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ORDER AND EVENT

On Badiou's Logics of Worlds

FRENCH PHILOSOPHY IN the twentieth century was marked above all by two projects.[1] For the sake of simplicity we might distinguish them with the labels of 'subject' and 'science'. On the one hand, thinkers influenced by phenomenology and existentialism—Sartre, Fanon, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty—embraced more or less radical notions of individual human freedom, and on that basis sought to formulate models of militant collective commitment that might engage with the forms of oppression or domination that constrain the subjects of a given situation. On the other hand, thinkers marked by new approaches in mathematics and logic, and by the emergence of new human sciences such as linguistics or anthropology, attempted to develop more adequate methods to analyse the fundamental ways in which a situation might be 'structured in dominance'. In the 1960s in particular, many thinkers came to the conclusion that a concern for the subject or for individual freedom was itself one of the main mechanisms serving to obscure the deeper workings of impersonal and 'inhuman' structure, be it unconscious, ideological, economic, ontological, or otherwise.

It may be no exaggeration to say that, leaving aside obvious differences between them, the most significant French thinkers of the last third of the twentieth century—Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida—all sought to develop forms of thinking that might integrate or at least accommodate aspects of both these projects; and that, conditioned by a broadly 'scientific' anti-humanism, might decentre but not simply exclude the role of an active subject. What is immediately distinctive about Alain Badiou's contribution to this endeavour is the trenchant radicalism of his own peculiar subject-science synthesis. The basic elements of

Badiou's project are familiar: to renew quasi-Sartrean notions of project and commitment in terms compatible with the anti-humanist analysis of structures developed by Althusser and Lacan, and perhaps more importantly, with the scientific or 'mathematizing' formalism characteristic of the French epistemological tradition. But unlike any other major thinker of his generation—he was born in Rabat in 1937—Badiou formulates this synthesis in the uncompromising and unfashionable language of *truth*. Badiou's chief concern has been to propose a notion of truth that holds equally true in both a 'scientific' and a 'subjective' sense. A truth must be universally and even 'eternally' true, while relying on nothing more, ultimately, than the militant determination of the subjects who affirm it.

This means that philosophy should concern itself with the consequences of truths that are both universal and exceptional. Philosophy thinks truths in the plural—truths that are produced in particular situations, that begin with a specific revolution or event, that are affirmed by a specific group of subjects, and upheld in the face of specific forms of reaction or denial. By 'holding true' to their consequences, the militant partisans of such truths enable them to persist, and to evade the existing norms of knowledge and authority that otherwise serve to differentiate, order and stabilize the elements of their situation. The discoveries of Galileo or Darwin, the principles defended by the French or Haitian revolutionaries, the innovations associated with Cézanne or Schoenberg—these are the sorts of sequences that Badiou has in mind: disruptive and transformative, divisive yet inclusive, as punctual in their occurrence as they are far-reaching in their implications.

Against the mainstream analytical tradition that conceives of truth in terms of judgement or cognition, against Kant as much as Aristotle, Badiou has always insisted (after Plato, Descartes, Hegel) that the material and active creation of truth is not reducible to any merely logical, linguistic or biological 'capacity of cognitive judgement'.[2] Within a situation, a truth is the immanent production of a generic and egalitarian indifference to the differences that (previously) structured that situation. Perhaps the two most important general notions that underlie this

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[2] Badiou, 'Philosophy, Sciences, Mathematics: Interview with *Collapse*', *Collapse* 1 (2006), p. 21.

philosophy of truth are *fidelity* and *inconsistency*. However varied the circumstances of its production, a truth always involves a fidelity to inconsistency. The semantic tension between these terms is only apparent. Fidelity: a principled commitment, variously maintained, to the infinite and universalizable implications of a disruptive event. Inconsistency: the presumption, variously occasioned, that such disruption touches on the very being of being. Inconsistency is the ontological basis, so to speak, of a determined wager on the infinitely revolutionary orientation and destiny of thought. Fidelity is the subjective discipline required to sustain this destiny and thus to affirm an 'immortality' that Badiou readily associates with the legacy of Saint Paul and Pascal. Inconsistency is what there is and fidelity is a response to what happens, but it is only by being faithful to the consequences of what happens that we can think the truth of what there is. In every case, 'the truth of the situation is its inconsistency', and 'a truth does not draw its support from consistency but from inconsistency'.[3]

To think the being of a situation as inconsistent rather than consistent is to think it as anarchic and literally unpresentable multiplicity. Badiou posits being as the proliferation of infinite multiplicity or difference, rather than as the orderly manifestation of stable and self-identical beings. For reasons explained in *Being and Event* (1988), the premise of Badiou's ontology is that the innovative edge of modern thought, when confronted with the ancient alternative of either 'one' or 'multiple' as the most abstract and most fundamental quality of being, has decided in favour of the multiple. (This decision immediately implies, Badiou goes on to argue, that ontology itself should be identified with the only discipline capable of rigorously thinking multiplicity as such: post-Cantorian mathematics.) As far as the discourse of being is concerned, the multiple having priority over the one means that any figure of unity or identity, any conception of a being as *a* being, is itself secondary. Unity is the derivative result of a unifying or identifying operation performed upon a being that is itself without unity or identity, i.e. that in-consists.[4] Badiou admits that we can only ever experience or *know* what is presented to us as consistent or unified, but it can sometimes happen, in the wake of an

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[3] Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, Paris, 1989, p. 90; *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique*, Paris, 1998, p. 57; *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, London 2003, pp. 77–8.
[4] Badiou, *Being and Event*, London 2005, pp. 53–5.

ephemeral and exceptional event, that we have an opportunity to *think*, and hold true to, the inconsistency of what there is.

I

The fundamental argument of Badiou's philosophy is that, in any given situation, only the subjects who are faithful to the implications of an event can think the truth of what there is in that situation. Inconsistency is a category of truth, rather than knowledge or experience. With the publication of Badiou's third major philosophical work, *Logics of Worlds* (2006), we can now distinguish three broad stages in the development of this argument.[5] At each stage what is at stake is a concept of truth that articulates, through the mediation of its subject, a practice of fidelity and an evocation of inconsistency. At each stage what is decisive is the active intervention of this subject. Badiou's way of presenting and situating such intervention, however, has evolved considerably.

