

## Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: Part I. The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?\*

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### The Philosopher's Behind

"In the present ideological conjuncture, our principal task is to form the core of a true materialist philosophy and a just philosophical strategy so that a progressive ideology may emerge."<sup>1</sup>

Built into the essence of materialism is an intrinsic dimension of praise and blame, of justice and infamy, as witnessed by the endless attacks and rebuttals that make up most of the history of its struggle against idealism. This is not merely an issue of judgment or taste, whether good or bad, added onto the ideas of materialism and idealism as a moral or political afterthought. Instead, the strategic value of each term is inseparable from the definition of the concepts themselves, just as the use made out of both terms belongs to the core of their meaning. There is thus something irreducibly practical and impure about the debate concerning materialism, which from the start defeats the purpose of a strictly speculative or philosophical elaboration. One should never forget, in other words, how the concept of materialism functions as part of a polemical apparatus—or

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser, *Filosofía y marxismo: entrevista por Fernanda Navarro* (Mexico, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno, 1988), p. 75. Because I am writing this article in Mexico without having access to the various existing English-language translations, all references will be to the original works, with translations being my own. For their invaluable comments and support, I would like to give special thanks to Simone Pinet, Peter Hallward, and Alain Badiou, as well as to Alberto Toscano.

at the very least such has been the case in modern times, most clearly after Marx. Indeed, it is above all the latter's unfinished conception of materialism that has given the term its strong cutting edge, even retrospectively, as one of the most effective arms of criticism in any scientific, ideological, or philosophical battle — including its use within philosophy as a weapon against ideology in the name of science.

Louis Althusser, for one, repeatedly insists throughout his work on the polemical function of all philosophy, defining the latter as "politics in theory", or declaring that "philosophy is, in the final instance, the class struggle in theory."<sup>2</sup> Marxism, he explains in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, has not founded a new philosophy so much as a new practice of philosophy, conditioned by politics. To practice philosophy then is a matter not just of inventing concepts with demonstrative rigor but of drawing lines of demarcation and taking a stand, particularly by means of theses. A thesis, understood as a position, may be orthodox or heretical, but it is never exactly true or false. There are no real mistakes in philosophy because its propositions are never strictly theoretical but theoretical *and* practical. Between Althusser's *Elements of Self-criticism* and his final interviews with Mexican philosopher Fernanda Navarro in *Philosophy and Marxism*, moreover, it becomes increasingly evident how every thesis is in some way already an antithesis, every proposition already an opposition. The very nature of the philosophical art of war indeed obliges its practitioners to include preemptive strikes against likely objections, to interiorize the conflict so as better to master it, or to occupy the enemy's own territory directly. As a result no position ever appears in pure form; no opposition is ever absolute but only tendential — each tendency, or arrangement of theses, being present at the heart of its opposite.

No less indebted to Machiavelli than to Marx, this view of philosophical practice holds particularly for the age-old battle between idealism and materialism itself; elements of which can therefore be found tendentially in any philosophical system. "In every 'philosophy,' even when it represents openly and in the most 'consequent' manner possible one of these two antagonistic tendencies, there exist visible elements, or virtual ones, of the *other* tendency," Althusser observes in *Elements of Self-Criticism*, and in *Philosophy and Marxism* he repeats: "In reality, every philosophy is only the — more or less accomplished — realization of one of the two antagonistic tendencies, the idealist one and the

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<sup>2</sup> See L. Althusser, 'Tendances en philosophie' in *Eléments d'autocritique* (Paris: Hachette, 1974), pp. 85-101.

materialist one. And in every philosophy it is not one but *the* antagonistic contradiction of both tendencies that is realized."<sup>3</sup> Materialism and idealism are thus caught in a specular dyad in which each one bears the other within itself, like enemy troops lying in wait inside the empty entrails of the Trojan horse.

The opposition of materialism and idealism is not only tendential and impure but it is also decisively asymmetrical. Only the materialist tendency in philosophy is capable of recognizing the logic of internalized conflict itself. Whereas for idealism, the history of thought offers the spectacle of an uninterrupted chain of solutions to a closed set of seemingly eternal and immanent problems, only the materialist view affirms that philosophy, being articulated onto other theoretical and non-theoretical practices, has a certain outside. Here Althusser recalls how François Mauriac once confessed that as a child he believed that famous people had no behind. Materialism, then, shows that philosophy too has a behind. Far from constituting a self-enclosed totality, philosophy is an apparatus with which to register conflicts and to act indirectly, by way of ideology, on its conditions. To the question "What does philosophy do?" Althusser himself answers in conversation with Navarro: "Philosophy produces a general problematic, that is, a mode of posing — and thus of solving — the problems that may emerge. In the end, philosophy produces theoretical schemes and figures that serve as mediators to overcome the contradictions, and as links to tie together and bolster the elements of ideology," by acting at a distance for example "on cultural practices such as the sciences, politics, the arts, and even psychoanalysis."<sup>4</sup> In a paradoxical torsion, these practices thus constitute the outside, which seizes and at the same time is seized by philosophy from within.

From this brief outline we can already infer not only that the materialist tendency stands in an unequal and asymmetrical relation to idealism but also that, precisely because of this dissymmetry, the impure

<sup>3</sup> Althusser, *Éléments*, p. 91 and *Filosofía y marxismo*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Althusser, *Filosofía y marxismo*, pp. 73 and 62. In passing, the reader will have captured the four procedures of truth that later define the conditions of philosophy for Alain Badiou: art, science, politics, and love (especially as treated in psychoanalysis). See Badiou, *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1994). This raises the serious problem of defining the specific difference between Althusser's understanding of the relation of philosophy to ideology and Badiou's own concept of philosophy. For starters see Badiou, 'Qu'est-ce que Louis Althusser entend par 'philosophie'?' in *Politique et philosophie dans l'œuvre de Louis Althusser*, ed. Sylvain Lazarus (Paris: PUF, 1993), pp. 29-45.

definition of theoretical practices and their relations of internal exclusion to other practices together constitute the very substance of any materialist philosophy. Althusser in fact starts out in his canonical works *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, both published in 1965, by assigning this double task to the philosophy of dialectical materialism. Though apparently out of fashion, if not long-forgotten, today, this discussion remains vital against all odds, especially if we seek to grasp the originality of one of Althusser's most engaging students, Alain Badiou, who after thirty years at the University of Paris VIII at Vincennes (founded in the wake of May '68) recently occupied his old mentor's post at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* at the rue d'Ulm.

In my view, I should add from the outset, Badiou's philosophical project as summed up in the clear and distinct meditations from *Being and Event* cannot be understood apart from the famously dense and rarely read *Theory of the Subject*. After almost twenty years and several annual seminars on the same topic, this text promises to be fully reworked in the forthcoming *Logics of Worlds*, but it has yet to provoke a rigorous polemic in the context of contemporary debates about philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis — for instance, with fellow travelers such as Ernesto Laclau or Slavoj Žižek. The importance of Althusser's legacy in this context remains unsurpassed perhaps even by Heidegger and Lacan. As though in anticipation of this point, one of Badiou's first publications—his own contingent beginning as a philosopher — is an extensive review of Althusser's two canonical works titled 'The (Re)commencement of Dialectical Materialism.'<sup>5</sup> This quite astonishing

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', *Critique* 240 (1967): 438-467. In addition to *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, this review deals with a short article by Althusser, 'Matérialisme historique et matérialisme dialectique', *Cahiers Marxistes Léninistes* 11 (1966). In the likely absence of an original copy of Althusser's article, the reader may want to consult the Spanish translation, which appeared in Mexico together with Badiou's review in a well-known and often reprinted booklet, *Materialismo histórico y materialismo dialéctico*, trans. Nora Rosenfeld de Pasternac, José Arico and Santiago Funes (Mexico, D.F.: Pasado y Presente, 1969). For many readers in Latin America, this booklet was their main point of entry to the work of Badiou. This is also a good opportunity to insist that, though he has only very recently attracted the attention of the English-speaking world, Badiou's philosophy has always played an active and even militant role, especially through psychoanalysis and politics, in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, while some of his theatre pieces have been performed in Venezuela and Uruguay. Let me mention, in particular, the remarkable project of *Acontecimiento: Revista para pensar la política*, an Argentine journal edited by Raúl Cerdeiras and Alejandro Cerletti, which for more than a decade has published translations and unedited materials by Badiou as

book review can serve as a reader's guide, first, to a brief account of Althusser's view on the matter; and second, to Badiou's own philosophy and theory of the subject.

