

## TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF INFINITUDE: BADIOU AND THE POLITICAL SUBJECT

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**ABSTRACT:** In the English-language reception of Alain Badiou's work, he has often been one-sidedly positioned as a direct heir to the antihumanist projects of Lacan, Althusser and Foucault. Whilst there is much to this claim, this paper argues that the retention of a notion of the 'political subject' in Badiou's work necessarily also depends upon a commitment to a much-underexamined notion of a minimal philosophical anthropology that puts Badiou in a tradition with thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach. It is further argued that Badiou's minimal philosophical anthropology is opposed in essence to apparently similar phenomenological projects because it aligns humanity with infinity and not finitude.

**KEYWORDS:** Badiou; Feuerbach; Philosophical Anthropology; The Subject; Humanism; Antihumanism

### INTRODUCTION

Against the evacuation of any positive use of the term in Althusser's work and its reduction to mere ideological effect, it is clear that Badiou wants to retain a post-Sartrean conception of the 'subject', and that this has been the case from his earlier, more heavily political, works (*Théorie du sujet* from 1982), to his later exercises in meta-ontology and a theory of truth (*Being and Event*, 1988 and *Logiques des mondes*, 2006).

However, we can immediately complicate this claim by further stating that the later Badiou does take on board one aspect of the Althusserian claim that there are no extant 'subjects' qua autonomous agents *alongside* the seemingly opposed Sartrean idea that subjectivation is possible and, indeed, desirable. Badiou's relationship to the claims and vicissitudes of the so-called humanism-antihumanism debate play out over the question of how and why he retains and defines, not just a question of who or what the collective political subject might be, but also what the significance of the 'subject' might be for philosophy *in toto*. His work is an attempt to merge and go beyond the two terms of the debate, in which structuralism 'opposes' humanism, by entering into a topological discourse that nevertheless permits the continued possible existence of the subject (indeed, we could say that Badiou's preservation of the 'subject' is the most consistent element of his work). Whilst Badiou seeks to align himself with the antihumanism of Foucault,

Lacan and Althusser, against both a ‘return to Kant’ in human rights discourse and the ‘bad Darwinism’ of a contemporary conception of man as finite animal, there are hints, both explicit and implicit, of his belonging to a longer trajectory of ‘political humanism.’ Indeed, we will see this in particular in Badiou’s mathematico-political deployment of terms such as ‘generic’, and its political correlate ‘generic humanity’. It will not be argued that Badiou’s ‘mathematical turn’ is necessarily over-determined by his politics, as some have suggested, but rather that the mathematics and politics co-implicate each other in ways that entail that when Badiou uses terms like ‘revolution’ the resonances are intended to be heard at both levels, scientific and historico-political.

The major claim made here is that Badiou’s use of the term ‘humanism’ is, however, evidence of a political struggle whose vicissitudes have leant the philosophical implications of the word a different sense at different points between the original ‘debate’ of the 1960s and the contemporary era: the story here with regard to Badiou’s work is how the impossibility of using the term in the era of Stalin (‘a “Soviet humanism” through which we can glimpse the well-heeled dachas and the black Mercedes.’<sup>1</sup>) has been transformed into the possibility of equating the quasi-Feuerbachian term ‘generic humanity’ with the politics of an egalitarian communism (‘Equality means that the political actor is represented under the sole sign of the uniquely human capacity’<sup>2</sup>).

Also at stake in this article is an attempt to confront some of the early English-language reception of Badiou’s philosophy of the subject as a contemporary continuation of the Cartesian project. This is a reading primarily promulgated by Žižek in his *The Ticklish Subject*, where he is explicit in his attempt to ‘reassert’ the Cartesian subject, and enlists Badiou in this endeavour by aligning him on his side in the war against those who would oppose ‘the *hubris* of so-called Cartesian subjectivity.’<sup>3</sup> This article, on the other hand, will take seriously Badiou’s claim in Meditation Thirty-Seven of *Being and Event* where he writes: “The “there is” of the subject is the coming-to-being of the event, via the ideal occurrence of a truth, in its finite modalities. By consequence, what must always be grasped is that there is no subject, that there are no longer some subjects. What Lacan still owed to Descartes, a debt whose account must be closed, was the idea that there were always some subjects.’<sup>4</sup> What Žižek downplays in Badiou is the fact that it is precisely not a question of the psychoanalytic subject (as it surely must remain the case for Žižek in his project to rehabilitate Lacan), which is why the latter must preserve the idea that Badiou remains in some sense Cartesian, or post-Cartesian in a nevertheless strictly indebted manner, and thus partly Lacanian in the way that Žižek desires: ‘The subject is strictly correlative with the ontological gap between the universal and

1. Alain Badiou, *Théorie du Sujet*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 201 (henceforth TS). All translations are my own with the kind help of Alberto Toscano.

2. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London, Verso, 2005, p. 97 (henceforth M).

3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London, Verso, 1999, p. 132.

4. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London, NY, Continuum, 2005, p. 434 (henceforth BE).

the particular'.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Žižek does recognize a split between Badiou and Lacan on the question of the identification of the subject with the void (imperative for psychoanalysis, but an illegitimate 'ontologization' for Badiou), he nevertheless aligns Badiou with a philosophy of subjective decisionism, on the model of a psychoanalytic 'act': 'For Badiou ... the subject is cosubstantial with a contingent act of Decision.'<sup>6</sup> The problem with this conflation is that, whilst it represents a common criticism of Badiou, it makes Badiou's position a kind of voluntarism (see the section on Badiou and Schmitt below), which has indeed been one of the charges levelled against Badiou in his initial English language-reception. Contra Žižek, I seek here to unpack Badiou's own definition of a subject, in particular, his notion of a political subject, which pays attention to and defends its collective, procedural and organized nature.

But what, to begin with, of Badiou's *own* philosophical concessions to Cartesianism? In his monograph on Deleuze, Badiou himself analyses the reasons why the latter cannot uphold any kind of Cartesianism, even though Descartes does not appear to have any ostensible recourse to 'the transcendence of principles', a position to which Deleuze would otherwise appear committed. Badiou presents a series of reasons why Deleuze cannot be aligned with a 'philosophy of the subject': that the principle of the univocity of being precludes the primacy of the subject, which can only reverberate within the confines of equivocity, body-soul, being-nothingness, extension-thought (and here Deleuze is close to Heidegger's opposition to the metaphysics of the subject); that the subject is predicated on a certain reflexive negativity that is again precluded by a prioritization of the univocity of Being, which cannot abide negativity; that philosophies of the subject place the operator 'subject' within a scientific paradigm (the relationship between the cogito and Galileanism); that a certain reactionary tendency towards the capitalist-parliamentary model of politics generally brings with it a commitment to a moral and humanitarian subject.<sup>7</sup> In place of these four criticisms of the subject, Badiou argues that Deleuze replaces their starting-points with a different model: that of the fold, the 'auto-affection of the outside' where thinking coincides with Being: 'It is remarkable that one can name this identity "subject" without having conceded anything to the Cartesian filiation. For to be a subject is "to think the outside as time, on the condition of the fold"' (D 90). The problem for Badiou with this 'escape-route' from subjectivity is its identification of thought with the One of being, the aestheticization of 'folding', and its consequent political and philosophical inadequacy: for Deleuze in the end 'what always matters is folding, unfolding, refolding',<sup>8</sup> the mere performance of the expression of univocal Being. Whilst Badiou will of course retain the language of subject and subjectivation, it is imperative that this subject not be understood as an individuated thinking or doubting entity, i.e. as classically 'Cartesian'. For Badiou, it is clear that some

5. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 158.

6. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 159.

7. All these points are taken from Badiou's *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 80-81 (henceforth D).

8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, trans. Tom Conley, London, NY, Continuum, 2001, p. 137.

subjects are not conscious (the subject of a truth in art is an artwork, for example), some are collective (the political subject) and some are dyadic (the truth of the amorous couple is their separate two-ness, not the romantic ‘fusion’ itself).

As a prelude to a more detailed exploration of Badiou’s theories of the subject, however, it is important to set out a certain non-philosophical thread—in essence, a positive, active, usually Marxist ‘subject’—as it is this notion, which in part takes its cue from one particular element of Descartes (namely the activity of the thinking thing) that underpins Badiou’s own conceptions and the political history of his thought. This takes us from a certain line of thought stretching from Rousseau to Dunayevskaya, before we turn to Badiou’s own *Théorie du sujet* and *Being and Event*.

