

THE GENERIC POLITICS OF EXTINCTION REBELLION: TOWARD A BADIOUIAN CONCEPTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Evan Supple

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that for an emancipatory environmental politics to be fundamentally distinct from the liberal democratic tradition, it must take the form of what Alain Badiou terms a 'truth procedure'. This form of processual politics structured around an affirmative norm disclosed by an Event — which I here claim to be the emerging ecological crises vis-a-vis modern States — and determined by what Badiou designates the generic will, has the potential to maintain a receptive and reciprocal relation with the environment within which it is situated. To justify this claim, I enlist Alain Badiou's formalist ontology and political thought. I begin with an exegesis of the latter and then, following a discussion of what I designate as the ecological Event, proceed to introduce the environmental activism movement, Extinction Rebellion — one of the first examples of a Badiouian political truth procedure in the 21st century — to animate Badiou's abstract political thought. By referencing Extinction Rebellion and its indubitable success, I demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Badiou's politics and articulate why it ought to guide future environmental-political theories and praxes. In pleading this case, I simultaneously affirm the emancipatory potential that inheres in XR, giving heed to its ontological form.

KEYWORDS: Ontology; Ecology; Badiou; Universality; Radical Politics

INTRODUCTION

While the currently proliferating theories of the 'environmental State' or 'ecological democracy' are numerous and variegated in scope, many are formulated strictly in juridico-political terms. Few political ecologists go to the length of determining the ontological assumptions on which their theories hinge

and in turn propound superficially radical theories that represent no real threat to the current hegemonic structures they aim to supplant. Many do not acknowledge that for an emancipatory environmental politics to be successful, it is the underlying ontological *form* that must be absolutely heterogeneous, rather than merely antithetical, to the anti-ecological frameworks of the present. Furthermore, they implicitly refer to the teleological being of the environmental State as basically indifferent to the way in which it is constituted, overlooking centuries of discourse surrounding political immanence and legitimacy. In other words, the ontological inter-entanglement of the process and the product goes neglected. A theory of the ‘environmental State’, like any other political theory, cannot be disarticulated from the implementational process it implies.

For an environmental politics to be fundamentally distinct from the liberal-democratic tradition, it must take the form of an interminable and immanent process of construction, affirmatively informed by what Alain Badiou designates, paraphrasing Rousseau, ‘the generic will’.¹ This is what Badiou terms a ‘truth procedure’, the processual form of which is its very product.² The environmental-political truth procedure’s inherent aversion to ossification will enable it to maintain a receptive and reciprocal relation with the environment within which it is situated.

Thus, the task here is not to formulate a normative conception of an environmental State but to illustrate the ontological *form* an emancipatory environmental politics must assume. To demonstrate this, I enlist the formalist ontology and political thought of Alain Badiou. I begin with an exegesis of his mathematical ontology and theory of the Event, which serves as the scaffolding for the ensuing discussion. Then, after elucidating the Event which opens up the space for environmental politics to hold sway, I introduce the environmental activist movement, Extinction Rebellion (XR), one of the first examples of an unequivocally Badiouian political truth procedure in the twenty-first century, to breathe life into Badiou’s abstract political thought. In referencing XR and its success, I demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Badiou’s political thought and articulate why it ought to guide future environmental-political theories and

¹ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels, Brooklyn and London, Verso, 2012b, p. 40.

² Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, Brooklyn and London, Verso, 2005, p. 41 (Henceforth MP).

praxes. In pleading this case, I simultaneously affirm the emancipatory potential that inheres in XR, giving heed to its specifically ontological (viz. formal) status.

Before proceeding, I should mention that Badiou has been a staunch critic of ecology for years, decrying it a ‘contemporary form of the opium of the people’ and stating that ecology concerns him ‘solely inasmuch as it can be proven that it is an intrinsic dimension of the politics of the emancipation of humanity.’³ While explicitly negating his position is not my primary aim here, I hope to succeed in ‘displacing’ it using his own system of thought by demonstrating that ecology indeed constitutes an ‘intrinsic dimension of the politics of the emancipation of humanity.’⁴

BADIOU’S MATHEMATICAL ONTOLOGY

Although a comprehensive exegesis of Badiou’s ontology is not necessary here, I summarize the relevant concepts that pertain to the ensuing discussion. To commence, Badiou conceives being as ‘what presents (itself).’⁵ Any reference to being-qua-being for Badiou is a formalist reference to presentation. Thinking what is need not, in contradistinction to the Parmenidian tradition, equate to thinking in terms of a One. Badiou insists that the One *is not*; infinite, indifferent multiplicity is all there is. This can only, however, be ascertained retroactively, as I explain below.

