

Preface: Badiou in Jamaica?

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What are the conceptual terms through which one might think—or *rethink*—Jamaica today? What, in the present, is the *theory-demand* on Jamaica?¹ How should we productively think the relation between “theory,” thought of as an analytical or interpretive apparatus (whatever its name), and “Jamaica,” conceived of as an historical and geopolitical object? What are the conceptual and rhetorical features of “theory” that need to be activated—or else, *invented*—to enable it to more adequately come to terms with or illuminate “Jamaica”? But also, and inverting the normative *direction* of the relation between theory and its object, What is the “Jamaica” in relation to which “theory” is supposed to think? What “Jamaica” is at stake in any practice of theorizing Jamaica? Is “Jamaica” merely *passive* in relation to theory’s purposes? Is “Jamaica” a self-evident entity whose contours can offer themselves up to theory in a timeless fashion? Or is “Jamaica” itself a variously constructed place of imagination, never stable, always inside some history and therefore a variable condition of possibility for what theory can aspire to be? Perhaps, then, “theory” and “Jamaica” are *not* so neatly separable as one might expect—each external to the other, the one thought of as being *applied* to the other—but rather reciprocal figurations in some relevant discursive sense. Perhaps what is called “Jamaica” ought to be thought of as exerting its own interpretive and methodological

1 This is the sort of question that, over the years, I have found myself asking. For one early iteration, see my “A Note on the Demand of Criticism,” *Public Culture* 8, no. 2 (1995): 41–50. Or again, more recently, “The Theory of Haiti: *The Black Jacobins* and the Poetics of Universal History,” *Small Axe*, no. 45 (November 2014): 35–51.

imperatives on the demand that “theory” seeks to bring to bear on it.² Undoubtedly, these are inexhaustibly recurrent and inexhaustibly contested questions to which there are no simple or secure, let alone *final*, answers. But they are, I believe, not irrelevant questions if only because they can help us clarify the discursive terrain on which problems are constructed as problems as such. They can help us clarify what the *point* is of these problems, what we are aiming to solicit from them as much as what they are aiming to solicit from us.

At any rate, these are questions that almost *impose* themselves on us when we are presented with books like Colin Wright’s *Badiou in Jamaica: The Politics of Conflict*.³ Published in 2013, significantly and, indeed, commendably by re.press, an open-access format with an explicit commitment to refusing conventional academic constraints (re.press seeks to publish “philosophy that doesn’t give way on its desire”), *Badiou in Jamaica* has nevertheless passed virtually unnoticed in those intellectual circles that *Small Axe* regularly intersects with.⁴ I dare say that this ignorance is *not* at all to our credit. We cannot see everything within our constantly expanding intellectual field, it is true, but so complex and so explicitly militant a work with “Jamaica” so prominently in its title ought certainly to have already gained a place in our larger critical conversations. It hasn’t. But it is also worth considering, perhaps, that it may partly be that *Badiou in Jamaica* has itself *resisted* such inclusion, that it has not imagined itself as part of such networks of theoretical engagement with Caribbean questions as *Small Axe* has sought over the years to foster and shelter. That, too, would be worth reflection. For me, anyway, given both my inheritances and my predilections, one impetus for the Small Axe Project has been precisely to think and rethink the relation between theory and Jamaica.

Now, what kind of book is *Badiou in Jamaica*? What is the form of its self-consciousness? What demand does it seek to make on us? What is the import of its mode of address? What, in short, is its project? To begin with, *Badiou in Jamaica* stages itself as an uncompromising and unrelenting *theoretical* provocation; its richly ironic title announces itself as such. For what could possibly be the connection between Alain Badiou’s notoriously arcane theoretical ideas propounded in an unapologetically European theater and Jamaica’s dense cultural and colonial and postcolonial political history? This, presumably, is what Wright will set out to clarify for us in his book. He doesn’t quite do that, but I want to urge that, whatever our final judgement is on the virtues of his argument, we take Wright’s book seriously as a considered attempt to get us to think *differently* than perhaps we have been about the relation between theory and

2 I also have in mind an intriguing book by Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). I don’t necessarily agree with its argument in every line, but its *provocation* that Asia is not reducible to being a mere *object* of method is enormously important, I believe. How, I would like to ask, might we think of Jamaica as a method?

