

BOOK REVIEW

A QUESTION OF FIDELITY

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Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, Continuum, London, 2004. ISBN: HB: 0-8264-5906-4, PB: 0-8264-5907-2

To devote a collection of essays to the work of a practising philosopher is not of itself remarkable. To adopt as the title of such a volume an unequivocal exhortation is, if not unprecedented, striking to say the least. It signals immediately the interventionist character of Badiou's thought, its potential to puncture and transform the structures that underpin contemporary philosophy and, by extension, the plethora of critical perspectives that have evolved under the rubric of poststructuralist theory. At the same time it masks an ambivalence of address: just who is being asked to 'think again'? The most immediate answer is the myriad of doubters and sceptics whose voices can be heard at any seminar or conference paper devoted to Badiou's work. Inevitably there are objections from Kantians, Hegelians and Deleuzeans (to name just a few) who are disturbed, if not visibly incensed, by what they see as Badiou's 'misrepresentation' of their field of specialization. And most threatened, it would seem, are Heideggerians who refuse to countenance Badiou's radical separation of ontology, the science of being *qua* being, from any form of phenomenological consciousness. Other objections come from literary and cultural theorists: how, they ask, can Badiou claim that art is not political when the political content of so much art is self-evident? But it is not only the doubters who are targeted by Hallward's exhortation. Some of the most perceptive essays succeed in unveiling points at which Badiou's thought itself exposes its limits; in such instances it is Badiou who is urged to rethink particular aspects of his project. And to take yet another tack, one could read Hallward's title as a paean to what emerges once more as the very possibility of the philosophical enterprise, to Badiou's emphatic demonstration that philosophy's post-Nietzschean 'death' was no more than an extended hibernation.

Think Again is not exactly an *introduction* to Badiou's work and most of the essays would make little sense to anyone unfamiliar with the fundamentals of his ontology. It is, as Hallward points out, a 'collection of critical responses' (1) and needs to be read alongside more explicitly introductory material and, above all, in conjunction with Badiou's own writing, an ever-expanding range of which is becoming available in English translations. Given the often sophisticated level at which many of the contributors engage with Badiou's thought, one might well wonder at the purpose of the 'overview' that occupies the major part of Hallward's introductory chapter. Ostensibly directed at readers who are 'new' to Badiou's philosophy, it reaches rather too gesturally towards the axiomatic foundations of Badiou's thought to establish its validity and, at the same time, it is insufficiently nuanced to contextualize with any precision the critical interventions of particular contributors. Its main value is to remind the reader who has read at least some of Badiou's work of the interrelation of its various elements.

The remaining part of the introduction which seeks to summarize the main areas of contention in Badiou's thought is equally problematic. Here the difficulty relates to the somewhat anomalous position Hallward adopts towards the aspects of Badiou's work he identifies as questionable. Particularly puzzling is the way that, following a discussion of largely spurious objections, he qualifies his remarks by suggesting that over time 'much of their importance has steadily eroded away' (20). Would it not be more useful, one wonders, to present this revised assessment directly? It seems that Hallward is more concerned to anticipate the negative responses of his readers than to offer a dispassionate appraisal of Badiou's philosophy. One suspects, too, that this approach represents a gesture of accommodation towards those contributors who, for various reasons that ultimately do not stand up, are antagonistic towards certain of Badiou's claims.

Excessive carping about the book's shortcomings, however, would render a distinct disservice to what overall is undoubtedly an important and, as Hallward suggests, timely publication. The seventeen essays are grouped judiciously so as to focus progressively on key areas of Badiou's thought: his ontology, the related concepts of the event and fidelity to the event, and the four regimes of truth with particular emphasis on politics and art. While *Being and Event* receives the most expansive treatment there are essays that give explicit attention to other important texts such as *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, *Théorie du sujet*, *The Century* and *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. If, as I have indicated, the at times trenchantly argued attempts to challenge the validity of particular claims are largely unsuccessful, they nevertheless contribute usefully to the collection, first by identifying obstacles to the reception of Badiou's thought and second by testing what might be described as the committed reader's fidelity to the Badiou 'event', forcing him or her to mount a counter-argument in defence of Badiou's position. At the other extreme are contributions by those who are quite unambiguously converts to Badiou's philosophy. Importantly, too, the essays in this category are, without exception, much more than straightforward explications of Badiou's thought. In some instances they trace its genealogy, and by contextualizing and grounding it within particular intellectual traditions they bring into focus its function as what Badiou might call a situated inquiry, effectively

