

## *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom? (What Is Sarkozy the Name Of?)*

by Alain Badiou, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2008, 155 pp.

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It's now been a year since Nicolas Sarkozy, by a wide margin, swept into France's presidential palace with promises of sweeping reforms of everything from the country's finances to its national character. You will remember the trajectory. After a skittering rise that saw him in and out of power, he took control of the UMP, Jacques Chirac's electoral machine. In the 2005 post-EU-referendum cabinet reshuffle he unexpectedly ended up back in his old job at the interior ministry, where his nightly television interventions during that year's awful suburban riots made him a national star. When the 2006 student protests over the Contrat première embauche delegitimated his only remaining rival, the prime minister Dominique de Villepin, Sarkozy won his party's nomination and eventually the presidency by making the election a referendum about himself.

Everyone's disappointed. The world of high capital is aghast at the lack of action while the left remains up in arms at the few reforms pushed through (particularly of higher education, which has seen students in the streets again). The voters who put Sarkozy in office have turned on him, for his rumbustious love life as much as his policies or lack thereof, and the UMP went down to an ignominious defeat at local elections in March. [1] An II of the Sarkozy revolution began as the president posted the lowest approval ratings in the history of the Fifth Republic.

Yet although the president's star has fallen, he remains a godsend to news outlets, magazines of the glossy as well as high-minded varieties, and especially book publishers. So many titles on Sarkozy have flooded the market that, in the bookstore near my apartment in Montmartre, they occupy a table unto themselves. The more serious strain of these books ranges from rigorous sociology (*La république du mépris*) to rhetorical analysis (*Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l'histoire de France*) to theoretical takes on the media (*Le starkozysme*). They sit alongside breathless volumes on the personal lives of the president and his family – my store had three titles on ex-first lady Cécilia alone – and comic takes on the reign of Nicolas Premier. And inevitably there are the books by second-tier politicians who still indulge the bad French habit of writing treatises on the ills of society that few will ever read. Pierre Moscovici, a pretender to the leadership of

the Socialist Party, has just put out a doorstop of a screed against the president called *Le liquidateur*, and judging by figures online I'm not the only one to have left the book at the store.

Of all the Sarkozy books, the one with the most surprising success came not from a politician or a comedian, but from a hardcore Maoist professor at the Ecole normale supérieure. Alain Badiou, whose considerable fame in the English-speaking world derives from his work as a philosopher, has also published a series of short books – pamphlets, really – on contemporary politics. The first three are simply called *Circonstances*, but sensing the political winds he or his publisher gave the fourth in this series its own title: *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* (What Is Sarkozy the Name Of?). That a book exhorting communist revolution via violent means or otherwise rose to the higher strata of France's best-seller lists earlier this year is, if somewhat surprising, a perfect indication that the appetite for material on the hyperpresident is strongest among his political opponents. But Badiou's treatise is a troublesome, even dangerous book, and its public success necessitates scrutiny.

Much of *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* is devoted to a formulation of the principles on which citizens should found a new communism (with a lowercase C) and resist the etiolating rigors of the State (with a capital É). The central chapters of the book are devoted to a somewhat irregular list of such precepts; for example, 'Love must be reinvented ... but also quite simply defended' (p. 64). If Sarkozy is very much a bad guy, he is nevertheless not the enemy in and of himself. He is merely a spokesman or a symbol for something larger. Throughout the text – indeed from the title on – Badiou understands the new president not as a person, nor as an event à la Georges-Didi Huberman, but as a symptom, one both peculiarly French and depressingly universal.

This symptomization of Sarkozy is tactical, and of a piece with Badiou's larger battle against 'capitalo-parliamentarianism.' Sarkozy stands for something beyond himself and bigger than himself, and if a battle is to be fought then militants must not mistake the effect for the cause. But although his argument reduces Sarkozy's role, that does not stop the philosopher from ripping the president with dozens of insults throughout a text of uncommon contemptuousness. References to Sarkozy's height are frequent: 'Napoleon the very small,' 'little Sarkozy,' the 'little father of the people.' Badiou bashes him as looking like 'a middle manager at a bank in a second-rate town' (p. 38). Sarkozy is 'visibly uneducated,' a 'twitching accountant,' and on and on. (Ségolène Royal, that 'deadbeat,' merits little better: 'a clouded *bourgeoise* whose thoughts, if she has any, are rather secret' [p. 8].)

