Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy, vol. 2, no. 1-2, 2006

THE BOURGEOIS AND THE ISLAMIST, OR, THE OTHER SUBJECTS OF POLITICS

Alberto Toscano

ABSTRACT: There is much theoretical work already underway on the many facets of Badiou's theory of political subjectivation. However, little attention has been directed hitherto to those figures of the subject which cannot be easily identifiable with a universalist or generic orientation. Beginning with Badiou's struggles with the subjectivity of the bourgeois in the seminars that make up his *Theorie du sujet* (1982), this article tries to track his thinking of the 'other', non- or anti-universalist subjects of politics, and to think what effects their inclusion within a theory of the subject, and indeed a theory of political praxis, may have. Taking issue with some recent remarks of Badiou on the isomorphies between Islamism and fascism in *Logiques des mondes* (2006), the article also seeks to develop Badiou's notion of 'reactive' and 'obscure' subjects through a brief engagement with recent interpretations of political Islam.

KEYWORDS: Badiou; Subject; Islamism; Fascism; Reaction; Bourgeois

SUBJECTS OF UNTRUTH

Among the less fortunate by-products of the recent resurgence in emancipatory theories of political subjectivity is the tendency to depict the subject in an exclusively militant or, at the very least, 'progressive' light. Bracketing the contradictions of social class, or the pathologies of ideology, the political subject seems endowed, by fiat, with the steadfast virtues of universalism. While, confronted with a proliferation of noxious political 'agents' and ideas, such a stance may possess an attractive if minimalist rectitude, reserving the term 'subject' solely for the kind of collective egalitarian figure that could divert our baleful course might mean depriving ourselves of a potent instrument to intervene in the present. If we relegate the reactionary, or at best ambiguous, figures that loom large on our political horizon to the rank of structural epiphenomena, fleeting phantoms or mindless tendencies, we run the risk of producing political theories that differ little from plain wishful thinking or self-satisfied sectarianism. Even within the generally optimistic politico-philosophical paradigm which, by way of shorthand, we could call 'the theory of the multitude', some have begun to foreground the deep *ambivalence* of contemporary forms of political subjectivity.[1] But can there be any concessions to

1. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2004.

such an ambiguity, to the presence of 'untruthful' subjects, in Alain Badiou's affirmative, and avowedly 'Promethean' theory of the subject?

Badiou's decades-long preoccupation with political subjectivity does indeed seem marked by an increasingly trenchant and 'internalist' treatment of the subject as both rare and aloof from the vicissitudes of social mediation. What's more, Badiou makes 'subject' inseparable from the novelty of an exception and the arduous trajectory of a truth which is always in the world, but in many ways not of it (or rather, a truth which, by forcefully including itself in the world makes sure that the world will never be the same). He does this by advocating a strenuously 'post-Cartesian' thinking of the subject in which the latter is only figured as an *effect*, an aleatory trajectory or point of arrival, and not as a pre-existing source. After Marx and Freud, the subject is not a starting-point, it must be 'found'.[2] All signs point to a stance which is wholly refractory to any analysis of the subject's particularistic attachments, violent and violating impulses, repressive desires, and so on. Badiou's explicit decision not to treat the subject by way of a theory of ideology, and—despite his grounding allegiance to Lacan—not to delve into its Freudian unconscious, also militate for a purified, formal theory of the subject that would shun the subject's unsavoury, pathological side. And yet, as I would like to examine in these pages, within the strictures of an asocial, non-ideological and uncompromisingly universalistic theory of the subject Badiou has proposed a number of ways to think and formalize the existence of other subjects, ones which are not the bearers but the enemies or obfuscators of truth.

AMBIVALENCE OF THE BOURGEOISIE

Given Badiou's roots in revolutionary theory one cannot but expect some traces in his work of the numerous contributions to the theory of anti- or semi-universalist subjectivity within Marxism—from Marx's own paean to bourgeois destruction in *The Communist Manifesto*, to the wrestling with the rise of fascist politics in the writings of Trotsky and many others. It is evident, for instance, that a reckoning with the figure of *reaction* has been a constant in Badiou's work. But perhaps one of the more interesting points of entry into Badiou's theory of 'untrue' subjects concerns the status of the bourgeoisie. To begin with, Badiou intends to dislocate the apparently frontal confrontation, the class struggle, between proletariat and bourgeoisie. For the proletariat as a *force* (a crucial concept in Badiou's dialectical writings of the 1970s) does not seem to be pitted against the bourgeoisie as another force. In some of the early seminars that make up Badiou's *Théorie du sujet*, the bourgeoisie is depicted as a mere agent of a system of places, of a Whole which the proletariat seeks to destroy by what Badiou calls a 'torsion', whereby an included but suppressed element comes to limit, then destroy, the totality of which it is a part: 'To say proletariat and bourgeoisie is to remain with the Hegelian artifice: something and something else. And why? Because the project of the proletariat, its internal being, is not to contradict the bourgeoisie, or to cut its legs off. Its project is com-

2. Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 295 (henceforth TS).

munism, and nothing else. That is to say the abolition of any place wherein something like a proletariat could be situated' (TS 25). And, *a fortiori*, anything like a bourgeoisie. In this sense, whilst the confrontation with the bourgeoisie might be the 'motor' of history, the proletariat's target is really the social Whole, i.e. 'imperialist society'.

Moving further in the series of seminars that make up Badiou's first major theoretical work, however, we encounter, in the midst of an analysis of the subjective weakness of May '68, a portrait of the bourgeois as subject and force. Indeed, Badiou stresses that revolutionaries have always made the mistake of thinking themselves to be 'the only subject, and represent the antagonistic class to themselves as an objective mechanism of oppression led by a handful of profiteers'. On the contrary, one of the lessons of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, according to Badiou, is that the bourgeoisie too engages in politics, and not simply by means of exploitation or coercion. Asking himself *where* this politics takes place, Badiou answers, with rare Gramscian overtones: 'Exactly as with the proletariat: in the people, working class included, and I would even say, since we're dealing with the new bureaucratic State bourgeoisie, working class *especially* included'. The reason for thus foregrounding the 'subjective force of the adversary' is to counter the feeble-minded and objectivist 'anti-repressive logorrhoea', for which the only enemy would be a Moloch-like State. Contrary to this anarchistic 'leftism', Badiou proposes the following assertion: 'Of course, they are a handful, the bourgeois imperialists, but the subjective effect of their force lies in the divided people. There is not just the law of Capital, or the cops. To miss this is not to see the unity of the space of placements [*esplace*], its consistency'. The suggestion here is that the social space wherein the latent force of the proletariat is captured, placed and instrumentalized cannot be envisaged in a purely structural manner, as an impersonal given, but must instead be conceived in terms of that counter-revolutionary or reactionary subjectivity which carries its own project into the pre-subjective mass of the people. Or, as Badiou summarizes in a Hegelian pastiche: 'We must conceive of imperialist society not only as substance, but also as subject' (TS 60). This, at least, is the position put forward in the seminar dated '15 April 1975', which appears to rectify the earlier understanding of the proletariat as the sole political and subjective force.

In the seminar dated '14 February 1977', Badiou approaches the question of the proletariat/bourgeoisie relation from a topological angle. If we follow an economistic tradition, which sunders Marx's *Capital* from the concrete (strategic) analysis of concrete (political) situations, bourgeoisie and proletariat appear topologically exterior to one another—the first defined in terms of its ownership of the means of production, the second in terms of its separation (alienation) from them. The result of this purely external topology, is paradoxically to render the proletariat functionally interior or immanent to the bourgeoisie. Reduced to alienated labour-power, the proletariat is nothing but a piece in the apparatus of exploitation, whose identity is entirely heteronomous, dictated by the laws of capital. Briefly, 'capital is the place of the proletariat'. Badiou deduces from this the possibility of Soviet state-capitalism, since it is perfectly possible, given this arrangement, to 'suppress capitalists, all the while maintaining the law of capital'. To

depart from the compulsion to repeat and the allergy to novelty that characterize the economistic framework, Badiou enjoins us to think the 'interiority of the bourgeoisie to the working class' (TS 147).