Ultimately it will be argued that Badiou’s theory of the subject, whilst beginning from a primarily political problematic and broadening out into a conception that will also include such processes as art works (in the domain of art), mathematical innovations (in the domain of science) and couples (in the domain of love), nevertheless demonstrates certain conceptual continuities at the level both of its formalized character and procedure. As Vainqueur puts it, for Badiou: ‘The subject is neither conceived as the existential place of a set of representations, nor apprehended as the transcendental system of the constitution of objects of possible experience, similarly, truth can no longer be envisaged as the adequation of subject and object.’<sup>9</sup> It is this evacuated subject that persists in Badiou’s thought as the primary basis of all the truth procedures, including politics.

## THE ACTIVE POLITICAL SUBJECT

*Prima facie*, we know that the category ‘political subject’ has, at different historical points, operated in completely antonymic ways: from the passive subservience of a subject (*subjectum*, ‘that which is kept down’—literally ‘that which is thrown underneath’), to the active subject, and its seizure of politics itself. This active subject, we can say, is largely a ‘collectivizing’ of an idea of the Cartesian ‘self-subject’ in the realm of politics, rather than a reversal of the substantive passive qualities of an older Aristotelian notion. However, it also bears a relation to the history of the term *subjectus*, namely the being submitted to an authority (sovereign, monarchical). When Dunayevskaya writes in 1971 that ‘[n]o word is more important than Subject ... Whether we mean the workers or a single revolutionary; whether we mean women’s liberation, Blacks, Indians, “organization,” it is clear that “Subject” is the one responsible for both theory and practice,’<sup>10</sup> there is no doubt that ‘subject’ is here understood as the propulsive, active, revolutionary force manifested by *both* individuals and collectives in the fusion of theory and practice. It retains absolutely none of its traditional passive senses. How did the term ‘political subject’

9. Vainqueur, Bernard, ‘De quoi “sujet” est-il le nom pour Alain Badiou?’, *Penser le Multiple*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2002, pp. 313–38, p. 314.

10. Raya Dunayevskaya, ‘Marxist-Humanism’s concept of “Subject”’, letter to young members of News and Letters Committees, *The Raya Dunayevskaya Collection, Supplement*, 1971, pp. 14110–11. Available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/dunayevskaya/works/1971/subject.htm>.

become mediated by these two senses of the subject (the Cartesian active subject and the political *subjectus*)?

It is clear that this is not merely a theoretical question, but one that engages the historical invention of certain mediating terms, such as ‘people’ (*peuple*) and citizen (*citoyen/ne*), and certain events (the French Revolution, the Paris Commune). Balibar argues, for instance, that it was only by way of the citizen ‘that universality could come to the subject.’<sup>11</sup> Linguistically, there is evidence in the term of a move from adjective to noun, from individuals who are subjected to the power of another, to the representation or active force of a people or a community as a set of ‘subjects’. We can contrast this ‘political fusion’ of the Cartesian subject and the *subjectus* with the recent Hegelian and psychoanalytic attempt to trace another history of the subject as a prelude for a discussion of radical politics, such as we find in Žižek: ‘the standard notion of the gradual becoming-subject of the substance (of the “active” subject leaving its “imprint” on the substance, moulding it, mediating it, expressing in it his subjective content) is ... doubly misleading ... [it] is always the remainder of substance which eludes grasp of “subjective mediation”.’<sup>12</sup> Žižek thus turns the question of the subject into something like a haunting remainder to be psychoanalytically traversed, rather than addressing the activity of a collective political subject in all its potential historical force.

It is in Rousseau’s 1762 text, *The Social Contract*, above all, that we explicitly witness the metamorphosis of subject in the old sense (obedience) into a new kind of subject, the subject of law which is, nevertheless, also the final arbiter of legal pronouncements and is thus active and passive to the same degree, although not yet the wholly active revolutionary subject of Dunayevskaya’s theory and practice:<sup>13</sup>

The public person thus formed by the union of all other persons was once called the *city*, and is now known as the *republic* or the *body politic*. In its passive role it is called the *state*, when it plays an active role it is the *sovereign*; and when it is compared to others of its own kind, it is a *power*. Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of a *people*, and call themselves individually *citizens*, in that they share in the sovereign power, and *subjects*, in that they put themselves under the laws of the state.<sup>14</sup>

This collective of associating beings who are *simultaneously* people, citizens and subjects, operates at the level of the law, and is neither subject to it in the more classical sense, nor does it impose laws from above (for it would be merely imposing them upon itself): ‘There must be an exact correspondence between the absolute activity of the citizen

11. Etienne Balibar, ‘Citizen Subject’, *Who Comes After the Subject?*, Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), London, Routledge, 1991, p. 45.

12. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 21.

13. Historically, the first recorded use of the term ‘citizen’ to mean ‘bearer of rights’ was in 1751. See *Trésor de la Langue Française*. Available at <http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm>.

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston, London, Penguin, 1968, pp. 61-62.

(legislation) and his absolute passivity (obedience to the law). But it is essential that this activity and this passivity be *exactly* correlative.<sup>15</sup> The inhabitant of such a republic splits himself or herself between general and particular interests, and thus inaugurates a new subject, as Balibar demonstrates, the citizen-subject ('[t]he citizen properly speaking is *neither* the individual *nor* the collective, just as he is *neither* an exclusively public being *nor* a private citizen').<sup>16</sup> In this historical turn, there is a certain move towards informality with regard to the state. The term 'citizen', from a 12<sup>th</sup> century term meaning 'inhabitant of a city', carries with it an actual attempt to reinvent certain public forms of address—after the French Revolution, a bill was issued to replace 'Monsieur' and 'Madame' with 'citizen' (qua non-deferential, urbanized, generic term).<sup>17</sup> We could perhaps call this the 'Republicanization of thought', which finds its rapid historical culmination in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (26<sup>th</sup> August 1789): 'Article 6: Legislation expresses the overall will'.

But what is this overall (so-called sovereign) will? In Rousseau, we are presented with a concept of the subject mid-way between the passivity of the sovereign-subject and the activity of the revolutionary subject: this subject is mediated not only via the citizen, but also by a new conception of sovereignty. When Rousseau asks 'what then is correctly to be called an act of sovereignty? It is not a covenant between a superior and an inferior, but a covenant of the body with each of its members',<sup>18</sup> there is another circularity, not just of subject and law, but also of subject and sovereign. But how is this circularity determined?

It is via the conception of the 'general will' that the laws decided upon by subjects will operate equally for all: 'since each man gives himself to all, he gives himself to no one; and since there is no associate over whom he does not gain the same rights as others gain over him, each man recovers the equivalent of everything he loses, and in the bargain he acquires more power to preserve what he has'.<sup>19</sup> How does the suppressed subject of sovereignty come to be collective? By associating in such a way as that to assume one's being subjected to the law is simultaneously one's giving oneself to 'no one' *and* the recovery of one's rights in the equal and simultaneous agreement of all. The social pact or contract expresses this generic, empty will, which functions by subtracting the sum of individual differences (the pluses and minuses of interest) in the name of a common claim. But why does Rousseau maintain the classical link between subject and sovereign at all? Merely because of the traditional connotations of the concept? If the subject and sovereignty coincide in the legislating power of the subject as general will, why not dispense with the formal framework of a hierarchical political, theological and

15. Balibar, 'Citizen Subject', p. 49.

16. Balibar, 'Citizen Subject', p. 51.

17. The question of the term 'citizen' is also tied up with the question of tutoiement (the informal use of 'you' in French): 'Times that one would [use the informal form of 'you'] and one would say: citizen' (as in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* from 1862).

18. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 77.

19. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 61.



monarchical system by replacing the term 'subject' with a completely new term?

