



Sapere Aude

THE WOOSTER JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

VOLUME V 2012

A Badiouian Notion of Normativity

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I. INTRODUCTION

Political realism arises amidst political philosophy that justifies and is docile within the trajectory of politics^{xxx} as it is. In this sense, realism can first be understood as reactionary – its first task is to explain *why* it must diverge from what is. Realism proposes a new way of thinking about how politics should be practiced, suggesting a realistic foundation for action in opposition to idealistic motivations. While political realism or real politics is a stimulating way to think about politics as a whole, this realm of thoughts, still developing, harbors deficiencies which should be addressed to strengthen it. The project of this paper, then, is to make a contribution to political realism which enhances its validity as a body of work. French philosopher Alain Badiou makes an important contribution to political realism. I show that Badiou, though he never specifically states that he is a political realist, does in fact align with this school of thought. Furthermore, in this paper I argue that Alain Badiou's concept

of the event creates a foundation for normative judgments that fills a corresponding gap in prominent works of political realism. This Badiouian notion of normativity provides part of the answer to the question, "how does political realism allow for normative judgments?" because it creates a foundation for normative judgments which avoids those criticisms that political realists present concerning the foundation for normativity in politics today.

II. WHAT IS POLITICAL REALISM?

In what follows, I will show how Alain Badiou is a political realist and how his work can supplement political realism. First, however, we must understand the specifics involved in political realism itself. Political realism, expanded on by many contemporary philosophers such as Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams is most succinctly labeled and defined by Geuss in his 2008 book *Philosophy and Real Politics*.^{xxxi} In this book, Geuss intentionally lays out the project of political realism. Here, he describes four theses useful to understanding the basic premises of the movement.

First, he says that politics should be realist by focusing not on how things "ought" to be, but instead the *realities* of

occurrences, social situations, and human motivations. In this sense, politics should not begin with an envisioning of a Utopian possibility of how a perfect political world looks or is structured, or the individual ends of people living in such a Utopia. Instead, it should focus on the reality of the present and how things *are*. This means the tangible evaluative aspects of a state, the economic situation, the place of a state internationally, and so forth. Second, Geuss asserts that politics should be oriented toward actions instead of beliefs. Rather than orient politics toward reflecting or responding to beliefs—such as ideologies or religions—of people or groups, political interactions should be products of the actual occurrence of a specific action. In this way, politics can be realist – by responding to the tangible and deducible truths of an action rather than the beliefs or perceived beliefs behind it. For example, if a totalitarian government takes an international political action, a democratic government should not respond with retribution because of a supposed fundamental ideological disagreement between totalitarian regimes and democratic ones, but rather should evaluate the action for what it is and for its repercussions. Third, politics should be viewed as “historically located.” In this sense, political action is a product of its dynamic context and unique situational location in the landscape of time. Thus, politics is not dependent on any assumed eternal truths, but rather its

historical and situational truth. This is important because it is different from the current origins of politics, on which I will soon elaborate. The final thesis of political realism is that the practice of politics is the practice of an “art” or “craft”^{xxxii} rather than the application of science. This means that politics requires imagination and skill: it should be viewed as an inventive process of decision making to seek a positive outcome. As such, there is not any definitive correct response to an action based on tradition or some set of guidelines on how to act or how one should vote. Geuss calls this the “ability to act in a flexible way” with “forms of judgment that cannot be easily imparted by simple speech.”^{xxxiii} Political responses aren’t calculable, formulaic responses that respond to a previous framework – they require a more acquired and creative finesse. A correct response is one that is inventive and takes into account the previous three stipulations of realism: the reality of a situation, the action that occurred which itself demands action, and the historical locality of an event.^{xxxiv}

These stipulations depict a tidy picture of the common threads of political realism that characterize the pillars of the movement. However, while these develop a useful picture of what political realism *is*, there exists a potentially perilous gap in what is *not* included in integral texts that establish realism, a gap that leaves this supposedly “realistic” tradition utterly

without possibility to be reality beyond theory. The gap exists in a lack of bases for judgment that political realism allows. This deficiency is detrimental because an acknowledged source of how political decisions are made and of what should motivate political action determines the legitimacy of political action. Political realism criticizes current sources of legitimation as unfounded, as based on archaic and fallible notions of what is right. Without any assertive work of what politics can look like, realism risks being taken only as critical work when it has, I argue, the potential to create its own concept of how to judge what is good.

