

JYX



**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Backman, Jussi

**Title:** Politics of the Idea : (Anti-)Platonic Politics in Arendt and Badiou

**Year:** 2020

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2020 the Authors

**Rights:** CC BY 4.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Backman, J. (2020). Politics of the Idea : (Anti-)Platonic Politics in Arendt and Badiou. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 12(3), 168-181.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1842701>



## Politics of the Idea: (Anti-)Platonic Politics in Arendt and Badiou

Jussi Backman

To cite this article: Jussi Backman (2020): Politics of the Idea: (Anti-)Platonic Politics in Arendt and Badiou, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, DOI: [10.1080/17570638.2020.1842701](https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1842701)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1842701>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Dec 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 42



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Politics of the Idea: (Anti-)Platonic Politics in Arendt and Badiou

Jussi Backman 

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

### ABSTRACT

This paper compares two influential but conflicting contemporary models of politics as an activity: those of Hannah Arendt and Alain Badiou. It discovers the fundamental difference between their approaches to politics in their opposing evaluations of the contemporary political significance of the legacy of Plato, Platonism, and the Platonic Idea. Karl Popper's and Arendt's analyses of the inherently ideological nature of totalitarianism are contrasted with Badiou's vindication of an ideological "politics of the Idea." Arendt and Badiou are shown to share an understanding of politics as a realm for the human deployment of novelty and world-transformation. Their key disagreement concerns the form of activity that accomplishes this deployment. For Arendt, political activity has the basic form of noninstrumental and nonteleological action (*praxis*), devalued by the Platonic tradition of political philosophy. Badiou, by contrast, follows Plato in regarding politics essentially as a process of production (*poiēsis*) oriented to an ideal end.

### KEYWORDS

political theory; ideology; Hannah Arendt; Alain Badiou; Plato; Platonism

### The End and Return of Ideology?

In his 1938 essay "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," a rather unique statement of the totalitarian approach to ideology by a totalitarian leader, Joseph Stalin writes that far from denying the significance of "social ideas," Marxist historical materialism stresses their importance, as "it is *impossible* to carry out the urgent tasks of development of the material life of society without their organizing, mobilizing and transforming action" (Stalin 1972, 314). In order to "accelerate the development and improvement" of the material life of society, the communist party

must rely upon ... such a social idea as correctly reflects the needs of development of the material life of society, and which is therefore capable of setting into motion broad masses of the people and of mobilizing them and organizing them. (315)

In the Stalinist version of historical materialism, ideas are ultimately mere reflections of underlying material, economic, and social circumstances; nonetheless, Stalin attributes a central role to "advanced" ideas as practical instruments in the mobilization of the masses

**CONTACT** Jussi Backman  jussi.m.backman@jyu.fi

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

for the purpose of assisting the ineluctable logic of historical development. Even though history is governed by objective and knowable material laws and not by human actions, ideological propaganda and terror are needed to “smash” counterforces and clear the way for historical development.

Stalin’s statement can be read as a synthesis of the two main totalitarian strategies distinguished by Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper 1945, 1–4, 138–148): radical historicism and utopian social engineering. The first of these refers to a view of history as a developmental process determined by immutable objective laws; the latter refers to the possibility of immeasurably accelerating this process through the total ideological mobilization and reshaping of society. Popper famously starts his genealogy of totalitarian thought with Plato, whose political philosophy he sees as “the earliest and probably the most influential” example of historicism and social engineering (19), even arguing for an “identity of the Platonic theory of justice with the theory and practice of modern totalitarianism” (4). The first volume of *The Open Society*, provocatively titled “The Spell of Plato,” argues that the political and social naturalism, essentialism, idealism, collectivism, intellectualism, utopianism, and authoritarianism of Plato’s *Republic* have cast a lasting spell on Western thought that has kept attracting thinkers towards totalitarianism and informing actual totalitarian practices. Plato’s particular version of “historicism” is his political idealism, that is, the view that “all [political] change can be arrested if the state is made an exact copy of its original, i.e. of the Form or Idea of the city” (74). This notion of an ideal end to historical-political development immediately calls for radical social engineering, to be performed by experts – philosophers – with privileged access to the ideal form of a perfectly just political community.

In the sixth book of Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates describes to Adeimantus this productive activity of political design (*diagrapseia*) by philosophers acting as painters (*zōgraphoi*) with a divine model (*paradeigma*). They start by wiping the city clean of its former mores (*ēthē*), like a drawing tablet, and then begin tracing in outline the shape (*schēma*) of the new political community (*politeia*) (Plato, *Republic* 6.500e2–501a10). In the process of elaborating their design, “they would frequently look ... to that which is by nature [*physei*] just, beautiful, moderate, and so forth, and again to that which they would be producing among human beings” (501b1–4; my translation). Out of the different elements of civic life they concoct a new human image (*andreikelon*), “taking their indications from that which Homer calls the likeness [*theoieides*] and image of a god [*theoikelon*] that has come to be among human beings” (501b4–7; my translation). Commenting on this passage, Popper (1945, 127–131) points out that for Plato, the philosopher-sovereign is the totalitarian social engineer *par excellence*, the technocratic designer of the ideal polity as well as the “philosophic breeder” of a “racially” perfect human being. Popper bluntly concludes that Plato reads like a

totalitarian party-politician, unsuccessful in his immediate and practical undertakings [that is, in his attempts to influence the tyrant of Syracuse], but in the long run only too successful in his propaganda for the arrest and overthrow of a [democratic] civilization which he hated. (149)