Making reference to Marx's analysis of the series of uprisings ('social hysterias' in his Lacanese) of the eighteen-thirties, forties and fifties, Badiou sees the emergence of a proletarian figure not as a functional cog in the machinery of capital, but as an internal 'torsion', an 'exceptional disorder' within the political trajectory of the democratic bourgeois movement. The proletarian subject is born out of its bourgeois impurity, its being indexed to a heteronomous capitalist order, and only emerges by the 'expulsion, the purging … of the internal infection that, to begin with, constitutes it'. The proletariat is thus depicted, through these somewhat unsettling medical metaphors, as perpetually in the process of healing from the malady of the bourgeoisie. Insisting with the topological vocabulary, Badiou writes that 'the politics of the proletariat is in a situation of internal exclusion with regard to bourgeois politics, that is, with regard to its object'. The proletariat is thus both within and against the bourgeoisie, constantly 'purging' its intimate bourgeois determination. Its 'topology of destruction' means that it is enduringly engaged in an effort to dislocate and ultimately destroy the site of its existence (without this destruction, it might just be a mask or ruse of the bourgeoisie, as Badiou deems to be the case for the USSR); but it can only do so, because of its originary impurity, in an immanent, dialectical combat with the bourgeoisie that internally excludes it. This topological vision transforms the standing of the bourgeoisie within Badiou's theory of the subject yet again:

> Does the bourgeoisie make a subject (*fait sujet*)? I said so in this very place, in April 1975. Let us contradict ourselves, it is just a trick of *par-être*. The bourgeois has not made a subject for a long while, it makes a place (*lieu*). There is only one political subject, for a given historicization. This is a very important remark. To ignore it is to become confused by a vision of politics as a subjective duel, which it is not. There is one place and one subject. The dissymmetry is structural (TS 148).[3]

Class struggle, if the term still applies, is thus not between two separate *forces*, two subjects indexed to different places within the apparatus of capital. It is an effect of the proletariat (that 'surviving body, born from the rot') expelling itself from bourgeois politics, and thus gaining its existence through that very process of organized destruction. The theory of subjectivation as destruction thus appears to require the exclusivity of the term 'subject', and the relegation of the bourgeoisie, and any subjects other than the proletariat, to a phantasmagorical structural semblance.

This oscillation in the appraisal of the bourgeoisie, and the dialectical arguments that motivate it, indicate the thorny problem posed to Badiou's project by the existence of other, non-emancipatory subjects: if the bourgeoisie is not a subject, the theory of the proletariat risks a 'leftist' solution, a repressive hypothesis which singles out an impersonal State or Capital as its only enemy; if the bourgeoisie is a subject, antagonism seems

3. The untranslatable notion of '*par-être*', a play on '*paraître*' (to appear) is taken by Badiou from Lacan's seminars of the 1970s.

to absorb Badiou's theory of torsion-destruction, and the historicity of politics appears doomed to ambivalence with the introduction of multiple forms of universality into the situation. As we will see further on, this antinomy of the other subject continues to haunt Badiou's work.

JUSTICE AND TERROR, NIHILISTS AND RENEGADES

Abiding within the rich confines of the *Théorie du sujet*, we witness the return, in a very different guise, of the problem of the 'other subject' in Badiou's attempt to formulate an *ethics*. Insisting with the metaphors of location and the topological arsenal that dominates the recasting of dialectics in the *Théorie*, Badiou proposes to rethink the question of ethics in terms of a 'topics' [*topique*]: 'There is no major Marxist text that is not driven by the question: Where is the proletariat? That is why politics is the unity of opposites of a topics (the current situation) and an ethics (our tasks)' (TS 297).[4] But this topics also acquires a more precise meaning, referring to the affective figures that the subject (viewed as an unstable mix of destructive 'subjectivation', and restorative 'subjective processes') moves across. This ethics is thus, first and foremost, immanent to the becoming of a subject—so how might it allow us to deepen our investigation of other, non-emancipatory subjects?

Given the centrality of radical novelty to Badiou's investigation, and what he has already indicated regarding the proletariat, born of a rotting bourgeoisie on the occasion of a social hysteria, the starting point for an ethics of subjectivity can only be *disorder*. What *affects* are borne by a subject that might try, by bringing itself into the world, to draw novelty out of this disorder? To begin with, a methodological proviso is required: like his theory of the subject, Badiou's theory of affect is also post-Cartesian, which is to say that it treats the subject as a formalization and an aleatory trajectory, meaning that 'affect' does not refer to an experience, a capacity, a spiritual or mental disposition. This ethics of affects, which principally concerns the subject's stance vis-à-vis the law of the world which is being destroyed, circulates through four concepts: anxiety, superego, courage and justice. 'These are categories of the subject-effect. What they allows us to know is a specific material region, at the basis [*principe*] of every destruction of what sustains it'. How these concepts are articulated to one another by the subject will determine its disposition with regard to the situation and its aptitude for the tasks of innovation.

Anxiety [*angoisse*] treats the given order as *dead*. It does not foresee the splitting and re-composition of the symbolic around a new law, but the simple 'killing' of the symbolic by the real. The consequence of this non-dialectical treatment of destruction as chaos and paralysis, abrogation of sense, is that 'the law, always undivided, glimmers in the distance of what it no longer supports' (TS 307). The excess over the law has no other symbols than those of its death, and remains in a sense hysterical, 'a question without an answer'.

4. The philosophical notion of a 'Topics', concerned with the *topoi*, the places or locations of discourse, derives from Aristotle's eponymous treatise.

The intervention of the *superego* is thus depicted as a response to the morbid paralysis of anxiety: 'As a figure of consistency, [superego] puts excess back in place *by distributing it over all the places*. The superego is the structural aspect of excess. Through it the algebrization of the topological is effected, as if, filled with subjectivating anxiety, the place recomposed itself upon itself in the terrorizing prescription of placement. … The superego is the subjective process of terror' (TS 308). The model here is provided by one of the crucial sources for Badiou's treatment of the dark side of subjectivity, Hegel's diagnosis of the Terror. Where anxiety signalled the chaos of a world without law, the superego determines a fixing of excess (and of death); a pitiless control of the situation by the forcible introduction of a new law, which, as Hegel shows, takes the shape of a purely negative and persecutory universality. But, foreshadowing the use of the same passages of Hegel in the more recent lessons on the twentieth century, for Badiou the superego-Terror 'is a phenomenon of the subject, and not of the State … terror is a modality of politics and not the mechanical product of the modern State' (TS 309).[5] What does it mean to think terror as internal to the subject? For Badiou it means that the criminal ravages of terror (e.g. the Gulag) cannot be the object of an anti-statist moral critique, but must be rethought from within a (Marxist) politics that comprehends the superego as an internal, dialectical and 'restorative' figure. If terror is subjective it is only by understanding the ethical trajectory of subjects—from the inside—that it may be parried or limited. External critique, which excises or ignores the subjective element, merely prepares the return or repetition of terror.

The third ethical figure, *courage*, presents an important alternative to the subjectivity of terror qua antidote to the ravages of anxiety—where anxiety was a 'question without an answer', courage is presented as 'an answer without a question'. As an affect, courage qualifies the kind of subject capable of facing disorder and the anxiety that issues from it, without demanding the immediate restoration of the law. What is more, courage subtends the capacity to act, to traverse the chaos of anxiety, without the coordinates provided by the law. When gnawed by anxiety—so goes Badiou's recommendation—to act with courage is to do that very thing you think impossible, or before which you anxiously recoil. Or, as his motto has it: 'Find your indecency of the moment' (TS 310).