defusing perceptions that it is in some way aberrantly idiosyncratic. Other essays, in contradistinction to the spurious objections characteristic of the first category, identify aspects of Badiou's work that are genuinely problematic and suggest approaches that might overcome particular aporias. And by no means of least significance, yet another type of response undertakes a detailed analysis of fundamental Badiouian concepts. The value of such discussions, a notable example of which is Alberto Toscano's clarification of the notion of fidelity in 'Communism as Separation', is that they expose the erroneous assumptions underpinning arguments that are typically used to discredit Badiou's views.

Hostility towards Badiou's philosophy falls broadly into two categories. Some critics take umbrage at claims which, if endorsed, would render their own cherished positions untenable: protection of intellectual turf in such instances becomes paramount. Todd May strives with considerable ingenuity to rescue Deleuze from Badiou's insistence that, in spite of his emphasis on plurality, he remains essentially a philosopher of the one. So deftly does Badiou dislodge the foundations of the Deleuzian edifice that no amount of sophistry can repair the damage. Other critics object to the minimalism of Badiou's ontology, to its radical exclusion of the phenomenological concerns that they refuse to relinquish from philosophy's grip. Here, it is Jean-Toussaint Desanti who comes most immediately to mind with his discussion of what he calls Badiou's 'intrinsic' ontology. Badiou's 'choice' of a minimal ontology, he argues, does not in any way eliminate the need for ontology to account for being in a more expansive sense. This emphasis on 'choice' as if it were simply a matter of personal predilection entirely overlooks Badiou's rigorously axiomatic development and exposition of his thesis. It is only his foundational decisions that (i) mathematics is ontology and (ii) the 'one' does not exist that could be construed as acts of choice. Even these decisions, though, are, as Badiou has pointed out, not arbitrary but based empirically on the logical impasse generated by alternative points of departure.¹

Another line of demarcation could be drawn between those who criticize, often from a position of fidelity to the Badiouian *event*, aspects of Badiou's procedural methodology, and those who, like Desanti, attack Badiou for failing to encompass what at no stage he sets out to encompass. Implicit in most such critiques is the assumption that ontology must, by definition, account for every conceivable aspect of being, that it must contain within it the promise of boundless plenitude. But it is precisely this kind of totalizing gesture that Badiou is at pains to avoid. In a brief response to his critics, he stresses the *limits* of his enquiry into the nature of being:

It is very important to grant a statement from the very beginning of *Being and Event* its full scope: ontology *is a situation*. Or, if you prefer: ontology is a world. This means that the mathematical theory of pure multiplicity in no way claims to inform the way we might think everything that is presented in the infinity of real

1. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005, pp. 4-9; 23-25 (henceforth BE). The impasse of the one as a foundational entity is also discussed in Meditation 10, 'Spinoza', pp. 112-120.

situations, but only the thinking *of presentation as such*. This is what I call, adopting the vocabulary of the philosophical tradition, being *qua being* (233).

Clearly, there is nothing in Badiou's ontology that challenges the validity of Desanti's concerns *per se*. When, for example, Desanti asks (60) how we are to gain access to what he calls 'modes of presence' (seemingly just another version of his need to know who performs the count-as-one and in what 'realm'), he raises questions that, however pertinent they might be to the world of 'real situations', have nothing to do with the 'thinking of presentation as such'. If Badiou's ontology were to embrace these concerns by extending itself into its 'margins' (to use another of Desanti's terms), it would immediately lose the rigour that sets it so decisively and productively against the grain of poststructuralist indeterminacy.

