In much of French philosophy today, as Gilles Deleuze observes, “the function of the singular is replacing that of the universal.” The switch is subtle but significant. The singular is, naturally, one, unique. If the universal opens a general space for the distinction and relation of specific individuals, the singular creates the medium for its own expression or existence, a field of absolute self-distinction. The singular, as Deleuze defines it, exists in the absence of the specific. It is by escaping the specific – the realm of the merely individual or particular – that the singular grounds its very existence as such, as absolute, as disinterested, as beyond negotiation or “discussion.” The singular is sovereign in something like the absolutist sense (concentrated in the monarch, immanent to the whole political field). Contemporary French versions of such a singular reality abound. Through the widely shared commitment to a singularity without specificity, to a “subject without vis-à-vis” (MP 74), the philosopher Alain Badiou looks forward, today, to “a possible regrouping of Lacan, Sartre and myself, on the one hand, and on the other, of the Heideggerians and, in some ways, Deleuze and Lyotard [...] – a somewhat unexpected formal regrouping of the philosophy of these last thirty years” (“L’Entretien de Bruxelles” 23).

Badiou’s own philosophy of a generic singularity is perhaps the most rigorously argued, most exacting, most original contribution to this emerging configuration. His is “a singularity without predicate, an infinity without determination or immanent hierarchy, which I call the generic” (DO 13-14; cf. EE 194). Badiou aims to “formulate a philosophy of the singular that is, at the same time, capable of being a philosophy of the decision and of the wager [du pari]” (DP 28), a philosophy based on a militant and performative conception of “subjectification.” An individual becomes a subject in Badiou’s sense by first declaring and then maintaining his or her fidelity to an evanescent event which cannot itself be recognised in nor specified by the situation in which it takes place – for instance, a political revolution, an artistic innovation, a scientific breakthrough, a falling in love. Such a subject asserts a coherence without objectivity, which provides Badiou with his definition of truth, a wholly subjective truth sustained in the absence of all objective specifications. In other words, Badiou seeks to distinguish subjective truth from objective knowledge, and to show how a subject affirms truth through its subtraction from knowledge.

The truths wagered by such a philosophy are necessarily aspecific or “indiscernible,” “in-different,” the stuff of a radical homogeneity; they can be grouped, for reasons explained below, in the modes of “revolution, passion, invention and creation,” or, by domain, in politics, love, science, and art (DZ 97).

Although his work remains strangely unknown in the English-speaking world, Badiou occupies a prominent place in contemporary French philosophy. Editor of the prestigious collection “L’Ordre philosophique” at Les Editions du Seuil and professor at the Collège International de Philosophie, he is a prolific writer and critic, a novelist, dramatist, mathematician and political activist. His lectures consistently draw hundreds of listeners. Committed Maoist in the 1970s, he retains an assertive voice in radical politics, and

peter hallward

GENERIC

SOVEREIGNTY

the philosophy of

alain badiou

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is directly involved in a number of campaigns concerning immigration, labour issues and political equality in general. His work ranges across a bewildering cluster of fields – mathematical set theory, topology, modern poetry, political theory, theatre and performance theory – and includes detailed readings of both the classical giants of the tradition (Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel...) and of his major colleagues and contemporaries (Deleuze, Lyotard, Lacan, Lardreau...).

The great and peculiar interest of Badiou's work is that it links in the most rigorous terms a philosophy of the extraordinary – of the event – with a philosophy of the absolutely generic as such. It is a philosophy of the extraordinary under the Platonic sign of the Same, a philosophy of the singular both as it occurs and as it subsists. The two are connected by Badiou's highly original notion of the subject. The connection enables him to salvage reason from the monopoly of analytical philosophy, being from Heidegger, the event from Deleuze, the subject from deconstruction, revolution from Stalin, a critique of the state from Foucault, and, last but not least, love from American popular culture. It is a remarkable enterprise. Badiou's mature work provides the most powerful alternative yet conceived in France to the various forms of postmodernism that arose after the collapse of the Marxist project, without yielding an inch to the liberal, neo-Kantian "pre-postmodernisms" that have more recently emerged in response. He affirms a philosophy of the subject without recourse to phenomenology, a philosophy of truth without recourse to "adequation," a philosophy of the event without recourse to historicism, a philosophy of justice without recourse to "rights." His work is above all, supremely, an affirmation of philosophy as such, an unqualified declaration of philosophical sovereignty.

If the eclectic range of Badiou's work disconcerts, it should be stressed that the mixture itself is anything but haphazard. Badiou situates himself squarely in the rational tradition, the Enlightened mobilisation of science against "superstition" and "infamy" (CS 164). For Badiou, philosophy's "systematic vocation is inevitable and part of its very essence" ("L'Entretien de Bruxelles" 25; cf. CM 22). That "philosophy is always systematic" ("Being by Numbers" 85) means that it is both "coherent" and, crucially, that it is conditioned by a strictly axiomatic (or unconditional) point. Much of Badiou's work is devoted to and dependent upon the axiomatic consequences of an inaugural decision, the decision constitutive of philosophy as such. The most obvious consequence, for the "average" reader of philosophy, is the special privilege accorded to that most axiomatic discipline: mathematics. For Badiou as for, in different ways, Plato, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant, mathematics is an essential condition of philosophy (which is not to say that Badiou, any more than Plato, writes a philosophy of mathematics). The mathematically illiterate should not be put off; Badiou's demonstrations assume little prior knowledge.

Precisely because of its highly systematic rigour, however, Badiou's work does require a little patience. Each component makes sense only according to its place in the system as a whole; even Deleuze and Guattari, no strangers to complication, testify to the "extreme complexity" of Badiou's system. The system itself, moreover, has much evolved and continues to evolve.

In the most general terms, Badiou presents his work as an effort to "take another step" within the modern "laïcisation of the infinite" asserted most acutely with Cantor's set theory, through which Badiou reflects upon the full consequences of the much-declared "death of God," the absence of any One or Whole. Perhaps the most important of the earlier steps taken in this long tradition reach back to those of the most influential of ancient philosophers and those of that most influential of contemporary "antiphilosophers": Plato and Lacan. From the outset, Badiou's mature work takes up "the banner of Plato." With Plato, Badiou asserts the eternal sufficiency of the true or Ideal, the essential relation of philosophy to events and situations beyond its domain (politics, science, art, friendship), the privilege of mathematics over poetry, and the importance of love as link between encounter and truth (MP 21-22; EE 14).
Like Plato, for Badiou the major challenge of philosophy is posed by sophistry in all its forms, from Gorgias to Lyotard. As for Lacan—"my master Jacques Lacan" (CS 85), "the greatest of our dead" (MP 7)—he is for Badiou "the educator of every philosophy to come. I call contemporary philosopher him or her who has the courage to traverse, without faltering, the antiphilosophy of Lacan" (CS 196; cf. EE 474). From Lacan, Badiou takes the notion that "the subject has no substance, no 'nature,'" that "there exists no norm upon which we might found the idea of a 'human subject'" (ET 8). And from Lacan he adapts the crucial "distinction of truth from knowledge" (EE 369; cf. CS 201).

In addition to these two supreme points of reference, Badiou regularly turns to the inspiration offered by several other "dialecticiens français": Pascal, Rousseau, Mallarmé, and, up to a point, Sartre and Althusser. Like Plato and Lacan, all work to surpass the sphere of representation as such, to move beyond that which mediates between subject and Idea, and thereby, to establish the wholly sufficient, self-constituent sovereignty of the Idea itself (Faith, the General Will, the Book, science or class struggle) — Rousseau by refusing political representation, Pascal by excluding any representation of God, and Mallarmé by transcending the "mimetic" function of language (PP 86-87; EE 443). In each case, what defines the subject is the radical, active elimination of a relation to an object of any kind; the subject becomes subject through its "subtraction" from the objective.

I the question

One of the few explicit things Badiou shares with his immediate contemporaries — Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, Lyotard, Deleuze, Agamben and others — is a profound distrust of the very concept of community. For these thinkers "community" often connotes a notion of fascism broad enough to include the former Rector of Freiburg and the present leader of the French Front National. Badiou's less inflammatory label is "romanticism": "how to move beyond [...] romanticism without consenting to a nihilist sophistry whose pure present [présent] is the global market, the economy, and the consensual automatism of capital?" ("Dix-neuf réponses" 266). For Badiou — unlike Lyotard or Lacoue-Labarthe, say — the declared "end of metaphysics," the eclipse of the subject or the dissolution of metanarratives, do not provide a viable answer. "How to move beyond romanticism by other means than those of a neoclassical reaction? This is the real difficulty, all too real once we see that, with the theme of the 'end of the avant-gardes,' the postmodern option is nothing more than an eclectic classico-romantic mix" (CS 163). Badiou knows that "the declaration of 'the end of metanarratives' is as arrogant as the great metanarratives themselves, [and] that the certainty of the 'end of metaphysics' operates within the metaphysical element of certainty." He sees the task of philosophy as constrained by the ascetic rigour of its inheritance, by the imperative to work through those essential "conditions of philosophy, the three nodal concepts that are being, truth and the subject" (MP 12).

