

Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism? (Part II)²³⁶

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The Real Not Only As Cause But Also As Consistency

“We ask materialism to include that which is needed today and of which Marxism has always made its guiding thread, even without knowing it: a theory of the subject.”²³⁷

The sharp tone of Badiou's polemic against Althusser and Lacan no doubt comes as a response to the incapacity of both thinkers to find any significant truth in the events of May '68, while to draw further consequences from these events remains the aim of Badiou's work in the seventies and early eighties. His *Theory of the Subject*, presented in the form of a seminar from 1975 until 1979, with a preface written in 1981 at the time of Mitterrand's arrival to power, is the first massive summary of this ongoing effort.

In the case of Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” is perhaps his only theoretical attempt to register the effects of the revolt, including examples from the world of education as well as the obligatory scene of a police officer hailing a passerby in the street. After his much publicized *Elements of Self-Criticism*, most of Althusser's subsequent work can then be read as a double effort—not unlike the two parts in Badiou's later *Can Politics Be Thought?*—of destruction and recomposition of Marxism, respectively, in “Marx Within His Limits” and “The Subterranean Current of the Materialism of the Encounter.”²³⁸ These final notes change the terrain once more, this time from dialectical

²³⁶ The first part of this paper was published in *Pli* 12, “What is Materialism?”

²³⁷ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, p. 198.

to aleatory materialism, in order to grasp the essence of political events in their purely contingent occurrence, regardless of the so-called laws of historical necessity. One might therefore expect this extremely lyrical inquiry into the materialism of chance encounters, deviating atoms, and aleatory conjunctures to have attuned its author in retrospect to explosive events such as those of 1968 in France. At the end of a long list of examples, however, the greatest manifestation of this watershed year still appears as a non-event: “May 13th, when workers and students, who should have ‘joined’ (what a result that would have given!), pass by one another in their long parallel processions but *without joining*, avoiding at all cost to join, to rejoin, to unite in a unity that no doubt would have been without precedent until this day.”²³⁹ Missed encounter of students and workers, or paradoxical failure on the philosopher’s part to come to grips with the event of their reciprocal transformation?

If Badiou’s Maoist pamphlets are unforgiving in their attack against Althusser, the point is above all to counter those among the latter’s theses on structure and ideology which after the events facilitate the betrayal of students, workers, and intellectuals alike. His *Theory of Contradiction* thus opens on a statement of principle: “I admit without reticence that May ’68 has been for me, in the order of philosophy as well as in all the rest, an authentic road to Damascus,” and the impact of this experience is further investigated in *On Ideology*: “The issue of ideology is the most striking example of a theoretical question put to the test and divided by the real movement.”²⁴⁰ The first booklet then seeks to redefine the fundamental principles of dialectical materialism in a return to Mao’s “On Contradiction” which already served Althusser in *For Marx*, while the second takes aim not only at the latter’s one-sided views of ideology and the subject in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” but also at their alleged rectification in *Elements of Self-Criticism*: “We have to put an end to the ‘theory’ of ideology ‘in general’ as the imaginary

²³⁸ These texts are taken up posthumously, under the apt subheadings of “Textes de crise” and “Louis Althusser après Althusser,” in *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. François Matheron (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1994), vol. I, pp. 367-537 and pp. 553-594. For the importance of these texts, see among others Gregory Elliott, “Ghostlier Demarcations: On the Posthumous Edition of Althusser’s Writings,” *Radical Philosophy* 90 (1998): 20-32.

²³⁹ Althusser, “Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre,” *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques*, p. 584. For a short, slightly bitter criticism of this unfinished text, see Pierre Ramond, “Le matérialisme d’Althusser,” in *Althusser philosophe*, ed. Pierre Ramond (Paris: PUF, 1997), pp. 167-179.

²⁴⁰ Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), p. 9; and Badiou with François Balmès *De l’idéologie* (Paris: François Maspero, 1976), p. 7.

representation and interpellation of individuals into subjects.”²⁴¹ Historicity cannot be reduced to the objective inspection of a structure of dominant or subordinate instances, even if incompleting by an empty place of which the subject is invariably the inert and imaginary placeholder. The transformative impact of an event can be grasped only if the combinatory of places and their ideological mirroring play is anchored, supplemented, and divided by a dialectic of forces in their active processing. Such is, philosophically speaking, the experience of Badiou’s road to Damascus that would forever distance him from Althusser.

While Althusser’s failed encounter remains foreign to the events themselves, Lacan’s open indictment of May ’68 by contrast is far more inherently damaging. Before tackling the university discourse as a whole, Lacan clearly hits a central nerve in the student-popular movement insofar as his accusation of its being an hysterical outburst in search of a new master anticipates in a painful irony the subsequent arguments and apostasies of so many an ex-Maoist turned New Philosopher. At an improvised meeting in 1969 at the newly established campus of Vincennes, in a speech reproduced in *The Obverse of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan thus mockingly provokes his students: “If you had a little bit of patience, and if you wanted my impromptu to continue, I would tell you that the only chance of the revolutionary aspiration is always to lead to the discourse of the master.”²⁴² This criticism, which restages much of the battle between anarchists and party hardliners, if not the ancient struggle between sceptics and dogmatists in their fitting co-dependence, is clearly the unspoken impetus for Badiou’s systematic reply to Lacan in *Theory of the Subject*. To understand this situation is all the more urgent today because Žižek in *The Ticklish Subject* will throw the same Lacanian criticism—of deriving a dogmatic masterly philosophy from a politics of short-lived hysterical outbursts—back at the feet of ex-Althusserians such as Badiou.

After the insights from *Theory of Contradiction* and *On Ideology*, what is then the principal lesson to be drawn, according to Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*, from the political sequence initiated by the events

²⁴¹ Badiou and Balmès, *De l’idéologie*, p. 19. For a more detailed discussion of Badiou’s two early works in the context of a concrete case in literature, namely Borges, see my article “La ideología borgeana,” *Acontecimiento: Revista para pensar la política* 14 (1997): 51-92. Ernesto Laclau discusses and reuses the theses of Badiou and Balmès in his own *Política e ideología en la teoría marxista: capitalismo, fascismo, populismo* (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno, 1978), especially pp. 197-200.

²⁴² See the appendix in Jacques Lacan, *L’envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 239.

of May '68?

The full effect of these events is first of all registered in philosophy as a humbling lesson in dialectics. Even the double articulation of places and forces, or the negation of one by the other, is not quite enough. The dialectic is first and foremost a process, not of negation and the negation of negation, but of internal division. Every force must thus be split into itself and that part of it that is placed, or determined by the structure of assigned places. “There is A, and there is Ap (read: ‘A as such’ and ‘A in an other place,’ the place distributed by the space of placement, or P),” as Badiou writes: “We thus have to posit a constitutive scission: $A = (AAp)$.”²⁴³ Every force stands in a relation of internal exclusion to its determining place. The famous contradiction of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or labour and capital, for example, is only an abstract structural scheme, A vs. P, that is never given in actual fact. Althusser’s argument for overdetermination, of course, already rejected the purity of these contradictions, but his solution was only to move from a simple origin to a complex structure that is always already given; Badiou’s dialectic, by contrast, aims at the actual division of this complex whole. As the history of the twentieth century shows in excruciating detail, what happens actually is the constant struggle of the working class against its determination by the bourgeois capitalist order, an order that divides the proletariat from within. There are notorious contradictions in the midst of the people. “In concrete, militant philosophy, it is thus indispensable to announce that there is only one law of the dialectic: One divides into two,” Badiou summarizes: “Dialectics states that there is a Two and proposes itself to infer the One as moving division. Metaphysics poses the One, and forever gets tangled up in drawing from it the Two.”²⁴⁴

If determination describes the dialectical placement of a force and its resulting division, then the whole purpose of the theory of the subject is to affirm the rare possibility that a force comes to determine the determination by reapplying itself onto the very place that marks its split identity. From the slightly static point of departure $A=(AAp)$, in which p is the index of the determination by P within A so that Ap controls the divided essence of A, or $Ap(AAp)$, we thus get the actual process that both limits and exceeds the effects of determination: $Ap(AAp) \rightarrow$

²⁴³ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, p. 24.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32 and 40. A whole chapter in Badiou’s *Le Siècle* will be devoted to the particularly violent episode of this struggle in the ideological history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, between the defendants of the idea that “Two fuse into One” and the adherents of “One divides into Two.”

A(Ap), or A(Ap). This is without a doubt the single most important moment in all of Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*: a symptomatic twist, or torsion, of the subject upon the impasses of its own structural placement—a process that we will find again, but in a more succinct and potentially misleading formulation, in *Being and Event*. “It is a process of torsion, by which a force reapplies itself to that from which it conflictingly emerges,” Badiou explains: “Everything that belongs to a place returns to that part of itself which is determined by it in order to displace the place, to determine the determination, to cross the limit.”²⁴⁵ Only by thus turning upon itself in an ongoing scission can a rare new truth emerge out of the old established order of things—a truth process of which the subject is neither the origin nor the empty bearer so much as a material fragment, or finite configuration.