It is perversely enlightening in this regard to turn to one of Rousseau's most reactionary critics for a summary of this problem, Joseph de Maistre who, in his *Study on Sovereignty* (1821), defends classical sovereignty in the following way:

It is said that the people are sovereign; but over whom?—over themselves, apparently. The people are thus subject. There is surely something equivocal if not erroneous here, for the people who *command* are not the people which *obey* ... If a democracy in its theoretical purity were to exist, there would be no sovereignty within this state: for it is impossible to understand by this word anything other than a repressive power that acts on the *subject* and that is external to him. It follows that this word *subject*, which is a relative term, is alien to republics, because there is no sovereign, properly speaking, in a republic and because there cannot be a *subject* without a *sovereign*, just as there cannot be a *son* without a *father*.<sup>20</sup>

De Maistre points out a certain linguistic and structural irony in Rousseau's idea that 'the sovereign, which is simply a collective being, cannot be represented by anyone but itself'.<sup>21</sup> Whilst De Maistre's own conception of sovereignty is without doubt anti-philosophical, theological, elitist and nationalist (a clutch of sentiments handily summarized in the following quote: 'whoever says that man is born for liberty is speaking nonsense'), this depiction of the 'circularity' of subject and sovereignty in Rousseau's 'republicanization of thought' is important: It means that the political subject, as egalitarian and as generic, is perilously close, etymologically and in practice, to tipping back into forms of despotism. Rousseau himself recognizes this possibility very clearly: 'if the danger is such that the apparatus of law is itself an obstacle to safety, then a supreme head must be nominated with power to silence all the laws and temporarily suspend the sovereign authority'.<sup>22</sup> We are thus left with an odd formula that at any moment potentially replaces the old sovereign (i.e. the will of the people expressed through law and subject to those laws) with a new 'supreme head'. The moment the subject and law slip out of alignment with each other is the moment a novel, perhaps even more despotic, form of authority could fill the breach. This scenario is reflected in this retort to Rousseau, again from De Maistre: 'People complain of the despotism of princes; they ought to complain of the despotism of *man*'.<sup>23</sup> Whilst De Maistre promulgates a form of naturalized politics, which emphasizes tradition and divine purpose: 'all sovereignty derives from God; whatever form it takes, it is not the work of man',<sup>24</sup> De Maistre's criticisms of Rousseau nevertheless point to the fundamental difficulty of reversing the meaning of the term subject

20. Joseph de Maistre, *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, trans. and with an introduction by Jack Lively, London, Allen and Unwin, 1965, p. 120.

21. Maistre, *The Works*, p. 69.

22. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 171.

23. Maistre, 'Study on Sovereignty', in *The Works*, p. 118

24. Maistre, 'Study on Sovereignty', in *The Works*, p. 114. Compare Rousseau's incidentally pre-emptive response: 'all power comes from God ... but so does every disease, and no one forbids us to summon a physician.' *The Social Contract*, p. 53.

from a politically submissive entity (either collective or singular) to an active self-regulating collective noun, namely the ‘people’, the ‘citizens’ (we could call this the question of a subject-predicate reversal within the term subject itself). This difficulty remains in so far as the political subject is mediated by the concept of the sovereign, since the sovereign structures the entire space and placing of that which is contained in the political framework, namely the subjects therein. It is the destruction of what he will call this ‘space of placements’ that Badiou is concerned to explicate in *Théorie du sujet*.

The same theo-political hierarchization that remained in Descartes in his conception of man engenders difficulties for a more explicitly political project with egalitarian aims. When Balibar, in an explicit attempt to justify some of the egalitarian elements apparent in Rousseau (and compare his own project of *egaliberté*, where the coextensivity of equality and freedom immediately concerns the universality of individuals), argues the following: ‘[a]fter the subject comes the citizen ... and whose constitution and recognition put an end (in principle) to the subjection of the subject’, there is a sense in which he overlooks the inherent limitations of a such a positive conception of the political subject and its inscription within constitutions. While it is clear, as he suggests, that one cannot think a modern concept of the political subject without taking into account its *mediated* role through the terms ‘citizen’ and ‘people’,<sup>25</sup> there remains an inherent danger that the retention of the term ‘subject’ will leave it open to recuperation by whatever force desires to subordinate it. By transforming the discourse on the political subject from that of representation in a certain political space to a reformulation of the very question of ‘placement’ in politics, Badiou attempts to overcome the circular logic that would always leave a subject (however ‘active’) prey to recapture by the logic of the (sovereign) state.

## BADIOU, BALIBAR AND ROUSSEAU

It is revealing, with regard to the analysis of the terms subject, citizen and politics, to briefly compare Balibar and Badiou’s readings of Rousseau, composed around the same time (and indeed published in the same year, 1988), but rather different in emphasis and conclusion.<sup>26</sup> Whilst acknowledging, at the outset, with Balibar, that for Rousseau ‘the words *subject* and *sovereign* are identical correlatives’, Badiou will subsume this dyadic relationship (what we could call the ‘republican democratization’ of power) under what he names, and will call in his own work, ‘the generic becoming of politics’. Why? Because what he wants to unveil in Rousseau is an instance of a conception of politics that manifests certain key features present in Badiou’s own theory: a demand for generic equality, an ‘event’ in politics (in this instance, the social contract), and, above all, the idea that politics ‘is a *creation*, local and fragile, of collective humanity’. This is, in the end, the form of ‘political subjectivity’ that Badiou wishes to extract from Rousseau, rather than

25. Very much more could be said of this latter term ‘people’, of course: in its very origins it is ambiguous; it could potentially refer to ethnicity, inhabitants of a nation, a territory, etc.

26. See Balibar’s ‘Citizen Subject’; *Being and Event* was originally published 1988.



remaining within the historical-conceptual locus of questions concerning the citizen *per se*, as Balibar does. Instead of focussing on the more classically bourgeois elements of Rousseau's proposals (the defence of property, security and the 'rights' of the state qua state), Badiou sees in the general will an almost pure form of 'fidelity' to egalitarian aims ('[t]he general will is the operator of fidelity which directs a generic procedure'). The citizen, in this account, becomes translated as a 'militant' of a political cause, faithful (albeit precariously) to the rare emergence of an 'event' in politics, the social contract (or rather to its generic demands).<sup>27</sup> Later, Badiou will speak of the 'militant identification' of politics: 'which, for me, is ... the *only* identification which can ally politics and thought' (M 13).

However, there are two problems here, aside from the question of whether Badiou's reading of Rousseau is something of a theoretical imposition. One is the instability of the political event itself, whereby there is an 'inherent and inevitable vice which relentlessly tends to destroy the body politic from the moment of its birth' (BE 345). In essence, this represents the acknowledgement that the egalitarian impulse behind the social contract will inevitably be corrupted. Badiou's point here is again extremely close (and will remain so in his own work) to Sartre's argument in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, namely that there is a kind of constitutive failure, an inevitable ossification or falling-off of the demands behind every revolutionary impulse and any collective project.

The second major difficulty here is the distance between what Badiou wants to valorize in Rousseau (the generic nature of the will, the 'event' of the social contract, the precarious creation of a 'collective humanity') and the way Rousseau sees this in which the generic or general will manifested, namely through voting, the counting of each representation: 'this act of association creates an artificial and corporate body composed of as many members as there are voters in the assembly' and 'for the will to be general, it does not have to be unanimous; but all the votes must be counted'.<sup>28</sup> Badiou admits that Rousseau submits the general will to the 'law of number' and thus turns a generic, egalitarian political programme into a majoritarian one. (In France, the major historical definition of whether one was technically an active or passive citizen was determined by whether the person voted or not.) If the critical question for both Badiou and Rousseau is ultimately 'how can the generic character of politics subsist when unanimity fails?' (BE 349), with the emphasis on the genericity of politics, then Rousseau clearly finds the answer in a form of electoral systems and majority agreement. Badiou, on the other hand, will turn to the concept of fidelity (and, etymologically at least, introduces a new version of the theological 'faithful subject'). Ultimately Badiou criticizes Rousseau for eliding politics with legitimation (and the electoral) and not with truth. It is politics as a 'truth procedure', and the separation of truth from knowledge that grounds Badiou's own presentation of politics. Clearly, if the 'general will is infallible, due to being subtracted from any particular knowledge, and due to it relating solely to the generic exist-

27. The Badiou quotes are from Meditation 32 of BE, pp. 344-54.

28. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 61, 70.

ence of people' then ballot boxes and the counting of representations would seem to be *a priori* superfluous, or at least something that wouldn't touch the 'correctness' of the will.<sup>29</sup> Carl Schmitt has a quite different criticism of Rousseau, which nevertheless chastises him for something very similar to Badiou, albeit from the *other side* of sovereignty, as it were: this critique (famously) circles around the need to maintain a purer concept of 'decision'. Schmitt argues the following:

The general will of Rousseau became identical with the will of the sovereign; but simultaneously the concept of the general will also contained a quantitative determination with regard to its subject, which means that the people become sovereign. The decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty was thus lost.<sup>30</sup>

For Schmitt, as we saw in the previous section for De Maistre too, it is the becoming-anonymous of the arbitrary and idiosyncratic element of the sovereign that is at fault in Rousseau, because it deprives the Sovereign of his fundamental characteristic, namely, to intervene in the name of an exception ('Sovereign is he who decides on the exception').<sup>31</sup> Similarly, again following De Maistre, Schmitt points out the peculiarity of retaining the (originally) theologically-structured term 'subject' in a political context if the concept of sovereignty is, according to Rousseau, to be dissolved into its antonym ('The politicization of theological concepts [in Rousseau] is so striking that it has not escaped any true expert on his writings'<sup>32</sup>). For Schmitt, it is a question of the 'systematic structure' of these secularized theological concepts which renders their new 'democratic' use suspect.