### Structural Causality: Science and Ideology Revisited

"Every truly contemporary philosophy must start from the singular theses with which Althusser identifies philosophy."<sup>6</sup>

Althusser's polemical aim in *For Marx* and the collective *Reading Capital* — at least this much is unlikely to have been forgotten — is to defend the specificity and scientificity of Marx's dialectic against the threatening return of Hegel. He does so together with his students by arguing for a radical epistemological break in Marx's work, a rupture made evident in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*, which liquidates not only the entire Hegelian legacy but also its famous inversion after Feuerbach. Marx thus changes terrains, abandoning the empiricist and anthropological mystifications in which even this so-called reversal remains caught, and installs himself in an entirely new problematic, forsaking the humanism of the *Manuscripts of 1844*, for example, in favor of a full-blown scientific theory of history, as witnessed by *Capital*. Marx's doctrine, however, not only lays the groundwork for a new science but also contains the elements for a new philosophy. His discovery thus entails a double theoretical foundation in a single epistemological break, or two ruptures in a unique inaugural act: "It is by founding the theory of history (historical materialism) that Marx, in one and the same movement, has broken with his earlier ideological philosophical consciousness and founded a new philosophy (dialectical materialism)."<sup>7</sup> Althusser's own positive aim then consists in a formidable group effort to construct this new philosophy which, though

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well as a variety of interventions and debates about political events from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to the Zapatistas in Mexico. Our narrow-minded intellectual world all too easily ignores such projects, which are not global but internationalist.

<sup>6</sup> Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspéro, 1965; La Découverte, 1986), p. 25. For a succinct discussion, see Gregory Elliott, 'A Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism', *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 70-114. In this chapter, despite the use of the same title, Elliott only incidentally refers to Badiou's review article and completely ignores all of the later work by Althusser's one-time student.

never fully formulated as such by Marx nor even by Engels or Lenin, would nevertheless already be at work, in practice, in the scientific theory of Marx himself.

Even if we were to join the complacent trend of our times by condemning the orthodox terminology to oblivion, it is not too much to say that the difference between these two disciplines, historical materialism and dialectical materialism, continues to be a real enigma today, albeit under different guises. Badiou explains first of all how this difference is obliterated in the various types of so-called vulgar Marxism. Althusser's comprehensive return to the distinction between historical and dialectical materialism in fact allows us to establish these very types, insofar as they either reduce one of the two disciplines to the other (with metaphysical readings of the young Marx collapsing the two into a truncated historical materialism, and totalitarian Marxism, into an abstraction of dialectical materialism and its 'laws' after Stalin), or else merely juxtapose them without any serious consideration for their structural asymmetry (analogical Marxism of the kind found in flat correspondences between literature and economy). The struggle to pull Marx from under Hegel's prolonged shadow is only the dramatic form of appearance of this wider debate within Marxism. Everything seems to revolve then around the complex difference between historical and dialectical materialism: how are we to articulate the intricate unity of this difference?

A first articulation implies the response to a question raised by Althusser: "By what necessity of principle should the foundation of the scientific theory of history imply and include *ipso facto* a theoretical revolution in philosophy?"<sup>8</sup> The principle in question holds that after every major scientific breakthrough, which produces new forms of rationality, there occurs a revolutionary transformation in philosophy. The classical example of course refers to the discovery of mathematical science as the very condition of the beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece, but similar encounters take place in the cases of Descartes, Leibniz, or Kant. In his later work Badiou himself will always subscribe to this principle, with two caveats: not every scientific break is always registered in philosophy, sometimes its impact goes unnoticed or for a long time is driven underground as in the case of set theory, and, more importantly, the formation of a philosophy is always conditioned not just by scientific discoveries but also by emancipatory politics, by artistic experiments, and by the encounter of a truth in love, as in psychoanalysis.

<sup>8</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 25.

These clarifications allow us to postulate that Marxism, defined as a doctrine that intervenes politically in a history of singular sequences, can still be a condition for modern philosophy, even if historical materialism does not achieve the status of a science, as is indeed no longer the case for the later Badiou.

Althusser's dilemma, by contrast, as he seems to admit in his many self-criticisms, is to have mistaken a political condition for a scientific one. To be more precise, there is an unarticulated tension between politics as the fundamental practice conditioning philosophy from the outside, and science as the only safeguard, within philosophy, against the ideological reinscription of this political invention, the importance of which is then obscured. The result is a mixture of 'scientism' and 'theoreticism' which we somewhat lazily identify, following among others the melancholy views of the author himself, with Althusserianism. In his *Manifesto for Philosophy* Badiou would later describe this situation as the outcome of a misguided yet heroic attempt to relay a first "suture" of philosophy, that is, the reduction and delegation of its four generic conditions onto politics alone, with a second one, this time onto science. Without becoming the servant of a third condition — poetry or art — as happens so often after Nietzsche and Heidegger, philosophy today must undo this double suture, which is in fact a belated inheritance from the nineteenth century, so as to disentangle the strict compossibility of all four generic procedures of truth.<sup>9</sup> This clarifying extension, though, remains in a way faithful to Althusser's materialist view of philosophy as a theoretical practice conditioned by truths that are produced elsewhere, or on another scene.

The second and third articulations no longer invoke a general principle about science and philosophy but concern the specific nature of historical and dialectical materialism. The object of historical materialism, the theory of history, is the various modes of production, their structure and development, and the forms of transition from one mode to another. In principle the scientific nature of this theory cannot be established by historical materialism itself but only by a philosophical theory designed for the express purpose of defining the scientificity of science and other theoretical practices in their specific difference from ideological

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, 'Sutures', in *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 41-48. With regard to Althusser's obligatory lesson about politics as a condition for philosophy, see 'Althusser: le subjectif sans sujet', in Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, pp. 67-76. For Althusser's own description of his double suturing of philosophy, see *Eléments d'autocritique*, pp. 100-101.

practices. This general epistemological theory of the history of the theoretical offers a first definition of dialectical materialism. As Badiou writes: "The object proper to dialectical materialism is the system of pertinent differences that at the same time join and disjoin science and ideology."<sup>10</sup> This is the cardinal object of the discipline which Althusser, in his essay 'On the Materialist Dialectic' in *For Marx*, distinguishes from traditional philosophy by calling it Theory: "We will call Theory (with a capital T) the general theory, that is, the Theory of practice in general, itself elaborated starting from the Theory of existing theoretical practices (the sciences), which transform into 'knowledges' (scientific truths) the ideological product of existing 'empirical' practices (the concrete activity of human beings). This Theory is the materialist *dialectic*, which is none other than dialectical materialism."<sup>11</sup> The reconstruction of this general theory would thus seem to take an extremely perilous turn, since few distinctions have provoked more polemical outbursts than the infamous break between science and ideology, the ineffectiveness of which is then often equated with the perceived failure of the entire endeavor of Althusser.

