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THE EXEMPLARY RHETOR: ON ANTI- PHILOSOPHY AND SOPHISTICS IN ALAIN BADIOU

Abstract

This article investigates the ambiguous status of rhetoric, situated between proper philosophy and mere sophistry, through Alan Badiou's three exemplary figures of thought: the philosopher, the anti-philosopher, and the sophist. With the recent return of the sophist in politics in the form of populist politicians, contemporary rhetorical studies have expressed a need for the discipline to reconsider its alliance with relativist sophistics. However, by studying Badiou's three exemplary figures, and relating them to his understanding of the three forms of negation, the article explores a possible rift between sophistical rhetoric and anti-philosophical populism that complicates prevalent understandings of the relationship between rhetoric, philosophy, and sophistics. Finally, the article brings up some issues concerning how to fit exemplarity in general, and the three exemplary figures in particular, into the framework of Badiou's entire philosophy and discusses how to potentially counteract these limitations.

Keywords: Rhetoric; Alain Badiou; Sophistics; Anti-Philosophy; Exemplarity

DER EXEMPLARISCHE RHETOR: ÜBER ANTI-PHILOSOPHIE UND SOPHISTIK BEI ALAIN BADIOU

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht den zweideutigen Status der Rhetorik, der zwischen echter Philosophie und bloßer Sophisterei angesiedelt ist, anhand von Alain Badiou's drei exemplarischen Denkfiguren: dem Philosophen, dem Anti-Philosophen und dem Sophisten. Mit der jüngsten Rückkehr des Sophisten in die Politik in Form populistischer Politiker hat die zeitgenössische Rhetorikforschung die Notwendigkeit zum Ausdruck gebracht, dass die Disziplin ihr Bündnis mit der relativistischen Sophistik überdenkt. Indem Badiou's drei exemplarische Figuren untersucht und sie mit seinem Verständnis der drei Formen der Negation in Beziehung gesetzt werden, untersucht der Artikel eine mögliche Kluft zwischen sophistischer Rhetorik und anti-philosophischem Populismus, die das vorherrschende Verständnis der Beziehung zwischen Rhetorik, Philosophie und Sophistik verkompliziert. Schließlich wirft der Artikel einige Fragen dazu auf, wie die Exemplarität im Allgemeinen und die drei exemplarischen Figuren im Besonderen in den Rahmen von Badiou's gesamter Philosophie eingeordnet werden können, und erörtert, wie man diesen Einschränkungen möglicherweise entgegenwirken kann.

Schlüsselwörter: Rhetorik; Alain Badiou; Sophistik; Anti-Philosophie; Exemplarität

In Plato's *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger states that one of the main aims of his discussion with Theaetetus is to uncover an example, or rather a pattern [παράδειγμα], that could aid the pair on their mission to “find out what a sophist is” (2006, 221c). But each of the patterns unearthed by the conversation – from the distinction between the hunter of tame and wild animals (222a-e) or between products nurturing the body and those nurturing the soul (224a-e) to the difference between public figures aiming to persuade with long speeches and those that refute their interlocutor with short replies (268b-c) – fail to capture the sophist's essence, and because of this, our interlocutors also fail in their ultimate attempt to separate the wild wolf of sophistic from the tame dog of philosophy. The only universal attribute that the couple is capable of ascribing to this exemplary non- or anti-philosopher is, as Theaetetus also admits, the one assumed already from the beginning: that the sophist is ignorant. However, this problem is not simply,

as the Stranger also points out regarding the zoological *paradeigma*, one of ignorance. Instead, “man must be especially on his guard in the matter of resemblances, for they are very slippery things” (2006, 231a). Therefore, when handling exemplars, we need to remain vigilant, or we might end up assuming that an example exemplifies something that it, in fact, does not. According to the Stranger, this issue – threatening us as we, for instance, are trying to discern whether an animal is a friendly dog or a vicious wolf – comes down to a matter of perspective: mistaking the one for the other is an effect of the onlooker’s position in relation to the exemplar. Beyond this, the sophist introduces another layer to this problem, as he purposely puts his audience in a position from which the individual image merely appears to be the exemplary embodiment of a universal. Hence, it is not only due to the particular circumstances of life that we might find ourselves in a disadvantageous position from which we might mistake a foe for a friend. We also live under the threat of having our perspective intentionally thwarted by malicious sophists. Therefore, in this attempt to distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist, the universal and the merely apparent exemplar of a wise man, the Eleatic Stranger also provides us with two forms of the art of image-making – the εἰκαστικόν and the φανταστικόν or the art of creating exemplary images and the art of furnishing images pertaining to the false perspective (236c). These exemplary patterns are, however, not only part of an attempt to separate the true philosopher from the false sophist. These figures, in turn, themselves acted as patterns in Plato’s grander attempt at separating the proper from the improper use of the λογῶν τεχνή, or how one is supposed to correctly lead someone else’s soul. At the heart of this question, we encounter the discipline that Plato named rhetoric, which, as an effect of its role in Plato’s work, to this day remains stuck in a struggle to decide whether it is the philosopher or the sophist that constitutes its exemplary figure. Today, after the so-called ‘populist moment’ of the last decade, the ambiguity concerning rhetoric’s status was awarded a new sense of urgency, as this demagogic politician offered yet another pattern through which the original Platonic divide could be read. But while this development offered something of a wakeup call for the discipline of rhetoric, Alain Badiou had by that time already spent decades criticizing the complacency of modern sophistics.¹ Hence, the aim of this article is to

¹ It should be noted upfront that Badiou’s few explicit comments on rhetoric are primarily negative. However, it has been shown how he is nevertheless forced to also operate with a more positive notion of rhetoric within his philosophy (cf. Scott, Forth).

read Badiou's critique through the lens of the populist moment in order to understand what his reading of Plato's exemplary figures can tell us about the role of rhetoric in politics today.