Badiou finally suggests that the dialectical process in a typical backlash risks to provoke two extreme types of fallout, or *Rückfall* in Hegel's terms: the first, drawn to the “right” of the political spectrum, remits us to the established order, and thus obscures the torsion in which something new actually took place: $Ap(AAp) \rightarrow Ap(Ap) = P$; the second, pulling to the “left” instead, vindicates the untouched purity of the original force, and thus denies the persistence of the old in the new: $A(AAp) \rightarrow A(A) = A$. What is thus blocked or denied is either the power of determination or the process of its torsion in which there occurs a conjunctural change: “But the true terms of all historicity are rather $Ap(A)$, the determination, and $A(Ap)$, the limit, terms by which the whole affirms itself without closure, and the element is included without abolishing itself.”²⁴⁶ These distinctions then allow the author to propose

²⁴⁵ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, pp. 29-30. One of Althusser's most breathtaking texts, “Le ‘Piccolo,’ Bertolazzi et Brecht,” in *Pour Marx*, is the closest he comes to Badiou's philosophy and theory of the subject, including the false dialectic of melodrama, which opposes the Hegelian beautiful soul to the corrupt outside world, and this extremely condensed version of dialectical time in the process of torsion: “A time moved from within by an irresistible force, and producing its own content. It is a dialectical time par excellence. A time that abolishes the other one,” the empty time without history, “together with the structures of its spatial figuration” (p. 137).

²⁴⁶ Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 30. Badiou illustrates this dialectic with a lengthy excursion into the ancient history of the Christian Church with its twin heresies: “rightist” Arianism, for whom Christ is wholly mortal, pure P; and “leftist” Gnosticism, for whom God is inhumanely divine, pure A. Given this crucial rereading of Hegel's dialectic and the history of Christianity, it is quite surprising to see that Badiou's *Théorie du sujet* is not even mentioned in Judith Butler's recently reissued *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

an extraordinary rereading of Hegel's dialectic—itself in need of a division and not just the resented victim of a wholesale rejection as in the case of Althusser.

The complete deployment of this dialectic also provides us with a key to understand the perceptions of failure and success that put such a heavy stamp on the aftermath of May '68. In fact, both the provocative accusations by outside observers such as Lacan and the contrite turnabouts by ex-Maoists such as Glucksmann remain caught as if spellbound in the inert duel between the established order of places and the radical force of untainted adventurism. The world-famous picture of Daniel Cohn-Bendit during one of the manifestations of May '68, with the student leader smiling defiantly in the face of an anonymous member of the riot police who remains hidden behind his helmet—a picture that eventually will decorate the cover of Lacan's seminar *The Obverse of Psychoanalysis* from the following year—might serve to illustrate this point. Indeed, the contagious appeal and extreme mobilizing force of this image depends entirely on a limited structural scheme in which there appears no scission in the camp of the ironic and free-spirited students nor any torsion of the existing order of things beyond a necessary yet one-sided protest against the repressive State. Althusser's example of the police officer interpellating a passerby in the street remains bound to this dual structure, as might likewise be the case of the definition of politics in opposition to the police in the later work of Rancière. For Badiou, however, this view hardly captures any specific political sequence in its actual process. "There is not only the law of Capital, or only the cops. To miss this point means not to see the unity of the order of assigned places, its consistency. It means falling back into objectivism, the inverted ransom of which consists by the way in making the State into the only subject, hence the anti-repressive logorrhoea," the author warns: "It is the idea that the world knows only the necessary rightist backlash and the powerless suicidal leftism. It is Ap(Ap) or A(A) in intermittence, that is to say P and A in their inoperative exteriority."²⁴⁷ Lacan's accusation thus merely reproduces a face-off between the two extreme outcomes of the dialectical process, without acknowledging the true torsion of what takes place in between.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 60 and 30. In *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), Peter Starr devotes much of his argument to the paralyzing effects of this dilemma and the search for "third way" solutions among members or fellow travelers of Tel Quel. Unfortunately, though, he does not deal with a single text by Badiou.

In view of this acute diagnosis and the elaboration of an alternative materialist dialectic in the remainder of *Theory of the Subject*, there is something more than just awkward in the criticism according to which Badiou's *Being and Event* would later get trapped in a naive undialectical, or even pre-critical separation of these two spheres—being and event, knowledge and truth, the finite animal and the immortal subject. Not only does this criticism systematically miss the point even of Badiou's later philosophy but the whole polemical thrust of his earlier work consists very much in debunking the presuppositions of such critical postures as they emerge after May '68. The almost cynical irony is that Badiou's theory of the subject arrives at this turning point in a rigorous dialogue and confrontation with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which will then become the authoritative point of reference for the criticisms raised against Badiou's later philosophy by someone like Žižek.

With the need to divide the subject in relation to the order in which it receives its place, we still may seem to find ourselves on the familiar grounds of the logic of structural causality, which for Badiou can be summed up in a single statement from Lacan's *Écrits*: "The subject is, as it were, in external inclusion to its object."²⁴⁸ This object can then be read as either the symbolic order itself, following the earlier Lacanian view, or else as the uncanny element that has to be foreclosed if such an order is to gain any coherence at all, according to the later teachings of Lacan. In the first instance, the subject's decentred cause would be the unconscious which is structured as a language; in the second, the subject is the strict correlate of the gap in this structure, the place of which is then held by the piece of the real that is included out and as such embodies the impossible object-cause of desire. Regardless of which reading applies to the object, however, Badiou's theory of the subject hinges on how exactly we understand their dialectical relation of external inclusion—whether as a structural given or as a divided process.

For Badiou, most of Lacan's work stays within the bounds of a structural dialectic which is strikingly similar, as far as its basic operations are concerned, to Mallarmé's poetry. These operations consist, first, in setting up a scene marked by the traces of a disappearance, say a sunken ship or a drowned siren, whose vanishing sustains the whole scene itself. This is the operation of the absent or evanescent cause, which determines the established order of things: "Nowhere placed, the vanished force supports the consistency of all places."²⁴⁹ This vanishing

²⁴⁸ Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 861.

²⁴⁹ Badiou, *ibid.*, p. 81.

cause then produces a chain effect by leaving behind a series of metonymical terms, a white hair or the foam on the surface of the sea, the division of which is the mark of the lack that caused them: “Thus the absent cause is always reinjected into the whole of its effect. This is a great theorem of the structural dialectic: in order for the causality of lack to exert itself, every term must be split.”²⁵⁰ Prescribed by the lack of its object, finally, a subject appears only as the unspeakable vacillation eclipsed in the flickering intermittence between two markings. “The subject follows throughout the fate of the evanescent term, having the status of an interval between the two signifiers, S_1 and S_2 , which represent the subject one to the other,” Badiou concludes: “Whoever wants to declare its substance is a swindler.”²⁵¹

Mallarmé’s poetry thus offers an illuminating exposition of the doctrine of structural causality as developed in the Lacanian school. However, the problem with this doctrine is precisely that, while never ceasing to be dialectical in pinpointing the absent cause and its divisive effects on the whole, it nevertheless remains tied to this whole itself and is thus unable to account for the latter’s possible transformation. “A consistent thought of the vanishing term is the realist peak of the structural dialectic,” which means that there is no temporal advent of novelty: “The logic of places, even when handled by an absolute virtuoso, would be hard put to deliver anything else than the regular, virtually infinite iteration of that which vanishes and annuls itself.”²⁵² For Mallarmé, in the end, “nothing will have taken place but the place itself,” just as Lacan indicates the unsurpassable law that forbids the emergence of the new out of a division of the old: “When one makes two, there is never any return. It does not amount to making a new *one*, not even a *new one*.”²⁵³ Mallarmé’s and Lacan’s structural dialectic in this sense ends up

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 151-152. Badiou will adopt and rephrase this Lacanian definition of the subject, as that which one signifier S_1 represents to another signifier S_2 , in *Being and Event*: a subject is then that which an event E_1 represents to another event E_2 . This goes to show the potentially misleading structural-ontological orientation of this later work, the inevitable one-sidedness of which should be supplemented with the topological orientation of a theory of the subject.

²⁵² Ibid., pp. 115 and 52.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 126 and Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX, Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 79. Following Badiou’s own reading, I have added a double emphasis in my version of this sentence, which is nearly untranslatable: “Quand un fait deux, il n’y a jamais de retour. Ça ne revient pas à faire de nouveau un, même un nouveau.” Cf. Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, pp. 131-

being profoundly idealist according to Badiou. It should be noted that this is not the usual objection against the idealism of the signifier or discourse in the name of some hard referent or concrete human practice. Badiou's argument is rather that idealism consists in denying the divisibility of the existing law of things, regardless of whether these things are ideal or material: "The indivisibility of the law of the place excepts it from the real. To link this exception means in theory to posit the radical anteriority of the rule," he writes: "The position of this antecedence is elaborated in philosophy as idealism."²⁵⁴

After the lesson in dialectics, there thus appears to be an even more urgent need to return to the definition of materialism. The latter, as we saw, is always marked from within by its opponent: "Materialism stands in internal division to its targets. It is not wrong to see in it a pile of polemical scorn," which is why "materialism most often disgusts the subtle mind."²⁵⁵ The first historical target of materialist scorn, in its enlightened form, is the idealism of religion, followed by a second onslaught, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, against the very humanism of Man with which the first materialists had tried to displace God. Nowadays, this antihumanist materialism, which delegates the constituent power to the symbolic structure, or to the big Other, risks in turn to become idealist, insofar as it blocks the production of a new truth of the subject. This is then the idealism to be targeted by a third, contemporary form of materialism: "Linguistic idealism is today the cause of the materialist assault. Which is exactly why the essence of an activist materialism requires, by a Copernican reversal, the production of a theory of the subject, which it once had the task of foreclosing."²⁵⁶

If, for Badiou, Mallarmé and Lacan are two of the four great French dialecticians together with Pascal and Rousseau, then it is also true that their legacy must be divided into its idealist and its materialist tendencies, as happened before with Hegel. In Lacan's case, the dividing line may seem to fall between his earlier and his later work. The determining role of the symbolic order then tends to be idealist, while the persistence of the real guarantees a materialist outlook. "Just as Hegel for Marx, Lacan is for us essential and divisible," Badiou observes: "The primacy of the structure, which makes of the symbolic the general algebra of the subject,

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²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202. An entire segment of this work is thus devoted to a "Retournement matérieliste du matérialisme" (pp. 193-255).