It is indispensable, however, to traverse the very problematic nature of the difference between science and ideology if we want to understand not only Althusser's enterprise but also the systematic foundation of Badiou's philosophy, for the latter hinges on a similar Bachelardian or Platonic distinction between truth and knowledge, or between truth and opinion. In fact, this is exactly the point where a frequent misunderstanding, affecting the reception of both philosophers, needs to be addressed.

In his review Badiou himself insists on the primitive impurity of the difference in question: "The fact that the *pair* comes first, and not each one of its terms, means—and this is crucial—that the opposition science/ideology is not distributive. It does not allow us immediately to classify the different practices and discourses, even less to 'valorize' them abstractly as science 'against' ideology."<sup>12</sup> The relation of these two forms of the theoretical cannot be equated with the opposition of truth

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', p. 449.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 169 (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 171-172). For the shortlived attempt to distinguish *theory*, 'theory', and Theory, see the terminological note at the beginning of *Pour Marx*.

<sup>12</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement', p. 450. In the chapter 'Science et idéologie' from his *Eléments d'autocritique*, Althusser himself admits that he had reduced the theory of science and ideology, despite the injection of a recurrent dialectical struggle, to a speculative-idealist opposition of truth 'against' error, of knowledge 'against' ignorance.

and error, which is little more than the old illusory struggle of good and evil as recast by modern rationalism. Instead of serving as a simple point of departure or normative guarantee, the opposition must be endlessly processed and divided from within: "In reality, the opposition science/ideology, as the opening of the domain of a new discipline (dialectical materialism), is itself developed therein not as a simple contradiction but as a process."<sup>13</sup> Not only is every science dependent upon the ideology that serves merely to designate its possible existence; but there is also no discourse known as ideological except through the retroaction of a science. Of this further thesis, the importance of which cannot be overestimated, the following statement from *For Marx* offers a paradigmatic rundown:

There exists no *pure* theoretical practice, no bare science, which throughout its history as a science would be safeguarded by who knows what grace from the threats and attacks of idealism, that is, of the ideologies that besiege it. We know that there exists a 'pure' science only if it is endlessly purified, a free science in the necessity of its history only if it is endlessly liberated from the ideology that occupies it, haunts it or lies in wait to attack it. This purification and this liberation are obtained only at the cost of a never-ending struggle against ideology itself, that is, against idealism—a struggle which Theory (dialectical materialism) can guide and clarify regarding its reasons and objectives as no other method in the world today.<sup>14</sup>

Always marked by the possibility of false departures and sudden relapses, this contradictory processing of the difference between science and ideology, or between materialism and idealism, is key to a proper reconstruction of Althusser's philosophy; as will likewise be the case for the difference between truth and knowledge, or between fidelity to the event and its obscure or reactive counterparts, in the later philosophy and theory of the subject of Badiou: "It is not exaggerated to say that dialectical materialism is at its highest point in this problem: How to think the articulation of science onto that which it is not, all the while preserving the impure radicality of the difference?"<sup>15</sup> From this point of

<sup>13</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', p. 450.

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', p. 452. Peter Hallward, in a personal note to the author, insists that for Badiou, mathematics *is* such

view, the general theory being sought after can be redefined as the theory of impure breaks, using the same principle of unity in difference to articulate not only science and ideology, or truth and opinion, but also theory and practice, base and superstructure, as well as the very distinction between dialectical and historical materialism.

A third and final articulation of these two disciplines depends in effect upon the peculiar unity that ties together the different instances and practices of a determined social formation. While historical materialism approaches this unity from the point of view of its actual existence, mainly under capitalism, its use of a series of concepts and their order of deployment in the course of analysis simultaneously point to a paradigmatic exposition which, though absent as such from the study of history itself, defines in a new way the object of dialectical materialism. The latter is then no longer, or not only, the theory of the complex difference between science and ideology, but the linked system of concepts and their laws of combination defining the specific unity, or type of causality, which structures the whole of any given society.

Althusser elaborates this theory of causality in 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic' from *For Marx*, and in 'The Object of *Capital*' from *Reading Capital*. Two concepts in particular, dominance and overdetermination, define the essence of Marx's discovery of a new, structural causality, radically different from its more traditional definitions, whether linear or expressive. As for the first of these two concepts, a society always possesses the complex unity of a structure dominated by one of its instances, or articulated practices. Here Althusser relies heavily on Mao's 'On Contradiction' whose author likewise insists that in every society there are many contradictions and yet, among these, one that is principal; just as within each contradiction there is a principal aspect and a secondary one. This means that a social formation constitutes a complex unity that develops unequally and hierarchically under the dominance of one contradiction or instance in particular. Depending on the conjuncture at a given moment in the history of a society, the dominant contradiction can be economical, political, scientific, religious, and so on. If a conjuncture is thus defined by the attribution of dominance to one instance or other in the social whole, we

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a pure theoretical practice, in fact the *only* science that is axiomatically set free from the ongoing struggle mentioned by Althusser. To answer this objection would require us to take up the enormous task of investigating the double status of mathematical science, both as the discourse of ontology and as one subjective condition among others, in Badiou's philosophy.

can affirm with Badiou: "The first great thesis of dialectical materialism — here considered to be the epistemology of historical materialism — posits that the set of instances *always* defines a conjunctural kind of existence."<sup>16</sup> As for overdetermination, it is a concept imported from psychoanalysis to account for the causality of conjunctural change, that is, the displacement of the dominant from one instance or practice to another as well as the condensation of contradictions into an explosive antagonism. The notoriously controversial argument then holds that such conjunctural variations are the effect of an invariant cause, which is the economy as final, determining instance. "Such is, brutally schematized, the second great thesis of dialectical materialism: There exists a determining practice, and this practice is *the 'economical' practice*."<sup>17</sup> In a peculiar decenterment, the latter thus fulfills two unequal functions at once; since as determining force it is absent from the structured whole in which it nonetheless finds a place as one articulated instance among others.

The theory of structural causality is perhaps no less susceptible to misunderstandings than the break between science and ideology. Althusser's structuralism, a common objection then goes, is incompatible with the profoundly historical insights of Western Marxism and as such is unable to stave off the dogmatic threats of Stalinism. The grand imaginary battle over history and structure, however, remains blind to what is without a doubt the core aspect of the theory of overdetermination, which reemerges in Badiou's theory of historical situations, at the center of *Being and Event*. This aspect becomes especially clear when Althusser re-reads, through the famous concept of the weakest link, Lenin's analysis of the specific conditions that enabled the success of the revolution of 1917 in Russia. In Lenin's eyes, this unique historical event is made possible in the most backward of imperialist countries by the sharp accumulation and condensation of multiple contradictions and heterogeneous tendencies. Once they fuse and become antagonistic, the latter constitute the objective conditions that retrospectively can be shown to have precipitated the revolution. The resulting impasse or dead end is then the site where the party, as a chain without weak links, can subjectively force its way into history. To be more precise, the fact that such a structural impasse becomes visible is already the retro effect of a subjective passage. The revolutionary situation, in any case, cannot be deduced from a simple contradiction

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 455.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 457.

such as that between capital and labor, or between forces and relations of production. Such a general contradiction never actually exists apart from the specific currents and tendencies that are overdetermined in the historical direction of either change or blockage. "The universal exists only in the specific," as both Althusser and Badiou are fond of repeating. What may appear to be an exception is in fact the rule, namely, that an historical event is conditioned by a complex play of multiple contradictions and not by the realization pure and simple of a general contradiction as a radical origin that would be given in advance.