III. LIBERALISM

The “sources of legitimation” which realism critiques are those of liberalism, in which legitimation is founded [upon] abstract moral notions. This can be summarized as political moralism,^{xxxv} suggesting that the practice of politics (in liberalism) is *preceded* and guided by a notion of what is right and of what morals should be upheld in politics. A general schema of moralism is created and applied regardless of the situation. As Bernard Williams says, this “moral obligation”^{xxxvi} actively undermines the reality of lived experience, instead relying on some assumed functional system of what “should be”.^{xxxvii} Whether this stems from a religious viewpoint or from a Kantian notion of the universality of morals, deducible through a universal quality of reason possessed by

people, this moral framework of sorts guides the practice of politics today, a practice which I will refer to henceforth as liberalism. The term ‘liberalism’ in this context does not refer to American or other political parties, but rather the system as a whole.^{xxxviii} In this system, the source of legitimacy for political action is a universal appeal to morality with a dialogue of how people should be regarded and of what is impermissible in politics. A material example of this is in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”^{xxxix} set forth in 1948 by the United Nations. This document asserts in its preamble that humans have “inherent dignity”^{xl} and that human beings are “endowed with reason”.^{xli} Such a dialogue assumes that normative judgments are made as a product of reason. If, as the Declaration says, all humans are “endowed with reason,” then this reason leads to the conclusions of rights and equality asserted in the Universal Declaration. This offers legitimacy, if believed, to a liberal framework – actions that the United Nations take aim to uphold these rights. This moral framework for judgment provides the normative foundations on which liberalism is accepted.

IV. NORMATIVITY

An evaluative assertion of what “should be” is a normative statement, for the purposes of this paper. Principally, normative statements are those which prescribe value to something. A value is a

subjective characteristic like ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as opposed to an objective characteristic; something that is determinately factual. For example, the statement “people should not steal” is a normative statement because it assumes that stealing is inherently wrong in some way – it is overlaid with implications of detracting from community trust and negatively affecting the community as a whole. However, a statement such as “stealing can legally be punished” is not a normative statement because this is a true and factual statement which offers no judgment. The normative element of the statement is thus that which attributes meaning to action. Though there are different applications of the term “normative,” I am only concerned with that which relates to normativity in politics – for example, the question of what makes a law good or bad. An assertion of what is right is a normative assertion, so creating a moral framework of how politics should be based on aforementioned sources such as the presumed inherent equality of people is a normative action. Realism disputes the legitimacy of this moral framework of liberalism.

It forsakes this framework for a situational interpretation and understanding of how politics does and should operate, as I previously explained. How then, without these traditional bases of what is right, can we determine what constitutes a *good* political outcome? If realism challenges these notions, it must replace them with its

own answers to the questions “what should the craft of politics seek to achieve? how can a political action be determined as good or legitimate?” Without any conception of what constitutes a political action as good, right, or legitimate, politics has no accountability; it needs some source of normativity with which to evaluate what is right. Political realism offers no outright means to evaluate exactly what constitutes political success. As I previously explained, political realism also deprives politics of these traditional means of judgment, challenging the legitimacy and relevance of beliefs that form judgment. Without a structure of what is good, of how and toward what end judgments should be made, political realism as a generalized movement lacks anything but critical capabilities. Herein lies the problem of normativity which I seek to address through Alain Badiou. To prove Badiou’s concept a realist one, I first will address how he is a realist; a characterization that applies to him though he does not ever explicitly claim it.