With reference to the idea of decision, whilst Badiou will separate his notion from the idea of the personal, arbitrary decision and fix it instead to a kind of collective experience of the egalitarian and generic demand of politics itself, it is clear that Rousseau's ultimate subsumption of the faithful and decisional character of the general will to representation via the electoral system *also* strips it of a certain purity for Badiou: 'As a procedure faithful to the event-contract, politics cannot tolerate delegation or representation' (BE 347). It is also intriguing to note a certain similarity in the tone of both Schmitt and Badiou's disgust with what Schmitt calls 'technical-organization' and what Badiou names 'capital-parliamentarianism' (and its corollary, 'opinionism'): The core of

29. A clear indication of Badiou's opinion of voting can be found in *Metapolitics*: 'If our knowledge of planetary motion relied solely on suffrage as its protocol of legitimation, we would still inhabit a geometrical universe' (M 15).

30. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1985, p. 48.

31. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 5.

32. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 46. See also p. 36 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts'. And also Atger: 'The prince develops all the inherent characteristics of the state by a sort of continual creation. The prince is the Cartesian god transposed to the political world'. (*Essai sur l'histoire du contrat social*, 1906).

the political idea, ‘the exacting moral decision’ is evaded in both the economic or ‘technical-organization’ and the political dissolves into ‘the everlasting discussion of cultural and philosophical-historical commonplaces’<sup>33</sup> (Schmitt); ‘The essence of politics is not the plurality of opinions’ and his description of ‘the State ... the normative threefold arrangement of economic management, national assessment and democracy’ (Badiou) (M 84). Obviously there is no sense in which Badiou and Schmitt share the same political aims—Badiou’s concept of politics consistently opposes any statist, arbitrary or personalist arguments, and the *decisional* nature of Badiou’s faithful subject is predicated on a certain undecidability, not sheer arbitrary will. Bosteels, for one, points to some of the problems with understanding Badiou’s faithful subject simply as a ‘decisionist’ conception, emphasizing instead the centrality of process and not merely the act of decision: ‘The impure and equivocal nature of all truth processes is ... inseparable from any topological understanding of the subject.’<sup>34</sup>

#### BADIOU’S POLITICAL SUBJECTS: FROM *THÉORIE DU SUJET* TO *BEING AND EVENT*

It is important to set out the relation between Badiou’s conceptions of force and destruction in the earlier work of *Théorie du sujet* (which consists of seminars presented from 1975-79 with a preface from 1981) to his later (*Being and Event* and *Metapolitics*). Badiou is politically at his most Leninist in the earlier text, both terminologically and rhetorically. The book is without doubt, at least in part, an attempt to come to terms with certain responses to the explosion and rapid recapture of the events of May ’68, as well as a certain reactionary moment in French political life (‘the bitter period of betrayal’ as he later describes it) (M xxxiv). It is also an attempt to demonstrate his distance (as well as his debt) to Althusser in the wake of the ‘Humanist controversy’.

The question of why Badiou wants to maintain a concept of the subject in the first place is a crucial one. Whilst it is clear that he is heavily indebted both to Lacan and to Althusser for their structural analyses and their anti-humanism, he sees a danger in the way in which they handle the question of the subject. He writes: ‘the essence of an activist materialism requires ... the production of a theory of the subject, which it once had the task of foreclosing’ (TS 202). So whilst the ‘materialism’ of Althusser and Lacan usefully criticized certain classical, humanist conceptions of subjectivity and the subject *at one critical juncture*, there is a sense in which Badiou is unwilling to give up on the term in the context in which he now writes. Indeed, he speaks instead of a kind of ‘subjective deficiency’:

More deeply, I know that what has happened to us which is essential, in force as in humiliation, bears the mark of a *long-term* lack, whence derives the fact that, however sudden, the irruption is also light, whilst, as could be predicted long in

33. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 65.

34. Bruno Bosteels, ‘Alain Badiou’s Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?’ Part II, *Plü*, vol. 13, 2002, p. 205.

advance, moral disarray is no less ineluctable. This lack is essentially subjective. It relates to the way in which potential forces, at the heart of the people, have been kept apart from their own concept. (TS 13)<sup>35</sup>

As Callinicos puts it, Badiou seeks ‘a conceptual black sheep—a materialism centred on a theory of the subject’.<sup>36</sup> Not only, but a materialism that allegedly takes its cue from Hegel, as summarized by Badiou in the ironic statement: ‘We must conceive imperialist society not only as substance but also as subject’ (TS 60).

Badiou sets out two political temptations, or ‘deviations’, that he argues followed the events of 1968: on the one side, the left deviation, a fetishism of the ‘pure’ political act that would have done with everything that belongs to the original situation and, on the other, the right deviation, the cynical denial that nothing had in fact taken place, that all was perfectly ‘normal’. Both of these temptations he argues, were inadequate to explain the singularity of the events, and also inadequate for an understanding of political subjectivity more generally. Badiou, instead, revisits Hegel and introduces a notion of ‘scission’ in order to refute both these deviations. In *Théorie du sujet* Badiou argues that there are two ‘dialectical matrices’ in Hegel’s *Logic*. The former is covered by the term alienation, ‘the idea of a simple term that deploys itself in its becoming-other, to return into itself as a completed concept’ and the latter, a matrix whose operator is ‘scission’, ‘and whose theme is that the only unity is a divided one’ (TS 22). It is this second matrix that Badiou will use as the basis of an attempt to found a distinction between ‘something’ and ‘another thing’ (*Etwas und Anderes*). The repetition of the same thing posed twice, which Badiou will refer to as A (A as such) and Ap (A at another place) introduces a discussion of ‘placement’ (where p is place). Whilst he explicitly denies that p is to be understood spatially or geometrically (‘A doubling can be temporal, or even fictional’) (TS 24-5), it is this split that he depends upon for his positing of a ‘constitutive scission’, which he formulates as  $A=(AAp)$  (A is A, but also its placement as A). This ‘minimal difference’, he states, can also be understood as the relationship between theory and practice, the letter and the site in which it is marked. The dialectic is first and foremost a process, not of negation and the negation of the negation, but of internal division. Every force must be split into itself and that part of it is placed, or determined by the structure of assigned places.<sup>37</sup> Every force thus stands in a relation of ‘internal exclusion’ as to its determining place: ‘As the history of the twentieth century shows in excruciating detail, what happens actually is the constant struggle of the working class against its determina-

35. In an interview from 2001, Badiou makes the following claim, with reference to his own work in the late 1960s and 70s: ‘I found in Sartre’s theory of practical freedom, and particularly in the subjectivized Marxism that he was trying to produce, something with which to engage myself politically, in spite of everything, in the situation’, ‘Can Change be Thought?’, 2001 interview with Bruno Bosteels, in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, ed. and with an introduction by Gabriel Riera, New York, SUNY, 2005, p. 242.

36. Alex Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique*, Cambridge, Polity: 2006, p. 93. This is one of the chapter headings in Badiou’s TS.