The point of Althusser's reading is not simply to reiterate Lenin's well-known analysis but rather to ask how a structure actually *seizes* and *becomes* history, or to put it the other way around, how history *eventualizes* and *periodizes* the structure of a given situation at the site of a subjective intervention. Technically foreign to Lenin no less than to Marx, yet supposedly already at work and implied in their analyses, Freud's concept of overdetermination is thus meant to articulate history and structure without separating them into concrete empirical fact, on the one hand, and abstract transcendental or ontological principle, on the other:

Overdetermination designates the following essential quality of contradiction: the reflection, within the contradiction itself, of its own conditions of existence, that is, of its situation in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. This 'situation' is not univocal. It is not only its *de iure* situation (the one it occupies in the hierarchy of instances in relation to the determinant instance: the economy in society) nor only its *de facto* situation (whether it is, during the stage under consideration, dominant or subordinate) but *the relation of this de iure situation to this de facto situation*, that is, the very relation that makes of this factual situation a '*variation*' of the structure, in dominance, '*invariant*' of the totality.<sup>18</sup>

Neither univocal nor equivocal, this 'situation' is perhaps best understood in the everyday sense in which we say that 'we have a situation' when something happens that no longer fits the natural order of things. If Althusser adds the quotation marks it is no doubt to distance himself from an overly Sartrean term, which in contrast will be pivotal to all of the Badiou's work. Using the latter's terms from *Being and Event*, we could

<sup>18</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 215.

say that this is indeed the point where the structure of a situation suddenly becomes indiscernible, or newly discernible only through an intervention faithful to the event — in this case a political event — that will have changed the very parameters of what counts or not as discernible in the language of the situation.

To say, metaphorically, that the gap between history and structure is then bridged would still leave the two in a relation of externality. We would still fail to grasp the fact that, through the theory of structural causality, it is not just that dialectical materialism is the systematization of historical materialism, but the latter is also present, as if immanently withdrawn, in the former. Nor is one discipline meant to provide only the empty places, structures, or necessary forms which would then have to be applied to, or filled by, the concrete forces, contents, and contingent circumstances studied by the other. Rather, what is most striking in the theory of the weakest link as developed in the concept of overdetermination is to see how a structure takes hold of the actual moment; how isolated facts are literally thrown together to form a specific conjuncture and, thus, how necessity, far from realizing or expressing itself in history, actually emerges out of contingency. Finally, to speak of the determining instance of the economy does not mean letting traditional determinism reenter through the back window: “Neither at the first nor at the last instant does the solitary hour of the ‘last instance’ ever sound.”<sup>19</sup> The last instance is an absent cause given only in its possible effects, which at the same time are its conditions of existence. Any change produced by overdetermination, therefore, exceeds the realm of scientific objectivity and at once becomes the site of a subjective wager, irreducible to the way individuals function ideologically in the normal state of the situation. Thus, as Badiou would recall many years later in *Abridged Metapolitics*: “Overdetermination puts the possible on the order of the day, whereas the economical space (objectivity) is that of regulated stability and the space of the state (ideological subjectivity) makes individuals ‘function.’ In reality, overdetermination is the place of politics.”<sup>20</sup> Historical materialism could thus still be said to be implicated, or contained in the hollow spaces of dialectical materialism: not as the objective science of history in a traditional sense but as the theory and concrete analysis of historical possibility.

Traversing the pseudopolemic of history and structure, then, is the fundamental question of what truly constitutes an historical event. For

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, p. 75.

instance, in politics: “When, and under which conditions, do we say that an event is political? What is ‘that which happens’ when it happens politically?”<sup>21</sup> For Althusser, at least in his two canonical works, the answer to this question requires the passage through dialectical materialism, understood as the theory of the structural causality between economy, ideology, and politics. “What makes that such event is historical depends not just on its being an event, but precisely on its insertion into forms that are themselves historical, into the forms of the historical as such (the forms of base and superstructure),” he writes in *For Marx*, obviously struggling with the difficult relation of form and content between dialectical and historical materialism: “An event which falls within these forms, which has something to fall under these forms, which is a possible content for these forms, which affects them, concerns them, reinforces them or disturbs them, which provokes them, or which they provoke, or even choose and select, that is an historical event.”<sup>22</sup> The theory of structural causality, in this sense, is already an attempt to think through the problem of how the structure of a given situation, in the effective process of becoming historical, will have been transformed as the result of an unforeseeable event. Together with the impure difference between science and ideology, this is the other half of the unfinished task that Badiou draws early on from the canonical works of Althusser: “In any case, it is on the solution, or at least on the posing of the problem of structural causality that the ulterior progress of dialectical materialism depends.”<sup>23</sup>

### Going Through the Fantasy: Enjoyment Beyond Interpellation

Lacan institutes himself as the educator of every philosophy to come. I call contemporary philosopher one who has the unfaltering courage to go through Lacan’s antiphilosophy.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most intriguing chapters in the ulterior development of the general theory of structural causality and of the difference between science and ideology refers to the unpublished notes for a new, collective project, initiated under the guidance of Althusser less than a year after the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Althusser, *Pour Marx*, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, ‘Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique’, p. 458.

<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 196.

publication of *Reading Capital*. Thus, in the fall of 1966, Althusser sends a series of confidential letters and typewritten drafts to his students Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Yves Duroux, and Pierre Macherey, in which he proposes to form a "group of theoretical reflection" in preparation for what is to become an ambitious work of philosophy, *Elements of Dialectical Materialism*, nothing short of their systematic *Ethics* in an explicit reference to Spinoza. Although this joint effort never goes beyond the exchange of personal research notes, published only in the case of Althusser and even then only posthumously in his *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, in retrospect we might say that this collective project, fostered by the encounter with Lacan's thought, constitutes one of the three major sources for Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*, together with the poetry of Mallarmé and the still obscure political sequence after May '68, as marked by French Maoism. What Althusser could not foresee is that this extraordinary project would lead him, if not the other members of the group, into a theoretical deadlock which in the eyes of some commentators sums up the ultimate demise of the entire historical endeavor of Althusserianism.

The fundamental thesis of Althusser's draft, 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses', is that the philosophy of dialectical materialism in its contemporary conjuncture must come to terms with the theoretical impact of psychoanalysis, especially through the work of Lacan. To develop this thesis entails a double task: a reflection on the status of the object of psychoanalysis, the unconscious and its formations, in its relation to ideology, and the elaboration of a theory not of language or discourse as such but of discourses in the plural. Althusser's notes thus start out by distinguishing four discourses, each marked by a certain subject-effect, a particular type of structure, and the use of certain signifiers as its material: the *discourse of ideology*, in which the subject is present 'in person,' possesses a specular structure that appears to be centered due to an essential effect of misrecognition, and operates with a variety of materials not limited to concepts but including gestures, habits, prohibitions, and so on; the *aesthetic discourse*, in which the subject is present by the 'interposition' of more than one person, relies on an equivocal structure of mutually exclusive centers, and likewise operates with a diversity of materials, to produce an effect of recognition and perception; the *discourse of science*, from which the subject is absent 'in person,' proposes a decentered structure, and operates with concepts and theorems to produce an effect of knowledge or cognition; and, finally, the *discourse of the unconscious*, in which the subject is 'represented' in the chain of signifiers by one signifier that is its 'place-holder,' is supported

by a structure of lack, or fading, and operates with fantasies to produce a circulation of libido, or drive.

