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Coordinadores:

Dr. Juan José Abud Jasso (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)

Dr. Raúl Reyes Camargo (Instituto de Educación Media Superior de la Ciudad de México y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana)

Autores

Alfredo González Reynoso

Juan Manuel Rodríguez Rojas

Camila Joselevich Aguilar

Miguel Ángel Olivo Pérez

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo

Angelina Uzín Olleros

Alfredo Pizano Ferreira

Emmanuel Díaz del Ángel

José Pedro Rodríguez Ramos

Editor Técnico / Juan José Muñoz Mendoza

Corrección de Estilo / Francisco Ruiz Solís

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Alain Badiou una Vida y un Sistema de Pensamiento: Ha-
cia una operación histórica en defensa de su contribución
a la Historia de las Ideas del Siglo XXI

Alain Badiou une Vie et un Système de Pensée : Vers une
opération historique en défense de sa contribution à l’His-
toire des Idées du XXIe Siècle

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0612-013X>
Universidad de Los Lagos, Departamento
de Ciencias Sociales,
Osorno, Chile.

Editor: José Luis Cisneros Arellano Dr., Universidad
Autónoma de Nuevo León, Centro de Estudios Huma-
nísticos, Monterrey, Nuevo León, México.

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Email: nicol.barriaasenjo99@gmail.com

**ALAIN BADIOU A LIFE AND A SYSTEM OF
THOUGHT: TOWARD A HISTORIC OPERATION IN
DEFENSE OF HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY
OF IDEAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**ALAIN BADIOU UNA VIDA Y UN SISTEMA
DE PENSAMIENTO: HACIA UNA OPERACIÓN
HISTÓRICA EN DEFENSA DE SU CONTRIBUCIÓN A
LA HISTORIA DE LAS IDEAS DEL SIGLO XXI**

**ALAIN BADIOU UNE VIE ET UN SYSTÈME DE
PENSÉE: VERS UNE OPÉRATION HISTORIQUE EN
DÉFENSE DE SA CONTRIBUTION À L'HISTOIRE DES
IDÉES DU XXI^E SIÈCLE**

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo¹

¹ Universidad de Los Lagos, Departamento de Ciencias Sociales, Osorno, Chile.

Abstract

“L’histoire des idées”, has a nominal existence in the period of the Enlightenment, that is to say, it has its origins in the 19th century in France. From the moment of its appearance and establishment as an independent field, it maintained a close and complementary relationship with philosophy. At present, the History of Ideas is a field in dialogue with History, Historiography, Philosophy and even Psychoanalysis. It is necessary to return to the French intellectual terrain, to the living history and intellectual production of our time in order to analyze the contribution that French philosophers make to the history of Ideas in the 21st century. Specifically, to pay special attention to the system of thought created by the philosopher Alain Badiou. The present document, which emerges as an initial and introductory kick-off to a more complex project, is a general reading and analysis of some of Badiou’s contributions to contemporary philosophy.

Keywords

Philosophy, Alain Badiou; History of Ideas; System of Thought.

Resumen

“L’histoire des idées”, tiene una existencia nominal en el periodo de la Ilustración, es decir, tiene sus orígenes en el siglo XIX en Francia. Desde el momento de su aparición e instauración como un campo independiente mantuvo una estrecha y complementaria relación con la filosofía. En la actualidad la Historia de las Ideas es un campo en dialogo con la Historia, La Historiografía, la Filosofía e incluso el Psicoanálisis. Es necesario retornar al terreno intelectual francés, a la historia viva y producción intelectual de nuestra época para analizar la contribución que los filósofos franceses realizan a la historia de las Ideas del siglo XXI. En específico, poner una atención especial al sistema de pensamiento creado por el Filósofo Alain Badiou. El presente documento, emerge como puntapié inicial e introductorio a un proyecto más complejo, es una lectura y análisis general de algunas contribuciones que Badiou realiza a la filosofía contemporánea.

Palabras clave

Filosofía; Alain Badiou; Historia de las Ideas; Sistema de Pensamiento.

