

Democratic materialism and the materialist dialectic

Alain Badiou

France's agony was not born of the flagging reasons to believe in her: defeat, demography, industry, etc., but of the incapacity to believe in anything at all.

André Malraux

What do we all think, today? What do I myself think when I don't monitor myself? Or, rather, what is our (my) natural belief? By 'natural', of course, I mean in accordance with the rule of an inculcated nature. A belief is all the more natural to the extent that its imposition, or its inculcation, is freely sought out – and to the extent that it serves our immediate and often unavowed designs. Today, natural belief can be summarized in a single statement:

There are only bodies and languages.

This statement is the axiom of our contemporary conviction. I propose to name this conviction *democratic materialism*. Why?

Democratic *materialism*. The individual fashioned by the contemporary world recognizes the objective existence of bodies alone. Who would ever speak today, other than to conform to a certain rhetoric, of the separability of our immortal soul? Who does not subscribe de facto – in the pragmatics of desires and the self-evidence of commerce – to the dogma of our finitude, of our carnal exposition to enjoyment, suffering and death?

Take one symptom among many: artists, the 'creative' people of our day – choreographers, painters, video-makers – track the self-evidence of bodies, of the desiring and machinic life of bodies, of their intimacy, their nudity, their entwinings and ordeals. They all adapt the inhibited, quartered and soiled body to the domain of fantasies and dreams. All, in the end, impose upon the sphere of the visible the partition of bodies shot through with the noise of

the universe. Aesthetic theory merely follows in their wake. A random example: a letter from Antonio Negri to Raúl Sanchez, from December 15, 1999. In it, we read the following:

Today the body is not just a subject who produces and who – because it produces art – shows us the paradigm of production in general, the power of life: the body has become a machine into which production and art are inscribed. This is what we postmoderns know.¹

'Postmodern' is certainly one of the possible names for contemporary democratic materialism. Negri is right about what the postmoderns 'know': the body is the only concrete instance [*instance*] available to individuals who aspire, in their desolation, to enjoyment. Man, within the regime of the 'power of life', is a somewhat unhappy animal, perpetually needing to be convinced that the law of the body harbours the secret of his hope.

In order to validate the equation 'existence = individual = body', contemporary *doxa* must bravely absorb humanity into an overstretched vision of animality. 'Human rights' are indistinguishable from the rights of the living – that is, the rights of the living being to remain a desolate individual aspiring to enjoyment. Mortal bodies. Suffering lives. The humanist protection of all animals, humans included: such is the norm of contemporary materialism. It supplies contemporary materialism with its scientific name, 'bioethics'. The progressive inversion [*envers progressiste*] of bioethics borrows its own name from Foucault: 'biopolitics'.

This materialism is therefore a materialism of life. It is a bio-materialism.

Moreover, it is essentially a *democratic* materialism. This is because the contemporary consensus, in

* This text is an extract from a draft version of the Preface to Alain Badiou's forthcoming book, *Logiques des Mondes (Logics of Worlds)*. Further anticipations of that work can be found in Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. R. Brassier and A. Toscano, Continuum, London, 2004, chs 16 and 17.

recognizing the plurality of languages, presupposes their juridical equality. That is why the absorption of humanity into animality culminates in the identification of the human animal with the diversity of its subspecies and with the democratic rights that inhere in this diversity. This time, the progressive inversion of this stance borrows its name from Deleuze: 'minoritarianism'.

Communities and cultures, colours and pigments, religions and religious orders, traditions and customs, disparate sexualities, public intimacies and the publicity of the intimate: everything and everyone deserves to be recognized and protected by the law.

Having said that, democratic materialism acknowledges a global limit to its polymorphous and animalistic tolerance. A language that does not recognize the universal juridical and normative equality of languages does not deserve to benefit from this equality. A language that claims to regulate all the others, to rule over all bodies, will be termed dictatorial and totalitarian. Then it is no longer a matter of tolerance, but of our 'right to intervention': legal, international and, if necessary, military intervention. Aggressive actions serve to rectify our universalistic claims, along with our linguistic sectarianism.

Bodies will be made to pay for their excesses of language.

That is how a violent Two (the war against terrorism, democracy against dictatorship – at any cost!) sustains the juridical promotion of the multiple. In the final analysis, war, and war alone, makes possible the alignment of languages.

War is the barely hidden materialist essence of democracy. This is something we can already see, and shall not stop seeing, as this new century unfolds, if we do not manage to cut short the effects of the following maxim (which nonetheless guides us, irresistibly): 'There are only bodies and languages.'