1. Sophistical Rhetoric? On the Exemplary Rhetorician

Although Plato and Aristotle undoubtedly defined rhetoric in different ways, both of them shared the initial question treated by Plato in *The Sophist*, but also in *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, namely: how to find the *paradeigma* capable of distinguishing between the proper and the improper use of the art of *logos*.² If we look closer at Aristotle, we can see how he, in his *Rhetoric*, repeatedly claimed that this body of knowledge is located at the intersection of the universal and the particular. Initially, he notes how rhetoric, similar to dialectics, cannot be confined to a singular field or class of objects. Instead, both are universal in their scope (which, according to Aristotle, also explains why they are useful) (1356a). On the other hand, in difference to dialectics, which deals with both universal and particular problems, rhetoric is confined to the individual case, even though the thesis put forth or the decision made by the audience (the judges, the assembly, the demos) might, and even should, have universal validity (1354b). As it is applied to the particular case, while expressing at least a quasi-universal validity, rhetoric is awarded a sort of in-between status which also reveals itself in what Aristotle calls the rhetorical means of proof [*πίσταις*]: the example [*παράδειγμα*] and the enthymeme [*ἐνθύμημα*] (1356b). It has usually been highlighted how these forms constitute simpler variations of the inductive and syllogistic forms of reasoning belonging to dialectics, but as a consequence, this difference also transforms the status of rhetorical argumentation. In short, because of this difference, rhetorical arguments are, on the one hand, "like dialectic, on the other like sophistic *logoi*s" (Aristotle, 2006, 1359b [transl. mod.]). Thus, the issue is not primarily, as it is traditionally depicted, that rhetorical argumentation, due to the nature of its questions, is forced to draw its conclusions from probability [*εἰκός*], sign [*σημείον*], and exemplar rather than conclusive proofs and truths (1357a). Instead, what constitutes the threat against rhetoric is how these restrictions force it to operate in

² There are numerous patterns offered in these dialogues, and as a consequence, Plato's position on rhetoric has been a question of great debate (cf. Cassin, 1990).

the shadowland between proper philosophical reasoning and sophistical trickeries. Furthermore, in one particular aspect of rhetorical argumentation, that which pertains to emotion [*πάθος*], this issue becomes even more pertinent. In order to induce a certain emotional response in the audience, Aristotle notes how the speaker creates exemplary images [*φαντασία*] in the minds of the listeners. The aim is here for the speaker to furnish an image that presents the thing in question from a perspective that makes the matter discussed appear, for instance, enraging, endearing, or enthralling to the audience. We have, in other words, returned to Plato's problem of the onlooker's perspective. However, in Aristotle the line between the proper and the false image is no longer down to the wise man's knowledge (or lack thereof), but to the intention of the individual speaker, separating the rhetorician from the sophist, and placing the former together with the dialectician (1355b). With this distinction, Aristotle has taken up the fallen mantle of his master and once again attempted to provide a stable distinction between the philosopher and this false pretender, between proper wisdom and "the dissembling part of the art of opinion" (Plato, 2006, sec. 268c), in order to salvage rhetoric and bring its paradigmatic argumentation under the umbrella of philosophy.

As Barbara Cassin has often noted, the primary war machine employed by Aristotle against the sophists was his law of non-contradiction, as the one who refuses this law "is a plant, whose place is outside of humanity" (1992, p. 60).³ With this, he was able to exclude the sophists, those who merely intend to "speak for the pleasure of speaking," from the community of humans endowed with *logos*. Hence, although the law of non-contradiction is not capable of completely eradicating the threat of the false perspective, the prohibition against intending to proclaim both A and non-A at the same time could at least dispel some of the most flagrant excesses of sophistics from rhetoric. And it would take until modernity before this exclusion was successfully challenged anew.⁴ Within one of the many movements that, since the early 19th century, has challenged the Aristotelian exclusion – a tradition that Richard Rorty in 1984 named 'the rhetorical turn' – a recurring trope is the foregrounding of an inherent 'rhetoricity' of language and knowledge, turning the law of non-contradiction into, at best, a suggestion

³ Translations are my own if nothing else is indicated.

⁴ Although an admiration for rhetoric has been expressed by a number of thinkers of the Western canon, the sophists remained in obscurity from the time of the second sophistics until the dawn of the modern era.

rather than a prerequisite for speaking. Taking this inversion as a starting point, important figures within this ‘rhetorical turn’, including, for instance, Kenneth Burke and Chaïm Perelman, were able to claim that it was, in actual fact, the sophists who constituted the “progressives” of their time (Burke, 2013, pp. 28–29; See also Perelman, 1982, pp. 5, 154). Within this perspective, both the sophistic understanding of language, highlighting its inescapably ambiguous and equivocal nature and turning any notion of a stable truth into an impossible dream, as well as their teachings in rhetoric and political *aretē*, are understood as furthering democracy and the proliferation of different viewpoints against the philosophical quest for impermeable truths.⁵

These familiar claims are part of the larger modern critique of philosophy, which, in this particular case, attempts to turn the Platonic hierarchy between sophistics and philosophy on its head by reading it through a different pattern, no longer the one of wolf and dog but that of democrat and totalitarian. In other words, following the supposed democratic relativism of the sophists, who supposedly championed the idea that the final arbiter of truth claims always has to be τῶν ἢ δόξα πολλῶν, a sophistic rhetoric, depicted as an attempt to free language from the old aristocratic rules and truths, acts in service of democracy. A philosopher, on the other hand, with his love for the universal Truth, remained an exemplary protector of old (seemingly stable) hierarchies. Furthermore, this inversion also allows proponents of the rhetorical turn to argue that the separation of the proper image-making art from the art of making φαντάσματα is false: language creates the world, and as such no independent scale – neither ideal nor empirical – exists for us to decide whether an example facing us perfectly fits its universal category, or if it only appears to do so. The world is only made up of appearances, seen from a certain peculiar perspective, and as such particulars never truly, only at best effectively, embody the universals they exemplify. The rhetorical turn, born as a democratic answer to the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, thus found an ally in the ancient sophist (cf. Jarratt, 1991; McComiskey, 2012; Poulakos, 1995).