Possibly the most interesting ethical concept proposed in this 'topics' is that of *justice*, which is presented as basically the opposite of terror in its relationship to the law. While, inasmuch as its terroristic implementation is self-justifying, the superego absolutizes law, justice relativizes it, working by the criterion that the more Real and the less law, the better. But for this very reason, justice is a deeply unsettling affect, generating ever further anxiety as it casts doubt on the viability of rules for dealing with disorder. Insisting with a dialectical approach, this is why the institutive character of justice can never be wholly sundered from the restorative procedure of the superego, and why justice calls forth two stances which deny its autonomy: *dogmatism*, which demands the untram-

5. See also Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. and commentary by Alberto Toscano, London, Polity Press, 2007, especially Chapter 5: 'The passion for the real and the montage of semblance', where Hegel features as the principal philosophical reference for a reckoning with the molten core of the twentieth century.

melled supremacy of the superego over courage; and *scepticism*, in which the non-law of justice does not open up to the institution of new laws, but is merely the stand-in for the undecidability of law, which is to say, for anxiety. 'Justice is the *flux* [*flou*] *of places*, the opposite, therefore, of the right place [*la juste place*]' (TS 312).

What are the consequences of this quadripartite schema for a thinking of other subjects? I would like to focus on two. The first concerns the ideologization of subjects, the second Badiou's typology of ethical discourses.

Besides serving as a psychoanalytic clue to the functioning of Hegelian terror, the superego is also employed by Badiou to account for the immanent production of ideology out of the travails of subjectivation. Following a general methodological principle, which is that of following the vicissitudes of the subject without immediately imposing upon it the marks of structure, Badiou here proposes to see ideology as a product of something like an ethical failing within the subject itself. While 'true' subjectivation involves the real piercing into the symbolic, and the hazardous effort to recompose a new order after the destruction of the system of places, ideology is a question of the imaginary. Holding to the dialectical demand that organizes his ethics of the subject—the idea that faithful subjectivity must topologically adhere to its other—Badiou sees subjectivation and ideology as facets of the same process. He illustrates this with an example from an event, the German Peasants' War of 1525, which he had already touched upon in his earlier collaborative work on ideology: 'When Thomas Müntzer sets the German countryside aflame with an egalitarian communist aim, he subjectivates courageously, on a background of death, and calls for justice. When he names his courage on the basis of the absolute conviction that Christ wants the realization of this project, he imaginarily articulates the rebellious bravura on the superego whose allegory is the "kingdom of God"' (TS 314).[6] The same lesson can be drawn from the Cultural Revolution: it is the incapacity of the Red Guards to sustain their egalitarian programme, with courage and justice, that calls forth the imaginary and ideological guarantee, the ethical stop-gap provided by the superego-cult of Mao. The anxiety produced by egalitarian disorder is thus assuaged, not just through the idolatry of a new, if under-defined law (Mao-Tse-Tung-thought), but, following Hegel, through the persecution it gives rise to: the superego's manner of 'saturating places', which can only be occupied, without ambiguity, by revolutionaries or enemies. The imaginary dimension thus arises as a way of comforting the anxious subject, unable to sustain the uncertain discipline of courage and the undecidable measure of justice.

The terror exercised by the superego thus represents a weakness of the subject. But this does not exhaust the content of ethics. If ethics 'makes discourse of what cannot wait or be delayed', if it 'makes do with what there is', then its key problem, as Badiou explicitly draws from Lacan, is that 'the world only ever proposes the temptation to give up', 'to inexist in the service of goods' (TS 325, 328, 334). What an 'ethics of Marxism' would therefore need to confront are the various ways in which the temptation to give up on

6. See also Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, Paris, F. Maspéro, 1976.

the labour of subjectivation, the labour of destruction, manifests itself. If 'subjectivation' names the destructive process whereby the subject subordinates place to excess, while 'subjective process' defines the contrary, conservative tendency, then the character of defeatism or even reaction involves giving up on subjectivation for the sake of an older subjective process. The source for this remains internal to the subject itself, in the failure of 'confidence' [*confiance*] ('the fundamental concept of the ethics of Marxism'). If the ethical subject is identified with the party pure and simple, then the ethical nemesis is surely the renegade, the traitor to be liquidated (thereby returning us to superego-Terror). But if we rein back this ferocious form of placement, what light can ethics shed on the existence of other subjects?

While Badiou had abandoned the idea of plural subjects when wrestling with the conundrum of the bourgeoisie, the issue seems to return once he declares ethics to be 'a naming of the subject as historically effectuated in the form of discourse'. For there is not just one, but *four* discourses of the subject for Badiou and thus, in a complex and problematic sense, if not four separate subjects, at least four tendencies within subjectivation and subjective processes. These four discourses are the discourse of praise, that of resignation, that of discordance, and the 'Promethean' discourse. Their fundamental affective tonalities are belief, fatalism, nihilism and confidence. Now, without delving into the detail of how these positions are derived from the prior distinction between superego, anxiety, courage and justice, it is important to note that the ethical subjects indexed to these discourses are intrinsically relational. In other words, they only exist by designating their others and the discourses of these others.

The discourse of praise and the Promethean discourse are the two that in a sense lie beyond anxiety. But they are diametrically opposed in their relations to the Whole (or space of placements, *esplace*) and the force of novelty (or the out of place, *horlieu*). It is a matter of belief (or confidence in the space of placements) versus confidence (or belief in the out-of-place). While belief opens up the possibility of salvation, and the potential eternity of the subject in a finally realized space of placements (without lack but determined by law), confidence, instead, works with fidelity to the innovative decision (courage), and a more porous recomposition of the real, less open to the law (justice). The subject of praise can here be recast in terms of something like the subject of the system itself, the believer and defender of its righteousness, a truly *conservative* subject. But the Promethean subject of destruction and recomposition, the universalist (proletarian) subject, has two other counterparts, mired in different forms of anxiety. These are the resigned fatalist and the nihilist. The resigned fatalist is most likely the one who has succumbed to the service of goods, who, though not beyond the pale, is in a sense a *passive* nihilist and something like an after-subject. It is the real nihilist instead who, plunged into the discordance of an anxious world, but without the safety of knowing scepticism, is the subject whom the Promethean discourse wishes to capture and persuade. For the nihilist is indeed imbued with a certain form of courage (the passion for the act, for excess) but is incapable of justice, of the right measurement of the relationship between the real and the law. He lacks the confidence which alone allows the organization and

endurance of both courage and justice in a universal figure.

Thus, despite his arguments to the contrary when addressing the possibility of a bourgeois subject, Badiou already recognizes, in the *Théorie du sujet*, the need to think different subjective configurations, not all of which can be regarded as the ethical bearers of novelty and universality. Though his more recent work on ethics has been far more widely discussed than the earlier foray into an ethical 'topics', we can identify some manifest continuities, which bridge the theoretical caesura triggered by the introduction of the theory of the event and its metaontological, set-theoretical armature. In the first place, there is the idea that a subject is ethically defined by the manner in which it relates to other subjects within the space created by its confidence, or fidelity: 'Every fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance'.[7] This *agonistic* dimension of subjectivation clearly relates to the relational character of the theory of ethical discourses (e.g. there is no Promethean subject without 'its' nihilist). Secondly, there is the idea that one can only rescind one's incorporation into a subject by *betrayal*. This theory of betrayal is in some respects akin to the discourse of resignation in the *Théorie du sujet*. The (ex-)subject of betrayal in fact *denies* having been seized by a truth, drowning his previous courage in deep scepticism and bowing to the imperative according to which we must avert the risks imposed by any truth procedure. Thirdly, there is the key tenet that the pathologies of subjectivity—more particularly the emergence of 'false' subjects that trade in *simulacra* of truth (e.g. Nazism) and the *terror* which exerts a full sovereignty of truth over all places—can only be understood from out of the possible impasses of a subject of truth.

The last is a persistent conviction underlying Badiou's treatment of what, for lack of better terms, we could refer to as 'non-universal' subjects. In other words, it is the irruption of a subject of truth which serves as the aleatory condition of possibility for the formation of other subjects. In the case of Nazism, for instance: 'Such a simulacrum is only possible thanks to the success of political revolutions that were genuinely evental (and thus universally addressed)'. This is why it is only from the standpoint of fidelity to events of universal address—'the truth-processes whose simulacra they manipulate'—that these other, non- or anti-universal subjects, become intelligible.[8] Or, in Badiou's more classical terms, why Evil can only be understood from the standpoint of the Good.

