

Neo-classic

Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*

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If anyone was in doubt about the continuing grip of French philosophy on the theoretical imagination of the anglophone humanities, the reception of the writings of Alain Badiou must surely have put paid to such reservations. The translation of his magnum opus, *Being and Event*, in spring 2006, brought to eleven the number of his books published in English in eight years – a period following swiftly on, not entirely contingently, from the deaths of Deleuze, Levinas and Lyotard (1995–1998), and coinciding with that of Derrida (2004).^{*} However, it is not simply the number of translations that is remarkable ('remarkable, but not surprising', as Wittgenstein would say), but the fact that a philosophy such as this – for all its idiosyncratic philosophical charms – could so readily have assumed the role of 'French philosophy of the day' within the transnational market for theory.

Badiou's philosophy takes a forbiddingly systematic form; it is anti-historical, technically mathematical and broadly Maoist in political persuasion. It has no interest in (in fact, denies the philosophical relevance of) 'meaning', and appears impervious to feminism. It takes a roguish self-satisfaction in its heterosexism.

Stylized individuality is a condition of branding, and 'difficulty' is a prerequisite of entry into this particular field, but there are more than market factors at work in Badiou's successful transition to international theorist. It is a gauge of a number of things: the desire still invested in the English-language reception of French philosophy; the theoretical heresies that a new generation of the so-called 'old' Left will overlook in exchange for political solidarity (Žižek, master of this field, is Badiou's mentor here); the strategic brilliance

of two interventions – against Deleuze (*The Clamour of Being*, 1997; trans. 2000) and against the 'delirium' of ethics (*Ethics*, 1994; trans. 2001);¹ the inherent brilliance of *Being and Event*, for all its ultimate philosophical madness; and last, but by no means least, the rhetorical power of 'the (re)turn of philosophy itself' – title of an essay of Badiou's from 1992.² It is in the profoundly contradictory character of the return of philosophy in Badiou – at once avant-garde and breathtakingly traditional – that the historical meaning of his thought is to be found.³ To anticipate my conclusion: *Being and Event* is a work – perhaps *the* great work – of philosophical neo-classicism. As such, at the level of philosophical form, it surpasses its ambivalent predecessor, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, in the rigour of its reactionary modernism. The modernity of Badiou's mathematics does not mitigate, but rather reinforces, the authoritarianism of his philosophical axioms and the mysticism of his conception of the event.

From philosophy to Theory and back

It has been the fate of French philosophy within the anglophone humanities since the 1970s to represent contemporaneity in theory. Indeed, by a transcultural quirk of US hegemony, French philosophers are now beginning to *become* contemporary philosophers – that is to say, 'philosophers' in the strong, individualized sense of the word – even in France, via their English-language reception. The English 'philosopher' signifies differently when accompanied by the qualification 'French'. Yet while French philosophers have dominated theoretical developments in the anglophone humanities, it has largely been because of the power-

^{*} Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, Continuum, London and New York, 2005. xxxiii + 526 pp., £19.99 hb., 0 8264 5831 9. Translation of *L'être et l'événement*, Editions du Seuil, 1988 (hereafter EE). Page references to the English translation appear in brackets in the main text. The first of Badiou's books to be translated was *Manifesto for Philosophy* (French edition, 1989), in 1999. 1999 was also the year of the first – and still the best – introductory critical essay on *Being and Event* in English, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*: The Philosophy of Alain Badiou', *Radical Philosophy* 93, January/February 1999, pp. 6–13.

fully *post*-philosophical character of their reception – post-philosophical in a delicately dialectical sense, whereby what is most philosophically productive has been manifest only in a non-philosophical setting.

There were several conditions of this situation, not the least being the *philosophical* problematicity of the disciplinary autonomy of philosophy. Recognition of this has been pretty much a criterion of philosophical modernity since Kant, and it comes in a variety of forms. Most significant in this context are, on the one hand, Derrida's modified extension of Heidegger's destruction of the history of ontology, whereby deconstruction came to occupy the space of Heidegger's postulation of a post-philosophical 'thinking'; and on the other, Althusser's introduction of the term 'Theory' (with a capital T) to designate what he had previously called 'Marxist philosophy' – namely, 'the theory of theoretical practice', or the theory of 'practice in general' – in order, as he put it shortly afterwards (while changing his mind and giving up the usage), to 'reserve the term *philosophy* for *ideological* philosophies'.⁴

In the Anglo-American context, there was a crossing and consequent de-specification of these two post-philosophical fields, and 'Theory' emerged as the name of the generic hybrid. The idea of Theory was adopted in a generalized *non*-Marxist form, in part precisely because this allowed for a sidestepping of the question of its complex relationship to philosophy. (The pragmatism of the native (post-)philosophical tradition had an enabling effect here too.) This was a nifty piece of footwork, in so far as it allowed for the investment of broad transdisciplinary fields by general-theoretical categories – be it the 'textuality' of a general semiotics, the 'discourses' of a Foucauldian historicism, or the topography of Lacanian metapsychology – uninhibited by their ties to philosophy's past. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, as political and institutional contexts changed, and Theory began to succumb to the reification and repetition of its commodification, the disavowal of its relations to philosophy became increasingly problematic. This was especially so once the far less equivocally philosophical work of Levinas and Deleuze was subjected to the same discursive conditions, under which it was (and still is) frequently travestied.

