



Review Article

Universal Emancipation: Race Beyond Badiou (2020) by Elisabeth Paquette

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Post-structuralist philosophical thought, which developed in France in the second half of the twentieth century, constitutes a stage of forced confrontation, as much for the conceptual innovations made to the multiple fields of 'critical theory', as much as for the political positioning of many members in the Marxist and post-Marxist cultural milieu. In spite of its militant lineage, this theoretical field suffers from some limits linked to what R.J.C. Young, on the basis of J. Derrida's metaphor, called 'white masks', the Eurocentric structure of thought production. Although, and undeniably, this same structure has been the object of attacks and deconstructions. The current anti-racist conflicts (and the cultural work related to them), in fact, try to speak to the unconscious symptoms of the post-structural canon, to test the theoretical statements, and to stress the same limits, in the context of a renewed political appropriation.

Elisabeth Paquette's recent work 'Universal Emancipation' co-faces the philosophy of Alain Badiou, who, famously, on the basis of Althusserian philosophy, has developed a relevant machine of thought on the forms of political emancipation from a Marxist perspective. The author interrogates this significant theoretical corpus through the concept of race, highlighting both the absence of a problematization of it, and the contradictions that these *vulnus* bring to the heart of the theoretical framework. To introduce the content of the book, Paquette's precise comparison with Badiou's conceptual catalogue mainly highlights the 'race-blind' foundation, and the impossible self-sufficiency of the universal dimension of emancipation, which leads Badiou himself to subsume contingencies and differences within a monolithic totality. The first chapter introduces the key-words that underpin Badiou's emancipation theory. The meta-political form taken by the subjective decision, and the universal dimension of the event as the very manifestation of truth are symptomatic of what the author calls 'indifference to difference'.

According to this reading, race, like other claims concerning minorities and differences, implies the extension of state powers, and therefore invalidates political struggles. Revolutionary political struggles, as a real expression of the will for emancipation, are struggles that operate by subtraction from particular claims and move towards the universal, the political truth (p. 35). Identity, which for Badiou represents a socially mediated construction, is reduced to a particular enunciation, that contradicts the enunciation of a universal singularity, and is perceived as a political limit, a corollary that does not reach the effectiveness of the people as a designated conflictual subjectivity. If the people represents the manifest form of revolutionary subjectivation that exceeds the logic of the state, then race and other claims based on identity remain anchored to non-existence.

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The second chapter continues, in the first section, to investigate the negative aura assumed by identity and minority formulations in the philosopher's political analyses, questioning the book he dedicated to the problem, with the icastic title 'Black'. In fact, he recognizes the oppressive origin of the race as a product of the colonial structure, which, consequently, lacks its own facticity and cannot access emancipation. Hence, the dialectic of blackness remains internal to the ideological and binary dialectic of whiteness, as a negative element that opposes purity, and which cannot make its own claims. In this sense, race is a minor (or secondary) contradiction that paves the way for liberation policies, but cannot designate one of its own. (pp.43-47)

In the second section, the author inscribes Badiouian posture in the more general tendency of twentieth-century French Marxism to underestimate the racial question, to consider it as a tactical element and not as a systemic contradiction *tout court*. The analysis, at this point, focuses on the famous debate between Sartre and Fanon on Negritude and its impact on the political strategies implemented by both intellectuals and organizations of the working-class movement. Sartre, both in 'Orphée Noir' and in the introduction to Fanon's *magnumopus* 'Les Damnés de la Terre', recognizes in the black identity movement an aesthetic and expressive function, and in black consciousness a dialectical moment of the construction of the proletariat, whose function is exhausted in the formation of a universal class. In response to this discourse, Fanon's anti-colonial and revolutionary phenomenology breaks the monopoly of political enunciation by the engagée intellectuals, so as to restore an epochal visibility to the material experience of the colonized, and to the formation of their consciousness as an antagonistic class consciousness. By detaching political subjectivation from the progressive and colonial gaze, the Martinican revolutionary highlights the immanent dimension of blackness, its creative and anti-essentialist nature, and outlines both the partiality of the anti-colonial event and its universal emancipatory vocation. Fanon's analysis assumes fundamental relevance in refuting the particularistic definition of race produced both by Badiou and, *de relato*, by a certain Western Marxism linked to the hypostasis and abstraction of events and subjectivities.