Resumé

“L’histoire des idées a une existence nominale dans la période des Lumières, c’est-à-dire qu’elle a ses origines dans la France du 19^{ème} siècle. Dès son émergence et son établissement en tant que domaine indépendant, elle a entretenu une relation étroite et complémentaire avec la philosophie. Aujourd’hui, l’histoire des idées est un domaine en dialogue avec l’histoire, l’historiographie, la philosophie et même la psychanalyse. Il est nécessaire de revenir sur le terrain intellectuel français, sur l’histoire vivante et la production intellectuelle de notre temps pour analyser la contribution des philosophes français à l’histoire des idées au XXI^e siècle. Plus précisément, il convient d’accorder une attention particulière au système de pensée créé par le philosophe Alain Badiou. Le présent document, qui se présente comme un coup d’envoi initial et introductif d’un projet plus complexe, est une lecture et une analyse générales de certaines contributions de Badiou à la philosophie contemporaine.

Mots-clés

Philosophie; Alain Badiou; Histoire des idées; Système de pensée.

A great Philosophy is an attempt to solve a contradiction. And after may 68, my trajectory is in some sense the same, that is, to save the figure of the subjectivity inside the context of structures and science. So, there is a possible definition of my philosophy, is to organize the possibility of a synthesis between Sartre and Plato, which is impossible

Alain Badiou.

May 1968 breaks my life in two parts, and it is why its, for me, the model of what is an Event

Alain Badiou

The History of Ideas in Alain: Badiou in the History of Ideas

Alain Badiou affirmed, with Nietzsche, that Philosophy is the biography of the philosopher, in this way produces an inseparable knot between the existential traces, the experience and the appearance of the philosopher/intellectual, according to Badiou it is the experiential becoming of life what is shaping a system of thought that is written by the figure of the philosopher, it will be this perspective “L’entrée la plus essentielle dans notre question”². According to Kelley “the history of philosophy,

2 Alain Badiou, “Les Langues de Wittgenstein,” *Rue Descartes*, no. 26 (1999), 107.

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including its errors as well as its truths, was inseparable from and indeed an essential part of philosophy itself³, interesting turn of events, especially if we remember that Badiou⁴ in his text *The Ethic of Truths: Construction and Potency*, proposes the following: “All the categories through which the essence of the truth can be submitted to thought are negative: undecidability, indiscernibility, the generic ‘not-all’ (pas-tout), the unnameable”. So, what is the attempt to capture truth that we will be able to undertake in the light of the study of the system of thought that Alain has made and will continue to produce?

According to Donald R. Kelley in his text: *The descent of Ideas*, we found:

The ‘history of ideas’ had a nominal existence in the Enlightenment, but it was in nineteenth-century France that it emerged most conspicuously as an independent practice. It was still associated with philosophy, to be sure, but it also became recognizable as a branch of historical scholarship distinct from the old conventions of ‘doing philosophy’. Or rather, it was joined to a particular way of doing philosophy, a so-called ‘eclectic’ way, in which history in effect took precedence over unassisted and unencumbered reason and became ‘first philosophy’. The modern philosophy of eclecticism appeared in France in the early nineteenth century. Eclecticism had important antecedents in early modern Germany and in antiquity but it was Victor Cousin, student of philosophical schools from Plato and Proclus to Descartes and Kant, who revived

3 Donald R. Kelley, *The descent of Ideas* (2002), 12.

4 Alain Badiou, “The Ethic of Truths: Construction and Potency”, *Plí. The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 12. (2001), 247. <https://plijournal.com/papers/alain-badiou-the-ethic-of-truths-construction-and-potency/>

the term, established his own school, and found a rationale for this conception which incarnated the history of philosophy and that more particularized pursuit which he called l'histoire des idées.⁵

The “History of Ideas” as a theoretical construction and field, begins in France, and now, for the purposes of this work, we turn again to the French production to identify the dual contribution that philosophy, or to be more specific, all that the philosopher Alain Badiou, has contributed from his system of thought, to this field. The study of the works of other epochs is a field that is widely published, what persists as a maxim of the historiographic operation is to look at the contribution from the future to the past, only to the extent that a figure has died, that an author and intellectual has disappeared from the material world, his ideas become valid. It is no surprise to anyone that many thinkers who in life died in the oblivion of their time, in other centuries have great repercussions and their works are valuable legacies of the spirit of their own time.