In the 1970s, faithful to the unfolding consequences of May 68 in France and the Cultural Revolution in China, Badiou's orientation was broadly political and historical. The ongoing Maoist project remained a central point of reference. From this perspective the rebellious masses could be understood as the historical materialization of inconsistency. In the first of Badiou's major works, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), the masses figure as the dynamic, inventive and 'vanishing' term of history, an evanescent causality that comes to 'consist' insofar as a suitably organized Marxist-Leninist party is able to purify and sustain the revolutionary force of its eruption. It was in the shift from the inconsistent movement of the masses as historical cause to the consistency of a political party capable of maintaining a militant 'confidence' in such movement that the early Badiou found 'the trajectory of a thorough-going materialism'.[6]

In the early 1980s, confronted by the historical wreckage of actually-existing Maoism, Badiou shifted his fundamental frame of reference from history to ontology. In his most important work to date, *Being and Event*, inconsistency comes to characterize the unpresentable being of all that is presented. Rather than evoke an evanescent historical movement,

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[5] Badiou, *Logiques des mondes. L'Etre et l'évènement*, vol. 2, Paris 2006; henceforth LM.
[6] *Théorie du sujet*, Paris 1982, p. 243; the book was written mainly in the later 1970s.

inconsistency is now understood as the very being of being—on condition that strictly *nothing* can be presented or conceived of such being. This is the guiding premise of Badiou's mathematical ontology; a skeletal version of its development runs as follows.

The initial presumption is that all thought and action take place in specific and distinctive situations. The most general definition of a situation is provided by analogy with mathematical set theory, whereby a situation can be defined simply as the presenting or 'counting-out' of elements that belong to a given set (for example, the set of French students, the set of Turkish citizens, that of living things, galaxies, whole numbers, etc.). What structures a situation can then be described as the set of criteria and operations that enable an element to count as a member of that situation (e.g. to count as a student, or as French). Thus defined, a situation can only ever present consistent elements—elements that consist or hold together as *an* or *one* element. This unity or consistency, however, figures here as the *result* of the operation that structures the set in question. This means that unity or consistency is not itself a primordial ontological quality, and it implies that the unifying or structuring operation specific to each situation applies to material that in itself is not unified or structured, i.e. that *is* inconsistent. All that can be presented of such inconsistent being, however, from within the limits of the situation, is that which counts for nothing according to the criteria of the situation. What figures as nothing or 'void' will thus present inconsistency 'according to a situation'.[7] In the situation of set theory (the situation that presents or counts instances of counting as such), inconsistency takes the form of a literally empty set, a null- or void-set—one that counts as zero. By analogy, in the situation of capitalism, a situation that counts only profits and property, what counts for nothing would be a proletarian humanity.

Though inconsistency thus conceived can no longer exert even a vanishing causal force in a historical world, from time to time a combination of chance and a site of structural fragility in a situation may enable its ephemeral indication. Such an 'event' (Badiou's examples include political revolutions, amorous encounters, scientific or artistic inventions) evokes the inconsistent being of the elements of a situation—the purely multiple being that, according to what counts for that situation, counts

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[7] *Being and Event*, p. 56.

for nothing. The subjects who are faithful to the implications of such an event may subsequently devise, step by step, a newly egalitarian way of reordering or representing the terms of the situation in line with what they truly are. In the move from *Theory of the Subject* to *Being and Event* the ontological point of reference thus shifts, so to speak, from the masses to the void.

This new articulation of being and event allowed Badiou to maintain, if not reinforce, his uncompromising insistence on the eternal sufficiency and integrity of truth, and to do so in terms apparently proofed against historical betrayal or disappointment. The author of *Being and Event* thereby escaped the fate of so many other erstwhile enthusiasts of May 68, notably those ultra-leftists whose subsequent conversion into reactionary *nouveaux philosophes* continues to provide Badiou with the paradigmatic incarnation of a political in-fidelity he associates, in other contexts, with Thermidor or Pétain.[8]

Being and Event was one of the most original and compelling works of philosophy written in the twentieth century. It allowed Badiou to pre-serve a post-Sartrean theory of militant subjectivity in terms that made few concessions to the ambient atmosphere of humility and defeat. It permitted him to articulate a theory of event-based change that refused the liberal-hegemonic 'end of history' as much as it deflated any quasi-religious investment in the messianic advent of a transcendent alterity. Further, it enabled him to broaden the mainly political focus of his early work into a fully-developed theory of *truths* in the plural, a theory that might also apply to forms of science, art and love, all understood in terms that enabled the rigorous subtraction of their truth from any mere knowledge of the prevailing state of things.

The price to be paid for this ontological reorientation of Badiou's project, however, was considerable. While the equation of ontology and math-ematics allowed him to mount a radical challenge to more familiar conceptions of being (such as those of Heidegger or Deleuze), its lit-eral foundation on the void seemed to eliminate any significant link between the ontological and the ontic domains, between being-qua-*being* and being-qua-*beings*. It provided clarity and distinction in a realm where many other thinkers had preferred to draw on religion or art, but

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[8] See Eric Hazan's interview with Badiou, also appearing in this issue of NLR.

did so at the cost of rendering the discourse of being utterly abstract. It served to reduce the scope of ontology from the study of what and how something is to a manipulation of the consequences stemming from the assertion *that* it is. Conceiving the being or presenting of a person (or a particle, a planet, an organism) as a mathematical set can by definition tell us nothing about the empirical or material—let alone historical or social—existence of such beings. The definition of situation adapted from the mathematical model of a set reduced it to an elementary presentation or collection of units or terms, and such a definition pays no attention to the relations that might structure the configuration or development of those terms, for instance relations of struggle or solidarity. Likewise, Badiou's set-theoretical definition of an event as an anomalous, ephemeral and uncertain sub-set of its situation (a set which momentarily presents both itself and those elements that have nothing in common with the rest of the situation) appeared to privilege an abrupt if not quasi-'miraculous' approach to the mechanics of historical change. In short, Badiou's new theory of a subject subtracted from all conventionally 'objective' mediation—the theory of what he dubbed in 1989 a 'finally objectless Subject'[9]—seemed to involve a sort of subtraction from the domains of history and society as well. Following in the footsteps of Plato and Descartes, Badiou had secured the domain of truth, but at the apparent cost of abstracting it from mediation through the socio-historical configuration of a world. For an author who seeks to affirm a 'materialist dialectic', this would seem to be a significant loss.