Despite that the One is not, there is *oneness*, an effect produced by an unavoidable unifying operation enacted upon elements of infinite multiplicity known as ‘the count-as-one’. All we, as observers, encounter in reality is oneness. In turn, we can think pure multiplicity, but we are unable to adequately define it, as definitional construction necessitates the submission of pure multiplicity to the power of the One inherent in language (i.e. in language, it becomes *this* multiplicity, rather than multiplicity as such). The task of ontology, then, is to *think* what cannot be *said*.

By way of a neo-Kantian transcendental-deductive gesture, Badiou infers

³ See Alain Badiou & Oliver Feltham, ‘Live Badiou’, in *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*, Oliver Feltham, New York, Bloomsbury, 2008, p.139.

⁴ Badiou & Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*, p. 139.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, New York, Bloomsbury, 2013a, p. 26 (Henceforth BE).

from the apparently immediate oneness of reality that there must be inconsistent (viz. not compositionally determined) multiplicity prior to the count in order for the latter to generate unity or ‘consistency’. Badiou terms the resulting consistency a ‘situation’, which designates for ‘any presented multiplicity ... the place of taking place, whatever the terms of the multiplicity in question’ (BE 26). All situations have a structure, which is ‘what prescribes, for a presented multiple, the regime of its count-as-one’ (BE 26). In other words, structuration is equivalent to predication. There is nothing we encounter apart from situations, as they are all that can be *said* to be but once the count’s effects have been identified we can, according to Badiou, retroactively infer that every situation consists of pure inconsistent multiplicity.

Since no concept of the multiple can be derived per se, Badiou argues that ontology must be axiomatic. Axioms are capable of prescribing the rule for their manipulation while avoiding the need for any prior determination regarding that which they employ. It is on this note that Badiou makes his foundational *decision*: mathematics — set theory, specifically — is ontology. While, say, a Heideggerian might object that this decision appears to be a regression to an impoverished formalist ontology, Badiou attests to the power of form itself⁶; any conception more fixated on presence over presentation blurs the ontological difference, the integrity of which is best preserved using mathematics as Badiou sees it.

Interpreted ontologically, set theory rigidly prescribes what is and ‘legislates (explicitly) on what is not ... Inconsistent or ‘excessive’ multiplicities are nothing more than what set theory ontology designates, prior to its deductive structure, as pure non-being’ (BE 45). To put it otherwise, set-theoretic axioms solely recognize counted multiples, so uncounted multiples cannot, at least from the standpoint of individual situations (the ontological designation for ‘set’) in which they reside, be said to exist. However, since Badiou only speaks in terms of situations⁷, the (non-)existence of uncounted multiples is not an absolute

⁶ One should note in passing that Badiou, when it comes to his emphasis on form vis-à-vis *universality*, is not immune to criticism, though this is not a point of criticism in the present text. As Kisner (2007, 231) notes from a Hegelian perspective, Badiou’s emphasis on form over content ends up landing him with ‘the very abstraction of a universality freed from particular content that he perhaps rightly sees as belonging to capitalism, an empty universality of capital that is left behind by default once truth in general is relegated to postmodern relativism’.

⁷ Situations can fortuitously overlap but are not ontologically interdependent.

determination but is locally determined by each situation's predicative structure. From this, one can begin to apprehend the political nature of the axiomatic apparatus, as it decides what is accorded ontological status in each situation.

The sole relation in the axiomatic lexicon is belonging. Belonging indicates the 'operator of denotation for the relation between the 'something' in general and the multiple ... [It] determines, in a uniform manner, the presentation of something as indexed to the multiple' (BE 47). In other words, a predicate determines what elements can be said to belong to a situation; however, there exists no predicate immanent to being itself, as predicates are transcendently imposed, although Badiou fails to articulate what, if anything, governs their imposition and from where they originate. Being-qua-being is not intrinsically relational⁸ — this is a matter of being-there or appearing — hence, ontology's ken is restricted to counted multiples.

In every situation there inevitably exists a remainder of inconsistent multiplicity which cannot be structurally acknowledged. Despite not being accorded an ontological status in the situations to which they do not belong, non-belonging multiples are not destroyed by structure but merely go uncounted.⁹ The un-locatable inconsistency which underlies structured situations, enabling them to be structured at all, must be designated *nothing*, since it is not presented as *something*. However, 'inconsistency is nothing' is distinct from 'inconsistency is not', the latter of which Badiou refutes (BE 57). There is a being of nothing despite that it cannot be said to exist as a localizable term. Resultantly, there is such thing as an empty set in all situations, which itself *is* but whose elements are indeterminate, given that the situation's determinacy implies negation, or a 'nothing' against which its determinacy can be recognized, bound up with it in a negative way. The empty set cannot be differentiated from another set in the situation as there is no predicate into which it can be assimilated, as predicates are concomitant with structure. Additionally, 'nothing', which Badiou terms 'the void', is not absolutely determined but is unique to each situation and marks the initial point of being from which every situation begins.

