

Political Ontologies of the State. Žižek, Badiou, and the Idea of the Revolution from the Outside.

One way of beginning to understand Žižek's conception of the state is by looking at the differences between his view and that of his long-time interlocutor, French philosopher Alain Badiou. In 2012's *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek takes Badiou to task for 'ontologizing' the state in his mature system.¹ According to Žižek, Badiou makes no distinction between the state and society. In fact, Badiou reduces the state to nothing more than the ideological (and ultimately military) guarantee of the static social order – as repressive and exploitive as it may be. Because of this, Badiou is unable to conceptualize a state beyond coordinates of the bourgeois capitalist form of the state. This conceptual weakness in Badiou's account is the result, as Žižek puts it, of his movement from 'history to ontology'.² Instead of thinking about the historical nature of particular states (and their differing historical forms), Badiou offers a non-historical, static concept of the state that is nothing more than that which acts as both a repressive and an ideological apparatus; the agent that produces (and reproduces) the view that a given social order is both just and without alternative. This leaves Badiou in the unfortunate position of being unable to conceive of revolution or a revolutionary practice without also seeing it as completely oppositional to – or outside of – the state form as such.

Žižek goes on to argue that even Marx does not end up at such a problematic stalemate with regard to the state. Though there is of course Marx's controversial notion of the 'withering of the state' under proper communism, the state that 'withers' is the bourgeois capitalist state, not the state form itself. So in this way, the state in the form of political activity, simply becomes something else: a body in which all participate. Thus, communism does not lead to the total absence of the state, but rather to its transformation into a body that does not simply serve the needs of one social class.

Badiou and Žižek have, thus, two different notions of the way in which revolutionary politics takes place outside of the state as it exists now. This has far-reaching implications for the ways in which they conceptualize such politics. In an attempt to better understand Žižek's own view of this 'outside' and how it differs from that of

1 Žižek 2012, 841-42.

2 Ibid., 842.

Badiou, I will explore the ways in which Badiou forgets an important insight of his one-time teacher and collaborator, Louis Althusser, namely the fact that ideology is something that is ever-present (even in a post-revolutionary situation) and is in fact a *necessary* component of any social organization whatsoever (even a revolutionary one). This is a position, I will argue, with which Žižek is in agreement, with the result that for him the state (as the foundation and support of ideology and ideological apparatuses) becomes a necessary component of revolutionary practice. By triangulating the views of Badiou, Žižek, and Althusser and looking at their similarities and differences, we can gain a better understanding of Žižek's overall position vis-à-vis the idea of the state and its role in emancipatory and revolutionary politics.

Badiou

To gain a better understanding of Badiou's conception of the state, a logical starting point is his seminal *Being and Event*. This text famously begins with the claim that 'there is no one, only the count-as-one'.³ For Badiou, this is a foundational ontological claim about the nature of reality. The world (and its contents) as we understand it at any given time is the result of an 'operation' – or a set of operations – which Badiou identifies here as the 'count-as-one'.⁴ It is through this operation that individuals, objects, institutions, and so forth come to have a kind of oneness, consistency, and are ultimately made meaningful in particular ways. In other words, the count-as-one operation does the work of making these kinds of things 'legible' (i.e. understandable, sensible) in a given time and place. What underlies this oneness, that is, what 'is' outside of (or prior to) the operation of the count, is what Badiou terms 'Being-*qua*-being,' or 'the multiple without one'.⁵ This is what reality (or society) ultimately is: an infinite, inconsistent, incomplete, and unstructured multiplicity that is necessarily divided and contradictory.

Only by bringing order to such an inconsistent multiplicity (through the operation of counting) can a 'situation' be brought about. A 'situation' is a place in which Being-*qua*-being becomes legible in the particular way that it does at a particular time and in a particular place.⁶ So 'situations' are temporally located places in which series of multiples are 'presented' as consistent and in such a way that makes them legible. Here is Badiou:

Let's fix the terminology: I term *situation* any presented multiplicity. Granted the effectiveness of the presentation, as situation is a place of taking place, whatever the terms of

3 Badiou 2005, 24.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 35.

6 *Ibid.*, 23-30.