Objective worlds

Conceived as a sequel to *Being and Event*—indeed, its subtitle bills it as Volume Two—*Logics of Worlds* was written to address these and related questions. Guided by recent work in category theory and algebraic geometry (notably topos theory and the theory of sheaves), much of *Logics of Worlds* consists of an attempt to provide new formulations of precisely those topics excluded by the ontological orientation of *Being and Event*—existence, object, relation, world.[10] As its title suggests, the new book aims to provide an account of a 'world' understood not simply

9 'D'un Sujet enfin sans objet', *Cahiers Confrontations* 20 (1989).
10 For a sense of the range of mathematical material at issue here, see for instance Saunders Mac Lane and Ieke Moerdijk, *Sheaves in Geometry and Logic: A First Introduction to Topos Theory*, Berlin 1992; or Robert Goldblatt, *Topoi: The Categorial Analysis of Logic*, New York 1984.

as a set or collection of elements but as a variable domain of logical and even 'phenomenological' coherence, a domain whose elements normally seem to 'hold together' in a relatively stable way. It supplements a set-theoretical account of being-qua-being with a topological account of 'being-*there*'—an account of how a being comes to appear in a particular world as more or less discernible or 'at home' in that world.

The guiding intuition of *Logics of Worlds* is that being always and simultaneously *is* and *is-somewhere*. Badiou retains his commitment to the set-theoretical ontology of *Being and Event*, such that to be is to be multiple (rather than one), but he now needs to show how instances of being-multiple might come to appear as situated objects of a world. Since (for reasons demonstrated in *Being and Event*) there can be no all-encompassing 'Whole' of being, any being always *is* in a specific location. The process whereby a being comes to be located 'there' or 'somewhere' is one that Badiou equates with the 'appearing' or 'existence' of that being. By understanding appearing/existence in a geometrical or topological rather than perspectival sense, Badiou can present his new logic as an exercise in 'objective' rather than 'subjective' phenomenology: the goal is to understand the way a given being appears as an 'intrinsic determination' of its being as such, rather than as the result of either a transcendental correlation of perceiving subject and perceived object on the one hand (after Kant or Husserl), or of a more experiential correlation of a *Dasein* and its lifeworld on the other (after Heidegger or Sartre).[11]

Though the 'groundless ground' of inconsistency remains ontological, Badiou can now provide a detailed account of how a truth overturns the very logic of a world by transforming the norms that regulate the manner in which things appear—the way different elements of a world appear as more or less discernible, significant or 'intense'. A new truth appears in a world by making its old norms of appearance inconsist: when in the wake of an event 'being seems to displace its configuration under our eyes, it is always at the expense of appearing, through the local collapse of its consistency, and so in the provisional cancellation [*résiliation*] of all logic.' 'What then comes to the surface', Badiou continues, 'displacing or revoking the logic of the place, is being itself, in its fearsome and creative inconsistency, or in its void, which is the without-place of every place'.[12]

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[11] LM, pp. 111–2, 185, 239–40; cf. Badiou, *Court Traité d'ontologie transitoire*, Paris 1998, pp. 191–2.
[12] *Court Traité*, p. 200.

As in Badiou's previous work, the discipline of fidelity is then what is required to enable a representation of this inconsistency to consist as the basis for a newly ordered configuration of a world. Through fidelity to the consequences of an event, that which used to appear as minimally intense or existent may come to impose a wholly new logic of appearing. One of Badiou's clearest political examples in *Logics of Worlds* is the Paris Commune, a sequence he analyses in line with the familiar exhortation of *L'Internationale* ('we are nothing; let us be everything').

If in relation to *Theory of the Subject* the mathematical turn of the 1980s implied a more abstract approach to historical situations and political events, *Logics of Worlds* marks a partial return to some of Badiou's earlier concerns by providing an apparently more substantial account of objective worlds, a more fleshed-out characterization of the subject, and a more 'materialist-dialectical' approach to the consequences of an event. Here is a new conception of the world that would seem to be entirely organized in line with Marx's famous prescription: the point is not to interpret it, but to change it.

II

Like its predecessor, the second volume of *Being and Event* invites a certain amount of hyperbole. Nothing like it has ever been published in France. It aims to provide new answers to ancient questions ranging from the most general definition of an object to the meanings of both death and 'immortal life'. It begins with an assault on the hypocritical tolerance of our prevailing 'democratic materialism' (the world of a self-satisfied but paranoid hedonism, a world that recognizes nothing more than a relativist plurality of 'bodies and languages'), and ends with an appeal to the pure 'arcana' of the exceptional Idea. In the space of a few pages the reader may move from a relatively dry discussion of one of the finer points of sheaf theory to a resounding celebration of heroic commitment. Written in a style that is alternately detached and exuberant, its central sections are punctuated with densely illustrated formal demonstrations of some of the most daunting theorems of contemporary mathematical logic. Its 600-plus pages are packed with an astonishing number and diversity of examples and analyses, from Webern's music to Galois's contribution to number theory or the architectural layout of Brasilia (to say nothing of substantial new discussions of canonical

thinkers like Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Lacan and Deleuze). The frame of reference is broad enough to include the cave paintings of Chauvet and Mao's military strategy in Jiangxi. Detailed illustrations of points made along the way refer, economically and ingeniously, to texts by Virgil, Valéry, Maeterlinck, Rousseau, Gracq and Sartre. *Logics* is also the most personal of Badiou's philosophical works, and the tenor of many of its endnotes is more biographical than bibliographical. If the dominant register of *Being and Event* is classical and abstract, *Logics* pushes the work of complex concretion to the limits of a neo-baroque excess.

Such complication applies, most obviously and immediately, to two of Badiou's primary concerns: event and subject. Rather than assume a stark distinction between 'historical' innovation and 'natural' stasis, Badiou now equates a world with the sum of its gradual and ongoing self-modifications. Like the truths they enable, events remain emphatically exceptional occurrences, but Badiou has acquired logical operators that allow for the formal distinction of an event per se from other forms of transformation or change. Briefly, he can distinguish between a normal *modification* (which is the ordinary way that objects of a world appear), a *fact* (a genuine but relatively insignificant novelty), a *singularity* (a novelty that appears 'intensely' but that has few consequences), and an *event* proper (a singularity whose consequences come to appear as intensely or powerfully as possible). An event now figures as nothing less than the start of a process that enables a thorough revaluation of the 'transcendental evaluations' that govern the way things appear in a world. Roughly speaking, an event triggers a process whereby what once appeared as nothing comes to appear as everything—the process whereby, paradigmatically, the wretched of the earth might come to inherit it.