⁸ For example, the numbers 6, 9, and 12 are not intrinsically related — the transcendently imposed predicate 'multiples of 3' creates their relationality.

⁹ For example, in the situation 'multiples of 3', the number 4 cannot be recognized; however, the number 4 continues to exist regardless of the predicate.

From the void, five main axioms work upon counted multiples to manipulate and construct various forms of existence. While a wholesale exegesis is not necessary, the axiom of subsets is of import here. It demonstrates that there exists a set, the elements of which are all the possible combinatory rearrangements, or ‘subsets’, of the initially presented elements of a set — the power-set — and whose numericality exceeds the sum of those initially presented elements. With this axiom comes a second-order count which redoubles the initially presented elements by indexing them to additional transcendental determinations introduced by this second count, similar to the transcendental imposition of predicates at the structural level. The resulting power-set is always greater than the initial set, but in the sense of a transcendent excess over the situation rather than an immanent extension of the latter; the quantitative excess generated by the power-set does not emerge from the initial elements or predicates themselves but must nonetheless be ‘included’ in the result.¹⁰

Linked to the axiom of subsets is the schema of belonging and inclusion, the point at which we can distinguish Badiou’s ontology as decisively hierarchical, in contrast to the currently fashionable flat ontologies of various new materialisms.¹¹ Belonging, the relation between multiples created by structure, is to presentation, as inclusion, the relation between multiples created by the power-set — what, in ontological jargon, Badiou terms the ‘state of the situation’¹² — is to representation. A multiple can be said to be included if it is represented. For every given multiple, there exists a corresponding power-set, so representation is (mostly) unavoidable. Thus, pure presentation is the exception rather than the rule, which will be what ends up according truth procedures with their novel status.

With the introduction of a second-level order of being comes increased typological complexity in terms of the types of multiples we can deal with, given the combinatory options that become available. With the schema of

¹⁰ For example, in a political State, parliament is created at the point of the State’s conception — it is not an element of the pre-political situation but only emerges at the point of the State’s constitution. Thus, it must be included in the State as a whole despite not being an initially presented element.

¹¹ For example, see Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor, Open Humanities, 2011; Graham Harman, *Object Oriented Ontology*, London, Pelican, 2018.

¹² The capitalized State designates the state of political situations.

belonging/inclusion, three types of multiples are deduced: excrescent multiples, whose elements are included but do not belong, only having been introduced with the axiom of subsets, singular multiples, whose elements belong but are not included, and normal multiples, whose elements both belong and are included. It is the singular multiple which concerns the present discussion.

The singular multiple is constitutive of the *historical* situation, which is characterized as such by its possession of at least one *evental site* and the potential for structural disruption and change (viz. an Event) with which it is imbued. Notably, disruption and change can only occur in representational situations (i.e. States), not only because they are the rule, but also since purely presentational situations are not invested in maintaining the stability of a representative apparatus which would make changes appear as such. Evental sites are local and specific to the situations in which they exist.¹³ One could apprehend an evental site as the empty set at the level of representation: the set itself technically exists and is structurally necessary, insofar as the state's individuality is to persist, but the same cannot be said about that of which it is composed. At an evental site lurks the possibility of what Badiou terms an *Event*, or irruption of void-multiples into the situation in which they are not represented.¹⁴ Despite their lack of situational recognition it is conceivable, albeit fortuitous, that the 'inexistent' elements of evental sites can indeed emerge and interrupt the situation's apparent unity from below.

THE EVENT

Badiou defines the Event as 'that which interrupts the law, the rules, the structure of the situation and creates a new possibility. So, an Event is not initially the creation of a new situation. It is the creation of a new possibility'.¹⁵ In ontological jargon, it is an aleatoric irruption of un-counted multiplicity into a state from

¹³ What is void in one situation is not necessarily void in another since what is void is determined by the structure and state of each situation.