Popper’s concepts of radical historicism and utopian social engineering also capture the core of Hannah Arendt’s even more influential account of totalitarianism. For Arendt,

totalitarianism was an entirely new phenomenon of the twentieth century, a culmination in the development of the modern ideological mass movements that emerged in the wake of the great revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ideological movements came about as post-Hegelian theoretical attempts to explain the teleological logic of history were transformed into efforts to implement this kind of logic in society. Like Popper, Arendt sketches out an intellectual genealogy of totalitarian strategies within the historical framework of Western political philosophy; she, too, begins her genealogy with Plato. However, Arendt's interpretation of the historical maturation of the key elements of totalitarianism is more elaborate, nuanced, and attentive to historical detail. For Arendt, attributing totalitarianism or even proto-totalitarianism to the Platonic ideal polity would be a blatant anachronism. Nonetheless, she also detects a certain Platonic heritage in modern totalitarian practices.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new theoretical position on the left, perhaps most prominently represented on the popular cultural scene by Slavoj Žižek, but arguably developed to its most innovative extent by Alain Badiou. Žižek's and Badiou's approaches are distinguished by their anti-Arendtian stance and their criticisms of a notion of "totalitarianism" that would simply conflate Nazism and (Stalinist) communism as ideologically differing variations of a single model.<sup>1</sup> What they basically seek to redeem is the modern tradition of revolutionary idealism so deeply compromised by the totalitarian experiences in the twentieth century – the tradition of left-wing politics in its original sense of egalitarian radicalism. Inherent in this project is the attempt to restore plausibility to "ideological" politics in the sense of political idealism or a so-called "politics of the Idea," which, for Badiou, equally signifies the rehabilitation of a certain form of political Platonism.

In what follows, I will first study Arendt's specific conception of ideology and the function of the ideological "idea" in her analysis of totalitarianism. I will then unfold the respective meanings and functions of these terms in the thought of Badiou, particularly in his more recent work. Through this comparison, I will show that the Badiouan "return to ideology" is not simply antithetical to the Arendtian approach. Both thinkers are concerned with articulating politics as a domain for implementing the distinctive human capacity for novelty, that is, for transforming the world without falling prey to the "historical" temptation to identify this transformation with a predetermined movement of history. What they ultimately disagree on is the form of activity through which novelty is truly realized. I illustrate their fundamental difference with the help of their starkly contrasting evaluations of the political significance of Plato and Platonism – of the Platonic Idea and its legacy.

## Arendt: Ideology as the Logic of an Idea

Arendt's key analysis of the function of ideology as the inner logic of a totalitarian movement can be found in "Ideology and Terror," an essay originally published in 1953 (the

<sup>1</sup>Compare with Žižek's (2002, 2–3) view that the elevation of Arendt during the past decades into an "untouchable authority" is "perhaps the clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the Left." See also Badiou's sharp distinction between Nazism and Stalinism in this regard (2005c, 147; 2007, 102–103) and his indirect attack on Arendt (via the Arendtian position of the French political philosopher Myriam Revault d'Allonnes) as a proponent of the "democratic materialist" conception of politics, as based on the plurality of opinions and judgments (Badiou 1998, 19–34; 2005b, 10–25).

year of Stalin's death) and appended to the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt [1951] 1985, 460–479). Her specific concept of ideology is distinct from the Marxist notion of ideological superstructure, which refers to the set of moral, religious, and cultural values and practices that provides the imaginary rationale and self-justification for a given social order and conceals the underlying class struggle as the violent logic of the movement of history (Marx and Engels 1976, 59; 1978, 46; compare with Arendt 1994b, 374–379). For Arendt ([1951] 1985, 470), by contrast, “ideology” is largely synonymous with the nineteenth-century concept of *Weltanschauung*, “world-view” – a total perspective from which the world as a whole can be viewed. Totalitarian rule is distinguished from all earlier forms of government, even the most oppressive tyrannies, precisely by the inherently ideological nature of its dynamic. Ideology, for Arendt, is essentially the “logic of an idea” (Arendt [1951] 1985, 469). An ideological idea in Arendt's sense is first and foremost an heir of Hegel's Absolute Idea, of the supreme thought that comprehends the entire history of ideas and conceptual determinations. Such an idea unfolds only in and through this history. It is a total explanatory principle – one that assigns to all of human history an ultimate purpose (the unalienated classless society for Marxist historical materialism, an Aryanized human race for Nazi racial doctrine) as well as an inherent and inexorable movement (class struggle, the struggle of the races) towards the attainment of this purpose. The idea of an ideology is, in a sense, an Aristotelian “final” cause and an “efficient” cause in one.

Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process ... because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas. ... The “idea” of an ideology ... has become an instrument of explanation. To an ideology, history does not appear in the light of an idea ... but as something which can be calculated by it. What fits the “idea” into this new role is its own “logic,” that is a movement which is the consequence of the “idea” itself and needs no outside factor to set it into motion. (Arendt [1951] 1985, 469)

In ideological thinking any individual historical phenomenon can be accounted for by deriving it from a single ideological idea. Ideology turns the task of interpreting historical singularities into a matter of deduction from a single premise. No hermeneutic dialogue with other people, historical epochs, or cultures is required, nor is the empirical study of relevant facts necessary. Neither people nor facts can teach the ideological student of history anything, since everything needed for understanding is already contained in the relevant idea. Experience in general is supplanted by ideological deduction (Arendt [1951] 1985, 470). Unlike intersubjective “common sense” and empirical experience, logical reasoning, Arendt maintains, is an element of human understanding that can function even in loneliness. Ideological logic therefore holds a particular appeal for an alienated human being who is out of touch with other humans and the communally shared world (470–479). Arendt's genealogy of totalitarianism accordingly gives a key role to the breakdown of traditional social identities and the increased social mobility and fluidity of classes and groups in the industrialized modern mass society, which, together with the “front experience” of senseless annihilation in the First World War, created an atmosphere of rootlessness and aimlessness that was efficiently exploited by totalitarian movements. The disintegration of conventional social distinctions increasingly transformed society into an inarticulate, confused mass of lonely individuals, only too eager to embrace the reassuring rigidity and clarity of total ideologies (305–340).

While both Nazi racial doctrine and Stalinist dialectical materialism were fond of emphasizing their own “scientificity,” the only thing they really share with the empirical sciences is their striving for a lawlike coherence, regularity, and predictability. In fact, the only point of contact that a totalitarian ideology has with empirical reality is the initial experience from which it abstracts its fundamental premise – for example, in the case of modern racism, the experience of Europe’s imperialist encounter with non-European cultures (Arendt [1951] 1985, 158–184). But since, for the totalitarian movement, the process of realizing the idea, that is, ideological mobilization, is more important than attaining the end of this process, even the “idea” becomes a sort of working hypothesis whose main function is to provide a logic of movement. What is expected of the ideal totalitarian subject is not so much belief in the pre-existing truth of the ideological idea, but rather total conformity to the logic of movement that it generates. Thus, in her study of Adolf Eichmann as a prototype of the totalitarian subject, Arendt points to Eichmann’s largely apathetic and impersonal attitude toward anti-Semitic doctrines, which he nevertheless accepted as the practical rationale for his activities under constant totalitarian mobilization (Arendt [1963] 1994a, 26). In totalitarian discourse, what appear to be factual statements with truth-value (such as “the Kulaks are a dying class”) effectively function as practical prescriptions to be implemented (that is, “the Kulaks must be liquidated”) (Arendt [1951] 1985, 341–364).

For Arendt’s mentor Martin Heidegger, the fundamental “nihilistic” aspect of Western technical modernity is contained in its confidence in the omnipotence of the human being and her capacity to fabricate reality and truth, to transform the world according to a pre-established idea or a “world-picture.” In the eyes of modern technical nihilism, nothing is ultimately beyond human manipulation and control. “[T]he impression comes to prevail that everything the human being encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. ... It seems as though the human being everywhere and always encounters only himself” (Heidegger 1977, 27; 2000, 31; translation modified). For Arendt, ideological totalitarianism, in its striking disregard for facts, is simply an extreme manifestation of this conviction. Its most basic belief is “the belief in the omnipotence of *man* and at the same time of the superfluity of *men* ... the belief that everything is permitted and, much more terrible, that everything is possible” (Arendt 1994b, 354). Totalitarianism believes that we can “fabricate truth insofar as we can fabricate reality. ... It is the underlying conviction of any totalitarian transformation of ideology into reality that it will become true whether it is true or not” (Arendt 1994b, 354).

Ideological totalitarianism seeks to eliminate the contingency of empirical facts and the unpredictability of human beings and their actions by imposing on the world and on human history the logic of movement that is contained in the ideological idea. The ideological idea, from which all courses of action can be deduced, is a tool for eliminating *novelty* which, for Arendt, constitutes precisely the distinctive feature of the human being. Ideological totalitarianism seeks to dissolve the singularity conferred upon human beings by their natality, that is, by the fact that every human being enters the world as a literal *newborn* who is capable of initiating something entirely unprecedented through her words and deeds (Arendt [1958] 1998, 247). Against the tyranny of the logical consistency of the ideological idea, “nothing stands but the great capacity of men to start something new. ... Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can

have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning” (Arendt [1951] 1985, 473; compare with Miller 1979).