3 Colin Wright, *Badiou in Jamaica: The Politics of Conflict* (Melbourne: re.press, 2013). Not of course that Badiou is a complete stranger to work on the Caribbean. See Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment* (London: Verso, 2007). Hallward is one of the preeminent interpreters of Badiou; see his *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

4 “About,” re.press, re-press.org/about.

Jamaica. By *we*, here, I mean especially those of us who take ourselves to have a *stake* in the *question* of Jamaica, that is, who in some measure locate ourselves in something like a Jamaican intellectual *tradition* (see the discussion in this issue, “The Jamaican 1970s,” which is part of an ongoing attempt to rethink aspects of the making of Jamaica’s cultural-political modernity). Notably, Wright himself offers a notion of *belonging*—a biographical stake—as part of his stated justification for thinking about Badiou in relation specifically to Jamaica. “Jamaica,” he writes, “happens to be my birthplace and the background to my formative years.”⁵ To my mind this is not necessarily irrelevant to the role theory has in the constitution of its objects, or the way such objects emerge in the first place as objects for theoretical reflection. But how, for Wright, does this fact count for something *interpretive*? What conceptual labor is it meant to perform? This is not made very clear.

In any event, in what follows, my aim is not an exhaustive review of Wright’s book (though I have written at greater length than I am typically inclined). Nor am I much interested in evaluating his fidelity to Badiou’s philosophy (however that might be achieved). Rather, what interests me is the presumed *relation* he constructs between “Badiou,” explicitly understood as “theory,” and “Jamaica” conceived as the object to which that theory is (in his formulation) “applied.”

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Wright opens his book by raising a number of profound questions, namely, “How does genuine novelty enter the world? How is it distinct from mundane change? How can it be made to endure?” (17). These seem to me crucial questions that aim, in effect, to *re-pose* or *re-signify* the older Marxist problematic of revolution. For Wright these are the kinds of questions that motivate Badiou’s “philosophy of the event.”⁶ And the answer Wright offers, one he says is implicit in Badiou’s work, though underarticulated, is “conflict.” Antagonism to the status quo is the way change enters the world, the way, as Wright puts it, “new worlds struggle to be born” (17). Wright’s intervention is prompted by a desire to re-animate the idea of novelty with radical or transformative content, to release it from the commodity-form in which it manifests itself (i.e., “in-built obsolescence”) in our global neoliberal present. As he says, in a discerning phrase, “Neoliberalism nullifies novelty.” Authentic novelty, *real* transformation, is what Wright is after. How, he asks, can political subjects in a neoliberal world “invent a new time at the end of times”? The aim of *Badiou in Jamaica*, then, is to “extrapolate from the theme of conflict within Badiou’s work a theory of radical novelty suitable to our putatively post-historical yet conflict-ridden era” (18). The book is divided into two not very equal parts. The first considers

⁵ Wright, *Badiou in Jamaica*, 21; hereafter cited in the text.

⁶ See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). Badiou’s famous philosophic treatise was first published in French as *L’être et l’événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

Badiou in relation to the theme of conflict and event. The second seeks to apply this schema to aspects of Jamaica's cultural history.