V. HOW IS ALAIN BADIOU A POLITICAL REALIST?

The first element in Badiou’s development as a realist is his rejection of current enactments of politics (liberalism), a divergence that is reflected similarly by the qualities of political realism as was previously explained. In his 1993 book *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*^{xlii} (which I will hereafter refer to as

Ethics), Badiou rejects notions and current enactments of politics. For Badiou, countries that subscribe to liberalism are called “western”^{xliii} – these are countries of parliamentary democracies and democratic republics, especially the United States, Britain, and his own country, France. Specifically, he condemns those organizations which enforce a world order in which western countries invade and blockade non-western countries in the name of human rights, and calls for the dissolution of NATO.^{xliv} He says that the moralism pervading these actions and organizations stems from the attempt to maintain the status quo in which the United States and other such western countries reign.^{xlv} His criticism of liberalism certainly reflects that aspect of political realism which seeks to diverge from current liberalism. Just as realism calls for political actions to be based on the reality of an action rather than a belief behind the action, Badiou criticizes the West for punishing any difference of non-liberal or western countries not necessarily because of its threat, but because of the difference in beliefs which is perceived as “evil.” He criticizes this “ethical ideology”^{xlvi} as a system of unfounded and in reality sinister principles. Such an ethical ideology is in this context the equivalent of “political moralism” as it was previously explained – it represents the existence of an ethical framework that shapes political action in liberalism. For

Badiou, “ethics” is a system of principles of which, in current Western Liberal incarnations, he rejects but subsequently replaces with his own realm of ethics – an “ethic of truths”.^{xlvii}

Badiou wishes to establish that in reality the ethical ideologies of liberalism amount to nihilism. This nihilism, which Badiou speaks of, stems from his diagnosis of current politics as reactionary. For Badiou, ethics in its current usage relates to the maintenance of so called “natural rights” like those associated with the Universal Declaration which seek to avoid negative consequences—that which is labeled by western countries to be “evil”^{xlviii}—rather than to create good. Normative political judgments in an ethic of ideologies in this sense are based [on] what is deemed evil. They are not creative in prescribing a ‘good’ answer to a political question, but instead are resigned to dodge what is ‘bad.’ He claims that the ethics of liberalism seek solely to avoid death – rights in this sense are not rights *to*, but in fact protections *from* what Liberal dialogue labels as evil. For example, a dialogue of transcendent human rights is in place not to enable people to truly live justly and strive toward progress, but rather to prevent that which is deemed evil – evil being anything which challenges the Western dominated world order. Badiou condemns this “rights” dialogue as a product of states and power rather than the product of actual reason; it is “overlying

unthought with mere humanitarian prattle”.^{xlix} He calls this nihilistic because this conception of how politics should construct itself gains meaning only from escaping evil, rather than from creating its own good – resigning political practice to mere avoidance of negativity instead of allowing it the normatively creative powers that Badiou believes it to possess, as I will elaborate. So, Badiou rejects a dialogue of political ethics which claims timelessness and universality based on some unfounded abstraction – the idea of rights as inherent. This direct criticism of liberalism mirrors political realism. In this criticism are the assumptions that rather than based on unfounded abstractions, political legitimation should be situationally and historically true, that instead of ideological assertions, politics should react to what is real and present.

As such, in response to this ethical ideology, Badiou asserts that only “an ethic relative to a particular situation”^l has the possibility of creating its own good, as opposed to a general conceptual framework of ethics. This situational understanding of politics is ultimately what aligns Alain Badiou with political realism. His situational conception of how our ethical judgments should arise relies on the historicity that Geuss so emphasizes as a tenant of realism. Badiou maintains that situations (events) produce ethics on which people can rely and live and make judgments by, as opposed to a moralism

that exists independently of situational difference. This “ethic relative to a particular situation,” then, is an ethic that rises from the particular but proves itself to be part of a greater truth process. This ethic begins in “events.”

A material understanding of what situational politics manifests itself as can be found in Badiou’s discussion of an “event.” From the event, I will show, arises a foundation for normativity which legitimizes this situational (realist) politics.

VI. THE EVENT

In *Ethics*, Badiou presents the idea of an event as something that is organically occurring from the reality of the time and from history. Badiou says that the event takes place within an artistic, romantic, scientific, or political realm. There are several key characteristics of an event. It is historically based, transformative, emancipatory, and universal. He gives the example of a new development in science such as Albert Einstein’s 1905 texts as an event in that it influenced all that came after and changed the way that people thought about physics.^{li} The texts were historically based in that Einstein’s developments could not have arisen without the work of his predecessors; transformative in that physics could no longer be practiced as it had before Einstein’s developments; emancipatory in that these developments freed the science from the bounds of knowledge that had previously existed;

and universal in that any person who saw Einstein's developments could reflect the truth found there in their future relations to physics.