Arendt, unlike Popper, sees totalitarianism as a purely modern phenomenon. For her, the emergence of ideological politics begins only with Marx’s demand for a transition from philosophically interpreting the world to transforming it (Arendt 2005, 74–75, 86; compare with Marx and Engels 1976, 8; 1978, 7). Even so, in Arendt’s ([1961] 1993, 17–18; 2005, 81–92) reading, Marx is the culmination and end of a tradition of political philosophy inaugurated by Plato. Platonic political philosophy was born at a time when the classical Greek *polis* culture, culminating in Pericles’s Athens, was already in decline after Athens’s defeat in the Peloponnesian Wars (Arendt 2002, 423; 2005, 5–39, 130–135). The classical *polis* as Arendt ([1958] 1998, 29–37, 50–58, 192–207) interprets it saw the political community primarily as an arena where great words and deeds could gain communal recognition and remembrance for their own sake. In other words, the *polis* was a sphere of *action* in Arendt’s specific sense of the term.<sup>2</sup> However, Platonic-Aristotelian political philosophy, disillusioned by the political trial and sentence of Socrates, saw the *polis* ultimately as a means to an end, as an instrument whose final aim is to make possible the philosophical contemplation of eternal truths, which is the only activity that can grant a degree of “immortality” to a human being (Arendt [1961] 1993, 107–108, 114; 1994b, 428–429; [1958] 1998, 12, 17–21).<sup>3</sup> Politics thus ceases to be a realm of manifesting excellence through public action – the consequences of action being potentially infinite and uncontrollable – and becomes an inherently technical process of producing a predetermined outcome.

It is for this reason, Arendt ([1958] 1998, 222–227) argues, that political philosophy since Plato is predisposed to think politics in terms of ruling and governing. In this technocratic-administrative model of politics, the “identification of knowledge with command and rulership and of action with obedience and execution... became authoritative” (225). Like Heidegger (2000, 160; 2001, 166), Arendt reads Plato’s doctrine of the ideas as a “fabrication ontology” in which the ideas are ultimately the functions appropriate to each type of thing that provide the models for a production process. Arendt also points to this doctrine as the metaphysical root for the long-standing tradition of conceiving politics as fabrication, making, or producing, *poiēsis*.

The Platonic wish to substitute making for acting... becomes most apparent where it touches the very center of his philosophy, the doctrine of ideas. ... Only in the *Republic* were the ideas transformed into standards, measurements, and rules of behavior. ... This transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics. (Arendt [1958] 1998, 225–226)

Arendt suggests that it is this Platonic tendency to see political governance as progress towards an ideal end that in our age has finally unfolded into the totalitarian use of the ideological idea for the violent mobilization and transformation of society.

<sup>2</sup>For Arendt on action see, in particular, Arendt [1958] 1998, 7–8, 94–98, 173–199, 204–206, 233, 237, 243–247.

<sup>3</sup>For Aristotle’s account of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) as the supreme human excellence to which practical prudence (*phronēsis*) and political science are subordinated see *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7.1141a20–22, 6.13.1145a6–11. On contemplation (*theōrein*) as the supreme human activity which alone provides a degree of immortality see 10.7.1177a17–1178a8.



How persistent and successful the transformation of action into a mode of making has been is easily attested by the whole terminology of political theory and political thought, which indeed makes it almost impossible to discuss these matters without using the category of means and ends and thinking in terms of instrumentality. ... We are perhaps the first generation which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end. (Arendt [1958] 1998, 229)

## Badiou: The Event of Novelty and the Politics of the Idea

In *The Century*, his philosophical résumé of the twentieth century, Badiou (2005c, 53–54; 2007, 32) writes: “The famous ‘end of ideologies,’ which supposedly defines our present modesty ... represents nothing less than the forsaking of any novelty that could be ascribed to man.” It is quite appropriate to characterize Badiou’s oeuvre in its present form as one of the great contemporary philosophical attempts, alongside those of Arendt and Gilles Deleuze (among others), to articulate an ontology of novelty and to highlight the human capacity for transforming the human world.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Arendt and Badiou share a vital interest in the modern phenomenon of revolution as the establishment of a “new world order,” a *novus ordo saeculorum* (Arendt [1963] 1990; Badiou 2009a, 2010a).

However, we immediately note an almost diametrical opposition in their approaches to ideology. For Badiou, the twentieth century was an “ideological” century precisely as a century of novelty, of artistic, scientific, and political experiments in world-transformation. As Badiou sees it, the totalitarian experiments were merely an obscure corruption of these avant-garde undertakings (Badiou 2005c, 53; 2007, 32). A pupil of Louis Althusser’s structural Marxist theory of ideology, Badiou became a militant Maoist in the wake of the May 1968 events, and his works of the 1970s emphasize the central role of ideology and theory in revolutionary struggles (see, for example, Badiou and Balmès 1976).