These three "concepts nodaux" — being, truth, and the subject — organise Badiou's alternative to "romanticism." All three are generic in their substance and singular in their occasion. They are linked together by a concept of the event, and thought through the active process of a "subtraction [soustraction]" — their subtraction, in short, from the specific or specifiable, from the known. The event, as the occasion for this subtraction, is a singular and evanescent passing-through, what Badiou calls a moment of undeserved, unjustifiable "laicised grace" (SP 70, 80-81; DZ 143); acting in the name of this singular event, the subject proclaims and maintains a properly universal or generic truth (PP 89). In what follows I briefly unpack these central components — being, event, subject, truth, subtraction — one after the other.

Il the ontology

Badiou's concept of being-as-being (l'être-en-tant-qu'être) — as distinct from beings — turns on a very particular concept of pure multiplicity. For Badiou, quite unlike Deleuze or Lyotard, say,
the multiple is purely and simply multiplicity, conceived in the absence of any further predication or qualification. His ontology concerns things simply to the degree that they can be distinguished in thought, rather than how or why they distinguish themselves from each other; it concerns, that is, the presentation of things, their being-as-presented, rather than what is presented. Ontology, as Badiou defines it, is a consideration of being which suspends the question of the actual material existence of what is considered, so as to isolate in all its purity the presentation of multiplicity itself.

The only rigorous articulation of such a multiplicity is the one posited by contemporary mathematics. Only mathematics - at its most elementary, the deployment of numbers as demonstrated in the set theory posited by Cantor and refined by Zermelo, Fraenkel, and Gödel - deploys in its very medium the abstract form of the multiple as multiple (as opposed to multiples of something). According to Badiou, the operation of mathematics is itself the discourse of ontology, the description of being-as-being or pure multiplicity in itself (which is not to say, however, that mathematics provides the discourse which might interpret or make sense of that ontology). “Mathematical apodicticity is guaranteed directly by being itself, which it pronounces.”10 If mathematics is a wholly transparent discipline, wholly immediate to being, it is because “there exists no mathematical object” as such (MP 57). Rather, mathematics makes explicit the logic which presents any conceivable (or indeed inconceivable) object, the logic of presentation itself, as formalised in the axioms and theorems of set theory.

A multiple is thus synonymous with a set. What set theory describes is the distinction of an absolute multiplicity of elements, an absolutely infinite multiplicity of infinities, without recourse to any positively specified constituent unities or definitions. The multiplicity asserted by set theory is a multiplicity “sans-un.” It is a multiplicity founded - as the only conclusion consistent with the modern declaration of the death of God - purely and sufficiently on the empty set or void. “In the beginning was the void.” According to Badiou, individuality can only be the result of an operation, a being-counted-for-one. That is, the unity of any given element of a set results from only its belonging to that set, just as the unity of a part or subset of a set results from its inclusion in that set. “L’un n’est pas”; rather, “il y a de l’Un” (EE 31), as produced by a particular counting-for-one.

What Badiou calls a “situation” is again synonymous with a “set”; it is any multiplicity structured by a particular count, by particular criteria of belonging and inclusion. The “structure” of a situation is what establishes it as a particular situation (PP 76); it is that which counts or distinguishes its elements as its own elements. Any situation is the result of an operation, a structuring (“Six propriétés de la vérité” 42). The structure of the situation or set of life, for example, distinguishes the elements of the set of living things from the elements - which make up living elements - of the set of nonliving, biochemical elements; the structure of the situation “France” distinguishes the national set of French citizens, and so on. It should perhaps be pointed out that the consequence of this approach is anything but some kind of naive trust in quasi-statistical enumeration; it goes without saying for Badiou that any human situation or set (individual as much as collective), without ceasing to be conceivable as a set, composes an “uncountable infinity” (SP 10). Always, what is of genuine value is precisely what lies beyond number and escapes any possible count.

Although thorough consideration of Badiou’s ontology exceeds the limits of this brief study, three moments in its deduction stand out as especially significant. The first is the axiom of infinity, the active assertion of a radical infinity beyond all possible proof or “construction”; the result is the assumption of a banal, indifferent multiplicity as the condition of all conceivable situations. With Badiou as with Cantor, the infinite ceases to be the limit of the conceivable, of the human - of the finite - to become the very medium of all existence (including possible existence). Granted the incoherence of a “Large Totality [Grand Tout]” (demonstrated by Kant) as one all-inclusive “self-belonging [auto-apparte-
The second is the axiom of foundation, or the void. Set theory begins with the assertion, “there is the void [il y a le vide],” written as. The empty set e has no elements. Set theory further declares that the void or empty set – the set to which nothing belongs – is itself included in every possible set (including itself). The void is the universally included subset. This empty subset is foundational in the sense that to be “founded” is to have “at least one element which presents nothing of which the multiple [i.e., the set itself] presents” (NN 93). Badiou gives as an example the set of living things: if cellular organisms can be included in this set, at a certain point of cellular organisation there are elements (mitochondria, say) whose own elements (proteins, membranes, biochemical structures) are not themselves elements of the set of living things. Such biochemical structures are “fundamental” to the set of living things, i.e., that upon which living elements are built, but not themselves living. In the case of mathematical entities, the void or empty set e is this foundational term. The void is universally included in every mathematical set (noted {e}), but belongs to none. A direct consequence, whose ontological implications will become clear, is that no (founded) set can belong to itself. The set of whole numbers, for instance, cannot itself be a whole number (cf. EE 51, 59). A set cannot be self-founding. To put it another way, the void or empty set e cannot be constructed, but is rather the foundation of all possible constructions. “The absolutely initial point of ontology is the name of the void” (EE 170), because, “in a situation, there is no conceivable way to encounter the void” (EE 69). Everything present in a situation is “counted-as-one.” The void is rather that upon which any conceivable count is effected, it is “that from which” there is presentation (EE 68).

Badiou goes on to demonstrate how the set of whole numbers – the basis for his concept of nature – is indeed founded upon the axiom of the void, in conjunction with the axiom of subsets. (The matho-phobic are invited to skip this paragraph.) What is known as the axiom of subsets further declares that if a set a exists, so does the set of its subsets or parts (i.e., the different combinations of its elements); this set is noted p(a) – the “putting-into-one [mise-en-un] of the multiple a” (EE 106). Now the empty set e, of course, has no elements. But, like all sets, it does have a part, the universally included part {e}. Given e, asserted by the axiom of the void, we have p(e), asserted by the axiom of subsets, the “putting-into-one” of its one part. This new set p(e) or {e} does have an element, e itself (or the “proper name of the void”). This set to which only the void belongs is not the void itself, because nothing belongs to the void; rather, the void is included as the element of the set of its subsets, p(e) – the void “put into one.” Universal inclusion of the void generates a “new” element, so to speak, in the set of its subsets. So, given e, we have {e}, and since {e} or “the singleton of e exists, its putting-into-one [mise-en-un], that is the putting-into-one of the putting-into-one of e, also exists [i.e., {e}, {e}]” (EE 106-07). That is, given {e}, itself “the putting-into-one of the name of the void,” the axiom of subsets ensures that p({e}), the set of its subsets, also exists. This set p({e}) now includes two subsets or parts: {e} itself, that is, the “whole” part, the set e itself, treated as a part; and of course e, because it is, for every set, the universally included subset (EE 151). The process can be repeated again and again, each time adding a new “successor” element. Such is the basis for a literal creation ex nihilo: “here begins the unlimited production of new multiples, all drawn from the void, through the combined effect of the axiom of subsets – for the name of the void is part of itself [i.e., included in itself, but not belonging to itself], and of the putting-into-one” (EE 107).

This generation of ordinals is itself an illustration of the third critical moment in Badiou’s ontological system: the excess, for any given set (including the empty set), of parts over elements.
There are clearly many more ways of combining the elements of a set into parts (or subsets) than there are elements of that set. A finite set with \( n \) elements will have \( 2^n \) subsets or parts; a set with an infinite number of elements will have an infinitely larger number of subsets. For example, the set \( a \) with three elements, \( x, y \) and \( z \), has 8 parts (\( 2^3 \)): \( \{x\}, \{y\}, \{z\}, \{x, y\}, \{x, z\}, \{z, y\}, \{x, y, z\}, \{\} \) — this last subset \( \{\} \) being universally included in all sets. “There is always - regardless of what is \( a \) - at least one element of \( p(a) \) which is not an element of \( a \),” even in the limit case of the set \( a \), which has no elements. “That is to say that no multiple is in a position to make-one of everything that it includes [...]. Inclusion is in irremediable excess over belonging” (EE 99).

What Badiou calls the “state” - the state of the situation, as much as the state in the political sense - or the “meta-structure of a situation,” is what intervenes to control this excess, to establish the set of the parts or subsets of a set. The state organises the various ways of ordering the parts of a set into one integrated whole. For the situation’s structure, the principle of its count (the enumeration of its elements), does not itself suffice to preserve it as structured. The structure provides no order to the excess of parts over elements. So if a situation is to persist - and it is, according to Badiou, in the nature of situations to persist - there must be, contemporary with its structure, an original “metastructure” which orders the relation between structure and elements, between the count and what is counted. What Badiou further calls “knowledge [savoir]” (or the “language of the situation”) furnishes virtually infinite ways of arranging a situation’s parts, but cannot itself provide a global, enabling unity to these arrangements. That “the count itself [...], in the presentation, escapes the count” requires, then, that “every structure be doubled by a metastructure,” through which “the structure of a situation - of any structured presentation - is counted for one” (EE 110-11). A situation counts elements; the state of a situation counts its parts, the ways of combining the elements (EE 113-14). In a national set, for example, whose elements include the population counted as nationals, the state is what organises its parts as taxpayers, voters, social security recipients, criminals, and so on.