¹⁴ The void irrupts into states, but not purely presentative situations. Hence, while excrescent multiples are not those from which the void irrupts, they bear a relationship with singular multiples as their existence is a result of the same state which creates the latter.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, 'Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology', *The International Journal of Badiou Studies* vol. 2. no. 1, 2013b, p. 3.

which it was previously excluded. Legislating what exists, states are myopic insofar as they cannot acknowledge newness (viz. void-multiples) that emerges external to their rigidly delineated horizons of possibility. A structurally unnameable irruption of the void would be unrecognizable as such to any representative apparatus, as its elements — pure, situationally uncountable multiplicity — are inaccessible to the state's axiom of subsets which must be applied to any multiple whose existence is to be recognized. Signs of an Event typically go unacknowledged, are distorted and absorbed into the state's predicative schema, robbing them of their genuine newness, or disavowed as contingent disturbances. Despite these typical reactions, Events mark the only moments in which states are graced with genuine novelty that fundamentally undermines the established order and creates the possibility for real, *singular* change.

Singular change differs from mere modification, the latter of which is 'only the transcendental absorption of change, that part of becoming which is constitutive of every being-there'.¹⁶ One could apprehend the Lampedusian state of change propelled by capitalism (and the liberal-democracy that enables it) as typical of modification, given that its inability to surpass its immanent limit renders it incapable of producing *formal* novelty. That is, something not indexed to the logic of the commodity. Real singular change occurs in the order of appearing 'when an inexistent of the world starts to exist in the same world with maximum intensity'.¹⁷ Such change is not a simple alteration one could enact from within the coordinates of a given situation, but one that undermines the very coordinates within which one identifies change altogether. Singular change reveals the arbitrary structure that grounds the situation, but which could never wholly secure that which it deems inexistent from irrupting and undermining its apparent stability. To clarify, the emergence of an inexistent does not itself constitute an Event; the Event merely enables the emergence by momentarily lifting the state's exclusionary structure and according existential status to all of the situation's presented elements, including those not heretofore included, and disclosing a new possibility.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano, New York, Bloomsbury, 2019, p. 303.

¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Brooklyn and London, Verso, 2012a, p. 56.

In this light, Events disclose a universal possibility not previously imaginable from the formal standpoint of the situation on the edge of which it occurs. To bear witness to the becoming-existent of a hitherto-inexistent is to witness a fleeting apparition of universality, which reveals the generic (viz. universal, non-predicated) being upon which the situation is founded, what had to be repressed for an illusion of unity to materialize. In other words, the Event modifies the situation in which being takes place. A hitherto-inexistent's becoming-existent is enabled by the revelation of the situation's *truth*, which I explain below, so an Event that privileges a particular identity, even one that is historically oppressed, would be but a reactive simulacrum. The consequences of the Event must apply equally to all, though the distribution of its effects may affect some more than others.

Since an Event is totally aleatory and indiscernible in the state in which it occurs, its status of belonging and thus its existence cannot be proven using the situation's available verificatory methods. An Event and the truth it discloses must be reflexively declared by a subject, which, in a temporal short circuit, constitutes itself as a subject at the very point of this declaration.¹⁸ The subject sees beyond the situation's structure and decides upon and declares both the existence of a hitherto-inexistent and the truth which enables it to make the declaration. From there, it meticulously unfolds the consequences that result from the decision in what Badiou calls a 'generic truth procedure'. The subject acts in fidelity to the Event which, by experimentally inventing a new way of being congruent with the situation's truth, simultaneously invents its own subjectivity, gives *itself* its content through a process of self-determination. Without a subject there 'is' no Event and, inversely, without an Event there is no subject. There remains solely what *is*, as indexed to the state's classificatory and representational structures.

BADIOUIAN TRUTH

Badiou's conception of truth refers not to an objectively verifiable statement of adequation, but to that which performatively instigates a subjective procedure, such as is the case in a declaration of 'true' love. The trueness of love, and in the

¹⁸ Badiou's subject does not designate a single individual, but the collection of thinking-beings subjectivized by the same Event.

case of politics I delineate below, lies in its continuous (re)production and subjective fidelity to the consequences that unfold. Thus, it cannot be corroborated with external epistemological criteria, as this would submit it to the determinative coordinates of what already *is* and diminish its radical heterogeneity. It is best designated, following Žižek, as a ‘symbolic fiction’ to the situation whose truth it is, but is nonetheless *real* to those whom it subjectivizes — those who have glimpsed the exteriority of the ossified situation.¹⁹ Thus, the novelty of the event lies in its continuous resistance to inscription within the ontological framework of the state.