STRUGGLES OVER SUBJECTIVE SPACE

The foregoing discussion suggests that the problem of other subjects—in its ethico-political, rather than epistemological sense—has been an abiding preoccupation and a thorny challenge for Badiou's thinking ever since the mid-seventies. In this regard, the treatment of the theory of the subject in *Being and Event*, wholly concerned with the subject of truth, seems to hark back to one of Badiou's theoretical tendencies, already encountered in the *Théorie*—the one which contends that, for a given situation (or space

7. Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, London, Verso, 2000, p. 75.
8. Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 77.

of placements) and for a given historical sequence, *there is only one subject*. As we observed with regard to the concept of the bourgeoisie, there is something structural about this oscillation in the work of Badiou. Are there one or many subjects? Prior to the recent publication of the *Logiques des mondes*, which we will deal with below, Peter Hallward already indicated, in his indispensable and lucid summary of Badiou's 1996-97 lectures on the axiomatic theory of the subject, that Badiou has found it necessary to introduce a modicum of mediation[9] and plurality into his account of the subject. As Hallward puts it, 'Badiou realizes that an event can evoke a range of subjective responses. … He now sees each effect of truth as raising the possibility of a countereffect, no longer considered as simply external to the process of subjectivation, but as internal to subjective space itself'.[10]

As I have already suggested however, this realization should not be seen as a sudden innovation in Badiou's thinking, but as the recovery of a problem intrinsic to his theory of the subject ever since his seminars of the 1970s. Besides the abiding preoccupation with the lessons of Hegel's phenomenology of terror, and the attempt to flesh out a theory of subjective betrayal, Badiou has demonstrated an abiding concern with the possible existence of subjects who veer from, react to or occlude the struggle for transformative universality. In this respect, the *topique* presented in his ethics of Marxism, with its nihilists, fatalists and believers, is a clear precursor of the theory of subjective space sketched out in his 1990s lectures and, with some amendments, introduced in his 'meta-physics' of the subject in the 2006 *Logiques des mondes*.[11] In other words, I think it is useful, especially in order to survey the gamut of subjective possibilities investigated by Badiou's thought, to recognize that it is not just in the past few years that he has come to consider 'the subjective realm precisely as a *space*—as something that no one figure can fully occupy and determine, as something that every subject must traverse'.[12]

Given Hallward's exhaustive treatment of the earlier and unpublished sketch of the theory of subjective space, I will focus here solely on the shape that this notion of subjective space takes on in Book I of the *Logiques des mondes*.

To begin with it is necessary briefly to outline the parameters of Badiou's recent finessing of his formal theory of the subject. Pitted against hermeneutic, moral, and ideological models of subjectivity, it is worth reiterating that Badiou's theory is not interested in the *experience* of subjectivity, but simply in its *form*. Nor is Badiou particularly concerned with the subject as a source of statements, a subject of enunciation capable of saying 'I' or 'we'. Rather, the subject is depicted as what *exceeds* the normal disposition and knowledge of 'bodies and languages'—the exclusive focus upon which defines

9. 'To lend the event an implicative dimension is already to submit the process of its affirmation to a kind of logical mediation, as distinct from the immediacy of a pure nomination'. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 145.

10. Hallward, *Badiou*, pp. 144-5.

11. Among the differences between the two is that what appears as the 'faithful subject' in the *Logiques des mondes* was split into two figures, the hysteric and the master, in the lectures outlined by Hallward.

12. Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 145.

Badiou's current ideological nemesis, what he calls 'democratic materialism'.[13] While the theory of the subject as a whole certainly tackles the 'subject-bodies' (political parties, scientific communities, artistic configurations…) that support truth procedures, the formal theory as such limits itself to the various formalizations of the effects of the 'body' of the subject. The theory propounded in Book I of the *Logiques* brackets the body (which is why Badiou dubs it a 'meta-physics'), providing the general parameters for thinking how subjects exceed the situations whence they arise. The notion of subject therefore 'imposes the readability of a unified orientation upon a *multiplicity* of bodies' (LM 54). This means that it also suspends a consideration of the specific historicity of a process of subjectivation, the manner in which the body of a subject is composed by incorporating certain elements of the situation and disqualifying others. The subject is thus viewed as an 'active and identifiable form of the production of truths'. The emphasis, evidently, is on 'form'.

But does this entail that the only subjects deserving of our theoretical attention are subjects of truth, of the *one* truth that may affect and dislocate any given situation? The particular inflection of Badiou's definition tells us otherwise: 'Saying "subject" or saying "subject with regard to truth" is redundant. For there is a subject only as the subject of a truth, at the service of this truth, of its denial, or of its occultation' (LM 58). This 'with regard to' already indicates that there are indeed, as Hallward suggests, different subjective positions or comportments, determined by a subject's stance towards the irruption of the event and the truths that may follow from it. Badiou himself presents this theory as a self-criticism of sorts, arguing that his earlier work (he is thinking of the *Théorie du sujet* in particular) stipulated an all too firm and drastic opposition between the new and the old. In this new formal theory he wishes instead to confront the existence, amongst others, of what he calls '*reactionary novelties*' (LM 62-7). To resist the new, to deny it, one still requires arguments and subjective forms. In other words, the theory of the subject needs to countenance the fact that reactionary forms of subjectivation exist—which for Badiou unsurprisingly take the shape of the anti-communist anti-totalitarianism which spurred the backlash of revisionist historians (François Furet) and the renegade *nouveaux philosophes* (André Glucksmann) to the emancipatory innovations arising in the wake of May '68.

Now, as I suggested above, it is not entirely true that the *Théorie du sujet* foreclosed the possibility of reactionary novelties. The briefly-explored possibility of a bourgeois subject (not just in the French 'new bourgeoisie', but in the Soviet bureaucratic caste) definitely depended on its ability to generate some kind of novelty, however abject or corrupt. Similarly, the subjectivity of betrayal and resignation, or even that of active nihilism, as explored in Badiou's early 'ethics of Marxism', depend on the particular manner whereby they avoid or repress the courageous subjectivity and the just praxis of a revolutionary proletariat. They too are new by dint of how they respond (or better,

13. Alain Badiou, 'Democratic Materialism and the Materialist Dialectic', trans. Alberto Toscano, *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 130, 2005, pp. 20-24. This is an excerpt from the preface to Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, Paris, Seuil, 2006 (henceforth LM).

react) to the disturbing irruption of that subjective figure. The fact that this formal theory of the subject comes after Badiou's formulation of a theory of evental subjectivity (first sketched in the 1985 book *Peut-on penser la politique?*) does make a difference to the account of 'other', non- or anti-universal subjects. For one, as we already intimated in our discussion of the *Ethics*, the dependency of subjectivation on the event permits Badiou to propose a philosophical argument as to why 'other' subjects are radically dependent on a subject of truth. As he writes: 'From a subjective point of view, it is not because there is reaction that there is revolution, it is because there is revolution that there is reaction' (LM 71).[14] This Maoist thesis of the primacy of revolt, which Badiou had already formulated as early as his 1975 *Théorie de la contradiction*, is now philosophically articulated in terms of the key 'temporal' category of Badiou's theory of the subject, that of the *present*. In responding to the *trace* of a supernumerary, illegal event, and in constructing the *body* that can bring the implications of this event to bear on a given world, a faithful subject is involved in the production of a present. Indeed, the only subjective temporality, which is to say the only historicity, envisaged in Badiou's system derives from such an irruption of generic universality into the status quo.

But if the present, as a kind of rigorous and continued sequence of novelties (a permanent revolution…) belongs to the subject of truth, how can 'other subjects' partake in it? Badiou's contention is that they do so in a strictly derivative and parasitic (albeit by no means passive) manner. As he puts it, subjective 'destinations proceed in a certain order (to wit: production—denial—occultation), for reasons that formalism makes altogether clear: the denial of the present supposes its production, and its occultation supposes a formula of denial' (LM 71).