multiplicity in question. Every situation admits of its own particular operator of the count-as-one. This is the most general definition of a *structure*; it is what prescribes for a presented multiple, the regime of its count-as-one.⁷

We might think here, very broadly, of the ways in which the contemporary capitalist situation counts-as-one individuals according to their economic and other related properties. Under this regime of the count (or ‘structure’ as Badiou puts it in the quote above) we have (again very generally) various categories of workers that are counted, for instance, by the types of work that they do – blue-collar, white-collar, full-time, part-time, contingent, precarious, informal and so forth – and other categories of individuals who are non-workers but are also counted in relation to their status as laborers insofar as they make up the varieties of non-laboring individuals that are made possible by this particular counting operation – from the super wealthy who need not work to those who lack work for various reasons, to those who are, in some places anyway, prohibited from working (i.e., the very young, ‘illegal’ immigrants, et cetera).

What is nice about a simple example like this is that it allows us to see how it is that Badiou understands the claim that outside the structure of the situation in which things and individuals are counted-as-one in particular ways, there is an infinite/inconsistent multiplicity of non-ones. It is easy to see, for example, that individuals certainly can be counted this way (in relation to their status as workers/laborers in capitalist societies) but this is not the only way that such individuals can be counted-as-one. Indeed, there are multiple ways in which such individuals could be counted that have nothing to do with economics or job status. Moreover, these ways of counting-as-one are inconsistent with one another. For instance, individual humans can also be counted by other counting regimes based on religion, political affiliation, familial status, gender, biological sex, and so on.

We can now begin to see how, for Badiou, individuals are foundationally not-one. Badiou’s view is that all things (not only individual humans) are subject to the same conditions. Nothing is a ‘one’ foundationally, but rather all things, foundationally, are shot through with inconsistencies, and contradictions. As such, they are neither fixed nor whole. It is, however, the counting regime that brings about fixity and consistency. The former in that it fixes the *ways* in which multiples are counted, and the latter because the counting regime, in Badiou’s parlance, ‘subtracts’ all of the other possible modes of counting-as-one. So again, the structure of the counting operation ‘subtracts’ all of the multiple ways of counting that are inconsistent with the way a given structure counts. In doing this, the count-as-one subtracts or covers over the foundational inconsistency at the heart of multiplicity itself.

7 Ibid., 24.

The example given above, of the ways in which individuals can be counted by capitalism in relation to the status of their working lives, opens a window to another important feature of Badiou's general (or ontological) conception of both situations and the functioning of the law of the count here: it shows us the ways in which the counting operation is *asubjective*, as it is not the result of the subjective choices of individuals themselves. The differing categories and statuses of work/labor discussed above pre-exist any one individual and are, rather, categories into which we are inserted and into which we insert ourselves through our own activity and understanding.

It is here then, in relation to these last two points, that Badiou's understanding of the state becomes important. It is the 'state' of the situation that acts as the enforcer of the particular regime of the count-as-one. The state does this, according to Badiou, by acting to 're-present' the counted multiples that a given situation has presented in being structured by the law of the count.⁸ There is, however, always the possibility that the foundational non-oneness (or inconsistent multiplicity) itself bubbles to the surface, with the result that the counting operation comes to be seen for what it is (as non-foundational). Hence, its legitimacy can be challenged, destabilized, and ultimately, toppled. It is the state as Badiou understands it that prevents this:

The state is a sort of meta-structure that exercises the power of counting over all the subsets of the situation. Every situation has a state. Every situation is the presentation of itself, of what composes it, of what belongs to it. But it is also given as a state of the situation, that is, as the internal configuration of its parts or subsets, and therefore as representation.⁹

When Badiou says that the state 'represents' and codifies the subsets of counted multiples in a given situation, what he is getting at is that the state, in its re-presentation, ensures that all presented multiples have a place in the situation, that there is nothing – no unrepresented inconsistency or set of inconsistent multiples – that can act to disturb the structure. In this way, then, the state for Badiou acts, to refer again to Althusser, both as a repressive apparatus – that is, it works to force all presented multiples into the categories delineated by the law of the count, repressing anything that is inconsistent with that law – and also as an ideological apparatus: it makes the situation and its structure appear as if it is foundational full stop, that there is nothing underneath or outside of this structure; that this particular structure is the eternal way of things rather than something which is the result of the counting operation itself. This is why, for Badiou, any truly revolutionary politics – indeed anything that can be properly called politics – must happen at a distance from the state and is a

