

# Philosophy and politics

**Alain Badiou**

From Plato until today, there is one word which can sum up the concern of the philosopher with respect to politics. This word is 'justice'. The philosopher's question to politics is the following: can there be a just political orientation? An orientation which *does justice* to thought? What we have to begin with is this: injustice is clear; justice is obscure. For he who undergoes injustice is the irrecusable witness to this. But who can testify for justice? There is an affect of injustice, a suffering, a revolt. Nothing, however, signals justice, which can be presented neither as a spectacle, nor as a sentiment.

Must we then resign ourselves to saying that justice is only the absence of injustice? Is it the empty neutrality of a double negation? I do not think so. Nor do I think that injustice is on the side of the perceptible, or of experience, or of the subjective; nor that justice is on the side of the intelligible, or of reason, or of the objective. Injustice is not the immediate disorder of which justice would be the ideal order.

'Justice' is a word from philosophy, at least if (as we must) we leave aside its legal signification, entirely devoted to the police and the magistrature. But this word of philosophy is under condition. It is under the condition of the political. Because philosophy knows it is incapable of realizing in the world the truths it testifies to. Even Plato knows that, for there to be justice, it's probable that the philosopher must be king, but that the possibility of there being such a monarch precisely does not depend on philosophy. It depends on political circumstances, which remain irreducible. We will call 'justice' the name by which a philosophy designates the possible truth of a political orientation.

The vast majority of empirical political orientations have nothing to do with truth, as we know. They organize a repulsive mixture of power and opinions. The subjectivity that animates them is that of the tribe and the lobby, of electoral nihilism and the blind confrontation of communities. Philosophy has nothing to say about all that, because philosophy only thinks thought, while these orientations are explicitly presented as non-thoughts. The only

subjective element which is of importance to them is that of interest.

Some political orientations, throughout history, have had or will have a connection with a truth. A truth of the collective as such. They are rare attempts, often brief, but they are the only ones under condition philosophy can think about. These political sequences are singularities, they trace no destiny, they construct no monumental history. Philosophy can, however, distinguish in them a common feature. This feature is that these orientations require of the people they engage only their strict generic humanity. They give no preference, for the principles of action, to the particularity of interests. These political orientations induce a representation of the collective capacity which refers its agents to the strictest equality.

What does 'equality' mean? Equality means that the political actor is represented under the sole sign of his specifically human capacity. Interest is not a specifically human capacity. All living beings have as an imperative for survival the protection of their interests. The specifically human capacity is precisely thought, and thought is nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal.

Thus a political orientation worthy of being submitted to philosophy under the idea of justice is an orientation whose unique general axiom is: people think, people are capable of truth. Saint-Just was thinking of the strictly equalitarian recognition of the capacity for truth when he defined before the Convention, in April 1794, public consciousness: 'May you have a public consciousness, for all hearts are equal as to sentiments of good and bad, and this consciousness is made up of the tendency of the people towards the general good.' And in an entirely different political sequence, during the Cultural Revolution in China, we find the same principle, for example in the decision in sixteen points of 8 August 1966: 'Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement, let them determine by themselves the distinction between what is just and what is not.'

A political orientation touches on truth provided it is founded on the equalitarian principle of a capacity to discern the just, or the good, expressions that philosophy apprehends under the sign of the truth that the collective is capable of.

It is very important to remark that, here, 'equality' does not mean anything objective. It is not a question of the equality of status, of income, of function, and even less of the supposed equalitarian dynamics of contracts or reforms. Equality is subjective. It is equality with respect to public consciousness for Saint-Just, or with respect to the political mass movement for Mao Tse-tung. Such equality is in no way a social programme. It has, moreover, nothing to do with the social. It is a political maxim, a prescription. Political equality is not what we want or plan, it is what we declare under fire of the event, here and now, as what is, and not what should be. In the same way, for philosophy, 'justice' cannot be a state programme. 'Justice' is the qualification of an equalitarian political orientation in act.