37. See Bruno Bosteels, ‘Alain Badiou’s Theory of the Subject’, p. 176.

tion by the bourgeois capitalist order, an order that divides the proletariat from within'.<sup>38</sup> Bosteels repeatedly stresses the dialectical thread of Badiou's work as a whole, refusing to understand the title of *Being and Event*, for example, as the presentation of two disjunct areas, rather, 'Badiou's later thought remains dialectical, despite the mathematical turn, in rejecting such stark opposition between being and event, in favour of the specific site through which an event is anchored in the ontological deadlock of a situation that only a rare subjective intervention can unlock'.<sup>39</sup> It is the process of 'internal division', as set out in Badiou's heavily politicized reading of Hegel's *Logic*, that founds his claims about the subject: his analysis falls somewhere between a structural presentation and a more classically Marxist one (such as Dunayevskaya or Lukács) that would always stress the importance of retaining a post-Hegelian notion of the subject. In retaining a notion of the subject, however, Badiou nevertheless does not take up a notion of history, as Sartre would do, as a way of *placing* this subject. In fact, Badiou aligns 'history' on the side of the objective, structural, reactionary drive *to place* in the negative sense: 'it is always in the interests of the powerful that history is mistaken for politics—that is, that the objective is taken for the subjective' (TS 60). His position on this, at least, does not radically alter in the later work: 'There are only plural instances of politics, irreducible to one another, and which do not comprise any homogeneous history' (M 23).

In *Théorie du sujet* Badiou goes further in these paradoxical non-spatial, anti-historical claims regarding place. When he states that 'the true contrary of the proletariat is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world ... the project of the proletariat, its internal being, is not to contradict the bourgeois ... Its project is communism and nothing else. That is to say, the abolition of all place in which one could deploy something like a proletariat. The political project of the proletariat is the disappearance of the space of placement of classes' (TS 25-6), there is a clear sense in which the (non)space of politics is what is at stake, the complete overturning of the subjective alignment of class positions, of the very opposition proletariat-bourgeoisie. There is a double play on the terms subjective and objective in *Théorie du sujet*: not only must political subjectivity be posited as an active force in the face of the seemingly static nature of the existing order, but 'subjective' is also opposed to the apparently 'objective' basis of placement, in the sense of an understanding of class as a social 'object'—the total number of people who would 'count' as 'the working class', for example. Turning to Badiou's claim that 'there is only one subject, so there is only one force, whose existence always produces the event' (TS 160), we must ask: why only one? In this early conception of politics, it is a question, not of a conception of politics as a battle, taking place in history (as in late Sartre), but, again, of place. The proletariat is not opposed to the bourgeoisie in a battle over who owns the means of production (the bourgeoisie is thus not a 'subject' in the same way as the proletariat; there is a fundamental dissymmetry between the two classes), but, as Badiou puts it we must reject 'a vision of politics as subjective duel ... There is one place,

38. Bruno Bosteels, 'Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject', p. 176.

39. Bruno Bosteels, 'Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject', p. 206.

one subject' (TS 148). Furthermore, as a counterweight to certain of the discourses surrounding May '68, in which running battles with the police summed up the oppositional structure of active politics: '[t]here is not only the law of Capital, or only the cops. To miss this point means not to see the unity of the order of assigned places, its consistency' (TS 60).

Ultimately it is a question of the separation between what Badiou calls *l'espace* ('space' or 'placement'—the neologistic combination of 'space' and 'place') and *horlieu* ('outplace'—another neologism fusing 'outside' and 'place'). 'The dialectic is the *horlieu* against the *espace*' (TS 148). What does this mean? For Badiou, the working class cannot be synonymous with the proletariat—the former is the object of a well-defined social and economic placement, with a set of identifiable roles and positions.<sup>40</sup> The proletariat is instead the 'active', destructive, purifying force of the undoing of all object-placement (hence its primarily subjectivized nature): 'the proletariat exists wherever a political *horlieu* is created. It is thus in purging itself that it exists. It has no existence anterior to its organization of political survival' (TS 204-5). The question for Badiou here is one of destroying (intended quite literally) a certain structural distribution of place. In his later works he will openly regret this rather violent presentation: 'I was, I admit, a little misguided in *Théorie du sujet* concerning the theme of destruction. I still maintained, back then, the idea of an essential link between destruction and novelty. Empirically, novelty (for example, political novelty) is accompanied by destruction. But it must be clear that this accompaniment is not linked to intrinsic novelty; on the contrary, the latter is always a supplementation by a truth' (BE 407). It is critical to note that the introduction of 'truth' as a category in Badiou's later works is conceptually bound to the attempt to separate out his political project from the violence historically perpetrated in the name of communism and instead links to a different theoretical lineage, that of Plato and, indeed, to an older concept, that of 'justice': 'We shall call "justice" that through which a philosophy designates the possible truth of a politics' (M 97). This self-placement in the political trajectory of justice and truth is also reflected in his turn from the term Proletariat to more generic conceptions of man, thought and humanity, as we shall see.

Aside from the terms *horlieu* and *espace*, in *Théorie du sujet* Badiou more broadly opposes the terms 'force' and 'place', such that the *horlieu* (outplace) is not to be understood as another other than a *force*, rather than a set location: 'the double articulation of force and place', whereby 'the one is the loss of the other ... this is Marx's great discovery' (TS 188). Badiou goes on to say that: 'We will call *subjective* those processes relative to the qualitative concentration of force' (TS 59). There is a point of comparison to be made here with regards to the earlier and later work on this question of force, or as it is later termed, forcing: in *Being and Event* Badiou will define forcing (a 'fundamental law of the

40. As Hallward puts it: 'In the early work, this distinction obtains above all in the (still dialectical) movement from the working class (as object) to the proletariat (as subject)...Insofar as they are conditioned by their well-defined social and economic *place*, the working classes are the mere object of history, not its subject or motor'. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 34.



subject') in the following way: 'the belonging of [the] term of the situation to come is equivalent to the belonging of this term to the indiscernible part which results from the generic procedure' (BE 403). What does this entail? That the indiscernible part of a situation, that which cannot be captured by knowledge (and Badiou will always oppose knowledge to truth in the later works) cannot be known to a subject, yet the 'subject of truth' 'forces veracity at the point of the indiscernible' (BE 411), in other words, it realizes an indiscernible by deciding on a truth even whilst not being certain that it belongs to the situation in which it is found: 'The subject, which is the forcing production of an indiscernible included in the situation, cannot ruin the situation. What it can do is generate veridical statements that were previously undecidable' (BE 417). The move from the indiscernible to the undecidable is what characterizes a faithful subject for the Badiou of *Being and Event*, and precludes any illegitimate forcing of the naming of the event, precisely because it is based on the indiscernible elements within a specific situation, not the imposition of a name from a pre-existing sum of knowledges. In the terminology of the later work, Badiou will put this claim with regard to knowledges in the following way: 'Any subset, even that cemented by the most real of interests, is apolitical, given that it can be named in an encyclopaedia. It is a matter of knowledge, and not of truth' (BE 347). Furthermore, '[a] truth is that indiscernible multiple whose finite approximation is supported by a subject, such that its ideality to-come, nameless correlate of the naming of an event, is that on the basis of which one can legitimately designate as subject the aleatory figure which, without the indiscernible, would be no more than an incoherent sequence of encyclopaedic determinants' (BE 433). It is on the basis of this indiscernible, not the force of a pre-named collective, that a political truth rests. In *Théorie du sujet*, Badiou claims, however, that 'every subject is political'<sup>41</sup>, and it is not unfair to ask whether this is still the case to some extent, or at least whether the structure of subjectivation in Badiou is primarily conditioned by his analysis of the 'rare' political processes he repeatedly returns to (TS 46). In *Conditions* (1992), Badiou does in fact criticize his earlier position in *Théorie du sujet*: 'Today, I would no longer say 'every subject is political', which is still a maxim of suturing. I would rather say: 'Every subject is induced by a generic procedure, and thus depends on an event. Which is why the subject is rare'.<sup>42</sup> It is not clear, however, whether this amounts to a retraction of the *form* of subjectivation which was originally understood solely politically—subjects were already 'rare' in *Théorie du sujet*, for example.

However, in the earlier work, Badiou's thought itself does precisely circulate around a certain collection of names and knowledges: Marxism, Badiou argues, 'is the discourse that supports the proletariat as subject. This is a principle we must never abandon'. Despite his separation of proletariat from the working class, the fact that Badiou sets up a name as a 'principle' can be retroactively criticized from the standpoint of his later work as overdetermining that which is left undecided and unseen in the later formula-

41. cf. Peter Hallward's claim that 'In Badiou's early work, the mechanism of this subjectivation is exclusively political', *A Subject to Truth*, p. 35.

42. Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 234, n. 41.

tion of a political event. The political question in the early work is ‘what is the organic link between the masses in revolt—the decisive historical actor—and the Party, as constituted political subject?’<sup>43</sup> It is this notion of an ‘organic link’ that marks Badiou out as essentially vanguardist in his conception of the political subject at this point, albeit a vanguardism that oscillates with regards to who the ‘subject’ is: there is an inherent ambiguity about who is the true subject in this situation—the party or the proletariat? Or a fusion of the two? As Hallward puts it: ‘[t]he subjective, or historical, “topology” of partisan antagonism explodes the static algebra of class ... Whereas every object stays in its place, every subject violates its place, inasmuch as its essential virtue is to be disoriented. Subjectivism operates in the element of force whereby place ... finds itself altered.’<sup>44</sup> Yet it is not an unmediated proletariat that seeks to abolish the ‘space of placement’ of classes. On the contrary, ‘It is only through the party that the (objectively) working class becomes revolutionary Subject ... the masses make history, but as vanishing or ephemeral; the party makes this very vanishing *consist* and endure.’<sup>45</sup> As well as a response to Sartre’s problems of the ‘fleetingness’ of the group-in-fusion, as outlined in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, there is a presentiment of Badiou’s later ‘faithful subjects’ in the role he assigns to the Party in this earlier work: ‘the initial univocal act, which is always localized, inaugurates a fidelity, i.e. an invention of consequences, that will prove to be as infinite as the situation itself.’<sup>46</sup> In this sense, we could say that Badiou’s attempt to make fidelity an on-going process, rather than a simple declaration mutates from donating to the party a vanguardist role to a retention of this same form in later non-political and more generically political conceptions of the subject. Badiou’s criticism in *Théorie du sujet* of mass movements without a party is furthermore extremely close to Lenin’s criticisms of ‘spontaneity’ and his centralizing of the party in *What is to be Done?*: ‘We must take upon ourselves the task of organizing ... an all-sided political struggle under the leadership of *our* party that all and sundry oppositional strata could ... give assistance to this struggle and this party according to their capacities.’<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Badiou is adamant in his defence of Lenin’s affirmation of the subjective aspect of politics, and in fact argues against the common claim that Lenin delegates too much strength to the party: ‘For Lenin, the party is nothing but the ... mandatory focal point for a politics. The party is the active purification of politics, the system of possibility practiced through the assessment of the Commune. It is inferred from politics (from the subjective aspect of force)’ (TS 64). Later Badiou could not be more explicit in his turn away from the logic of the party, however: ‘the question worth highlighting is one of a politics *without party*, which in no sense means unorganized, but rather one organized through the intel-

43. Alain Badiou, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre’ (pamphlet), Paris, Potemkine, 1980, p. 7.

44. Hallward, *A Subject to Truth*, p. 35.

45. Hallward, *A Subject to Truth*, p. 36.

46. Alain Badiou, ‘Eight Theses on the Universal’, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, London, NY, Continuum, 2004, p. 150.

47. V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, trans. S.V. and Patricia Utechin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 128.

lectual discipline of political processes, and not according to a form correlated with that of the State' (M 122).

This earlier recourse to the party is Badiou's response to the problem shared by Rousseau and Sartre, as noted above, namely, how to preserve over time the initial moment of the subjective realization of revolution (for Sartre it is in some sense hopeless; for Rousseau, politics becomes a question of legitimation). Indeed, Badiou makes it clear in *Théorie du sujet* that his conceptualization of the party is precisely the 'subject' (however unclear its relation to the proletariat whose struggle it carries) that preserves the initial moment of force: 'The party is something subjective, taken in its historical emergence, the network of its actions, the novelty it concentrates. The institution is nothing but a husk' (TS 59). Again, Badiou is very close to Sartre on this point (although for Sartre there is no question of 'the party' preserving the initial moment of revolt)—the ossification of force into institutions is not the framework that preserves the initial moment of novelty: here we see why Badiou must maintain the centrality of the 'subjective'—structures and organization are not enough if their participants are not gripped by the motive force that catalysed their initial movement. Placing, institutionalizing, is always on the side of the objective: 'every force is ... a subjective force, and inasmuch as it is assigned to its place, structured, splaced, it is an objective force' (TS 59).

In later Badiou, this question will mutate into a more historically reflexive, again more Sartrean, and, we should say, less rhetorically Leninist, one: 'Why do the most heroic popular uprisings, the most persistent wars of liberation, the most indisputable mobilisations in the name of justice and liberty end ... in opaque statist constructions wherein none of the factors that gave meaning and possibility to their historical genesis is decipherable?' (M 70) As Hallward puts it:

What has happened in Badiou's subsequent work is that he has slowly adopted, while struggling to maintain his strictly political principles, a perspective similar to Sartre's historical-ephemeral pessimism. ... but whereas Sartre was able to move beyond the ephemeral only by equating an ultimate historical coherence with a global political coordination—which accounts for the failure of the second volume of his *Critique* to move beyond Stalin as the apparent end of history—Badiou's determination to avoid this alternative has driven him ever further toward the radical subtraction of politics from history altogether.<sup>48</sup>

The rhetoric of the party leads Badiou in the earlier work to preserve a 'pure' aspect of the proletariat amidst its 'contradictory unity' as the 'practical' working class (in the historical context, to differentiate the Marxist-Leninist and Maoist movements from the PCF). If *Théorie du sujet* considers the party the only effective organizational structure, later Badiou will, on the contrary, turn his back completely on the necessity of the proletariat-party movement: 'the balance of the twentieth century is the withering away of the party-form, which knows only the form of the party-State'.<sup>49</sup> We can again note this

48. Hallward, *A Subject to Truth*, p. 43.

49. *La Distance Politique*, no 35, 2001.

move as the shift from a conception of party as subject to the idea of ‘politics without a party’ (the latter in fact being the maxim behind Badiou’s work with *l’Organization politique*).

Badiou’s later conception of the subject uncouples its relation to the proletariat in favour of a more generic conception of humanity, what he calls ‘polyvalent man’: ‘the real characteristic of the party is not its firmness, but rather its porosity to the event ... what needs to come about is nothing but the affirmative multiplicity of capacities, whose emblem is polyvalent man, who undoes even those secular connections that bring together intellectual workers on the one hand, and manual workers on the other.’ (M 75). This radical lack of political specification indicates a perhaps surprising turn to pre-Marxist considerations, at least partly on the basis of real historical failures, and aligns Badiou more with a Feuerbachian lineage than a strictly politically Marxist-Leninist one. This is particularly the case with Badiou’s transition from the rhetoric of ‘destruction’ to the axiomatic assertion that ‘people think ... politics is a thought’ (TS 46). The rationalist philosophical universality of Badiou’s newer conception of politics removes the antagonism of the earlier work between the proletariat and the bourgeois world, but precisely at the expense of a Marxist analysis of the structure of capitalism. The later theory of the subject is ahistorically affixed to the notion of event, and less to the topology of the proletariat/bourgeois relation: ‘If one were to identify a cause of the subject, one would have to return, not so much to truth, which is rather its stuff, nor to the infinity whose finitude it is, but rather to the event’ (BE 433). The ‘event’ of politics will, however, subtract Badiou’s subject from a structured analysis, not only of capitalism, but also from ‘worldly’ politics altogether. This later subject (political and otherwise) is ultimately characterized more by what it is not than by what it is—neither the existential place of a set of representations, nor the transcendental system of the constitution of objects of possible experience. It is a subtractive entity, a ‘fragment’ of ‘collective humanity’ that arguably remains wedded, because of Badiou’s later theoretically pre-Marxist turn, to the problem of sustaining the original political impulse behind mass movements, and thus again to the Sartrean problem of the depressing ossification of the group-in-fusion. The subject’s exemption from a philosophy of history perhaps avoids some of the problems of Sartre’s progressive-regressive method, which ultimately sees the totality of history refracted in the life of a single individual, but brings with it its own problems, namely, how we are to understand the *relation* between the structure of the political subject/collective and the state of affairs more broadly, not to mention historical forces and tendencies.