For Wright, Badiou's idea of the "event" is a "vital contribution to the theorization of conflict and change" (18–19). Badiou, he argues, mobilizes the idea of the event as part of his attempt to break free from what he perceives as the "oppressive weight of dialectically determining history" (187). In this view, *event* is the key term in Badiou's war against the "historicism" of various Marxisms—including Hegelian, economistic, and Heideggerian Marxisms. Badiou's fundamental problem with historicism, Wright tells us, is that it reduces truth to historically determined contexts. Historicism, in other words, nullifies the possibility of radical novelty by making truth a mere *effect* of the "spatio-temporal location of its emergence" (188). Historicism produces a "container" version of history, or rather History (that is, official or statist history), and it is with this view that Badiou seeks to break through the *antihistoricist* concept of the event. For Wright, however, there has been an unfortunate tendency, even in some of Badiou's own formulations, to treat the event in purely, starkly, ahistorical terms—as "utterly punctual, radically singular, and therefore 'other-worldly'" (20). In a certain sense, the topological set theory that informs its conceptualization in *Being and Event* encourages this underhistoricization, and arguably even Badiou's later *Logic of Worlds* doesn't entirely remedy the problem.⁷ However, Wright does not abandon Badiou at this point, as he might have; rather, he reads him (partly against himself) in such a way as to extract a concept of the event that is at once radically antihistoricist and yet saturated with historicity.⁸ And this is what Wright's idea of an "evental historiography," elaborated in the central chapter of the first part of *Badiou in Jamaica*, aims to comprehend.

An evental historiography, Wright argues, aims to introduce a certain historicity into the idea of the event and so to break with the idea of "the event as a total break with history" (208). Offering us a definitional and methodological schema, Wright tells us that an evental historiography is not a history of the unfolding of significant past events but a *rewriting* of history by "subtracting" these events from the discourse of official History. In this sense, an evental historiography does not aim to write a more accomplished historical account of the past but seeks, rather, to intervene theoretically in order to identify the novel truth in the event of the past. But truth here is not understood as a supposed correspondence to the existing real. Truth in Badiou is not representational. To the contrary, truth aims to *escape* the real. Truth is a *demand* on the future. In order to write such an evental historiography, Wright outlines a number of stipulative procedures: the identification of an historical referent from the historical record, an event that has been "occulted" by official History; the distillation of an "evental

7 Alain Badiou, *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

8 I take the antihistoricist concern seriously. See my "Dehistoricizing History" in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). And I certainly think there is something at stake in resisting the urge to reduce time to history. See my *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

sequence” that retemporalizes the arc of the story, that “edits,” as he puts it, the record in a “subversive manner”; the extrapolation of an “evental statement” that “crystallizes” the truth of the “evental sequence”; and, finally, the deployment of this new evental statement in a way that helps us rethink a contemporary moment (210–13).

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The second half of *Badiou in Jamaica* is devoted to a “sustained application” of this schema to “the Jamaican situation” (21). Again we are reminded of Wright’s autobiographical impulse and the complex character of Jamaica’s cultural political history. Interestingly, Wright’s inspiration to “look at Badiou askance from a Jamaican perspective comes from Susan Buck-Morss’s reframing of Hegel by way of the Haitian Revolution” (227). Now, to my mind, this is a very doubtful inspiration. I have written elsewhere that the assumptions that shape Buck-Morss’s *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* are unpersuasive, to say the least.⁹ But more importantly, perhaps, what is to be noted here is the explicit *direction* of Wright’s theory-preoccupation—what is at stake is Badiou, *not* Jamaica. Through what he calls a “Jamaican displacement,” Wright hopes to “test Badiou’s compatibility with, on the face of it, utterly incompatible modes of analysis, such as postcolonial theory, cultural studies and their shared emphasis on cultural politics” (227). What are the conceptual implications of this “Jamaican displacement”? I return to this at the end.

Wright takes up two cases, the Morant Bay rebellion of October 1865 and Rastafari—different but not necessarily unrelated cultural-historical formations. For the sake of space, I will concern myself only with his discussion of the former. Morant Bay, 1865, is undoubtedly a rich and endlessly significant moment in *any* historiography of Jamaica, evental or otherwise, literary or cultural-political. This is because a good deal of our understanding of the aftermaths of emancipation and the making of the contours of Victorian, and subsequently nationalist, Jamaica hang on its interpretation.¹⁰ To begin with, Wright rehearses the “prehistory” of 1865 in the traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave resistance (Tacky, the Maroons, Sam Sharpe). It is not an especially illuminating account, partly because it depends so unselfconsciously on conventional contrasts inscribed in the colonial and nationalist historiography of Jamaica—for example, the idea of an “African culture” that was supposedly maintained in the Maroon communities at a “genuine remove from surrounding Jamaican culture” (229). However, against this background, the general direction of which is to argue that slave abolition was a merely “simulacral event,” not a real one, Wright turns directly to the question of 1865, which to him was a genuine event, the moment of real novelty. But again, Wright traverses a

9 David Scott, “Antinomies of Slavery, Enlightenment, and Universal History,” *Small Axe*, no. 33 (November 2010): 152–62. See also Buck-Morss’s response in “The Gift of the Past,” *Small Axe*, no. 33 (November 2010): 173–85.