In the third chapter, Paquette formulates the proposal of a positive conception of identity, with a theoretical detour into the critical debates on the emancipative function of identity, and a further passage into Marxist formulations on Negritude, further exploring the traces of the previous chapter.

The racial question, in fact, as suggested by C. Robinson in his pioneering 'Black Marxism', is an invariant in the global structuring of capitalism, and, therefore, constitutes an enrichment in Marxist theory, integrating a peripheral vision capable of deconstructing the Western framework and reading the history of black radicalism as a class history, internal to anti-capitalist struggles. In this sense, Césaire's works constitute an excellent antidote to Sartrean and Badiouian politics of indifference. Negritude is the device used to name constitutive difference, founded in the refusal of alienated identity, which becomes a moment of powerful self-affirmation of subjectivity (pp.81.86). Hence, the positive conception of race, as a process of openness, is linked to communitarian experiences, to the solidarity built in the struggles and to the processual imagination of becoming-revolutionaries, intersecting the multiple material determinations of subjection and exploitation, and enriching the conceptual baggage and the praxis. Paquette, on the basis of Gordon's work, introduces the concept of the creolization of politics, a movement lateral to radical political theory that focuses on the universal aspiration, while giving value to the experiences of contingency, and the transformation of the methodology of emancipatory thought and practice (pp. 89-93).

The fourth chapter concerns the critique of the reduction of racial identity to mere cultural practice. The affirmation of revolutionary 'pure politics', for the philosopher, divests particular truths, of which both identity and culture are integral parts. The comparison is shifted to critical discussions of the Haitian Revolution of 1804, seen as a practical example of anti-colonial insurrection and affirmation of Creole and Black identity. To Nesbitt's Badiouian interpretation, which reads the event as an example of the displacement of the

particular will of the insurgent slaves into the more general policy of universal emancipation that arose with the French Revolution and its Declarations, Paquette opposes the reading of the events advanced by G. Ciccariello Maher. The political scientist, in fact, underlines the subversive nature of the revolutionary process, because it was directed against the very constitutional and abstract principles of freedom and equality. Consequently, the main effect of the victory of the insurgent slaves was the recognition and promotion of black identity in opposition to whiteness, which was identified as an element of global oppression. In this sense, difference is a fundamental and necessary element of liberation politics, which goes beyond the limits of the philosopher's Eurocentric framework (pp. 108-122).

The last chapter tries to push these limits, bringing together the political aspiration for universal emancipation with the work of Quijano, Mignolo and Sylvia Winter. The combination of these approaches, in fact, addresses the colonial nature of the category of 'human' and 'humanity' as elements that exclude marginal subjectivities and their phenomenal reality. Firstly, decolonial approaches point to the divestment of the primacy of abstraction in favour of a 'pluri-conceptual framework' capable of weaving relationships between the many worlds and events that speak (pp.147-149). The Badiouian event can be embodied in what Winter calls '*liminality*', the structural condition of marginality that offers the possibility of a multiple and different view of reality.

In this sense, the margin constitutes an assemblage of all minor identities situated along the same line of exploitation, a veritable tool for organizing differences within a critical project, in which particular claims are the source of universal emancipation (p. 154).

In conclusion, Povinelli, focusing polemically on Badiou, targeting the posture of certain Marxist scholastics impervious to the issues raised by race, gender and class. Through the construction of identity as a mobile and dynamic element, the author punctually demonstrates how this dimension of intersectionality constitutes a useful methodological and political starting point that can and must decolonize Marx and Marxism, without abandoning the material potential of collective liberation that they contain. Using Badiouian concepts metaphorically, the event to come will have to be decolonial, or will be indifferent to revolutionary subjectivities.

Bio-note

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