It was briefly noted above that Badiou’s later ‘theory of the subject’ uncouples the term from a strictly political affiliation and broadens its possible points of reference to other ‘conditions’, namely art, science and love, as well as politics. Nevertheless, the structure of the political subject in the later works (*Being and Event* and the collection of essays uniquely devoted to his more recent position on politics, *Metapolitics* from 1998) has its own specificity that Badiou is clear to delineate: ‘every situation is ontologically infinite. But only politics summons this infinity immediately, as subjective universality’ (M 143). If Badiou has delinked this newer conception of the political subject from ques-

tions of antagonism and terms such as Proletariat, as it seems clear he has, what is the status of this ‘subjective universality’? In a sense, Badiou is deliberately vague, perhaps in part to atone for the overly polemical thrust of his earlier work. For example when he claims the following: ‘In collective situations—in which the collective becomes interested in itself—politics (if it exists *as generic politics*: what was called, for a long time, revolutionary politics, and for which another word must be found today) is also a procedure of fidelity ... its infinite productions are indiscernible (in particular, they do not coincide with *any part nameable according to the State*), being nothing more than “changes” of political subjectivity within the situation.’ (BE 340). The admission that ‘another word must be found today’ indicates the difficulty Badiou has in trying to differentiate his own project both from that of Marxist-Leninism and from that of the lineage of political humanism (Feuerbach and the early Marx, as well as parts of the later Sartre) that has characterized much of twentieth-century political thought. Despite stressing Badiou’s relationship to the trajectory of thought that concerns itself with the generic in politics, we must be a little wary of trying neatly to fit Badiou back into a lineage of humanism which he seems to ignore or repudiate, or of neglecting the historical and political circumstances of the impossibility of an unproblematic usage of the term ‘humanism’ in a period when its invocation implied devastating inhumanity in practice (Stalinism). As further noted in the introduction, a key component of Badiou’s contemporary criticisms of the discourses of ‘human rights’ and his attack on the inherent ‘victimization’ of man in contemporary ethical discourse in the *Ethics* is the defence of those French thinkers that we would typically characterize as ‘anti-humanist’—Althusser, Foucault and Lacan. For Badiou, in what is only seemingly a paradox, these attempts to think beyond ‘man’ and ‘without’ man remain among the most politically emancipatory available to us. However, it seems clear that whilst Badiou is faithful to Foucault in some sense, and to the explicit problematic of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, i.e. that the historical emergence of the very posing of ‘man’ as a problem and the empirico-transcendental overcodings that inevitably follow is due for surpassing, nevertheless this argument is not taken up in the same way for Foucault as for Badiou. *Pace* Foucault, it seems that for Badiou there is a different way of both asking and answering the question of what man is that manages to obviate the temptation of post-Kantian (transcendental or naturalist) answers. So, despite having gone through the filter of theoretical anti-humanism, the question itself—‘What is man?’—remains in place for him in the political context. Politics, however, becomes something of an autonomous region, tied to the situation, but oddly distanced from larger tendencies and geopolitical processes: ‘Politics is, for itself, its own proper end; in the mode of what is being produced as true statements—though forever un-known—by the capacity of a collective will’ (BE 354). If philosophy’s task vis-à-vis politics (as with the other truth conditions) is to gather together the ‘truths’ revealed in situations, we can in fact retroactively use the early Badiou to criticize the later. When in *Théorie du sujet* he states that ‘[a] sum of rebellions does not make a subject, regardless of how much you may want to “coordinate” them’ (TS 62), do we not see a kind of pre-emptive self-critique of the later work? If philosophy’s task is to ‘compossibilize’, to hold together, the

truths emergent under the four different conditions (whilst possessing none of its own), then what distinguishes philosophy's capture of these episodes of non-antagonistic, non-historical, generic manifestations of politics precisely from this 'sum of rebellions'?

In the later writings on metapolitics, we confront the possibility that that dependency on 'thought' to found the possibility of politics may cause problems from within the system. Badiou makes use of two axioms, in particular, that ultimately seem to occupy a floating role between the set-theoretical ontology, on the one hand, and the discussion of events and truth procedures, on the other. These are, first, the axiom of equality, namely that: 'equality is not an objective for action, it is an axiom of action'.<sup>50</sup> Second, the generic axiom that 'man thinks' or 'people think', namely that: 'philosophy addresses all humans as thinking beings since it supposes that all humans think'.<sup>51</sup> Whilst these seem at minimal or almost banal assertions, without them Badiou could not preserve his commitment to what he calls a modern politics of emancipation. The connection between the genericity, equality and politics is basically outlined in the following claim:

Some political orientations, throughout history, have had or will have a connection with a truth. A truth of the collective as such. They are rare attempts, often brief, but they are the only ones under condition philosophy can think about. These political sequences are singularities, they trace no destiny, they construct no monumental history. Philosophy can, however, distinguish in them a common feature. This feature is that these orientations require of the people they engage only their strict generic humanity. They give no preference, for the principles of action, to the particularity of interests. These political orientations induce a representation of the collective capacity which refers its agents to the strictest equality. What does 'equality' mean? Equality means that the political actor is represented under the sole sign of his specifically human capacity. Interest is not a specifically human capacity. All living beings have as an imperative for survival the protection of their interests. The specifically human capacity is precisely thought, and thought is nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal.<sup>52</sup>

The following question is important here: Is an anti-humanist fidelity to thought *per se* possible in Badiou, such that it can avoid any question of a specifically human capacity from the outset? Perhaps in the case of mathematics (i.e. Badiou's set theoretical ontology) we can respond in the affirmative. However, when it comes to politics, this seems unlikely. The related question that needs to be posed here is the following: Can Badiou ever truly sever 'thought' from a baseline, axiomatic notion of the human as equal and generic? Badiou's entire project is founded on a commitment to political subjectivation—but subjectivation and generic humanity are not ontological facts, and

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50. Here Badiou shares a similar conception with Rancière, for whom equality is not an outcome to be desired, but an axiomatic supposition.

51. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and Desire', *Infinite Thought*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, London, Continuum, 2003, p. 40.

52. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and Politics', *Radical Philosophy*, 96, July/August 1999, p. 29.



nothing guarantees their possibility. Indeed, events are strictly speaking impossible, or extra-ontological, given the logic of the situation (which is why Badiou refers to them as ‘ultra-ones’). What, then, is the relation between what Badiou calls ‘generic humanity’, the axiom that ‘man thinks’, and man’s capacity for immortality and infinity as a collective political subject? We could perhaps say that at least one ‘meta-event’ conditions the very existence of these two non-mathematical axioms—not the existence of philosophy, but rather the existence of *politics*, of events that once contained political ‘truths’ (Badiou repeatedly refers to the French and Russian Revolutions). Furthermore, *without* the two floating axioms of equality and generic thought, politics would not even be thinkable, and certainly not the egalitarian forms of politics which Badiou in his later works tries to defend.<sup>53</sup>

If the capacity that is specifically human is that of thought, and, as Badiou argues, ‘thought is nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal’,<sup>54</sup> we may wish to ask what the status of this traversing is. The answer seems to be that the path of a truth enables that which is *inhuman* to be borne by the generic thinking of man. But this thought in some sense *pre-exists* the traversing, via the axiom that ‘man thinks’, and that man has the capacity to think disinterestedly. Why disinterestedly? For Badiou, interest is not a specifically human capacity, since all living beings protect their interests as imperative for survival. Thought as traversed by truth—this peculiarly human capacity—must be capable of being absolutely disinterested. Badiou writes: ‘Any truth procedure distinguishes a properly immortal disinterest from an abject properly “animal” assemblage of particular interests’. Furthermore, thought and disinterest coincide in the overcoming of all that is finite in man: ‘Thought is the specific mode by which a human animal is traversed and overcome by a truth’ (E 16). The relationship of philosophy to politics that comes to take a central role in Badiou’s later work takes a historical and theoretical step *backwards* by replacing the question of political practice with this more general conception of thought: ‘By “metapolitics” I mean whatever consequences a philosophy is capable of drawing ... from real instances of politics as thought’ (inscription from M xxxix). There is a potential problem here, aside from the obscured yet apparently necessary philosophical anthropology, if politics is reduced to something like noology, a mere examination of its rational qualities.