More importantly perhaps, Badiou can also now begin to address a question that could not easily be posed within the framework of *Being and Event*—that of how the configuration of a world may encourage or discourage the imminent occurrence of an event. One of the most compelling sections of the book offers an elaborate account of the ways in which the logical fabric of a world may be penetrated by a greater or lesser number of precisely located 'points'. A point is an 'isolated' site in which the otherwise infinitely ramified complexity of a world may in principle be filtered through the logical equivalent of a binary 'decision'.[13] A point is a place in which participation in a world may polarize into a simple yes

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[13] LM, pp. 421–3, 432–3.

or no, for or against, backwards or forwards and so on. A world marked by many such points—for instance one disrupted by quasi-revolutionary unrest—is a world whose objective disorder lends itself to evental intervention. A 'lifeless' (*atone*) or point-less world, by contrast (for instance the apparently stable, orderly world of our prevailing 'democratic materialism'), is one in which the sites of possible intervention remain few and far between. 'Pre-evental' assessment of a world, in other words, may now have a role to play in the preparation of a post-evental truth. By implication, Badiou may be more willing today than previously to recognize that the critical analysis of ideology and hegemony may have something to contribute to the pursuit of justice or equality.[14]

Living subjects

Badiou continues to understand the subject pursuing such things as a primarily 'formal' process that maintains the logical consequences of an event. He qualifies the earlier version of his theory of the subject, however, in two important respects. First, he now recognizes that an event may elicit a more complex range of responses than simple conversion or rejection. In addition to the active affirmation maintained by a subject who develops its implications, an event may provoke equally active denial or obliteration. The former is characteristic of those reactionary subjects who reassert their commitment to the dominant state of things by insisting on the futility or criminality of attempts to change it (Badiou evokes Thermidor and neo-Thermidorians such as François Furet). The subjects described as 'obscure' or 'obscurantist' go further, and seek to obliterate the very possibility of a new event on the basis of a dogmatic allegiance to an originary super-Event (examples include Stalinism and religious fundamentalism). An event whose implications are forgotten or denied may always be revived, finally, by the subject who commits to its 'resurrection' or renewal.

The second qualification is more far-reaching, and the steps required to carry it through are what organize the book as a whole. Although the subject is first and foremost a formal response to an event's implication, Badiou recognizes that in order for a truth's effects to appear in and transform a world, its subject must itself 'live' in that world. In order to appear in a world, a subject must have a 'body', complete with the specialized organs it may require to deploy the consequences of its truth.

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[14] See for instance Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, Paris 2007, p. 151.

The notion of a body may invite misunderstandings. The sort Badiou has in mind is not necessarily organic, and his examples include armies, political organizations, groupings of artistic works or sets of scientific results. Perhaps the most intuitive of the examples are military—Mao Zedong's organization of a newly disciplined 'red army' in the late 1920s, or the slave revolt led by Spartacus in the first century BCE. The formal principle of this latter sequence, for instance, was an insistence on free-dom and the determination of Rome's captive slaves to return to their homes. The body that developed in the aftermath of the initially small uprising of Capua gladiators in 73 BCE was an army capable of defeating the Roman legions in open battle; the military specialization of this body (the differentiation of 'organs' capable of handling supplies, movement, organization, command) dealt with certain problems while avoiding oth-ers. In order to live in the face of reactionary denial or occultation this new body was obliged to confront a series of decisive 'points' located at specific junctures along its itinerary through the world of Roman slavery: the new 'freedom fighters' had to decide whether to remain in Italy for plunder or to escape north to Gaul, whether to remain united with their families, whether to divide into several sub-armies, or to seek refuge in North Africa, and so on. The literal crucifixion of survivors of this body would be followed in due course by its metaphorical resurrection in the form of Haiti's 'black Spartacus' (Toussaint L'Ouverture) and Germany's revolutionary Spartacists.

Understood along these lines, to participate in the affirmation of a truth involves, in any given world, active incorporation into the subject body or *corps* of that affirmation. Such incorporation provides Badiou with his definitions of a true worldly life. This involves a determination to be 'incorporated in a truth': 'to live is to participate, point by point, in the organization of a new body in line with what is required by a faithful subjective formalism'.[15] More exactly, as Badiou explains in the conclu-sion of *Logics*, to live is: to commit oneself to the disruptive implications of an event which allows that which has hitherto 'inexisted' as minimally apparent to appear instead as maximally intense; to subordinate oneself to the discipline of a new and emergent 'body of truth'; to recognize that the infinitely laborious development of such a body must proceed 'point by point'; to appreciate that the formation of such a body has no necessity other than its own determination to create and impose itself;

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[15] LM, p. 44.

to realize that such creative self-imposition is the only source of criteria adequate to judge the validity and 'vitality' of a truth. Since every human being lives in many worlds and enjoys many such opportunities for incorporation, humans are thus the only animal that can aspire to a genuine, that is, eternal or immortal life.

To affirm so uncompromising a notion of our true life, Badiou points out, involves nothing more (or less) than a renewal of some familiar speculative assertions: 'Plato: philosophy is an awakening, ordinary life is nothing but a dream. Aristotle: we must live as immortals. Hegel: the absolute works through us. Nietzsche: we must free the overman within man.'[16]

III

In order to lend this account of subjective incorporation the rigour it requires so as to be compatible with his mathematical ontology, Badiou needs also to develop a suitably mathematized theory of 'objective' or 'apparent' (or corporeal) existence. Rather than emphasize the formal sufficiency of a 'finally objectless subject', he has to show how a subjective body may appear as an *object* oriented or animated by a truth. More generally, he has to show how abstract instances of being-multiple might be thought as actual multiple-*beings*.

