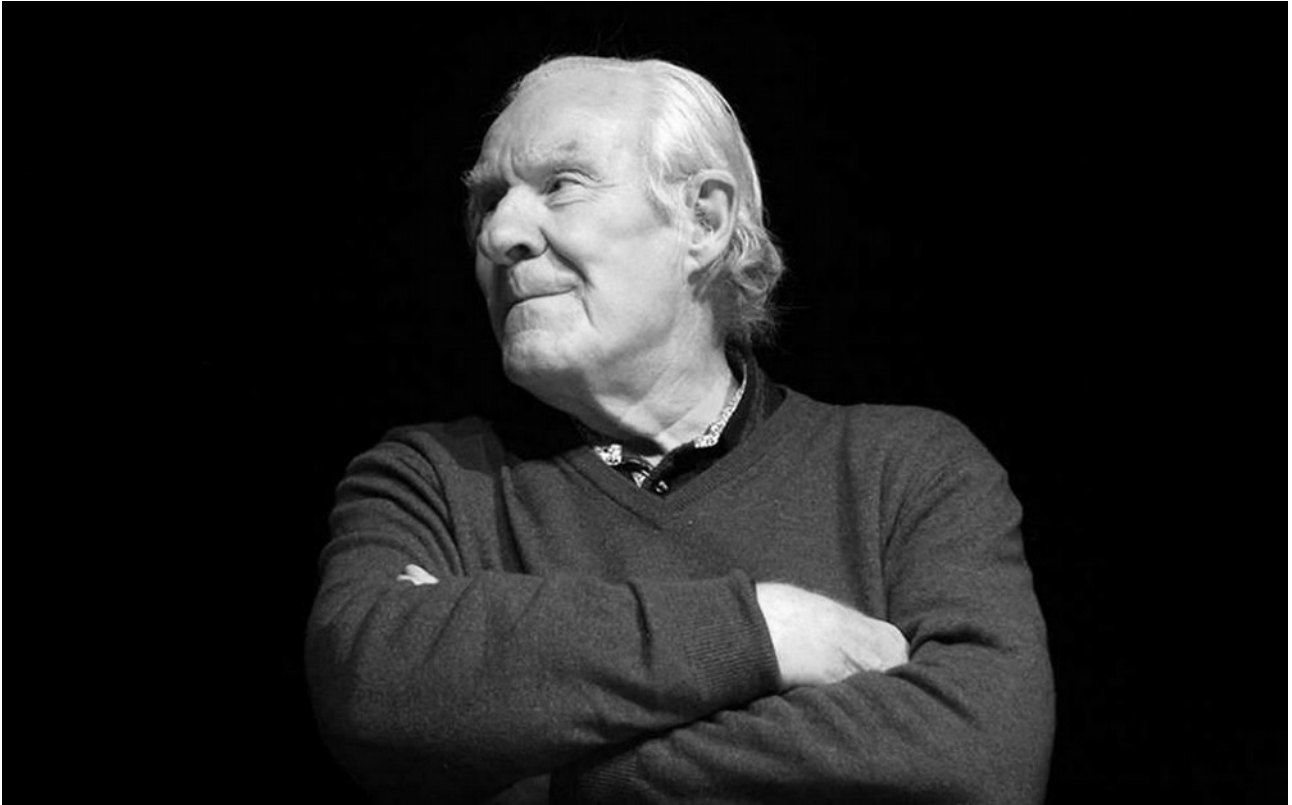


## THE FACTORY AS EVENT SITE

Alain Badiou

WHY SHOULD THE WORKER BE A REFERENCE IN OUR VISION OF POLITICS?