Logics of Worlds deploys a fair amount of science to the task of a somewhat fastidious examination of democratic materialism. What name can we give to the theoretical ideal under whose aegis this examination is carried out? Many a good mind has been tempted by versions of an aristocratic idealism. Often under the shelter provided by a communist vocabulary, this was the stance taken by the surrealists, and then by Guy Debord and his nihilist heirs: to institute the secret society of the few surviving creators. It is also the speculative wish of what remains most commendable within the Heideggerian heritage: practically to safeguard, in the secret sharing enabled by the writ-

ings in which the question dwells, the possibility of a Return. However, since such a preservation – intended to sustain the hope that the intellectual and existential splendours of the past will not be abolished – has no chance of being effective, it is inadequate to the creation of a concept for the coming times. The struggle against forms of nostalgia, often waged as a war against decadence, is not only endowed – as it already was in Nietzsche – with a martial and 'critical' image, but is also marked by a kind of delectable bitterness. All the same, this struggle is always already lost. And while defeat may have its poetics, there is no philosophy of defeat. Philosophy, in its very essence, elaborates the means of saying 'Yes!' to the previously unknown thoughts that hesitate to become the truths that they are.

But if we refuse to counter 'democratic materialism' with its formal opposite, which is indeed 'aristocratic idealism', what will be our own (still insufficient) name? After much hesitation I have decided to name my enterprise – or, rather, the ideological atmosphere in which it gives vent to its most extreme tension – a *materialist dialectic*.

This is surely to conjure up a phrase from the realm of the dead! Wasn't my teacher Louis Althusser, more than thirty years ago, already one of the last to make noble use (not without some misgivings) of the phrase 'dialectical materialism'? And Stalin? He is no longer what he once was, not even in his reputation as exemplary state criminal (a role in which, in these last years, he has been overshadowed by Hitler). But he nevertheless remains an unwelcome reference: didn't Stalin spell out, under the heading 'Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism', the most starkly formalist principles of a communist subjectivity whose paradoxical radiance now seems inexplicable? What is one to do with such a black sun? With a 'beheaded sun'?² Does the inversion of the terms – turning materialism into the adjective – suffice to shield me from the fatal accusation of archaism?

Let us agree that by 'democratic' (or 'Western', it's the same thing) we should understand the maintenance and dissolution of symbolic or juridical multiplicity in warlike violence, in real duality. For example, the cold war of the free nations against communism, the semi-cold war of democracies against terrorism, or the Israeli war ('the only democracy in the Middle East', is it not?) against the ragged Palestinians. Let us agree that by 'dialectic', following Hegel, we should understand that the essence of all difference is the third term that marks the gap between two others. It is then legitimate to counter democratic materialism

with a materialist dialectic, if by ‘materialist dialectic’ we understand the following statement, in which the Three supplements the reality of the Two:

There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths [sinon qu’il y a des vérités].

You will recognize here the style of my master Mallarmé – nothing has taken place but the place, except, in the heights, perhaps, a Constellation.

I erase, nevertheless, ‘in the heights’ and ‘perhaps’. The statement ‘there are some truths’ which opposes the dualistic axiomatic of democratic materialism – the law protects all the bodies, arranged under all the compatible languages – is for me the obvious empirical point of departure. There is no doubt concerning the existence of truths, which are not bodies, languages, or combinations of the two. And this obviousness is materialist, inasmuch as it does not require any scission of world, any intelligible place of its own, any ‘height’.

In our worlds, as they stand, truths are taking place. These truths are incorporeal bodies, languages devoid of sense, generic infinities, unconditioned supplements. They become and remain suspended, like the poet’s consciousness, ‘between the void and the pure event’.

We should be attentive to the syntax that separates the axiom of the materialist dialectic from that of democratic materialism. Specifically, we should be attentive to this ‘except that [*sinon que*]’ whose Mallarméan character I have already underlined. This syntax indicates that we are dealing neither with an addition (truths as mere supplements of bodies and languages) nor with a synthesis (truths as the self-revelation of bodies seized by languages). Truths exist as exceptions to what there is. We admit therefore that ‘what there is’ – what composes the structure of worlds – is well and truly a mixture of bodies and languages. But there isn’t only what there is. And ‘truths’ is the (philosophical) name of what thus comes to interpolate itself into the continuity of the ‘there is’.

In a certain sense, the materialist dialectic is identical to democratic materialism, and to that extent they are indeed both materialisms, even if, by a nuance that cannot be neglected, the first renders adjectival what the second substantializes. Yes, there are only bodies and languages. Nothing exists as a separable ‘soul’, ‘life’, ‘spiritual principle’, etc. But in another sense, the materialist dialectic – centred on the exception that truths inflict on what there is through the interpolation of an assertion that ‘There is what there is not’ – differs entirely from democratic materialism.