One of the most peculiar aspects of Badiou’s mature thought is his identification of ontology – in the Aristotelian sense of the science of being *qua* being – with mathematics and more precisely with modern post-Cantorian set theory, understood as a purely formal study of unities and multiplicities. The ontology elaborated in Badiou’s *magnum opus*, *L’être et l’événement* (Being and Event) (1988), is based on the primal “decision” that the “One is not.” Being *qua* being is primarily an inarticulate, unstructured, and inconsistent multiplicity that becomes structured into unified, intelligible totalities only as an effect of a structuring and unifying operation of “count-as-one” (Badiou 1988, 31–32; 2005a, 23–24). The great structural anomaly faced by this mathematical ontology is what Badiou calls the *event*. This is Badiou’s key concept; it is precisely an event that makes the emergence of novelty possible by initiating “truth-procedures,” processes in which the world is rearticulated into novel categories, “truths” in Badiou’s idiosyncratic sense.

An event emerges precisely as a singular element of a given world or situation<sup>5</sup> that gains a universal meaning in that world by being identified as an event and named in

<sup>4</sup>On Badiou’s ontology of novelty see Gillespie 2008; Pluth 2010.

<sup>5</sup>In *L’être et l’événement* (Being and Event), Badiou (1988, 32, 557; 2005a, 24, 522) uses the term “situation” for all structured multiplicities; in *Logiques des mondes* (Logics of Worlds) (2006, 45, 612; 2009b, 36, 598) he uses the term “world” for such articulated totalities within which reality can “appear.”

what Badiou (1988, 223–233; 2005a, 201–211) calls an *intervention*. Using one of Badiou’s favorite examples, the French Revolution of 1789, we can see that it is a set of innumerable particular elements. There is the establishment of a National Assembly, the Tennis Court Oath, the storming of the Bastille, and so on. However, it is only when the Revolution is declared to be a Revolution – which can only happen retrospectively, and necessarily involves a reference to a prior event, such as the English Revolution of 1688 – that these elements emerge as constituting a new set, and that set is the event called “the French Revolution.” Yet the French Revolution is not *simply* this set of elements associated with it, nor is it simply identical with any *one* of these elements. The declaration that states, “There has been a Revolution,” decides that, in addition to the individual revolutionary elements, there is a further element – the Revolution, which is what determines all the other elements *as* revolutionary. Formally put, the event of the French Revolution is a set that includes all of the particular elements identified as constituting a Revolution *as well as itself*. It thus violates the basic set-theoretical axiom of regularity or foundation, which implies that no set can be a member of itself. An event is therefore ontologically speaking an exception, a disruption in the order of being and precisely by that token the keystone for a historical transformation of the prevailing order (see Badiou 1988, 199–204; 2005a, 178–183).

Just as the event becomes an event only retrospectively, its transformative effect is also only an aftereffect of the event. The historical episode known as the French Revolution did not in and of itself change the world. Rather, it provided a legacy, a point of reference in terms of which the heirs of the revolution are able to sustain a transformative and potentially infinite process of rearticulating the world. This process is what Badiou designates as *fidelity* to the event, and it formally consists simply in classifying, according to some specific formal method of classification, the particular elements of the world, one by one, as either connected or unconnected to the event and its principles. Fidelity to the French Revolution would thus consist in categorizing all things – one by one – as either “revolutionary” (that is, connected to the revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity) or as “counterrevolutionary.” Such a process is truly transformative in cases in which it is “generic” in the set-theoretical sense of the term. This term, coined by the mathematician Paul Cohen, means constituting a set that is “indiscernible” in the pre-event situation; that is, a set that corresponds to no previously accepted category, class, or identity (Badiou 1988, 361–377; 2005a, 327–343). Badiou’s perhaps most illuminating example of such genericity is the fidelity to the event of Christ described by the apostle Paul and regarded by Badiou as an inherently political, rather than religious, procedure. This event exemplifies the Christian fidelity that refuses to accept any pre-existing identity – Greek or Jew, female or male, slave or free citizen – as a basis for determining the new category “Christian” (Badiou 1997, 105–113; 2003, 98–106). According to Badiou’s (1988, 23, 375; 2005a, 16, 340) thesis, the main forms of generic fidelity are politics, science, art, and love. These are the four ways of producing *truths* in the Badiouan sense, that is, potentially infinite and thus always unfinished and open-ended political, scientific, artistic, or amorous rearticulations of the world in terms of a retrospectively identified event (political, scientific, or artistic “revolutions” or breakthroughs, as well as amorous first encounters). This kind of truth is strictly distinguished from truth in the sense of the truth-value or “veridicity” of statements, which already presupposes a completely rearticulated world, an ideally completed

truth-procedure that can verify specific claims (Badiou 1988, 361–377; 2005a, 327–343). For example, the revolutionary maxim of the equality of all human beings would be true in the sense of a veridical statement only in an ideal world in which the revolutionary process of rearticulating humanity would have been completed.