Ernesto Laclau's critique of Badiou's ontology or, more precisely, of the extra-ontological status of the Badiouian *event* is at a formal level the inverse of Desanti's. Where Desanti has nothing but praise for Badiou's *procedural* thoroughness—the reader, he insists, will find 'admirably set out, all the mathematical instructions required in order to follow [the book's] argument' (63)—Laclau enthusiastically embraces Badiou's interventionist notion of ethical engagement but rejects entirely the theoretical apparatus that underpins his concept of fidelity. What for Laclau is particularly problematic is the relation between the evental site, the subject and the constitution of a truth procedure. Once again, though, it is a critique that founders on its distortion of Badiou's fundamental categories. Rather than pursue in a rigorous way Badiou's suturing of ethical commitment to the constitution of the subject, he persists with a focus on the curious notion of 'filling' the void, arguing that, even though this process is incompatible with Badiou's ontology, it nevertheless requires 'theoretical description' (125). At the heart of Laclau's protestations is a refusal of the *mathematical* basis of ontology, but it is a refusal that is justified by only the most cursory reference to Badiou's use of set theory. Before canvassing the possibility of situations in which the 'logic of representation might lose its structuring abilities' (125), Laclau might have made a more systematic examination Badiou's exposition of such crucial concepts as the event, the evental site, the state's 'prohibition' of the event and the act of subjective intervention.² It soon becomes clear, though, that what is at stake for Laclau is the inability of set theory to account for what is *not* included in a situation in terms other than the void. Of course, what in a given situation escapes the count is not nothing in any absolute sense and, contrary to the impression given by Laclau, set theory at no point makes any such claim; it simply has no existence *for the situation*. It is precisely because Laclau's own project—the articulation of his theory of 'hegemonic universality' (131-2)—is rooted in what he mistakenly takes to be voided *unconditionally* by set theory that he finds it necessary to dismiss Badiou's ontology. A more productive exchange might emerge if Laclau were to regard his formulations as part of a *different*, that is, non-ontological, situation.

2. See BE, Meditations 16 ('Evental Sites and Historical Situations', pp. 173-177), 17 ('The Matheme of the Event', pp. 178-183), 18 ('Being's Prohibition of the Event', pp. 184-190), 20 ('The Intervention', pp. 201-211).

Jean-Luc Nancy is another contributor who, like Laclau, frames his critique through his own hardly inconsiderable philosophical enterprise and accordingly misrepresents important elements of Badiou's project. In spite of being 'close' on certain points, Nancy insists that he and Badiou 'inhabit utterly different sites of thought' (39), an observation which appears to license him to 'force' Badiou into an entirely alien theoretical context. A prime example is where Nancy takes Badiou to task for his account of the origins of philosophy, *ex nihilo*, as a consequence of Plato's foundational gesture. In disputing this account Nancy blurs what for Badiou is a crucial distinction between generic form, or discursive mode, and articulated content. At issue is *not* the emergence, several centuries before Plato, of 'philosophy' as a discursive focus on what Nancy calls the 'deconstruction of the structures of a crumbling ... mythico-religious world' (45), but the wresting of that discourse from the clutches of the poem so as to constitute an independent, 'properly' philosophical mode of enquiry. Like Desanti's critique, Nancy's is based on the assumption that Badiou's claims are other than they actually are.

In some instances Badiou emerges only marginally more intact at the hands of those who might be regarded as his disciples. Again, it is the desire of individual commentators to suture Badiou's thought to their own projects that leads to a positioning of Badiou that hovers ambivalently between misrepresentation and valid critique. Bruno Bosteels' attempt to reconfigure Badiou as the practitioner of a new kind of dialectics falls clearly into this category. Even though he acknowledges the separateness of the realms of 'being' and 'event', he nevertheless insists that this non-relationality does not foreclose the possibility of a 'dialectical dimension' (153). But by definition dialectics involves the resolution of an impasse through reference to its constituent polarities which, as Bosteels once again acknowledges, is precisely what Badiou's deployment of mathematics circumvents. To substantiate his claim, Bosteels finds it necessary to distinguish between the conventional or positivist form of dialectics, between, for example 'nature' and 'history', and 'another' dialectic that is 'capable of thinking through the material rupture produced by a political intervention' without recourse to positivist categories (155). Impregnably, it may seem, this move is validated for Bosteels by Badiou's own reference in *Being and Event* to the 'dialectic of the void and excess' (159). Yet, of the two occurrences of this phrase, only one, linked to a discussion of the irreducible persistence of the state, offers the possibility of the kind of construction Bosteels seeks to impose on it:

It is not antagonism which lies at the origin of the State, because one cannot think the dialectic of the void and excess as antagonism. No doubt politics itself must originate in the very same place as the state: in that dialectic. But this is certainly not to seize the State nor to double the State's effect. On the contrary, politics stakes its existence on its capacity to establish a relation to both the void and excess which is essentially different to that of the State; it is this difference alone that subtracts politics from the one of statist re-insurance (BE 110).

At first glance the originary status of the 'dialectic of the void and excess' seems to be affirmed. Just what this exchange might mean, though, if it is not founded on 'antagonism', is not entirely clear. At face value the statement is oxymoronic: without

antagonism, how can there be a dialectic? The term, however, may simply signify the residual site of a dialectic, in the conventional sense, without necessarily implying the need for a ‘new’ form of dialectic. In any event it seems rather too slender a basis for Bosteels’ claims.³

While not exactly a disciple, Slavoj Žižek is nevertheless strongly supportive of much of Badiou’s work. But even he, I would argue, manages to misrepresent Badiou’s position in his otherwise very useful systematization of Badiou’s relation to Lacan (‘From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real’). While Badiou’s debt to Lacan is extensive, there is, Žižek insists, an important difference between their respective accounts of the concept of truth and its status vis-à-vis the Real. For Lacan the Real represents the absolute limit of human experience; it can, under certain circumstances, be encountered, but not traversed and any attempt on the basis of that encounter to ‘impose a new order’ is necessarily an illusion (171). As a moment of truth the encounter amounts to no more than a ‘shattering experience of the Void—a sudden insight into the abyss of Being’, while for Badiou ‘Truth’ is the ‘long, arduous work of fidelity that follows an encounter with the real’ (171-2). It is in further delineating this difference that Žižek paints rather too stark a contrast between the two positions. As he puts it, the ‘work of fidelity’ that for Badiou brings about a new order “‘sublates” the exploding negativity into a new consistent truth, while for Lacan, every Truth displays the structure of a (symbolic) fiction’ (177). What this distinction overlooks, however, is Badiou’s insistence that the ideal that inspires the truth procedure is never fully realized, and that there is always a gap between it and what a new order actually achieves. In other words, that which is articulated or enacted in the *name* of a truth must necessarily be distinguished from the same truth *at the moment of its subjective apprehension*.

By far the most incisive contributions are those that engage with Badiou’s work on its own terms and, as I’ve suggested, they fall into three broad categories: (i) attempts to situate Badiou’s thought within specific intellectual traditions, (ii) the identification of particular aporias, and (iii) explications of pivotal, and often misunderstood, concepts. It remains to survey each of these in turn.

A very fine example of the first category is Etienne Balibar’s essay ‘The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy’. The first part of Balibar’s title is taken from Pascal’s *Pensées*, or more precisely, from the quotation with which Badiou introduces his meditation on Pascal, and serves to emphasize what he sees as its centrality to the evolution of Badiou’s notion of fidelity. Pascal’s significance is twofold: not only, Balibar notes, was he the first to conceive of truth as having a *history*, but, even more crucially, he exemplifies for Badiou the thinking of truth as *militant engagement*. Importantly, too,

3. The second use of the expression ‘dialectic of the void and excess’ renders it even more marginal to Badiou’s thought. Here, referring to Spinoza’s achievement, Badiou identifies this dialectic as *foreclosed* by presentation or, in terms of the situation, *non-existent*: ‘Th[e] essential homogeneity of presentation *expels the un-measure in which the dialectic of the void and excess might be revealed*, or encountered, within presentation’ (BE, p. 117, my emphasis). It seems likely that the *unthinkability* of this dialectic is precisely the reason that it plays no further part in Badiou’s exposition.