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

its transcendental horizon, is increasingly counteracted in Lacan by a topological obsession, in which all movement and progress depend on the primacy of the real.²⁵⁷ Lacan's inquiries into the real would thus have the greatest political resonance for a materialist philosophy. Several years before Laclau and Mouffe consolidate this reading in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the real is in fact already understood in a political key in Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* so that "if the real of psychoanalysis is the impossibility of the sexual as relationship, the real of Marxism states: 'There is no class relationship.' What does this mean? It can be said otherwise: antagonism."²⁵⁸ Lacan's materialism, from a politico-philosophical perspective, would thus lie in an undaunted insistence on some traumatic kernel of antagonism that fissures every social order.

Upon closer inspection, however, the shift from the symbolic to the real turns out to be a necessary but insufficient condition for a materialist theory of the subject. To recognize in antagonism the real that is the constitutive outside of any society, while a fundamental strategy of the structural dialectic, at best gives us only half of the process by which a political subject is produced, and at worst can actually keep this process from ever acquiring the coherence of a new truth. From the point of the real as absent cause, indeed, any ordered consistency must necessarily appear to be imaginary insofar as it conceals this fundamental lack itself. For a materialist understanding of the dialectic, however, the decisive question is rather whether the real cannot also on rare occasions become the site for a newly consistent truth. In addition to the real as an evanescent cause, we ought therefore to conceive of the real as a novel consistency. Badiou calls the first conception algebraic, insofar as the real is considered in terms of its relations of belonging and foreclosure, while the second is topological, in terms of adherence and proximity. "We thus have to advance that there are two concepts of the real in Lacan, as is adequate to the division of the One: the real of evanescence, which is in a position of cause for the algebra of the subject, and the real of the nodal point, which is in a position of consistency for its topology," with both being required for a materialist theory of the subject: "From the real as cause to the real as consistency we can read an integral trajectory of materialism."²⁵⁹ Lacan's obscure topological investigations, however, are limited by the fact that they remain bound to the constraints of the structural dialectic. For this reason, even his uncompromising insistence

²⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 150-151.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 243-244.

on the real threatens to become contemplative and idealist—as though the end of analysis were the mere recognition of a structural impasse, maybe accompanied by an identification with the remaining symptom of enjoyment, but without the actual process of a subject conditioned by truth.

The line of demarcation between idealism and materialism in Lacan's thought must therefore be drawn through the very concept of the real, splitting its core in order to mark off those aspects that remain tied to a structural lack and those that point toward a torsion, or destruction, of the structure itself. "Our entire dispute with Lacan lies in the division, which he restricts, of the process of lack from that of destruction," Badiou concludes: "Destruction means torsion. Internal to the place, it ravages its spaces, in a laborious duration."²⁶⁰ This violent language in fact only restates the rare possibility, discussed above, of overdetermining the determination, and displacing the existing space of assigned places, while the price to be paid if one seeks to avoid such violence, whether it is called symbolic or metaphysical, is the droning perpetuation of the status quo. True change, or a change in what counts as true, however, comes about not merely by occupying but by exceeding the empty place of the existing structure—including the empty place of power under democracy that seems to be all the rage among so many political philosophers today. Can we actually register any political sequence, though, in the wearying reiterations that democracy is the only regime capable of acknowledging the inherent impossibility that is its absent centre? Or, consider the condition of love: Can any new truth actually emerge in a couple from the sole recognition of the real that is their constitutive impasse? For Badiou, the truth of love or of politics is neither this impasse itself nor its symptomatic outbreaks in a situation of crisis. The formal impossibility of the sexual or social bond, which certainly reveals itself in such a crisis, is at best the site of a possible event, but the truth of a love encounter or a political manifestation consists only in whatever a dual or collective subject makes happen afterwards, on the basis of this event, as being generically applicable to the entire situation. For a truth to take place, therefore, something has to pass through the impasse. "If, as Lacan says, the real is the impasse of formalization," then Badiou suggests, "we will have to venture that formalization is the im-passe of the real," which breaches the existing state of things and its immanent deadlocks: "We need a theory of the pass of the real, in a breach through the formalization. Here the real is not only that which can lack at its place,

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

but that which passes *with force*.”²⁶¹ Surely anchored in the real as a lack of being, a truth procedure is that which gives being to this very lack. Pinpointing the absent cause or constitutive outside of a situation, in other words, remains a dialectical yet idealist tactic, unless this evanescent point of the real is forced, distorted, and extended, in order to give consistency to the real as a new generic truth.

For Badiou, consequently, there are two parts to the theory of the subject in the long aftermath of May '68. The first, dialectical or algebraic half holds that every force is divided by the law of its structural placement: “Every *it* that stands to itself in a relation of distance that is due to the place where it is,” while the second, materialist or topological half accounts for the emergence of a subject out of the forced torsion of its determining law: “It happens, let us say, that ‘*it* turns *I*.’”²⁶² This double articulation is, finally, Badiou’s way of explicating the old Freudian maxim, *Wo es war, soll ich werden*, in such a way that the subject cannot be reduced purely and simply to the impasse of the structure itself, as seems to have become the idealist trend after Lacan.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, though, there are two subjective figures that point toward an excess of the real beyond its placement in the existing law of things: anxiety and the superego. The first signals a radical breakdown, due to the irruption of an overwhelming part of the real, in the whole symbolic apparatus. In this sense, anxiety is an infallible guide for a possible new truth, the site of which is indicated precisely by such failure. “Anxiety is that form of interruption which, under the invasion of the real as too-much, lets the existing order be as dead order,” Badiou summarizes: “We might say that anxiety designates the moment when the real *kills*, rather than divides, the symbolic.”²⁶³ In this way, anxiety is only the revealing counterpart of a violent superego injunction, which constitutes the obscene and unlawful underside of the

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 41. In the Lacanian school, the *passé* describes the end of an analysis when the position of the analysand gives way to that of the analyst. Badiou’s use of the concept in *Théorie du sujet* and *L’Être et l’événement* is clearly inspired by this definition but it is not restricted to the therapeutic situation. Among the numerous references on the topic, I want to mention the remarkable testimonies in the collective volume *La passe et le réel: Témoignages imprévus sur la fin de l’analyse* (Paris: Agalma, 1998).

²⁶² Badiou, *ibid.*, pp. 27 and 59. The two sentences are nearly untranslatable: “Tout ça qui est se rapporte à ça dans une distance de ça qui tient au lieu où ça est” and “Il arrive, disons, que ‘ça fasse ‘je,’” whereby the emphasis falls on the making, or *faire*, of a process, which is not just a *werden* or becoming as in Freud’s original.

²⁶³ Ibid., pp. 172 and 307.

public law. “The superego is related to the law, and at the same time it is a senseless law,” Lacan writes: “The superego is simultaneously the law and its destruction. In this regard, it is the word itself, the commandment of the law, inasmuch as only its root is left.”²⁶⁴ The figure of the superego gives access to that part of non-law that is the destructive foundation of the law itself, but only in order more forcefully to recompose the structural space of assigned places. In conjunction with the barbaric ferocity that serves as its native soil, the superego is a terrorizing call to order that seems almost automatically to fill out the void revealed by anxiety. Between anxiety and the superego, a subject only oscillates in painful alternation, without the event of true novelty, just as the insufferable experience of formlessness without a law provokes in turn the reinforcement of the law’s excessive form. At best, these two subjective figures thus indicate the point where the existing order of things becomes open to a fatal division, but without allowing a new order to come into being.