Here the reader may recall how Badiou's very first publication, 'The Autonomy of the Aesthetic Process,' studies the subjectivity that is specific to the discourse of art, in particular the novel, and thus contributes to the theory of four discourses as proposed by Althusser.<sup>25</sup> Though essentially mixed and equivocal, as we will see, this theory can also be considered an important touchstone not only for Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* but even more so for his recent unpublished seminars on the same topic which will be reworked in *Logics of Worlds*, not to forget Lacan's own theory of the four discourses which he begins to elaborate in his seminars right after May '68, from *The Obverse of Psychoanalysis* until its last version in *Encore*: the master's discourse, the hysteric's discourse, the university discourse, and the analyst's discourse.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the confused and equivocal nature of these theories in the case of Lacan and Althusser can be explained using Badiou's own later terms by seeing how, in the name of various discourses, they conflate two questions of an entirely different nature: the question of the different figures of the subject within a given truth procedure, and the question of the various types of truth procedure in which these figures appear. For instance, Althusser's description of scientific discourse involves aspects of the subjective figure of fidelity that pertains to every condition of truth, but at the same time and on another level pretends to define science differentially in relation to other procedures such as art, or love as seen in psychoanalysis. His ideological discourse does not belong on this same level since it is not an alternative procedure, but rather designates a mixture of the act of subjectivation and the obscure and reactive figures which, for any procedure, conceal or deny that a truth has actually taken place. Lacan's hysterical and masterly discourses, similarly, describe

<sup>25</sup> Badiou, 'L'autonomie du processus esthétique', *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* 12-13 (1966): 77-89. This article was supposed to become a book-length study on *l'effet romanesque* for Althusser's series *Théorie* at Maspéro. See Althusser, *Lettres à Franca (1961-1973)* (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1998), p. 691. Actually published in this series the same year, the most systematic investigation of literature along the lines of Althusser's theory of four discourses remains of course Pierre Macherey's *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Maspéro, 1966).

<sup>26</sup> See Badiou, *Théorie axiomatique du sujet (Notes du cours 1996-1998)* (author's unpublished typescript). For a succinct exposition of Lacan's theory of four discourses, with clear traces of the influence of Badiou's thought, see Bruce Fink, 'The Status of Psychoanalytic Discourse', in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 127-146.



subjective figures that in one sense are universal, while in another they are strictly internal to the clinical discourse of psychoanalysis itself; though they cannot be put on a par with the analyst's discourse, in an otherwise understandable attempt to differentiate its status from university discourse — the latter being little more than a codeword for revisionist ideology. Despite the obvious family resemblances, not to mention the recurrent number of four, any attempt to transpose Badiou's theory of the subject directly onto Lacan's or Althusser's theory of discourses is doomed to failure.

Althusser himself, however, quickly abandons the idea that there could be such a thing as a subject of the unconscious, let alone a subject of science, reducing instead the subject-effect to a purely ideological function — a view of which he was later to provide a systematic account, through the theory of interpellation, in what is no doubt his last canonical text, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.'<sup>27</sup> In the third and final of his research notes as well as in the letter of presentation accompanying all three, he thus warns the other members of the group that to him the notion of the subject seems more and more to belong only to the ideological discourse, being a category inseparable from the latter's structure of misrecognition and specular redoubling. Individuals are interpellated into subjects and at the same time are given the reasons necessary for their identification with those same symbolic or imaginary mandates for which, as a result, they believe to have been predisposed in advance. Without ideology, a social formation would distribute the various instances and practices of its structure, including all the phenomena of dominance and determination studied in the general theory of structural causality, while designating empty places for the function of the bearers of this structure. By interpellating individuals into subjects, ideology then provides who will fill the blank spaces of this function. Althusser often describes this mechanism by using expressions from everyday life which clearly have a didactic purpose. Ideology is indeed what allows a structure to gain a firm grasp on lived experience: it is the mechanism by which a social formation 'takes hold' as when in French one says that the mayonnaise 'takes' or 'holds'. Finally, this mechanism

<sup>27</sup> Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), pp. 127-88. Significantly, this is the only text I have present at hand in an English translation. It is no doubt the overwhelming influence of this essay by Althusser in critical discourses over the last few decades that has given rise to such a strong attempt to debunk its presuppositions—an anticanonical project which in recent years has started to form something of a canon in its own right.

of ideological interpellation does not come about without an unconscious effect of misrecognition and transference illusion, which are therefore constitutive of the subject. Althusser suggests that in everyday language the unconscious and ideology are articulated like a machine and its combustible: the unconscious 'runs on' ideology just as an engine 'runs on' fuel. Ideological formations, such as the structures of kinship or the religious and moral constructions of the family, are what allow the unconscious, through repetition, to seize onto the lived experience of individuals.

Here we arrive at the unsolved problem of Althusser's encounter with Lacan, as well as to the combination of the latter's return to Freud with Althusser's own plea for Marx. In order to understand the historical effectivity of an event, between its blockage and its irruption, dialectical materialism had to explain how a structural cause takes hold of a specific situation, which is 'eventalized' by the effects of conjunctural change. Similarly, to understand the individual effectivity of the practice of the cure, psychoanalysis must explain how the unconscious functions only when 'repeated' in a variety of situations, between the normal and the pathological, which make up the lived experience of an individual. In both cases, though, Althusser ultimately cannot conceive of these "situations" otherwise than as a function of ideology. Hence, even if Freud and Marx, each in their own way, contribute to this new logic, or materialist dialectic, best summed up in the concept of overdetermination by the unconscious and by the mode of production respectively — something Althusser demonstrates as early as 'Freud and Lacan' and as late as 'On Freud and Marx' both published in his *Writings on Psychoanalysis* — Althusser can no longer explain, except by way of ideology, how this dialectic somehow already implies the concepts of history, in the guise of a materialist understanding of historical possibility. Because the efficacy of overdetermination in producing situations for a subject is now perceived to be profoundly ideological, Althusser's philosophy can no longer register any true historical event, not even in principle let alone in actual fact, as will become painfully evident during and after the events of May '68 in France. Conversely, we can surmise what will be needed to think through the possibility of a situation's becoming historicized by virtue of an event, namely, a theory of the subject which is no longer reduced to a strictly ideological function but accounts for the specificity of various subjective figures and different types of truth procedure. Ideology could then be said to describe a certain configuration of the subjective space, which besets each and every condition of truth as part of its ongoing process, but one that is no longer

a symmetrical rival on a par with science, or truth, as such.

With the articulation of ideology and the unconscious, in any case, Althusser hits upon an exception to the rule that humanity only poses itself those problems that it is capable of solving. "I said that there had to be some links but at the same time I forbade myself to invent them — considering that temporarily this was for me a problem without solution, for me or perhaps not only for me," he admits in a personal letter: "Not every question always implies its answer."<sup>28</sup> Althusser's project thus seems to run aground when faced with the question of the relation between structure and subject. What is more, insofar as this deadlock is a result of Althusser's dialogue with the discourse of psychoanalysis, there seems to be no easy escape from this impasse by way of a return to Lacan. As Badiou will write in his *Abridged Metapolitics*:

The very frequent attempt, anchored in the few Althusserian texts on psychoanalysis, on this point to complete Althusser by Lacan is in my view impracticable. In Lacan's work there is a theoretical concept of the subject, which even has an ontological status, insofar as the subject's being consists of the coupling of the void and the *objet a*. There is no such thing in Althusser, for whom the object exists even less than the subject.<sup>29</sup>

The impossible, though, can sometimes happen, and the impracticable, become real. Back in 1959-60, as he recently recalled, Badiou himself was after all the first student to bear witness to the published work of Lacan during Althusser's course at the *École Normale Supérieure*.<sup>30</sup> And a few years later, after making psychoanalysis the topic of a seminar of his own in 1963-1964, Althusser would send another student of his to visit the ongoing seminar of Lacan, who, upon hearing how he was being interrogated about his ontology, promptly sent his colleague a word of praise for the student responsible for this intervention, the same student who was later to become Lacan's son-in-law and official editor: Jacques-

<sup>28</sup> Althusser, *Ecrits sur la psychanalyse*, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>30</sup> In a footnote to *Le Siècle*, Badiou writes: "Personal testimony: in 1960 I was a student at the *École Normale Supérieure*, and I had just discovered with extreme enthusiasm the published texts of Lacan, when Althusser, who at the time was in charge of philosophical studies at the *École*, charged me with providing my colleagues with a synthetic presentation of the concepts of this author who was then utterly ignored. Something I did in two *exposés* which, even today, continue to guide me from within" (author's unpublished typescript), p. 138 n. 25.