The difficulty with most of the doctrines of justice is wanting to define justice, and then trying to find the means for its realization. But justice, which is the philosophical name for the equalitarian political maxim, cannot be defined. For equality is not an objective of action, it is an axiom of it. There is no political orientation linked to truth without the affirmation – affirmation which has neither a guarantee nor a proof – of a universal capacity for political truth. Thought, on this point, cannot use the scholastic method of definitions. It must follow the method of the understanding of an axiom.

'Justice' is nothing else than one of the words by which a philosophy attempts to *seize* the equalitarian axiom inherent in a veritable political sequence. And this axiom itself is given by singular statements, characteristic of the sequence, such as Saint-Just's definition of public consciousness, or the thesis on the immanent self-education of the revolutionary mass movement upheld by Mao.

Justice is not a concept for which we have to find in the empirical world more or less approximative realizations. Conceived as an operator for the seizing of an equalitarian political orientation, which is the same thing as a *true* political orientation, justice defines an effective, axiomatic, immediate subjective figure. It is what gives all its depth to the surprising affirmation of Samuel Beckett, in *How It Is*: 'In any case we are *within* justice, I've never heard anyone say the contrary.' In effect, justice, which seizes the latent axiom of a political subject, designates necessarily not what must be, but what is. The equalitarian axiom is present in political statements, or it is

not present. And by consequence, we are within justice, or we are not. Which also means: the political exists, in the sense that philosophy encounters its thought within it, or it does not. But if it does, and we relate to it immanently, we are within justice.

Any definitional and programmatic approach to justice makes of it a dimension of the action of the state. But the state has nothing to do

with justice, because the state is not a subjective and axiomatic figure. The state as such is indifferent or hostile to the existence of a political orientation which touches truths. The modern state only aims at fulfilling certain functions, or obtaining a consensus of opinion. Its subjective dimension is only to transform in resignation or resentment the economic necessity, that is, the objective logic of Capital. This is why any programmatic definition or state definition of justice changes it into its contrary: justice becomes by it, in fact, the harmonization of the interplay of interests. But justice, which is the theoretical name of an axiom

of equality, refers necessarily to a wholly disinterested subjectivity.

This can be said simply: any political orientation of emancipation, or any political orientation which imposes an equalitarian maxim, is a thought in act. But thought is the specific mode by which a human animal is traversed and overcome by a truth. In such a subjectivation, the limit of interest is crossed, so that the political process itself is indifferent to it. It is then necessary, as all political sequences that concern philosophy show, that the state not be able to recognize as appropriate to it anything in such a process.

The state is in its Being indifferent to justice. And inversely, any political orientation which is a thought in act entails, in proportion to its force and its tenacity, serious trouble for the state. This is why political truth manifests itself always in times of trial and trouble. It follows that justice, far from being a possible category of state and social order, is the name which designates the principles at work in rupture and disorder. Even Aristotle, whose goal is entirely a fiction of political stability, declares from the beginning of Book 5 of his *Politics*: ολος γαρ το ισον ζητουντες στασιαζουσιν. This can be translated as: 'In general in fact, the pursuers of equality rise in rebellion.' But Aristotle's conception is still a state conception, his idea of equality is empirical, objective, definitional. The veritable philosophic statement would be rather: political statements bearing truth rise up in absence of any state and social order. The latent equalitarian maxim is heterogeneous to the state. It is then always during trouble and disorder that the subjective imperative of equality is affirmed. What the philosopher names 'justice' seizes the subjective order of a maxim within the ineluctable disorder to which this order exposes the state of interests.

Finally, what does making a philosophical statement on justice, here and now, amount to? It's first a matter of knowing to what singular political orientations we adhere, which are worth our trying to seize the thought specific to them by the resources of the philosophic apparatus, of which the word 'justice' is one of the pieces.

In the confused and chaotic world of today, when Capital seems to triumph from within its own weakness, and what is fuses miserably with what can be, it is not an easy job. Identifying the rare sequences through which a political truth is constructed, without being discouraged by the propaganda of capital-parliamentary government, is of itself a taut exercise of thought. Still more difficult is attempting within the order of doing politics to be faithful to some equalitarian axiom, by finding timely statements of it.