An event discloses a situation’s truth and the resulting consequences are materialized in the form of a new subjective body. Badiou states that the latter ‘is the realization of the possibility that is opened by the event in a concrete form, and which develops some consequences of the new possibility.’²⁰ The development of said consequences forms a truth procedure in which the truth’s content is immanently constructed and follows no guiding teleological imperative. Its trajectory is speculative and requires faithful subjects to preserve it and ward off usurpation by the state.

Badiou, following Marx, uses ‘generic’ to designate the being of a truth (which paradoxically has no official status of ‘being’ in the situation in which it emerges and must resist statist normalization if it is to remain ‘true’), in that the latter yields to no particular interests or perspectives and thus applies to all, despite whether they acknowledge it or not. Generic ‘positively designates that what does not allow itself to be discerned is in reality the general truth of a situation, the truth of its being, as considered as the foundation of all knowledge to come’ (BE 345). A truth procedure immanently constructs a One, or Sameness-in-being, in a bottom-up and non-alienated way. Truths exist exclusively at the level of pure presentation. In other words, they resist reduplication and transcendental predication. Immanently exceptional, the One can indeed be, but only insofar as it is generic, constructed at the level of presentation, and internally absent of a state.

A truth has a definite local origin given that it is first encountered in an evental sequence, but since it applies to all and is without a condition of

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Brooklyn and London, Verso, 2008, p. 33.

²⁰ Badiou, ‘Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology’, p. 4.

belonging, it is transversal to *knowledge* and ‘is diagonal relative to every communitarian subset; it neither claims authority from, nor ... constitutes an identity.’²¹ Truths do not require one to relinquish one’s concrete particularities, such as cultural identity, but they ultimately render these particularities superfluous by exposing the arbitrariness of the seemingly neutral background which once made them appear relevant.²² While it is inevitable that some results of a truth procedure will coincide with the established encyclopaedic determinants of the state, since a truth does not inaugurate an absolute beginning and takes place *in situ* (consequently leading to an overlap in the language of the truth and that of the situation), what differentiates it from being a mere object of knowledge is its *infinite being*.²³ A truth is an infinite part of a situation ‘because for every finite part one can always say that it has already been discerned and classified by knowledge’ (BE 351). Truth cannot be predicated on a closed set but must be open-ended and inexhaustible so as to allow the continuous unfolding of its immanent potential without the attribution of a predicate which would truncate its unfolding.

A truth can never be *known* by a subject, since ‘its procedure contains an infinity of enquiries’ and exceeds the parameters of biological finitude (BE 352). Its unfolding relies upon the eternal novelty immanent to the truth. Thus, much like in the Hegelian system, we have divided subjectivity here, marked by the opposition between its infinite and finite being, but the subject in being such works to overcome the natural element with which it is immediately imbued by virtue of being human. That to which a subject can act in fidelity is framed in the future-perfect: the idea of what a truth will-have-been from an eventually retroactive gaze. In terms of a political truth procedure, one might argue that Badiou sides with Spinoza in that politics is a praxical endeavor that requires continuous production (*conatus*) and maintenance of its immanent cause (or, fidelity to its event), such that there is no ontological discontinuity between the

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, Stanford University, 2003, p. 14.

²² Similar to what Engels & Marx (1969, p. 40) suggest the destruction of classes would do to religious identities.

²³ For further clarification of Badiou’s conception of infinity, see *Being and Event: Meditations* 13, 14, & 26.

cause and the effect.²⁴ Its process *is* its product and it is this which the specifically environmental-political theorist cannot disavow when it comes to deciphering how a political change might permissibly be implemented. If the process itself is purely presentative, and pure presentation is originary, such that all beings exist on an ontologically equal footing (which is not to say that the principles of distribution in the concrete procedure must be congruous with formal equality, as proportionality does not elude Badiou's thought), this leaves open the possibility that processual politics may encompass more beings than just humans.

THE ECOLOGICAL EVENT

Vis-à-vis anthropocenic ecological crises, such as rising temperatures and escalating threats to biodiversity, I claim (in alignment with XR as I discuss below) that insofar as these crises 'interrupt the structure of the (liberal-democratic political) situation' they collectively constitute an Event in politics.²⁵ As I indicated previously, there is no such thing as a global Event; an Event is tethered to a local site in a historical situation. However, much like how the national factions of transnational socio-political uprisings (despite the global *spectacle* they collectively produce) are evental vis-à-vis their individual locales, the way ecological crises impact States individually renders it permissible to accord them evental status. While each State is a distinct situation, it is relatively anodyne to remind one that many share the same antagonisms. Hence, it is unsurprising that they are faced with similar Events. The key stipulation *apropos* of this designation is that despite the global impact of ecological crises, one must continue to refer to their local (viz. national) implications as revealed by the Event and its subject, given that the nation-state paradigm continues to formally structure international politics. The State persists as the locus for political engagement.