Now although it is an intrinsic determination of being that it *be there*, or that it appear (locally), nevertheless it is not exactly pure being-qua-being as such that appears: what appears *of* pure being is a particular quality of being, namely *existence*. Thanks to the equation of ontology and set theory, pure being-qua-being is essentially a matter of quantity and univocal determination: something either is or is not, with no intermediary degree. Existence, by contrast, is precisely a 'quality' of being, a matter of relative 'intensity' or degree. Something *is* if it belongs to a situation, but it *exists* (in a world that manifests something of that situation) always more or less, depending on how intensely or distinctively it appears in that world. We might say for instance that while a great many things belong to the world of the US, it is normally arranged such that certain distinctively 'American' things—free speech, pioneers, private property,

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[16] Badiou, 'Some Replies to a Demanding Friend', in Peter Hallward, ed., *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London 2004, p. 237.

baseball, freeways, fast food, mobile homes, self-made men—appear or exist more intensely than other, dubiously 'un-American' things: 'unassimilated' immigrants, communists, supporters of Hezbollah or Hamas, for example.

With a panache typical of *Logics*, Badiou argues that formulation of a complete logical theory of appearing requires nothing more than three simple presumptions or operations. In any given world, he posits that it must be possible: to specify its minimal degree of appearing, its zero-degree (i.e. a degree that has nothing in common with any other); to conjoin or compare the degrees of appearing that apply to two or more elements of that world; and to envelop the degrees of appearing of two or more beings. (Elsewhere in *Logics* Badiou goes on to show how the rest of conventional logic, such as operations of quantification, implication or negation, might be derived from these elementary procedures. The worldly negation of a given element X, for instance—and the question of how negation as such might 'appear' has posed significant problems for philosophers, from Plato to Kant to Sartre—can be understood here simply as the synthetic envelope of all those other elements that have nothing in common with it.)[17]

A greater logic

The effort to devise a viable theory of existence on the basis of these presumptions shapes the central sections of *Logics*, which, after Hegel, Badiou groups together under the ambitious title of a 'greater logic'. This is assigned four general tasks: first, to describe the transcendental regime that serves to differentiate the possible range of distinctive degrees of existence or appearing characteristic of a given world; second, to show how these criteria of appearance or existence connect with specific elements belonging to that world so as to constitute the 'objects' that populate it; third, to suggest how this connection might further exert a 'retroactive effect' on the very being of these elements; and lastly, to demonstrate that the relations which may then obtain between intra-worldly objects nevertheless do nothing to alter or affect either the being or the existence of the objects themselves. A logic adequate to these tasks will explain, Badiou suggests, why it is that being *is* inconsistent but (almost) always *appears* as consistent.

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[17] LM, pp. 113, 117–8, 185–94.

The way Badiou tackles the first of these challenges determines his approach to the others. Whereas Kant associated the transcendental conditions of experience with the invariable limitations of an abstract human subject, what Badiou calls the 'transcendental' of a given world is entirely immanent to the objective configuration of that world. Badiou assumes that every world is equipped with such a transcendental regime, and in what is perhaps the most crucial move in the whole of *Logics*, he assumes that its operation serves to differentiate and *rank* the infinitely many degrees of appearing that are compatible with the logical configuration of that world.[18] What a transcendental does, essentially, is to order the various elements of its world in terms of their existential intensity: the fundamental wager of *Logics* is that the simple mathematical relation of asymmetrical order (i.e. the relation that ranks any given quantity as greater-than or lesser-than other quantities) suffices, ultimately, to organize the otherwise infinitely ramified complexity of a world. In our American example, the transcendental would be the set of all those diffuse operations that measure the relative degrees of appearing or existing as more-or-less-American, arranging them in a hierarchy that stretches from minimally American to maximally so. Badiou himself illustrates the point by asking us to imagine the world of a tranquil autumn evening in rural France, in which what appears is a set of familiar and coherent elements (reddish ivy on an old stone wall, fading light, trees in the distance, etc.); these elements hold together in such an orderly way that the abrupt emergence of an incongruous element (e.g. the abrasive sound of a motorcycle) ensures that it can only resound or appear as literally 'out of place'.

In the more technical terms that Badiou relies on throughout his greater logic, a transcendental is based on what, in category theory, figures as the central object (or 'classifier of sub-objects') of a topos. This defines the transcendental of a world as a set of degrees or 'identity functions' that is at least partially ordered (so that its elements can be related in terms of ≥ or ≤) and contains a minimum and a maximum degree. An identity function measures relative levels of self-coincidence, so to speak. The object of such a function can coincide with itself maximally (and thus 'appear' absolutely) or minimally, or to any degree in between.[19] Given the equally elementary operations of conjunction and synthesis, a transcendental can further measure the 'obverse' or negation of any

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[18] LM, pp. 128, 212–3.   [19] LM, p. 252.

degree X, and with reference to any two degrees X and Y can measure what they have in common (the 'largest inferior degree' that they share) and the 'global' (or smallest superior) degree just large enough to envelop them both. In other words, given a set of degrees of self-identity, the transcendental of a world (or the classifier of sub-objects of a topos) can subsequently measure the level of identity between two degrees in terms ranging from 'exactly the same' to 'entirely different'.

The next step is to show how these degrees of appearing might apply or be indexed to actual 'beings' (*étants-multiples*) that belong to the situation—that is, to beings that can be thought, in line with Badiou's mathematical conception of being-qua-being, as pure multiplicities or infinite sets. The conjunction of a given degree of appearing (or identity-function) and a given being (*étant*) is what determines a specific *object* of a world. The basic idea is not complicated: a being will 'have all the more phenomenal existence in the world, the more vigorously it affirms its identity in that world'. A being is more likely to endure as an object of a world if it appears in ways that enable it either to dominate or at least remain compatible with the objects that surround it. Badiou illustrates the point in a number of ways, including an evocative description of the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE.[20] The victory of Alexander's army over Darius's numerically superior force appears here not as the outcome of any sort of event but as the topo-logical localization or spatialization of the objective properties of a world. This Gaugamela-world is made up of a large number of military objects, for instance the chariots that occupy the centre of the Persian line, the cavalry deployed to the Macedonian right flank, and so on; as these objects confront each other their relative ability to impose themselves or 'affirm their identity' in the situation determines, tautologically, the intensity of their relative existence. Some objects flourish and shine in this world (Alexander's Companion cavalry), others quickly fade into insignificance or non-existence (the Persian chariots).

