

The Nomadic Proletariat: An Interview with Alain Badiou

TRANSLATED AND CONDUCTED BY THOMAS NAIL

ABSTRACT: Thomas Nail's interview with Alain Badiou focuses on the concept of the migrant, or the *sans-papiers*. Badiou discusses the importance of this concept in his previous work and for contemporary politics. Nail also inquires into Badiou's involvement with a migrant-focused political organization, *L'Organisation politique*, as well as his eventual break with the organization.

KEY WORDS: migrants, *L'organisation politique*, borders, proletarians

THE CENTRALITY OF THE MIGRANT

Thomas Nail: The *sans-papiers* are perhaps the single most cited example of a contemporary political event in all of your work. You say in *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* that their struggle “defines what is most important in politics today.” Why do the *sans-papiers* occupy such a privileged position in your work—and in contemporary politics?

Alain Badiou: My position is classical: Marx already considered the “late-arriving” proletarians who came from the countryside and who were not yet integrated into the logic of wages to be the “hard core” of the workers’ revolts in the big cities. It must also be remembered that these proletarians were also migrants (from the countryside to the cities) and *that they were also undocumented migrants* [*sans-papiers*]. Indeed, the right to remain in the city was subordinated to a document, the “worker’s booklet,” without which you could be sent home. Imperialist logic has only served to extend this attitude of police control, precarity, and permanent suspicion to proletarians coming from more remote countrysides of Africa, Asia, and others. This has in fact only internationalized the status of the proletariat in imperialist metropolises. Hence, the firm support for undocumented

migrants [*sans-papiers*] is a natural and fundamental factor in the large-scale organization of the entire “nomadic” proletariat today.

L'ORGANISATION POLITIQUE

TN: According to *La Distance Politique*, *L'Organisation politique* was created in 1983 and published its political writings from 1983 to 1991 in the journal *Le Perroquet*. From 1992 to 1999 their writings were published in *La Distance Politique*. Where were the group's writings published from 1999 to 2007? How would you characterize the group's activity and writings during this time?

AB: The *Organisation politique* followed the more openly Maoist organization created in 1970 called the “UCFm” [*Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste*], Marxist-Leninist Union of Communists of France. The general inspiration that required the change of name was that the reference to Maoism and Marxism-Leninism was undoubtedly too classical on the one hand, too shared with dogmatic groups, and on the other, it did not place enough emphasis on our own properly political novelty, in particular the fact that our aim was no longer to quickly build a Party to “represent” the working class. But as far as I am concerned, I have always considered there to be a continuity of political practice between the two and believe that the change of name was not essential.

THE BREAKUP

TN: Why did the group break up in 2007?

AB: In 2007 there was no longer sufficient unity and centralized political labor on a scale large enough to maintain a national organization. Personally, as far as I am concerned, I would say that the action of the *Organisation politique*, in any case since the 2000s, had gradually become more and more limited: In fact, it existed practically only in the workers' hostels of undocumented African workers. The living organization was in fact the one that had the name “the organization of the undocumented workers of the hostels and the political organization.” But “political organization” in this case no longer meant much. There have been four attempts to remedy this state of affairs. The first was to extend the organization to all hostels, perhaps on a national scale, which would have been a considerable extension. The second was to open political schools in the hostels. The third, to actively take over mass production in the factories. The fourth, and in my opinion the most important, was to create a “Council” of the *Organisation politique* and the militant workers who had demonstrated their great qualities as organizers and bearers of new ideas, and together create a new political direction truly anchored in the nomadic proletariat. I participated very actively in these attempts. But I also had to admit, against their success, some doubts about a certain inertia that I was not in a position to overcome. Eventually, I felt like the *Organisation politique*

had become a specialized association of hostels and undocumented workers, and as such it was no longer “political.” This is because a political organization is an organization that is capable of holding, simultaneously, multiple processes among very different political situations.

CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

TN: What has changed in your analysis of the *sans-papiers* since your work with them from 1996 to 1999? How would you compare those events to what is happening today with other non-status migrant justice movements in North America and Europe more broadly?

AB: What initially made the difference for us was that the slogans and actions concerning undocumented migrants were only part of a much broader political vision, which aimed at politicizing, on new grounds, the nomadic proletariat, but also the factory workers, the subaltern commercial employees, the educated youth, the intellectual milieu. . . . As I said above, this project has been transformed and depoliticized. There are indeed many associations that deal with undocumented migrants, and I am obviously very happy about that! But they are support organizations, bearers of a genuine modern humanism, and not political organizations aimed at undermining the general order of private property and capital. If the *Organisation politique* no longer exists, it is precisely because it has become similar to the movements you cite, whose slogans are specialized, particular, and not supported by a general ideology—what we used to call “the primacy of the point of view of the whole.”