Ecological crises are a return of the repressed as it were, in that they result from the repression and/or domination of that which quite literally underlies States. What they reveal, whether discovered via scientific, phenomenological, or

²⁴ See Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes, London, G Bell & Sons, 1883.

²⁵ Badiou argues that 'there are no natural events ... in natural or neutral situations there are solely *facts*' (BE 187); however, since a) the event is occurring in a historical situation, b) since his ontology is not explicitly anthropocentric, and c) since 'nature' belongs to but is not included in liberal-democratic States, I see no issue with designating the event as I have.

intuitive methods, is not that the purportedly ‘stable’ environment has been disturbed and must be restored to equilibrium (as if such reasoning is different from the Baconian notion that humans can control nature, which caused this predicament in the first place), but modernity’s fundamental epistemological and ontological misperception of ‘nature’ — a concept which itself must be done away with²⁶ — and humanity’s relation to it. The inherent unsustainability of the historically constituted cleavage between nature and politics in modern States is immanently coming to the fore.

Despite the increasing incontestability of this notion, environmental-political initiatives remain vulnerable to cooptation by those who are concerned only with conservative self-preservation, seeing environmental efforts as a mere necessity which ought to supplement the existing situation; however, such concerns are purely reactive and ultimately translate to a plea for a Hobbesian Leviathan. They fail to grasp the emancipatory possibilities with which the current moment is, contrary to popular belief, impregnated.²⁷ Thus, the task of the eventual subject, a designation that I claim accurately characterizes XR, is to act in fidelity to the *generic* possibility revealed by the Event (in each subject’s respective situation) which, broadly speaking, is a new form of non-alienated collective existence governed by the axiom of equality which ensures the inclusion of all elements, both human and not.²⁸ The realization of this possibility would amount to a decidedly singular change.

In virtue of this, a new conception of *politics* is requisite. In contrast to liberal-democratic politics which, particularly in the Hobbesian conception, serve purely as a means of preventing chaos and war, a truly generic environmental politics must be informed by an affirmative truth and actively choose life over the mere

²⁶ See, for example, Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Harvard, 2004; Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, Cambridge, Harvard, 2007, as well as Badiou himself who argues that ‘nature does not exist ... [it] has no sayable being. There are only *some* natural beings’ (BE 147) since, as proven by Cantor’s theorem, it is illogical to speak of totality.

²⁷ In this light, they interpret ecological crises not as an Event but, as I noted above in typical reactions to eruptions, as a contingency to be quelled.

²⁸ I refrain here from articulating a specific stance as to how the nature/politics divide and associated concepts such as political agency ought to be recast, as this ought to be determined immanently by the subject of each truth procedure.

prevention of death. On this note, the subject that constructs such a politics cannot fall prey to an apocalyptic vision of the future, as this would amount to a betrayal of the Event and consequently annul its subjectivity.

Many political-ecologists frame the implementation of green initiatives in liberal-democratic States as an oxymoron, given that the logic of capitalism and the liberal conception of the commons are fundamentally incompatible with ecology, insofar as ecological concepts like sustainability infringe upon the negative freedom which such States are founded upon.²⁹ Environmental repression and degradation are structural necessities for the liberal State and its capitalist economy, the latter of which is clearly non-truthful in the Badiouian sense, as it inculcates its agents with a particularized ‘ethic’ of private interest. Notwithstanding, the subject must be cautious not to accord primacy to the economy over the State when determining the agenda of its truth procedure. For Badiou, the State is primarily accountable for the economy’s health and hence cannot be absolved of the integral role it plays in bolstering capitalist destruction. The subject’s task of unfolding the emancipatory agenda it constructs must unfold in conversation rudimentarily with the State rather than the economy.

In contrast to the rather smug pseudo-realist positions claiming we ought to look to ‘nature’ for moral guidance (as if ‘nature’ is not also capable of radical destruction and as if any declaration of nature’s ‘morality’ is not a mere projection of anthropocentric morale onto non-human entities), I concur with Žižek in his reading of Badiou that subjectivity is ‘the only hope of redemption.’³⁰ Only a subject of truth can supplant destructive self-interest and the systems which perpetuate it. Despite that the subject’s harnessing of the capacity to purely think, bringing to fruition the Idea revealed in the Event, and foster the common good would be a real illumination of the difference between the human and the animal, it would not signify human superiority, *per se*. Rather, it would situate humans in a place to serve as guarantors of universality and subsequently enable an revision in terms of how politics are ontologically located within the broader context of

²⁹ See, for example, Robin Eekersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MIT, 2004.