In Descartes we encounter an intuition of the same order concerning the ontological status of truths. We

know that Descartes names ‘substance’ the general form of really existing being. Substance is what there is. Every ‘thing’ is substance. It is figure and movement in extended substance. It is idea in thought substance. Whence the commonplace identification of Descartes’s doctrine with dualism: the substantial ‘there is’ is divided into thought and extension, which, in man, means soul and body.

Nevertheless, in paragraph 48 of Descartes’s *Principles of Philosophy*, we see that this substantial dualism is subordinated to a more fundamental distinction. This distinction is precisely the one between things (what there is, that is substance, whether as thought or extension) and truths: ‘I distinguish everything that falls under our knowledge into two genera: the first contains all the things endowed with some existence, and the other all the truths that are nothing outside of our thought.’

What a remarkable text! It acknowledges the wholly exceptional ontological and logical status of truths.



Truths are without existence. Is that to say they do not exist at all? On the contrary. Truths have no *substantial* existence. That is what must be understood by the notion that they ‘are nothing outside of our thought’. In paragraph 49, Descartes observes that this criterion serves to designate the formal universality of truths, and consequently their logical existence, which is nothing other than a certain kind of intensity.

For instance, when we think that we cannot make something out of nothing, we do not believe that this proposition is some thing that exists or the property of some thing, but we treat it as a eternal truth that has its seat in our thought, and that is called a common notion or maxim: nevertheless, when someone tells us that it is impossible for something to be and not to be at the same time, that what has been done cannot be undone, that he who thinks cannot

stop being or existing whilst he thinks, and numerous other similar statements, these are only truths, and not things.

Note that the basis of the cogito (the induction of existence through the act of thought) is a truth in the sense outlined in this passage. This means that a truth is what thought persists in presenting even when the regime of the thing is suspended (by doubt). A truth is thus precisely what insists as an exception to the forms of the 'there is'.

Descartes is a dualist not only in the sense accorded to this term by the opposition it draws between 'intellectual things' – that is, 'intelligent substances, or rather properties belonging to these substances' – and 'corporeal things' – that is, 'bodies, or rather properties belonging to these bodies'. Descartes is a dualist at a more essential level, which alone sustains the demonstrative machinery of his philosophy, the level at which things (intellectual and/or corporeal) and truths (whose mode of being is inexistent) are distinguished. One will carefully note that unlike 'things' – even when these 'things' are souls – truths are immediately universal and very precisely beyond doubt. Consider the following passage, which also links truths to the infinite of their (in)existence: 'There is such a great number of [truths] that it would be difficult to enumerate them; but it is also not necessary, because we could not fail to know them once the occasion to think about them presents itself.' And it is true that a truth is an exception to what there is, since, if we are given the 'occasion' to encounter truth, we immediately recognize it as such.

One can see in what sense Descartes thinks the three (and not just the two). Indeed, his own axiom might be formulated as follows: 'There are only (contingent) corporeal things and intellectual things, except that there are (eternal) truths.'

Like every genuine philosopher, Descartes registers, at the point of friction between ontology and logic, the necessity of what we have chosen to call a 'materialist dialectic'.

The idea that the type of being that pertains to truths can be identified over and above the empirical evidence of their existence was one of the principal issues at stake in my 1988 book *Being and Event*. In that text I established, on the basis of a lengthy analysis of the forms of being, that truths are generic multiplicities: no linguistic predicate allows them to be discerned, no explicit proposition allows them to be designated. I also explained why it is legitimate to call 'subject' the local existence of the process that unfolds these

generic multiplicities (the formula was: 'a subject is a point of truth').

It is not a question here of returning to those conclusions, which undermine the linguistic, relativist and neo-sceptical parenthesis in which contemporary academic philosophy is confined – a philosophy which, when all is said and done, is merely the sophisticated handmaiden of democratic materialism.

For the time being, suffice it to say that these conclusions fully ground the possibility of a prospective metaphysics capable of enveloping the actions of today and of reinforcing itself, tomorrow, in view of what these actions will produce. Such a metaphysics is a component of the new materialist dialectic.

I would like to draw attention here to the fact that, via entirely different (even opposed) paths, that of a vitalist analytic of undifferentiated bodies, Deleuze too sought to create the conditions for a contemporary metaphysics. In this sense, he too embodied one of the orientations of the materialist dialectic, as can be shown by his stubborn resistance to the devastating gains made by democratic materialism. We should remember that he used to say that when the philosopher hears the words 'democratic debate', he turns and runs. That is because Deleuze's intuitive conception of the concept presupposed the survey of its components at infinite speed. But this infinite speed of thought is indeed incompatible with democratic debate. Generally speaking, the materialist dialectic opposes the real infinity of truths to the principle of finitude which is deducible from the maxims of democracy. For example, we can say:

A truth affirms the infinite right of its consequences, with no regard to what opposes them.

