

Book Review: Controversies: Politics and Philosophy in our Time by Alain Badiou & Jean-Claude Milner, translated by Susan Spitzer

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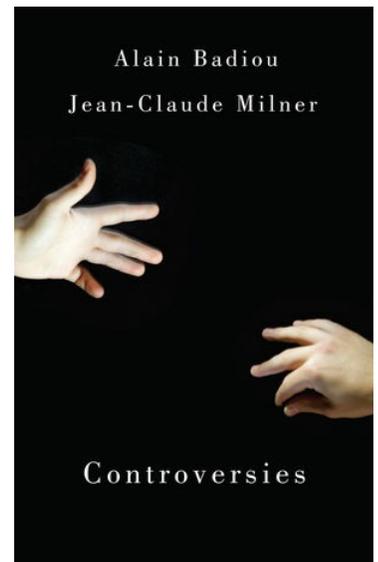
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Anyone with an interest in philosophy, politics, history and economics will find many threads of debate and thoughts to contemplate alongside Badiou and Milner, writes Alexis Bushnell. The book is an exciting intellectual exercise with subjects of tangible consequence.

Controversies: Politics and Philosophy in our Time. Alain Badiou & Jean-Claude Milner, translated by Susan Spitzer. Polity Press. 2014.

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Alain Badiou and Jean-Claude Milner's recent dialogues, moderated seamlessly by Philippe Petit, are transformed from spoken word into the book *Controversies*, translated by Susan Spitzer. The trio met four times between January and June 2012, the gaps in time purposeful to provide Badiou and Milner space to contemplate their positions and disagreements. The book is intentionally contemporarily relevant in its subjects, while taking on some of the most fundamental concepts and ideas of the last century. The ideas debated between Badiou and Milner range from the [un]intelligibility of the name "politics"; the cycles of revolution and the nature of communism; the name "Jew" and the universal; the concept of the "infinite"; the French State and the Left; the decline of the French language and dialect as the language of ideas; to the world financial crisis.



While areas of the debate may be esoteric for some readers, the dialogues flow in and out of concepts political and historical in nature, interweaving discussions through the lenses of linguistics and mathematics. Readers without a background in philosophy but with interest in the subjects covered in the book will be able to follow the discussions. There are sections that perhaps beg for Badiou and Milner to determine for a reader their definition of a particular term when they first debate it, but as these pages are ultimately conversations, the format does not lend itself to this. Nevertheless, throughout the course of the dialogues there are moments in which the two come together to assert their respective definitions.

Many times the crux of their disagreement lies in their particular approaches to the topic being discussed. Badiou argues, for example, that Milner's pure scepticism of politics is not in fact "politics" but rather, what Badiou contends is in itself the philosophy of the State. Badiou indicates that Milner's scepticism is precisely what The State relies on – the citizen bodies' scepticism of it to maintain the status quo of their political systems, and Badiou links this to the notion of political efficacy. Much of the debates are concerned with the elements and essence of politics as well as forms of communism, socialism and revolution.

There is some discussion on the dwindling role of public intellectuals in popular society. Badiou, as Milner discusses, maintains his status as an intellectual, but points out that left-wing parties in France are not partners in intellectual discourse in the manner they were with Sartre, for example (p.121). From an American context, it is refreshing to read this book as a critique of the truth that intellect is largely missing from political and cultural discourse.

Controversies is conversational and largely affable in tone. Arguably the most contentious section of the book is the postscript, in which Milner and Badiou have an exchange subsequent to their final reading of the discussions that

had taken place, asking the moderator to highlight particular disagreements. This leads to a notable closing debate surrounding the understanding of Palestinians and Jews. Milner begins by discussing the Political name of “worker” and “Jew”, arguing that these are inherently part of the twentieth century, if we accept that the twentieth century happened. Badiou, on the other hand, insists that he does not understand what Milner means when he discusses “names”, arguing these are just fetishisations. (p.152) Perhaps Badiou’s sharpest criticism of Milner is found in this postscript stating,

[w]asn’t in Benny Levy and his followers, Jean-Claude Milner among them, who, because they were disappointed that the Gauche Proletarienne’s boastful proclamations hadn’t brought them to power, started to savagely attack “the political worldview” and “progressivism,” to scrap the word “worker” and many others along with it, to turn “Jew” into a hyperbolic name, and, in so doing, converted, with the same conviction of being the best and brightest of their day, from the fierce pro-Palestinians they once were to the more hard-line Zionism, or even turned “the Arabs,” without too much nuance, into the antithesis of any new thinking. (p.153)

Milner then provides a thoughtful, if controversial, response, ultimately leaving the last response of the debate to Badiou.

Anyone with an interest in philosophy, politics, history and economics will find many threads of debate and thoughts to contemplate alongside Badiou and Milner. The book is an exciting intellectual exercise with subjects of tangible consequence. As Milner states, ‘the task of thinking, of producing a careful, detailed, in-depth analysis of the events of the twentieth century, has not been completed[...].’ (p.142). This book is a good place for an individual to start.

Alexis Bushnell has an LLM in Humanitarian Law and Peace Support Operations from the Irish Centre for Human Rights. She is currently finishing her Doctorate with the Irish Centre for Human Rights in International Human Rights Law. Her research is sociolegal, and interrogates international and domestic legal architecture that influence spaces of violence and exclusion, focusing on refugee camps. She has taught at the National University of Ireland on Art and Literature in Human Rights Advocacy and works on issues relating to refugee law, architecture and space and private security firms in international law. [Read more reviews by Alexis.](#)

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