Paradoxically, then, it has to be the case that for the later Badiou, it is the generic human capacity for thought that minimally founds a universal inhumanism—and this is the key role of both politics and mathematics. But in order to link this back to the condition of politics we should ask the following question: Does our capacity for mathematics in any sense relate to the fact that we can be seized by specifically political truths? Whilst this might sound like an impossible question from Badiou’s point of view, a mixture of

53. Rather than try and force Badiou’s mathematical analysis of the generic onto levels of thinking to which it cannot apply, it should be pointed out that it is he himself who uses the language of the generic, outside of its specifically technical role, in order to found the very possibility of politics (separate from philosophy), as well as in his discussions of generic humanity *tout court*.

54. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 71.

two distinct conditions, it directly interrogates the role of infinity in Badiou's philosophy. If it is mathematics that teaches us that there is no reason whatsoever to confine thinking within the ambit of finitude, and yet it is man's capacity to be traversed by the infinite that is immediately relevant to any thinking of politics, rather than mathematics, then it seems that we cannot avoid posing what at first appears to be an illegitimate question.<sup>55</sup>

If every politics of emancipation rejects finitude, rejects 'being-towards-death' on the basis of the *immediate* subjective universality of the infinite, then it seems clear that, paradoxically, infinity is just as, if not more, important for a politics of emancipation than it is for mathematics. But what is the relation between infinity and immortality? In the *Ethics* we are told that every human being is capable of being *this* immortal, that 'in each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man' (E 12). This is why there is no ethics in general, and no politics in general. All humanity has its root in the identification in thought [*en pensée*] of singular situations. If infinity is actually only the most general form of multiple-being, then human capacity for infinity is perhaps the most banal of starting points. Nevertheless it plays the founding role for politics more than for any other condition, including mathematics itself. In 'Politics as Truth Procedure', Badiou writes the following: 'The infinite comes into play in every truth procedure, but only in politics does it take the first place. This is because only in politics is the deliberation about the possible (and hence about the infinity of the situation) constitutive of the process itself ... politics treats the infinite as such according to the principle of the same, the egalitarian principle. We will say that the numericality of the political procedure has the infinite as its first term; whereas for love this first term is the one; for science the void; and for art a finite number.'<sup>56</sup>

Let us digress slightly here, and look briefly at Feuerbach, in order to go over the role that the generic plays in his thought, and to make sense of its relation to politics in Badiou. In a section of *The Essence of Christianity* entitled 'The Essential Nature of Man', Feuerbach tells us that 'consciousness in the strictest sense is present only in a being to whom his species, his essential nature, is an object of thought'.<sup>57</sup> In the 'strictest sense' here excludes 'brutes' who can only conceive of themselves as individuals and not in a generic sense. There is seemingly nothing unusual in Feuerbach's definition of consciousness; we are familiar with the argument that because man is by nature in possession of both inner and outer life, we can differentiate ourselves from other animals that apparently lack this separation. However, Feuerbach dislocates the role nature usually

55. cf. Badiou's 'On the Truth-Process: An open lecture', where he argues that: 'the modern politics of emancipation freed from the dialectic scheme of classes and parties has as its aim something like a generic democracy, a promotion of the commonplace, of a quality abstracted from any predicate—so it's possible to speak of a generic politics, and a warfield of prose such as Samuel Beckett's, which tried by successive subtraction to designate the naked existence of generic humanity' (August 2002, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/badiou/badiou-truth-process-2002.htm>).

56. Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*.

57. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, New York, London, Harper and Row, 1957. p. 1.

plays in this equation (as that relating to the outer life, outside of consciousness), and states instead that: ‘the inner life of man is the life which has relation to his species, to his general, as distinguished from his individual, nature’. So, to be ‘individual’ is to be an external, natural being, like the brute who can ‘exercise no function which has relation to its species without another individual external to itself’. To be conscious in the ‘strictest sense’, on the other hand, is to be universal, by virtue of the very fact that man can ‘perform the functions of thought and speech, which strictly imply such a relation, apart from another individual’. Thus man’s very essence, his *Gattungswesen*, depends on his capacity for universal, abstractive, activity, even (especially) in his isolation (his inner life).

Paradoxically, Man’s capacity for ‘asceticism’ (understood here as the reflection of thought upon thought, or upon the very capacity for thought) is that which most indicates his universality. Feuerbach, in his thinking of man’s ‘inner life’ as *Gattungswesen*, inaugurates a strand of philosophical anthropology that has nothing to do with the equation of interiority with finitude, by which thought comes to reflect upon its own limits, and ultimately the possibility of its own absolute impossibility (as in Heidegger’s explicitly anti-anthropological formulation). On the contrary, thought *qua* thought is always based on a demonstration of the *infinity* of thought, and thus simultaneously of man’s ‘generic essence’. Here are two quotes from Feuerbach that demonstrate this point a little further, the first from the preface to on *the Essence of Christianity*, and the second from ‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy’:

Consciousness, in the strict or proper sense, is identical with consciousness of the infinite; a limited consciousness is no consciousness; consciousness is essentially infinite in its nature. The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for its object the infinity of his own nature.<sup>58</sup>

The human form is ... the genus of the manifold animal species; it no longer exists as man but as genus. The being of man is no longer particular and subjective, but a universal being, for man has the whole universe as the object of his drive for knowledge.<sup>59</sup>

Returning to Badiou, we must of course point out the quite distinct roles that universality and consciousness play for him—such that universality can in no way precede an event, and that consciousness plays no part in his radically anti-phenomenological formulations. But what is clear in Feuerbach is that maintaining a generic thinking of infinity as a constitutively human capacity is the *only* way to escape the over-determination of man by his finitude. Hence Feuerbach’s philosophical anthropology has nothing to do with limiting thought, and in fact, precisely points to a radically de-individualized generic ability to think the infinite which looks to be very close to the claims Badiou makes in his later conception of politics.

However, Badiou differs from Feuerbach here in more complex ways. First, by hav-

58. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, ed. and trans. Zawar Hanfi, New York, Anchor Books, 1972, p. 99.

59. Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook*, p. 93.

ing a singular, and not a general, conception of the universal (which also separates him on this specific point from Kant and the transcendental tradition). Thus, when it comes to ethics there can be no general principle of *human* rights, 'for the simple reason that what is *universally* human is always rooted in particular truths, particular configurations of active thought'. Similarly, 'Politics as thinking has no other objective than the transformation of unrepeatable situations' (E 16). To become a subject (and not remain a simple 'human animal'), is to participate in the coming into being of a universal novelty. The subject here will be singular because it will always be an event that constitutes the subject as a truth. However, to return to the axiom of equality, it is important that equality does not refer to anything objective. Equality is subjective, or revealed through subjectivity, and it is this key claim that links both Badiou and Feuerbach, aside from the question of the generic.

Politics, as we have seen, is impossible without the idea that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that also constitutes the post-evental political subject. But at what point are people capable of this thought? It is my claim that, in the case of politics, Badiou needs to found, at an absolutely minimal level, a kind of pre-evental philosophical anthropology of a quasi-Feuerbachian kind. This is something of a problematic position, cutting directly against arguments made elsewhere by others, including Badiou himself, and Peter Hallward, who states explicitly that 'there is no distinct place in Badiou's work for a philosophical anthropology of any kind'.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, there is no room in Badiou for any philosophical anthropology of finitude. The question here is whether one can have a philosophical anthropology of infinitude, as Badiou seems to require for his discussion of politics. That is why asking this question returned us to Feuerbach. The anthropological aspect of the answer to this question would have to be empty, generic, unlimited. In other words, that claim that we are 'subtractively infinite' means that what we do as subjects, without any reference to an object, has infinity as its dimension. That we are infinite because we think infinitely, or in Feuerbachian terms, because we think infinity *as such*.

The reason for this incursion into the (mostly uncharted) territory of an infinite philosophical anthropology is that, without some kind of discussion of a pre-evental generic capacity, or an empty axiomatic regarding the thought of all, it seems that Badiou would be incapable of claiming that the events which set off the truth procedure of politics have any reason to be more or less egalitarian. It could be the case that there are no subjects until an event and its nomination, but without the generic axioms of universal thought underlying the very possibility of subjectivation, there would be no positive content to Badiou's defense of emancipatory, egalitarian politics.

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60. Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, p. 53.