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, Brooklyn and London, Verso, 1997, p. 152.

‘nature.’³¹ This would enable humans to locate themselves as equal to their surroundings rather than in superior opposition, as has historically been the case with previous hegemonic political modalities, and foster a new form of collectivity.

BADIOUIAN POLITICS

For Badiou, politics stands in contrast to the *political*, the latter of which is characterized by a struggle *with(in)* the existing order. In contradistinction, politics ‘is a singularity in situation, dependent on an Event affecting the collective, of which, in sequential fashion, it presents the truth’ and reveals a mode of ‘being-together’ absent of statist excess and alienation.³²

In contrast to the politics of liberal democracy, Badiou’s politics is aligned, at least ontologically, with the Rousseauian tradition. In the latter, the general will — the will of the people as a whole, concerning only common interest, which cannot be redoubled by a representative apparatus — governs the situation, whereas in the former it is ‘the will of all’ — the sum of particular wills, which takes private interest into account — that governs.³³ The liberal-democratic State solely registers individuals reduced to their finite and contingent determinations by the State’s count, but the general will — which Badiou has re-designated the ‘generic will’³⁴ — amounts to more than an agglomeration of counted singletons. It embodies the situation’s generic being as revealed in the Event. Being an *extension* of the Event, the generic truth procedure’s ontological status remains identical to that of its cause, not importing anything external to alter its form. Despite that a truth procedure continuously produces its content, it never sublates its form.

Conducive to the maintenance of its status as a positive end in- and for-itself, Badiouian politics relies on the logic of separation or subtraction (from the

³¹ Moving out of context here, one might use Hegelian terminology and say that human life is a universality for-itself and non-human life as universal in-itself, insofar as the latter is not conscious of its universality beyond its mere individuality.

³² Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran, New York, Continuum, 2008, p. 154.

³³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, London and Toronto, J.M. Dent & Sons, 1923, Book II, Chapter III.

³⁴ Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, p. 40.

State).³⁵ Subtraction does not imply disengagement from the State, but rather that the subject is not informed by the State's logic nor does it seek State power. Politics works alongside the State, intersecting with it periodically, by *prescribing* it. Badiou terms a political prescription 'the post-evental establishment of a fixed measure for the power of the State' which facilitates the coming-to-be of a possibility irreducible to the continuation of the current order, without having to work within the State apparatus as a Party (MP 145).

Prescriptions introduce a topological complexity. A true political subject remains outside the State, as existing inside would reduce it to a 'negative figure of opposition', thereby compromising its affirmative status.³⁶ Politics does not put an 'objective reality' on display and it is not spurred by existing contradictions, but rather by the positive possibility revealed by the Event, which secondarily informs the subject what ought to be adjusted *in situ* to have it materialize. With the revelation of this possibility, in addition to accomplishing its tasks in a fully subtracted way, the subject must supplement the State from the outside to make it more congruent with the truth of which it is a subject, despite that total congruence will never be attained because truths elude representation. With this, I posit that an emancipatory environmental politics must be subtractive if it is to be defined by a norm other than the prevention of death and preservation of finite subjectivity, as is the case in the bio-political liberal State.

Badiou's unique modality of politics takes the form of a *meeting* (also translated as gathering): 'a local metonymy of its intrinsically collective, and hence principally universal, being' (MP 142). The meeting is the subjective body that materializes the consequences of the truth disclosed by the Event. While everyone in the situation will not be immediately present, the group of those directly involved will be a vector for the people as a whole and stand for generic being as such. I contend that today's most prominent environmental-political meeting bears the name Extinction Rebellion.

³⁵ For a critique of the absence of negativity in Badiou's politics, see Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, pp. 145-197.

³⁶ Badiou, 'Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology', p. 10.

EXTINCTION REBELLION: A SUBJECT OF TRUTH...

Although usually misrepresented by the mainstream media as reactionary left-wing eco-fascists,³⁷ XR is a decentralized non-partisan mass movement, currently in the process of succeeding its initial evental period and commencing a truth procedure. It began in 2018 in the UK with 15 activists who embarked on a grassroots campaign of civil disobedience with the goal of transforming the discursive landscape in which political-ecological injustices are discussed, motivated by the possibility disclosed by the Event as discussed above. While the gravity of the imminent crises certainly played a role in the urgency with which they conducted this effort, the larger affirmative truth by which they were suspended constituted their real motivation.