In other words, the state ensures that the potentially anarchic organisation of social combinations remains structured in such a way as to preserve the governing interests of the situation. The state keeps things in their place. It is a kind of primordial response to ontological anarchy. The state is, very literally, the principle of an ordered objectivity; the (violent) imposition of order is itself an intrinsic feature of objectivity (TS 176). Or again, the state prohibits revelation of the void fundamental to any particular situation. In the capitalist situation, for example, this founding void, included but not represented, not belonging, is the proletariat, the “invisible” but productive basis upon which the situation as such exists; the state, in this situation, prohibits the revelation or empowerment of the proletariat. In the contemporary French situation, the state ensures a similar exclusion of an invisible immigrant class (TS 235, 278; PP 75; CS 72-73).

Always for Badiou, “the state is the serious question, the central question [...]. Every vast revolt of the working masses of the people sets them against the state, invariably” (“Le Flux et le parti” 33-34), and “a thought [une pensée] is nothing other than the desire to have done with the exorbitant excess of the state” (EE 312). In the 1990s as in the 1960s, “the de-statification [désétatisation] of the Truth remains for us a program of thought” (EE 149). In other words, the goal remains “the end of representation [the end of the metastructure], and the universality of simple presentation” (EE 125), the freedom of elements without the coercive integration of their combinations, a free and equal belonging without forced inclusions.

The production of “generic truths” will involve first and foremost, and at the full peril of the void, the “de-statification” of thought (la désétatisation de la pensée). If we “understand as ‘statellite’ [étatique] that which counts, names, and controls the parts of a situation,” then that a
truth is subtracted from the state means that it is “outside number, beyond predication, and uncontrollable” (SP 80). By the same token, “to think a situation [penser une situation] is always to go toward that which, in it, is the least covered [couvert] by the shelter the general regime of things provides, as today the situation in our country is to be thought from the state’s unsheltering [désarrement étatique] of the illegal immigrants [sans-papiers]” (DZ 126). A truth will come to pass as immediate to the void that founds a situation, in its being; this void or minimally sheltered part of the situation, that part least protected (if not actively persecuted) by its state, is what Badiou will elsewhere call its “eventmental site,” the place from where something new may occur, something beyond the state’s recognition and control (EE 193-97; ET 61-62; DZ 126). According to Badiou, it is “the void [that] effects the suture [la suture] of multiples to their being as such” (EE 355), and if the nature of being is forgotten it is because this void is “filled in” (Spinoza or Heidegger) or “covered up” (Leibniz or Wittgenstein) – so many philosophical efforts, Badiou will say, to dodge the question of the state.

Badiou’s ontology describes, in other words, the conditions which must be met in order to move beyond the state with its representation, and toward a situation of pure presentation. Unlike Heidegger or Deleuze, say, Badiou establishes an ontology so as to move beyond it. His ontology provides a precise description of what cannot be included in it, of what exceeds the very nature of “objectivity” – the cluster event-truth-subject. “Fundamentally, we can only make sense of the existence of thought if we understand how might begin a possible rupture with the law of being” (“L’Etre, l’événement et la militance” 22).

III subject and event

We arrive now at the dynamic core of Badiou’s system, the dynamism which moves beyond objectivity, beyond the “nature” or “normality” enforced by the state of a situation. With the concepts of subject and event, Badiou breaks out of the confines of l’être-en-tant-que-être (EE 193).

An event provides the point of departure for a nonobjective coherence, a specifically subjective integrity. What Badiou calls the subject is that which, in its declared fidelity to an event, maintains the articulation of a wholly “generic” truth, the truth of its situation, beyond the supervision of the state. The truth comes to be, in a situation, as “subtracted” from what can be represented of that situation, as something “indiscernible” to the language of that situation. The truth emerges as the outcome of a process, as the living result of a labour; “there can be no instantaneous salvation” (SP 96). More precisely, the truth coheres as what Badiou calls the “generic subset” of a situation, maintained by a subjective fidelity to the event from which it springs. In this way, the unity that was banished from ontology is resurrected as the outcome of an event-based truth: “there is no One except inasmuch as it is for all” (SP 80), a unity actively made all-inclusive. In a characteristically concise formula, “the only universal is that which is in immanent exception [n’est universel que ce qui est en exception imméritée]” (SP 119).

A couple of examples may elucidate this somewhat abstract schema: the assertion of Christianity according to Saint Paul, and the French Revolution according to Robespierre and Saint-Just. (The second example indicates, incidentally, something of Badiou’s own political-ethical orientation; the first does not, or at least, not explicitly.)

The case of Christianity. “In Christianity, and in Christianity alone [of the world’s major religions], is the essence of truth declared to presuppose an ‘eventmental ultra-one’ [ultra-un événementiel, i.e., the resurrection]. Only in Christianity is the effort to join the truth declared to be a matter not of contemplation – or immobile knowledge – but of intervention” (EE 235). With Saint Paul in particular – the solitary missionary with no personal relation to Jesus, who shows, after his conversion, little interest in building an established church in Jerusalem – the event is not a matter of verification or demonstration, but of conviction and proclamation. The Christian subject constituted by this proclamation (“in the name of Christ”) “does not pre-exist
the event he declares” (the end of death), and need belong to no privileged community or class. The truth thus proclaimed is neither a matter of immemorial law and prophetic signs, nor of a cosmic harmony; it is a laborious process and not an illumination, an ongoing demonstration of faith bolstered by a “hope” and “love” themselves grounded only in their own integrity. This truth is indifferent, finally, to the prevailing values of the situation (Roman, Jewish or Greek) in which it comes to pass (SP 15-16). Whereas the Greek and Jewish discourses provide alternative assertions of mastery and legality (SP 27-28), the Christian event is neither cosmic nor legal, neither sign for the chosen nor indication of things to come, and cannot be integrated into any community other than the universal community of those who become its “child” or “son” (fils) (SP 45). Paul is thus one of the first to “subtract the truth from the grip of the communal, whether it be a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class” (SP 6).

For Badiou, “all of the parameters of the doctrine of the event are thus evident in Christianity” (EE 235). What he calls the “eventual site [site événementiel]” is here marked by Christ’s death (SP 74), the suffering of the flesh, the human experience taken to “the edge of the void.” What he calls the event – Christ’s death/resurrection – is a wholly ephemeral, wholly insubstantial passage, which cannot be assigned to any stable element of the situation in which it takes place. The event of Christ’s resurrection comes to pass immediately and without justification in a situation whose being is made up of endlessly varied multiplicities (Jewish, Greek, Roman...); this event remains unrecognisable and without substance for almost all of those who belong to this situation. The exceptions are those vanguard apostles who, by declaring the resurrection of Christ, the advent of truth, constitute themselves as subjects in his name. This truth is presented as beyond or “subtracted” from the competence of the religious authorities of the day (the Roman imperial state, the “metastructure” of the situation). Subjective intervention makes of the event, retrospectively, the ineffable basis for a new beginning (AD 0) (TS 143; cf. PP 101). Organised Christianity eventually establishes an “institutional fidelity” – “the Church, the first institution of human history to claim universality” (EE 237) – in order to maintain a genuine “connection” to this event, distinct from false, heretical connections.

The case of Rousseau and 1792. For Badiou, “Rousseau establishes what is forever the modern concept of politics” (EE 380; cf. PP 13) because he declares that the political as such begins with an event (the contract) rather than with social structure or communal relation. In his wake, “Robespierre and Saint-Just [develop] the most intense, the most inventive political thought” before Marx (DO 34; cf. CS 136). As Badiou describes them, the Jacobins are those who intercede, coûte que coûte, to preserve a fidelity to that self-constituent sovereignty prescribed by Rousseau’s general will. The Revolution is the ephemeral event affirmed, retrospectively, by its militant partisans as the inauguration of a new order (or the naming of the old order as ancien). The elements of its site événementiel include, of course, the convocation of the Estates General, the peasants of the Great Fear, the sans-culottes, the public debt, and so on; “what draws a limit to this dissemination is the mode by which the Revolution is an axial term of the Revolution itself, that is, the way in which the consciousness of the day – and the retroactive intervention of our own – filtered the whole site through the one of its eventual qualification” (EE 201). As proclaimed, the Revolution becomes an “element of itself,” constituent of the revolutionary experience as such. “Of the French Revolution as event we must say that it both presents the infinitely multiple sequence of facts situated between 1789 and 1794, and that it further presents itself as the immanent résumé and drawing-into-one [trait-d’un] of its own multiplicity” (EE 201). The various revolutionary groups are those which compete to establish a viable institutional fidelity to this event.

In more general terms, then, the event – regardless of “what happens” – is what ontology excludes. The event is “supernumerary,” in a wholly “numerical” ontological scale. It “is” a
substanceless, perfectly transient fragment of pure chance which allows for the assertion of a truth to come. “Events are irreducible singularities, that which situations put ‘beyond-the-law’ (ET 40); an event marks “the point where a thought subtracts itself from the state, inscribing this subtraction in being” (DO 57). In every case, the event itself is “a matter of pure chance, which cannot be inferred from the situation” (EE 215; SP 75). The event has no being as such – it exists to the degree that it is proclaimed to exist. It leaves no trace, it is nothing, “evanescent” (“Dix-neuf réponses” 263). If Badiou’s aim is to “de-substantialise truths without transforming them into [the] language games” typical of postmodern philosophy (“Dix-neuf réponses” 263), what rescues truths from “the sophistic tyranny of language” is precisely their “eventmental localisation” (CS 177; cf. MP 87).