BORDERS

TN: In a previous interview you have said that you are in support of the withering away of the state and an end to borders. Strategically, however, you say, “We should first tackle the question of how, concretely, we treat the people who are here; then, how we deal with those who would like to be here; and finally, what it is about the situation of their original countries that makes them want to leave. All three questions must be addressed, but in that order.” What would you say to those who argue that we should be engaged in all three types of struggles at once or we will never get past the first? For example, the Canadian group No One Is Illegal aims to deal with all three at once.

AB: Yes, it is possible to act in all three directions. But, ultimately, you end up with the necessity of directly confronting the semi-colonial states from which the nomadic proletarians (I prefer the name “migrants”) come, the imperialist states, and the big multinationals. How can we do this without returning to the project of a global political organization clearly situated in a real antagonism with the hegemony of capitalism, which is itself globalized? And this project presupposes

that we revive what the Chinese called “the two ways,” namely the capitalist way and the communist way, and that all local struggles be measurable according to the final decisive criterion: which way are they taking? Marx always thought that a proletarian political organization must be an international communist organization. This is more true today than in the time of Marx! But we’re a long way off.

THE FIGURE OF THE MIGRANT/WORKER?

TN: The next question is about the figure of the migrant/worker. In *La Distance Politique*, the *Organisation politique* frequently writes that the true political figure is not the immigrant or the *sans-papiers*, but the *figure-ouvrière* [figure of the worker]. Many migrant-justice movements have chosen instead to universalize the figure of the migrant with the slogan “We Are All Immigrants!” against many governments’ discriminatory usage of the term. Given the history of colonialism, current record numbers of global migration and unemployment, do you think that it is possible to politically reclaim the figure of the migrant (in addition to, or instead of, the worker)?

AB: This is a false debate. As I said at the beginning, proletarians have always been first and foremost “migrants.” And the slogan “we are all immigrants” is friendly but false—precisely because we are not all immigrants. The world’s middle class, which is about 40 percent of the world’s population, does not in any way represent itself as being composed of immigrants. It is today seduced by nationalism, hostility to foreigners, racism, and xenophobia. I believe that we must oppose to all this a universal figure more affirmative than “migrants,” which is only a provisional, empirical figure. It must be said that today there is an enormous nomadic proletariat, created by imperial capitalism, and that our goal is that it be organized in alliance with some minority detachments of the planetary middle class (in practice, mainly intellectuals and young people).

STRATEGY: PRESCRIPTION VS. PREFIGURATION

TN: The last question is about strategy. Reading *La Distance Politique*, it seems that most of the *Organisation politique*’s work was focused on public demonstrations and prescriptions directed at the state. In addition to prescriptions directed at the state, what do you think about migrant justice groups like No One Is Illegal, Toronto, who have tried to build what they call a “sanctuary” or “solidarity” city—a city where all the schools, women’s shelters, food banks, clinics, and even city police, do not ask about status and allow *sans-papiers* to use their services freely. Is our political militancy limited only to making prescriptions against the state and hoping that they change the laws? Is it not also important to engage in these sorts of prefigurative efforts?

AB: It's an old discussion. The nineteenth-century partisans of utopian communism already thought that it was necessary to create "just cities," and they tried to do so, especially in Latin America. I personally do not believe in anything like that. Today, capitalism holds everything in its hands, and covers all spaces. Look what happened to the "free radios" of the seventies, what became of television, then the Internet (now a tool of billionaires and policemen). Look how friendly technology "start-ups" or organic foods just as naturally become, as soon as they succeed, monstrous businesses. The crucial point is that on a grand scale, we need to break the dictatorship of private property over all aspects of social life. Marx said in the *Manifesto* that everything he advanced could be put into a single slogan: "the abolition of private property." For this, we still require the existence of a strong planetary organization centered on the nomadic proletariat (hence the crucial importance of "migrants") not for temporary protests but for the real purpose of confronting the state and breaking from power. The road is very long, for sure. But I want to reaffirm that, in any case, any effort to unite the masses of the nomadic proletariat is just and useful, even if it proves insufficient, and I salute the militants who carry out this kind of fight, wherever they are.

*Thomas Nail, University of Denver
Alain Badiou, École normale supérieure*