Correlations

The key logical question at stake in such a sequence may appear straightforward, but Badiou's ontological commitments require him to deploy a formidably elaborate approach in order to answer it: in what sense can we say that the objects which thus appear in the world of Gaugamela

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[20] LM, pp. 233, 260, 296–305.

are the manifestation of the particular multiple-beings that make up the very *being* of that world? Although the precise steps of the demonstration are too technical to summarize here (and in any case far exceed my own understanding of the mathematics at issue), essentially Badiou needs to show that his theory allows him to establish direct formal relations between specific ontological elements of a world and the objects that appear in it. He needs to establish a correlation between a given set of elements and a given range of existential intensities. This requires in turn a demonstration that every appearing object contains minimal and literally fundamental or 'atomic' components, elements whose appearing might be directly prescribed by their ontological counterparts. If the objects that appear in a world can be broken down into such minimal and indecomposable components, then it is logically possible to correlate them directly with the comparably minimal elements of a corresponding mathematical set.

There is no doubting such a logical possibility. Crucially, however, Badiou's theory offers no way of demonstrating that such correlation is actually real or effective. That every such atomic prescription is *real* must be assumed here as a pure postulate, which Badiou names the 'postulate of materialism'.[21] Another of Badiou's examples, a description of the world of a political demonstration as it unfolds on the Place de la République, may help illustrate what is at stake. This little world may include groups of anarchists and Trotskyists, striking postal workers, hesitant members of an undecided union, irritated bystanders, aggressive police. Insofar as they appear as distinctive, then according to Badiou's logic these groups or objects will include at least one atomic element that serves to 'exemplify' the general object—for instance, an exemplary anarchist whose appearance and behaviour typifies what it is to appear as an anarchist in this world: in rivalry with the communists, hostile to the police, and so on. (Badiou pays less attention to the possibility that whatever appears as most 'typical' of a group may instead be the result of a particular dynamic at work in and around that group.)[22] Badiou's assumption is that this atomic anarchist is the worldly manifestation of an actual ontological element that belongs to the situation. So long as we accept the postulate of materialism then at the atomic level it seems that, against any Deleuzo-Bergsonian investment in the virtual, the appearing of every object is directly determined by its actual ontological composition.[23]

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[21] LM, pp. 231, 264–5.   [22] LM, pp. 232, 241.   [23] LM, p. 265.

Equipped with this atomic logic, Badiou moves on to the third task of his 'greater logic'—to show how the appearance and modification of an object in a world has a 'retroactive effect' on the multiple-being underlying it.[24] The goal here, in perhaps the most challenging and elusive sections of *Logics*, is to provide a formal description of what happens to a multiple-being insofar as it exists or is objectified in a situation, above and beyond the infinite multiplicity that it is. In a sense, Badiou's ambition is to renew nothing less than the great Platonic project to reconcile Parmenides and Heraclitus, i.e. eternity and change. For Plato, the question turned on the way in which transient becoming might participate in eternal being; Badiou's concern is with how variable appearing might effectively alter being itself. We know that he defines being per se as 'pure multiplicity', which as such is 'absolutely immobile' and 'inflexibly immutable'.[25] The existential or apparent aspect of a being, on the other hand, is nothing other than constant worldly variation. He summarized the crux of the argument shortly before publishing *Logics*:

> The main theorem of this whole theory demonstrates the existence of a crucial link between appearance and being, namely the retroaction, onto a pure multiple, of the transcendental structurings of a world. Using the pure relational logic of Topoi, we can actually demonstrate that, when it is caught up in a determinate world, a multiple receives an intrinsic *form*. Without doubt, the exploration of this form is the most difficult part of *Logiques des mondes*—just like the theory of truth as a generic sub-set is the most difficult part of *Being and Event*. I hope nevertheless that it receives the attention it deserves since I think, if I may say so, that it's a rather beautiful theory! It shows both that every object is composed of atoms and that every 'homogeneous' part of an object can be synthesized (i.e. enveloped by a dominant term).[26]

In the case of our Gaugamela-world, for instance, the confrontation of various battling objects (disciplined cavalry, ineffectual chariots, poorly equipped auxiliaries) can be assumed to have a retroactively 'ordering' impact on their very being, arranging them in a hierarchy of relative combat-effectiveness. The general idea is that, once elements of being (i.e. pure multiples) have been sutured to appearance in the form of a fundamental or atomic component, they will weave relations amongst themselves by way of the worlds in which they come to appear, and thereby assimilate the structures of a transcendental. The result is 'a

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[24] See in particular LM, pp. 209, 235, 277, 293–6, 303–5.
[25] LM, p. 377.
[26] Badiou, 'Some Replies to a Demanding Friend', p. 235.

kind of objectification, a becoming-object, of pure being' insofar as it appears according to the logical constraints of the world to which it belongs.[27] (I will return to this account of atomic prescription and onto-logical retroaction below.)

Status of relation

This brings us to the last of the four tasks of Badiou's greater logic—an account of the logical status of relation. As noted above, his set-theoretical ontology excludes relation from being by conceiving any function as the set of elements that it generates, and it remains a fundamental point of principle that 'a being qua a being [*l'étant en tant qu'étant*] is, itself, absolutely un-related'. Set theory obliges us to think that 'there are only multiplicities, nothing else. None of these are, by themselves, linked to any other . . . Being, thought as such, in a purely generic fashion, is subtracted from all relation.' Badiou needs then to explain how it is that 'however inconsistent their being, all worlds or situations are implacably bound or related [*liés*]' in their appearing.[28] The core of his new relational theory, however, may still disappoint readers who are drawn to more conventional forms of dialectic. The key assumption is that the appear-ing or existence of an object of a world is nothing other than the ongoing process of its relation to itself. The identity-function that determines the degree of its apparent intensity is a self-reflexive 'morphism', a relation that measures the degree of identity between X and X (always on the assumption that this can vary between minimal and maximal limits). An X that fully identifies itself asserts itself with maximal intensity in the world it inhabits. What Badiou calls a relation between two objects can then be treated as nothing more than a measurement of the relative intensities of their self-identity.