The reaction to this situation was a move away from 'T/theory' and a return to disciplinarity in the humanities, and with it the tradition virtues of both 'old' historicism and aesthetics. As a result, a dual pressure began to build up within the discursive space of Theory for a re-evaluation of the virtues of 'philosophy'. It is

in this context that the *hyper*-philosophical approach of Badiou's *Being and Event* acquires its unique polemical force. Of the trio of post-Althusserians competing within the US academy for the honorary position of French philosopher of the day (the other two are Balibar and Rancière), Badiou is the one who most explicitly – indeed, massively – reinvests the field of Theory with the idea of philosophy. This time, though, (Badiou's Althusserian heritage notwithstanding) it is philosophy *without* Marxism – that is, without Marx's critique of philosophy – indeed, seemingly without any version of the critique of the self-sufficiency of philosophy which has hitherto been a condition of possibility of the continuation of European philosophy, ever since the critique of Hegel at the end of the 1830s.⁵ The self-proclaimed 'return' of philosophy in *Being and Event* is a return to a classical conception of philosophy, with a vengeance. This is its polemical force. It is Badiou's self-declared aspiration 'to have done with finitude'.⁶ The story of *Being and Event's* place in the history of philosophy is a Gothic tale of the doomed attempt of a philosophical classicism to take revenge on modern philosophy. Its result is a magnificent philosophical folly.

The strategic brilliance of Badiou's *Deleuze* lay, in essence, in its reduction of the terms of Deleuze's thought to Badiou's, in the manner of a Heideggerian 'violent reading', by emphasizing its classically philosophical character. Badiou was aided in this task by Deleuze himself: specifically, by the disciplinary conservatism of his final book with Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (1991; trans. 1994), a text that tends to be read (erroneously, in my view) as a kind of methodological summation of Deleuze's thought. The traditionalism of the demarcation of philosophy in *What is Philosophy?* became the point of entry for Badiou's appropriation and destruction of Deleuze's thought. With *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze opened the door to Badiou and, after Deleuze's death, Badiou moved in, exploiting to the full his projection of the two of them as 'a sort of paradoxical tandem'.⁷ In a way, this is where Badiou still resides in his philosophical reception in English – making-over his rival's house – although he also has a political readership, egged on by Žižek's Pauline 'new Lenin'.⁸

Heidegger – Dasein + mathematics = Badiou

Surprisingly, given his frequently expressed antipathy to Heideggerianism,⁹ Badiou's conception of the contemporary philosophical problematic appears at first sight orthodoxly Heideggerian in its starting point:

‘Along with Heidegger, it will be maintained that philosophy as such can only be re-assigned on the basis of the ontological question’ (2). Already, though, there is a difference. For by the ontological question Badiou does not mean ‘what is the *meaning* of Being?’ (Heidegger’s version), but rather more simply ‘what *is* being qua being?’ Furthermore, Badiou takes this ‘what is?’ question to be answered by ontology as the ‘science of being qua being’ – precisely that Greek metaphysical enterprise that Heidegger sought in *Being and Time* to replace with a fundamental ontology, which would no longer treat ‘being qua being’ on the model of particular beings/entities, as the special object of a metaphysical science. At the very outset, *Being and Event* thus polemically opposes itself to Heidegger on the very ground that they ostensibly share, and in a manner that seems to reproduce the precise structure of the object of Heidegger’s critique.

Moreover, the philosophical basis of this opposition does not derive from a critique of the early Heidegger’s version of the question of being, with its ground in the ontic peculiarity of Dasein’s being-ontological. Rather, it derives from Badiou’s independent pursuit of another possibility, another path for thought: a restoration of the rationalist tradition’s grounding of philosophy in a thinking of mathematics. This path is opened up not by a philosophical event, but by a mathematical one: Cantor’s set theory and specifically its treatment of infinity. Yet it cannot be discerned, and hence travelled, without the philosophical thought of being as ‘pure multiplicity’. This thought co-grounds the famous speculative thesis on which Badiou’s system is built: namely, ‘ontology is mathematics’. It is because mathematics is the science of multiplicity, and being is pure multiplicity, that, according to Badiou, mathematics is the science of being. The syllogism is a simple one. (Mathematics is not a method or a model for philosophy here: mathematics *is* ontology.) This is a genuine co-grounding because, as we shall see, it requires Cantorian set theory to make the idea of mathematics as ontology work – to make the speculative thesis productive. There is thus a simple formula for Badiou’s opening move: Heidegger – Dasein + (set-theoretical) mathematics = Badiou.

But what of the ontic peculiarity of Dasein’s being-ontological, which is what allows – indeed, for Heidegger, dictates – philosophy to *ask* the ontological question in the first place? Badiou maintains a symptomatic silence. The issue is crucial since the competing fates of existential ontology and the new classical ontologies of Deleuze and Badiou depend upon it. The latter are polemically anti-phenomenological. But

phenomenology is a stand-in for the real enemy here, which is existential ontology. The question is not that of the possibility, or otherwise, of phenomenology as such (a relatively easy target), but that of the unavailability, or otherwise, of the existential. Badiou seems to believe that the reduction of ontology to mathematics cuts the Gordian knot of the ontically-ontological (‘existence’, in Heidegger’s sense). Yet while mathematics may be in a certain sense inhuman – a position to which defenders of Badiou tend to retreat at this point in the argument – philosophy as meta-ontology has a rather different discursive and historical status. Its inhumanity is no more, or less, than that of the (existential) inhumanity of the human itself.¹⁰

With regard to Heidegger, Badiou criticizes not the existential starting point and ground of his ontology, but the (conceptually independent) temporality of the ‘Greek return’ that is appended to it: ‘the figure of being as endowment and gift, as presence and opening, and the figure of ontology as the offering of a trajectory of proximity’. (He rests on Derrida here.) Inverting Heidegger’s terms, it is this, a poetic ontology ‘haunted by the dissipation of Presence and the loss of origin’ that appears as ‘the essence of metaphysics’ in the pejorative sense (9–10). In contrast, Badiou conceives his own project as thoroughly modern, ‘perhaps even “more-than-modern”’.¹¹ Before we consider this paradoxical more-than-modernity, let us examine more closely the concept of philosophy in *Being and Event*.