Given the arduous and ongoing production of a truth, *reactionary* subjects seek to deny the event that called it into being, and to disaggregate the body which is supposed to carry the truth of that event. It is for this reason that reaction, according to Badiou, involves the production of another, 'extinguished' present. The thesis of reaction, at base, is that all of the 'results' of a truth procedure (e.g. political equality in the French revolution) could be attained without the terroristic penchant of the faithful subject, and without the affirmation of a radically novel event. As Badiou recognizes, this constitutes an *active* denial of truth, which demands the creation of reactionary statements and indeed of what we could call reactionary anti-bodies. Think, for instance, of the elaborate strategies of cultural organization with which the CIA and its proxies sought to incorporate some of the innovations of aesthetic radicalism in order to deny their link with communist politics, invariably borrowing many formal traits and discursive dispositions from their nemeses.[15] Or consider the emergence, very evident nowadays among what some refer to as the 'pro-war left', of reactionary subjectivities. The resilience of such

14. This means, incidentally, that Badiou reiterates his intolerance for those, generally 'leftist' positions which base their notion of revolt on the prior reality of oppression, and for whom the political subject par excellence is therefore the *oppressed*.

15. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London, Granta, 2000.

subjectivities was convincingly mapped by Georg Simmel when he set forth his portrait of the 'renegade'. Due to the drastic violence of his conversion, the renegade, according to Simmel, is in a sense a far more steadfast and loyal subject than a militant or partisan who, for whatever reason, might not have adhered to his camp with the same conscious resolve. As Simmel writes:

> The special loyalty of the renegade seems to me to rest on the fact that the circumstances, under which he enters the new relationship, have a longer and more enduring effect than if he had naïvely grown into it, so to speak, without breaking a previous one. … It is as if he were repelled by the old relationship and pushed into the new one, over and over again. Renegade loyalty is so strong because it includes what loyalty in general can dispense with, namely, the conscious continuance of the motives of the relationship.[16]

While the reactionary—and the renegade as one of its sub-species—suspends or attenuates the present produced by an event, denying its novelty but absorbing many of its traits, the second type of 'unfaithful' subject, what Badiou calls the *obscure* subject, entertains a far more severe relation to the new present that the faithful subject had given rise to. Rather than *denying* its novelty, the obscure subject is focussed on actually *negating* the very existence of this new present. The *obscure* subject, in order to occult novelty, 'systematically resorts to the invocation of a transcendent Body, full and pure, an ahistorical or anti-evental body (City, God, Race…) whence it derives that the trace will be denied (here, the labour of the reactive subject is useful to the obscure subject) and, by way of consequence, the real body, the divided body, will also be suppressed' (LM 68).[17] The obscure 'anti-body' is thus very different than the reactive one. While the latter may be repressive, it is also aimed at persuading the faithful that 'it's just not worth it', that they should resign themselves to a 'lesser present' and enjoy its diminished but secure rewards. The transcendent body conjured up by the obscure subject is instead a kind of 'atemporal fetish', writes Badiou, under whose weight novelty must be thoroughly crushed and silenced.

Persisting with a conviction that dominates both the *topiques* of the *Théorie du sujet* and the theory of evil in the *Ethics*, Badiou suggests that the faithful subject, the subject that produces a new present by drawing the worldly consequences of an event, must entertain a differentiated relationship to the other figures who inhabit the new subjective space that his fidelity has opened up. Compared to the treatment of the fatalist and the nihilist in the *Théorie*, in the *Logiques* Badiou strikes a more cautious note. I will take the liberty of quoting at length the passage where he compares the two figures of the reactionary and the obscurantist, in part because of the literary flair with which he gives flesh to these formal figures:

> It is crucial to gauge the gap between the reactive formalism and the obscure

16. Georg Simmel, 'Faithfulness and Gratitude', in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York, The Free Press, 1964, pp. 385, 386.

17. Badiou links the theory of 'obscure' fascism to the 'production of imaginary macroscopic entities' and 'passive bodies of subjectivation' in *The Century*, Chapter 9.

> formalism. As violent as it may be, reaction conserves the form of the faithful subject as its articulated unconscious. It does not propose to abolish the present, only to show that the faithful rupture (which it calls 'violence' or 'terrorism') is useless for engendering a moderate, that is to say extinguished, present (a present that it calls 'modern'). Moreover, this instance of the subject is itself borne by the debris of bodies: frightened and deserting slaves, renegades of revolutionary groups, avant-garde artists recycled into academicism, lovers asphyxiated by conjugal routine. Things are very different for the obscure subject. That is because it is the present that is directly its unconscious, its lethal disturbance, while it disarticulates within appearance the formal data of fidelity. The monstrous full Body to which it gives fictional shape is the atemporal filling of the abolished present. This means that what bears this body is directly linked to the past, even if the becoming of the obscure subject also immolates this past in the name of the sacrifice of the present: veterans of lost wars, failed artists, intellectuals perverted by rancour, dried up matrons, illiterate muscle-bound youths, shopkeepers ruined by Capital, desperate unemployed workers, rancid couples, bachelor informants, academicians envious of the success of poets, atrabilious professors, xenophobes of all stripes, mobsters greedy for decorations, vicious priests, and cuckolded husbands. To this hodgepodge of ordinary existence the obscure subject offers the chance of a new destiny, under the incomprehensible, but salvific, sign of an absolute body, which demands only that one serve it by entertaining everywhere and at all times the hatred of any living thought, of any transparent language and of every uncertain becoming (LM 67-70).

While the reactive or reactionary subject incorporates the form of faithfulness, the obscure subject seems be defined by the twofold movement of laying waste to the immanent production of the new and generating a transcendent, monolithic novelty, essentially indistinguishable from the most archaic past. Leaving aside the return of faithfulness in the fourth subjective figure, that of *resurrection*,[18] what changes does this theory of subjective space bring to the earlier theorization of non-universalist subjects, and what prospects for formal analysis does it harbour?

Most importantly, the theory of subjective space appears designed to resolve the conundrum about other subjects which, in the earlier work, had been most acute in the figure of the bourgeoisie. In a sense, the new formal theory allows Badiou to affirm the relative autonomy of non- or anti-universalist subjects, whilst holding true, in his account of the sequence of subjects, to the primacy of revolt, in other words, to the primacy of the universalist subject. The new theory can thus be seen as a return, with the aid of a different formalism, of the 'topical' theory provided by the *Théorie du sujet*, though now instead of a discontinuous field of subjective affects we are presented with more clearly distinct subjects (faithful, reactive, obscure, resurrected). The relative exteriority of these figures to one another is also explained by the forsaking of the de-

18. For some interesting comments on the figure of resurrection, and its introduction into Badiou's thought of a complex link between novelty and *repetition*, see Slavoj Žižek, 'Badiou: Notes from an Ongoing Debate', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, available at: <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/zizek/article.cfm?id=21&issue=3>.

structive-dialectical schema which, in *Théorie du sujet*, had portrayed the proletariat as an immanent purification of bourgeois space, a subjective torsion whose aim was to destroy the space of placements constituted by imperialist capitalism.

THE OBSCURE SUBJECT OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

What purchase can such a formal theory have on the identification and examination of contemporary political subjects? In his philosophical considerations on the facts of September 11, 2001, Badiou opted for the notion of 'nihilism' to capture the specular relationship between the 'infinite justice' of Bush's God-bothering 'capitalist-parliamentarian' regime and Bin Laden's pyrotechnic theological terror. The current situation would thus be framed by the 'disjunctive synthesis of two nihilisms'.[19] These nihilisms, unlike the youthful discordant nihilism courted by Badiou in the *Théorie du sujet*, are clearly not subjectively recoverable. What's more, it is rather opaque what relation, if any, they might entertain with faithful political subjects. So it is once again to the recent *Logiques des mondes* that we turn for some clarification.

One of the more striking features of this sequel to *Being and Event* for our aims is that, despite its formality, the meta-physics of the subject it deploys is marked by some extremely concrete examples. The most striking of these concerns Badiou's treatment of 'Islamism' as the present-day incarnation of the obscure subject:

> it is in vain that one tries to elucidate genealogically contemporary political Islamism, in particular its ultra-reactionary variants, which rival the Westerners for the fruits of the petrol cartel through unprecedented criminal means. This political Islamism is a new manipulation of religion—from which it does not derive by any natural (or 'rational') inheritance—with the purpose of occulting the post-socialist present and countering, by means of a full Tradition or Law, the fragmentary attempts through which some try to reinvent emancipation. From this point of view, political Islamism is absolutely contemporary, both to the faithful subjects that produce the present of political experimentation, and to the reactive subjects that busy themselves with denying that ruptures are necessary in order to invent a humanity worthy of the name, and who moreover flaunt the established order as the miraculous bearer of a continuous emancipation. Political Islamism is nothing but one of the subjectivated names of today's obscurantism (LM 67-8).