As early as in his first seminar, however, Lacan himself raises the question whether this analysis should not be extended to include two other figures of the subject: “Should we not push the analytical intervention all the way to the fundamental dialogues on justice and courage, in the great dialectical tradition?”²⁶⁵ For Badiou, who from this point on elaborates what is only a suggestion in Lacan, courage and justice indeed are outmoded names for the process whereby an existing order not only breaks down, gets blocked or is reinforced in its old ways, but actually expands, changes, and lends coherence to a new truth. Like anxiety, courage stands under the dissolving pressure of the real, but this time it is in order to twist the structure at the point of its impasse. “Courage positively carries out the disorder of the symbolic, the rupture of communication, whereas anxiety calls for its death,” Badiou writes: “All courage amounts to passing through there where previously it was not visible that anyone could find a passage.”²⁶⁶ The part of destruction in the figure of courage then no longer provokes the restoration of a senseless law of terror, but instead puts the old order to the test so as to produce an unforeseeable alternative. “Anxiety is lack of place, and courage, the assumption of the real by which the place is divided,” so that now the old non-law of the law gives way to a new law, one which no

²⁶⁴ Lacan, *Le Séminaire I, Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 164-165.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

²⁶⁶ Badiou, *ibid.*, pp. 176-177 and 310.

longer recomposes the archaic fierceness of the superego injunction but rather produces a figure of unheard-of justice. “Justice is that by which the subject’s nodal link to the place, to the law, takes on the divisible figure of its transformation,” Badiou concludes: “More radically, justice names the possibility—from the point of view of what it brings into being as subject-effect—that what is non-law may serve as law.”²⁶⁷

Badiou’s theory of the subject, in sum, ties four subjective figures into a single knot. The first two figures—anxiety and courage—divide the act of subjectivation that marks a flickering moment of destruction, while the other two—superego and justice—split the moment of recomposition that is the enduring work of a subjective process. Any subject thus combines a destruction with a recomposition, following two possible trajectories, or strands, which an integral theory needs to combine. The first strand—from anxiety to the superego—is subordinate to the law of the existing order of places and its founding lack; the second—from courage to justice—actively divides the consistency of the existing order so as to produce a new truth. According to the first strand, which can be called algebraic, a subject fundamentally occupies a position of internal exclusion with regard to the objective structure in which it finds its empty place; according to the second, a subject stands in a topological excess over and above its assigned placement, the law of which is then transformed. In short, a subject insists on being caused by that which lacks at its place, but it consists in the coherence of a forced lack. As Badiou concludes: “The theory of the subject is complete when it manages to think of the structural law of the empty place as the anchoring point of the excess over its place.”²⁶⁸ Lacan’s psychoanalysis only gives us half of this theory, that is, the structural and algebraic strand that remains caught in an endless vacillation between the twin figures of anxiety and the superego, or between the vanishing object-cause of desire and the violent restoration of the archaic law.

A last way to fix the irreducible distance that separates Lacan and Badiou involves a return to ancient tragedy as an ethical source of inspiration behind psychoanalysis. In Freud and Lacan, this source has always been Sophocles, whereas Aeschylus should rather serve as our model of tragedy according to Badiou: “The whole purpose of critical

²⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 277. For a further discussion of this alternative for the sinister future of the Left in the aftermath of 1968, not only in France but also and especially in Mexico, see my “Travesías del fantasma: Pequeña metapolítica del 68 en México,” *Metapolítica* 12 (1999): 733-768.

delimitation with regard to psychoanalysis, as far as its contribution to the theory of the subject is concerned, can be summed up in this question: Why, through Oedipus, has it been so profoundly Sophoclean?"²⁶⁹ If, in the world of Sophocles, Antigone and Creon name the twin figures of anxiety and the superego, i.e., the formlessness of what persists without legal place and the surfeit of form that restores the law as terror, then Badiou's aim in turning to the alternative model of Aeschylus is to find examples of courage and justice in the twin figures of Orestes and Athena, i.e., the interruption of the vengeful law of things and the recomposition of a new legal order. "There exist indeed two Greek tragic modes," Badiou suggests: "The Aeschylean one, the sense of which is the contradictory advent of justice by the courage of the new; and the Sophoclean one, the anguished sense of which is the search in return of the superego as origin."²⁷⁰ Lacan firmly establishes himself in the world of Sophocles while pointing toward its extension by Aeschylus, which is precisely where the theory of the subject must come according to Badiou.

In retrospect Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* can still be said to suffer the effects of several shortcomings, or possible misgivings:

1. Philosophy, in *Theory of the Subject*, still appears to be sutured onto the sole condition of politics. The procedures of art, science, and love—as well as the eternal shadow condition of religion—are already present throughout the book, but they may seem to be mere illustrations rather than conditions in the strict sense, since the subject of truth is defined exclusively in terms of politics: "Every subject is political. Which is why there are few subjects, and little politics."²⁷¹ Later, in *Conditions*, which builds on the new foundations of *Being and Event*, Badiou would correct this statement: "Today, I would no longer say 'every subject is political,' which is still a maxim of suturing. I would rather say: 'Every subject is induced by a generic procedure, and thus depends on an event. Which is why the subject is rare,'" while in *Manifesto for Philosophy* the author concludes: "Every subject is either artistic, scientific, political, or amorous. This is something everyone knows from experience, because besides these registers, there is only existence, or individuality, but no subject."²⁷² If Badiou is soon to write a new theory of the subject as part

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 178. In the final theses of his *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1990), Badiou raises an even more wide-ranging question: Why tragedy? Why not comedy? This brief treatise, moreover, is in many ways the closest relative of *Théorie du sujet* among Badiou's later works.

²⁷⁰ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, p. 182.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 46.

of *Logics of Worlds*, the various figures that open up a subjective space will thus have to be accounted for in each and every condition of truth.

2. Within the condition of politics, *Theory of the Subject* still considers the party as the only effective organizational structure. Badiou has since then abandoned this strict identification of the political subject with the party, which in all its incarnations over the past century has remained bound to the State. In practice, this has led Badiou to participate in a small alternative militant group, simply called Political Organization, which states in a recent issue of its newsletter *Political Distance*: “The balance of the nineteenth century is the withering away of the category of class as the sole bearer of politics, and the balance of the twentieth century is the withering away of the party-form, which knows only the form of the party-State.”²⁷³ Philosophically, moreover, this search for a new figure of militantism without a party brings Badiou back to an old acquaintance, in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, as though almost thirty years had to pass before Badiou could finally come to terms with his personal road to Damascus: “For me, Paul is the poet-thinker of the event, and at the same time the one who practices and voices the invariant features of what we might call the militant figure.”²⁷⁴

3. Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject* seems to presuppose from the start that there is such a thing as subjectivity, without giving this thought much ontological support. Although the book at the end already introduces the whole question of Cantorian set theory, and in fact pinpoints the location of the subject in the immeasurable excess of inclusion over belonging, only *Being and Event* will systematically elaborate the underpinnings of this thesis from an ontological, that is to say mathematical, point of view. In the preface to this second major work, the author writes in retrospect:

²⁷² Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 234 n. 41 and *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 91. The political suturing of Badiou’s early philosophy has left a trace in his later work: the wordplay on the state of the situation and the modern political State. How this play would work for the three other conditions is not always equally clear.

²⁷³ “Sur le XXe siècle et la politique,” in *La Distance Politique* 35 (2001): 3-4. All articles in this newsletter are anonymous, but for similar arguments about the fate of the party-form, see Badiou’s *Le Siècle*. L’Organisation Politique, founded in 1985, gathers members of the Maoist Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste (UCFML), which in turn emerged in 1970 amidst the worldwide revolutionary sequence of 1965-1975. For more information, see the recently published theses or guidelines of the group, in *Qu’est ce que l’Organisation politique?* (Paris: Le Perroquet, 2001). Badiou discusses some of the recent activities of this group in his interview with Peter Hallward, reprinted as an “Appendix: Politics and Philosophy,” in *Ethics*, pp. 95-144.

²⁷⁴ Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l’universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997), p. 2.

“The (philosophical) statement according to which mathematics *is* ontology—the science of being-as-being—is the stroke of light that illuminated the speculative scene which, in my *Theory of the Subject*, I had limited by purely and simply presupposing that ‘there was’ subjectivation.”²⁷⁵ The new task in *Being and Event* will then consist in articulating a coherent ontology together with the theory of the subject—a task which dialectical materialism in the old orthodox days accomplished by means of an homology between the dialectics of nature and the dialectics of spirit, but which today requires a careful reformulation—this time above all in a polemic with Heidegger and not only with Lacan, whose ontology was already questioned by Miller.

4. Much ink finally has been spilled, including on the part of Badiou himself, to correct the violent language of destruction with which *Theory of the Subject* seeks to displace the structural dialectic of lack in Mallarmé or Lacan. The tone of this language at times reaches chilling heights indeed while affirming the part of loss that inheres in any new truth. “Every truth is essentially destruction,” Badiou already writes in one of his early Maoist pamphlets: “History has worked all the better when its dustbins were better filled.”²⁷⁶ Toward the end of *Being and Event*, the author admits: “I went a bit astray, I must say, in *Theory of the Subject* with the theme of destruction. I still supported the idea of an essential link between destruction and novelty.”²⁷⁷ In a strict ontological view, the part of loss in novelty must be rephrased in terms not of destruction but of subtraction and disqualification. A new truth cannot suppress any existence, but by extending a given situation from the point of its supplementation that is an event, an inquiry into the truthfulness of this event can disqualify, or subtract, certain terms or multiples—namely, those inegalitarian ones which are incompatible with the generic nature of all truth. Destruction is then only a reactive name for that part of knowledge that no longer will have qualified as truthful in the extended situation. The distinction between these two paths, destruction and subtraction, is moreover a key topic of the author’s ongoing inquiries. Much of Badiou’s *Ethics*, for instance, deals with the specific restraints

²⁷⁵ Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement*, p. 10.

²⁷⁶ Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction*, pp. 27 and 86. For a ferocious attack upon these and other comparable statements from Badiou’s early Maoist work, see Jean-Marie Brohm, “La réception d’Althusser: histoire politique d’une imposture,” in Denise Avenas, et al., *Contre Althusser. Pour Marx* (Paris: Editions de la Passion, 1999), pp. 278-287. Just to give the reader an idea of the fierceness of this attack: Brohm describes Badiou as a “Maoist pitbull” (p. 279 n. 25).