A self-sufficient circulation

Being and Event is a systematic work in that it proceeds more or less deductively from its founding propositions – ‘being is pure multiplicity’ and ‘mathematics is the science of multiplicity’ – to derive a series of fundamental categories of Being (Parts I–III), Event (IV and V), Knowledge and Truth (and, one might add, Politics) (VI and VII), ending up with the Subject (VIII). This fourfold structure underlies Badiou’s own more diffuse division of his thirty-six ‘meditations’ into eight parts. In fact, it harbours an even more elemental, tripartite structure, Being–Event–Subject, in so far as the parts on Knowledge and Truth, whilst important, have a largely transitional structural function. Philosophy may have been ‘re-assigned’ on the basis of the ontological question, but it is nonetheless towards the ‘theory of the subject’ (ch. 35 – interestingly, one of the few appearances of the word ‘theory’) that *Being and Event* drives.¹²

Progress is ‘more or less’ deductive in the conventional way of a system, with the steady introduction of

supplementary premisses (explicit and implicit) moving the process forward according to a pattern that, while immanently ‘derived’, is nonetheless structurally pre-figured – the covert aim being logically to redeem, and thereby cover over, the prefiguration, or teleological projection. In this case, both the axiomatic and teleological moments stand out as philosophically decisive, while the demonstrations themselves take the form of a devilish logico-mathematical game, in which Badiou pits himself against a range of self-imposed tasks. The tasks are formidable and the detail of their execution is breathtaking in its ingenuity, even when accompanied by a growing sense of the philosophical redundancy of much of the mathematics, as elementary hermeneutical structures (the selective nature of interpretation, for example) are mathematically redescribed (‘the operator of connection’), as the result of tortuous processes of derivation. (See Meditation 23, ‘Fidelity, Connection’.) This is in many ways an Alice-in-Wonderland world, in which nothing non-axiomatic can be accepted until it has been deduced, mathematically recoded, as part of the system. In fact, this is an ethical imperative for *Being and Event*, in which deduction is ‘the means via which, at each and every moment, ontological fidelity to the extrinsic eventness of ontology is realized’ (242).

Yet Badiou’s categories, the philosophical consequence of the thought that ontology is mathematics, whilst the result of a prodigious and highly abstract formal procedure, are in no way merely formal:

The categories that this book deploys, from the pure multiple to the subject, constitute the general order of a thought which is such that it can be practiced across the entirety of the contemporary system of reference. These categories are available for the service of scientific procedures just as they are for those of politics or art. They attempt to organize an abstract vision of the requirements of the epoch. (4)

Badiou’s categories thus appear to function much like the categories of Theory – that is, transdisciplinarily – although they have been derived quite differently, and aspire to a more lofty fundamental status. (Concept-formation in the field of Theory itself has been, historically, extremely eclectic, but generally involves some process of generalization and re-theorization of concepts from empirical disciplines, rather than deductive derivation, and the status of the result is usually ultimately pragmatic.) Precisely what the status of Badiou’s more fundamental philosophical concepts is, however, is by no means easy to grasp. Everything hinges on, first, how Badiou arrives at the thesis that ‘ontology is mathematics’, and second, how we under-

stand the operation of mathematics (qua ontology) both *upon* and *within* philosophy itself. For despite the Heideggerian starting point, Badiou insists that ‘philosophy is not centred on ontology – which exists as a separate and exact discipline’ (mathematics), but rather ‘*circulates*’ between ontology (= mathematics) and its other conditions, or more broadly ‘throughout the referential’ (3, 19).

Despite appearances, Badiou is insistent that his philosophy has no ‘foundational ambition’. The reason for this is that it recognizes that it has ‘conditions’. This is a rare historical and material moment in Badiou’s thought. Philosophy thus cannot be absolutely self-grounding; self-grounding is not the basis of its self-sufficiency. Rather, what philosophy does ‘is propose a conceptual framework in which the contemporary compossibility of these conditions can be grasped’ (4). The way it does this is ‘by designating amongst its ... conditions, as a singular discursive situation, ontology itself in the form of pure mathematics’. This designation is described as ‘delivering’ philosophy (*délivre* EE, 10 – ‘setting free’ would perhaps be better) and thereby ultimately ‘ordaining’ or preparing it (*l’ordonée*) for ‘the care of truths’. (The Pascal epigraph to Meditation 21 – the starting point of Balibar’s essay on Badiou in *RP* 115 – reads: ‘The history of the Church should, properly speaking, be called the history of truth’.¹³) The role of philosophy here is thus a complex, if not a contradictory one. For it appears to act prior to its own constitution. Philosophy (i) *designates* one of its own conditions, as a consequence of which (ii) it is set free, allowing it (iii) to ‘propose’ a conceptual framework in which the contemporary compossibility of its *other* conditions can be grasped. Whether these other conditions are also ‘designated’, or have some kind of more brute factuality, qua conditions, is at this stage unclear. But it is the first move which is of greatest critical interest: philosophy’s designation of one particular condition (ontology in the form of pure mathematics) grounds the possibility of its grasping the compossibility of its conditions as a whole. Even if the other conditions are designated, one designation is qualitatively different from the rest. But how does philosophy do this? How does philosophy arrive at the conclusion that ‘mathematics is ontology’? And what, according to Badiou, are philosophy’s other conditions? It is at this point that the historical judgements set out at the start of *Being and Event* reveal themselves to be no mere introductory contextualization (as might be thought), but the argumentative basis of a project that otherwise presents itself in a far ‘purer’ form.

Badiou offers varying overlapping descriptions of philosophy's current conditions in the introduction to *Being and Event* and elsewhere (principally in *Manifesto for Philosophy*). But in *Being and Event* these are initially grouped into three 'assumptions about the current global state of philosophy', which can be summarized as follows.