Following the foundational thesis of the primacy of revolt (or primacy of the universal) Badiou is obliged to argue that if there is indeed an Islamist subject, then this subject is derivative (by way of occultation) of a faithful subject. Rather than a regurgitation of the past, Islamism is the contemporary of a politics of emancipation (which is why it is useless to engage in 'genealogical' explanations). Possibly the most important, and disputable, aspect of this argument is that the *purpose* (whether conscious or otherwise) of contemporary Islamism is 'occulting the post-socialist present'. Osama Bin Laden's

19. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and the "war against terrorism"', in *Infinite Thought*, ed. and trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 143.

jihadist piety is precisely depicted as a kind of sinister fetishism: 'the sole function of the God of conspiring Islam is to occult, at the heart of peoples, the present of the rational politics of emancipation, by dislocating the unity of their statements and their militant bodies' (LM 69). In what follows, I will briefly survey some of the debates about the nature of Islamism's relation to the politics of emancipation. For the moment, I want to indicate one of the most problematic aspects of Badiou's account, which inserts it directly into some bitter and vociferous recent debates. This has to do with the equation between Islamism and fascism.

In his response to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, Badiou had in fact already characterized those acts as 'conjuring up the fascist concept of action' and thus as 'formally fascistic'.[20] Moreover, the Islamist use of religion was judged to be akin to that of 'anti-capitalism' by the populist fascism of the thirties, a mere demagogic vocabulary cloaking Bin Laden's thirst for oil and political supremacy. At bottom then, the 2001 attacks signal the presence, under the instrumental facade of 'Islam' of 'a type of fascistic nihilism' typified by the 'sacralization of death; the absolute indifference to the victims; the transformation of oneself and others into instruments'.[21] In the *Logiques*, this verdict is corroborated by the inclusion of Islamism under the rubric of obscure subjectivity, which is by definition 'fascist'. Thus, according to Badiou's definition: 'The obscure subject engineers the destruction of the body: the appropriate word is *fascism*, in a broader sense than was given to this term in the thirties. One will speak of generic fascism to describe the destruction of the organized body through which there once transited the construction of the present (of the sequence)' (LM 81).

Besides the all too hurried identification of Bin Laden with Islamism (when many commentators indeed see him as a phenomenon which is subsequent to, and incompatible with, 'political Islam' proper), one cannot but register the unexpected convergence of this formal theory with one of the theses that have recently permitted the convergence between American neo-conservatives and left renegades, to wit, the existence of something like 'Islamic fascism' or 'Islamofascism' as the archenemy of today's democrats and progressives—a notion promoted by the likes of Christopher Hitchens, and very recently publicized, in some particularly incoherent speeches, by Bush himself. Leaving aside the dubious invocation of crimes of association, what is interesting about this congruence lies in its preconditions. It is indeed the short-circuit between a notion of 'generic fascism' (or of Ur-fascism)[22] and the specific subjective history of anti-fascist

20. Badiou, 'Philosophy and the "war against terrorism"', p. 143.

21. Badiou, 'Philosophy and the "war against terrorism"', p. 160.

22. For a recent treatment of (and intervention in) the scholarly debate on 'generic fascism', see Robert Griffin, 'The Palingenetic Core of Generic Fascist Ideology', in Alessandro Campi, ed., *Che cos'è il fascismo?*, Rome, Ideazione, 2003, pp. 97-122, also available at: <http://ah.brookes.ac.uk/history/staff/griffin/coreoffascism.pdf>. See also his *The Nature of Fascism*, London, Routledge, 1993. On 'Ur-fascism' or 'eternal fascism', see Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 42, no. 11, 1995, pp. 12-15. It is worth noting that while those who advocate the concept of generic fascism tend to stress the modern and modernizing character of fascism, Eco regards the 'rejection of modernism' as a key feature of fascism. Badiou's formal notion of 'generic fascism' seems far more ample than either Griffin or Eco's proposals.

politics that has recently allowed members of the so-called left to sign up to the propaganda wing of the 'war on terror' as if they were joining the International Brigades. It is important to note in this respect that the historical and sociological debate on fascism has long been dominated by polemics regarding its specificity and extension, both historical and geographical. So it is rather peculiar to see Badiou, so adamant about thinking the subjective singularity of particular political sequences (e.g. Nazism in *The Century*) sign up to a thesis, that of 'generic fascism', which, in its formality, seems to forestall an inquiry into that very singularity. By way of contrast, we can note that one of the more exhaustive recent studies of fascism, starting from the methodological imperative to, as it were, 'take the fascists at their word' (to treat their political thought and practice as a subjective form) concludes with a subtle repudiation of the notion of 'Islamic fascism'.[23]

But, as we have already intimated, at the core of Badiou's vision of the obscure subject as generically fascist there lies not a political taxonomy of the elements necessary for a fascist politics, but a formal evaluation of how this type of subjectivity relates to the subject which, by definition, opens the subjective space: the universalist subject of emancipation, the faithful subject. For Badiou's theory of the obscure subject to find its exemplification in Islamism it must be possible to argue that, in some sense or another, the relationship between Islamist obscurantism and the politics of emancipation is one where the purpose of the former is absolutely to negate the latter, through the production of a full subjective body and an archaic future. Now, in the case of Bin Laden, while it may be disputed whether the portrait of a cynical oil-fiend can withstand much scrutiny, it is indeed correct that, ideologically forged in the fight against the Soviet Satan, his relationship to communism bears all the hallmarks of the obscure subject. Consider this declaration, from Bin Laden's first public statement, addressed to religious jurisprudents and spurred by the Saudi royals' support for the south Yemenis in the 1994 civil war:

> It is ludicrous to suggest that Communists are Muslims whose blood should be spared. Since when were they Muslims? Wasn't it you who previously issued a

23. For some useful references about this inevitably heated, and cliché-ridden debate, see the 'Wikipedia' entry at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_fascism>. According to Michael Mann, in none of the disparate, and often incompatible, instances of political Islam do we find 'the complete fascist package'. Rather, 'the term "Islamic fascism" is really just a particular instance of the word "Fascist!"—a term of abuse for our enemies … the most powerful term of abuse in our world today'. As for Islamism and Hindu nationalism, he makes the following judgment: 'They most resemble fascism in deploying the means of moral murder, but the transcendence, the state, the nation, and the new man they seek are not this-worldly'. See his *Fascists*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 374. While the polemical character of the appellation is obvious, and the point about the categorical differences well taken, I think it can be argued that most of the aims of Islamist politics, whether economic, legal or political, are remarkably 'this-worldly'. It is also worth noting that Badiou himself, contradicting his use of it in *Logiques des mondes*, has even disputed the political value of the term 'Islamism'. As he declared in a 2004 interview, 'words like "terrorism", "Islamism" and "crimes against humanity" are only destined to confuse situations and to create a kind of international political stupidity'. Alain Badiou, 'Las democracias están en guerra contra los pobres' (Democracies are at war against the poor), *Revista Ñ*, 23.10.2004. Available at: <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2004/10/23/u-854775.htm>.

> juridical decree calling them apostates and making it a duty to fight them in Afghanistan, or is there a difference between Yemeni Communists and Afghan Communists? Have doctrinal concepts and the meaning of God's unity become so confused? The regime is still sheltering some of these leaders of unbelief in a number of cities in the country, and yet we have heard no disapproval from you. The Prophet said, as related by Muslim, 'God cursed him who accommodates an innovator'.[24]

This ferocious hatred of innovation, of non-submissive secular equality, and of 'this torrential current of global unbelief',[25] seems to single out Bin Laden and his cohorts as sterling examples of Badiou's figure of the obscure subject.