It seemed, however, as if the re-emergence of the figure of the populist following the 2008 financial crisis confronted rhetoric scholars with the

⁵ This idea was of course not born within rhetorical studies or even the rhetorical turn more broadly construed. Instead, it can be traced back to Hegel and even a right-Hegelian such as Eduard Zeller lauded the sophists as the prime example of an era “penetrated with the spirit of revolution and progress” (1881, p. 404).

nightmare version of this modern sophist, the figure destined to defeat the universalist terror of philosophy (cf. Biesecker, 2018; Fuller, 2017; McComiskey, 2017; Myres, 2018; Stagnell, 2020). Epitomized in Donald Trump's comment before the 2016 Iowa caucus, claiming that he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" without losing a single voter, this new populist leader seemed acutely aware of how politics ultimately rests on the opinion of the masses, allowing this figure to spread blatant lies as long as the message aligned with, or even strengthened, the existing perspective of the audience. However, when compared to Plato's critique, the problem no longer seemed limited to the sophistic rhetor capable of deceiving the audience by creating images that distort their perspective of the universal. Rather, the commitment to a particular perspective is mirrored in the public as well, perhaps best exemplified by a notorious comment on a fake news article in Sweden concerning a young girl who, the article claimed, was punished with detention by her school because her smartphone donned a Swedish flag. Seemingly aware of the untrustworthy nature of the article, the commenter wrote: "I don't give a shit that it is fake, it is still fucking horrible".⁶ In many ways, these exemplars could be said to express a sophistic epistemology: no intrinsic higher moral values or eternal truths exist, only opinions, and it is not argumentative reason or empirical facts that ground these opinions, but rather strong emotional commitment. In other words, the populist seems to share with the sophist the opinion that the important question for politics is not what is true, good, or even probable, but what is effective and persuasive. This development has opened the question of whether (and how) rhetoric scholars could disassociate the epistemology of modern rhetorical studies from its mirror image found in often chauvinistic right-wing populism. So, while modern rhetorical studies were able to invert the Platonic dismissal of sophistic rhetoric by depicting the latter as representing a relativistic democratic pluralism, thereby reducing philosophical argumentation to just a particular instance of rhetorical discourse, the populist moment has forced rhetoric scholars to return to Plato's old question of the exemplary rhetorician. But are the only options to either follow the example of Plato, and once again return rhetoric to philosophy in order to receive a (new?) notion of the universal capable of combatting what seems to be populist relativism, or to double down, ignore the populist menace and deepen rhetoric's commitment to Gorgias as

⁶ The comment, in Swedish "Ja[g] skiter i att det är fejk det är förjävligt ändå," was for instance used as the title of Swedish journalist Jack Werner's book on online myths (2019).

the paradigm of anti-philosophical sophistic? It is to this ossified paradigm that Badiou can offer another perspective.

2. Badiou's Sophist

Few contemporary thinkers have mapped out the pattern distinguishing the sophist from the philosopher to a greater extent than Alain Badiou. Not only has he been grappling with these figures as such through meticulous readings of some exemplary "great sophists" of modernity (e.g., Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Lyotard), but his aim has also been to furnish a notion of the philosopher as a figure capable of going beyond the failures of the sophists, just as Plato did in relation to his contemporaries. In this context, Badiou has repeatedly criticized the philosophical will to completely eradicate its sophistic counterpart, instead claiming that "[n]othing is more philosophically useful to us than contemporary sophistry" and that "[p]hilosophy ought never yield to anti-sophistry extremism" (2017a, p. 18). This is not, as perhaps a rhetorician would suggest, proof that Badiou is embracing the plurality of liberal democracy against philosophy's aristocratic truths. Instead, proclaiming a prohibition against eradicating the sophist has a much more fundamental, even ontological, aspect to it: Plato's failure with regards to the sophist lies in his desire for the totality of philosophy's universal One, an image of thought completely free of its problematic other. Against this, Badiou famously follows the Maoist dialectical formula of "One divides into two", making the bad other into an inescapable part of any philosophical endeavor. Surpassing the contemporary sophist, the one who "attempts to replace the idea of truth with the idea of the rule" (Badiou, 2017a, p. 6), can therefore not consist in the total destruction of this figure, but rather in an attempt at "conserving the polemos, or dialectical conflict" (Badiou, 2017a, p. 19) between the sophist and the philosopher.

Although never formulated explicitly, these key points allow us to imagine Badiou's reply to proponents of the rhetorical turn as part of the larger movement of modern sophistic. In order to turn the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy created by Plato on its head, contemporary rhetoric has refrained from completely dismissing all philosophy as inevitably tied to a totalitarian notion of universality. Instead, it has attempted to support the inversion of the Platonic hierarchy by including in its canon a number of philosophers as 'honorary rhetoricians', that is, (mainly modern) philosophers

who, against Plato, have taken the side of rhetoric.⁷ When making such an argument, which seemingly accepts the law of non-contradiction (by accepting the distinction between philosopher and non-philosopher) while rejecting that of the excluded middle (by opting for what we might call the ‘rhetorical philosopher’), rhetorical studies follow the intuitionistic logic linked, by Badiou himself, to “reformist politics” (2008, 1882). In other words, when seen from Badiou’s perspective, the appropriation by modern rhetorical studies of anyone from the modern canon of philosophers – from Nietzsche, Derrida, and Habermas, to Badiou himself – incapacitates any eventual potential that the rhetorical turn might have harbored in the first place. What is instead performed in the naming of exemplary ‘rhetorical philosophers’ is a mere restructuring of the history of philosophy, wherein a certain form of philosophy (from Plato, via Petrus Ramus up to modern empiricism and positivism) can be dismissed as (at least potentially) totalitarian, while another historical line of figures is embraced as part of a rhetorically democratic heritage stretching from the linguistic turn back to the sophists. This perspective can, for instance, be exemplified by an influential text which, in the nineties, argued for the inclusion of “continental philosopher” Michel Foucault into the rhetorical studies canon. In the conclusion, it is highlighted how