1. 'Heidegger is the last universally recognizable philosopher.'
2. Mathematics and logic have conserved 'the figure of scientific rationality' as a paradigm for thought.
3. 'A post-Cartesian doctrine of the subject is unfolding', which has *non*-philosophical origins and complications.

These three assumptions give rise to the following prescriptions and specifications:

1. Philosophy can only continue on the basis of the ontological question. (Otherwise, presumably, it would not be connected to 'the last universally recognizable philosopher', and hence its philosophical status would be in doubt.)
2. It is post-Cantorian mathematics (= set theory) that is the scientifically rational paradigm for thought.
3. The places of practical unfolding of the post-Cartesian doctrine of the subject are psychoanalysis, contemporary art and politics.

It is the second and third of these three conditions, taken together, that will subsequently be presented, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, as the 'four' conditions of philosophy, where they are further reduced to: the *matheme*, the poem, political intervention, and love. (Badiou may reject Heidegger's poetic ontology, but he accepts his anachronistic Romantic reduction of art to poetry.) The philosophically important condition – the one that secures the general compossibility of the other conditions – is missing from *Manifesto for Philosophy*. This is the 'singular discursive situation' of 'ontology itself in the form of pure mathematics' – the belonging together of the first two assumptions (above). Addressing the classical ontological question anew (having rejected Heidegger's approach as poetic), in the historical-intellectual context of post-Cantorian mathematics, leads to the sudden flash of insight that mathematics is ontology. In Badiou's words, 'mathematics is ontology' is 'a meta-ontological or philosophical thesis necessitated by the current cumulative state of mathematics (after Cantor, Gödel and Cohen) and philosophy (after Heidegger)' (15, emphasis added). This is the bedrock of Badiou's philosophy. Philosophy, which had thought it was – or, in any case, should

be – ontology, finds itself 'originally separated from ontology' (13). Meanwhile, mathematics, although it turns out (unknowingly) to be – and hence always to have been – ontology, is nonetheless so discursively, not immanently, that is, only from the meta-ontological standpoint of philosophy. Mathematics, qua ontology, is 'commanded by philosophical rules, and not by those of contemporary mathematics' (13). To put it another way: philosophy *transcodes* mathematics into ontology. So although philosophy is not ontology, it nonetheless still governs the ontological meaning of mathematics (it is philosophy as meta-ontology that asks the ontological question), and in this way remains the 'queen of the sciences'. This is the paradoxical result of its history, which delimits the domain of ontology without itself ever having been able to answer the ontological question.

Furthermore, and crucially for *Being and Event*, philosophy is also concerned with the supposedly non-ontological and specifically modern topic of 'what-is-not-being-qua-being' (15). On Badiou's account, this topic was introduced into philosophy, historically, by the third item on the original list of philosophy's current conditions: the post-Cartesian doctrine of the subject. For, it is by circulating between this supposedly non-philosophical condition (although one can actually find it in Kant)¹⁴ and the unifying condition of the thesis that ontology is mathematics that philosophy produces the category of 'what-is-not-being-qua-being'. 'What-is-not-being-qua-being' (the event) is the negative ontological register of a non-ontological condition that becomes thinkable via the post-Cartesian subject. It is the mark of the distinctively *post*-Cartesian, and hence truly 'modern', status of Badiou's philosophy, despite its (Heideggerian) assignation 'on the basis of the ontological question'.

Beneath its meta-ontological status, philosophy thus finds that it has its own quasi-ontological discourse after all. It is this quasi-ontological category of 'what-is-not-being-qua-being' that furnishes *Being and Event* with its project: namely, to give a philosophical elaboration of the concept of the subject by locating it, formally, via the philosophical rule over mathematics, in relation to a derivation of the categories of being (i.e. precisely what it is not). Hence the fourfold teleological structure of the book (above). In this respect, the text that *Being and Event* is rewriting/replacing is less Heidegger's *Being and Time* than Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

This is a strikingly original conception of philosophy, which, nonetheless, for all its originality, continues the pursuit of the mainstream of postwar French

philosophy: namely, a theoretical anti-humanism or critique of the subject that is *anti*-Hegelian and *post*-Heideggerian in its basic historico-philosophical affiliations. Like all singular philosophical trajectories, Badiou's thought is heavily weighted towards its beginnings, its inaugural philosophical moves. And, as we have seen, although pronounced as 'global' (*à échelle mondiale* – worldscale), these are highly specific. They carry with them three dubious philosophical assumptions:

1. In the reformulation of Heidegger's ontological question and the designation of its appropriate (mathematical) form of address, there is the assumption that ontology has no immanent existential-phenomenological or semantic presuppositions.
2. As consequence of its philosophical or meta-ontological treatment of ontology, there is the assumption that 'ontology' is exhausted by an all-inclusive opposition between 'being-qua-being' and 'what-is-not-being-qua-being'. (Here, not just despite, but even more by virtue of, Badiou's departure from Heidegger, the standard Hegelian criticisms of Heidegger would seem to apply.)
3. With respect to philosophy's historical conditions, there is the assumption that there are only four historico-philosophically privileged partners, or, as they are also called, 'generic procedures' or 'truth procedures'. One might ask, for example, as Žižek has asked, 'what about the economic?' Not in the quasi-disciplinary sense, to which Badiou restricts himself in specifying his conditions, but in the historical-ontological sense of the social conditions of biological reproduction. Is there really no 'truth' to be had there?

Badiou's lack of interest in this eminently materialist topic (oddly, he continues to insist on his 'materialism') corresponds to his neglect of philosophical critiques of the self-sufficiency of philosophy – a topic on which Marx's and Heidegger's thought converges. For while his image of philosophical thinking is the attractive one of a *practice of circulation* between its conditions, this practice is nonetheless conceived as fiercely self-sufficient in its taking up of philosophy's conditions into itself – including its ur-condition, mathematics as ontology, whereby, as he puts it, meta-ontologically, philosophy reorganizes the knowledge of mathematics by means of 'the imaging powers of language' (xiv). Ontology may be mathematical, but philosophy (mathematics' meta-ontological guide, without which its ontological status could never be known), remains fundamentally linguistic and conceptual in a manner

that Badiou subsequently actively disavows. Philosophy's reorganization of mathematical thought must thus appear in the guise of axiomatic decision, as a philosophical, rather than just a mathematical, procedure.