And in a rhetorical move that has won Badiou substantial media coverage, he refers to the president, over and over again, as the 'Rat Man.' This outrageous sobriquet is, on one level, supposed to recall Freud's case of the *Rattenmann*, an obsessive neurotic who feared that rodents would eat through the skin of his loved ones. It is also a reference to the Pied Piper of Hamelin: fans of Sarkozy are referred to as 'rats,' with the Rat Man as their leader. But more than either of these, Badiou's slur sounds like a lab experiment gone wrong or a Hollywood villain: half man, half rat, all evil.

'Rat Man' is the name of the president; 'Sarkozy' refers to something else. So what is Sarkozy the name of, then? For Badiou, 'Sarkozy' names a certain societal disorientation, a turning away from social progress in the face of fear. Fear constitutes the zero-level of all political discourse; fear is the mechanism by which politicians and other masters of the dominant order retain their stranglehold on the populace, and elections are nothing more than the operation – 'democratic terror' (p. 15) – by which this fear is legitimized. The author, needless to say, does not vote.

Badiou gives examples of fear's centrality to politics reaching as far back as 1815 and the Bourbon Restoration, but he concentrates on one: Pétainism. The philosopher's equation of Sarkozy with Pétain, which the philosopher does not hesitate to extrapolate over a whole chapter, is in many ways more offensive than the cheap insults he flings at the president. Sarkozy's rhetoric is little better, for Badiou, than that of his Vichy predecessor. His pronouncements on French culture, we learn, are not without parallels to Pétain's attacks on Jews. And Sarkozy's promised reforms are not just an attempt to enslave the French further to 'the demands of global capitalism's potentates' (p. 106); worse still, they are cloaked: the gambit for a subservience in the guise of liberation. Is the man in the Prada suit from Neuilly-sur-Seine enjoining the French to get to work (and here we get another insult: Sarkozy sounds like 'a *bourgeoise* from the 19th century addressing her maid' [p. 106]) acting any differently from the collaborationist general? Today, Badiou writes, France is faced with 'a typically Pétainist disorientation: servility before the powers of the day...is called by the Chief 'national revolution!' (p. 106)

A critic more patient than I might attempt a point-by-point exegesis of how raising the retirement age or allowing pharmacies to stay open on Sunday is of a different order than aiding the Axis Powers. Let me say only this: it's unfortunate that Badiou rails so outrageously, because there are legitimate criticisms to make of Sarkozy and his program. He even makes some. But this invective is morally perilous and, more basically, strategically naïve. There may or may not be two legitimate sides to the arguments of whether France should reintegrate its military with NATO, cut down

the civil service, or change the train schedule. But for an opponent of Sarkozy to suggest that his mooted policies are tantamount to collaborationism does little more than reinforce the majority's claim that all its 'reforms,' from the most necessary to the most illegitimate, should be pushed through, since the objectors have already proved themselves to be hysterical.

And this is the paradox lying at the heart of *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*: the author claims that Sarkozy is only a symptom or a name of something, but the fervour with which he attacks the man himself is out of scale with the minor position he occupies in Badiou's analysis. That is, I am afraid, a symptom itself: a symptom of Sarkomania, an epidemic that swept the nation last year and from which the French, as the sales of the book make clear, have still not recovered. Almost nobody is immune. (I admit that I flipped through the recent issue of *Paris Match* featuring Nicolas and Carla embracing in the gilded office of the Elysée.) And this personalization and spectacularization of politics, a phenomenon that accounts both for the book and its sales, goes wholly undiscussed by Badiou.

'Serious' writers are still a bit scared of 'la politique pipole,' to use the Franglais for the growing importance of images and celebrity in the political sphere. But if Sarkozy is the name of anything, he signifies the increasingly complex manner in which image-based politics (*la politique*) and political action (*le politique*) inform and articulate one another. Sarkozy is our greatest example of how images do not constitute merely an overlay of the 'real world' of politics, but are politics itself. He made his name by understanding this interaction and has lost much of his traction as a president by losing his mastery of it.

And this phenomenon is one which a Maoist philosopher at France's most prestigious university is ill-equipped to understand. Badiou outlines his own definition of politics (*la politique*) early on: 'organized collective action, conforming to certain principles, and seeking to develop in the Real the consequences of a new possibility suppressed by the dominant state of affairs' (p. 12). This definition is so old-fashioned as to be laughable and bespeaks a complete failure to understand how politics and the political, *la politique* and *le politique*, have transformed each other. Badiou's book, like the president in his elevated wingtips, comes up short.

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### Notes

[1] For background on the March municipal elections, see my 'Sarkozy's mythos takes a hit,' <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/mar/17/sarkozysmythostakesahit>