In Badiou's terminology, inspired by Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, a *subject* designates a finite part, a particular incorporation, of a truth (Badiou 1988, 429–447; 2005a, 391–409). The Badiouan subject is not an individual conscious ego, but rather a singular and finite "bearer," in a given situation, of an ongoing political, scientific, artistic, or amorous rearticulation of the world – for example, a revolutionary faction, an innovative scientist or artist (or scientific or artistic collective), a couple in love. In *Logiques des mondes* (Logics of Worlds) (2006), his sequel to *Being and Event*, Badiou complements this "faithful" or revolutionary type of subject with two other formal, non-faithful subject types. The "reactionary" or counterrevolutionary subject incorporates an attempt to deny the possibility of a truth-procedure by denying the event underlying it; the "obscure" or fascist subject seeks to supplant fidelity to a singular historical event with fanatical subservience to a transcendent, hypostasized, and substantial mythical entity, such as Race or the Proletariat (Badiou 2006, 53–87; 2009b, 45–78). It is in this latter figure that we find Badiou's counterpart to the Arendtian notion of totalitarian ideology as a derivation of historical movement from a suprahistorical idea. All three subject types, it must be noted, are subjects only in terms of their relation to a transformative process of rearticulating the world.

In Badiou's more recent work, however, the term "Idea" gains another, positive meaning.

I name "Idea" that upon which an individual's representation of the world ... is based once s/he is bound to the faithful subject type through incorporation within the process of a truth. The Idea is that which makes the life of an individual, a human animal, orientate itself according to the True. ... This sense of the word "Idea" instantiates my own interpretation of the Platonic idea, and particularly the "idea of the Good." (Badiou 2010b, 99; 2011, 105)

The Idea is the way in which the impossible ideal of a completed truth-procedure – for example, a world of completed liberty, equality, and fraternity in the case of revolutionary political truth – appears to an individual incorporated within a faithful subjectivity and regulates her view of the world. As Badiou (2010b, 99–102; 2011, 105–109) notes, this function of the Idea corresponds to that of the Platonic Idea of the Good – and also, we might add, to that of the Kantian regulative idea. It is an orienting ideal of perfection and completeness that is, as such, never present in itself as an "objective" reality, but only as a point of orientation for a political, scientific, artistic, or amorous truth-procedure. In the fiction or narrative laid out by the truth-procedure, the Idea provides the ideal narrative conclusion in terms of which the present is narrated. In the specific context of political truth-procedures, the function of the Idea is obviously "ideological," but, for Badiou, in an entirely positive sense.

The Idea exposes a truth in a fictional structure. ... The communist Idea is the imaginary operation whereby an individual subjectivation projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History. It is in this sense that one may appropriately say that the Idea is (as might be expected!) ideological. (Badiou 2009a, 188–189; 2010a, 239–240)<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>The relationship between ideology and a political Idea is discussed in the interviews compiled in Badiou 2017.

One of Badiou's central aims is to upset the ontological foundations of the dominant contemporary "ideology," which he terms "democratic materialism." Democratic materialism is first and foremost characterized by a reactionary denial of, or at least a lack of interest in, truths. It is the "postmodern" ideology for which everything becomes a matter of opinion and perspective (Badiou 2006, 9–11; 2009b, 1–3). The ontological principle of democratic materialism is that there are only material bodies and languages, that is, different discourses, different articulations of the relationships between bodies. Accordingly, the ethical maxim of democratic materialism is "Live without an Idea," that is to say: do not engage in "ideological" or revolutionary projects (Badiou 2006, 533; 2009b, 511).

Badiou's own approach – the "materialist dialectic" – seeks to disrupt the ontology of democratic materialism with the help of his notion of truth-procedures and thereby to render plausible the maxim according to which "to live" is, quite simply, to "live for an Idea" (Badiou 2006, 532; 2009b, 510). In other words, the mere cynical sustenance of one's biological organism and gratification of its desires in accordance with facts and necessities, without incorporation in some form of world-transforming subjectivity, is not "life" at all, in the Aristotelian sense of the "good life," the life worthy of a free human being. Life without an Idea is life without novelty, an eternal recurrence of the same without an orienting direction. An ideological Idea is for Badiou, as for Arendt, a way of perceiving the concrete present situation in terms of a historical narrative. As in Arendt's analysis, an Idea is needed in order to maintain the mobilization of a subject engaged in a truth-procedure. But Badiou's Idea is not a totalitarian, transcendent idea. It is not above history, but inherently related to a singular, contingent historical event. It is not an instrument of domination; its relevance is maintained only through subjective fidelity.