Alain Miller.<sup>31</sup>

Yet anecdotes, however many, will never amount to a theory. Nor do I wish to provide an abridged repetition of the well-documented history of the encounter between Althusser and Lacan. However, what I do want to signal is how, through these and other personal stories, the logic of overdetermination became the cornerstone for a unified theoretical discourse which today constitutes one of the most powerful doctrines in all theory and philosophy. J.-A. Miller himself lays the foundation for this combined doctrine most clearly in 'Action of the Structure' in *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*:

We know two discourses of overdetermination: the Marxist one and the Freudian one. Because Louis Althusser today liberates the first from the dangerous burden, which conceives of society as the subject of history, and because Jacques Lacan has liberated the second from the interpretation of the individual as the subject of psychology—it now seems to us possible to join the two. We hold that the discourses of Marx and Freud are susceptible of communicating by means of principled transformations, and of reflecting themselves into a unitary theoretical discourse.<sup>32</sup>

Miller adds that the principal injunction behind this ambitious project could be Freud's own *Wo es war, soll ich werden* ("Where it was, I shall come into being") — a succinct condensation if there ever was one of the way substance and subject are to be articulated in the new unified theory. Two other articles by Miller, finally, remain essential references for anyone seeking to reconstruct the genealogy of what will become the common doctrine of structural causality, namely, 'Suture' and 'Matrix'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For Lacan's note and Miller's personal recollection of the effect this caused in him, see the correspondance quoted in Althusser, *Ecrits sur la psychanalyse*: "Rather good, your guy. Thanks", was all Lacan's note said, but this was sufficient for Miller: "Here, a spark fixated something for me" (p. 304).

<sup>32</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Action de la structure', *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 9 (1966): 103. The journal *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, with about a dozen thematic issues, was the remarkable organon of the *Cercle d'Épistémologie* at the *École Normale Supérieure*. Badiou started participating in the journal precisely with this special issue, devoted to the *Généalogie des Sciences*, in which Michel Foucault also formulates his own archaeological theory of discourse and event in response to a questionnaire by members from the *Cercle*.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 'La Suture', *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 1 (1964) and 'Matrice', *Omicron?* 4 (1975). Badiou will rely on this second article in his *Théorie du sujet*, and more recently still refers to both texts as canonical, in another footnote to *Le Siècle*, p. 140

This is precisely the doctrine, however, with which Badiou seeks to come to terms most emphatically and polemically in his *Theory of the Subject*.

While urging a more coherent account of Miller's overall thought, I will summarize this doctrine by referring to the work of a student of his, Slavoj Žižek, whose doctoral thesis, directed by Miller and published in French in two volumes, *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel passe* and *Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font: Le sinthome idéologique*, provides the basic materials for his provocative entry onto the theoretical scene in the English language, above all, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.<sup>34</sup> *Wo es war*, of course, is also the name of the series which Žižek edits for Verso and in which he recently published not only his highly critical rejoinder to Badiou's philosophy, as part of *The Ticklish Subject*, but also Badiou's very own *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.<sup>35</sup> For many

n. 25.

<sup>34</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *Le plus sublime des hystériques: Hegel passe* (Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1988) and *Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font: Le sinthome idéologique* (Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1990). Translations of this two-volume work can be found, with numerous changes and additions, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991) and *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994). It should be noted that similar titles in English and French by no means cover identical tables of content. Žižek, furthermore, only seems to stick to the same basic Lacanian concepts, but in fact these terms often receive dramatically different interpretations. His dialogue with contemporary thinkers, finally, offers a superb example of the Machiavellian art of war in philosophy—often presenting an opponent's positions as entirely his own before attacking them for reasons that in fact apply only to his previous position. Many criticisms in Žižek's books can thus be read as self-criticisms of an earlier book of his, but since the fundamental concepts appear to be the same even though their meaning changes over time, a coherent overall interpretation of this vast body of work is quickly becoming a fascinating impossibility. For an admirable attempt at such an interpretation, necessarily restricted to Žižek's early works, see Marc de Kesel, *Grens en Grap: Slavoj Žižek ideologiekritiek* (Gent: NEP, 1993); and, more recently, Sean Homer, 'It's the Political Economy, Stupid! On Žižek's Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 108 (2001): 7-16.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek, 'The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 127-170; and Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. and introd. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001). The latter work also contains a useful bibliography and translator's introduction in which Peter Hallward anticipates some of the criticisms from his forthcoming *Subject to Truth: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Alain Badiou* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). See also, by the same author, 'Generic Sovereignty: The Philosophy of Alain Badiou', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3:3 (1998): 87-111. Hallward's

readers Žižek's work thus provides the perspective from which they will read Badiou in English. This makes it even more urgent to understand the fundamental differences between the two in terms of Lacan's legacy — a task that in my eyes cannot be achieved properly unless Badiou's *Being and Event* is read in conjunction with his *Theory of the Subject*, which is completely ignored by Žižek. As for the lineage of Marxism, or post-Marxism, the first ones to elaborate Lacan and Miller's views on suture and structure, together with Gramsci's thought on the historical bloc, into a programmatic statement of political philosophy are Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, a text which furthermore links the logic of structural causality to a critique of essentialism that is much indebted to Derrida.<sup>36</sup>

Three points can be made regarding the real, the subject, and ideology, which sum up the basic elements of the new doctrine of structural causality:

1. Just as the symbolic order is structured around the traumatic kernel of the real, a social field is articulated around the real of antagonism, which resists symbolization. Like the theory of relativity, the special theory of foreclosure needs to be generalized. To become consistent, not just a psychotic but any symbolic order needs to foreclose a key element which paradoxically 'incompletes' the structure by being 'included out'. The structure is not all: there is always a gap, a leftover, a remainder or, if we slightly change the perspective, an excess, a surplus, something that sticks out. A social formation is not only overdetermined but it is constitutively incomplete, fissured, or barred because of the very impossibility of society which embodies itself in its symptomatic exclusions. "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship," Lacan

criticisms, which target above all the sovereign and absolutist tendencies in Badiou's thought, coincide to some extent with the argument against dogmatism made by Žižek. In his introduction to Badiou's *Ethics*, however, Hallward seems to have tempered these criticisms quite a bit, and pays more attention to the situated and impure specificity of all truth along the lines of the materialist reading I present here.

<sup>36</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985). For a useful didactic overview of the common doctrine of Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999). I have offered a Badiou-inspired critique of the political philosophy of radical democracy, which is tied to the doctrine of structural causality, in 'Por una falta de política: Tesis sobre la filosofía de la democracia radical', *Acontecimiento: Revista para pensar la política* 17 (1999): 63-89. Reprinted as 'Democracia radical: Tesis sobre la filosofía del radicalismo democrático', in *Los nuevos adjetivos de la democracia*, a special issue of the Mexican journal *Metapolítica* 18 (2001): 96-115.

declared in *Encore* in a formula which Laclau and Mouffe restate, or translate, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: "There is no such thing as a social relationship," or simply: "Society doesn't exist."<sup>37</sup> The absence, or lack, of an organic society is then the point of the real of politics, but precisely by opening the field of the political, this impossible identity is also the condition of possibility of any hegemonic identification. All this may very well seem to be a supplement to the common textbook idea of structuralism but in fact the logic of structural causality never reduced the effects of overdetermination to a closed economy of grid-like places and their differential relations. The aim was rather always to detect and encircle the uncanny element which, in the efficacy of its very absence, determines the whole structure of assigned places as such. "The fundamental problem of *all* structuralism is that of the term with the double function, inasmuch as it determines the belonging of all other terms to the structure, while itself being excluded from it by the specific operation through which it figures in the structure only under the guise of its *placeholder* (its *lieu-tenant*, to use a concept from Lacan)," Badiou writes in his early review of Althusser, describing what even today remains the principal task of the critique of ideology for someone like Žižek: "Pinpoint the place occupied by the term indicating the specific exclusion, the pertinent lack, i.e., the *determination* or 'structurality' of the structure."<sup>38</sup> As an absent or decentered cause, the determining instance may well have shifted in keeping with the increased attention for Lacan's later works, so that the real is now to the symbolic what the

<sup>37</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, 'Beyond the Positivity of the Social: Antagonisms and Hegemony', in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 93-148.