²⁷⁷ Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement*, p. 446.

that must apply to any process of truth in order to avoid the catastrophe of forcing an entire situation. There is thus a limit, or halting point, which cannot be forced from the point of the situation's extension by a new truth. "Let us say that this term is not susceptible of being made eternal," Badiou writes: "In this sense, it is the symbol of the pure real of the situation, of its life without truth."²⁷⁸ To force this limit, which is the unnameable or neutral that is specific to each generic procedure, is a major cause of what Badiou then defines as Evil. An example of this would be the disastrous suppression of all self-interest, in the guise of total re-education, as proclaimed by certain Red Guards at the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Badiou himself, finally, tends to read his earlier doctrine of lack and destruction as such a disastrous forcing of the unnameable. Everything thus seems to point at the notion of destruction as the principal misgiving in Badiou's early thought, which was very much sutured onto politics under the influence of Maoism.

In view of this last crucial objection, I only want to recall how Marx himself defines the scandalous nature of dialectical thinking, in the famous Postface to the second edition of *Capital*: "In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists. In its rational figure, it is a scandal and an object of horror to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its understanding of what exists at the same time that of its negation and its necessary destruction."²⁷⁹ What is happening today, however, is a new transfiguration of the given which may well cast itself as radical but which, precisely by trying to ward off the horrifying scandal of thinking in terms of negation or rather scission and destruction, merely ends up confirming the status quo in the name of a respectful ethical principle devoid of truth. The mandatory limit of the unnameable, then, far from restraining an ongoing process of truth from within, actually blocks such process in advance and thus keeps a truth from ever taking hold to begin with. Even transfigured by an acknowledgement of the real as its inevitable kernel of idiotic non-knowledge, a mortal life without truth is the radically mystified figure of today's structural dialectic. By criticizing the ferocity of destruction, Badiou perhaps unwittingly allows his thought to participate in this trend which, guided

²⁷⁸ Badiou, *L'Éthique*, p. 76. Much of Badiou's *Le Siècle* is also devoted to this alternative between destruction and subtraction, especially in art, as answers to the question of the end and the beginning that haunts the entire century—or rather Badiou's "brief" twentieth century, from the Revolution of 1917 until the period of what he calls the Restoration in the 1980s.

²⁷⁹ Quoted and commented by Althusser, *Pour Marx*, pp. 87-88.

by the undeniable authority of Lacan or Levinas and their doctrinaire spokesmen, is all too quick to abandon the idea that in addition to respect for the other or recognition of the real, a truth implies a symptomatic torsion of the existing order of things. Destruction, in Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*, only means such a torsion whereby a subject is neither chained onto the automatism of repetition nor fascinated by the haphazard breaking in two of history, as in Nietzsche's figure of the overman, or by the sudden death of the whole symbolic order as such, as in the figures of anxiety and the superego in Lacan or Žižek. For Badiou, destruction was not to be confused with death or with a total wipe-out of the existing law of things. Since *Being and Event*, however, Badiou himself seems to have forgotten that destruction—even as an exaggerated figure of resentment for which the past always remains the heaviest weight—names part of the process of torsion by which a new subject comes into being and as a result of which something drops out of the old picture. In this sense, to use the most accessible generic procedure as an example, can we not all say that the dustbin of our romantic history is filled with old loves?

The Ontological Impasse

“What a marvel of dialectical materialism is Cantor's famous diagonal reasoning, in which what is left over founds what stands in excess!”²⁸⁰

The change between Badiou's two major works thus far may seem proof of a definitive shift from dialectics to mathematics—with the former dominating his *Theory of the Subject* together with the slender volume *Can Politics Be Thought?* which in fact already anticipates the doctrine of the event, and the latter appearing systematically in *Being and Event* for which the accompanying *Manifesto for Philosophy* then provides an easily accessible situated context. Does this trajectory, however, really imply an irredeemable break, or is there some underlying continuity? Are the earlier misgivings merely abandoned after the so-called mathematical turn, or do we face a more systematic version of previous insights that in essence remain unchanged or perhaps even become obscured? In what direction, moreover, is this trajectory currently heading?

Badiou's *Being and Event* should be considered the first half of a larger project, the second volume of which is currently announced under

²⁸⁰ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, p. 234.

the title *Logics of Worlds*. The ambitious overall aim of this project is to affirm that philosophy, despite the prophetic declarations of its imminent end, is once more possible. The present times, in other words, are capable of articulating the key philosophical categories of being, truth, and subject in a way that requires neither an inaugural return nor the melancholic traversing of an end, but rather a decisive step beyond: “One step in the modern configuration which since Descartes links the conditions of philosophy to the three nodal concepts of being, truth, and subject.”²⁸¹ For Badiou, what is needed at present to link these basic concepts is a philosophy of the event which, despite an irreducible polemical distance, would be compatible both with the critique of metaphysics, as brought to a close by Heidegger, and with the intervening doctrines of the subject, mostly tied to political and clinical experiences, after Marx and Freud.

In *Being and Event*, mathematics then provides the master key to articulate—both to join and by way of an impasse to split off—the science of being with the theory of the subject. The book’s guiding thesis is deceptively simple: ontology exists, insofar as ever since the Greek origins of philosophy, and as one of its conditions, the science of being has always been mathematics: “This is not a thesis about the world but about discourse. It states that mathematics, throughout their historical unfolding, pronounce whatever can be said about being-as-being.”²⁸² For Badiou, the place where the ontological discourse is developed today, at least if philosophy accepts to take on this decision, is in axiomatic set theory, from Cantor to Cohen. The basic result of his meta-ontological investigation into set theory then holds that everything that presents itself, in any situation whatsoever, is a multiple of multiples, or pure multiple, without One. The One “is” not, but “there is” One. The latter is only the result of an operation, the count-for-one, as applied to the pure multiple which retroactively must be supposed to be inconsistent. To exist means to belong to a multiple, to be counted as one of its elements. A given multiple, or set α , acquires consistency only through the basic operation which counts whatever this multiple presents as so many ones that belong to this multiple. Prior to this count, though, we must presume that all being paradoxically inconsistencies, without any God-like principle or pre-given origin: “There is no God. This will also be said as follows: the One is not. The multiple ‘without One’—every multiple in its turn being nothing but a multiple of multiples—is the law of being. The only halting

²⁸¹ Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, p. 12.

²⁸² Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement*, p. 14.

point is the void.”²⁸³ Badiou’s ontology of pure multiplicity in this sense agrees with the critique of the metaphysics of presence, so that his deconstruction of the One is another way of declaring the death of God. Choosing a strict alternative to Heidegger’s hermeneutic path, however, his inquiry does not submit itself to the language of the poets who alone would be capable of rescuing the clearing of being. Instead of upending philosophy in the name of poetry, or art, the critique of metaphysics in this case is conditioned by the deductive fidelity of pure mathematics. Badiou seeks thus to avoid the dominant suture of contemporary philosophy in its pious delegation onto poetry; philosophy today must rather draw the required consequences from the closure of the age of the poets, which has run its complete gamut from Hölderlin to Celan. The axiom, and not the poem, holds the key to a science of being compatible with the theory of the subject, access to which is then provided by way of subtraction, and not by interpretive approximation.

All the ontological ideas, axiomatically established in set theory, proceed from the void or empty set, named by the letter \emptyset , which must be postulated as the only possible proper name of being. The empty set indeed is universally included in every other set while itself having no elements that belong to it, and as such founds all mathematical sets. In a normal situation, however, the void not only remains invisible or indiscernible, but the operation of the count moreover reduplicates itself in an attempt to establish the meta-structure, or the state of the situation, in the guise of an uninterrupted totality. This second operation consists in counting, or representing, as subsets whatever the first count presents as terms of a given set. The count of the count would then hold for parts just as the count-for-one holds for elements, with the latter doing for belonging what the former does for inclusion. What Badiou calls the state of a situation, in other words, operates by way of the power-set $p(\alpha)$, which is the set of all the subsets of a given set α . This explains not coincidentally why an operation such as a recurrent census is a characteristic feature of the modern State. What does a census produce if not a count of the count—the real question being not only how many citizens belong to a given nation but also how their numbers are distributed into parts according to variously defined subsets or groups? The real threat of course would be that in some place, say at the borders of the void, there be something that escapes this counting operation—singular elements belonging to the situation without being documented as part of its state or, the other way around, inexistent parts that are included

²⁸³ Badiou, *L’Ethique*, p. 25.

in the state without having any elements that are thought to belong to their mass. As Badiou writes: “An inexistent part is the possible support of the following, which would ruin the structure: the One, in some part, is not, inconsistency is the law of being, the essence of the structure is the void.”²⁸⁴ The emergence of such uncanny phenomena as inexistent parts or singular elements would fundamentally upset the operation of the redoubled count by which the state seeks to ward off the void that is always the foundation of its precarious consistency. The state of a situation in effect is an imposing defense mechanism set up to guard against the perils of the void.

