

Alain Badiou

Jean-Claude Milner



# Controversies



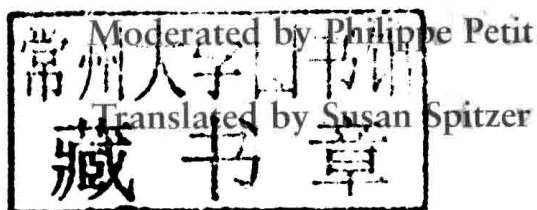
Dialogue on the politics and philosophy of our time

*Translated by Susan Spitzer*

# Controversies

A dialogue on the politics and philosophy of  
our times

Alain Badiou  
Jean-Claude Milner



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# Controversies

# Unreconciled

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*Philippe Petit*

Here are two giants, two French intellectuals who are frequently denounced, and never for the same reasons. They met in 1967, during the “Red Years” in Paris. Badiou was a *lycée* teacher at the time; Milner had just returned from a year at MIT. The former is now the most widely read contemporary French thinker abroad; the latter, who is largely unknown there, has become a leading intellectual figure in France.

Both share an unconditional love for the French language and its own particular dialectic. They hadn't compared their careers and ideas since they broke off relations in 2000 as a result of an article by Alain Badiou in the French daily *Libération* that had rubbed Jean-Claude Milner the wrong way. In that article, Badiou had lampooned the trajectory of Benny Lévy (1945–2003), a former comrade-in-arms and friend of Milner who had gone, as is well known, or as he himself put it, “from Moses to Mao and from Mao to Moses.” They had never really discussed their differences in such a head-on way.

So there was nothing inevitable about the exchange the reader will find in these pages between Alain Badiou,

born in 1937 in Rabat, Morocco, and Jean-Claude Milner, born in 1941 in Paris. It might well have broken off as they went along. It was therefore agreed by both parties that it would be carried out to its conclusion, that they wouldn't let it get bogged down in posturing, and that it would deal as much with the issues of our times as with each one's system of thought. It would moreover be an opportunity for them to set out their quarrels over time and justify their assumptions. And, finally, it would provide a summary, when read, of the differences between the speaker and the spoken to, without ever losing sight of those they were addressing.

To that end, a protocol had to be established. It was decided that we would meet four times, between January and June 2012. During the first three sessions we sat on a sofa and armchairs and, during the last one, around a table, something I had requested in order to vary the mode of interlocution and to be able to spread out my papers – but in reality so as to moderate the dialogue as much as possible. Jean-Claude Milner wryly remarked that he was afraid of being “devoured” by this system, the way Kierkegaard was by Hegel. Was it because of the table? The nature of the topics covered? Whatever the case, the last session was by far the most relaxed one. During the conversation – and it really was one – they treated each other with kid gloves.

These meetings had been arranged over a lunch during which a short summary of the points of friction between the two thinkers was addressed. The infinite was one of them, as were the universal and the name “Jew.”<sup>1</sup> But the discussion turned fairly quickly into a high-quality international press review.

<sup>1</sup>The English translation of the French noun *nom*, as used here in “*le nom 'juif'*,” is problematic. *Nom* can refer, variously, to a name, a noun, or a word. An interviewer once asked Milner what he meant by “*nom*,” adding: “Perhaps you might also take into account the

The scene could have been set in an embassy library, but it actually took place in a restaurant near Notre-Dame. Alain Badiou and Jean-Claude Milner had just gotten back in touch with each other. That day, they exchanged their views on Germany and Europe, American campuses, and French political life, though they didn't bring up the Middle East. It didn't matter, however, since the dialogue between them, focusing on theoretical issues and based on concrete analyses, had been renewed. All that needed to be done was to guide and moderate it to keep it from going awry.

The sessions lasted three hours each and took place as agreed. Rereading the discussions proved to be a particularly fruitful task. Each of the authors reviewed and revised his contribution, leaving the rhythm of the discussions unchanged but making the wording clearer in some places.

