

The background of the cover is a painting of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a small, bright white circle positioned slightly to the left of the center, just above the horizon. The sky is a gradient of warm colors, from a pale yellow near the sun to a soft blue at the top. The ocean is depicted with visible waves, particularly in the foreground where the water is a mix of blue and white, suggesting movement and reflection. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

ALAIN BADIOU
A NEW DAWN FOR POLITICS

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A New Dawn for Politics

Alain Badiou

Translated by Robin Mackay

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Copyright Page

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Preface

The texts in this collection were conceived, written, and delivered between 2016 and 2020, for various purposes and in various locations. Revised, and where necessary amended, here they are given a kind of new lease of life. What all of them try to do, although not necessarily in a systematic way, is to talk about the present ideological and political situation, both in France and worldwide. The aim being not just to 'recount' the various news stories that make the headlines, whether in print, on the airwaves or on smartphones, but to arm ourselves with a few useful notions, largely the product of the last three hundred years, in order to understand what is going on. In doing so we must also keep in mind that the official 'news', a commodity placed on the market by a few billionaires, is itself part of 'what is going on', rather than being any aid to its comprehension.

The first part opens with some necessary general overviews. Contrary to empiricists, then, who think that the only way to understand a totality is by listing all of its elements and parts, I begin from afar, from a great distance, even though I am adamant that we can only comprehend what is going on right under our noses if we go to see it, and then only if we are active, activist even. We must be activists, but activists with a faculty of comprehension broadened and enlightened by long-term thinking. Symmetrically, contrary to dogmatists, who believe that everything depends upon what they have been taught to believe, my assertions will be guided not so much by existing states of affairs as by the gap, generally quite glaring, between the constraints imposed upon the future

of societies and what could have been done, and still ought to be done, in order to overcome those constraints.

The first part of the book brings together essays that in some sense offer a 'bird's eye view', operating a dialectic of different epochs by examining what was constitutive of them, shedding light on their becomings and how they come to an end, and drawing some useful conclusions from these vicissitudes.

The second part, on the contrary, sets out from what is closest of all: those movements that have burst onto the scene, particularly in France, in recent years. It attempts to draw some lessons, both theoretical and practical, from these local adventures, in order to shed light upon what was misunderstood, to examine carefully what was proclaimed to be important, to point out what was neglected, and finally to prescribe what needs to be thought (the logic of Ideas) and done (the logic of activism) in order to bring about what I regard as, quite simply, the Good.

Alain Badiou
28 February 2021

Part I

Structures and Notions, Becomings and Visions

1

The Neolithic Age, Capitalism, and Communism

Let's start by being ambitious, in terms of both time and space. We shall go back to a few millennia before our own time and also, as is fashionable, we shall take a look at the fate of our beloved planet, revered by some contemporary believers under the name of the goddess Gaia.

It has become commonplace today to announce, for various reasons, that the end is nigh for the human species as we know it. From the typically messianic perspective of a certain brand of ecology, the predatory excesses of the evil animal that is the human being will soon bring about the end of the living world. And then, from the perspective of runaway technological development we are told, in no particular order, of the takeover of all labour by robots, the sumptuous delights of the digital realm, automated art, deadly microplastics, and the threat of superhuman intelligence.

Consequently, we see the emergence of menacing categories such as transhumanism and the posthuman, or, in the other direction, a return to the animal, depending upon whether we listen to the prophecies of the tech industry or laments about the wounds inflicted on Mother Nature.

I regard all of these prophecies as so much ideological rhetoric designed to obscure the real danger facing humanity today, namely the impasse into which we are being led by globalised capitalism. It is in fact this social form, and it alone, which, wedded as it is to the pure notion of private profit, authorises the destructive exploitation of

natural resources. That so many species are endangered, that the climate is still running out of control, that water is becoming a rare treasure – all of this is a by-product of the ruthless competition between predatory billionaires. And the fact that scientific development is anarchically enslaved to the imperative of producing saleable technologies has the same origin. Ecological preaching, which, despite its prophetic excesses, is often based on convincing descriptions, is in general becoming pure propaganda, useful to states that want to show everyone how caring they are, and transnational firms that, for the greater good of their turnover, are eager to make people believe in the noble and fraternal natural purity of the goods they traffic in.

Moreover, technological fetishism and the uninterrupted succession of ‘revolutions’ in this domain – the ‘digital revolution’ being currently the most fashionable – has constantly served to convince people that we are simultaneously heading for a workless paradise of helpful robots and universal laziness, and witnessing the human intellect being overtaken by electrical ‘thought’. Today, not a magazine is published that does not present its astonished readers with the imminent ‘victory’ of artificial over natural intelligence. But in the majority of cases neither ‘nature’ nor ‘artifice’ are correctly or clearly defined.

Since the very origins of philosophy, it has often been asked what the word ‘nature’ means. It has meant the romantic reverie of sunsets, the atomic materialism of Lucretius (*De natura rerum*), the innermost being of all things, Spinoza’s Totality (‘Deus sive Natura’), the objective flipside of all culture, the countryside as opposed to the suspicious artifices of the city (‘The earth does not lie’, as Marshall Pétain said), biology as opposed to physics, the scope of cosmology as opposed to the minuscule neighbourhood of

our planet, invariant tradition as opposed to frenzied innovation, natural sexuality as opposed to perversion Today, I'm afraid, 'nature' refers principally to nothing much more than the peace of gardens and villages, the touristic charms of wild animals, the beach, and the mountains where you might spend a pleasant summer. So who could possibly imagine that man is responsible for this Nature – man, who even now is nothing more than a thinking flea, hopping around on a secondary planet in a medium-sized solar system on the edge of a commonplace galaxy?

Since its origins, philosophy has also thought technics, or the arts. The ancient Greeks meditated on the dialectic of *technè* and *phusis*, situating the human animal within this dialectic and thus paving the way for the idea that the human is 'only a reed, the weakest in nature, but [...] a thinking reed', which, according to Pascal, means: stronger than Nature, and closer to God. They long ago realised that the animal capable of mathematics would achieve great things in the material order. And are these 'robots' we hear so much about anything more than calculations assembled into the form of a machine, numbers crystallised into movements? They certainly count faster than we do, but it is we who designed them for precisely this task. Even if a crane can lift a huge concrete pole to a great height, it would be stupid to conclude from this that humans are incapable of doing so and that we are witnessing the birth of some muscular transhuman giant Similarly, counting at the speed of light is not a sign of unsurpassable 'intelligence'. Technological transhumanism just replays the same old trope, an inexhaustible theme in horror films and science fiction, of the creator outmanoeuvred by his creature, either so as to revel in the coming of the superman, which has been overdue since Nietzsche