After the initial guiding decision that mathematics provide the science of being, the fundamental thesis of the whole meta-ontological inquiry in *Being and Event* then affirms that there is an excess of parts over elements, of inclusion over belonging, of representation over presentation. There are always more ways to regroup the elements of a set into parts than there are elements that belong to this set to begin with: $p(\alpha) > \alpha$. The state of a situation, in other words, cannot coincide with this situation. The cardinality of the set of all parts or subsets of a set is superior to the cardinality of this set itself and, in the case of an infinite set as with most situations in this world, the magnitude of this excess must be assumed to be strictly beyond measure. “There is an insurmountable excess of the subsets over the terms” which is such that “no matter how exact the quantitative knowledge of a situation can be, we cannot estimate, except in an arbitrary decision, ‘by how much’ its state exceeds it.”²⁸⁵ This is, finally, the ontological impasse—the point of the real in the science of being—around which the author builds the entire artifice of *Being and Event*: “This gap between α (which counts as one the belongings or elements) and $p(\alpha)$ (which counts as one the inclusions or parts) is, as we shall see, the point at which lies the impasse of being.”²⁸⁶

In the second half of *Being and Event*, Badiou exploits this point of the real that is proper to the metamathematical analysis of being, in order to discern in its deadlock, not some ordinary lack as a cause for pious ecstasy or postmodern respect before the unrepresentable, but the closest site where an event, as a contingent and unforeseeable supplement to the situation, raises the void of being in a kind of insurrection and opens a possible space of subjective fidelity. In normal circumstances, the

²⁸⁴ Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement*, p.113.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 113 and 309.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

structural impasse that is intrinsic to the state of the situation remains invisible, so that the void that is its foundation appears to be foreclosed. This foreclosure is the very operation that allows the smooth functioning of the established order of things—when everyone does what comes naturally because the state of the situation in effect appears to be second nature. Exceptionally, however, an event can bring the excess out into the open, expose the void as the foundation of all being, and mark the possible onset of a generic procedure of truth. As Badiou observes: “What makes that a genuine event can be at the origin of a truth, which is the only thing that is eternal and for all, is precisely the fact that it relates to the particularity of the situation from the point of its void.”²⁸⁷ An event is always an anomaly for the discourse of pure ontology, insofar as its irruption attests to a breakdown in the count of the count and thus brings out the real of the science of being. And while its chance occurrence uncovers the void that is the foundation of the entire structured situation in which it occurs, the event itself is a multiple that is wholly unfounded, that is to say, defined by the feature of self-belonging which all ontology consists in forbidding. A seemingly natural and well-ordered situation then becomes historical when what is otherwise a structural impasse, proper to the law of representation as such, becomes tangible through the effects of a radically contingent event. As the doctrine of the weakest link already implied, all historicity occurs at the point where a deadlock of structural determination is crossed by the irruption of a rare event.

Here, of course, I cannot discuss all the categories that mark the intermediate steps on the overall itinerary of *Being and Event*, an itinerary which ranges from the pure multiple of being to the subject, by passing through the situation, the state of the situation, the void, the point of excess, nature and historical situations, the site of the event, the intervention, fidelity, the generic, the indiscernible, and the forcing of truth. What should become evident is how, all along this itinerary, a modern doctrine of the subject as the local configuration of a procedure of truth paradoxically gets anchored in the deconstruction of metaphysics. For the purpose of our discussion, the most important argument in all of *Being and Event* effectively holds that an event, which brings out the void that is proper to being by revealing the undecidable excess of representation, can only be decided retroactively by way of a subjective intervention. In a concise and untranslatable formula, a final thesis thus sums up the trajectory of the entire book: “The *impasse* of being, which causes the quantitative excess of the state to wander beyond measure, is

²⁸⁷ Badiou, *L’Ethique*, p. 65.

in truth the *passé* of the Subject.”²⁸⁸ A subject is needed to put a measure on the exorbitant power by which the state of a situation exceeds this situation itself. Through the chance occurrence of an event, the structural fact of the ontological impasse is thus already mediated by subjectivity; without the intervention of a subject faithful to the event, the gap in the structure would not even be visible. The impasse is never purely structural but also at the same time dependent upon a haphazard intervention. In every subject, as in an equivocal nodal link, a structural law is tied onto the contingent occurrence of an unpredictable wager. “Everything happens as though between the structure, which liberates the immediacy of belonging, and the metastructure, which counts for one its parts and regulates the inclusions, a breach were opened that cannot be closed except by a choice without concept,” writes Badiou: “The fact that at this point it is necessary to tolerate the almost complete arbitrariness of a choice, and that quantity, this paradigm of objectivity, leads to pure subjectivity, that is what I would like to call the symptom of Cantor-Gödel-Cohen-Easton.”²⁸⁹ A subject, then, is that which decides the undecidable in a choice without concept. Setting out from the void which prior to the event remains indiscernible in the language of established knowledge, a subjective intervention names the event which disappears no sooner than it appears; faithfully connects as many elements of the situation as possible to this name which is the only trace of the vanished event; and subsequently forces the extended situation from the bias of the new truth *as if* the latter were indeed already generically applicable. “Situated in being, the subjective advent forces the event to decide the truthfulness of this situation,” Badiou concludes, and if we take into account the various conditions or generic procedures of truth, we understand why he writes in the introduction that “strictly speaking, there is no subject except artistic, romantic, scientific, and political.”²⁹⁰

Though essentially a repetition of the argument from Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*, the pivotal thesis about the impasse of being as the pass of the subject is nevertheless open to a fundamental misunderstanding, which in my view is due to the primarily ontological orientation of *Being and Event*. From a Lacanian point of view, above all, the thesis might as well be inverted so as to reduce the subject’s passing to the structural impasse pure and simple. To come to terms with the unbearable kernel of the real, a subject must then not only renounce all imaginary ideals and

²⁸⁸ Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement*, p. 471.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 471 and 26.

symbolic mandates, but also assume the essential inconsistency of the symbolic order itself. The end of analysis, in other words, lies not just in accepting the divided and alienated nature of the subject as one's positive condition, but in acknowledging that what divides the subject is nothing but the lack that keeps the symbolic order from ever achieving any meaningful closure. The pass in psychoanalysis displaces the bar, so to speak, back and forth between the divided subject \$ and the symbolic order which then in turn appears to be marked by the signifier of lack S(\emptyset). The event, in this case, would be like a symptomatic slippage which exposes the fact that the symbolic order itself is incomplete—unable as much as the subject is to offer any answer to the abysmal question of the other's desire: *Che vuoi?* The subject "is" nothing but the empty place opened up in the structure by the very failure to answer this founding question. Recognition of this ineradicable void in the midst of the structure would then already coincide with the traumatic truth itself—if, that is, there exists such a thing as a truth of the real in psychoanalysis, which would have to be more than its passing acknowledgement.

Žižek, for example, describes this passage as a kind of ideological anamorphosis, or change of perspective, whereby that which previously served as an unshakable guarantee of meaningfulness all of a sudden appears merely to cover a gaping chasm of nonsense. The sole task of the subject, then, lies in the purely formal act of conversion which assumes this immediate speculative identity between absolute power and utter impotence, by recognizing the point where the dazzling plenitude of being flips over to reveal its morbid foundation in a thing-like nothingness. Typically, what at first appears to be a purely epistemological obstacle, due to the subject's limited capacities as compared to the ungraspable power of some truly infinite entity, from a slightly different perspective—by looking awry at what is usually overlooked—turns out to be an essential ontological feature, inherent to the blocked structure of being itself. "Where it was, I shall come into being": for a subject, the formal act of conversion thus consists in somehow "becoming" what one always already "was" beforehand, namely, the very gap or empty place that impedes the symbolic order to attain full closure. All that happens has already taken place; there is nothing new under the sun, except for the formal gesture by which a subject assumes responsibility for what is happening anyway. "The 'subject' is precisely a name for this 'empty gesture' which changes nothing at the level of positive content (at this level, everything has already happened) but must nevertheless be added for the 'content' itself

to achieve its full effectivity,” as Žižek concludes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: “The only difference lies in a certain change of perspective, in a certain turn through which what was a moment ago experienced as an obstacle, as an impediment, proves itself to be a positive condition.”²⁹¹ The subject thus not only poses that what seems to be presupposed as something objectively given is already his or her own doing, but the activity of pure self-positing must in turn be presupposed as being split from within by an insurmountable deadlock which is not external but immanent to its very essence. In a formal turnabout or instantaneous flip over, devoid of any actual change, the subject’s pass would thus immediately coincide with the recognition of the impasse of the structure of being itself, that is to say, the gap between the real and its impossible symbolization.

The essence of truth, from this psychoanalytical perspective, is not a process so much as a brief traumatic encounter, or illuminating shock, in the midst of common everyday reality. This interpretation thus fails to understand the procedure whereby a truth is not something we chance upon in a slight change of perspective but something that is actively produced, through a step-by-step intervention, after an event. Žižek, for instance, mistakenly sums up Badiou’s philosophy by speaking repeatedly of the miracle of a “Truth-Event.”²⁹² Even regardless of the awkward large capitals, this syncopated and apocryphal expression collapses into an instantaneous act what is in reality an ongoing and impure procedure, which from a singular event leads to a generic truth by way of a forced return upon the initial situation. Whereas for Žižek, the empty place of the real that is impossible to symbolize is somehow already the act of truth itself, for Badiou a truth comes about only by forcing the real and by displacing the empty place, so as to make the impossible possible. “Every truth is post-evental,” Badiou writes in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, so that the event which in a sudden flash reveals the void of a given situation cannot itself already be the truth of this situation—hence the need for a militant figure of fidelity such as the one studied in *Saint Paul*: “Fidelity to the declaration is crucial, because truth is a process, and not an illumination.”²⁹³

Badiou’s *Being and Event*, however, may still give the false impression that a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective is the proper way to articulate the impasse of being with the pass of the subject. I would

²⁹¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 221 and 176.

²⁹² Žižek, “The Politics of Truth,” in *The Ticklish Subject*, passim.