In the transition from the spoken to the written word each one's arguments were tightened and their positions made more forceful. The conversational tone, in which long developments alternated with snappier, more staccato-like responses, was nevertheless preserved in the final product, which reflects the quality of the listening, the sense of surprise, and the desire to convince that had emerged in the face-to-face meetings.

question of the names for '*nom*' in English, that is to say, what we call the name and the noun." Milner replied: "And how to translate it" (Ann Banfield and Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Interview with Jean-Claude Milner," *Journal of the Jan Van Eyck Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 3 (2010), 14–15). Badiou, in contrast, tends to use *mot* ("word") for the same purposes (see, in particular, his "Portées du mot 'juif'" in *Circonstances* 3, translated by Steven Corcoran as "Uses of the Word 'Jew,'" in *Polemics* [London and New York: Verso, 2006.]). Indeed, in the Postscript to this book, where political names in general are discussed at some length, Badiou challenges Milner about his choice of terminology before agreeing to use *nom* for the sake of argument. Given this concession, I have translated *nom* as "name" throughout.

*Translator's note:* All footnotes in this translation are my own.

For if there is no thinking without a division at once internal and external to the subject, just as there is no violence that is not both subjective and objective, there can be no true dialogue unless the assumptions and method of each of the participants are broached. Just being opposed to each other is not enough; the other person still has to be convinced, and, when that can't happen, simply defending oneself is not enough; one must be able to justify the grounds for one's arguments. This, I believe, is something that Alain Badiou and Jean-Claude Milner pulled off perfectly in this dialogue. They argued, very heatedly at times – to the point of requesting that a postscript be added regarding what bothered them the most, namely, their respective positions on the State of Israel and the situation of the Palestinians – and they went head to head on key issues, such as the status of the universal, the name “Jew,” mathematics, and the infinite. But they also pooled their opinions, or, rather, harmonized their thinking, on a number of points having to do with the legacy of revolutions, Marx's work, international law, the Arab uprisings, the historical situation of France, the role of the parliamentary left, the so-called “normal” presidential candidate,<sup>2</sup> the *Indignés* movement, Nicolas Sarkozy's legacy, and many other issues as well.

They agreed, as it were, on their disagreement and didn't hesitate to agree on everything else. They had to do so, in order to avoid taking the easy way out and creating the impression that there was some subtext of friendly understanding between them to set off each of their careers to advantage. For it is a given of French intellectual history that it is unlike any other. It is not better than the others, nor does it reflect an indifference

<sup>2</sup>In the 2012 French presidential campaign, François Hollande, the Socialist candidate, in reaction to Nicolas Sarkozy's so-called “bling-bling presidency,” pledged to be “a normal candidate for a normal presidency.”



to anything foreign, but it is driven by its own principle of division. Thus, Descartes – that French knight<sup>3</sup> – is no more French than Pascal, and Rousseau, in terms of his language, is no less so than Voltaire, *pace* Péguy and all those who despaired of finding an appropriate phrase to define *l'esprit français*, whose lightness Nietzsche wanted so desperately to capture.

There is nothing to hope for from such ridiculous essentialism. Nevertheless, we should properly appreciate what sets French intellectual history apart in terms of its style and thought. Sartre was at once an implacable ideologist and a peerless analyst of political tensions, a writer in the tradition of the French moralists and a committed intellectual in the strongest sense of the term. Alain Badiou is a philosopher through and through, a staunch advocate of clear writing, and a gifted lecturer; he is both a writer and someone true to his commitments. His father, a member of the Resistance who would analyze for his son the Allied armies' advances on a map on his office wall and would become mayor of Toulouse after the Liberation, was his first mentor. Sartre and Althusser were his first masters, and those public agitators, the Enlightenment *philosophes*, were a constant source of inspiration to him. There's not a line of his work that isn't indebted to these diverse traditions, to which must be added the names of Plato and Lacan, who tie together his idea of truth and his conception of the subject.