the *discourse* of the history of truth has its own subsequent history and it is within—or, more pertinently, in *opposition to*—the trajectory of this discourse that Balibar situates Badiou's use of Pascal. In contrast to Derrida's insistence on the illusory status of any 'temporalization of idealities' (24) and to Foucault's reinscription of the notion of truth within variable systems of power relations, Badiou radically reconceptualizes truth in a way that 'relates neither to the idea of a transcendental appearance, nor to the idea of an intellectual dialectic, nor to the idea of self-knowledge' (28-9). The radical nature of Badiou's intervention is, of course, underscored by its grounding in set theory, and Balibar makes the observation that, in France at any rate, Badiou is 'no doubt the first person since [Jean] Cavailles to have taken seriously ...the need to discuss the question of truth in terms of an essential relationship with mathematics' (30). Further, Badiou shares with Cavailles a concern to articulate that relationship in such a way that it is 'extricated from all subordination to the logical concept of a rule and from syntactico-semantic correspondence' (30). This insistence brings him into headlong conflict with the influential Polish mathematician Alfred Tarski whose 1935 paper 'The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages' underpins important developments in modern logical theory. By delineating carefully the focus of Cavailles' investigations and by attending closely to details of Tarski's schema alongside key elements of what he calls Badiou's 'meta-mathematics', Balibar manages not only to position Badiou's work with impressive precision but also to demonstrate its potentially wide-ranging significance. Over and above the reinvigoration of the continental tradition, it has the power, Balibar suggests provocatively, to 'destroy the defences of so-called analytic philosophy, to the extent that it can still recognize itself in Tarski's semantics' (33).

Brief as it is, Ray Brassier's 'Nihil Unbound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism' is perhaps the strongest offering in the second category. It engages, in a way that much commentary does not, with the specifics of Badiou's mathematical formulations. This enables Brassier to defuse common misunderstandings and, in particular, to demonstrate with admirable concision how Badiou's materialism can be reconciled with his insistence on the 'ontological sovereignty' of thought (50). Notable, too, is Brassier's discussion of the *historicity* of the constitutive decision to 'identify being as nothing' (52). Taking his cue from a remark by Badiou in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, he argues persuasively that the *preconditions* for this decision are nothing other than the operations of capital; it is *capitalism* that, as "'over-event" of universal unbinding', becomes the "'historical medium" for subtractive ontology, unbind[ing] nihil from the fetters of Presence' (52). Brassier goes on from here to question Badiou's identification of the 'errant automation of Capital' with the 'excess of the state' (54), arguing that recent developments in the theorization of randomness open the possibility of an 'entirely *objective* determination of the excess of the void as embodied in [that errancy]' (58). What would need rethinking here is the absolute distinction between the mathematical definability of the state and the sheer randomness of the event, and this is precisely what Brassier proposes. To counter what he sees as Badiou's 'suspiciously commonsense notion of "chance" or "randomness"' (55) he draws on a demonstration by Gregory Chaitin of the

irreducible incompleteness (or randomness) that, far from being a ‘marginal, metamathematical anomaly’, is ‘a central, possibly even ubiquitous, mathematical predicament’ (57). While there is nothing here to challenge the fundamental orientation of Badiou’s thought, the implications for the theorization of both the event and the errancy of capital are considerable.