<sup>38</sup> Badiou, 'Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique', p. 457 n. 23. For further explanations, Badiou refers to Miller's 'La Suture' and to Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic 'Introduction à l'œuvre de Mauss', in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: PUF, 1950). Compare also with Gilles Deleuze's explanations about the role of the "empty place" in the structure, in 'A quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme?' in *La philosophie au XXe siècle*, ed. François Châtelet (Paris: Hachette, 1973; Bruxelles: Marabout, 1979), pp. 292-329, and Badiou's implicit reading of this text in his *Deleuze. "La clameur de l'Être"* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), pp. 57-63. For Žižek, however, "the basic gesture of 'structuralism' is to reduce the imaginary richness to a formal network of symbolic relations: what escapes the structuralist perspective is that this formal structure is itself tied by an umbilical cord to some radically contingent material element which, in its pure particularity, 'is' the structure, embodies it. Why? Because the big Other, the symbolic order, is always *barré*, failed, crossed-out, mutilated, and the contingent material element embodies this internal blockage, limit, of the symbolic structure" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 183).

symbolic was to the imaginary before; in any case, we remain firmly within the framework of the common doctrine of structural causality. As Žižek himself concludes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: "The paradox of the Lacanian Real, then, is that it is an entity which, although it does not exist (in the sense of 'really existing,' taking place in reality), has a series of properties — it exercises a certain structural causality, it can produce a series of effects in the symbolic reality of subjects."<sup>39</sup>

2. The subject 'is' nothing but this gap in the structure, the fissure between the real and its impossible symbolization. The new doctrine thus avoids at the same time the metaphysical understanding of both substance and consciousness. In fact, insofar as metaphysics, in one of its famous Heideggerian delimitations, culminates in the epoch of the image of the world as the representation and manipulation of the object by the subject, the new doctrine can also be said to entail a wholesale deconstruction of metaphysics. This means that the pseudo-polemic between structuralism and humanism can be avoided, since the doctrine of structural causality already implies a new notion of the subject. Subject and substance are then articulated through the lack at the very center of structure. In other words, if there is always a leftover in the process of symbolization, a stubborn remainder that signals the failure of the substance fully to constitute itself, then the subject coincides with this very impossibility, which causes the inner decenterment of the structure as substance. "The leftover which resists 'subjectivation' embodies the impossibility which 'is' the subject; in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition," Žižek writes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in a typical deconstructive move; while Laclau explains in his preface to the same book: "The traditional debate as to the relationship between agent and structure thus appears fundamentally displaced: the issue is no longer a problem of *autonomy*, of determinism versus free will, in which two entities fully constituted as 'objectivities' mutually limit each other. On the contrary, the subject emerges as a result of the failure of substance in the process of its self-

<sup>39</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 163. For Althusser, of course, the finally determining instance of the economy also does not 'exist', nobody ever encounters such a cause 'in person' but only through the effects that are its conditions of existence. This then raises the important question of the ontological priority attributed to the economy—or at least to the class struggle—in Marxism and refused in post-Marxism. Even when Žižek addresses this question in the book's introduction, he himself as always ends up relying on an ontologically prior antagonism—the traumatic kernel of the real whose correlate 'is' the subject.

constitution."<sup>40</sup> Before adopting any particular position, identity, or mandate, in a logical primacy that will guarantee the radical status of the new doctrine, the subject is thus the subject of lack. If to be radical means to go to the root of things, as the young Marx was fond of recalling, what can be more radical indeed than to show the constitutive uprootedness of the very notion of the subject, prior to any essence of the human being of the kind invoked by Marx?

3. Ideology is a fantasy-construct aimed at concealing the essential inconsistency of the sociopolitical field. The fundamental ideological fantasy, therefore, is always some version of the idea that society constitutes an organic, cohesive and undivided whole. By defining society as impossible, strangely enough, the new doctrine thus gives itself an unfailing measuring stick to redefine ideology in terms of a structural misrecognition — this time not of some concrete reality hidden behind the veil of false consciousness but rather of the fact that ideology conceals nothing at all, the 'nothing' of the structure which 'is' the subject. As Laclau writes in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*: "The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture."<sup>41</sup> Totalitarian ideologies, for instance, fail to acknowledge the empty place of power, which in democracy constitutes the paradoxical object-cause of all political struggles. The critique of ideology, therefore, can no longer consist only in unmasking the particular vested interests hidden behind the false appearances of universality. Instead, two rather different tasks impose themselves, which can be compared to the ends of the psychoanalytical cure as discussed by Žižek. The aim is, first, a traversing of the fantasy, so as to acknowledge how an ideology merely fills out a traumatic void in the midst of the social field. Second, in order to avoid that the symbolic order disintegrate altogether, it entails an identification with the symptom, with the piece of surplus enjoyment which continues to resist even after the dismantling of the fundamental fantasy, and which thus somehow gives body to the radical inconsistency of society itself. This

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *ibid.*, p. 209 and Laclau, 'Preface', *ibid.*, pp. xiv-xv. I should add that Žižek usually rejects any proximity to deconstruction, except in phrasings such as these about conditions of impossibility being at the same time positive conditions of possibility, while Derrida has always remained a constant reference for Laclau.

<sup>41</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 92.

obscene enjoyment, which attaches itself to the symptom and which is ultimately nothing else but pure death drive pulsating around the central emptiness in the midst of the symbolic order, cannot be overcome by means of an old-style symptomatic reading of ideology, nor even by a revolutionary social change. As Žižek writes about the drive to enjoyment which, as our human condition, is the ultimate pre-ideological support of all ideology: "The thing to do is not to 'overcome,' to 'abolish' it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it."<sup>42</sup> What Žižek thus adds to Laclau's cleaner, deconstructive version of structural causality is the obscene passionate enjoyment that is the dark underside of the lack in the symbolic order.

Finally, in a last ironic twist, the doctrine of structural causality is turned against Althusser — himself one of the first to use these terms to bring together Marx, Freud and Lacan! Žižek thus claims that to reduce the subject to an effect of interpellation, as the specular assumption of imaginary and symbolic mandates, misses the traumatic kernel of enjoyment that is the real object-cause of this process of subjectivation itself. Althusser, in other words, would fail to understand how the last support of ideology, its ultimate stronghold, is the subject of lack forever trapped in a structure of fantasy, like an unbearable truth that presents itself only in the structure of a fiction:

This is the dimension overlooked in the Althusserian account of interpellation: before being caught in the identification, in the symbolic recognition/ misrecognition, the subject (\$) is trapped by the Other through a paradoxical object-cause of desire in the midst of it (a), through this secret supposed to be hidden in the Other: \$Øa — the Lacanian formula of fantasy.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *ibid.*, p. 5. At the end of *Théorie du sujet*, faced with the tiresome question of ideology, Badiou asks: 'What more can we say ... to the various formulations of the 'human condition,' dogmatically exalted in its absolute power (art and religion), sceptically cornered to its lack and the inevitability of death? To show that all this sticks to our skin and takes the guise of a transcendent negation of the class struggle does not go further than an establishing of facts by some materialist bailiff.' (pp. 317-318).