Unlike a seventeenth-century philosophical system, Badiou claims no self-evidence for his axioms. Rather, they are taken over from mathematics – the nine axioms of set theory, it is claimed, concentrate 'the greatest effort of thought ever accomplished to this day by humanity'. They 'found' mathematics as 'theory of the pure multiple' (499). Within mathematics itself, these axioms are the result of 'decisions' with a variety of functional justifications, and they are the object of ongoing and intensifying dispute. Within philosophy, however, they are treated as authoritative, as a consequence of the prior and fundamental decision to give mathematics sovereignty over ontology. The content of this decision is an identification of the *concept* of multiplicity at stake in the thesis that 'being is pure multiplicity' with the *concept* of multiplicity at stake in mathematics, and in set theory in particular. Everything follows from this founding identification.

Using it, the Heideggerian distinction between being and beings (being qua being and the being of beings) can be re-presented as one between 'inconsistent' pure multiplicity and 'consistent' impure multiplicity. The former can be shown to be properly called 'the void', since it cannot be counted 'as one' ('prior to the count the one is not' [52]); and the latter can be shown always to be situational (restricted, structural) because it can. Set theory can then be rolled out to expound the intricacies of the different ways in which different things can be counted. Or, rather, what there is can be determined by the structure of the count. Ontology is severed from all phenomenological relations to objects. But only because Badiou *decided* to so sever it, in advance. He then has the awkward task of restoring a connection between his set-theoretical mathematical entities, philosophically received ontological concepts (like nature and history) and the world – itself conveniently reduced, decisionistically, to the 'four conditions' of philosophy (the matheme, the poem, politics and love).

The idea of the axiomatic decision re-presents the element of contingency inherent in all historical hermeneutics, logico-philosophically: that is, abstracted (or, as Badiou would say, subtracted) from its historical context – and hence from discursive justification – as the pure act of a philosophical subject. The authoritarianism of this philosophical axiomatics (philosophy by decree) is the political correlate of the mystery of the Badiouian 'event'.

Idealism of the encounter (or, structuralism + faith = event)

One of the main effects of the reduction of ontology to mathematics is the de-temporalization of being and non-being alike. This is Badiou's fundamental difference from – indeed, inversion of – Heidegger's early philosophy. It is covered over, to a great extent, by the word 'event' and the quasi-existential terminology – 'situation', 'decision', 'intervention', 'fidelity' – that accompanies it. But, once grasped, it reveals the extent to which *Being and Event* is at heart a structuralist text. Time is reduced to two dimensions – synchrony and diachrony – and diachrony is no more than a serial ordering of synchronically defined situations. Situations are considered 'historical' in which there is 'at least one evental site' ('an absolutely singular multiple'), but there is no unity to these situations, no 'evental situation' and hence no 'History' (176–80).

The everyday meaning of 'event' (something that brings about a change, mediating a 'before' and an 'after' in three-dimensional time) is both temporal and narrative. But while Badiou's 'event' is indeed a moment of change – fundamental change – the change that it represents is understood to have *no relation* to the situation in which it occurs. It is conceived not as a link in a narrative chain, but as absolute novelty, a pure beginning, which is literally 'unnameable' in the language of the situation. This is both its grandeur and its pathos. Events do not occur within being. Events are subtracted from being. Events have situations as their 'sites', since there must always be a specific situation in which an event occurs, in order that it surpass it. However, even though the event 'belongs' to that situation, it is not 'included' in it. The event thus has the 'being of non-being' – not because it 'transcends' being qua being, but rather precisely the opposite, because of its proximity to it. (Being qua being – inconsistency multiplicity/pure presentation – it should be remembered, is the void.)

This is the central philosophical claim of *Being and Event*. The mathematical interpretation, and hence ontological demonstration, of the thesis of the non-being of the event is the hinge of the book. It joins 'being' to 'subject'. And it opens the way for the quasi-existential terminology that is the basis of Badiou's philosophico-political 'militancy'. It is via this 'militancy' that his thought communicates to whatever non-technical audience it can muster, through his shorter publications.

In brief, and without the formalization, Badiou's 'matheme of the event' is a set-theoretical (= ontological), axiomatic translation, and hence philosophical

transformation, of the intuitive notion that events exceed the situation to which they belong. It holds that an event is a multiple (everything is a multiple) composed of the elements of its site *and also* itself; that is, it is a set that belongs to itself, or what the logician Mirimanoff called an 'extraordinary' set. However, 'extraordinary' sets violate the 'axiom of foundation', which Badiou had earlier made a 'metaontological thesis of ontology' (190). (The axiom of foundation stipulates that any non-void set must possess at least one element whose intersection with the initial set is void; thereby prohibiting self-belonging, avoiding Russell's paradox, and ensuring regularity and order in the realm of the countable.) The event is thus excluded from being: 'the event is not'. As such, however, it has 'the being of non-being' (what is not counted, and hence represented, within the situation), also described as 'the incandescent non-being of an existence' (183). In presenting the excess of presentation over what is representable, the event is said to be on the 'edge' of being itself, or on the edge of the void. Yet, in being composed, in part, by the elements of its site, it still has a relation to the representable. It is thus *not* an instance of the void (being) itself – there can be no such 'instances' – but of the void *within* a situation. It is said to impose itself 'between the void and itself' (182), although it would appear, rather, to stand between the void and the evental site, participating in but differing from each (a paradigm case of mediation, from a Hegelian point of view).¹⁵