Nothing can be understood about the development of his work, his metaphysics, and his recent entry into the public debate if he is not interpreted against that

<sup>3</sup>In his *Note conjointe sur Monsieur Descartes et la philosophie cartésienne* (1914), Charles Péguy wrote: "In the history of thought, Descartes will always be the French knight who took off at such a good pace." Cited in Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 139, n. 43.

background. The reason that Alain Badiou is a global thinker today, an international philosopher as well known in Argentina as he is in Belgium, Greece, or California, has as much to do with that legacy as with his ability to keep it at arm's length. There is, in fact, a big difference between the way he is viewed on the banks of the Seine and the way he is viewed on the banks of the Thames. Speaking in English wherever the need arises, translating into English what Beckett strove to express in French, he realizes how little the role he plays here or is made to play elsewhere corresponds to his particular situation.

Although different, the mark the war left on Jean-Claude Milner's background was also a decisive one. His father, a Jew of Lithuanian descent, was a habitué of Montparnasse. He was a bon vivant, sparing with his memories and reticent about his activities. Denounced by a neighbor during the Occupation years, he managed to avoid the worst by joining the STO [Compulsory Work Service]. But it was only around the age of 15, and by putting two and two together, that Milner figured out that his father was Jewish, since he had considered the word to be meaningless, except in the minds of anti-Semites. His aunt died in the Warsaw ghetto. A close friend of his parents who returned to France in 1946 had been deported to Auschwitz.

This background weighed heavily on his formative years and had a profound impact on his intellectual career, although not to the point of preventing the teenager he was from living his life, being enamored of frivolous novels and indulging in reading Rosamond Lehmann, or of being totally overwhelmed by his father's reticence.

We shouldn't be too quick to rely on personal anecdotes, however. And it would be wrong to reduce this dispute to a mere difference of temperaments or personal histories, unless we accept that the biographeme, or protohistory, coincides with the whole curve of life,

like body temperature or the silence of the organs;<sup>4</sup> or that contingency is all and the original choice is nothing; or that social determinations are the be-all and end-all and “the unfathomable decision of being” (Lacan) just some psychoanalyst’s whim. In the cases of Jean-Claude Milner and Alain Badiou there are certainly explanatory frameworks rooted in early childhood or youth. But let’s not exaggerate. Sartre’s and Camus’s tumultuous relationship can no more be reduced to a quarrel between a curly-haired Parisian petty bourgeois and a poor boy playing soccer with the kids of Mondovi in Algeria than the tempestuous friendship between these two epigones of May ’68 can be reduced to a titanic struggle between Badiou’s glorious father and Milner’s erratic one – let alone their mothers, who would only serve to corroborate the analysis.

To assume that a person’s life can either enhance or tarnish their work is the mark of a litigious mind, certainly not of inspired thinking. Such an attitude cynically imposes the perspective of death on life. It obfuscates what may yet come from these two great men whose work is not yet complete and whom it would be wrong to set in stone. Jean-Claude Milner, who admits in *L’Arrogance du présent* (2009) that he fulfilled the “duty of infidelity,” ought to know. The choice he made to devote himself to structural linguistics rather than to philosophy, even though he felt genuine admiration – as did Alain Badiou – for Lacan and Althusser, still weighs on him today. It represented an initial career orientation that was a unique way for him to enter the world of the French language, endure its silences, acquire the vocabulary of the French Revolution, and avoid becoming “the present’s servant,” meaning someone who, in his view, is merely the mouthpiece of the “unlimited society,” or, if you prefer, the symptom of smug progressivism, which

<sup>4</sup>A French surgeon, René Leriche (1879–1955), defined health as “life lived in the silence of the organs.”

only cares about the weak if they stay in their place and don't unduly disturb its appetite for power, conquest, and concealed domination.