Michel Foucault told us that “nothing hides the fact of a problem in common better than two similar ways of approaching it.” To be sure, throughout his career, Foucault had an uncanny capacity to approach things differently, to enact what Kenneth Burke has called a “perspective by incongruity” - not in order to distinguish himself from others working in the field but in order to keep his own intellect alive. [...] So far in this essay I have tried to argue that Foucault presents us with an alternative way to understand the condition of possibility and function of critical rhetorics, one that would surely alter our tactics of analysis without crushing our conviction that the world can be otherwise. (Biesecker, 1992, p. 362)

This claim seems to be driven by the conception that there is always a potential third position, between the extreme opposites of totalitarian philosophy and relativistic sophistics, in which the philosopher and the rhetorician might converge. This thought has even been extended to the notion of truth, purportedly the originary site of contention between philosophy and sophistic rhetoric. In an attempt to appropriate Badiou’s thought for

⁷ This critique of rhetoric’s appropriation of philosophers has been a topic of contention within the field for a long time (cf. Gaonkar, 1990).

rhetorical scholarship, it has, for instance, been claimed that his notion of “the event offers rhetoric access to the ontic without diminishing intentional or productive agency” (Daniel, 2016, p. 258), meaning that Badiou’s notion of truth and event could be coupled with the classical rhetorical emphasis on the intentionality and creativity of the rhetor. In other words, the aim is effectively to offer a third position, an option available beyond the opposition imposed by Badiou himself between his own philosophy and the focus on intentionality exemplified by classical rhetorical theory (2009, p. 174). The idea is that we, in this way, could avoid the downsides of completely committing to either side of the original antagonism. But if the sophistic position associated with the rhetorical turn operates according to the reformistic reason inherent to the intuitionistic logic, is it then enough to simply repeat Plato’s dismissal of the sophists as stuck in appearances, as creators of images that merely seem to exemplify a universal when seen from a certain perspective?

If we begin with the claim that modern sophistics is defined by the intuitionistic logic, i.e., the tendency to assign to itself the position of excluded third, such a reading of Badiou’s sophist could also further specify his statement that the sophist “*alerts* us to the singularities of the time” (1999, p. 98). These singularities, as Badiou points out apropos the intuitionistic logic, belong to the realm of appearance (as opposed to the classical logic, which coincides with the logic of being) (2008, p. 1881). In *Conditions*, Badiou writes:

What the sophist professes to show, ancient and modern alike, is precisely that there is no truth, and that its concept is useless and uncertain, because conventions, rules, genres of discourse and language games are all that exist. (2017a, p. 8)

However, the critique of this position is not simply a repetition of Plato’s denouncement of false appearances as opposed to the appearance of truth (since only the philosopher can identify an image that exemplifies truth because he knows the truth to begin with). Instead, Badiou claims that the world of appearance by necessity follows an intuitionistic logic. This might also explain Plato’s failure to separate the philosopher from the non-philosopher (sophist): when remaining in the world of appearances, the image is, at the same time, too much and not enough, opening up for an infinite number of positions in-between X and non-X. Here we can also see Badiou’s critique of both Deleuze’s and Cassin’s understanding of the sophist

and their shared effort, as Deleuze puts it, “to reverse Platonism” (1990, p. 253). When siding with multiplicity as it appears inside the One, with the simulacra or an *effet-monde*, i.e., when siding with the sophist, one simply remains stuck within the Platonic universe. Plato, as Badiou has noted *apropos* Cassin, remains the master and compass for sophistic thought (Badiou and Cassin, 2019, p. 44), making it into a “Platonism with a different accentuation” (Badiou, 2000, p. 26), as it accepts the totality of the One as the inescapable bounds holding together the regulated fluctuations of the world of appearances. Just as it is impossible to uphold a stable distinction between dog and wolf when faced with the myriad of examples in the world of appearances, there is no final distinction between the sophist and the philosopher, which is why the debate remains stuck in the infinite play of ambiguities and equivocities. Hence, Badiou’s claim seems to be that we should avoid the temptation to locate the division between these figures at the level of appearance.

Instead, we should follow Badiou’s claim that the main point of contention between the philosopher and the sophist is the notion of truth, as the latter denies the existence of truths and replaces them “with the idea of the rule” (2017a, p. 6). This is the choice that limits the sophist to the eternal play of discourses and appearances by fixating its gaze on the rules and regulations that in every given moment structure these interactions (Badiou, 2018a, p. 78). In other (Badiou’s) words: by thinking in accordance with the intuitionistic logic, “the ‘there’ of being-there as relation” (2015a, p. 180), the sophist can only perceive appearances as they are given, which leads him to deny anything that would not be possible to account for within the limits of a specific ‘there’. This is why sophistic rejects ontology in favor of what Cassin calls logology: since appearance, like logos, follows a logic that constantly allows for an infinite amount of “excluded thirds”, the sophist incorrectly (according to Badiou) draws the conclusion that being as such is beyond our grasp. Furthermore, the sophist’s attachment to the world of appearances explains why this figure appears to be external to philosophy (Bosteels, 2011, pp. 28–29). By denying any access to being, the sophist becomes incapable of thinking the event, the irruption of a possibility for the new, the moment when “the rational or conventional laws of this world are interrupted” (Badiou, 2008, p. 1878). However, we should not conclude that Badiou therefore portrays the sophist as impotent. Rather, when focusing on the ambiguity inherent in every exemplary image of the universal, the sophist also puts on display the emptiness of truth itself, a crucial insight

forcing philosophy to limit the hubris that accompanies its quest for a final truth (Badiou, 2017a, p. 11). Therefore, the philosopher cannot, as Aristotle suggests, reply to the sophist's attacks by simply castigating this figure for questioning truths such as the need to love one's parents or to honor the gods (*Topica*, 105a 8-9), because there is always a multiplicity of examples that might be used to disprove any attempt to formulate such a substantial truth. Faced with this problem, the philosopher must resist two temptations: both the temptation to completely exclude the sophist in order to save truth and the temptation to side with the sophist and completely abandon it. Instead, we should read Badiou as insisting on the task of thinking both the classical logic of the true event and the reformist version of sophistic logic, as two different modes of relating to being as such, even though the sophist denies any possibility of accessing it. But as soon as we move into the potentiality of the event, we encounter the anti-philosopher, the third character added by Badiou to the Platonic duality of sophist and philosopher.