This is all very technical, but it is crucial to Badiou because it provides a mathematical (= ontological) explanation of the *possibility* of what otherwise appears from the standpoint of a de-temporalized being as inexplicable: namely, novelty. Mathematics has a transcendental function here. The argument seems to be that since there is a 'place' for such an irruption within the set-theoretical count, this counters any possible accusations of arbitrariness or mysticism. However, this is not so clear, given that the demonstration is the result of a series of prior philosophical *decisions* (the mathematical restriction on the concept of being, de-temporalization, and the absolutization of novelty), which produced the 'extraordinary' status of the event in the first place. When the rationales of these philosophical decisions are taken into account, 'phenomenology' turns out to be harder to avoid than is supposed by the cheerleaders for axiomatics. On the other hand, *belief* – sheer belief – is nonetheless at the heart of Badiou's philosophy. And it is hard to eliminate its religious connotations. Indeed, in a kind of philosophical double bluff, Badiou courts them.

The main difficulty for Badiou's conception of the event is that being *absolutely* new it is unknowable and unnameable. It can 'only be revealed in the retroaction of an interventional practice' (178) which arises not out of knowledge, but out of faith: specifically, fidelity to the 'truth' of the event in question. In this respect, the event is the *product* of 'post-evental' intervention and can only be sustained by it. The interventional practice in question is the 'illegal choice' of a name for the unnameable event. More broadly, fidelity takes the form of being true to the implications of the event, as worked out by the 'operator of connection', by *organizing* a fidelity to its meaning. This is a two-stage procedure. Badiou expounds this problematic from the point of view of 'Pascal/Choice'. But the analogy is misleading, since the real problem here is not the same as that of Pascal's wager. It is the possibility and the consequences of *political delusion*. This is no small matter, especially given Badiou's personal political affiliations. It arises because Badiou separates truth from knowledge, absolutely. (A distinction between truth and knowledge is a condition of philosophy; their *absolute* separation, on the other hand, is the path to mysticism.) Yet the problem cannot even be thought from the standpoint of the separation, because fidelity to one's chosen event can never be cognitively mistaken. It is a matter of pure belief. Belief not only that the world will *actually* render up 'events' in Badiou's sense (his ontology only establishes their possibility), *and* that they will be 'revealed' to the retroactive agents of interventional practice, but also belief in these events themselves, irrespective of any cognitive or hermeneutical significance, manifestations of the truth of being. This is the religious dimension: the faith of 'militancy' or what one might call Maoism *without* the self-criticism. (Faith in the event is militant because it speaks in the name of the unnameable, and hence against the established order, or what Badiou calls, with a rather wearing pun, 'the state of the situation'.)

Being and Event provides the onto-theology for a religious conception of political practice. Badiou's only barrier to this slippage of politics back into religion is his linking of 'being in truth' to the thought of 'the generic'. However, since this link is made via truth's *indiscernibility*, and a pure nomination of the indiscernible, one might be forgiven for thinking that it reproduces the structure of the problem, in a formal manner, rather than dealing with it.¹⁶ Badiou embraces 'the randomness of the "militant" trajectory' (337). Indeed, it is 'randomness' alone that transcodes faith (fidelity to the encounter with the event) into 'materialism'— which is understood here,

as in late Althusser, in a restricted Democritian sense. No residue remains of Marx's sense of materialism – a materialism of practice – as a critique of the self-sufficiency of philosophy.

Space prohibits entering into the complexities of 'the generic' – a term taken from the mathematician P.J. Cohen and prized by Badiou as the 'emblem' of his own thought (15) – save to note that, as a post-dialectical (abstract and indeterminate) substitute for *Aufhebung*, it is the procedural path to the infinity of truth, and functions as the final transition to the theory of the subject. The generic is said to 'found the very being of any truth', a truth being 'that which always makes a hole in knowledge' (327), just as, for Lacan, a subject is a hole in being. For Badiou, subjectivization is 'interventional nomination *from the standpoint of the situation*'. Only a subject can 'force' a new situation to exist. The 'entire being' of the subject is 'to encounter terms in a militant and aleatory trajectory'. It is 'solely ... the local effects of an evental fidelity'. As such, ontology can 'think its law' but not 'the subject itself' (393, 342, 395, 406, 411). This leads to a hallucinatory terminological crescendo as the whole apparatus of the book is condensed into a series of attempts to describe this law:

A subject is what deals with the generic indiscernibility of a truth, which it accomplishes amidst discernible finitude, by a nomination whose referent is suspended from the future anterior of a condition. A subject is thus, by the grace of names, both the *real* of the procedure (the enquiring of the enquiries) and the *hypothesis* that its unfinishable result will introduce some newness into presentation. A subject emptily names the universe to-come which is obtained by the supplementation of the situation with an indiscernible truth. At the same time, the subject is the finite real, the local stage, of this supplementation. Nomination is solely empty inasmuch as it is full of what is sketched out by its own possibility. A subject is the self-mentioning of an empty language. (399–400)

The 'theory of the subject' really does seem to have reached the end of the road here.

For Badiou, the event, politics and the subject are all extremely *rare* (344, 392). Historically, different fields of activity are taken to be defined by the proper names associated with events to which new forms of subjectivization correspond: 'Saint Paul for the Church, Lenin for the Party, Cantor for ontology, Schoenberg for music' (393). Apart from the claim for Cantor, the canon is conventional. But the historical content of Badiou's philosophy is not itself philosophical (how could it be?). Rather, it involves a massive operation

of philosophical re-presentation of the consequences of 'decisions' taken elsewhere. Badiou is insistent that his thought is modern, 'perhaps even "more-than-modern"'. However, it is in this 'more' (which is also less than modern) that his neo-classicism resides.