8 Ibid., 94.

9 Badiou 2005a, 143-144.

process through which the state's power is called into question via making the limits (or the 'measure', as Badiou puts it in the quotation below) of its power visible. Politics, then, becomes a process of exposing the ideological nature of the state's work and the limits of its power:

Politics puts the state at a distance, in the distance of its measure [...] The state is in fact the measureless enslavement of the parts of the situation [...] Freedom here consists in putting the State at a distance through the collective establishment of a measure for its excess.¹⁰

Badiou claims that politics happens at a distance from the state because it is the state itself – as an ontological entity – that is constantly working in such a way as to stabilize the situation, to make it appear as though there are no alternatives, and, ultimately, to undercut any possibility of change. While this is true at the level of ontology in Badiou's system, this can also be read as evincing Badiou's conception of the political state. A truly political act – or 'event' in Badiou's language – exposes the weaknesses of the structure's count (by displaying its measure, or its limit) and thereby challenges the power of the state, in whatever state form there is. As Alberto Toscano has put it, for Badiou, 'politics invariably takes its departure from an excess – the hidden excess of singularity subtracted from but absolutely dominated by the law of a situation – and it is aimed at inhibiting or terminating another excess, the excess of domination, the excess of the state.'¹¹

Again, we can see that, on a Badiouan accounting of things, a truly political act/event opens up a space in which the inconsistent multiplicity becomes legible and thus offers a challenge to the workings of state domination insofar as it exposes the ideological limits of the state's activity and reveals the truth of the situation (that it is not all there is, that there are other ways of counting, other ways of organizing, etc). For Badiou, this truth is universal or non-historical, because in that moment of truth something is revealed that is not bound to that time and place or to that law of the count (for any situation whatsoever).

As Badiou puts it in *Logics of Worlds*, 'a truth is an exception to what is'.¹² To be sure, for Badiou, such truth-events, though they form the foundation of the possibility of the destruction of the domination of the state, should not and cannot, after such destruction, simply become the new place from which a new order arises (with a similar structure to the old one). Here again is Toscano speaking on this point:

No politics of non-domination can be founded on the proposal of a new order with which to substitute the old. Not the figure of a new bond, but the invention – extracted from the singularity of an event and directed at the structure of representation – of an experiment

10 Ibid., 145.

11 Toscano 2004.

12 Badiou 2009, 6.

in political unbinding, is what, according to Badiou, the politics of non-domination requires.¹³

To use Toscano's framing, for Badiou, the politics of non-domination, as a truly emancipatory form of politics, calls for an 'unbinding' of the political from the state apparatus, since the state is itself inextricably linked to politics of domination. For Badiou, any emancipatory politics must happen outside of the state form itself. With this in mind, we can turn to Žižek's critique, cited at the outset of this chapter, as it is here that this can now come into its proper focus.

Žižek

Žižek claims that Badiou loses sight of the radical potential of the state that exists outside of the bourgeois capitalist state, which is based on class domination. Žižek's critique is based on a different conception of the 'outside'. He states:

Where, then, does the flaw in Badiou's account reside? [...] The danger of this move is that by establishing a direct link between a particular historical form of social organization and a basic ontological feature of the universe, it (implicitly, at least) ontologizes or eternalizes the state as a form of political organization: the political state becomes something we should resist, subtract ourselves from, act at a distance from, but simultaneously something which can never be abolished (save in utopian dreams).¹⁴

This concern should come as no surprise given what has been said above. The state, for Badiou, is an ever-present tool of domination. Because of this, it can never be put in the service of a form of politics that is emancipatory, nor can the state be overcome. Žižek thus continues:

As a consequence of this short-circuit, Badiou gets caught in the typical Kantian ambiguity apropos the question of whether abandoning the form of Party-State, subtracting oneself from the State, acting in the interstices of the State, is an a priori necessity of radical emancipatory politics as such, or just the expression of a certain (our) historical moment, that of the global defeat of radical politics.¹⁵

The problem, according to Žižek, is not simply that Badiou has taken a less historical perspective overall in favor of the building of his philosophical ontology in *Being and Event*, rather in this process, Badiou has mistaken the historical nature of the bourgeois capitalist state – which is indeed a state that is a tool for class domination – for an ever-present ontological state of the situation. In other words, for Badiou,

13 Toscano 2004, 212.

14 Žižek 2012, 842.