Deleuze was a free and sombre bearer of such an affirmation of the infinite rights of thought. This affirmation had to clear a path for itself against the democratic complicity of the phenomenological tradition, always too pious (including Heidegger), and the analytic tradition, always too sceptical (including Wittgenstein). The insistent motif of this complicity is finitude, which has since been transformed, by essayists or editorialists, into that of 'modesty'. In the final analysis, one is never modest enough when it comes either to exposing oneself to the transcendence of the destiny of Being, or to becoming aware of the fact that our language games cannot open an access to that mystical beyond in which the meaning of life is decided.

The materialist dialectic exists only in so far as it digs the furrow which separates, on its right, the

diktats of authenticity, and, on its left, the humiliations of Critique.

If the combined effect of the two French traditions – of Brunschvicg (mathematizing idealism) and Bergson (vitalist mysticism) respectively: the one passing through Cavailles, Lautman, Desanti, Althusser, Lacan and Badiou; the other through Canguilhem, Foucault, Simondon and Deleuze – is enough to allow this new century not to be devastated by modesty, then philosophy will not have been useless.

To produce, in the world such as it is, new forms that might shelter the pride of the inhuman – this is what legitimates us. It matters therefore that by ‘materialist dialectic’ we understand the deployment of a critique of all critique.

To have done, if at all possible, with the diluted Kant of limits, of rights and of unknowables. To affirm, with Mao Zedong (and why not?): ‘We will come to know everything that we did not know before.’

In brief, to affirm this other variant of the axiom of the materialist dialectic: *Every world is capable of producing, within itself, its own truth.*

Nevertheless, the ontological break alone, be it mathematizing or vitalist, does not suffice. We must also establish that truths have their own distinctive mode of appearing, one that traces subjective operations whose complexity is not even broached in the purely ontological treatment provided in *Being and Event*.

What the 1988 book did at the level of pure being – determination of the ontological type of truths and the abstract form of the subject that activates them – my *Logics of Worlds* aims to do at the level of being-there, or of appearing, or of worlds.

In this respect, *Logics of Worlds* is to *Being and Event* what Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to his *Science of Logic*, despite the inverted chronological sequence: an immanent grasp of the given forms of being-there, a local survey of the figures of the true and the subject, and not a deductive analytic of the forms of being.

In this task we are guided – as Hegel was in the context created by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars – by a contemporary conjuncture which, believing itself to possess a stable, guaranteed foundation (democratic materialism), wages a ceaseless propaganda campaign against the evidence of truths. We are all familiar with the signifiers that punctuate this campaign: ‘modesty’, ‘team work’, ‘fragmentation’, ‘finitude’, ‘respect for the other’, ‘ethics’, ‘self-expression’, ‘balance’, ‘pragmatism’, ‘cultures’ ... All of these are summarized in an anthropological (and thereby restricted) variant of the axiom of democratic

materialism, a variant that could be formulated as follows:

There are only individuals and communities.

In opposition to this statement, the fourfold thinking of being, appearing, subjects and truths – a thinking whose construction is completed by *Logics of Worlds* – asserts the maxim of the materialist dialectic:

The universality of truths is upheld by subjective forms that can be neither individual nor communitarian.

Or:

Inasmuch as it is of a truth, a subject subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

Notes

1. Antonio Negri, ‘Lettre sur le corps’, *La Sœur de l’ange* 1; www.hautetfort.com/revuelasoeurdelage/pages/1174 [Translator’s note].
2. ‘Soleil cou coupé’ is the title of a poem by Aimé Césaire [Translator’s note].

2 July to 20 August 2005...
the art exhibition *without the art*...selector Gustav Metzger...

Ethics into Aesthetics...
two day international conference...
Norwich 12/13 August 2005...
**call for submission of abstracts
by 1 May 2005**

The conference *Ethics into Aesthetics* and the exhibition **EAST 05** are perceived by Gustav Metzger as dealing with the extreme economic, political and ethical issues facing us all... through the use by artists and artists’ groups of communications media in real time...

NORWICH GALLERY
Norwich School of Art and Design
east@norwichgallery.co.uk
www.norwichgallery.co.uk
tel. +44 (0)1603 756247

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND NORWICH GALLERY



EAST 05