Modernism + classicism = neo-classicism

It will be as well to start with Badiou's historical self-consciousness. This is indeed that of a combination of the classical and the modern, although the combination is understood thematically, within the time-consciousness of historicism, rather than as a matter of philosophical form; and Badiou's presentations of it are symptomatically inconsistent. In *Being and Event*, the classical philosophical problematic of being and truth is understood to come together with the distinctively modern problematic of the subject (inaugurated by Descartes, but moved decisively beyond him by Lacan), on the basis of the modernity of the mathematics of Cantor and Gödel and Cohen. *Being and Event's* modernity is thus that of both 'the subject' and set theory as a paradigm of rational thought. In Badiou's 2003 Preface to his *Theoretical Writings*, on the other hand, his work is understood 'to allow us to transcribe the classical problematic (being, truth, subject) into a conceptual assemblage that is not only modern, but perhaps even more-than-modern'. Oddly, the subject is classicized here and Badiou's philosophy attains an autonomy from its own classical problematic via eight 'new technical concepts': mathematical multiplicity, the plurality of infinities, the void as proper name of being, the event as trans-being, fidelity, the subject of enquiries, the generic and forcing.¹⁷

This relative decline of the subject within Badiou's historical self-understanding corresponds to the shift of a greater part of the burden of philosophical modernity onto mathematics and its meta-ontological transcodings. Yet it is precisely the idea that *philosophy* is to be pursued, systematically, through a thinking of mathematics that is Badiou's philosophy's primary classical, rationalist and idealist trait – its return to Plato – however modern the maths. This is the 'more' that is also less than modern, the carrier of the neo-classicism of Badiou's thought.

[Those] who thrive on slogans, have always had the tactical advantage that they need only bring forth again, from a period of imprisonment, one single means ... once cast aside as hopelessly antiquated, in order to launch it as an avant-garde achievement.¹⁸

This is particularly clear when we consider the broader polemical context of Badiou's thought: his

expressed desire to 'undo' the 'disastrous consequences' of the twentieth-century linguistic turn, and more fundamentally, to turn away from Romanticism, very broadly conceived, by which Badiou means any temporalization of conceptuality. For Badiou, Romanticism is 'any disposition of thinking which determines the infinite with the open, or as horizontal correlate for the historicity of finitude'. It is the historical function of the philosophical understanding of Cantor's mathematics 'to have done' with this finitude'.¹⁹ This is Badiou's neo-classical delusion and his own historicism of 'progress'.

Just as Badiou's conception of philosophical modernity is historicist and inconsistent, so his conception of neo-classicism is similarly temporally naive, and comes in two separate versions. On the one hand, at a philosophical level, in *Being and Event*, neo-classicism is associated with a 'constructivist' orientation in thought (exemplified by Leibniz), which

commands us to confine ourselves ... to the continuity of an engendering of parts regulated by the previous language. A neo-classicist is not a reactionary, he is a partisan of sense.... The neo-classicist fulfils the precious function of the guardianship of sense on a global scale. He testifies that there *must* be sense. (292)

This fits in with the role of mathematics in Badiou's thought in establishing continuity with classical philosophy. On the other hand, elsewhere, Badiou associates neo-classicism exclusively with scholasticism – 'academicization' and 'specialization' – and, in mathematics, with 'the little style', to which he opposes his own 'grand style'.²⁰ In neither case does he register the essential modernity of neo-classicism as a reaction against the modern *within* its own terms: a new beginning. Neo-classicism was (and is) a reactionary avant-garde – harbinger of the future of a past that is no more, if it ever was.

Being and Event is a philosophical neo-classicism because it exhibits a classicism that is taken up *into* its modernity. Formulaically: modernism + classicism = neo-classicism. In fact, in historicist terms, since neo-classicism was a phenomenon of the 1920s, Badiou's neo-classicism is a neo-neo-classicism, a *return* to neo-classicism, or neo-classicism squared. Badiou is to contemporary European philosophy what the Picasso of the 1920s was to the art of that day. Musically, Badiou thinks he is Schoenberg, but he is actually Stravinsky.

It should be clear from these formulations that I understand neo-classicism, primarily, as a historical category of cultural form and only secondarily a stylistic or formal term. This is not the neo-classicism

of conventional musical terminology – an objectivist reaction to the expressionism of late Romanticism (present in Badiou’s ‘academicization’). As Adorno puts it, ‘expressionism is objectivity’. Rather, it is Adorno’s sense of neo-classicism as a historical regression to means and forms that no longer have any *social* objectivity, however formally ‘objectivist’ they may appear. In artistic terms, this means appeals to beauty, harmony, consonance, tonality – ‘a questionable orderliness’ that provides ‘a cloak of forced affirmation’.²¹ Even when this forced affirmation is an affirmation of the new. We can see this in the compositional form of *Being and Event*.

Badiou identifies three strands, thematically, within the overarching form of a series of ‘meditations’: the conceptual, the textual and the meta-ontological, or philosophical interpretations of the mathematical. However, this is a weak (possibly ironic) rhetorical gesture to the Cartesian tradition. It establishes little linkage to the specificity of Descartes’ practice: there is no narrative of the philosophical subject here holding it all together, in fact, supposedly, no narrativity at all. The presentational form of the book is better viewed from the standpoint of its combination of systematicity with digressive textual historical-philosophical self-consciousness. This systematicity encloses both Badiou’s conceptual and meta-ontological strands. While the historical-philosophical digressions on particular thinkers (Aristotle, Spinoza, Hegel, Mallarmé, Pascal, Hölderlin, Leibniz, Rousseau, Descartes/Lacan – to each modern philosopher, his or her own history of philosophy) interposes an intermittent modernism at the level of form:

neo-classicism practices the old custom of joining brokenly disparate models together. It is traditional music combed in the wrong direction. The surprises, however, fade away like little pink clouds; they are nothing but a volatile disturbance of the order within which they remain.²²