Not only is relation thus conceived as little more than a variation on the elementary relation of *order* (greater-than or lesser-than), there is no clear sense that it can qualify, shape or otherwise affect the objects related. A relation of struggle between two interests or classes, for instance, does not here play a constituent role in their being or becoming so much as illustrate the relative difference in their 'intrinsic' intensity or strength. Such relation always comes after its terms. No relation can increase or

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[27] Badiou, 'Philosophy, Sciences, Mathematics: Interview with *Collapse*', p. 13.
[28] *Court Traité*, pp. 192, 177; and p. 200.

diminish the degree of identity between two terms, and 'a relation creates neither existence nor difference' for the simple reason that it is here the principle of identity itself.[29]

One implication of this is that relations between objects can never result in anything more than the mere modification of a world, even so violent or unpredictable a world as a battle or a political demonstration. The relations described in *Logics* can never serve to mediate or influence genuine change. This remains the exclusive preserve of an event, and as we have seen, an event involves the revaluation of the intensity of a singular object (what appeared as minimally intense now appears as maximally intense) before any alteration in the relations that this newly self-assertive object entertains with others.

Gauging intensities

Badiou illustrates his approach with a brief discussion of the relations between the indigenous inhabitants of Québec and the Francophone settlers. Understood as a world, 'Québec' is the sum of its internal modifications, a complex set of multiple-beings whose relative existential significance has been constantly evolving over the course of four centuries. There is enough geographical and general historical continuity to this evolution (for instance the severity of the winters, the austerity of much of the landscape, the significance of the St Lawrence river, the importance of a French linguistic and cultural inheritance and so on) to allow its inhabitants to see themselves as belonging to a distinctive world.[30] The major conflicts that have taken place in this world—between indigenous peoples and European settlers; between the French and British empires; between the Catholic church and secular society—can then be understood in terms of the intrinsic strength of the warring objects: for example, the British were eventually strong enough to defeat the French armies, but not to impose their language or political values on the majority population. Badiou further suggests that the outcome of a violent and protracted stand-off between Mohawk protestors and Québécois police in the town of Oka in 1990 was decided by the set of operations which continue to measure the relative and evolving intensities of the inhabitants of the contested world that is 'Québec'.

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[29] LM, p. 327; cf. pp. 316–7; 345–6.   [30] LM, pp. 320–1.

Although Badiou's approach here has the value of stressing the 'self-centred' quality of any relation, it invites obvious objections. In a relation of struggle, the first question must indeed always be: what can *we* do to strengthen our position, marshal our resources, expand our range of strategic options, and so on. But what would it mean to assess the 'intensity' of Québécois cultural nationalism without making direct reference to its long history of political marginalization at the hands of the Anglophone minority? How might we understand the ways in which Mohawks today 'appear' in Québec without emphasizing the colonial/anti-colonial relation as such? How might we otherwise understand the refusal of many indigenous people to accept 'Québec' as the name of *their* world? Again, when in the 1950s the federal government began to force the Inuit inhabitants of northern Canada to abandon their traditional lifestyle and take up residence in state-supervised communities, how might we understand the existential consequences of such a transition in non-relational terms?

Furthermore, the non-relational status of what Badiou describes here as a 'singularity' (the conversion of an object's degree of appearing from minimal to maximal) ensures that his revised conception of an event suffers from a simplification similar to that which characterized the 'evental site' of *Being and Event*. Such a site is what locates the occurrence of an event. In Badiou's lexicon, it figures as a sub-set of a situation that has nothing in common with the rest of the situation.[31] By conceiving site and singularity effectively in terms of exclusion pure and simple, however, Badiou evades, rather than illuminates, engagement with the actual power relations that structure situations in dominance.[32] Practical political work is more often concerned with people or situations who are not so much invisible or unseen as under-seen or mis-seen—oppressed and exploited, rather than simply excluded; they do not count for nothing so much as for very little. This difference involves more than nuance. As several generations of emancipatory thinkers have argued, modern

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[31] Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 175, 186. In *Logics of Worlds*, that which 'inappears' is 'absolutely different from' (i.e. has 'no relation with') other terms in its world: LM, pp. 133–4.

[32] In keeping with his insistence that contemporary forms of exclusion serve to 'deprive the vast majority of human beings of their visibility', Badiou concludes that today '*there is no world*', and that 'the great majority of humanity counts for nothing': Badiou, 'The Caesura of Nihilism', lecture given at the University of Cardiff, 25 May 2002; *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, pp. 71–8.

forms of power do not merely exclude or prohibit but rather modulate, guide or enhance behaviour and norms conducive to the status quo; the model of power that seems tacitly to inform Badiou's recent work, by contrast, still appears to pre-date Foucault, if not Gramsci.

IV

In addition to the questions that might be asked of Badiou's reductive theory of relation, there seems to be another and more glaring problem with the basic arrangement of *Logics*. As we have seen, Badiou's general goal is to describe the connection between being and appearing, such that the latter might be shown to exert a retroactive effect on the former. Pure being is the domain of pure multiplicity as such, the domain articulated by mathematics and subtracted from that of materially existing beings (analysed by physics and the other sciences). The domain of appearing, on the other hand, concerns the way in which a given set of beings may appear in this or that world—the way a group of working-class Parisians, for instance, may appear in the world of Napoleon III, or the world of the Commune, or the 'pacified' republican world that emerges after the Commune's repression in the spring of 1871.

However, Badiou assumes but does not account for the status of the middle and mediating term—the status of *beings* (*étants*). Neither Badiou's ontology nor his logic seem to provide any clear place for ordinary ontic reality. What appears in our various Parisian worlds, clearly, are not instances of pure being or multiplicity, but people. Depending on the transcendental configuration of their world, these people can then appear or exist as tranquil workers, patriotic heroes or rebellious insurgents, but in each case the transcendental appears to take the elementary ontic status of its inhabitants for granted. Between the being of a pure multiplicity and an appearing as docile or insurgent lies an abyss without mediation. The space that in other philosophies might be filled by an account of material actualization or emergent self-realization (or any number of alternatives) is one that Badiou, so far, prefers to consign to contingency. If the transcendental of a world determines the ways in which its objects may appear, Badiou seems to presume a meta-transcendental register which simply *gives* a world the ontic raw material of its objects (such that objects can be defined as 'the being-there of the being of a being [*l'être-là de l'être d'un étant*]').[33]

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[33] LM, p. 255.

