, there is no emancipating humanity.

Second, and very related, Alain Badiou is NOT “opening up space” for “discussion of the Cultural Revolution and the nature of revolutionary communism.” Rather, he is contributing to further locking in place a discourse – with its content, methodology, limits, and constraints - that essentially writes off as “no good,” the whole rich revolutionary and emancipatory history in the first wave of communist revolutions that took place in the Soviet Union and China.

At a time when rampant and gross distortions of the Cultural Revolution, and the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions overall, are the order of the day, what is greatly needed is going “against the tide” and struggling for the real truth about these experiences – with its genuine achievements and shortcomings. What is not needed is giving further impetus and rationale to the common-sense verdict and conventional-wisdom that these were, in Badiou’s words, “bureaucratic”, “authoritarian” and defined by “police coercion.” As noted in the polemic, Badiou completely elides what was most defining of these experiences: the establishment of a non-exploitative socialist economy that meets the basic needs of the people, and the radical and unprecedented liberating transformations wrought by these revolutions in the realm of politics, culture and social relations.

One feature of the anticommunist ideological barrage of the last few decades has been “a ganging up on communism by some intellectuals who should know better, and some of whom once did know better,” as Bob Avakian has recently commented. (1)

This is the context in which Alain Badiou has advanced his “politics of emancipation,” consistent with and reinforcing dominant anti-communist prejudices, and doing so under the moniker of communism. Most significantly, Badiou has “un-burdened” himself of the first wave of communist revolutions in the Soviet Union and China. Coming from someone who has a reputation as “a critic” of this system and who seemingly defends aspects of communist history and theory, it is *disorienting, confusing, and harmful*.

Is the door being opened to exploring revolutionary communism and the instrumentalities, the vanguard party and proletarian state, most needed for the emancipation of humanity? No. In fact, people are being led down a dead-end, minds are fundamentally unchanged...leaving the world “as is.”

Badiou’s unscientific summation of the GPCR, a summation shot through with anticommunism, is not the “opposition” we need to the more mainstream anti-communist narratives. Indeed, it is a false dichotomy to posit that these are the only poles out there. In fact, Badiou’s theses on the Cultural Revolution stand in stark contrast and opposition to a thoroughly scientific analysis of

what the GPCR represented – and how humanity can go further and do better – as concentrated in the work of Bob Avakian. (By the way, this issue of the journal features an interview with Bob Avakian on the GCPR.)

Creating space for genuine revolutionary communism (including and especially in Western academic circles), requires challenging the dominant discursive framework of what this first wave of communist revolutions and socialist societies embodied. Creating space requires breaking through the discursive limits that rule out discussion of communism as a project of human emancipation. It requires putting forth the truth and seizing every opportunity to wage epistemological, ideological and political struggle on these questions, wielding the most advanced concentration of communist science and theory, Bob Avakian’s new synthesis of communism.

Third, it is very hard – if not impossible - to open a space for discussion of genuine revolutionary communism, on the basis of having explicitly and firmly rejected the fundamentals, from Marx onwards – as Badiou has done. Instead as you correctly point out, he looks backwards “to the bourgeois democratic ideals of the 18th century.” How does a new generation of young people discover revolutionary communism when he tells them “the age of revolution is over” and that the conquest of state power is neither desirable nor feasible.

Further, Alain Badiou has lent his name to and helped sponsor high-profile conferences across continents that further advance this (his) “Idea of Communism” that has nothing to do with revolutionary communism. These conferences are not only vehicles for promoting unscientific and anti-communist views. They have also excluded the genuine revolutionary communist viewpoint: there has been no formal and invited participation or representation of Bob Avakian’s new synthesis.

Now having said all of this, it is also important to affirm that diverse channels of intellectual activity can indeed help open space for a genuinely liberatory, communist discourse.

For instance, there are some scholars in Soviet and Chinese studies doing valuable historical research about the achievements of and contradictions faced by the Soviet and Chinese revolutions in waging struggle against patriarchy. This work can contribute to a more favorable atmosphere for people to “rediscover” historical truth and deepen historical understanding of what communism actually represents. But to maximize the positive effect requires that the pole of revolutionary communism be exerting far greater influence. There are also some progressive scholars in various fields who, recognizing the importance of genuine communism being in dialogue and debate with diverse currents of thought, have made efforts to facilitate exchange. And, pivotally, as increasing numbers of radical thinkers feel moved and compelled to engage with and respond to Avakian’s new synthesis, the terms of intellectual-political debate over what is possible and what is desirable in today’s world will change. All of this will be interacting with and influenced by shifts, dislocations, and struggles in society and the world, like Egypt and Occupy.

But this is quite different from “the Badiou effect.” He is “opening” people’s eyes to a highly-worked out and refined position of opposition to the dictatorship of the proletariat and the

leading role of a vanguard party...in the guise of “carrying the torch” of Maoism.

Finally, a word on polemics. Polemics matter because ideas matter. In this regard, a statement attributed to Zhang Chunqiao, one of the great revolutionary leaders of the Cultural Revolution and one of the so-called “gang of four,” is highly relevant: “Theory is the dynamic factor in ideology.” People learn theory not only by directly studying the science of communism, but also by observing and engaging in the contention between different lines and worked out ideas. It is through this fierce contestation that people deepen their understanding and grasp of theory, heighten their ability to compare and contrast opposed lines, and learn better how to demarcate what is correct from what is wrong, what will lead to emancipation from what will not.

- 1 An interview with Bob Avakian, "What Humanity Needs, Revolution and the New synthesis of Communism," *Revolution*, 267, May 1, 2012.

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