3. Badiou's Anti-Philosopher

While the sophist constituted Plato's main rival for the position of wise man, Badiou complicates the already ambiguous distinction between these two figures by adding to it a third: the anti-philosopher. And since Badiou has not laid out the relationship between the three in any detail, their potential differences remain a point of contention. While there is a tendency by some commentators to treat the sophist and anti-philosopher as two completely separate figures (cf. Fiorovanti, 2012; Papastephanou, 2020) it is perhaps more common to view them as synonymous (cf. Bosteels, 2008; Feltham, 2008, p. 124), not least since even Badiou himself has referred to two of his exemplary anti-philosophers – Nietzsche and Wittgenstein – as sophists (cf. 2015b, p. 111, 2011, p. 116). Both these readings can mainly be explained by the shift of emphasis in Badiou's work, moving from the earlier focus on the figure of the sophist in, for instance, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, to that of the anti-philosopher (especially with his seminars on Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Saint Paul during the first half of the nineties). This allows us to either see these two as completely separate, or as two sides of the same coin. However, it should be noted that even Badiou himself seems to be aware of the risk of anti-philosophy and sophistic collapsing into one another, nicely illustrated by a question that Badiou poses in the seminar on Nietzsche's anti-philosophy. In an attempt to develop a notion

of archi-politics, *the* anti-philosophical notion of politics, he, for instance, asks: “Is every archi-political statement or project by necessity a sophistics in its critical means?” (Badiou, 2015b, p. 111). Questions like this one, which keep appearing at key moments in Badiou’s attempt to sketch the anti-philosophical mode of thought, hint at the existence of a fundamental kinship, but also some significant differences, between the anti-philosopher and the sophist.

Among scholars who have attempted to differentiate between the three figures in Badiou’s thought, the established consensus seems to be that the notion of event occupies a key position. Peter Hallward has, for instance, defined the difference between sophistics and anti-philosophy with regards to their respective relationship to philosophy in the following way: while for sophistics, the rivalry with philosophy revolves around the question of meaning and truth, anti-philosophy is a contender to philosophy in the realm of thinking and being. Sophistics, in other words, represents the assertion of the “unilateral supremacy of meaning” over truth (against which Badiou asserts the “meaningless primacy of truth as the annulment of meaning”) (Hallward, 2003, p. 3). In the case of anti-philosophy, it solves the problem of identity between thinking and being by referencing an inaugural first principle, the world, which resists articulation save for in an approximating way (through, for instance, poetry), against which Badiou sustains “this identity with reference to what happens, with reference to events and the decisions they give rise to” (Hallward, 2003, p. 4). A similar distinction is offered by Justin Clemens and Adam J. Bartlett:

Despite the discursive slippage between the two figures, the anti-philosopher can be identified in contrast to the sophist because rather than imitate the philosopher, rhetorically and institutionally, and from the side of skepticism with regard to truth, the anti-philosopher seeks the means for a deposition of philosophy entirely, predicated in part, not on the inadmissibility of truth per se but on the ‘axiomatic’ contention that truth may be *experienced* (in whatever fashion current) but ‘cannot be thought’. (Clemens and Bartlett, 2012, p. 192)

The fact that the sophist is challenging philosophy on the notion of truth rather than event can be read, as some have (cf. Johnston, 2010, p. 155; Norris, 2012, pp. 488–489), to indicate that sophistics constitutes a lesser (or even completely impotent) rival to philosophy. Badiou’s professed weariness with this figure can be read as a further indication of its lacking potency (cf. Bosteels, 2011, pp. 32–33). Badiou’s reading of Cassin’s *L’Effet sophistique* is here a case in point, as he describes the effects of this exercise

as anesthetizing, citing her in order to once again be “lulled and seduced” by her words (2012, p. 311). Or, as he concludes the reading: “Sophistics is not worth the effort” (2012, p. 318). However, here we should acknowledge that Badiou goes on to redeem Cassin’s work by noting that it is not sophistics that constitute her important contribution, but rather her attempt at “saving Heidegger” (2012, p. 318), and as such, her work can take on the role of antagonistic other against which philosophy can renew itself. But Badiou’s final comment on Cassin once again muddles the clear distinction between the anti-philosopher and the sophist, as it is the attempt “to think being as non-being” that constitutes philosophy’s “anti-sophistic act” (2012, p. 320), meaning that even sophistry seemingly contains some sort of relation to being. To further complicate this, in their co-written book on Lacan’s *L’écroudit*, Badiou names Cassin, next to Wittgenstein and Lacan, as one of the modern anti-philosophers capable of “issuing to philosophy the special challenge of a new object that they say single-handedly dethrones philosophy’s established pretensions, since philosophy has ‘forgotten about’ or dispensed with investigating this object” (2017b, p. 48). Hence, the distinction between truth and being, or impotence and event, ultimately falls apart.