The event can only exist through the declaration that it exists: this is another way of saying that the event belongs only to itself, that it is “self-founding.” “It is indeed both that which results of itself, and, as result, stopping point [point d’arrêt]” (EE 219). This is why “ontology rejects it” (EE 205, 154). In the most literal sense, the event has no “objectivity” (EE 214). From the retrospective assertion of the event, however, can be built the coherence of a militant fidelity to this declaration (“Christ is Risen,” “the Revolution has begun”).

Badiou “call[s] intervention every procedure by which a multiple is recognised to be an event” (EE 224), and he “call[s] subjection the emergence of an operator, following an intervening nomination” (EE 430), serving to maintain that nomination – for example, the Party, after the Revolution is declared, or the Church, after the apostles declared the Resurrection. Through this operator, “a truth groups all the terms of a situation that are positively connected to the name of the event” (EE 370). As a rule, “with the operator of fidelity, we can discern only two values – connection and disconnection” (EE 364, my emphasis). There is no possible “third term.” “A truth process is such that it is not made up of degrees. Either you participate, declare the founding event, and draw the consequences, or you remain outside it. This distinction without intermediary or mediation is entirely subjective” (SP 22). The decision is decided as for or against, and the philosophically “pure choice” is constitutive of its terms (CS 190). In Badiou’s earlier, Maoist work, the distinction of proletariat and bourgeoisie – of la raison from les réactionnaires – remains immanent to the historical process which itself decides the issue; his later work might be thought of as an attempt to retain an equally decisive mechanism, but as minimally contaminated by “objective” historical development.

Which is to say that the effective mechanism of connection is a kind of conversion in more or less the Pauline sense. “Fidélité” is Badiou’s term for the preservation of a “positive” connection. “To be faithful to an event, is to move about the situation supplemented by this event, while thinking [...] the situation “according to the event” (ET 38). For example, Berg and Wechern as loyal to Schoenberg – or “the politics of the French Maoists between 1966 and 1976, as they tried to think through and practice a fidelity to two interconnected events: the Cultural Revolution in China, and May 1968 in France” (ET 39).

What Badiou further calls the “generic subset” of a situation – the substance of its truth – is the sum of such positive connections. It is a complete subset, eventually, if the operator of fidelity manages to make a complete evaluation of the situation (i.e., measure every element of the situation against the event). Consider the example of love. Love begins with an encounter, a pure instance of chance. The encounter as such is not recognisable within: the given situations of those who encounter each other. The declaration of love, more or less “after the fact,” names the event of this encounter and allows its effects to persist, in a shared fidelity to this name (a fidelity which can at any time, of course, be betrayed). The “generic subset” begins here:

we have to explore the situation with respect to this new entity in such a way as to find out what is related or unrelated or difficult to relate to this primordial event. In so doing we will trace a subset of the situation, little by little over time
generic sovereignty

- because the extraordinarily ramified activities of love necessarily circumscribe a particular time. The subject is generic and, therefore, indiscernible. This means that the lovers cannot discern the subject that they themselves constitute. It’s in this sense that I’d say they are its subject. (“Being by Numbers” 87)

The subject proper is what wraps this whole package (event, intervention, connection, fidelity, generic subset) into one process, a unity labelled with a proper name. “Subjection counts what is faithfully connected to the name of the event [...] in the absence of signification [affirmed by] a proper name (dans l’absence de signification d’un nom propre). Saint Paul for the Church, Lenin for the Party, Cantor for ontology, Schoenberg for music” (EE 431). It would be unfair to ascribe to such subjects some sort of “personal” pre-eminence or privilege: he who is a militant of truth identifies himself, like everyone else, on the basis of the universal. The production of the Same is itself internal to the law of the Same” (SP 117). Badiou’s subject is poles apart from Foucault’s dandy who “makes of himself a work of art.”16 Badiou’s subject connects, in a rigorously impersonal austerity, the finite particularity of a situation to an infinitely generic universality. The subject is not itself the void (which is “inhuman and a-subjective” (EE 429)), but that which sustains an immediacy to the void. “I call subject every local configuration of a truth-supporting generic procedure” (EE 429), “far removed from any notion of psychology” (EE 264; cf. CS 286).

“Subject” and “object” are thus mutually exclusive categories. “What is the object? It is that which disposes the multiplicity of being for and with respect to signification [...]. Objectivity is being captive to signification” (“L’Age des poètes” 33). “Subjectivity,” then, is first and foremost that aspect of being which escapes signification. As a rule, “a subject is nowhere given (to knowledge). It must be found” (TS 294; cf. SP 48). The effective (active) subject of neurosis, for instance, is not the constituent consciousness of phenomenology, but the unconscious; consciousness is rather that which is subjected to neurosis (i.e., objectified by it). In the same way, for Badiou maoîste the “political” subject of the Revolution is not the working class as “objective” reality, but the proletariat as that which, in its coming-to-be, destroys the class-bound society determinant of the working class as the object of capital. “[O]bjectivity, representation, are always the concern of the State, or a state, a state of the situation” (DO 7), and we know that “the de-statification of the Truth remains for us a program of thought” (DO 57). The subject is that which subtracts itself from an “objective” status; for Badiou as for Sartre, “praxis” is first and foremost a “tearing away from passivity” or inertia, a refusal of “laziness [paresse].”17

From Badiou’s earliest works, “the real is not a matter of the object” (TC 52), and for Badiou as for Canguilhem, “the subject is the set of functions which resist objectification.”18 Following Lacan, Badiou insists that “experience is only Subject if (topologically) linked to a real which it lacks” (PP 80); the subject is, insofar as it is not objectively determined (determined by an object).19 Badiou’s is a “subject abandoned to the anguish of non-relation [non-lien]” (CS 120) — subject of and subjected to a general “déliaison” or separation. Such is our “modern ascesis: to expose thought to dé-liaison pure and simple [...]; everything diverges” (DZ 123). The subject exists in the absence of an object because, as we have seen, it creates itself out of a self-nomination based only on the void. This self-nomination is indeed situated on a particular “edge of the void,” in a particular “site.” But this particularity in no way objectifies the subject itself. The subject is an ongoing decision as such, the supremely “subjective” condition of an indecision-which-decides made consistent. The subject is a matter of rigorous “faith,” a “confidence” in truth. And because the true is the not-known so, very succinctly, “the subject is confidence in itself,” as “a subject, one might say, without vis-à-vis.”20

IV the truth

Badiou’s subject is what it does, and what it does is act as catalyst for the truth. For Badiou, his “is above all a doctrine of truth [la vérité].”21 More,
the category of truth is the central category [...] of every possible philosophy” (CS 62), where “truth” is, as always, universal, absolute, beyond all possible qualification, mediation or interpretation. Eternal, above all: “a truth is what within time exceeds time” (“Being by Numbers” 87). As a rule, “every truth is at once singular and universal” (CS 240; cf. DO 47; CS 199; SP 23). That is, the truth according to Badiou is immanent to its situation, is the truth of a situation – but as defined against merely particular knowledge (savoir) and meaning (sens), against the véridique. “A truth process is only universal to the degree that it is supported, as its real point [point réel], by an immediate subjective recognition of its singularity. Otherwise, we have to fall back on observances or particular signs,” which fix it in a particular place and inhibit its extension (SP 23).

The true is “subtracted” from the known. Truths can only be new, “absolute beginnings,” “incomparable singularities of thought” (DZ 136). Like anything else that is, “a truth can only be the singular production of a multiple [or set]. The whole point is that this multiple will be subtracted from or inaccessible to [soustrait à] the authority of the language [of that set]. It will have been indiscernible.” Badiou uses the term soustraction to describe, among other things: a liberation from class, that is, from the place assigned by a ruling class; a liberation from worldly interests and le service des biens; a liberation from communication, commerce and interpretation generally. “Subtraction” means, in sum, that truth is properly immediate, and so is revealed (comes to be) through the elimination of the mediate. It means that the living reality of human experience is what remains after the whole realm of the “cultural” has been “deposited” (though not eliminated) (SP 105-08). As a rule, the more radical the subtraction, the more truthful the result. As Badiou put it in his more orthodox Maoist days, “a revolution deserves recognition for what it makes disappear” (TS 259). In his most recent writings, Badiou distinguishes four related forms of such subtraction: (a) “the undecidable is subtraction from a norm”; (b) “the indiscernible is subtraction from a mark”; (c) “the generic is subtraction from predication”; and (d) “the unnameable” is that “singularity subtracted from singularisation” itself. I consider each aspect in turn.