So, an event in the *political* sense is historically based in that it stems from the political, social, and economic conditions that demand it. It is a genuine occurrence that is transformative as a "positive prescription of possibilities"^{lii}: *normative* possibilities to create truth, which cast all that comes after in the light of this truth that it produces (a concept which I will soon expand). These normative possibilities make a political event emancipatory – it frees the future from ideas of the past and does not simply react to conditions (as does liberalism), but creates the possibility for new answers to political questions. Badiou talks about how the event turns an object (of everyday occurrence) into a subject (of faithfulness to the event): a victim into an immortal in their part of something infinite. A political event is emancipatory because of its creation of possibility which frees normative judgments from whatever falsely derived, baselessly moralist constraints by which they were first held. It emerges from circumstances of normality as difference. If what is everyday is the particular for individuals that experience it, then an event is different because of its possibility for universality. It allows more than particular experiences; it is available for all who experience it (whether directly or indirectly).

As such, the event is a foundation for normativity. Its creation of possibility is, in other words, a creation of what is good and of what should happen. It is an innovative manifestation of truth to which people find themselves committed. This commitment or faith to the event means that everything after the event is illuminated by the event itself. A specific normative judgment is made, then, within the light of the event; a guide to which decision a person should make at a given time can be taken from the truth created by the event. Badiou says that while the event does not create reality, it creates a multitude of possibilities.^{liii} These new possibilities created by political events are possibilities of *how* to proceed in politics, dictated by normative decisions which, though particular to situations, are thought according to the event. Badiou writes that an event "resonates"^{liv} with the world. This "resonance" is inclusive of anybody who wishes to subscribe to the event. In this context, an event is more than the physical demonstration of a protest or a transformation of the government. Rather, the event is the all-encompassing utter deviation from what was, which continues to perpetuate the truth it generates. The truth, I will now explain, *is* the universal – a source for normativity.

An event both *is* and *provides* the answer to a question of what should be done. This answer is eternal and legitimate in that it produces faithfulness to it which

carries on past just the event itself, not simply affecting but *shaping* the future in its context. This faithfulness is what he calls a “truth process”^{lv} of the event.^{lvi}

VII. TRUTH

Truth processes are part of the Event, and are important because the Truth of an event is what allows it to be a source of normativity – a connection which knowledge of what truth processes are in this context will establish. Truth processes, according to Badiou, are the “real process of fidelity to an event”^{lvii} which determines the truth of the event itself – the event is validated by this truth procedure. The subject who experiences an event such as a revolution or who sees this event as genuine is now an agent of the truth that the event produces – they are part of a universal and must remain faithful to the event, and truth is in this enactment of faith to an event. Faith is enacted *by* making normative judgments with respect to the event. So, subsequent to the event, fidelity is that which separates simple violent protests from a revolution, or an erotic fling from the true love of a defining romantic encounter. The event is an utter break from what was, and the fidelity “compels the subject to invent a new way of being and acting in the situation” in the light of the event. This new way of being means, put simply, making normative judgments in the light of the event.

In short, truth processes are universal-ity manifested. An event is a window re-

vealing truth (singularity); universality is this singularity of truth, formed into action through the true occurrence of an event. A truth process continues this universality. A truth process is not fidelity to the dictated fruits of an event like a constitution or declaration, but rather the elements of the event itself – the revolution that produced the constitution. This is what allows for normative judgments within politics itself; political action is taken with respect to the truth produced by the event. Political universalism relies on the fidelity to an event. Political decisions which are not part of a truth process to this event deny and betray the truth that was realized by the event. A “good” political decision is made in this fidelity. This is normativity – a value judgment or normative decision is legitimized by its faithfulness to the conditions of truth that the event offers. Thus, normativity is a product of the event.