<sup>43</sup> Žižek, *ibid.*, p. 44. On the level of theoretical anecdotes, I am tempted to counter this objection by recalling how Althusser explains his absence from Lacan's seminar which he himself had invited to come to the *École* at rue d'Ulm: "I don't attend: which is the climax of enjoyment. Absence. A funny absence. There are funny absences, good absences," a thought that no doubt should be tied to this other

Žižek then briefly feigns to retrieve Althusser's original formulation of four subject-effects — in science, art, ideology, and the unconscious — only in his turn to reduce their variety to a single one of them, their underlying figure:

... there are two candidates for the role of the subject *par excellence*—either the ideological subject, present *en personne*, or the subject of the unconscious, a gap in the structure (\$) that is merely represented by a signifier. Althusser opted for the first choice (ideological status of the subject), whereas from the Lacanian standpoint the second choice seems far more productive: it allows us to conceive of the remaining three 'effects-of-subject' as the derivations-occultations of \$, as the three modes of coming to terms with the gap in the structure that 'is' the subject.<sup>44</sup>

This is a typical anti-philosophical move of radicalization in which the lack in the structure, a gap that coincides with the subject as such, is turned against the derived question of this subject's empirical ideological positions. Unless this absolutely prior gap is acknowledged, philosophy and the theory of the subject will always stumble upon the obstacle of the real that remains unthought. Žižek, who will repeat this move in his criticism of Badiou, interprets the deadlock of the entire Althusserian enterprise as a failure to come to terms with the subject of lack, caused by an impossible enjoyment before and beyond interpellation. At issue are thus the obscure prior scenarios of guilt, complicity, or desire which

reflection, in a letter to his analyst: "I think that you will agree on the very general principle that there is an efficacy to *absence*, on the condition of course that it not be an absence in general, the nothingness, or any other Heideggerian 'clearing,' but a determinate absence, playing a role in the very place of its absence. That is no doubt important for the problem of the emergence of the unconscious" (*Écrits sur la psychanalyse* pp.11 and 90-91). From a more theoretical perspective, moreover, Althusser himself ends these last texts on psychoanalysis by questioning the instability of Freud's two founding notions of fantasy and drive. Finally, the reader will find an exemplary analysis of fantasy as the ultimate support of ideology and identity in Althusser's vitriolic intervention during and after the meeting in which Lacan announced the dissolution of his School.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *ibid.*, p. 62. The fact that there is always a subject *par excellence* (the subject of lack) as well as the real *par excellence* (the real as enjoyment, or surplus-enjoyment) is symptomatic of the mechanism by which Žižek produces the irrefutable radicalism of his antiphilosophical act—an act which should *not* be confused with Badiou's notion of the event.

predispose an individual to become the subject of interpellation to begin with, and which will continue to resist its hold ever after. "In short, the 'unthought' of Althusser is that there is already an uncanny subject that *precedes* the gesture of subjectivization," Žižek writes: "'Beyond interpellation' is the square of desire, fantasy, lack in the Other and drive pulsating around some unbearable surplus-enjoyment."<sup>45</sup> We would thus have to conclude that Althusser's thought indeed cannot be completed by a return to Lacan, whose psychoanalysis instead shows precisely that of which one cannot speak in Althusserian Marxism. Except that this revelation, from beginning to end, keeps relying on the unified theory of structural causality — from the real of enjoyment, which is the absent cause of the symbolic law, to the subject as lack, which is strictly correlative to this object of desire itself — with ideological fantasy merely being an occultation of its perverse and uncanny efficacy.

Have we not perhaps left the domain of dialectical materialism altogether? If the social field is by definition barred, then the very ambition to produce a universal ontology and epistemology — of which the study of history and society would be a regional application — might well seem to be the quintessential idiocy. For Žižek, however, this is precisely the reason why we should remain committed to the cause. "'Dialectical materialism' stands for its own impossibility; it is no longer the universal ontology: its 'object' is the very gap that forever, constitutively, renders impossible the placement of the symbolic universe within the wider horizon of reality, as its special region," he writes in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, "In short, 'dialectical materialism' is a negative reminder that the horizon of historical-symbolic practice is 'not-all', that it is inherently 'decentred,' founded upon the abyss of a radical fissure—in short, that the Real as its Cause is forever absent."<sup>46</sup> Althusser, for his part, concludes his research notes for the unfinished *Elements of Dialectical Materialism* by stating that psychoanalysis, in order to be more than a practice or a technique, requires not one, but *two*, general theories: the first already known, historical materialism, which would define the specificity of psychoanalysis in comparison with other

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 61 and *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 124. See also Mladen Dolar 'Beyond Interpellation', *Qui Parle* 6.2 (1993): 73-96; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 106-131; and Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), who concludes the debate most succinctly: "The (psychoanalytic) subject is nothing but the failure to become an (Althusserian) subject" (p. 41-42 n. 11).

<sup>46</sup> Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, pp. 135-136 n. 18.

discourses and account for the conditions of its emergence and use in society; and the second, still to be constructed, a general theory of the signifier capable of explaining its function in the case of the unconscious. However, in letters from the same period, sent to his analyst with copies to the members of his theory group, however, the author shows more interest in understanding how something as radically new as language and the unconscious, for instance, emerges in the life of an infant. For Althusser, this sudden irruption of novelty, which is neither generated nor developed from a previously given origin, but instead introduces another structure into the existing order of things, is the essential object of what he now calls a logic of emergence, which is still nothing other, he adds, than the materialist dialectic as understood by Marx and Freud.

Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* will consist entirely in confronting these two orientations of dialectical materialism: one, a logic of structure, for which the act of subjectivation remains irredeemably anchored in the structural causality of lack, the other, a logic of emergence, which seeks to map a subjective process onto the rare emergence of a new consistency — onto the appearance of a new structure in which a subject not only occupies but exceeds the empty place in the old structure, which as a result becomes obsolete. Written several years before the key works of Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek, this remarkable, yet strangely ignored, text thus strikes in advance at the basic shortcoming of what has since then become their common doctrine: the inability to register the making of a new, consistent truth beyond the acknowledgment of the structural lack, or void, which is only its absent vanishing cause.

In fact, taking up a task already announced in “The (Re)commencement of Dialectical Materialism,” all of Badiou's subsequent work can be read as a giant polemical effort to untie the eclectic doctrinal knot that even today binds together the works of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger as read by Althusser, Lacan, and Derrida:

Can we think “at the same time” the reading of Marx by Althusser, that of Freud by Lacan and that of Nietzsche and Heidegger by Derrida? Headline, in our conjuncture, of the most profound question. If we take these three discourses in their integral actuality, I think the answer can only be negative. Better yet: to approach indefinitely that which keeps all three *at the greatest distance* from one another is the very condition of progress for each one of them. Unfortunately, in our instantaneous world in which concepts immediately become commercialized, eclecticism is

the rule.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, Badiou's small pamphlets, *Theory of Contradiction* and *On Ideology*, which otherwise correspond to the double object of dialectical materialism as defined above, also raise a staunch polemic against Althusser and, incidentally, against Deleuze's philosophy of desire; *Theory of the Subject*, as I already mentioned, sets the decisive stakes for the dispute between Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis; and, finally, *Being and Event* gives ontology a mathematical foundation in a systematic alternative against the dominant poetic suturing of philosophy that has taken place in the wake of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Badiou's philosophy, unlike Deleuze's affirmative style, is indeed polemical throughout. “I have never tempered my polemics, consensus is not my strength,” he admits in keeping with the materialist understanding of philosophy: “It is no doubt more instructive to write with an eye on that which one does not want to be at any cost than under the suspicious image of that which one desires to become.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Badiou, ‘Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique’, p. 445.

<sup>48</sup> Badiou, *Deleuze*, p. 8 and *Théorie du sujet*, p. 13.