That the true cannot be decided means that it is beyond calcul, beyond the calculation of interests or benefits. “The undecidable statement is properly without value, and this is what makes it valuable, in violation of the laws of classical economics” (CS 180). That the truth is undecidable means – far from some kind of “suspension” from decision – that the establishment or declaration of the truth is properly identical to that decision that establishes or declares it as true. The true is what is decided as true, nothing more. The true is true if this criterion alone obtains, in the absence of all “objective” evaluations, relations, or considerations. Always, “the existence of an undecidable is never decided away other than through axiomatic presupposition [l’existence d’un indécidable n’est jamais retenue que par une supposition axiomatique].” That the true cannot be discerned means that it cannot be treated as an object. “If the truth has nothing to do with the category of the object, it is precisely because it is always, as the result of an infinite procedure, an indiscernible multiple” (MP 77). To defend a notion of the true as indiscernible is to challenge what Badiou calls a “constructivist” conception of truth – the conviction, that is, common to both Leibniz, Wittgenstein, and contemporary partisans of the “linguistic turn,” “that thought cannot think something indiscernible [...] , that there can be neither concept nor thought of that which is inaccessible [soustrait à] to language.” That the truth is “generic” “allows us to think a truth both as the multiple-result of a singular procedure, and as hole [trou], or subtraction, in the field of the nameable” (MP 87). And finally, that the ultimate form of the true is thus unnameable ensures that assertion of the generic will not repeat the “disastrous” mistakes of Stalin or the Cultural Revolution. “The ‘proper’ [of a proper name], as always, derives from the unique [...] . The ‘unnameable’ is thus the proper of the proper. So singular that it does not even tolerate a proper name. So singular in its singularity that it alone has no proper name.”
generic sovereignty

(CS 185-86). Badiou gives as examples, sexual pleasure, in the field of love (CS 208), the collectif, in the field of politics; language-in-itself, in the field of the poem; and consistence, in the field of mathematics (CS 224 n.38). The (subjectively asserted) truth of a situation must never be confused with its objective substance, must never become "norm."

These four fields or dimensions make up, in turn, what Badiou calls the "conditions" of philosophy or "generic procedures": science (more precisely, the matheme), art (more precisely, the poem), politics (more precisely, [...] of emancipation), and love (more precisely the procedure which makes truth of the disjunction of sexual positions)." The generic procedures indicate the various dimensions of a becoming-disinterested or aspecific. Why these particular four? Because they mark out the possible instances of the subject, in Badiou's sense, considered as variously individual or collectif (the subject per se remains singular, of course, in either case). Love obtains "in the sphere of the individual." Love affects only "the individuals concerned [...], and it is thus for them [alone] that the one-truth produced by their love is an indiscernible part of their existence" (EE 374). Politics, by contrast, concerns only the collective dimension, an absolutely generic equality, an equality without exception. Such is the criterion of all "revolutionary politics [...] which invokes the social void [the proletariat or its equivalent] in the absence of the State [où est convoqué le vide du social au défaut de l'État]." And in "mixed situations" — situations with an individual "vehicle," but a collective import — art and science qualify as generic to the degree that they effect a pure invention or discovery beyond savoir, beyond the mere transmission of knowledges (EE 374). In short, "there is an individual subject to the degree that there is love, a mixed subject to the degree that there is art or science, a collective subject to the degree that there is [emancipatory] politics" (EE 430). As for the other domains of human experience, they stand condemned by their worldly status, by interest. "Every subject is artistic, scientific, political or loving [...], for outside these registers, there is only existence, or individuality, but no subject" (MP 91). In particular, "there can be no philosophy of commerce [philosophie commercante]" (EE 376).

What then according to Badiou are the great events of our time, our most compelling occasions of the generic?

The generic [la gênéricité], at the conceptual core of a Platonic gesture turned toward the multiple, is the basis for the inscription of philosophy as for the compossibility of its contemporary conditions. Of today's creative politics, when they exist, we have known at least since 1793 that they can only be egalitarian, antistate; that they trace, through the accumulated layers of history and the opacity of the social, a human genericity and the deconstruction of strata, the ruin of differential or hierarchical representations, the assumption of a communism of singularities. Of poetry, we know that it explores an undivided language, offered to all, noninstrumental, a use of language which founded the genericity of language itself. Of mathematics, we know that it grasps the multiple stripped of all presentable distinction, the genericity of multiple-being. Of love, finally, we know that beyond the encounter, it declares itself faithful to the pure Two that it founds, and that it makes a generic truth of that which there is of men and women [il fait vérité générique de ce qu'il y a des hommes et des femmes] (MP 91-92)

More specifically, Badiou maintains a "connection" to the following events: in mathematics, the evolution of set theory from Cantor to Cohen; in politics, the combined impact of the Cultural Revolution in China, May 1968 in France, the Iranian Revolution, and Polish Solidarity; in poetry, the works of Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Celan; in love and desire, the exemplary work of Lacan. In the broadest sense, Badiou's philosophy can be read as an effort to establish the "compossibility" of these events, an effort to be faithful to these declarations of the generic.
V the pure and the dé-lié

What emerges through “subjectivation” and the generic procedures of truth is an end product defined by its purity, its transcendence of worldly relations (liens). “The ultimate question is that of the truth, or of the Idea, the Notion,” where “the characteristic attribute of the notion is its purity” (CS 118, 119):

Purity is the composition of an Idea such that it is no longer retained by any relation [lien]. An Idea which grasps from being its indifference to all relation, its isolated scintillation [...] its coldness, its disjunction, its virginity, in the sense of a separating whiteness [à la Mallarmé]. That which the purity of the Notion brings forward, designates above all, is the un-related solitude of being, the ineffective character of every law, of every pact that links and relates. (CS 120)

The Pure is grasped through a rupture des liens, first as mere separation, then as active isolemant. The truth comes to be when the infinite escapes all sense of “familiarity,” of “proximity” (CS 128). In every domain, “the real infinity of being [...] is held in no calculable relation, and does not tolerate relation [ne supporte pas le rapport].”28 At best, then, relation with the other is here restricted to sharing a truth.29

So: one or many subjects? For the early Badiou, certainly, “there is but one subject, one force” (TS 160) – the subject of the proletariat-become-Party. With the later Badiou things are less clear. He declares that “there is in effect not one single [seul] subject, but as many subjects as there are truths” (ET 28). He also “emphasise[s] the fact that the subject is rare, and always singular.”30 The question turns, then, on the relation between seul and singulier. Badiou writes, for example, that “humanity is that which upholds the singularity of truths” (CS 259), and that “there is one humanity” (CS 258). Since the subject is defined as “that which upholds a truth” (EE 429), this logic would appear to work in the direction of a sole-singular subject. Moreover, if “a truth as such is inaccessible to [soustraire à] position” (CS 260), then it is hard to see how, in

the absence of an active relation – a relation other than mere nonrelation or “subtraction” – between truth and knowledge (or “position”), Badiou can account for an actual plurality of subjects and truths. The problems posed by this plurality are at the heart of Badiou’s current work in progress, and will organise the remainder of this essay.31

The question that arises is less the charge of “decisionism” levied against Badiou by Lyotard,32 than that of the peculiarly absolutist dimension of his work. In what sense does Badiou affirm a strictly sovereign notion of the truth? We know that absolutism defines “sovereignty” as one or univocal – in Bodin’s terms, as “perpetual,” self-coincident, a “pure and indivisible essence”33 beyond and opposed to all “particular interests.”34 It establishes the unqualified transcendence of the sovereign over the specified social field, such that the sovereign is always and everywhere immediate to the whole immanent extension of the field without being limited to or identified with any particular part of it. It is perfectly disinterested, or identical only to the general interest, the interest of God or Reason itself. It presumes the equation of specific position = war or disaster (what Hobbes and Spinoza call the “warring state of nature”), and so puts an end to war by transcending position.36 And absolutism begins, historically, with an apparently apocalyptic crisis of specific relations, positions or interests – the wars of religion – comparable only to what Badiou describes as the evil specificities of the twentieth century. It resolves the conflict of interests by establishing a power beyond interest, a position of pure disinterest, regulated only by a kind of enlightened self-restraint.

There are at least a few ways in which Badiou’s philosophy can be read as a variation upon such an absolutist logic – perhaps three ways in particular. First, his major concepts are all expressions of a self-constituent authority, whose model is the axiom. Second (and consequently), his ethical philosophy does not relate one power to another, but involves only the self-restraint of the one power (“the ethics of a truth derive entirely,
then, from a sort of restraint [retenu] with respect to its powers" [CS 194], a restraint solely designed to allow it to "persevere" and "continue" in its self-elaboration [ET 78; SP 99]). Third, Badiou shares the problem that eventually proved to be the undoing of absolutism: the problem of a relation between sovereign power on the one hand, and the multiplicity of social interests on the other. The sovereign, like Badiou's Pure, obtains in the absence of all mutually constituent relations with others. The sovereign is very exactly a sujet sans objet. It is that which has, as its only being, the being of its decision-to-be. The simple existence of the sovereign confirms it as inherently legitimate; its coming into existence (its transcendence of relations with others) establishes it as unique, universal, and "right" [37] (and consequently, incapable of relations with others).