Badiou (1989, 79–84; 1999, 97–101; compare with 1992, 63–64; 1999, 120–122) notes that the post-Nietzschean philosophy of late modernity has, as a whole, been decidedly anti-Platonic, a fact that he attributes to the late modern historicist and linguistic eradication of universal truths. Against this "Great Modern Sophistry," he offers a new "Platonic" gesture, but one that is Platonic in form rather than content – a gesture that retains Plato's commitment to the universality of truth while renouncing Plato's attempt to reduce the irreducible material multiplicity of being to the transcendent unity of the Ideas. Badiou's Platonism is a "Platonism of the multiple" that "propose[s] a doctrine of truth compatible with the irreducible multiplicity of being *qua* being" (Badiou 1989, 78, 85–86; 1999, 96, 103–104). Badiou repeatedly declares his allegiance to Plato, stating that the only "crucial" philosophers, for him, are Plato, Descartes, and Hegel (Badiou 2006, 552; 2009b, 527). He has even written a light-hearted contemporary "remake" of the *Republic*, noting in the preface that Plato

is the one we need first and foremost today, for one reason in particular: he launched the idea that conducting our lives in the world assumes that some access to the absolute is available to us ... because the materiality of which we are composed participates ... in the construction of eternal truths. (Badiou 2012a, 9; 2012b, xxxi)

In Badiou's eyes, the four world-transforming truth-procedures, and philosophy as a meta-reflection on their conditions of possibility, cannot survive without the Platonic determination to fight the sophistic relativization of truth.

As opposed to the “vulgar” Platonism of transcendent and pre-existing truths, Badiou’s “sophisticated” Platonism seeks to reconcile the potential eternity of truths with the historical singularity of their emergence, in the sense sketched out above. “We must, therefore, rationally account for nothing less than the appearance of eternity in time” (Badiou 2010b, 29–30; 2011, 26–27). This task entails a radical materialist reinterpretation of the Platonic idea, a “materialism” and “Communism” of the Idea in the sense of an ideally complete truth-procedure that redeploys a new kind of Platonic political idealism against the contemporary cynicism of hegemonic “democratic materialism” (Badiou 2010b, 56, 101–102, 114–115; 2011, 56, 107–109, 123–125).

### Politics as Action or Production: The Problem of Terror

We thus see that in spite of their opposing views of the value of ideology for politics, Arendt and Badiou share a fundamental common concern, namely, to articulate politics as a realm for the deployment of novelty in history through the singular and unforeseeable irruption of a new beginning and its sustainment through human activities. However, it is time to conclude with a final Arendtian objection to Badiou, one that also marks their basic disagreement.

For Arendt, the human activity in which the capacity for novelty is rooted is *action* or *praxis*, in the sense of an activity that, unlike production, *poiēsis*, is not judged in terms of its outcome but in terms of the inherent quality of its own initial principle, its *archē*. Through action in word and deed, human beings manifest their singularity in the visible space of the communally shared world by beginning something completely unprecedented, something that the world has never seen or heard before (Arendt [1958] 1998, 7–9, 175–181, 205–206, 243–247). For Badiou, by contrast, politics, like all truth-procedures, while gaining its principle from its beginning in an event, is still a process of construction, a *production* of a determinate, albeit ultimately unattainable, outcome: the ideally completed truth. “What it [the committed subject of a truth-procedure] ‘produces’ is the truth itself, an indiscernible part of the situation, but the infinity of this truth transcends it” (Badiou 1988, 444; 2005a, 406). Accordingly, as we have seen, the Idea guiding “ideological” politics is, for Badiou, the narrative fiction of an ultimate *end* to which the political process is a *means*.

However, the root of Arendt’s rejection of ideological politics is precisely her conviction that the Platonic Idea is implicitly based on the model of production and the model of means and ends which, through Plato, came to dominate Western political philosophy, and which has had extreme repercussions in the form of the totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century (Arendt [1958] 1998, 142–143, 220–230). The ideological logic of totalitarianism was based on the principle that the end justifies the means (“you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs”). Totalitarian terror was accordingly legitimized as a process of realizing an ultimate ideological end of history. It is precisely here that Arendt’s criticism of the instrumental model of politics is most pertinent, as it draws attention to what continues to be one of the most troubling points in Badiou’s political theory. For all his condemnations of Stalinist state terrorism, in the end Badiou is compelled to admit with a certain reluctance that his Platonic materialism, with its conception of politics as a mode of the production of truth, of the construction of new categories and the eradication of old categories under the guidance of an ideological

Idea, inevitably entails a possible moment of revolutionary *terror*, that is, of a *violent* transformation of the world.

Without any particular joy, the materialist dialectic will work under the assumption that no political subject has yet attained the eternity of the truth which it unfolds without moments of terror. ... None of that which overcomes finitude in the human animal, subordinating it to the eternity of the True through its incorporation into a subject in becoming, can ever happen without anxiety, courage and justice. But, as a general rule, neither can it take place without terror. (Badiou 2006, 98–99; 2009b, 88)

The problem of terror clearly troubles Badiou, and he has made attempts to qualify the concept, for instance, by making a distinction between purely destructive, non-transformative terror (such as that of the Nazis) and revolutionary terror (such as that of the Jacobins in the French Revolution) (Badiou 1993, 64–69; 2001, 72–77) or by limiting the term “terror” to designate repressive political violence exercised by a state (Badiou 2013). However, we see that the basic maxim of Badiou’s ethics of fidelity and truth – “Don’t give up!” “Keep going!” (Badiou 1993, 43–44, 47; 2001, 47–48, 52) – inherently presupposes the possibility, even necessity, of violent world-transformation. In the light of Arendt’s political thought, it can be argued that this is an inevitable structural feature of the production model of truth that is at the heart of Badiou’s philosophy. The ethical demand of the “materialism of the Idea” – to live for an Idea in the sense of being unremittingly committed to the indefinite process of its material implementation – is a demand for constant mobilization and constant reconfiguration of the relevant material of the truth-procedure in question. In the case of a political truth-procedure, this material is the human community. Thus, the Platonism of the multiple cannot avoid facing the charge that as long as we heed the Platonic model of politics and “believe that we deal with means and ends in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody’s using all means to pursue recognized ends” (Arendt [1958] 1998, 229).<sup>7</sup>