15 Ibid.

the state always works as a tool of domination over/against the inconsistent multiple in any and all ‘situations’.

Žižek’s claim is that Badiou has forgotten the lesson of Marx: that outside of the social relations of capital, we can – and, indeed, must – think of a state that is not a tool for domination:

Instead of withdrawing into a distance from the State, the true task should be to make the State work in a non-statal mode. The alternative ‘either struggle for State power (which makes us the same as the enemy we are fighting) or withdraw into a posture of resistance from a distance toward the State is a false one because both its terms share the same premise: the State form as we know it is here to stay so that all we can do is take over the State or remain at a distance to it. Here one should shamelessly repeat the lesson of Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*: the goal of revolutionary violence is not the take over of State power, but to transform it, radically changing its functioning [...] The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is a kind of (necessary) oxymoron, *not* a State form in which the proletariat is the ruling class. We effectively have the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat only when the State itself is radically transformed, relying on new forms of popular participation.’¹⁶

Rather than acting at a distance from the state, Žižek holds that a truly radical politics acts within the state in such a way as to open up a gap between the capitalist state (or the state of domination), and the state of emancipation. This should, furthermore, be done in such a way that the state of emancipation becomes a viable location from which to intervene in the situation as it exists.

One example of the kind emancipatory state that Žižek has in mind here is the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, as put forward by Marx. This is, in Žižek’s view, a truly a radical state form since it seeks to challenge the seemingly static and eternal nature of the bourgeois state. The latter cannot be done by simply divorcing oneself from the state. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not a state power in the same vein as the state power that exists under the capitalist regime. It does not simply constitute a change in the hands of power from one class to another, while leaving intact the exact same power structure. Rather it embodies something entirely different, something that acts to challenge the notion of what a state is, was, and could be. I will return to this below, but I want to pause to note that there is an important and helpful link here back to Althusser’s conception of the split between ideology and science.

16 Žižek 2010, 219-220.

In both *For Marx* and in his contribution to *Reading Capital*, Althusser argues that through his break with Hegel, Marx establishes the science of history known as ‘historical materialism’. It is this science that enables him to comprehend the historical development of society through different social formations. Furthermore, it provides Marx with a philosophical method (‘dialectical materialism’) which, as Althusser describes it, allows us to mark the distinction between the ideological and the non-ideological (in Althusser terms: the scientific).¹⁷ This distinction between the ideological and the scientific also signifies the difference between what Badiou himself, in an early review of Althusser’s work, describes as the difference between ‘repetition and transformation’.¹⁸ While ideology simply repeats existing structures, Marxist science transforms these structures into something new and different by recognizing the existing (and repeated) structures themselves as ideological, and subsequently partitioning the ideological structures off from that which science deems non-ideological.¹⁹

It is only through the scientific practice of dialectical materialism that we come to see existing social forms as non-static, and also become able to recognize attempts to assert such stasis as ideological. The connection to Žižek’s assertion that the Marxist state form of the dictatorship of the proletariat is a radically different state form is obvious: it is from this position that we can best come to view the capitalist state form as ideological and begin to work to erode its structure in practice. Whereas the capitalist state form – the form of domination in Badiou’s parlance – is ideological, the state form of the dictatorship of the proletariat – as the state form of emancipation – is scientific: once opened up, it is the space from which we can best view the ideological nature of the bourgeois state and its attempted dominance.