The analytical and objective conception determines the necessity of this reference through the compactness of the social bond, which is inferred in turn from the position of the exploited. But the approach is more convoluted than may at first appear. A subtle analytic (that of Marx himself, for example) clearly shows that from the mechanism of exploitation – the extortion of surplus-value – one can at first only draw the competition of workers on the market of labourpower, and by no means an immediately representable bond. Now, were this unbinding of competition stable, it would align – for those who think politics in the form of the bond and social consistencies, of “objective subjects” – the workers with the peasants, whose multiple-juxtaposition and egotism led Marx, as we know, to deem them incapable of generating an independent political force. What destabilises the competition between workers and unifies the class under a possible political representation? Truth be told, there are two responses to this question. The first (that of the 1844 Manuscripts) draws its argument from the void, directly subsumed by the generic being of workers,

since the latter possess nothing but a saleable abstraction, labour-power. The second (the one belonging, rather, to Engels) argues on the basis of the characteristics of industrial labour: concentration of human masses, military discipline, and so on. This time it's the constrained bond, the organisation of labour, that is the mode in which "the dead (the mechanical and despotic arrangement) grasps the living (worker's labour)" that is inverted into a bond which is simultaneously free and rigorous: the syndicalism of demands, followed by the representative party.

If the first response draw its authority from the abstract characteristics of workers" alienation, and thus refers back to the Great Logic of the socio-historical presentation of capitalism, the second is instead a empirical description of a characteristic place internal to this situation, that is the factory. Marxism thus joins a global representation of workers" political positivity – it is because they are nothing that they are capable of organising everything – to a local register – it is because there exists within the social presentation this singular and separated multiple that is the factory, that there is the possibility of the workers" one in politics. Thus, at the very heart of the objectivist version of the necessity of a worker reference, we encounter two terms, the void and the site, which as we will see only find their full sense once we decentre toward the subjective the vision of politics. A THESIS Letting myself be guided by these two finds of classical Marxism, the void and the factory, I propose the following thesis: in modern historical presentation, the factory is the event par excellence, the paradigm of the multiple at the edge of the void. Before making this thesis explicit, allow me some remarks on its status.

1. The thesis is in a certain regard objective, since it characterises the factory, not as the privileged place of a subjective political activity, but as a site, that is a as a particular form of the multiple in situation.
2. It is a thesis that affects the global signification of the worker reference (politics cannot disentangle itself from factories), and which thus avoids passing through the constitution of a global subject (the class).
3. It is a thesis that does not directly link workers to politics. In fact, to say that the factory is an event site in no way prescribes that there necessarily, or predictably, are factory events. One simply says that there can be. And, even more importantly, an event is not as

such political: it is only qualified as such through the retroaction of a conditioned intervention.

4. Therefore, it is a thesis that says the following: the factory and the workers delimit, within our situations, a possibility that there arise that on the basis of which politics can exist.

5. The maximal form of the thesis is instead its converse: there can only be politics to the extent that is capable of intervening on the – uncertain but possible – events of which the factory is the site. 6. The thesis does not in any sense say that workers are “political”. It says that they are inevitable for politics. A site is, in a situation, a multiple “at the edge of the void” in the sense that, though it is presented and counted as one in the situation, none of its terms is, itself, presented in a separate manner. Such a multiple is therefore absolutely singular, because it is impossible to consider it as a part and, consequently, the State does not count it as one.

The paradoxical statement I am defending is finally that the factory, by which I mean the factory as a workers’ place, belongs without doubt to the socio-historical presentation (it is counted-as-one within it), but not the workers, to the extent that they belong to the factory. So that the factory – as a workers’ place – is not included in society, and the workers (of a factory) do not form a pertinent “part”, available for State counting.

#### EXCRESCENCES: COMPANY AND UNIONISM, VERSUS FACTORIES AND WORKERS

This fact – as I will argue below – is masked today, for two main reasons. The first is that if the factory is not counted by the State, its unification, that is, the multiple of which the factory is the sole element, is, itself, perfectly counted. There is even, in order to designate this singleton of the worker-multiple that is the factory, a special name, which is the company. In our view, however, it is the case that this term serves to hide a singularity beneath an excrescence. That’s because if the factory is effectively presented, though its workers are not as such, the “company” isn’t: it is a pure re-presentation, a term of the State. In this excrescence, the workers, which the factory still presents, albeit at the edge of the void, are absolutely unrepresented. That’s because the company has only one element, which is the factory, and this unification is accomplished when, in the final analysis, the designation by the State of the one of this unicity, takes the explicit form of the “company head”. The “company head” is less a person than that by which the State, which does not designate, as a part, the multiples presented by the one-multiple that is the

factory, re-presents their unrepresentation in the guise of a singleton. The second modern dissimulation of what the factory presents of unrepresentable workers is unionism. Unionism presents itself specifically as a worker representation in the place of work. It is through unionism that the fact that workers are unrepresentable is occulted, since unionism associates the fiction of a bond to the factory-multiple.