In summation, the following stipulations can be made. The event is the illumination of truth, which occurs because of the historically based situation that a state is in. Truth processes are the fidelity to this truth. Truth is universality. Therefore, there is a possibility for all to experience fidelity to an event. Political decisions, which are by nature normative because they deem one action better than another, are made with regard to the event; they are the enactment of a truth process. The normative source of these political decisions is legitimized *because* of its universality;

what is a good decision in this sense is good universally, though in its historical location.

VIII. HOW IS THIS REALIST?

This conception of normativity is realist. There may seem to be a contradiction between the historically located or situational nature of politics and the universality that legitimizes normative judgments from politics as I have described them. This, however, is a false contradiction because the event which creates this basis for normative judgments is itself a situational occurrence. While the truths which stem from the event are universal in that they have the ability to “resonate” with anybody, they only can be realized within a historical locality. Political actions respond, in this way, not to what “ought to be” as with liberalism, but to what *is*; an event occurs at a specific location in a historical context to produce answers in its wake. Normativity as a product of the event is created in response to actions (such as a revolution) rather than beliefs (such as supposed “self evident” truths). Additionally, an event’s universality means that it must be accessible to anybody; while beliefs are specific and often culturally or religiously exclusive, the truth of an event is accessible to anybody who subscribes to it. Specifics laid out in a constitution are supposed to be timeless, but political judgments in response to an event (while universal in

their fidelity to truth) are able to continually be situational responses based in singularity to infinitely different happenings. Badiou writes that politics is “intrinsically required to declare that the thought that it is, is the thought of all.” This means that the nature of politics as a realm of decision making for a whole requires that these decisions have universal bases for decision making. The situational location of the event allows for this universality and for a historically located context that responds not to ethical ideologies, but instead creates its own ethic of truths.

IX. TUNISIA/EGYPT

A current example of an event of this sort which Badiou has written about is the ongoing revolution in Egypt and much of the Middle East collectively known as the Arab Spring. The self-immolation of a man in Tunisia almost a year ago sparked riots, revolution, and protests. Three governments have been forcibly overthrown and several leaders have stepped down because of pressure from the public. The Egypt and Tunisian revolutions can be spoken of as events concretely if tentatively. They are events with the ability to produce normativity, or possibly one singular event, for several reasons.

First, the revolutions arose because of the context these countries were in which left a majority of the populace subject to police and government corruption. The event is **historical** in this sense.

They are **transformative** in that they have created the possibility for change and provided answers to seemingly insoluble questions without the state – the solutions that revolutions provide are completely new in this sense – solutions that hold normative legitimacy because of the event itself. The revolution in Egypt continues as forty-two people were reported to have been killed last month in protests regarding how slow reform is – the people of Egypt will not accept the military regime simply because it is different from the old regime – they demand something new. As elections take place, political parties formed for the revolution win votes and previously staunch parties like the Muslim Brotherhood vow to make coalitions that will represent the actual needs of the people.^{lviii} These new solutions create uniting sources of normativity because of their accessibility. Legitimation for politics found in religion doesn't have the possibility of being normative for all because of its exclusivity, while the truths of how things *should be* found in the event can be universally applicable, allowing subsequent normative political decisions their requisite legitimacy.

The revolutions are **emancipatory** in that they remove constraints and allow for new political developments. Some – probably a majority – of western press says that this move toward emancipation from the government and the specific demand of liberty that is a product of revo-

lutions is a result of a desire to be the West. However, while a desire to 'be the west' (which Badiou calls "western inclusion"^{lix}) would end in elections and a government that conform to western liberal ideas, as of yet Egypt and Tunisia have aspired beyond this. Broadly, their wish for liberty is not liberty as the abstract ideal of the west, but a wish for liberty because they have been stifled by despotism. This can be read as emancipatory politics. The normative ideal of liberty is legitimized because it is based in the truth of the event. As such, this ideal of liberty is realist because it is historically based, situationally produced and based not on specific beliefs but on the action of the event. Through the "Arab Spring," the emancipation of a Badiouan event should be understood as realist.