All through *Logics*, in order to describe the terms that appear as this or that in a given world, Badiou regularly uses the term *étants-multiples*—multiple-*beings* or entities. Although he generally refers to things this way in order to evoke their strictly ontological status (their being as pure numerical multiplicity), he seems to assume that these beings can, without further explanation, simply be treated *as* material or living individuals—for instance as 'human animals', or as the inhabitants of Paris. Badiou knows perfectly well, of course, that given a pure multiplicity or number it makes no sense to move from that number to the appearance of an individual in a world. There is nothing about numbers qua numbers that might distinguish their appearance, in different worlds, on the pages of a book, on electoral registers or on price tags. Badiou knows that the movement can only work in the opposite direction: given a worldly individual we can think the pure being of its being-presented (i.e. its being counted as an element of a set), but we cannot derive what makes a being *a* being (or *this* being) from its mere being.[34] However, he offers no explanation of what is involved in this '*étant-donné*'—and in the absence of any account of the entity or *étant* we can rely only on what appears as given or *donné*. As the Argentinean philosopher and physicist Gabriel Catren has argued, if Badiou's goal here is to develop a philosophy that might rival Hegel's metaphysical system, what remains absent is any substitute for the mediation that allows Hegel to move (via the ontological 'restlessness' of material and then historical reality itself) from the abstract domain of pure logic to the more determinate domains of physical nature or political community. Badiou has yet to think existence not simply as a logical category but as actually determinate or effective, as *wirklich*.[35]

So long as it lacks an account of this mediating process or term, Badiou's analysis of the retroaction of appearing upon being reads as both logically rigorous and materially indeterminate. Insofar as *étants-multiples* are treated as multiples rather than as entities, they are emptied of any ontic dimension; an alteration in the appearing of an *étant* can then be referred back immediately to elements of the numerical set that is supposed to present the pure being of this *étant*, but there is no more reason to assume that this might have any effect on the material, effective or actual configuration of this being (its becoming as a determinate entity) than there is to believe we might derive some knowledge of *a* being from its being.

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[34] See Badiou, 'Some Replies to a Demanding Friend', p. 233.
[35] Gabriel Catren, letter to the author, 12 June 2005.

When pressed on this point Badiou explains that 'what is affected by the "placement" of a multiple in a world is precisely the inconsistency of being as such.'[36] Badiou's equation of ontology and mathematics ensures, as a matter of course, that whatever can be said of pure being will be subtracted or abstracted from what can be said of actual beings. But since the inconsistency of being is further subtracted from the discourse of ontology itself (which can present nothing other than consistencies), and since the ontological status of inconsistency is itself that of a pure implication (the presumption that, prior to the presenting of consistencies, what is thus presented itself inconsists), Badiou's further correlation of being and appearing also ensures that the retroactive effect exerted by the latter upon the former, under the condition of his 'postulate of materialism', might best be described not merely as immaterial but as simply esoteric.

Hence the peculiar and unsettling effect of Badiou's claim to have revived a materialist dialectic. On the one hand, *Logics* is a work of dazzling ambition and breadth, of remarkable conceptual nuance and complexity. By adding a 'phenomenological' and 'objective' dimension to his system, Badiou can fairly claim to have addressed a good many of the questions put to his extra-worldly ontology. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the occasionally arcane intricacy of Badiou's logic in any sense attenuates his fundamentally Platonic commitment to abstraction and simplification. On the contrary, it is precisely in order to compensate for the consequences of his enthusiastically simple if not simplistic conceptions of being (without beings), of appearing (without perception), of relation (without relation), of change (without history), of decision (without alternatives), of exception (without mediation), that Badiou must develop such an elaborate and laborious theory of logical worlds.

V

Over the course of the last forty years Badiou has never compromised on his essential revolutionary commitment, but the development of his philosophy suggests a qualification of its expectations. In his early work the eruption of inconsistency (in the form of mass insurrection) figured as an evanescent but directly historical force, and the project to make the

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[36] Alain Badiou, letter to the author, 3 June 2007.

state 'wither away' had a literal and immediate objective. In *Being and Event* he developed an ontology which accepted the state as an irreducible dimension of being itself: consistency is imposed at both the structural and 'meta-structural' levels of a situation, and a truth evades but cannot eliminate the authority of the state. In *Logics of Worlds* he has gone a little further still, by admitting that the very process of being's appearing ensures that it must always appear as consistent. The upshot is that 'inappearance' comes to serve as a de facto criterion of commitment and truth. In a world structured by compromise and betrayal, Badiou's motto has in effect become: trust only in what you cannot see.

Badiou's conception of political truth has the great merit of distinguishing specific sequences from the ordinary play of social domination, and of routing them through those occasional moments that are structured in terms of the ultimate simplicity of a 'yes or no', 'for or against'. This move, which aligns Badiou with a prescriptive tradition that includes Rousseau and Sartre (as well as Césaire, Fanon, Freire, among others), is surely essential to any political theory worthy of the name. The task remains to ensure that these decisive moments are not weakened by excessive simplification or abstraction. This will require a thoroughly relational ontology. It will also require us to privilege history rather than logic as the most fundamental dimension of a world, and to defend a theory of the subject equipped not only with truth and body but also with determination and political will. It may further require us to take seriously the fact that in some cases—with respect to some 'points' of a world—there can be more than one way of saying yes.

In the 1950s, when he was working on his own dialectical approach to history and subjectivity, Sartre continued to insist that the value of Marxism lay in its capacity to help people to get a concrete grip on the direction of their materially constrained and embattled lives.[37] With the second volume of *Being and Event* Badiou has taken some steps that may remind readers of his Sartrean roots. It begins with an account of militant 'incorporation' in a partisan truth, and it ends with a redefinition of life itself. It is, however, harder to see how this account could be characterized as either materialist or dialectical, other than in relation to the still more immaterialist and exceptionalist orientation of the first volume. Then as now, Badiou's chief concern is less material constraint than

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[37] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, New York 1968, p. 89.

exceptional excess, less determinate negation than abrupt revaluation, less dialectical mediation than immediate subtraction. His latest work is in large part a rigorous and exhilarating theory of logical consequence; the degree to which its subtractive orientation threatens to render this theory materially inconsequential is a question that is likely to divide his readers for some time to come.