That original choice, at any rate, defined the horizon of this dialogue with regard to the fate of the French language, "a dead language" today for Jean-Claude Milner, just as the history of France is "on its last legs" for Alain Badiou. Because if there was one topic – and this is no accident – on which our two dialogue partners agreed, could relate to each other, and came together, it was the topic with the name "France," whose history is allegedly disappearing – to parody Michel Foucault – "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."<sup>5</sup> To such an extent, in fact, that it is giving way, on this now faceless beach, to a divisive name – "French," as it happens – "which individuals and groups have a duty to resemble as closely as possible if they are to merit positive attention from the State."<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it another way, it is providing the key to the secret behind the calm<sup>7</sup> that was promised on this beach stripped of the name "France," namely, the revenge of the "spirit of '68," which "became the Restoration's staunchest ally."<sup>8</sup>

So that was the end point of this dialogue taking stock of our recent history. Whether it was a question of the left and the right, neither of which Jean-Claude Milner thinks is defined by "values"; or of Nicolas Sarkozy's legacy; or of the specific character of the

<sup>5</sup>In *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), Foucault famously predicted that man would disappear "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (p. 387). Milner refers to this quotation in his *Les Penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique* (Paris: Verdier, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 97.

<sup>7</sup>The calm in question is the one that has "prevailed in France over the past 40 years," as Milner explains in *L'Arrogance du présent* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009), 236.

<sup>8</sup>*L'Arrogance du présent*, 237.

French government machine, which can run only on condition of the reconciliation of the power elite (see below, pp. 113 ff.); or of the foretold death of the left-wing intellectual, a host of artificial oppositions were shattered here under the impact of the exchange. Even the opposition between moderns and anti-moderns was rendered obsolete.

After they both left the dead planet of revolution, by different routes, to be sure, they realized that the revolution was henceforth a matter of tradition. The end of the revolution marked its final destination, but certainly not the end of that goal. Thus, after reading this discussion, it is finally possible to be modern without having contempt for tradition, as Michel Crépu wrote of Chateaubriand.<sup>9</sup> Since the duty of transmission is the guarantee of the future, there is no longer even any need to oppose the past to the future to make it exist. The classic is no longer someone who is opposed to revolution or progress and recycles the past into pointless, boring folklore, but instead someone who reshapes the past and restores to it its share of experiences and failures so as to give innovation a chance. What kind of chance, though? Here is where the classics part company. And, not surprisingly, a theme that runs through this whole heated exchange, which began by recalling an earlier, original dispute, returns at the end.

Jean-Claude Milner and Alain Badiou did not, in fact, leave the planet Revolution aboard the same spaceship. And there is no common measure between Milner's abandonment of the political worldview and Badiou's ongoing pursuit of it. This exchange is thus first and foremost an invitation to a reading of the "century of revolutions," as Antoine Vitez called it, of the century of communism. It is a reading for two voices, which allows us to reject or accept – it all depends – the anti-totalitarian approach as much as the sequential

<sup>9</sup>Michel Crépu, *Le Souvenir du monde: Essai sur Chateaubriand* (Paris: Grasset, 2011).

approach, according to which, after the failure of the cycle of revolutions, there would come an “in-between” period when an emancipatory vision of history might be reinstated.

In this respect, the exchange is a follow-up to an earlier debate that took an unexpected turn upon the publication, in 1992, of *Constat*, a book that marked a major turning point in Jean-Claude Milner’s career. The discussion at that time was about the unintelligibility of the name “politics” and the status of the infinite as it was bound up with revolutionary fervor and the progress the French Revolution had brought about. Milner’s rejection of maximal behaviors, henceforth severed, in his opinion, from both rebellion and thought, led to a disagreement that was never resolved. Ever since then, the skepticism of the author of *La Politique des choses* has constantly run up against the doctrinal passion of the philosopher Alain Badiou.