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank Thomas Brockelman, Mirja Hartimo, Marina Marren, Timo Miettinen, and Simo Pulkkinen for wonderfully helpful comments on this paper and an earlier version. This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under the Academy Research Fellow’s grant *Creation, Genius, Innovation: Towards a Conceptual Genealogy of Western Creativity* (2018–2023; decision number 317276).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Jussi Backman* is an Academy of Finland senior research fellow in philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His work has focused on contemporary continental philosophy (phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, poststructuralism), continental political theory and philosophy of religion, and ancient philosophy. His current research project studies the conceptual history

---

<sup>7</sup>Some of the thoughts presented here have been discussed previously by me (in Finnish) in Backman 2013.

of creation and creativity. He is the author of numerous articles as well as the books *Complicated Presence: Heidegger and the Postmetaphysical Unity of Being* (SUNY Press, 2015) and *Omaisuus ja elämä: Heidegger ja Aristoteles kreikkalaisen filosofian rajalla* (Eurooppalaisen filosofian seura, 2005), and has coedited several edited volumes and special issues.

## ORCID

Jussi Backman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5243-6004>

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. (1951) 1985. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 3rd ed. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1958) 1998. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1961) 1993. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1963) 1990. *On Revolution*. 2nd ed. London: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1963) 1994a. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1994b. *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2002. *Denktagebuch 1950 bis 1973*. Vol. 1. Edited by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann. Munich: Piper.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Aristotle. 1894. *Ethica Nicomachea (Nicomachean Ethics)*. Edited by Ingram Bywater. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Backman, Jussi. 2013. “Idean politiikka: Arendt ja Badiou.” *Tiede & Edistys* 38 (4): 271–287.
- Badiou, Alain. 1988. *L'être et l'événement*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain. 1989. *Manifeste pour la philosophie*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain. 1992. *Conditions*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain. 1993. *L'éthique: essai sur la conscience du Mal*. Paris: Hatier.
- Badiou, Alain. 1997. *Saint Paul: la fondation de l'universalisme*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Badiou, Alain. 1998. *Abrégé de métapolitique*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain.. 1999. *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Norman Madarasz. Albany, NY: SUNY Press
- Badiou, Alain. 2001. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by Peter Hallward. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassier. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, Alain. 2005a. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, Alain. 2005b. *Metapolitics*. Translated by Jason Barker. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 2005c. *Le siècle*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain. 2006. *Logiques des mondes: L'être et l'événement, 2*. Paris: Seuil.
- Badiou, Alain. 2007. *The Century*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Badiou, Alain. 2009a. *Circonstances, Vol. 5: L'hypothèse communiste*. Paris: Lignes.
- Badiou, Alain. 2009b. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, Alain. 2010a. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Translated by David Macey and Steve Corcoran. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 2010b. *Second manifeste pour la philosophie*. Paris: Flammarion.

- Badiou, Alain. 2011. *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*. Translated by Louise Burchill. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Badiou, Alain. 2012a. *La République de Platon*. Paris: Fayard.
- Badiou, Alain. 2012b. *Plato's Republic*. Translated by Susan Spitzer. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Badiou, Alain. 2013. "The Communist Idea and the Question of Terror." Translated by **Susan Spitzer**. In *The Idea of Communism, Vol. 2: The New York Conference*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, 1–11. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain. 2017. *De l'idéologie à l'Idée*. Edited by Giovanni Minozzi. Paris: Mimésis.
- Badiou, Alain, and François Balmès. 1976. *De l'idéologie*. Paris: Maspero.
- Gillespie, Sam. 2008. *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou's Minimalist Metaphysics*. Melbourne: Re.press Publishing.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. New York, NY: Garland.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2000. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. 9th ed. Stuttgart: Neske.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2001. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1976. *Collected Works, Vol. 5: Works: April 1845 – April 1847*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1978. *Marx-Engels-Werke*. Vol. 3. Berlin: Dietz.
- Miller, James. 1979. "The Pathos of Novelty: Hannah Arendt's Image of Freedom in the Modern World." In *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, edited by Melvyn A. Hill, 177–208. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Plato. 2003. *Respublica (Republic)*. Edited by S. R. Slings. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pluth, Ed. 2010. *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Popper, Karl. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato*. London: Routledge.
- Stalin, Joseph. 1972. *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings, 1905–52*. Edited by Bruce Franklin. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2002. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*. London: Verso.