All of Badiou's major concepts are sovereign in this sense. Invariably, "the truth is not said of the object, but says itself only of itself." [38] His ontology, the discourse of l'être-en-tant-qu'être is built entirely upon the self-constituting decisions that are the axioms of the infinite and the void: "these concepts [the void, the infinite], derive from a decision, whose inscribed form is the axiom" (NN 263). His event is precisely that ontological contradiction in terms, an element which belongs to itself (EE 219), and if "Chance [le Hasard] is the pure thought of the event," it is because "Chance is the self-realisation of its Idea, in every act in which it is at stake, such that it is a delimited affirmative force, and in no sense a correlation with the world." [39] The subject, for the same reason, is that which can be indifferently described as immediate only to truth and responsible only to itself — the subject is confidence in itself" (D'un sujet enfin sans objet 21). The self-constituent is a constant in Badiou's work:

The intelligence [l'intelligence] of formal, mathematical montages is deployed in the conceptual practice of mathematics itself. (CM 62)

The poem is accessible only [ne se donne que] in its act. [40]

Politics refers only to its own categories, its own experiences. ("Les lieux de la vérité" 116)

A political sequence must be identified and thought through from the perspective of the sequence itself, as a homogeneous singularity, and not from the heterogeneous nature of its empirical happening. [41]

Finally, as supremely sovereign, "philosophy in its history is nothing but a de-substantiation of the Truth, which is also the auto-liberation of its act" (CS 82). Badiou's ultimate goal can be quite accurately described as a declaration of the sovereignty of "philosophy itself, in its singular delimitation, in its conformity to the definition which I have proposed" (CS 76-77). Badiou writes always in search of the "proper place" of philosophy (CS 57), against its delegation to something other than itself ("L'Entretien de Bruxelles" 2), including its own history. "Philosophy must determine itself in such a way that it is philosophy which judges its history, and not the reverse" (CS 58-59). Badiou opposes all forms of "philosophical" speculation that delegate its autonomy to a relation with another dimension — the historical, the transcendent, the linguistic, the poetic, the communal or "cultural." In other words, "if dialectical thought [i.e., philosophy] breaks with the order of representations, it has no guarantee of reality other than its own experience" (PP 90).

Everything turns on the assertion of a sovereign or "unconditional" point — unconditional, precisely, because conditioned by nothing other than itself. "That which is conditional, in this world, falls under the law of the circulation of objects, moneys and images" (DP 21; cf. SP 7). Consequently, the "radical demand of contemporary philosophy [is for] the interruption of this circulation"; its task is to "announce or assume that there is an unconditional limit or 'fixed point' [point d'arrêt]." [42] Such is the original characteristic of the sovereign, or radically singular.

For singularity, if we think the matter through, is properly always a matter of decision, and every decision, ultimately, to the degree that it
is a real decision, is a singular decision [...]. To the degree that what a truth commits [engage], or what commits one to a truth, or what is upheld by a fixed point, is of the order of a decision, so it is also of the order of the singular. (DP 27-28)

VI singular or specific?

The world according to Badiou tends toward impurity – toward the “objective” banality of the state, the petty negotiation of positioned interests, and so on. As Badiou describes it in his most recent book, our contemporary situation is characterised above all by a retreat into various forms of particularism, of identity or community politics, related to each other as so many commodities within the empty abstraction of monetary exchange – the triumph of the market, as medium for investment in competing “subsets of the oppressed” (SP 7-8). Truth and purity, in Badiou’s sense, have very literally no place in such a world (TS 28-29; SP 60). To maintain the Pure somehow “within” the world requires unending vigilance. Philosophy must forever purify itself of relations-with, and in particular, of the hermeneutic relation between interpreter and interpreted, between subject and object.

For Badiou, this effort takes place with comparable urgency on four fronts: against sophism and the fragmentation of opinions or language games (Lytard and the later Wittgenstein, as much as “Anglo-Saxon analytic scholasticism” [DZ 145]); against what he calls, with some admiration and respect, “antiphilosophy” (the consignment of “true” value to an ineffable transcendence or “pure act”: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, the early Wittgenstein, as much as Saint Paul, Rousseau, Pascal, and Lacan); against the interpretation of presence, or a quasi-religious turn back to a creator or virtuality beyond the actual (Heidegger and Levinas, as much as Deleuze); against “worldly” interests in general (“cultural politics,” liberalism). All four are, in the end, variants of a single “error” – an attachment to the mediate as such, the realm of relation or meaning (sens), the realm between virtual and actual. Badiou stands resolute against all forms of the contemporary “linguistic turn,” all neo-Leibnizian forms of “constructivism”: very precisely, “the decisive question is whether [...] there exists a realm of the thinkable which is inaccessible [soustrait à] to this total jurisdiction [of language].” Always, Badiou’s “thought of the same [...] excludes all hermeneutics of meaning,” just as his generic “politics excludes all interpretation” (CS 250).

At the root of this exclusion is a refusal of what might be called the worldly or “sublunar” condition in the broadest sense. “To be of the world [...] means: act without Idea” (CS 218). The “world [monde],” as such, is defined for Badiou by the imperatives of communication and interest, of communal links, of a generalised state of “liaison,” a “preservation in [objective] being” (ET 42). The world is organised against, in other words, all forms of a subtraction from being (PP 110; DP 22). If philosophy is a kind of “logical revolt,” a “wager [pari]” with “universal” dimensions (DP 56), it is blocked by the world at every step. The world is against revolt, through the illusion of a merely commercial freedom; against logic, for the world “is subject to the illogical dimension of communication,” the “incoherent” transmission of images and opinions (DP 8; ET 46-47); against pari, for the world works to cut itself off from chance, to affirm the “necessary calculation of security”; and against the universal, for ours is a “specialised and fragmented world,” a bundling together of specific communities and knowledges, enabled and tied together only through the false abstraction of money (DP 8-9; SP 7-8). Reeling from the collapse of any organised progressive political project, trapped within the exclusive medium of a global financial market, “we are contemporaries of an expansion of communitarian, religious, and nationalist passions” (DP 29; ET 12).

This last point is especially urgent. “No community, real or virtual, stands as vis-à-vis philosophy [n’est en vis-à-vis de la philosophie]” (CS 85). Philosophy is characterised by its “absence of address [absence d’adresse],” its lack of target. Badiou defines it as a discourse without partner, transmitted via “disciples” without substance (CS 85). Philosophy and communal specificity
are mutually exclusive; “every particularity is a conformation, a conformism,” whereas every truth is a non-conforming (SP 117-18). In this, at least, Badiou is very much a man of his time. “Our time,” for Badiou as for, in their different ways, Levinas, Deleuze, Lyotard, Lacoud, Labarthe, Nancy, Faye, and Agamben, is above all a time marked by fascism and the recurrence of neofascisms. With Badiou as with Hobbes or Bossuet, the problematic relation of philosophy and history can be resolved only by their permanent divorce. Hence his rejection of “community,” or, more “positively,” the assertion of a wholly generic form of community, in keeping with Blanchot’s communauté inavouable, Nancy’s communauté désœuvrée, and Agamben’s coming community, so many variations of a pure “presentation” without present or presence, a pure “déplacement” without place.45

For Badiou, “nothing is more opposed to the [communist] idea of community than a communal substance, Jewish, Arab, French or Western. Nothing renders community more impossible than the ‘realist’ alliance of the economy and communal cultural territories” (CS 218; cf. SP 219). Philosophy effects what Deleuze would call the deterritorialisation of truth:

In order for there to be emancipatory politics, it is absolutely necessary that the substantiality of the community remain unnameable [...]. When you’re for African-Americans, women and others having the same rights as anyone else, it’s absolutely indispensable to support that on other grounds than the existence of a community of African-Americans or women. The theme of equal rights is really progressive and really political, that is, emancipatory, only if it finds its arguments in a space open to everyone, a space of universality. If not [...] we have a profound submission to the figure of the state of the situation.46

What distinguishes Badiou’s critique of the communal is the rigour with which he carries it through to its admittedly unfashionable conclusion: “the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other must be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question – and it is an extraordinarily difficult one – is much more that of recognising the Same.”47 An ontology of infinite multiplicity posits alterity – infinite alterity – as the merely banal substance of what objectively is. So, “differences being what there is, and truth being the coming-to-being of that which is not yet, differences are precisely that which all truth deposes, or renders insignificant [...] The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e., the infinite multiplicity of differences) but that which comes to be [advent [...] as a truth. Only a truth is, as such, indifferent to differences” (ET 27). The Same, the generic, is according to Badiou – and it is a supremely debatable point – essentially acultural: “the same in its sameness need not be cultivated” (CS 250; cf. SP 117). The Same is what obtains through the subtraction of the specific. Certainly, only on this basis can an absolute distinction between philosophy and interpretation be maintained. “Every invocation [...] of custom, of community, works directly against truths” (ET 67), for the communal, “the social,” effects the “naming of the place of relation,” a place of “knowledge” and opinion (PP 19). If “opinions are the cement of sociability,” they are for that very reason “without an ounce of truth” (ET 46, 47).

VII the problem

The difficulties with this line of argument are obvious enough. In the absence of a relation between the political and the communal, between truth and knowledge, what establishes the specificity of a subject? “The power of a truth being that of a rupture, it is by violating established, circulating knowledges that a truth returns to the immediate nature of the situation” (ET 62). But what allows us, in this immediacy, to measure the singularity of the situation as such? Badiou’s current work in progress is to confront this problem directly – an effort, guided by the resources of category theory, to develop a rigorous framework for the conjunction of the specific and the generic, the relative or positioned and the absolute or “errant.” It is too soon, of course, to evaluate the results. Here we can only hint at two of the difficulties Badiou must confront, both of
which concern, ultimately, the relation between his generic and the specific.