It is, then, a matter of seizing philosophically the political orientations in question, whether they be of the past or of the present. The task is double: (1) examine their statements, their prescriptions, and uncover the equalitarian nucleus of universal signification; (2) transform the generic category of 'justice', by submitting it to the test of singular statements, of the specific mode, always irreducible, by which they vehicule and inscribe in action the equalitarian axiom. It is finally a matter of showing that, thus transformed, the category of justice designates the contemporary figure of a political subject and that it is of this figure that philosophy assures, under its own names, the inscription in eternity that our time is capable of.

This political subject has had several names. He was called a citizen, certainly not in the sense of the elector or of the city counsellor, but in the sense the French Revolution gives to the word 'citizen'. He was called a professional revolutionary. He was called a grassroots militant. We are probably in a time when his name is suspended, in a time when we must *find his name*.

We might as well say that if we dispose of a history, without continuity nor concept, of what 'justice' was able to designate, we do not yet know clearly what it designates today. We know this of course abstractly, for 'justice' always signifies the philosophic seizing of a latent equalitarian axiom. But this abstraction is useless. For the imperative of philosophy is to seize the event of truths, their newness, their precarious trajectory.

Is the contemporary state of political orientation such that philosophy can engage the category of justice in it? Isn't there the risk of confusing chalk with cheese, of reproducing the vulgar pretension of governments to render justice? When we see so many 'philosophers' attempting to appropriate for themselves state schemes with as little thought in them as: Europe, democracy in its capital-parliamentary sense, liberty in its sense of pure opinion, shameful nationalisms; when we thus see philosophy prostrated before the idols of the day, we can obviously be pessimistic.

But, after all, the conditions for the exercise of philosophy have always been rigorous. The words of philosophy, because these conditions were not maintained, have always been misused and turned around. There have been in this century intense political sequences. There are faithful followers of these sequences. Here or there, in yet incomparable situations, some statements envelop, in an inflexible and unsubjected manner, the equalitarian axiom.

The collapse of the socialist states has itself a positive dimension. Certainly, it is a pure and simple

collapse. No political orientation worthy of the name played the smallest part in it. And ever since, this political vacuity has not ceased to engender monsters. But these terrorist states were the incarnation of the ultimate fiction of a justice endowed with the solidity of a body; of a justice which had the form of a governmental programme. The collapse attests to the absurdity of such a representation. It frees justice and equality from any fictive incorporation. It restores them to their Being, both volatile and obstinate, of thought acting from and in direction of a collective seized by its truth. The collapse of the socialist states teaches us that the ways of equalitarian politics do not pass through state power, that they are matters of an immanent subjective determination, an axiom of the collective.

After all, from Plato and his unfortunate escape in Sicily up to the circumstantial aberrations of Heidegger, passing by the passive relations of Hegel and Napoleon, and without forgetting that Nietzsche's madness was to pretend 'to split the history of the world in two', everything shows that it is not massive History that authorizes philosophy. It is rather what Mallarmé called 'restrained action'...

Let us be politically militants of restrained action. Let us be within philosophy those who eternalize the figure of this action.

We have too often wished that justice find the consistency of the social tie, while it can only name the most extreme moments of inconsistency. For the effect of the equalitarian axiom is to undo the ties, to desocialize thought, to affirm the rights of the infinite and the immortal against finitude, against Being-for-death. In the subjective dimension of the equality that is declared, nothing else is of interest except the universality of this declaration, and the active consequences that it gives rise to.

Justice is the philosophical name of the inconsistency, for the state, of any equalitarian political orientation. And we can here join the declarative and axiomatic vocation of the poem. For it is Paul Celan who probably gives us the most exact image of what we must understand by 'justice':

On inconsistencies  
 Lean:  
 flick  
 in the abyss, in the  
 scribbles in the notebooks  
 the world begins to rustle. it all depends  
 on you

Keep in mind in effect the lesson of the poet: in matters of justice, where it is on inconsistency that we must lean, it is true, true as a truth can be, that it only depends on you.

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