10 See the stimulating volume edited by Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest, *Victorian Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), for a wonderful illustration of the complexity of this moment.

familiar story of what happened when and who the principal actors were—from the outbreak of violence in Morant Bay on 7 October 1865 through Governor Edward Eyre’s unprecedented repressions and executions (including of Paul Bogle and George William Gordon) to the conclusion in April 1866 of the Royal Commission’s investigation into Eyre’s actions. There is nothing really new here in either form or substance. But where Wright is headed in terms of his schema is the “distillation” of the eventual statement—that is, the historic *truth* of Morant Bay, 1865. Curiously, it doesn’t seem to strike Wright as odd, as perhaps another kind of historiographical conceit, that a sequence as complex as the one he has just described could be reduced to a *single* formulaic truth, simply in order to satisfy the formalistic and, one has to admit, doctrinal demands of fidelity to Badiou’s ideas.

In any case, what, then, is the supposed truth of 1865? Wright’s main concern seems to be to dispute the idea that 1865 can be properly understood on the particularistic terrain of racial identification: “Colour for colour!,” the famous battle cry among Bogle’s followers, is to him a doubtful claim to universality.¹¹ Poor blacks in the Jamaican world of 1865, Wright says, in a somewhat startling statement, behaved in exactly the same way Marx argued the proletariat in general behaves within capitalism: “It does not claim a particular redress, because the wrong done to it is not a particular wrong but wrong in general” (260). But surely this is a misunderstanding of Marx, because Marx’s claim (a profoundly disputable one, as we now know) depends specifically on the neat abstraction of the universalizing logic of capital and thus, dialectically, of labor. The proletariat’s universality is a function of the internal structure of capitalism. It is difficult to see how one could seamlessly extrapolate from this imagined European scenario to the *historical form* of the postemancipation peasantries in Jamaica. What is clear though is that Wright’s objective is to establish a programmatic universality for 1865 (for this is what an eventual statement demands), and *race*, evidently, does not serve this purpose well. On this basis, Wright declares that Bogle and his followers did *not* act in terms of “identity politics,” which is what he takes any stand on “blackness” or “black experience” would entail (261).¹² For him, presumably, the idea of a black radical tradition is an insupportable contradiction in terms.¹³ Thus Wright maintains (and I quote him at length here), “It is not as blacks in any essential sense, or *for* blacks in any communitarian sense, that Bogle’s followers rebel but as those who are discounted within their world *through* blackness as a differential mode of counting. Rather than the blackness filled by racist discourse with predicates such as ‘inferior’, ‘backward’, ‘physical not cerebral’ etc., this is the much more challenging because predicateless blackness of the void” (260; italics in original).

11 See, in this respect, Clinton Hutton, *Colour for Colour, Skin for Skin: Marching with the Ancestral Spirits into War Oh at Morant Bay* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2015).

12 Wright includes Negritude as an instance of “identity politics” blackness (*Badiou in Jamaica*, 261). But for a splendid meditation on the false problem of essentialism in Negritude, see Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*, trans. Chike Jeffers (Calcutta: Seagull, 2011).

13 See David Scott, “On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition,” *Small Axe*, no. 40 (March 2013): 1–6.