According to Gusynov:

The relationship of history and theory within philosophy reveals some features that make it unique, one of its kind. Two of these features are particularly tricky and enigmatic. First, philosophical systems are positioned with regard to one another as if each were the first and only system. Speaking about the prevalent trend, one system is not a continuation of others, and rather than elaborating them, arises alongside them, formulating in a new way the same old questions but answering them in a new way. Every philosopher begins ab ovo. Diverse philosophical systems do

5 Kelley, *The descent of Ideas*, 9.

not form a single chronological ascending chain in which every link co-opts the previous links they are positioned in space as if they existed simultaneously. Each philosophical system of course has its mortal author, arises during a certain epoch in a concrete situation, and bears characteristic marks of the period. Yet its content, at least potentially, has an everlasting relevant. Arising in time, it has an extra-temporal character. The deeper a philosophy is immersed in the affairs and passions of its time and its era, the more accurately it expresses their spirit, the greater its chances are of surviving them and getting a new lease of life at other times in different eras.⁶

How many will be the theoretical and conceptual productions that will appear in the century following ours on the legacy of Alain Badiou? What is the spirit of our time that is only identifiable by following Badiou's theses and intellectual trajectory? Why in our century does the attention persist on the thinkers of other times ignoring the invaluable work of contemporary intellectuals perform? Where is the history of philosophy and the history of ideas today being nourished by the history of philosophical theory and where is it heading?

Alain Badiou asked himself: "Théorie veut dire quoi?"⁷ And he answered it in the following way: "Eh bien cela veut dire justement que ce dont on parle ne préexiste pas comme objet d'expérience au développement de la théorie elle-même"⁸. In this way, we insert ourselves in the

6 Abdusalam A. Guseynov, "Philosophy: History and Theory," *Studies in East European Thought* 68, no. 2/3 (2016): 107–108.

7 Own translation: "What does the theory mean?" Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, «Aimez ce que jamais vous ne croirez deux fois», *Le Perroquet*, No. 13/14, (junio 1982).

8 Own translation: "Well, this means that what we are talking about does
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complexity of the mixture of a conceptual machinery and a system of thought inherited from others and at the same time with a singularity that has no pre-existence. François Dosse stated that: “The interrogation of the notions and concepts used by historians today can no longer avoid the detour through the discipline’s past, not for the purpose of self-remembering but to enter on an equal footing into a new era, that of the reflexive moment of the historical operation”⁹. We are in a quagmire that requires a new turn towards the reflection of historical operations, understanding the past, the conceptual struggle, the theoretical edification and the careful analysis of the theoretical field of our time is a necessary condition for the theory of tomorrow and above all for the “transmission of the cultural inheritance to future generations”¹⁰.

If the objective is to “keep in memory the actions of men”¹¹, the task must be undertaken in the present, to capture some fragments of the truth in the evolution of a life, understanding the social, historical and ideological framework that sustains the edification of a theorist in our times. What is it to be a philosopher today? What is an intellectual in the 21st century?

Alain Badiou himself synthesizes the question as follows: “having some ideas is not enough to be a philosopher”. Let us briefly recall that Thucydides, faithful disciple of Herodotus, whom he admired with complete devotion, lived a moment of rupture and separation from

not pre-exist as an object of experience in the development of the theory itself”. Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 3.

9 Own translation. Dosse, François. *La Historia: Conceptos y Escrituras*. (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión), 2003

10 Own translation. Dosse, *La Historia*, 12.

11 Dosse, *La Historia*, 12.

his idealization, mainly provoked by the fall of the figure of the ideal, to the extent that his commitment to the truth increased also proportionally increased the criticism of his master, finally “he dissociates himself from his master to insist on the search for truth”¹². The figure of the teacher in the Social Sciences, we must affirm, also requires this betrayal of the teacher in order to continue the search for truth and the defense of the critical look that is in the theoretical edification.

In this text, we will approach the contribution to the history of ideas of a master of our time, such as the French philosopher Alain Badiou, and at the same time, we will betray his figure of master to go after the search for the truth of his system of thought, that is to say we will incorporate and take the step of “touchons á une singularité éternelle”¹³ between the theoretical edifice and the infinite applause of the reader/disciple.

To begin with, who is Alain Badiou, by way of synthesis I will share his own words about the evolution of his life:

My birth is in Marroco... Rabat, at the beginning of 1937, the Morocco occupied by France... I have been practically educated by Arabic Women in the Kitchen of the house (...) I was in school, I was eccellente, I was always the first of the class (...) And so, it's a good moment of my life, except, naturally, for the relationship to my mother, which was particularly bad. I think my mother was melancholic at the end, a mixture of hysteria and melancholy, and she prefers my brother, it was