Equally valuable are two essays belonging to the third category—those that seek to explicate rather than critique aspects of Badiou’s thought. One of these is ‘Communism as Separation’ by Alberto Toscano, the other ‘What if the Other is Stupid? Badiou and Lacan on “Logical Time”’ by Ed Pluth and Dominiek Hoens. Both go beyond straightforward explication in that they do not simply *elucidate* particular Badiouian concepts—respectively, the thinking of communism and the subjectivity of a truth procedure—but, additionally, offer a perspective on those concepts that effectively dethrones a lot of what passes as critique. Toscano’s main concern is to emphasize the *eternal* dimension of what Badiou refers to as communism. Accordingly, all subjects, in their allegiance to the generic, to the radically egalitarian, are essentially communist subjects, but of a communism that is ‘bereft of the “fiction” that it is somehow inscribed into the dynamics of the social’ (148-9). No actual, or statist, regime can ever be regarded as the embodiment of communism in this sense; the fidelity of the subject is to the ‘eternity of the equal’ and the task of subjectivity is one of ‘continuous purification’, of the ‘infinite dissemination of what the order of representation forecloses’ (144). Pluth and Hoens also focus on the question of subjectivity, with particular attention to the process of apprehending, naming and affirming a truth. Central to their discussion is Badiou’s use of Lacan’s concept of ‘anticipatory certitude’ (182). Its context is an analysis by Lacan of a logical problem in which freedom is offered to the first of three prisoners who correctly identifies the colour of a mark that has been placed on his back. The problem cannot be solved by deduction alone; to be successful one of the prisoners must move forward, *as if he knew the answer*, and by gauging the responses of the other prisoners he will be able to provide the correct solution. As Pluth and Hoens note, there are important differences between ‘the truth’ as it applies to this problem and a Badiouian ‘truth procedure’; in contrast to the latter, the former is a ‘merely “veridical” statement’, fully confirmable within a given situation (189). But the anticipatory act needed to solve the problem—an act that is neither a straightforward consequence of a ‘line of reasoning’ nor ‘purely spontaneous’, but *both simultaneously*—bears *in this very ambivalence* a striking resemblance to the affirmation of a truth by the Badiouian subject.

I have left until last acknowledgement of those essays that deal with art as one of the ‘conditions’ for philosophy. In part this reflects the layout of Hallward’s book. It also has to do with the formidable challenges posed by this area of Badiou’s thought, challenges that the contributors who focus on it—Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Jacques Rancière—do little more than identify. As Badiou himself makes quite clear, his concern is not with aesthetic theory but with what he calls ‘inaesthetics’ which in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* he defines as ‘a relationship between philosophy and art which, as it posits that art is in itself a site for the production of truths, does not claim to make art in any

way an object for philosophy' (quoted by Lecerle [213] and Rancière [219]). It is the implications of this radical separation that interests both Lecerle and Rancière. Of the two contributions, Rancière's is the most strictly philosophical. His primary concern is to position Badiou's inaesthetics against the theorization of art as it evolved from Plato to Hegel, and he sees it as aligned to (yet distinguishable from) what he calls modernism's 'anti-aesthetic consensus'. In contrast, Lecerle, attending more closely to the detail of Badiou's discussion of art (or, more specifically, poetry), responds from the perspective of literary critic. He finds Badiou's reading of particular poems both illuminating and frustrating, and records his conflicting impressions as a series of 'paradoxes'. Central to these paradoxes is Badiou's emphasis on the 'thinking' of the poem—especially the Mallarméan poem—as something that lies quite outside the domain of 'semantics and meaning' (212); it is found, rather, in the realm of 'syntactic machination[s]' (214). At the same time, this leads to a further paradox in that syntax, by default, becomes 'another name for semantics' (216). Nevertheless, in spite of his misgivings, Lecerle recognizes clearly the significance of Badiou's 'anti-linguistic' turn for the theorization of the proposition that literature *thinks*. And while questions remain, Lecerle cannot but admire Badiou's achievement in formulating not just a poetics but an entire philosophical position that constitutes a 'point of resistance to the postmodern invasion' (217).

Think Again undoubtedly goes a long way towards clarifying important aspects of Badiou's work. It also identifies a range of elements that remain problematic, though here the boundary between spurious objections and informed critique is at times blurred. Yet as Bruno Bosteels points out, the real challenge posed by Badiou's thought requires intervention at a transformative and not merely exegetical level (164). How this challenge is met will determine Badiou's impact on the future of philosophy.

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