²⁹³ Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* p. 89, and Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 16.

suggest therefore that we reread this book's central thesis from the point of view of Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*, which also argues that from the real as the impasse of formalization we should be able to grasp formalization as the forceful passing of the real. The earlier work indeed seems to me much more effective in explaining where exactly this thesis imposes a vital step beyond psychoanalysis—a step which the later work barely signals in the title of its final part: “Forcing: Truth and Subject. Beyond Lacan.”²⁹⁴

Following the ontological orientation of *Being and Event*, the debate with psychoanalysis indeed depends purely on the *location* of the void: whether on the side of the subject as lack (for Lacan) or on the side of being as empty set (for Badiou). If the polemic were defined only in these terms, the answer on behalf of psychoanalysis could still consist in locating an ever more fundamental lack in the midst of the structure of being—before identifying the subject itself with this empty place, as would be the case for Žižek. In fact, the irrefutable radicality of this prior lack or void, as revealed in the ontological impasse, can then be used as an antiphilosophical rebuttal against any given subject's imaginary confidence and dogmatic mastery over a truth without precedent.

Following the algebraic and topological articulation of *Theory of the Subject*, however, the irreducible difference with regard to psychoanalysis lies rather in what *happens* near the borders of the void which will become the site of a possible event: whether a vanishing apparition of the real as absent cause (for Lacan) or a forceful transformation of the real into a consistent truth (for Badiou). The polemic, then, can no longer be reduced to the simple location of lack but instead resides in the inescapable choice between lack and destruction, between a vanishing cause and a symptomatic torsion, or between the determining placement of an empty space and the displacement of the excessive power of determination itself. Seen from this earlier point of view, any purely formal act of conversion or speculative judgment, which makes the subject's pass immediately transitive to an impasse of the structure, in fact would turn out to be as yet devoid of truth. What would be needed for a rare generic truth to emerge, in addition to this initial act of subjectivation, is the forcing of the situation and the gradual sequencing

²⁹⁴ Badiou, “Le forçage: vérité et sujet. Au-delà de Lacan,” in *L'Être et l'événement*, pp. 427-475. Part of this meditation has been translated into English as “Descartes/Lacan,” in *UMBR(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* 1 (1996):13-17. In the same issue, see also the excellent introductions to Badiou's work by Sam Gillespie and Bruce Fink.

of a subjective process by which the structure is actually transformed from the point of its breakdown.

Badiou's *Being and Event* in this sense can be said to be both more encompassing and more limited than his *Theory of the Subject*. More encompassing, insofar as the latter starts from the given that there is subjectivity, whereas the former work uses the deductive power of mathematics to give the subject its substructure in ontology. And more limited, insofar as the ontological definition of being, event, truth, and subject risks to remain caught in a structural dialectic which in reality is only half of the picture. By this I mean that from the strict point of view of what can be said about being, the subject of truth is defined by a lack of being, rather than by the process of giving being to this very lack. The ontological discourse, in other words, gives us the pure algebra of the subject without elaborating the topology of its purification; no theory of the subject can be conceived, though, without a constitutive dimension of impurity. From a set-theoretical perspective, the event can be seen as a vanishing mediator of the void—a revelation of the unrepresentable empty set, or non-place, which founds the presentation of each and every placement. Mallarmé, not surprisingly, re-emerges in the later work as the poet-thinker of the event of the event at its purest. From the older logical or topological perspective, however, the doctrine of structural causality is incapable of giving consistency to the actual making of a new truth. What is more, the subject can then no longer be reduced to a unique figure of fidelity in connection with the name of the vanished event, but must be unfolded according to the various figures of a twisted subjective space. In short, if *Theory of the Subject* gives us an intricate subjective configuration without much further ontological support, then the systematic metamathematical inquiry gives us only a one-dimensional figure of the subject, transitive to the structure, in *Being and Event*. These limitations not only give rise to certain misunderstandings in the reception of this last work but also constitute the main impetus behind the current continuation of its overall project.

Since the publication of *Being and Event* and in an implicit return to *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou has thus formulated a triple self-criticism, a more complete answer to which will eventually become the positive table of contents of his *Logics of Worlds*.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ For a good summary of this recent self-criticism, see Badiou's Preface to the Spanish edition of *L'Être et l'événement* as *El ser y el acontecimiento*, trans. Raúl J. Cerdeiras, Alejandro A. Cerletti and Nilda Prados (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 1999), pp. 5-8.

1. All the stuff of a given situation cannot be fully accounted for in the sole terms of belonging, which, as we saw, is the only verb for the ontological discourse. The key to understand the forthcoming work then lies in the greater attention given to the question not only of being but also of appearing, or being-there. This logical and topological emphasis will require a remodelling of the concept of the situation, particularly through the theory of categories as opposed to the strictly ontological purview of axiomatic set theory. Astonishingly, this current reorientation is already announced in the author's very first review article more than thirty years ago. Badiou indeed concludes his analysis of Althusser by pinpointing the problem of how to define that to which the action of a structure is applied. "There must exist a previous formal discipline, which I would be tempted to call the *theory of historical sets*, which contains *at least* the protocols of donation of the pure multiples onto which the structures are progressively constructed," Badiou writes: "This discipline, which is closely tied in its complete development to the mathematics of set theory, no doubt exceeds the simple donation of a procedure of *belonging*, or of an inaugural system of empty differences."²⁹⁶ This previous discipline is none other than the theory of categories, which as an expansion of the set theory of *Being and Event* will form the basis for Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*. Situations are then constructed no longer purely on the grounds of a relation of being as belonging and the impasse of inclusion, but in terms of networks, trajectories, and paths, which together give topological coherence to a universe of appearing, or a world. This is the logic of appearing anticipated in the small unpublished booklet, *Being-There*, which will no doubt reappear as part of *Logics of Worlds*.

2. The ontological perspective risks to define the event exclusively in terms of a sovereign and punctual irruption of self-belonging. Badiou's recent work, however, underscores ever more clearly to which extent the truth of an event not only constitutes a vanishing apparition of the void of being, but also sets off a regime of consequences to which the belaboring of a truth gives way in a forced return to the situation of departure. In addition to the ontological definition of the event, therefore, we must consider its logical aftermath, following the inferences that are the lasting result of the work of the subject. The event not only is a punctual and self-belonging encounter but also opens up a process of successive implications; it surely emerges in a sudden flash but its traces must also be elaborated according to a duration that is its own. Without such a

²⁹⁶ Badiou, "Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique," p. 461.

process, the event may indeed induce comparisons with the notion of the act in psychoanalysis, as in the most recent works of Žižek or Alenka Zupančič.²⁹⁷ Since the polemic in *Theory of the Subject* and its succinct but potentially misleading summary in *Being and Event*, Badiou has been relentless in his effort to counter this temptation, not by ignoring its insights but by closely examining its most forceful inner mechanisms, for example, in the unpublished seminar on *Lacanian Antiphilosophy*.

3. The definition of the subject that corresponds to the ontological perspective of the event is also one-sided. It only includes the effects of fidelity, without considering how any inquiry into the truth of a situation encounters other subjective figures as well, such as those of reaction or denial. It is precisely in this sense that *Being and Event* is more limited than *Theory of the Subject*, where the subject is defined in terms both of the act of subjectivation and of the subjective process in which at least four figures are tied in a knot: anxiety, the superego, courage, and justice. Badiou's *Logics of Worlds* will pick up on this older analysis from the point of view of the different conditions of truth, in order to distinguish how for each one of these conditions the act of subjectivation likewise opens up a subjective space configured by the complex interplay between the figure of fidelity and its obscure or reactive counterparts. Part of this ongoing investigation can be appreciated in the unpublished seminar *Axiomatic Theory of the Subject*.

In this seminar Badiou initially defines the act of subjectivation as a hysterical figure, capable of detaching an opening statement from the event itself, which as such disappears no sooner than it appears. From the event, ontologically defined in terms of self-belonging, $E \in E$, the hysterical act of subjectivation thus consists no longer just in naming the void but in extracting or detaching an indispensable first statement as true: $E \rightarrow p$. A declaration of love is no doubt the simplest example of such an operation of detachment. This first figure would be hysterical insofar as the subject of the statement somehow remains personally

²⁹⁷ See my articles “The Žižekian Act” and “Ethics after Lacan: Act or Event?” (forthcoming). Lacan, incidentally, began to develop his own understanding of the act in his seminar *L'acte psychanalytique*, which was interrupted due to the events of May '68 in France. A comparison between Žižek and Badiou's theory of the subject, I should add, is seriously hindered by terminological matters—with Žižek calling “subject” (of lack) and “subjectivation” (as interpellation) what for Badiou would be more akin, respectively, to (evanescent, hysterical) “act of subjectivation” and (consistent, masterly) “subjective process.” Invoking opposite reasons yet using the same terms, each thinker could thus accuse the other for remaining at the level of mere subjectivation!

implicated in the statement itself, as in the Lacanian formula: “Me, the truth, I speak.”²⁹⁸ Every subject of a truth process, in this sense, would first emerge by being hysterical. To derive a regime of consequences from this initial statement and thus to give consistency to a universalizable truth about the entire situation in which the event took place, a masterly figure is then required through which a series of further statements can be inferred from the first one that are no longer tied to the particular person of the speaking subject. This inferential process follows the simple rules of logical implication: given p , if $p \rightarrow q$, then q . While the point of emergence of a new truth is always caught in a hysterical scheme, the operations of the master name the figure of consequent fidelity. Mastery and hysteria would thus appear to be co-dependent in their mirroring relationship—with both being required before a truth can come into existence. In fact, if the implicated person of the hysterical act of enunciation is the unconscious to be repressed beneath the bar of the mastery of consequences, then we can also say that, vice-versa, the unconscious of the hysterical figure is a regime of mastered inferences. Or perhaps the hysterical figure does not “have” an unconscious but somehow “is” the unconscious. The act of subjectivation is necessary but also strictly speaking inconsequential, yet at the same time the enthralling intensity of the hysterical speech act can always be put forward to denigrate and mock the meagre outcome of the master’s inferences. This is how the hysteric, like any good antiphilosopher who is never far removed from this figure, can remind the master of the need always to begin anew.