12 Dosse, *La Historia*, 17.

13 Badiou, “Les Langues de Wittgenstein,” 108.

my terrible pain during my childhood: my mother prefers my brother. I was jealous (...) To be just, I must insist of this point: many determinations of my intellectual nature are coming from my mother, don't reduce my mother to a negative polarity of my life, its due to my mother the possibility to create conceptual fictions or narrative fictions.¹⁴

According to his own account, his first desire in relation to a profession and studies, from his memories takes place at the age of 15, his desire at that time was to be an actor—a question that in a sense he never abandoned, because let us remember briefly that within his facet of playwright he has taken the role of actor—. The birth of the philosopher, took place years later, with the reading of the book “L'Être et le Néant” from Jean Paul Sartre (1943), in his own words we find “the is, for me, during some years, philosophy was the philosophy of Sartre, Philosophy and Sartre was the same thing, and progressively, inside Sartre, i go beyond Sartre”¹⁵. We are in the presence, from his discourse, before the moment of rupture, the inaugural moment from which it is possible to identify the leap of Alain Badiou -as a man-, to move definitively to the glorious space of his life, that is to say, the figure of philosopher in the XXI century.

One of the warnings before the enterprise of studying a system of thought is found in Alain Badiou himself, who in his text “*Les langues de Wittgenstein*”, wrote:

Il est indiscutable que de toujours, la stratégie philosophique, comme stratégie de Maîtrise,

14 Alain Badiou, Documental, *Badiou* (EE.UU: A film by Gorav Kalyan, Norbert Shieh, 2018).

15 Badiou, *A film by Gorav Kalyan*, min 47:15.

privilégie le face-à-face oral avec ceux qu'elle a à devenir des disciples (ce qui veut dire: à devenir, dans la pensée, disciplinés). Le propos, le séminaire, l'École ou le cours, sont des vecteurs naturels pour cet office de persuasion rationnelle. D'Aristote à Lacan, en passant par une bonne partie du massif hégélien, on ne sait pas trop qui a écrit ce que nous lisons sous les noms propres les plus solennels de la bibliothèque spéculative. Nous ne voyons, au fil des pages, que se donne libre cours la dévotion obscurcissante du disciple fanatisé. Et même quand le philosophe opère intimement par l'écrit, on a le phénomène d'un travail infini, d'un noircissement de pages sans autre destine que l'avancée intérieure de l'analyse, pages illisibles par leur ressassement ou leur obscur enracinement dans le dédale subjectif.¹⁶

The obstacle at this point, it seems obvious, in relation to Badiou's proposal concerning "Séminaire dirigé par Alain Badiou" which are held at "Le théâtre de La Commune" in Paris. A dual work between the written work delivered to readers/disciples and the seminars in which he produces disciples through dialogue and the proposal of a critical look at the present times, a duality in his way of facing the dilemma that "Les mots prennent en philosophie un sens impérieux et troublant."¹⁷

Recharging Philosophy from the Viewpoint of Alain Badiou

To begin to think about the system of thought, or, "la stratégie philosophique" of Alain Badiou, it is important to understand that,

16 Badiou, "Les Langues de Wittgenstein," 108.

17 Badiou, "Les Langues de Wittgenstein," 109.

the philosopher is always a foreigner, dressed in new thoughts; he proposes new problems and new thoughts. And he gains supporters in the ways of silence, that is, he can make many interested in those problems to the extent that he convinces them of their universality”¹⁸...

one of the outstanding contributions to philosophy that Alain has made, is in principle, to think in our time from a critical perspective the condition of philosophy, the duty of the philosopher in this sense is to contribute to the production of philosophical meanings and concepts, from the reflection of the transformation of life, Badiou produces in parallel a transformation of philosophical perspectives and the problems to which philosophers must turn. Guseynov reminds us of the following:

on the other hand, as has been noted, philosophical systems are autonomous, each seeming to start from scratch as if it were the first to discover the philosophical truth. In developing his system the philosopher is not constrained by what philosophers have said before him, he can do without it, can choose to invoke some name others, skip over epochs, etc. Therefore a philosophical theory in each of its singular examples is independent of the history of philosophy.¹⁹

Purity in ideas, the pure point where the dislocation between the author and the intellectual, or, between the man and the author, is identifiable, is an inaccessible point, just as philosophy can be reduced to an interpretation. In 2010, Alain Badiou in his seminar entitled “The process of

18 Badiou, *Badiou*, 2018.

19 Guseynov, “Philosophy: History and Theory,” 108.

Philosophy” for the European Graduate School, stated that “the constructor of philosophical system is always a mixture of the two interpretations (...) philosophy is sometimes impure”²⁰, existence completed on the side of anxiety, of the obscurity of existence, the primitive experience of negativity is part of the philosophical process, a starting point from which experience, and the attempt to escape from experiences, produces a beginning of the philosophical process, it is the escape from the limit of experience.