But if we leave aside the not exactly representative figure of Bin Laden, with his anarchoid propaganda of the deed and kitsch fantasies of the caliphate, the relation between Islamism and emancipatory politics appears far more ambiguous. Taking the paradigmatic case of 'political Islam', the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran, we can see that the theocratic forces did not engage in a straightforward reaction to the mass revolts against the Shah—in which they, alongside the various groups of the radical left, instead played a mobilizing role—or in a simple occultation. It is certainly true that—as Badiou himself already noted in the *Théorie du sujet*—the Islamist superego in the figure of Khomeini played a role akin to that of the Mao, and the archaic and transcendent reference prepared the brutal occlusion of emancipatory trajectories. But the suppression of the left by theocratic forces worked, in the ideological arena, primarily by *borrowing* the left's prescriptions and 'Islamicizing' them, leaving the left the abject alternative of either abetting its own suppression or becoming traitor to the revolution. As Val Moghadam noted, in an incisive appraisal of the strategic and discursive failures of the Iranian left:

> The shared language of opposition had a further negative effect in that it obfuscated very real differences between the socio-political projects of the Left and the Religious Right ('national-popular government' versus political Islam/ theocratic rule). Moreover, most of the Left seemed unaware in the 1970s that the religious forces were weaving a radical—populist Islamic discourse that would prove very compelling—a discourse which appropriated some concepts from the

24. Osama Bin Laden, 'The Betrayal of Palestine' (December 29 1994), in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 8. Badiou's portrait, according to which Bin Laden's 'point of departure is a series of extraordinary complex manoeuvres in relation to the manna of oilfields in Saudi Arabia and that the character is, after all, a good American: someone for whom what matters is wealth and power, and for whom the means are of less concern' (Badiou, 'Philosophy and the "war on terrorism"', pp. 149-50), seems to underestimate the sinister sincerity of his conviction, and indeed the fact that, were wealth and power the objective, Bin Laden could have attained them with far greater ease without undertaking his peculiar brand of 'obscure' militancy.

25. Osama Bin Laden, 'Under Mullah Omar' (April 9 2001), *Messages to the World*, p. 98. It is worth noting that an 'obscure' notion of equality, the kind of equality by divine submission also favoured by Qutb, is part of Bin Laden's doctrinal arsenal. Thus, he writes in his declaration 'To the Americans' (October 6 2002), that Islam 'is the religion of unity and agreement on the obedience to God, and total equality between all people, without regard to their colour, sex, or language' (*Messages to the World*, p. 166).

> Left (exploitation, imperialism, world capitalism), made use of Third Worldist categories (dependency, the people) and populist terms (the toiling masses), and imbued certain religious concepts with new and radical meaning. For instance, *mostazafin*—meaning the wretched or dispossessed—now connoted and privileged the urban poor in much the same way that liberation theology refers to the poor. But in an original departure, the authors of the revolutionary Islamic texts, and especially Ayatollah Khomeini, declaimed that the *mostazafin* would rise against their oppressors and, led by the *ulama* or religious leaders, would establish the *umma* (community of believers) founded on *tauhid* (the profession of divine unity) and Islamic justice.[26]

Even if we accept that the 'purpose' of Iranian Islamism lay in the occultation (and indeed, the persecution and often slaughter) of any body that carried a promise of immanent universality—in what Achcar calls 'a permanent revolution in reverse' and a 'reactionary retrogression'[27]—it cannot be argued that it simply foreclosed the statements and organs of emancipatory politics. Rather, in a far more insidious and powerful move, it *incorporated* them, transcendentalizing, for instance, the concept of anti-imperialism into a religious duty bound to the defence of the *umma* rather than the creation of a truly generic humanity. Still remaining with the Iranian case, we can see that Islamism even produced a kind of revolutionary populism, in the figure of Ali Shari'ati, which, though posthumously manipulated by the clergy and its militias for their own rightist ends, is difficult to class simply as either reactive or obscure.

In Shari'ati we find an uneasy combination of the popular principle of rebellion, on the one hand, and an organicist vision of religious society, on the other. Via the likes of Fanon and Sartre, he incorporates an emancipatory drive into his political theology. For instance, he declares that 'Islam is the first school of social thought that recognizes the masses as the basis, the fundamental and conscious factor in determining history and society'[28]; that history is a struggle between the pole of Cain (of power, coercion, and most recently, imperialism) and the pole of Abel (a religiously oriented primitive communism); that 'it is the responsibility of every individual in every age to determine his stance in the constant struggle between the two wings we have described, and not to remain a spectator'.[29] But the very principles of the emancipatory politics which provides the obvious matrix for Shari'ati's thought (primitive communism, the classless society, rebellion…) are hypostasized into spiritual notions which, to use the language that the *Théorie du sujet* applied to the religious politics of the German Peasants' War, take equality into the *imaginary* domain of cosmopolitical unity, in the form of the opposition between

26. Val Moghadam, 'Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran', *New Left Review*, vol. 166, 1987, p. 14.
27. Gilbert Achcar, 'Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism' (1981), in *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, London, Pluto Press, 2004, p. 57.
28. Shari'ati, 'Approaches to the Understanding of Islam', in *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 49.
29. Shari'ati, 'The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel', in *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 109.

unity (*tauhid*) and discordance or contradiction (*shirk*),[30] together with a radical reading of the notion of *umma* which nevertheless sees it, against the supposed shortcomings of socialism as 'the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation'.[31]

A related 'translation' of emancipatory themes can be found in the earlier and much more evidently revolutionary-conservative writings of Sayd Qutb, whose sombre anti-philosophy,[32] organicist vision of society, and definition of 'equality and freedom as common submission before God'[33] captured an authentic demand for justice and twisted it into an archaic and transcendent vision of a society finally free, not just of imperialism, but of the discordance and anxiety of modernity.

According to the group of theorists and activist RETORT, this dialectic of appropriation is also present in the most recent incarnations of 'revolutionary Islam'. This movement is characterized, in its diffuse and networked 'body' by a remarkable degree of organizational, theological and technological 'democratization', the invention of a new, post-Leninist (or post-anarchist[34]), articulation of vanguard and violence, and what they appositely refer to as 'a new, and malignant, universalism'.[35] While they too note the gestation of contemporary Islamism in the writings Qutb, and some of the 'proto-fascist' (but also 'crypto-communist') organizational models at the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood, they regard its causes as originating in 'the *crisis of secular nationalist development*—abetted by a specific (and poisonous) political-economic conjuncture whose vectors were oil, primitive accumulation, and Cold War geopolitics'.[36] A similar judgment was put forward in the wake of the Iranian Revolution by one of the more astute Marxist analysts of Middle East politics, Gilbert Achcar. His theses on Islamic fundamentalism, which provide a classical analysis of the petty-bourgeois roots of the Islamist phenomenon, echo the analysis of fascism—such as when he writes that 'the violence and rage of the petit bourgeois in distress are unparalleled'. Indeed, Achcar sees the bourgeoisie's relationship to the phenomenon of Islamism (particularly in Egypt) as typical of its customary stance towards far right movements and fascism in general—in other words, to borrow Badiou's terminology, reactionaries are always happy to use obscurantists against progressives, especially if the obscurantists can 'outbid the Left on the Left's two favourite issues: the national question and the social question; any gains made by Islamic reaction on these two issues mean equivalent losses for the Left'.

30. Shari'ati, 'The World-View of Tauhid', in *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 82.

31. Shari'ati, 'The Ideal Society—the Umma', in *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 120. It is worth noting that this umma is distinguished by Shari'ati in terms of its 'purity of leadership', which he explicitly juxtaposes to the 'fascist' purity of the leader, obviously sensitive to the potential confusion.

32. On Qutb's relationship to philosophy and modernity, see Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemies in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 69.

33. RETORT, Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 146. See also *Enemies in the Mirror*, pp. 62-3.

34. 'For jihadist, read anarchist', *The Economist*, 18 August 2005, available at: <http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=4292760>.