(In what follows, it is essential to distinguish scrupulously between the specific and what might be called the specified. Actors are specific to a situation without their actions being specified by it, just as an historical account is specific to the facts it describes without its interpretation being specified by them. The specific is a matter of perspective, of how we see rather than what is seen; the specific is the related, the distinct but not defined (an I as related to a you). The specified, by contrast, is defined by positive characteristics (physical, cultural, personal); the specified is a matter of inherited “instincts” as much as of acquired habits. We might say that the most general effort of philosophy or critique is to move from the specified to the specific (without falling into the merely singular). Badiou certainly provides an important, compelling critique of the specified. But he has – thus far – inadequate means of distinguishing specified from specific. He has yet to formulate, in particular, a sustainable theory of “knowledge [savoir]” by which the one can be related to the other.)

(a) The first difficulty concerns the place of the void – a place fraught with what Badiou presents as “ethical” implications. “Disaster” or “Evil” is Badiou’s word for a generic-procedure which strives to become “substantial” or “absolute” – a subject which strives to become object, and thereby fuse with the state of the situation. Nazism provides the extreme case, in which the “positively” affected advent of the Nazi as subject-state is doubled with the “negatively” specified advent of the void of the situation (as Jew, as gypsy, as Slav). At all costs, argues Badiou, the procedure of truth must not take itself to be its own object. The generic absence of quality, in the subjectively asserted truth, must not be taken for the “objective” specificity of being-as-being.

Badiou must, in other words, ensure the clear distinction of the two voids in his system – logical and ontological. On the one hand, “the void of Truth [...] is really void” (CS 72), and “what characterises [the subjective position of philosophy] is that it is purely and simply void” (CS 85);

the empty set $\emptyset$, foundation of ontology and the “proper name of being,” is of course “equally” void. But to identify the logical void of truth with the ontological void $\emptyset$ would be to name the unnameable, and so to assert a “substantialisation” of the truth. “The being of truth is not the truth,” for

Being-as-being comes to be without founding any truth at all. It is this radical distinction of being and truth that my critics seem to have the most trouble grasping, especially when taken to the point where it assumes a complex conception of the being of truths, the distinction of the truth as truth...

In other words, truth builds from the void, not in the void. Of the void, “there can be no experience, for what results from its – always eventmental – convocation is only the laborious work of a procedure, a procedure of truth.” Badiou nevertheless encourages his critics’ confusion when he writes that

What allows a genuine event to be at the origin of a truth, which is the only thing that can be for all, and that can be eternally, is precisely the fact that it relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void. The void, the multiple-of-nothing, neither excludes nor constrains anyone. It is the absolute neutrality of being. (ET 65)

The “from what” a truth constructs its universal truth is indeed the “multiple-of-nothing,” $\emptyset$, foundation of “the absolute neutrality of being.” So if “there are not ‘several’ voids, but only one” (EE 82), and if “the law of the void is in-difference” (EE 227), why does this indifferent singularity not apply to the both ontological and logical voids? Needless to say, no void can be specified. The void of truth could be distinguished from the absolutely universal ontological void only if it can be thought of as irreducibly specific, that is, only if it exists in relation to something else (say, as relative to a historical movement, to the structure of the situation, etc.). This is what Badiou hopes to ensure through description of the “eventmental site” – that part of a situation, included in but not recognised by

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its state, that is located on the “edge of the void” (the position occupied, for example, by women in a fully patriarchal society, or by the proletariat in a fully capitalist society). Truth takes place as a specific convocation of the void of a particular situation in particular circumstances, as an occasion of the void (and never as the voiding of a situation). “Subjectivation is an occurrence of the void.”52

The question is then: is there adequate space for a concept of the specific within an ontology founded solely on the void? Is it possible to conceive or relate to the particularity of a situation only with respect to its void, in the sense that a truth procedure “relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void” (ET 65)? The ultimate question at issue here is the ontological status of relationship itself. We know that set theory, founded on the axiom of extensionality, rigorously excludes all consideration of the relations between the elements of a set from the description of that set. The set \{a, b, c\} is exactly the same as \{b, c, a\}. Matters of relation among elements occupy a strictly secondary, merely “logical” place, on the margins of Badiou’s ontology. But any viable conception of the specific, I would argue, will have to recognise the properly ontological status of relations between terms, relations as co-implied with the terms themselves (rather than, as Deleuze would have it, “external” to and so anterior to these terms). Badiou’s current work in category theory, although directly addressed to logical questions of order and relation, seems unlikely to qualify the set-theoretic ontological hierarchy asserted in the first volume of L’Être et l’événement, which remains essential to the very concept of a generic collectivity.

In any case, it is clear that if Badiou wants to maintain a viable distinction of the logical and ontological voids, he must relate the process of truth to a specifying process of knowledge (in which occurs the void of truth). If Badiou’s major critical effort – the campaign against hermeneutics and constructivism – aims to demonstrate the derivative insufficiency of knowledge, his major ethical effort – the separation of the voids – thus depends on a certain sufficiency of knowledge, sufficient, that is, to distinguish occasions of the void. For “a void is specified topologically by its edge [bord],” and it is only “the ‘edge of knowledge’ [bord de savoir] of a truth [that] identifies a truth according to the situation.”53 What actually emerges, somewhat unexpectedly, from Badiou’s conception of ethics is the need for a rigorous conception of the logic of situation in general, and of situated knowledge in particular.

(b) Such is the second difficulty: the precise place of a specifying “knowledge,” integral to the structure of a situation. What allows for the distinction of situations, as specific situations? This remains, I think, the great unasked question of Being and Event. If “the doctrine of truth I propose has the merit of ending the confrontation between thought and experience, theory and practice” (“Being by Numbers” 118), it comes at a high price: it excludes a productive confrontation of truth and knowledge. On the one hand, we have seen how Badiou asserts the generic being of truth as that which establishes the “Pure” or “dé-lié” – that which escapes all specific relations-with, which posits only itself, in itself. Through its subtraction from knowledge, philosophy decides itself into existence. The assertion of philosophical sovereignty – and with it, the critique of hermeneutics, sophism, constructivism – depends on this, absolutely. In the process, Badiou risks confusion of the voids. On the other hand, he asserts the event-specific occasion of truth as particular to its situation, as relative to a specified savoir. In the process, he risks the sovereignty of truth and with it, the coherence of his project as a whole.54

Deprived of any clearly defined ontological role, knowledge appears to operate in two mutually exclusive ways (one transcendental, another derivative) in Badiou’s present system. Knowledge as he describes it equates both specific and specified in an operation that is sometimes presented as the “constructed” effect of a given situation, and sometimes assumed as transcendental to all possible situations. In the first case, as that which specifies (or structures) a situation, knowledge can only be subtracted or displaced by truth. The specified exists only to become the genericity that it is. The truth “deposes knowledge” (“Six propriétés” 49; SP
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plicity of elements or "realities" (words, gestures, bodies, stars...), basis for the deployment of a known infinity.

Now we know that the effort to assert a specified void — the void of a situation as Jew, as proletariat, as immigrant — is for Badiou the very definition of Evil (le Mal). We have also seen how the nomination of the void is an absolutely original foundational principle or axiom of Badiou’s system. To accept the specificity of the void-in-occasion — a specific void —, then, is to accept at least some kind of “knowledge” or relation as transcendental to Badiou’s system as a whole. Knowledge would thus be transcendental to ontology itself. However, acceptance of the transcendental aspect of a specific knowledge would undercut his critique of knowledge as the mere result of a construction, as “added” in order to be eventually subtracted. In short, the successful critique of knowledge as “constructivist” — and hence the distinction of knowledge and truth, philosophy and “world” — seems fully possible only at an apparently “disastrous” price. Badiou cannot subvert the constructivist version of knowledge, and guard adequately against the identity of voids. Or again, to the degree that Badiou denies the transcendental status of the specific, he effectively identifies the voids. This is something Badiou’s current work in topology will have to address.

By any criteria Badiou’s project is one of the most remarkable, most original and most powerful contemporary efforts to renew an engaged philosophical left. His is certainly the most rigorous and least “naive” assertion of a subject-based philosophy since Sartre. That his work remains unknown in the English-speaking world is nothing short of scandalous. But as things stand, his philosophy has yet to confront the problem of relation in the broadest sense. We might say, in sum, that Badiou has yet to address in convincing detail: the relation of belonging to beings (the relation of the mathematical to the material or social); the relation between knowledge and the state of a situation (often treated as interchangeable); the relation between this knowledge and the truth that deposes it; the
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relation between subjects of a single truth (often presented as echoes of a single voice); and the relation of criteria of pertinence to the assertion of a truthful universality (is the universality of a truth, say Saint Paul’s truth, limited in any way by its strict irrelevance to those who embrace Buddhism or Islam; is the universality of a truth, even a mathematical truth, in any way limited by its reception?). If Badiou is personally engaged, today, in a number of highly specific political and artistic projects, his L’Être et l’événement remains at least partially inadequate to the articulation of this specificity. As long as philosophy is defined as singular rather than specific, as wholly dé-lié, the assertion of its sovereign power risks being at the same time an admission of its constitutional paralysis.

There is indeed no historical One, but this is because there is a “one” of the world, a “unity” in which this lack of unity remains a lack of unity; there is no place else to go. There is no One of meaning, no God – but this is because there is “one” shared faculty of meaning, one transcendental condition, a unity without substance, shared basis for the constrained negotiation of meanings. We must affirm both this transcendental unity, and the (consequent) multiplicity of its performance, co-implied together as aspects of a forever interested figuration-interpretation. We must dissolve the specified, but so as to cultivate the specific.

notes

1 Except where noted, all translations are my own, and in the interests of precision err on the side of a literal rendering. I have retained direct equivalents of the essential terms void (vide), truth process (processus de vérité), subtraction (soustraction), de-statification (désétatisation), and have recourse to the neologism “eventment,” for événementiel.