Badiou stated that “To narrate a rupture it is necessary, of course, to speak first of a relationship”²¹, so we can reformulate this thesis and affirm that to speak first of a philosopher, it is necessary to understand that at the base there is the existence of a philosophical disposition. For the birth of an author, of a philosopher to take place, it does not only require as a precondition an experience seduced by negativity, but it also requires a reflective disposition that goes beyond, to go out quickly to insert itself in the battle of knowledge, in the construction of a system of thought.

What is the writing process of a philosopher like Alain Badiou who sets out to write and think philosophically? About his first project, Badiou tells us the following:

In such sort of context it wasn't an obligation for me to be extremely strict in order of the book and in construction and to give to the book the form of something like a big proof, a big demonstration of the very detail, first of my definition of truth, and more important of the question of the being of truth, and to fight against the pure reduction of

20 Alain Badiou, “The process of Philosophy”, *Seminar in European Graduate School*. 2010.

21 Badiou, *Badiou*, 2018.

the notion of truth to a linguistic, and it is why this book subjectively has two characteristics first its a book where the order is constructive its reflected by constructive subjectivity to be perfect in the order of concerns and second is also the fighting book against the dominant context which was in fact a sort of victory in France during thus year of the analytic point of view, in fact the academic domination.²²

In this context, the creation of a new philosophical problem is the alternative adopted, Alain himself reaffirms his position by saying that “A true philosopher decides for himself which problems are important, and proposes new problems, philosophy is, above all, inventing new problems (...) “Philosophy shows us thought as a choice, thought as a decision. Its specific task is to explain this choice to us. We can say, then, that a philosophical situation is a moment in which a choice becomes clear; a choice in which it is a question either of being-there or of thought”²³ . In 1989 Alain Badiou answered an interview in the framework of the publication of two of his works “L’être et l’événement” and “Manifeste pour la Philosophie” as follows:

The relationship between the books is twofold. There is, first of all, the will to situate my project in the current historical place of philosophy. The Manifesto proposes some theses around the question “Where do we find ourselves in terms of the very possibility of philosophy?” Being and the Event, as is clear, took this possibility as something acquired and it is according to the hypothesis of this possibility that the book deployed its architecture. I wanted, in the Manifesto, to return to this system of conditions of possibility

22 Badiou, “The process of Philosophy”.

23 Badiou, “The process of Philosophy”, 13-16.

and from there I returned, further, to a problematic of the conditions of philosophy in general. I wanted to sustain the thesis that philosophy is possible, that it is not in the passage or the crossing that leads to its termination or its delegation to something else. The second line consists in indicating the points of support that organize Being and the event and that are at the same time of the order of the event and of reflection. That is to say, on the one hand, confrontation of the historical situation in terms of the possibility of philosophy, on the other hand, thematic approach itself.²⁴

Badiou's gesture consists in placing philosophy in a historical situation in order to bring philosophy itself, through the knot of history, philosophy and mathematics, closer to the question of the things of the world, revolution, human freedom, political intervention, love, and it is there where the complexity of philosophy and Alain's philosophical turn lie, in the words of Charles Ramond "Toute la difficulté philosophique était là, pour un philosophe qui ne voulait en aucune manière sortir du matérialisme et de la rationalité"²⁵.

Alain Badiou's name, appearing among "Les 10 philosophes qui influence le monde pour le meilleur et le pire" (2019), is undeniably one of the Social Sciences intellectuals with the greatest impact on international politics, and, one of the most important philosophers of French thought, with works as controversial as they are complex. The challenges of our time imply a necessary turn towards his productions and his seminars, we are witnessing the current evolution, the construction of legacies of the following centuries, the spirit of our time is embodied in the philosophical proposal. As a

24 Alain Badiou, "Conferencia sobre El ser y el acontecimiento y el Manifiesto por la filosofía." *Acontecimiento*, 1989.

25 Charles Ramond, "Alain Badiou," *Cités*, no. 58 (2014), 133.

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result of this, the present document arises as an incipient and initial contribution to the philosophical, historical and political challenge of entering into Badiou's system of thought, and it is also built from the philosophical commitment of entering into the current philosophical production.

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