Notes

1. Reviewed by Keith Ansell-Pearson and Peter Dews in *Radical Philosophy* 103, September/October 2000, pp. 51–3, and *Radical Philosophy* 111, January/February 2002, pp. 33–7, respectively.
2. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, SUNY Press, New York, 1999, pp. 113–40. This was originally published in French in *Conditions*, Seuil, Paris, 1992.
3. Lecerclé remarks, ‘There is no point in a historical treatment of Badiou’s thought, which is explicitly anti-historicist.’ ‘Cantor, Lacan, Mao’, RP 93, p. 7. But this is a non-sequitur, quite apart from its conflation of historical thinking with historicism, shared with Badiou (and inherited from structuralism). In other regards,

Lecerclé is less concerned to maintain a strictly immanent approach to Badiou’s thought. His example of an application of Badiou’s system – to a reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – is happy to violate the terms of its self-understanding (as one must) by treating it hermeneutically, as a metanarrative. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11. This is also the way it functions, practically, in its cultural dissemination.

4. Louis Althusser, ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ (1963) – ‘Remarks on the Terminology Adopted’ (1965), *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1969, p. 162.
5. One could say that Althusser’s own philosophy rapidly became a philosophy without Marxism too, in so far as his attempt to produce a Marxist philosophy was plagued by a split between its ‘Marxist’ and its ‘philosophical’ aspects – forever converting Marx’s critique of philosophy (his materialism) back into philosophical categories, which consequently clashed with the rest of Marx’s thought, all the way down to his final ‘aleatory materialism’ of the encounter. See John Kraniuska, ‘Althusser after Althusser’, below, pp. 38–42.
6. Alain Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Mathematics: Infinity and the End of Romanticism’ (1992), in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, p. 25.
7. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2000, p. 4.
8. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Lenin’s Choice’, Afterword to V. I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London and New York, 2002, pp. 165–336. This political reading finds its philosophical correlate in the tendency to contrast the philosophy–science–art triad of Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* with Badiou’s four ‘conditions’ of philosophy – science, art, politics and love – in order to imply that Badiou’s philosophy is both ‘more political’ than Deleuze’s and has a greater range. However, the precise opposite might also be argued: namely, that Badiou’s strictly exceptionalist conception of politics is a narrow variant of a classical conception that cannot grasp the fundamental ubiquity and complexity of the forms of power in capitalist societies, and consequentially fails to grasp their political processes in their most basic – that is, ontological – aspects. It is precisely a similar narrowness in its conception of politics that characterizes the recently rechristened ‘old’ Left, albeit on the basis of radically different theoretical presuppositions.
9. See, for example, the opening chapters of *Manifesto for Philosophy*.
10. The question of the ontological status of mathematical reason is relevant to the critical meaning of Badiou’s thought insofar as it is via mathematics that Badiou attempts to occupy the theological ideality of classical rationalism in a secular manner. On this model, mathematical truths are not merely eternal, but are unrelated to historical time. Mathematics has a (empirical) history as a discipline, but no immanent historicity. However, this question is subordinate to that of the ontological status of philosophical reason (in Badiou’s terms, the ontological status of metaontology), into which mathematics is taken up. Appealing to the ‘eventness’ (that is, the non-being) of ontology itself (242) begs this latter question, which Badiou literally cannot think, since he

- has no ontology of social being.
11. Alain Badiou, 'Author's Preface', *Theoretical Writings*, p. xv.
 12. 'Theory of the subject' is the title of an earlier book by Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, Seuil, Paris, 1982. It was followed by *Peut-penser la politique*, Seuil, Paris, 1985 (*Can Politics Be Thought?*, Duke University Press, forthcoming), which contains initial versions of the concepts of event and intervention. *Being and Event* takes up the thought of these two previous texts in order to re-present it, systematically, on the basis of its 'ontological conditions' (489), in the course of which it is, inevitably, modified. The telos driving the systematic structure of *Being and Event* thus comes from these earlier works.
 13. Étienne Balibar, 'The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy* 115, September/October 2002, pp. 16–28.
 14. See Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, Alain de Libera, 'Subject', *Radical Philosophy* 138, July/August 2006, pp. 15–42, especially pp. 29–32. Kant simultaneously founds and 'decentres' the modern philosophical concept of the subject. As such, he is both the first truly 'Cartesian' and the first 'post-Cartesian' philosopher – hence his unparalleled, and continuing, centrality to contemporary philosophy.
 15. Badiou is less fastidious with linguistic/conceptual determinations than mathematical ones, despite his (formal) acknowledgement of 'the imaging power of language' as the necessary medium of philosophy. Note the shift in the use of 'existence' in his argument above, from a conventional ontological meaning – the axiom of foundation 'forecloses extraordinary sets from all existence' (190; EE, 210, trans. altered) – to a de-temporalized and generalized existential one, according to which it is precisely this foreclosure from 'existence' (meaning 'being') that defines the singular 'existence' of the event, in a manner not so dissimilar from the later Heideggerian *Ereignis*. In this respect, Badiou's thought might be compared to a traditional metaphysical (= scientific) version of the later Heidegger. Although generally absent from the text after his inaugural citation, Heidegger lurks in the shadows of Part V, 'The Event: Intervention and Fidelity', in its final meditation, named 'Hölderlin'.
 16. Badiou's model for such fidelity is Saint Paul. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997), trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004.
 17. Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, p. xv.
 18. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1948), trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (1973), Sheed & Ward, London, 1987, p. 210.
 19. Badiou, 'Philosophy and Mathematics: Infinity and the End of Romanticism', in *Theoretical Writings*, pp. 21–38, pp. 24–5.
 20. Badiou, 'Mathematics and Philosophy', in *ibid.*, pp. 3–20, p. 5.
 21. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp. 48, 209.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

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