4 Examples include Nancy’s “plural singular” which, like Agamben’s “coming community,” takes place in the absence of the specific; Lacoue-Labarthe’s mimesis is forever unspecifiable; Levinas’ pre-ontological, “disinterested” responsibility precedes all possible relation with the Other; Henry’s Vie is ipséité and “auto-affection”; Lyotard’s différend is “the un-related [dé-lié] par excellence, repulsive of all secondary relations”; Milner’s singular réel is “without name nor form”; Jambet’s neo-Platonic “One-beyond-being,” like Lardreau’s Absolutely other, is “that by which everything is related,” and so “that by which every relation is undone”; Rosset’s Réel, like Laruelle’s Un, is that idiotic object with no “double,” source for a philosophy of elemental solitude(s). The present essay is part of a work in progress that draws these very different philosophical projects together through the concepts of the singular and the immediate.

5 Cofounder in 1984 of L’Organisation Politique, basis for a “politics without party,” Badiou like Sartre has spent much of his life moving from one urgent site-specific campaign to another, lending his very considerable oratorical and organisational skills to striking factory workers, militant student groups, organising immigrant communities, and the like. See in particular, “Vingt-cinq thèses sur notre politique comme ‘faire,’” in La Distance politique [journal of L’Organisation Politique] 16 (April 1996): 1-6. Unlike so many of his one-time comrades, Badiou can point out (in 1991) that “not for one second have I ceased to be a militant,” that “[I am] one of the very few philosophers – and surely reviled as a result – not to have succumbed either to the sirens of conversion to capitalo-parliamentarism, or to the abandonment of all principle that has, these past ten years, devastated the French intelligentsia” (“L’Être, l’événement et la mili- tance” 13).

6 For Badiou as for Plato, “mathematics is a thought [pensée] written immediately as thought,” and “philosophy has no other role than to identify thought as thought” (“Philosophie et poésie” 90).

7 Deleuze and Guattari, Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? (Paris: Minuit, 1991) 143.
8 “L’Entretien de Bruxelles” 13; cf. CS 165; MP 15; DZ 148.


10 EE 13. Number derives from neither concept nor syntax nor abstraction nor intuition, but is immediately a “form of Being” (NN 11, 261; cf. CS 158 n.26).


12 More precisely: to be included in a set, or to be a subset of a set, is to have no elements that are not themselves included in this set (NN 84). So “the void, to which nothing belongs, is for the same reason included in everything” (EE 100).

13 Cf. NN 93; EE 154, 203, 206-09; TS 320.

14 Knowledge (savoir) is defined rather loosely as a “classifier of subsets” (CS 201).

15 DO 57; cf. Le mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire contre le syndicalisme 32; TC 60; DI 55-56; 61, 67; EE 128. What must be “déséquatré is not the situation (which is impossible), but thought, that is the subject. To suture a situation to its pure multiplicity, through the Subject and by the void, is not, is never, to ‘void’ the situation [Faire venir en Sujet que le vide suture la situation à son être-multiple pur n’est pas, n’est jamais, ‘vider’ la situation]” (Badiou, letter to the author, 17 June 1996).


17 Badiou, Sartre 6; RT 28.

18 Badiou, “Y-a-t-il une théorie du sujet chez Georges Canguilhem?” 300. In Badiou’s early writings, “the political subject is the class party” (TS 259); “the party is reason become subject” (TC 25; cf. DI 15-18, 91; Contribution au problème de la construction d’un parti marxiste-léniniste de type nouveau 27).

19 Badiou, “D’un sujet enfin sans objet”; cf. MP 75; CS 80.

20 “D’un sujet enfin sans objet” 21; DI 128; TS 327, 341; MP 74. “L’Entretien de Bruxelles” 23. Badiou’s subject, clearly, is perfectly consistent with rather than a reaction against the “death of Man” declared by Althusser and Foucault (TS 203-04; ET 10).

21 Badiou, Une soirée philosophique 21; cf. EE 9.

22 MP 86. The mathematical authority for the description of such generic sets is drawn from Paul Cohen’s landmark research, Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis (New York: Benjamin, 1966).


24 “L’ontologie implicite de Spinoza” 60, my emphasis.

25 MP 76. Cf. “Silence, solipsisme, sainteté” 33-34; CS 60-61; DO 47; DP 13. Of course, “if a truth is indiscernible, it is not at all so with respect to other truths [...] but with respect to the resources of discernment belonging to the situation from which it proceeds” (DZ 114).

26 CS 79. Badiou has yet to explain, fully, these “plus précisément”s. It should be stressed that philosophy proper is not a generic procedure (which are rather the conditions of philosophy), but “an operation that sets out from truths” (CS 66), and that demonstrates the “composibility” of its contemporary conditions, i.e., the truths it is to articulate.

27 MP 60-69; cf. Une soirée philosophique 22-23.

28 CS 128. Badiou finds in Beckett and Mallarmé the supreme literary examples of such a “subtractive” return to the Pure. Cf. BK 21; “Le Plé” 182; CS 108 n.16, 119; TS 77-80, 90-92.

29 Cf. BK 46. In what Badiou presents as a loving relationship, for example, there is but one subject proper, not two (ET 40; TS 59).

30 “L’Etre, l’événement et la militance” 19; DZ 114; SP 8.

31 In a recent letter, Badiou outlines “four problems” to be addressed in the forthcoming second
volume of Being and Event: (a) inclusion of "an acceptable foundation" for the "language of the situation," whereby, considered as a topological "category," each term of the situation can be grasped (identified) only through the 'logical' network (nonexistent, in a certain sense) of its relations to others; (b) consolidation of the "theory of the eventmental site, in its role both as 'material' of the event and as local origin of the [truth] procedure [...]. The arbitrary (random) quality of the [subject's] trajectory is limited by the 'attractive' power of the site'; (c) reconsideration of the 'rapport 'en torsion' between a truth and the knowledge it deposes, [... whereby] knowledge is properly the exclusive material of a truth [...], in the sense of an attentive, complex re-folding [répli] of the logical relations constitutive of knowledge'; (d) reconsideration of "the unnameable as the unique instance of the One, but not as the 'réel' of the procedure. It belongs rather to its symbolic aspect. This symbol positions the procedure 'outside the Whole' [hors-Tout]. But it is quite a complicated business!" (Badiou, letter to the author, 19 June 1996).


33 Jean Bodin, La République [1576], bk. 1, ch. 8: "De la souveraineté." It is, according to one summary, "a supreme power, original, primordial, which derives nothing from another, a power which is not subject to the other by any link of subjection" (Jean-Jacques Chêvalier, Histoire de la pensée politique, vol. 1 (Paris: Payot, 1979) 271).


37 The deduction of sovereignty, for Spinoza as much as for Bossuet, "requires no belief in historical narratives of any kind," but is rather "self-vali-

38 "Saisissement, dessaisie, fidélité" [21, my emphasis. "A truth is never a matter of Critique. It is sustained only by itself" (SP 117).


40 "L’Age des poètes" 23; cf. "Art et philosophie" 164.

41 "Qu’est-ce qu’un thermidorien?" 55; cf. EE 381-82.

42 DP 21. "Faced with a [subjective] wager and with the chance occurrence [of an event] by which the new comes into existence, it is unavoidably necessary to have the support and the shelter of a point fixe" (DP 22).

43 Cf. "Qu’est-ce qu’un thermidorien?" 60-62.

44 “L’Entretien de Bruxelles” 21; cf. EE 321-25.


46 “Being by Numbers” 123; cf. CS 245, 250.

47 ET 25; PP 16; "Dix-neuf réponses" 263; SP 117.


49 "Dix-neuf réponses" 253; see especially EE 451-70. “Ontology is a situation. Consequently, any kind of transcendental deduction of situations from the intelligible schema of being-as-being is obviously impossible” (Badiou, letter to the author, 17 June 1996). Cf. Wahl, "Le soustractiv" 29.


51 The set-theoretic "logic of difference implies that the void is unique [unique]. It cannot differ
from another, since it contains no element (no local point) which might indicate this difference” (“Platon et/ou Aristote-Leibniz” 72). Cf. EE 82; CS 85, 282.

52 “D’un sujet enfin sans objet” 17, my emphasis; cf. EE 429.

53 Badiou, letter to the author, 16 Nov. 1996.

54 One consequence of the “rupture” between vérité and savoir is that it is difficult to determine the relation between unnameable and knowledge, the two forms of protection Badiou provides against Evil. They appear to be incompatible occupants of the same conceptual space. For example, is “sexual pleasure” (the unnameable of love) the “highest point” of its truth – or simply the medium of the “animal,” the stuff of a worldly “communication” by excellence? Badiou writes that his ongoing work “will demonstrate that moderation with respect to the power of names operates from within the topology of [subjectively driven] investigations [enquêtes]” of the situation, investigations which continue, laboriously, “step by step,” “to infinity” (Badiou, letter to the author, 17 June 1996).

bibliography

abbreviations


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Dr Peter Hallward
French Department
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
UK
E-mail: peter.hallward@kcl.ac.uk