For the State, and in the collective representation it induces, the worker-multiple that the factory counts as one is presented, because it is represented by the unions. This is to forget that representation does not necessarily induce presentation, since there are parts which are not elements, inclusion being in excess over appearance. The union bond is without doubt that of a part, to with the wage demand of which the union negotiators are the bearers guaranteed by the state meta-structure. However, there is no reason to consider this part, in other words the totalisation of demands ('legitimate demands'), as a presentation of the real terms of the worker multiple of the factory. Even if all the workers were unionised it would not follow that thus represented, they are presented as workers, that is in the effectivity of their belonging to the factory. Between the representational theme of union freedom within the factory and the presentational theme which is that of workers' freedom, there is an abyss – that of the separation of the State – an abyss that no matter what workers' revolt immediately elicits, through the conflict that it inevitably engenders between itself and the union apparatuses.

In truth, unionism, as a particular piece of the dispositif of the parliamentary State count, that is of the count in the "Western" historical presentation, is an excrescence. Its link to the factory is that of the artifice of a representation, which comes to complete the one designate, as a singleton, by the company head. The absolutely singular character of workers' belonging to the factory is rendered invisible through the legal superimposition of a representative excrescence. The bulk of "politicians" who refer to workers hold that the factory is disposed for politics by union representation. To which classic reactionaries object that unions must not be "politicised". This debate becomes obsolete as soon as one shows that unionism cannot politically designate the worker reference because it is of the order of the State – of the counting of parts – and therefore it operates the disappearance of the factory as event site, that is of worker unrepresentation as the feature of the factory-multiple. Neither in the version of unionism as "political education", nor in that of unionism as the pure instrument of wage negotiation can one find the least index of a political reference to the factory.

The dispute bears entirely on the State, the ones wishing to deploy within it their own personnel (that it may be socially composed of workers doesn't change a thing), the others wanting to maintain the representative monopoly of the company head. The parliamentary rule is to cut the pear in half. But since in any case the State is itself by no means a political reality – even if it plays an important role in the field of politics – the conflict under consideration will never involve the workers in their articulation to politics. Thus the included-singleton of the company, like the multiple-inclusion of unionism occult, in accordance with representation, the enigma of workers' presentation.

## ONTOLOGY OF THE SITE

Let us then come back to the site itself. 1. In the factory, workers are not considered as subjects, but as forces. Consequently, they are not presented as such, but only in accordance with their abstract articulation to the productive assemblage. Labour-power is not a presentation, it is a particular piece of the one-of-the-factory. It subtracts the presentation of the worker-multiple to the profit of the factory as a productive unit. Thus, the only criterion which globally qualifies labourpower, which is productivity, is entirely extrinsic to the worker-multiple, because it only designates him – at the edge of the void – according to the presentation of the term factory, as a non-decomposable unit in presentation.

2. Every worker is substitutable, or dispensable, which would not be the case were he presented. The layoff, a characteristic operation of the factory, even when it does not take place, designates worker unpresentation from the vantage of the one of the factory. A man has squandered his life and health on the assembly line, he is forty years old and is thrown out with no other requisite other than that of productive modernisation. How is this possible? It is obviously because, from the point of view of the situation such as it presents the factory, this worker does not exist. In particular, modernisation, a phenomenon which affects in general the presented existence of the factory in the situation, is not concerned with him in the least. What is re-presented is at most the singleton of the worker – himself as unicity, that is the nonconsideration of the multiple that he is (his life, his family, his country, and so on).

