Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*

New York: Routledge 2012, 394 pp., ISBN 9780415891912
Routledge Studies in ContemporaryPhilosophy (Book 27)

Reviewed by Anton Syutkin
European University at St Petersburg

Paul M. Livingston and the Paradoxical Basis of Political Critique

Paul M. Livingston was educated as an analytic philosopher. His early books were devoted to subjects that are canonical in this tradition: Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosophy of language, and the problem of mind (Livingston 2004, 2008). In *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*, he takes a decisive step into new territory. The key authors in his latest work include Rudolf Carnap, A.J. Ayer, and Wittgenstein, but also Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou. Over the past decade, a number of French authors (notably Quentin Meillassoux and Tristan Garcia) have attempted to destroy the "iron curtain" between the analytic tradition and the continental, doing so from the continental side of the divide. Livingston makes a similar attempt in *The Politics of Logic*, this time from the analytic side, which is one reason the work is notable and noteworthy. Most significantly, Livingston's treatment of the circle of continental authors is not founded in intellectual curiosity, but in the search for an approach to a subject new to analytic theory—that of the political consequences of various formal and logical constructions. It can be said that in this book Livingston finds himself in the parallax between the continental and analytic traditions of thought, between politics and logic. The continental tradition helps him uncover the political significance of logical arguments in analytic philosophy, while the analytic tradition, in turn, sheds light on the formal structures of continental philosophy's political theses.

Livingston's point of departure is simple enough: politics is a form of organizing the relationship between the social totality and its parts. This implies that any notion of the whole and the part, or of the unity and the

multiplicity, has an inherent political significance, because it already presumes some form of organized relationship between them. Throughout its history, from Parmenides to this day, as long as it has addressed the relationship between the unity and the multiplicity, Western philosophy has been—openly or secretly—nothing but a "politics of logic." In this long history, Livingston highlights a turning point, a peculiar "Copernican revolution," after which contemplating politics as it had been done in the past became impossible. The turning point for Livingston is Cantor's invention of set theory and its further development by Bertrand Russell and Kurt Gödel. The key question posed by Livingston in his book can be formulated as follows: What political consequences can be derived from Cantor's Copernican revolution?

Cantor's set theory was revolutionary because it demonstrated the logical impossibility of a non-contradictory whole, which would encompass all of its parts with no remainder. This whole will always be smaller than its subsets combined, therefore it will always be left with an inside remainder, which it cannot control or account for. Russell goes on to argue that the set of all subsets inevitably ends up being its own subset, which leads to a paradox and a logical contradiction: the whole cannot also be its own part. Gödel comes to the conclusion, on this basis, that either the whole is contradictory and paradoxical, or it is consistent, but incomplete and unfinished, that is, ultimately not truly whole. This way, he offers us a choice between completeness and contradiction on the one hand, and non-contradiction and non-wholeness on the other, excluding a third possibility—the existence of a non-contradictory whole.

Armed with Cantor's set theory, Livingston creates his own classification of the basic directions in contemporary philosophy, which, after Badiou (1998), he calls "orientations." First, he separates pre-Cantorian (i.e., sovereign) from post-Cantorian orientations. Among the pre-Cantorian orientations he counts those that, despite the discovery of set theory, insist on the existence of a non-contradictory whole. To designate these, he uses the Heideggerian term "ontotheology." Representatives of the ontotheological orientation consider the universe's qualities of wholeness and non-contradictoriness to be guaranteed by a supernatural being (God or a substitute thereof), situated beyond the limits of this world and inaccessible to finite human understanding. Livingston also calls this orientation transcendent. Its key characteristic for him is the extrinsic quality of an organizing principle with respect to the language or formal system whose structure it defines. In other words, the organizing principle is mystical, extra-linguistic.

Therein lies the difference between ontotheology and another pre-Cantorian orientation—criteriology. Within the framework of criteriology, the completeness and non-contradictoriness of the world are given by the rules of language (or another formal system), which are set up by the

theorist, who takes an outside position relative to the world. The availability of such rules gives the theorist criteria that allow for the separation of true statements from false ones; however, the truth of the rules might only be guaranteed by other, higher-level rules. This way, a representative of the criteriological orientation in philosophy faces the danger of infinite regression in an attempt to find the ultimate true criterion. Like Heidegger, Livingston counts the entire metaphysical tradition (with the exception of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas) among the representatives of the ontotheological orientation. Discussing the criteriological orientation, he refers primarily to the verificationism of Ayer and Carnap. Thus, from Livingston's perspective, despite all their differences, neither theology nor positivism survive Cantor's Copernican revolution: in the absence of a non-contradictory whole, there is neither room for God nor metalanguage.