Finally, the revolutions are **universal** because they are, in Badiou's terms, the "common creation of a collective destiny."^{lx} Not only is this seen within the countries by the popularity (though not uncontested) of the uprisings, but it is affirmed by the breadth of civil uprisings throughout the Middle East. They "prescribe new possibilities"^{lxi}, which gives them international value as a creative force, rather than providing legitimation in their search to avoid evil and dethrone ineffective leaders. The truths stemming from the revolution will influence the normative decisions that these countries make in moving forward as they live in

their fidelity to the event, as well as the moving forward of people who have been captivated by them. It is interesting to note that “the protester” was recently named Time magazine’s “person of the year”.^{lxii} This may, in some way, reflect the universal value that such radical events hold. While not all people are protesters, the role of such is universally appealing to those whose eyes are opened to the need for such action. In a time of complacency with domination by western liberalism, some nagging truth which begs revealing through an event gains realization through the protester. This universal appeal is, again, the legitimacy that normative political decisions require: a legitimacy lacking in liberalism but possible through realism.

This is a tangible contemporary example of a realist event. The development of truth through fidelity as such can be charted as history, created in Egypt, Tunisia, and increasingly throughout the world. We can now say that Badiou as a proponent of political realism has a unique contribution to the movement in his conception of the event as illuminating the universal. In this lies a realist foundation for normativity.

^{xxx} For the purpose of this paper, the term “politics” encompasses the actions of a state on the domestic and international level. Any actions which are part of this, whether on the part of individual political actors such as politicians or on behalf of a larger group of

people such as voters or a political body, are part of politics.

^{xxxii} Geuss, Raymond. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 16.

^{xxxv} The four stipulations I lay out are from Geuss, p. 13.

^{xxxvi} This language is from: Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California, 1993. Print. The entirety of the origin of Williams’ language is not within the scope of this paper. However, this language is useful to and fits uniformly into the framework of liberalism rejected by Geuss and Badiou.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, p. xix.

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*

^{xxxix} Which applies to mainly to so-called western and often parliamentary democracies.

^{xl} United Nations. General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948. *United Nations*. Web. 29 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>>.

^{xli} *Ibid.*, Preamble.

^{xlii} *Ibid.*

^{xliii} Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London: Verso, 2001. Print.

^{xliiii} *Ibid.*, p. lv.

^{xliv} *Ibid.*, p. lvi.

^{xlvi} In certain ways, culturally and economically, but primarily and most importantly militarily.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, p. lvi.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, p. 41.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, p. 13.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, p. 41.

^l *Ibid.*, p. 23.

^{li} *Ibid.*, p. 42.

^{lii} *Ibid.*, p. 31.

^{liii} Alain, Badiou. "Tunisia, Egypt: The Universal Reach of Popular Uprisings." *Lacan*. 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.

<http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1031>.

^{liv} *Ibid.*

^{lv} *Ibid.*, Ethics., p. 22.

^{lvi} It is not in the scope of this paper to provide defense of the event from its popular criticisms, i.e., those which point out historical occurrences such as the holocaust as possible events. Badiou has devoted part of his book to this project. However briefly though, it should be noted that such an event (as ethnic genocide) does not fit the four characteristics of an event as I have defined them. It does not hold the possibility of universality because it is, by definition, exclusive of people (Jews, Poland, Roma, Homosexuals, and so forth). The project of an event is to create possibility, where ethnic genocide rose to eliminate something it considered evil. Additionally, the fidelity to such events does not remain post the action itself.

^{lvii} *Ibid.*, p. 42.

^{lviii} Information here found at BBC. BBC. Web. <bbc.co.uk/news>.

^{lix} Erdem, Cengiz. "Alain Badiou on Tunisia, Riots & Revolution « Wrong Arithmetic." *Wrong Arithmetic*. Web. 23 Dec. 2011. <http://wrongarithmetic.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/alain-badiou-on-tunisia-riots-revolution/>.

^{lx} *Ibid.*, Tunisia.

^{lxi} *Ibid.*, Ethics., p. 31.

^{lxii} Wednesday, Kurt Andersen. "The Protester - Person of the Year 2011 - TIME." *Breaking News, Analysis, Politics, Blogs, News Photos, Video, Tech Reviews - TIME.com*. Web. 23 Dec. 2011. <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373,00.html>.

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