Whatever this is, it seems to me a lot of *theory-work* to mobilize in the effort to release race from any “ontological” binding on black people, and to redeem Bogle and his followers from the gross particularism of staking a claim on blackness as the constitutive mode of their historical being and agency rather than “through” blackness as though it were merely the strategic rhetoric of their intervention. Thus, in the end, what is the truth of 1865 that displaces the essentializing agonism of blackness? It would be preferable, Wright concludes, to “posit, as the eventual statement articulating the truth of the Morant Bay referent, the unconditional demand: equality before the law!” (263). And so, at the end of the long journey of Badiou in Jamaica, these are the privileged terms of the sought-after universality. Wright is perfectly correct to suspect that for many this will “sound like a weakly liberal rather than a strongly radical statement” and will feel like the contextualizing idea that “in the specific world of mid-nineteenth century Jamaica” the demand for equality before the law “amounted to a veritable call for total social upheaval” is, after all, little more than an abandonment of the militant antihistoricism we have earlier been called upon to endorse (263).

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But I don’t want to belabor this discussion any more than I have already belabored it. I want to return by way of conclusion to the concerns with which I began, namely, the concerns about theory and its objects. I have clearly found *Badiou in Jamaica* a disappointing book. Not because I don’t sympathize with Wright’s demand to theorize or even because I am unwilling to be persuaded by aspects of Badiou’s quarrel, for example, with poststructuralism. Rather, it is because I don’t sympathize with the particular *form* this theorization has taken. There is in *Badiou in Jamaica* something strained and forced about its concerted *will* to theory that, in the end, unbalances and overwhelms it. One would be mistaken to believe that the object of *Badiou in Jamaica* is really Jamaica. Wright has no more than a passing interest in the *internal* debates that constitute the historiography of 1865 (misconstruing Trevor Munroe and Don Robotham’s *Struggles of the Jamaican People*, being but one instance).¹⁴ The object of *Badiou in Jamaica* is Badiou, first and foremost, along with the select fraternity of those involved in the elucidation of his ideas. Jamaica, here, appears as merely an *occasion*, autobiographically authorized, that stands in for an outer limit of intelligibility of existing “Badiou scholarship.” Jamaica has no warrant of its own, say, as the historical institution of a contested archive that demands in some way to be *negotiated*, however critically. Jamaica has no active part in Wright’s *method*.

14 Trevor Munroe and Don Robotham’s *Struggles of the Jamaican People* (Kingston: Workers Liberation League, 1977), itself a repackaging and expansion of Robotham’s *Our Struggles* (Kingston: Workers Liberation League, 1974), can’t properly be reduced to an effect of “so-called radical historiography” as Wright makes out (*Badiou in Jamaica*, 253). It has to be located more specifically and complexly as an attempt on the part of the fledgling communist movement, in the specific conjuncture of the 1970s, to write a popular history of modern Jamaica for purposes of political education. One would have thought that this recognition would be a not insignificant dimension of a discerning historiographical intervention.

Reading *Badiou in Jamaica*, I was reminded of another major and equally militant work of theoretical excursus from a generation earlier, carried out in relation to another Jamaican “evental historiography,” namely, the labor revolt of 1938. I am thinking of Ken Post’s *Arise Ye Starvelings* and its two-volume sequel, *Strike the Iron*, parts of an unfinished work concerned to quarrel with versions of structural Marxism on the terrain of modern Jamaica.¹⁵ It is a very curious fact that Post’s books are not mentioned by Wright in the body of his text and do not even appear in his bibliography. After all, it could be said that Post too was interested in the question of how *novelty* comes into the Jamaican world and whether or to what extent one should speak of the labor revolt of 1938 as a genuine *event*. Indeed, arguably, there is an “evental” connection to be made between 1865 and 1938 that goes unrecognized by Wright, one that is not irrelevant to the story of Rastafari. For Post no less than for Wright, the *theory* question in relation to Jamaica was of enormous, generative significance. Neither, it is true, had a much developed or sophisticated sense of the historicity of “Jamaica” as a colonial or postcolonial object of discourse. But, still, in contrast to Wright’s preoccupations with Badiou, Post is less attached to structural Marxism as such than to suturing together his own version of it, selectively, so as to better illuminate the contours of Jamaica 1938, and to do so in such a way as to make that event differently available as a contestable inheritance for the Jamaican cultural-political present.

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15 Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), and *Strike the Iron: A Colony at War, 1939–1945*, 2 vols. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1981). The third volume in the sequence, to be called “No Savior from on High,” was never completed.