Moving on to post-Cantorian orientations, Livingston cannot avoid Badiou's philosophical project, which openly identifies ontology with mathematical set theory. Livingston labels this project the generic orientation, since the problem of the generic set has been key for Badiou at least since *Being and Event* (2007). As the axiom of his ontology, Badiou posits the non-existence of the whole, simultaneously rejecting the God of ontotheology and the formal rules of criteriology. Yet the non-existence of the whole does not make Badiou's philosophy nihilistic: mathematical formalism allows him to not only unmask any metalinguistic pretensions to a non-contradictory wholeness, but also to identify the generic set that is indiscernible within (meta)language. This allows for a given situation to be generically expanded until, at the infinite limit, it reaches its truth. This way, Badiou simultaneously posits the non-existence of the whole and the existence of the truth (which, it can be said, is consistent and non-contradictory). Therefore, according to Livingston, this is simply one of the two alternatives offered by Gödel.

Generic orientation is not the only post-Cantorian philosophical strategy. In the second half of the twentieth century, a whole host of authors belonging to the analytic and continental traditions opted for the other Gödelian alternative—the contradictory whole. Livingston terms this the paradoxico-critical orientation. Outlining its genealogy, he shows how continental structuralism and analytic philosophy both begin with the conception of language as an integral and non-contradictory sign system, and arrive at the acceptance of its paradoxical and reflexive nature. We find evidence of this transition in Deleuze's discourse on the primacy of nonsense (1990), Derrida's focus on the problem of undecidability (Derrida 1998), and Wittgenstein's late texts on language as a form of life (Wittgenstein 1969). These completely dissimilar philosophical projects are united by an understanding of the structural role of paradox, which becomes a critical weapon against any ideological attempts to present language as a harmonic unity.

Livingston concludes by pointing to the political theories behind various philosophical "politics of logic." First of all, he notes the weakness of Badiou's communist hypothesis (Badiou 2015), which he connects to the generic orientation of his thought. If truth in the generic orientation is separated from the contradictory whole, then the communist hypothesis does not have a direct relationship to political economy, which makes it useless for critiquing late capitalism. With regard to the paradoxico-critical orientation, Livingston references Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's radical democracy (2001) and Simon Critchley's anarchist ethics (2007). However, in his opinion, these theories have their drawbacks: Laclau and Mouffe confuse the transcendental contradiction inherent in the social order with empirical contradictions between various social groups, while Critchley takes anarchist ethics to be transcendental ethics in the spirit of Levinas, whereas the demand to recognize the Other must take place within, not outside the social whole. Nonetheless, these theories can serve as a foundation for the future rethinking of political economy in the framework of the paradoxico-critical orientation.

The goal of Livingston's book is to set up the task of renewing political critique in the context of late capitalism, although we cannot say that this goal has been fully accomplished. Applying the Gödelian alternative to politics, Livingston insists on the incompatibility of the communist hypothesis with critical theory. From this perspective, one can either deal with historically disembodied utopian truths, or with a critique of late capitalism that lacks a utopian horizon. In either case, nothing threatens the political status quo. It might be better to talk about how to combine truth and paradox, or the communist hypothesis with a critique of capitalism (and ultimately, the generic orientation with the paradoxico-critical) in a way that does not amount to a regression to pre-Cantorian ideological conceptions of the non-contradictory whole. But this would require a transition from analyzing the "political dimension" of various formal-logical systems to their dialectical transformation.

Translated by Alina Sidorova

Bibliography

Badiou, Alain (1998). *Briefings on Existence*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Badiou, Alain (2007). *Being and Event*. Trans Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.

Badiou, Alain (2015). *The Communist Hypothesis*. London: Verso.

Critchley, Simon (2007). *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London: Verso.

Deleuze, Gilles (1990). *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1998). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe (2001). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
Livingston, Paul M. (2004). *Philosophical History and the Problem of Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Livingston, Paul M. (2008). *Philosophy and Vision of Language.* New York: Routledge.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1969). *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Vol. 6 (2018) stasis No. 1