A simple (and perhaps sophistic) counterargument against Badiou would be to claim that the ambiguity on his part in fact is unavoidable: as he exemplifies the sophist or the antiphilosopher, either with a concrete figure from the history of philosophy (e.g., Gorgias, Saint Paul, Rousseau) or with a set of statements or doctrines (e.g., ‘there is no truth’, ‘nothing exists’, ‘the breaking in two the history of humanity’), each exemplar of the notion will get caught up in the contradictions of self-referentiality. As such, when attempting to make the claim that Wittgenstein is an anti-philosopher, Badiou will inevitably encounter aspects of the former’s thought which escapes the anti-philosophical label, inevitably leading him to conclude that Wittgenstein, especially in his later work, “slides from anti-philosophy into sophistry” (2009, p. 540). Even Lacan, according to Badiou not only the foremost anti-philosopher but also a thinker whom, it is often noted, he never accuses of sophistry, has explicitly associated his own psychoanalytical teachings with both anti-philosophy and sophistics (Lacan, n.d.). Thus, one could claim that Badiou, with the relation between these figures, arrives at the limit of exemplarity itself, while also illustrating the futility of his quest for universality and truth in the event. This critique of Badiou’s anti-philosophical brandishing of everyone “from Gorgias to Wittgenstein” has also been expressed by, for instance, Barbara Cassin, depicting this move as “a

pure product of philosophy, one that philosophy will present as always already having a structuring effect” (2017, p. 40). In other words, the will to point out the anti-philosopher or the sophist is only an expression of the universalist tyrannical inclination defining philosophical thought from Plato and onwards. However, these objections lead us straight back to Badiou’s critique of Cassin and the “*easiness* of the sophistic ‘solution’ that philosophy rejects” (2012, p. 315). The choice, as he puts it, is not ultimately one between the already given (and therefore true) meaning of a term (which would allow us to eventually reach the final distinction between these figures), and a sophistic relativism claiming that the problem of the exemplar is simply arising from the performative nature of language. To accept this is to succumb to “[t]he temptation of blissful sleep on the bed of rhetoric” (Badiou, 2012, p. 312). This critique, once again, exhibits the limit inherent to intuitionistic logic, as it remains caught in the fluctuations of meaning.

4. The Logics of Exemplary Figures

As already implied, the difference between the sophist, the anti-philosopher, and the philosopher should rather be sought in Badiou’s understanding of logic, more precisely in the three forms of negation – classical, intuitionistic, and paraconsistent – as these should be “deployed as an immanent characteristic of possible universes” (2015a, p. 177). So, if sophistics follows intuitionistic logic and philosophy follows its classical counterpart, anti-philosophy follows the mode of paraconsistent logic, accepting the rule of the excluded third, but not the law of contradiction. In his text on the three negations, Badiou writes:

The lesson is that, when the world is intuitionistic, a true change must be classical, and a false change paraconsistent. So the relationship between law and event is intelligible only if we clearly distinguish the three different meanings of negation. A truth, as a set of consequences of a change, is certainly transgressive in a classical context. But if the context is intuitionistic, the world continues with the same general laws, with some differences in their application. And if the context is paraconsistent, the change is only a fiction. (2008, p. 1883)

Hence, the sophist exclusively approaches the event as something that takes place within an already given world of minor differences, where change is prevalent since every example ultimately fails. When negating the opposite, the sophist only acknowledges the creation of a hybrid (the not-non-dog of Plato becomes Cassin’s wolf-dog, or the not-non-philosophy

becomes Philostratus' philosophical rhetoric), thereby reducing any potential event to the constant and rule-bound play of ambiguities and slip-pages in the given world (which, without the existence of truth, can never establish any hierarchy between its elements). The anti-philosopher, on the other hand, (unsuccessfully) joins the philosopher in a quest for truth in the event, and the failure of this figure, as Badiou points out in the seminar on Nietzsche, can be captured in what he calls the six statements of anti-philosophy, opposed to the six statements of his own philosophy. To summarize these differences, we might say that anti-philosophy, at least in its modern form, is primarily concerned with (i) the limits of what we might call 'the prison-house of language', and (ii) the instigation of the "fatalist act". Together, they foster (iii) a mode of thought focused on the rejection of ontology, logic, and the ideals of an appropriate or corresponding language, as well as a commitment to the critique of power relations inscribed in language, a mode of "intense fiction" or artistic thought, and the furthering of a notion of "life" or *il y a* which remains beyond the walls of this prison. Anti-philosophy always attempts to reach or convey this outside and tries to achieve its fatalist act through an artful or poetic style intended to invoke this realm rather than imposing on it a specific language. As a result of this, anti-philosophical thought can be defined as a form of impotent revolutionary spirit (Badiou, 2015b, pp. 155–158). Exemplary of this is Badiou's repeated return to the paraconsistent logic of Nietzsche's claim that his thought will be "breaking in two the history of humanity", an impulse which ultimately proves impotent as the name Nietzsche, the exemplary exemplar, is supposed to constitute both the instigation of a revolutionary break, the cut itself, and that which has to emerge afterward, organizing the new order. The proper name, the hallmark of anti-philosophy according to Badiou, is therefore an example which is, at the same time, event and non-event, "reaffirmation returns to a first affirmation: the act by which the history of the world is broken in two is legitimated to be under the name 'Nietzsche', of which 'Nietzsche' is already him who created the world" (Badiou, 2015b, p. 106). Thus, it seems as if, at the level of universality, nothing changes, the anti-philosophical event is at the same time a non-event, disclosing the impotence at the heart of the paraconsistent claim of furthering a radical act.

To fully understand this critique, we should now return to Badiou's claims that truth, "a set of consequences of a change, is certainly transgressive in a classical context" (2008, p. 1883). According to Frank Ruda, this

means that we should read the event, not as something new in itself but as “the creation of a new possibility, of a formerly nonexistent possibility” (2015, p. 66). This entails that the event, as this opening for change, must follow a paraconsistent logic, breaking both with classical logic and with the intuitionistic logic of the already instituted world of appearances. The event, in other words, needs to both reject the either-or of the given, which is why it rejects the law of non-contradiction, while also avoiding the temptation of continuing within the multiplicity of appearances that rejecting the law of the excluded third offers. The question for Badiou is then, as noted, how this dialectic between negations is taken up, and, more importantly, how this event, understood as an exemplary situation or as a pattern, can be presented. For the sophist, as we know, it is reduced to yet another example of the constantly ongoing transformation of appearance: the impossibility of a universal truth reduces all change (both radical and rule-bound) to a repetition of the same basic principles, i.e., there is nothing but “effects of discourse” and “that which is impossible to say”, limiting our concerns to the laws guiding their interaction (which is also why Badiou portrays it as boring) (Badiou, 2017a, p. 6). The point is here that being can only be approached “in the pure ‘showing’ of that which is subtracted from language’s grasp” (Badiou, 2017a, p. 6), meaning it can never be made into an exemplary example since the world of appearances does not allow for such distinction. And it is at this point that sophistics and anti-philosophy at times overlap. Badiou writes:

To state it simply, there is in the anti-philosophical subjectivity [...] an element which takes the sides of sophistics, the side which affirms that mathematics does not think. This is an absolutely crucial point. This, once again, does not transform the anti-philosophical position into sophistics, not at all. Why? Because, within the anti-philosophical position, the key remains the question of the act, and the thesis that it could exist here as a radical act is not sophistic in itself. It is really, in a certain way, the extreme opposite of all that which sophistics envisage. The Nietzschean thesis of a radical rupture, in the order of thought, the advent of a Dionysian “yes”, has nothing to do with sophistics. [...] It will matter to us to understand why the anti-philosophical subjectivity of the radical act enters into collusion with sophistics regarding a question as lateral in appearance: is or is not mathematics a thought? (2015b, p. 141)

The sophist and anti-philosopher agree that being remains beyond the grasp of thought, but while the sophist takes this as constituting the limit of thought, the anti-philosopher still imagines an exemplary act capable of

“breaking in two the history of humanity”. But since it can never actually reach beyond this limit, as that would mean imposing on the ‘il y a’ a given structure, anti-philosophy gets caught in what we might call a bad infinity, as it is incapable of halting interpretation, its exemplary act sinks back into the already existing multiplicity of other examples. It is in this sense that anti-philosophy is paraconsistent: at the same time there is, and there is not, an exemplary example, meaning that the “potency of negation” is at its weakest (Badiou, 2008, p. 1879).

5. Is The Populist the Exemplary Rhetorician?

It is tempting to see, in the right-wing populist of the last decade, a modern version of the ancient sophist. Its exemplary arguments are often depicted as not only indifferent but openly hostile to universal truths. Like the sophist, a populist’s only consideration is how to tailor their words to the desires of a specific segment of the population in order to win the argument for their own benefit. These are also defining features of what many have come to call the post-truth era, and it is implied in such a reading that rhetoric, at least partly, is to blame for the situation. The populist figure, in other words, is assumed to be the ultimate expression of a rhetorical epistemology furiously rejecting universal truths. As rhetoric is also, in the contemporary imagination, intimately tied to liberal democracy, this critique of it can be summed up by referencing Margaret Canovan’s popular depiction of populism as “the shadow cast by democracy itself” (1999, p. 3). In other words, mob rule and demagoguery are, as already Aristotle pointed out, the inevitable outcome of any democracy that has lost its commitment to truth and completely given in to rhetoric. But, as Badiou noted in a talk held just after the election of Trump in 2016, the success of populism should not be seen as the continuation or even the extreme endpoint of normality. Instead, he wants us to read it as a symptom of the impending crisis of our existing system. Thus, Badiou’s issue with an interpretation that merges populism and rhetoric is that it focuses exclusively on the epistemological similarities, ignoring, as we have seen, more politically relevant differences of logics. The populist moment should therefore not be read as the ultimate expression of the relativist nominalism indicative of what Badiou calls reformist politics. Instead, populism constitutes an anti-philosophical charge against the existing structure: it promises to redo the current order by instigating a radical act under the auspices of the proper name (Trump’s promise to “drain the

swamp” or Bolsonaro’s aim to put “Brazil above everything, God above everyone”). If we return to our previous examples – Trump’s claim that he would be able to shoot someone in public without losing a single voter and the anonymous person commenting on a fake news story in Sweden – what they seemingly have in common is a rejection of the law of non-contradiction. The comment “*I don’t give a shit that it is fake, it is still fucking horrible*” simultaneously affirms and rejects the truth value of the news story. The popularity of this phrase in Swedish public discourse for a time can be explained by the way in which it perfectly embodied the contradictory nature of the populist logic: the first part of the comment not only expresses the official knowledge (in the fetishized formula it could be formulated as “I know very well that the news story is not true”) but also denies this knowledge in favor of a belief (“but I nonetheless believe in its horrible truth”). The comment is exemplary of a fetishistic logic as it explicitly retains the object (in this case the official knowledge), rather than just directly denying it by, for instance, arguing for the factual or moral truth of the story. A similar case can be made regarding Trump’s statement concerning the loyalty of his voters. In the full statement, Trump begins by lauding his “people”, his voters, as both “so smart” and “the most loyal”. He then claims that these traits explain why his “people” would vote for him even if he had shot someone on a busy New York street. But, as is implied by the confused laughter from the audience at the rally, this statement seems to express a fundamental contradiction: the exemplary scene depicted here reveals his acceptance of the mainstream image of his voters as ignorant, gullible, and blindly devoted to him (“I know very well that my voters are not intelligent”), while the denial of this knowledge (“but I nevertheless believe they are so smart”) remain crucial to the entire Trump phenomenon. It is this contradiction that forces the audience to laugh at its own expense. However, the point here is not, as is common in much of contemporary populism research, to just point out the inherent contradictions of the populist discourse as if it would somehow undermine its persuasive power. Rather, the aim is to highlight how the existence of these contradictions, the anti-philosophical approach to the event, is fundamental to the anti-establishment aesthetics of populist figures. Together with the importance of the proper name and the act, the latter usually in the form of promising to impose the will of the people, the populist constitutes a prime example of how anti-philosophy constitutes a reactionary fantasy promising, after a violent break, that things will be able to go back to a previous (and more prosperous) state. This is

the reason why Badiou, in a presentation two weeks after the election, takes “Trump himself not for a very, very dangerous guy but as a symptom of a bad situation” (2019, p. 68). The symptom that Trump here represents could be the general shift from an intuitionistic to a paraconsistent logic, in which we experience an increasing number of ultimately impotent attempts at ‘breaking in two the history of humanity’. This also brings us back to the original question, namely what Badiou’s challenge to modern sophistics means after the populist moment. A primary conclusion to draw from this reading of the sophist and the anti-philosopher in Badiou’s thought is the clear distinction between a sophistical rhetoric’s intuitionistic logic and the populist paraconsistency. But if this symptom points to a recent turn to paraconsistency in politics, where does this leave rhetoric and its potential to think political transformation? The answer to this question ultimately comes down to the relationship between the three negations in Badiou.