This abstract set (this excrescence) which is represented but not presented, enters into statistics: a certain quantity of layoffs are necessary. What is numbered here is not a presented worker multiple, it is a collection of undifferentiated unifications. 3. Whomsoever is in civil society is presented, since presentation defines sociality as such. But the factory is precisely separated from society, by walls, security guards, hierarchies, schedules, machinic assemblages. That is because its norm, productivity, is entirely different from general social presentation. The similarity between the factory order and the military order has long been highlighted. The profound reason for this is that in both cases presentation is annulled through the sole count of substitutable singletons. A soldier is always unknown, because he is a recruit of death. Equally, to enter into the factory is to enter into unpresentation. From the point of view of the factory, a worker too is always unknown.

4. The very idea of workers' political capacity is contrary to the essence of the factory. The factory is essentially a non-political place, whether its workers are politicised or not. That is because politics is in complete and utter contradiction to the regime of productivity. Politics is the opposite of industrial work, precisely because it is itself work, a refined creation that requires the interruption of the other work. Politics is the work of presentation, and cannot be satisfied with the unpresentable but to the extent that the presentation of this unpresentable avers the void as the being of the situation. But at this point what is required is the interruptive capacity of the event.

## THE FACTORY EVENT

Let us say it plainly: if the factory is the paradigmatic event site of our societies, it is because the event within it is strictly speaking impossible without the collapse of the site as one. The factory event, since it makes exist the very thing whose inexistence sustains the one-of-the-factory, that is the workers. The factory is this exceptional place in which the charge of singularity is such that to even partially deploy it within presentation one ravages the count, in the irruption of the void which the count exiled and whose errancy it simultaneously concentrated.

A factory event is, in a particularly blunt manner, the supernumerary multiple which is composed, beyond itself, as an incalculable trait-of-the-one, of these unknown multiples which before it only stood as indifferent unifications: the workers. The fact that modern politics cannot avoid the worker reference is grounded neither on the working class as a structural term, nor even on the workers' movement as a historic term. It is simply a

question of acknowledging that the factory is an event site, and that by ignoring it, any politics would thereby allow to subsist a zone of complete unpresentation, thus reproducing in its own terms the general regime of the State. The only place from which can originate a consistency subtracted from the reign of State re-assurance are singular, or absolutely singular, multiplicities, and therefore the site, because it is only there that the presented term, not being included in the situation, does not see its belonging over-determined by the count of the count, by the State meta-structure. What's more, the intervening capacity of politics can only sound out and interpret the unrepresentable, and hold itself on the edge of the void, to the extent that the event disposes, as a trait-of-the-one, as an illegal and supernumerary signifier, the multiple of the terms of its site. It is therefore excluded that a politics can target the subtractive character of modern situations while excluding from its field these major event sites which are factories. That is no where the origin of politics lies, but it is certainly its testing ground. And factory events, being that through which workers are averred in their unpresentation, are necessarily mediators of contemporary political consistency. Now, I maintain that this is what Marx was the first to perceive, at a time when factories were in fact seldom counted in the general historical presentation. The vast analytic constructions of Capital are the retroactive foundation of what for him was a pre-predicative evidence: that modern politics could not be formulated, even as a hypothesis, otherwise than by proposing an interpretation-in-subject of these astounding hysterias of the social in which workers named the hidden void of the capitalist situation, by naming their own unpresentation. Reduced to its bare bones, Marxism is jointly the hypothesis of a politics of non-domination – a politics subtracted from the statist count of the count – and the designation of the most significant event sites of modernity, those whose singularity is maximal, which are worker sites. From this twofold gesture there follows that the intervening and organised experimentation of the hypothesis must ceaselessly prepare itself for the consideration of these sites, and that the worker reference is a characteristic of politics, without which one has already given up subtracting oneself from the State count. That is the reason why it remains legitimate to call oneself a Marxist, if one maintains that politics is possible.

*source: Alain Badiou, "L'usine comme site événementiel", Le Perroquet 62-63 (1986), pp. 1 and 4-6, published in Prelom magazine, 2006, translated by Alberto Toscano*