35. Boal, et. al., *Afflicted Powers*, p. 153.

36. Boal, et. al., *Afflicted Powers*, p. 162.

Islamic fundamentalism in this sense represents 'an *auxiliary for the reactionary bourgeoisie*'.[37] But for Achcar this emergence of a petty bourgeois reaction is only possible because of the feebleness of the revolutionary proletariat and the incapacity or unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to take on the aims of a national and democratic revolution.[38]

In this sense, the emergence of Islamism as a political subject does not necessarily represent an express reaction to emancipatory politics, but may rather constitute a capitalization on its absence, on the temporary incapacity of progressives to actually produce a present. Unlike Badiou, whose view of political subjectivation seems to preclude notions such as alliance or hegemony, Achcar does consider the possibility, which was of course the reality in Iran (his main point of reference in these reflections), that the proletarian subject might be obliged to struggle alongside Islamism against a common enemy, imperialism, and for 'national, democratic, and social issues'. And yet, this does not by any respects constitute a real alliance, since 'the duty of revolutionary socialists is to fight intransigently against the spell [Islamic fundamentalism] casts on the struggling masses'.[39] The least that can be said then, is that even from this classical Marxist position, the problem of other subjects—of how to confront reactionaries and obscurantists whilst producing an emancipatory political present—appears as both urgent and inescapable.

37. Achcar, 'Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism', p. 56.

38. This position is corroborated by one of the most in-depth, revealing and sympathetic treatments of the subjective trajectories and resources of Islamism, François Burgat's *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2003. Burgat, while discounting the kind of socio-economic analysis favoured by Achcar and other Marxists, and refusing its characterization as *primarily* reactionary, violent or anti-democratic, places Islamism firmly in the history of emancipation from imperialism and colonialism: 'At first political, then economic, the distancing of the former colonizer through the rhetoric of oppositional Islam becomes ideological, symbolic and more broadly cultural, on the terrain where the shock of colonization has been most traumatic. In addition to its own language, local culture and history endow the dynamic of independence with something that has been missing for a long time: the precious attributes of a sort of ideological "autonomy" which perfects it, the right of those who propagate it to regain universality, without denouncing the structural elements of their "specificity" … it is essentially in the old dynamic of decolonization that Islamism has taken root' (p. 49). While Burgat's sociological and anthropological focus on *identity* is deeply at odds with Badiou's theory of the subject, it is worth remarking the interest in this interpretation of Islamism as a tool for attaining a kind of universalizing autonomy. Without seconding Burgat's sympathies, it is important to note that such a demand for autochthonous universality is a sign of the failure of classical emancipatory discourses within the Muslim world to attain a truly 'generic' status and not be perceived as alien or imperial implantations. Moreover, Burgat's work is almost alone in providing detailed accounts, using numerous interviews and autobiographical texts, of the life-paths of north African Islamists—paths which, it should be noted, passed not only through Arab nationalism, but through Marxism too. For an attempt to delve into the subjectivity of extremist and terrorist variants of Islamism, see Juan Cole's intriguing study of the 'spiritual' documents left behind by the perpetrators of the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon, 'Al-Qaeda's Doomsday Document and Psychological Manipulation' (2003), available at: <http://www.juancole.com/essays/qaeda.htm>. Cole's text provides a useful sketch of what a situated phenomenology of the obscure subject might look like.

39. Achcar, 'Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism', p. 59.

CONCLUSION

So how does Badiou's theorization of 'untrue' subjects fare in the face of Islamism? The few cases and figures we have looked at point to the difficulties in formalizing the majority of politics that may be identified as 'Islamist' in terms of Badiou's theory of subjective space. Even if we accept the thesis of the primacy of the universal—the idea that 'other' subjects only arise in the wake of the emergence of a faithful subject and of the present it strives to produce—it is the specific relationship between the faithful subject and its two counterparts, reactive and obscure, that remains problematic.

First of all, the obscure subject—the subject that submits its action and statements to a transcendent, full body—does not necessarily have the occultation of the faithful subject as its express purpose. One of the difficult lessons of the present conjuncture might be that, having vanquished the semblance or placeholder of communist politics, reactionaries and obscurantists are facing one another without necessarily passing through a direct opposition to faithful subjectivity. Or rather—at least at the spectacular level—what we are faced with is the struggle between slogans, be it 'freedom and democracy', or mythical and theological corruptions of anti-imperialism, which, whilst bearing the traces of emancipatory subjectivities, do not refer to them directly.

When its genesis was coeval with that of progressive subject, the obscure subject of Islamism did indeed crush anything that could have given body to a generic emancipatory subject, but it did not, contrary to what Badiou seems to intimate, erase all traces of the founding tenets of emancipatory politics. On the contrary, its tactic, largely effective against a left deluded by its own populism and strategic ineptitude, was to adopt and hypostasize the key principles of emancipation, making out as if their secular, communist version was merely a degenerate form of an archaic and eternal Islamic politics, with its submissive organicist egalitarianism. In this sense, the obscure subject is more a thief of the present than simply its destroyer.

When instead, as is mostly the case nowadays, Islamism is not in direct contact with figures of emancipation, it seems to operate with the epigones of capitalist reaction (Cold Warriors like Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz) as its counterparts, and entertains no univocal relationship to a politics of emancipation (aside from gloating at the defeat of its Soviet simulacrum, peddling theological variants of anti-imperialism and egalitarianism, or even, in today's Lebanon and Egypt, making tactical alliances with socialist and communist groups). In a sense, this goes to corroborate Badiou's sequence, which moves from the production of the present, to its denial, to its occultation. But, for reasons very much having to do with the concrete strategic history of these movements, the phantasmagorical anti-bodies of Islamism (e.g. the caliphate) are more to be understood as the mythical filling-in of a political void produced by reaction than as a direct occultation of a subjectivized universal body. This is not to say that Islamism cannot be obscurantist, and indeed openly and virulently anti-communist (recall Bin Laden's exterminationist statement), but to note that our subjective space is currently dominated by struggles between non-universalist subjects far more than it is by their struggle against intelligible forms of 'post-socialist' subjectivity.

Having said that, the presence of a *gigantomachia*, a bloody and disjunctive synthesis, between reactionaries and obscurantists does not as such occlude the emergence of 'true' subjects. Which is why, in this grim interregnum, it is not a bad idea, not only to maintain open the possibility of universalist courage and justice, but to build on Badiou's several attempts to develop a muscular theory of the subjects of contemporary untruths and half-truths.

Alberto Toscano
Lecturer in Sociology
Goldsmiths College
University of London

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Achcar, Gilbert, 'Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism', in *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, London, Pluto Press, 2004.

Badiou, Alain and François Balmès, *De l'idéologie*, Paris, F. Maspéro, 1976

Badiou, Alain, *Théorie du sujet*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.

Badiou, Alain, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, London, Verso, 2000.

Badiou, Alain, 'Las democracias están en guerra contra los pobres', *Revista Ñ*, 23.10.2004

Badiou, Alain, *Logiques des mondes*, Paris, Seuil, 2006.

Badiou, Alain, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, London, Polity Press, 2007.

Burgat, François, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2003.

Cole, Juan, 'Al-Qaeda's Doomsday Document and Psychological Manipulation', 2003.

Eco, Umberto, 'Ur-Fascism', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 42, no. 11, 1995.

'For jihadist, read anarchist', *The Economist*, 18 August 2005.

Euben, Roxanne L., *Enemies in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.

Griffin, Roger, *The Nature of Fascism*, London, Routledge, 1993.

Griffin, Roger, 'The Palingenetic Core of Generic Fascist Ideology', in Alessandro Campi, ed., *Che cos'è il fascismo?*, Rome, Ideazione, 2003.

Hallward, Peter, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Lawrence, Bruce (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, London, Verso, 2005.

RETORT (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London, Verso, 2005.

Moghadam, Val, 'Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran', *New*

Left Review, vol. 166, 1987.
Shari'ati, Ali, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. Hamid Algar, Oneonta, Mizan Press, 1979.
Saunders, Frances Stonor, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London, Granta, 2000.
Virno, Paolo, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2004.
Wolff, Kurt H. (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York, The Free Press, 1964.
Žižek, Slavoj, 'Badiou: Notes from an Ongoing Debate', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007.