Badiou himself rather quickly abandons the twin names—though not the processes—of the master and the hysteric so as to avoid any confusion with the theory of four discourses in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The last two figures of reaction and obscurantism in Badiou’s new axiomatic theory of the subject also correspond only vaguely to Lacan’s university discourse and the discourse of the analyst. A subjective figure, rather, becomes reactive whenever the logical outcome of a truth process in retrospect is considered to be indifferent as compared to the event that caused it. This event might as well not have taken place and the result would still be exactly the same: no matter if p or not- $p \rightarrow q$. In a strangely perverse argument, the fact that an event has taken place with unmistakable consequences is thus denied. The subjective support of truth is then no longer split by an emergent speech act nor barred by the labour

²⁹⁸ Badiou, *Théorie axiomatique du sujet*, seminars of December 4, 1996 and January 9, 1997.

of consequences but purely and simply obliterated. In a certain sense, the reactive figure re-enacts the “rightist” deviation of the dialectical process discussed above, whereas the obscure figure is enraptured by a “leftist” solution, which turns the event from an singular condition into a radical and unattainable origin that from times immemorial precedes and overwhelms the search for a specific truth in the present. Knowledge of this transcendent origin is then simply imposed and transmitted, instead of being actually detached, which means forever to obscure the possibility that an unprecedented regime of consequences can be initiated in the here and now by a rare temporal act of subjectivation. In this denegation of all present temporality, the obscure figure is fundamentally a figure of death. Is it then a coincidence that Badiou’s seminar parts ways with the Lacanian theory of four discourses precisely at this point where the obscure figure is discussed? Should we not consider the passing acknowledgement of sexual difference, of desire and the death drive, or, in a politicised reading, the recognition of the real kernel of social antagonism, as such a radical and obscene absolutely prior origin, which always already threatens to render impossible—or merely imaginary and naive—the consequent belabouring of a new and unheard-of truth? At this point I leave it up to the reader to decide how in this light we might not only reframe the criticisms raised by someone like Žižek but also interpret the latter’s thought from within the theory of the subject as it is currently being reworked by Badiou.

For Badiou, in the final instance, everything revolves around the simple question: how does true change occur in a given situation? Not only: what is being, or what is the event? But: what truly happens *between* ordinary configurations of the multiple of being and their supplementation by an unforeseeable event? Badiou’s principal concern, in my view, is not with a pristine opposition but with the impure difference of being and event, while the subject is that which operates in the equivocal space of this in-between. His critics are mostly one-sided, if not mistaken, in charging his philosophy with dogmatism or absolutism for relying on a sovereign divide separating being from event, or with decisionism for defining the event in terms of a strict self-belonging. Whenever Badiou establishes such a divide as that between truth and knowledge, or between being and event, these should not be taken as two already separate dimensions or spheres which only his critics transcribe with large capitals, but from the point of a subjective intervention they stand as the extremes of a ongoing process of detachment and scission. Despite a recurrent temptation by Mallarmé’s wager, Badiou is rarely

taken in by the absolute purity of truth as a voluntaristic and self-constituent decision in the radical void of the undecidable. To the contrary, much of his philosophical work is guided by the hypothesis that the oppositions between being and event and between structure and subject, far from constituting in turn a structural given that would merely have to be recognized, hinge on the rare contingency of a process, an intervention, a labour. Truth as an impure and ongoing process actively destroys the premise of a simple face-off, no matter how heroic or melancholy, between an established order of being and the untainted novelty of an event. Was this not, after all, the harsh subject lesson to be drawn from the events of May '68 according to Badiou himself?

Being and Event in this respect admittedly proves itself to be much less decisive and insightful, or rather, as a treatise in ontology it is by necessity much more purified and decisionistic than *Theory of the Subject* or the forthcoming *Logics of Worlds*. The impure and equivocal nature of all truth processes, which is not easily grasped in the algebraic science of being as being, is by contrast inseparable from any topological understanding of the subject. When the ontological inquiry is reread from the point of view of the older subject theory, even Badiou's later philosophy begins to revolve around two key concepts—the site of the event and the forcing of truth—which his critics and commentators tend to ignore but which in fact sum up his contribution to the forgotten tradition of dialectical materialism. From the ontological view, the matheme of the event indeed is $E_x = \{x \in X, E_x\}$, that is, not just a pure event of self-belonging $E \in E$ cut off from the situation S but an event *for* this situation, E_x , as determined by the site $X \in S$. There is little doubt in my eyes that the idea of the evental site is a continuation, in ontology, of the search for a dialectic in which every term or multiple, even the otherwise unfounded multiple of the event, is marked by the structure of assigned spaces in which this multiple is placed. Otherwise, the ontological discourse risks almost literally to lead us back to the false structural or creationist scheme of P vs. A , insofar as the event constitutes a pure vanishing insurrection of the void which founds the structure of being and is revealed in the immeasurable excess of $p(\alpha) > \alpha$. Even Badiou's later thought remains dialectical, despite the mathematical turn, in rejecting such stark opposition between being and event, in favour of the specific site through which an event is anchored in the ontological deadlock of a situation that only a rare subjective intervention can unlock. An event is not pure novelty and insurrection but is tributary to a situation by virtue of its specific site.

A subject's intervention, moreover, cannot consist merely in showing or recognizing the traumatic impossibility around which the situation as a whole is structured. If such were to be the case, the structural dialectic would remain profoundly idealist—its operation delivering at most a radical, arch-aesthetic or arch-political act that either renders visible the unbearable anxiety of the real itself, or ultimately calls upon the annihilation of the entire symbolic order in a mimicry of the revolutionary break, which can then perfectly well be illustrated with examples drawn from *Antigone* to Hollywood. Badiou's thought, by contrast, seeks to be both dialectical and materialist in understanding the production of a new truth as the torsion, or forcing, of the entire situation from the precise point of a generic truth, as if the latter had already been added successfully onto the resources of knowledge available in this situation itself. Without such a process, the real that resists symbolization will only have been the site of a possible truth but it is not already the given truth of the situation itself; in fact, the real in this case would merely indicate a structural impossibility and not a eventual site whereby the regular structure of a situation becomes historicized. The subject, finally, is a material process of making or doing, which requires a putting to work of an event. It does not come to coincide, in a purely formal act of conversion, with the impasse of the structure as with the real kernel of its own impossibility—through the traumatic symptom with which a subject can only identify after traversing the ideological fantasy. At best, to acknowledge this radical impasse, as in the case of antagonism for the political philosophy of radical democracy which I have discussed elsewhere, is still only the inaugural act of subjectivation bereft of any subjective process; at worst, it is actually that which forever blocks and obscures the consequential elaboration of a new truth. For Badiou, a subject emerges only by opening a passage, in a truly arduous production of novelty, through the impasse—forcing the structure precisely there where a lack is found, so as to make generically possible that which the state of the situation would rather confine to an absurd impossibility. In a famous Chinese saying, this means nothing if not to bring the new out of the old. To force a new consistent truth out of the old order of things from the point where our knowledge of the latter is found wanting.

Badiou's overall philosophy can then be read as an untimely recommencement of dialectical materialism in the sense in which the latter would be a philosophy not of pure and absolute beginnings but of impure and painstaking recommencements. It is a thought of change situated in whatever can be said of being as pure multiple yet

supplemented by the irruption of an event, the truth of which emerges not in a unique and instantaneous vanishing act that would be the event itself, but rather after the event in an ongoing process of fits and starts, of destructions and recompositions, of backlashes and resurrections, of fidelity and the extreme fallout of reaction and obscurantism. An event is a sudden commencement but only a recommencement produces the truth of this event. Badiou's philosophy could thus be said to obey not one but two ethical imperatives: "Never give up on one's desire!" but also "Always continue!" that is, "Always rebegin!" As he says in his latest seminar on the theory of the subject: "The ethical would be to rebegin rather than to continue."²⁹⁹ According to a thoroughly reworked materialist dialectic, then, always to rebegin means for a subject to keep drawing consequences of events that take place in emancipatory politics, artistic experiments, scientific discoveries, and loving encounters; to force these events in return to come to bear generically on the current situation; and thus to bring a precarious regime of truth, as a small fragment of immortality, out of our finite encyclopaedias of available knowledge. Far from being a masterly or dogmatic discourse, philosophy then only seeks within its own domain to register the effects of these truths that are produced elsewhere, behind the philosopher's back, and to invent a conceptual space of compossibility in which to shelter them.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 83. See also Badiou, *L'Éthique*, pp. 70 and 78. In fact, the figure of (re)commencement is a constant throughout Badiou's work. See, for example, the interview with Natacha Michel about *Théorie du sujet*, "Re-naissance de la philosophie," *Le Perroquet* 6 (1982): 1, 8-10; and 13-14 (1982): 1, 10-13; or the article about Marxism which anticipates Badiou's arguments in *Peut-on penser la politique?*, "La figure du (re)commencement," *Le Perroquet* 42 (1984): 1, 8-9.