If we accept that the three paradigmatic figures exemplify three different ways of making sense of political transformation, it remains to be seen how these relate to each other. An initial interpretation would perhaps highlight Badiou’s claim that “when the world is intuitionistic, a true change must be classical, and a false change paraconsistent” (2008, p. 1883), suggesting that we are dealing with two false and one true way of thinking change. While philosophy, following classical logic, can think transformation as it is made possible in the event, sophistics only reduces the potential impact of the event by including it in the series of regulated shifts making up the world of appearances. The anti-philosopher, in such an interpretation, does not constitute any real threat, as the contradictory logic of paraconsistency is only capable of thinking a pseudo-event. Although this would mean that the sophistical rhetoric is incapable of combatting populist anti-philosophy, the latter’s paraconsistency would eventually force the impotent act to sink back into the already given world of appearances. But reading the negations as three completely separate contexts, without any inner dialectical movement, would overlook Badiou’s repeated claims that philosophy cannot simply brush over sophistics, but must make sure that the “statements of the sophists” are “included in the dialectic” (2017a, p. 19). As sophistics is associated with the world of appearances and therefore lacks any notion of an act, it can be assumed to exemplify the necessary understanding of a given world. But out of its inability to account for change, due to essentially accepting the Platonic totality of the One, both philosophy and anti-philosophy can arise as the acknowledgment of how any count of the One immediately

splits into the two. This is why only anti-philosophy, for instance in the form of psychoanalysis, constitutes “an independent figure of thought and act” (Badiou, 2017a, p. 246). As the One of the sophists splits into philosophy and anti-philosophy, this also makes truths integral to the two latter: the philosophical fidelity to the possibility of truths proper can only arise as a decision against the background of anti-philosophy’s Nietzschean “local” (Badiou, 2015b, p. 145) or Lacanian “half-said” truths (Badiou, 2018b, p. 20). Only in this way can we understand Badiou’s statement that philosophy is “the heir to anti-philosophy” (2001, p. 10), meaning the philosopher is the exemplary figure of the diagonal move from paraconsistency back to a classical world. This also seems to be, for instance, Ruda’s position, as he describes this ‘philosophical act’ in Badiou as a “determinate affirmation” (2015, p. 23). The issue with reading the *paradeigma* in this way is that it seems to represent the philosopher as the exemplar of truth, as the one who, against the anti-philosophical ambiguity concerning truth (it is only “local” or “half-said”), fully commits to a truth. As such, we risk committing the other great sin of Badiou’s philosophy, namely that of suturing philosophy to a truth procedure. In other words, if we read the pattern as representing a dialectical sequence – beginning with the sophist, who turns into the anti-philosopher capable of opening up the possibility for the philosopher – it seems as if philosophy becomes the locus where a truth begins to emerge. But how can the philosopher, as a particular exemplar, proceed universally to follow truth in its process from singular to universal? As has been noted in the critique of Badiou in the context of exemplarity, this is impossible as a notion of abstract universality excludes any instance of particularity (cf. Mácha, 2023, p. 31). It thus seems as if, when seen from within Badiou’s own philosophic system, his *paradeigma*, the pattern from which we should be able to distinguish different ways of relating to the event, suffers from the same problem as Plato’s original attempt to separate the sophist from the philosopher: it remains stuck within a particular configuration of appearances. As particulars, they bar any universal sublation, as only a “singularity that is subtracted from identitarian predicates” can constitute a true universal. Given this, the philosopher becomes a paradoxical figure, both a paradigmatic figure in a dialectical relationship with other particulars and a singular universal that decides on the undecidable. In order to save Badiou’s theory of the event, we would therefore need to abandon his depiction of the paradigmatic figures of thought.

As a final point, we could take a brief look at one way that rhetoric could salvage the paradigmatic triad and its critique of modern sophistry. The entire issue of the paradoxical position of the philosopher can, within the paradoxical critique of Badiou, be understood as an extension of his ontology of “incomplete plurality”, against which this perspective suggests we follow one of “inconsistent unity” (Livingston, 2012, p. 243). And is it not precisely here, at a potential limit of Badiou’s philosophy, that we also find Slavoj Žižek’s critique of Badiou’s understanding of the relationship between the three negations? Early on during the ‘populist moment’, Žižek noted a transformation by which the paraconsistent logic of anti-philosophy had taken over as the main logic of appearances. While the post-political model, stretching from the end of the *trentes glorieuses* to the first decade of the new millennium, followed the intuitionistic logic, Žižek claimed that the world of appearances now had moved into paraconsistency (2012, pp. 1009–1010). But in such a situation, Žižek claims, the determinate affirmation of philosophy, its return to the classical world, is always-already undermined by a world of appearances in which a choice between “yes or no” constantly slides into a “yes and no”. Because of his ontological commitment, this interpretation becomes impossible within Badiou’s own philosophy. But for Žižek, this is simply an effect of the founding antagonism of any world. Seen from this perspective, each paradigmatic figure constitutes a step in “the enchainment of failures”, wherein we – in the move from the sophist, via the anti-philosopher, to the philosopher – discover what Žižek refers to as the concrete universal: the moment when that which is excluded in each exemplar can be turned into “the element that grounds this universality itself” (2020, p. 8). In other words, the exemplary figures of the event arise because the event in itself is antagonistic. As such, rhetoric is perhaps not required to pick a side, but can – because it finds itself, as already Aristotle noted, at the borderline, distinguishing properly dialectic from harmful sophistic reasoning – join the dialectic transformation by moving from one exemplary figure to the other.

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