Further, as Žižek points out here, the goal of this communist state form is the total transformation of the state. In Marxist terms, this is referred to as the ‘withering of the state’, but we should not be mistaken: the state that withers and dies is the capitalist state, not the state form as such:

This is why then, in a properly Marxist perspective, the ill-famed ‘withering of the state’ does not aim at a de-politicization of society, but (in its first step at least) at its radical and thorough ‘politicization’: one does not ‘abolish the state’ by getting rid of its excess in a transparent harmonious self-organization of a society, but by abolishing the specter of apolitical spheres, by demonstrating how ‘there is nothing which is not political,’ up to and including people’s most intimate dreams.²⁰

17 For more specifics, see Althusser 2005 and chapters one and two of Geoff Pfeifer 2015.

18 Badiou 2012, 147.

19 See chapter 2 of Pfeifer 2015 and Pfeifer 2015a.

20 Pfeifer 2015a.

Where the capitalist state partitions society and the social structure into various forms of political and non-political (and, hence, non-historical) practices and institutions, the emancipatory state form seeks to show that this very division is itself ideological, that all practices are both political and historical. This is to say that all practices, regardless of their temporal location and grouping with other practices, are the result of particular historical social organizations and thus act to sustain those particular organizations. But this also means that these particular organizations are subject to the possibility of revision through a radical form of politics that seeks to reorient them in the ways that we have discussed above.

Again, there is a link to Althusser's work, this time to his notion of ideological interpellation. On Althusser's account, everything about us, down to our subjective (conscious) awareness is the result of the particular way(s) in which the social space is ordered at a given time (there is, here, broad agreement between Althusser, Žižek, and Badiou). For Althusser, it is through engaging in (and being engaged by) the particular sets of pre-existing social practices that we find in our world that we come to our self-understanding. These practices 'interpellate' us (or call to us) to act in certain ways – which are defined by the social structure – and to locate and understand ourselves as beings in that world. The example given above of different forms of work might again be helpful in this context. These different categories exist for us as various ways in which (portions of) one's life can be defined. They 'call' to us to insert ourselves into one or more of them so that we can achieve the identities that we would like or that we simply come to have. In this way, at least partially, they allow (or don't allow) the kinds of identities within which we recognize ourselves and others recognize us.²¹ The key feature of these interpellative social practices (or 'ideological apparatuses', as Althusser calls them) is that they are ever-present. Though a given set of practices might come and go as differing forms of social organization might come and go (or shift and change), the overall structure of interpellation remains: our self-understanding is always subject to a given set of interpellative practices (or ideological apparatuses). Here is Althusser on this point:

Ideology is as such an organic part of every social totality. It is as if human societies could not survive without these specific formations [...] Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life.²²

21 For more on this, see: Althusser 1971.

22 Althusser 2005, 232.

Two Conclusions

There are two ways to understand the link between Althusser and the thought of both Badiou and Žižek in relation to notions of the state. On the one hand, one could say that if Badiou's conception of the state as the ideological enforcer of a situation's count is right, then we can see how Althusser's understanding of ideology is implicated in this. That is, if ideology is ever-present, then Badiou is right to think of the state of the situation as ever-present, always working to enforce a given count and working to subtract any inconsistencies so as to avoid any instability in the situation. From this perspective, one can certainly see why Badiou might claim that any way of overcoming this domination must find its origin outside of the coordinates of the state and ideology and thus must be a kind of politics that challenges the state as such.

On the other hand, we can also read Althusser differently. Although it may be true, given the structure of ideology, that there is no escaping its interpellative processes completely (as a mechanism that structures society), scientific practice can still make us aware of these ideological structures so that we can come to challenge them. The Althusserian notion of science provides us with a means to differentiate between the ideological and the non-ideological, but this is an ongoing process. For this, we need a state apparatus of our own, an outside *within* the state form itself. Such a communist state apparatus could act on, and in, the ideological plane in such a way as to offer a challenge to the existing state of affairs. This, then, is the goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat and how it works.

This latter position leads us back to the Žižekian emphasis on the importance of the state for revolutionary/emancipatory politics. If it is true that ideology and ideological practices are part of what make up our subjective awareness, then the self really is political all the way down. In this case, it is the job of the communist state form to bring that process to light and appropriate it for revolutionary and emancipatory goals.

This also brings to light another difference between Žižek and Badiou. While the latter ultimately searches for universal, non-historical truths, Žižek insists that there is no neutral, non-political/historical place from which to act. Such action always takes place from within a given historical present and a given set of social structures and social practices. In this respect it is a matter of finding those practices that allow for the opening of the revolutionary gap: the 'outside' inside the historical situation that opens up the space for change. Opening up this space will not end in the destruction of the state as such. Rather it will lead to the destruction of the bourgeois state form in favor of a renewed and emancipatory state form.

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