That incipient debate couldn’t be allowed to come to nothing. After the death of Guy Lardreau<sup>10</sup> in 2008, Jean-Claude Milner reconnected with Alain Badiou, who three years later would come up with the idea of this *disputatio*. But how could the debate be resumed? What basis could be provided for the question, inasmuch as it was addressed to this other person who still wanted to “change the world”? “Let’s be clear-headed and sensible!” said one of them. “Let’s formulate hypotheses!” said the other. With an alternative like that, it was a given that Lucretius’ admirer would bang heads with Plato’s heir. Weren’t Milner’s minimalist arguments actually a sort of challenge to the maximalist propositions of the author of *Logics of Worlds*?

<sup>10</sup>The philosopher Guy Lardreau (1947–2008) was one of the co-founders, in 1968, of the Maoist Gauche Prolétarienne organization. His book *L’Ange* (Paris: Grasset, 1976), co-authored with Christian Jambet, later became a founding text of the “new philosophy.”

Likewise, the latter's "communist hypothesis" betokened a final attack on the renegades of the so-called "new philosophy," who, in Milner's case at least, had assumed the mantle not of an abandonment of thinking but of anti-philosophy, or, to be more precise, of a subtle pragmatism in which were combined a fierce rejection of violence on behalf of history's massacres and an unsparing view of his opposite number's bold aberrations. Until the name "Jew" – and what it implies in terms of the universal's status – intervened and reopened the quarrel, this time for good.

The quarrel needed to be reopened and the issues defined. It had to be put back on a track that could only be determined through the apparatus of thought of these two children of war. "Apparatus" must be understood to mean something a little more than equipment or armor, since when two classics meet and discuss the future, what's at issue is not same-sex marriage but the type of access they have to the real. When Jean-Claude Milner says, "I don't have an affirmative ontology" and Alain Badiou replies that there may be a local convergence of an affirmative ontology and a "dispersive ontology," given that in both instances the world is presented to us in the guise of multiplicity, the importance of that exchange should not be underestimated. It marked the beginning of the massive disagreement that developed as the dispute went on. It introduced an acknowledgment that, although mutual at the beginning, was only as good as its consequences, as the adventure of thought that spawned the disagreement and fueled it, until it produced the formulation: "The twentieth century took place."<sup>11</sup> The crisis of traditional politics is the proof of this. On that they agreed, it is ironic to note, but their respective interpretations of

<sup>11</sup>This sentence, credited to the novelist and political activist Natacha Michel, originally appeared in Badiou's *The Century* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), xiii; translation modified.

what was meant by it differed. For Jean-Claude Milner, the hard kernel of politics is the possible killing, and the survival, of bodies, whereas for Alain Badiou it is “the historical process of the collective correlation between equality and freedom,” as well as the possible return to the understanding of mass murders.

Thus, there was a total lack of agreement between them about the “terrible twentieth century”<sup>12</sup> and its aftermath. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet’s second film, which opened in theaters in 1965, was entitled *Unreconciled* (*Nicht versöhnt* in German). The title fits these two intellectuals who strode boldly through the last century to a tee. It accurately captures their desire not to sell their experience short, as though that century’s violence were still permeating their current thinking and it was the responsibility of both of them to inform the public that they would not accept a degraded present; that it was important to question whether the petty bourgeois intelligentsia still had a future; that there were at least two ways of examining its exit from history – definitive for Milner, temporary for Badiou – and that it was possible to cultivate the difference between two related yet opposed conceptions of transmission.

Two giants, as I called them, worlds apart from each other, but whom I nonetheless brought together. Two unreconciled authentic thinkers who have lost none of their argumentative spirit, which they have no intention of giving up any time soon, and who peer into the world of the future armed with this shared vision: “For to end yet again.”<sup>13</sup>

*September 2012*

<sup>12</sup>The phrase was originally Winston Churchill’s.

<sup>13</sup>This is the title of a short prose work by Samuel Beckett, implying, perhaps, the impossibility of attaining final closure.



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