In October 2018, XR officially declared itself in rebellion against the UK government. By April 2019, after significantly expanding its reach and mobilizing hundreds of thousands of participants globally, it commenced the International Rebellion to fight against political corruption, environment degradation and, more importantly, to fight *for* collectivity, solidarity, and environmental stewardship. Additional factions that cropped up in other States protested their respective governments,³⁸ but I use the UK movement as the local example here by virtue of it being both the strongest and most successful faction.

Participants were mobilized around a bill presented to the UK parliament, which was composed of three precise demands:

- 1/ the government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change
- 2/ the government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to net zero by 2025
- 3/ the government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizen's Assembly on climate and ecological justice³⁹

Following two weeks of radical economic and civil disobedience in May 2019, shutting down landmarks in London including the Oxford Circus and Parliament Square and blocking roads to the Treasury and the London Stock Exchange,

³⁷ Negative reactions to Events and evental subjects are shored up from statist excess; from the official standpoint of the state, they cannot but be mere contingencies to be quelled.

³⁸ Extinction Rebellion, *This Is Not A Drill*, London, Penguin, 2019.

³⁹ Extinction Rebellion, 'The Truth', <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/> 2020 (accessed 16 April 2021).

resulting in the arrests of over 1,000 activists, XR succeeded in having its first demand met by the State: the UK parliament was the first in the world to declare a state of emergency vis-à-vis climate change.⁴⁰ It continues to organize and stage mass rebellions and acts of non-violent disobedience⁴¹; however, it has superseded its initial eventual rupture and embarked on a truth procedure, the task of which is making the truth *exist* in the situation (though not in terms of the State's existing encyclopaedia) via a process of supplementation.

While some suggest that environmental politics ought to be culturally tailored⁴², Badiou makes it clear that true politics maintain an *indifference* to difference.⁴³ To be generic is to resist the imposition of a synthetic predicate; only an *enumeration* of the truth is permissible. In this light, XR states that its make-up 'is young, old, black, white, indigenous, of all faiths and none, of all genders and sexualities and none: being alive on earth now is all the qualification required'.⁴⁴ This is evocative of the statement 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' made by Saint Paul⁴⁵, Badiou's exemplar of a subject of truth.⁴⁶ Insofar as it avoids recourse to a pre-determined notion as to who and what composes its collective, XR leaves open the possibility that what Badiou calls an 'anti-humanist politics of the same', in which sameness 'is supported only by the void of all difference in which to ground [the subject]', can develop.⁴⁷ By distilling the criteria of its subjective constitution down solely to 'being alive on the earth', XR does not foreclose on the possibility that its truth procedure might encompass both

⁴⁰ BBC, 'UK Parliament Declares Climate Emergency', <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48126677>, 2019 (Accessed 16 April 2021); Extinction Rebellion, *This Is Not A Drill*.

⁴¹ Although, at the time of publication, we should acknowledge that its efforts have been dampened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions.

⁴² See, for example, Marit Hammond, 'A Cultural Account of Ecological Democracy', *Environmental Politics*, 29.1, 2019, pp. 55-74.

⁴³ Recollect that being-qua-being, or pure presentation — the ontological form of true politics — is infinite, *indifferent* multiplicity.

⁴⁴ Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/>, n.p.

⁴⁵ Galatians, 3:28.

⁴⁶ See Badiou, *Saint Paul*.

⁴⁷ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 175.

humans and non-humans in a way immanently determined by the subject.⁴⁸

Although ecology is the primary cause around which the movement is mobilized, it acknowledges that ‘the climate crisis — and the associated crises of capitalism and colonialism that caused it — will not be solved by gradual reform and rotten compromise. This is a crisis that requires radical system change.’⁴⁹ Thus, XR shares with Badiou the conviction that economic change must be a by-product of political change. To be successful, however, its methods must fundamentally differ from those of past movements. Badiou argues that the State, the existence of which will be perennially inevitable in some form or other⁵⁰, always borders a political truth procedure but the latter cannot be led by statist (viz. representational) logic. As I previously mentioned, politics does not seek to seize the State or mimic its effects, but ‘stakes its existence on its capacity to establish a relation to both the void and excess which is essentially different from that of the State’ (BE 115). Thus, it takes place in the gap opened up between itself and the State. This imperative is realized in the aforementioned bill’s first demand for an emergency declaration. While the language could be interpreted as an endorsement of the current trend claiming that the state of exception is becoming the rule⁵¹, I hold that it not only forces the State to admit its repressed truth, as it were, thereby exposing its impotence, but also wrests open the gap necessary for the implementation of a Citizens’ Assembly.

XR’s second demand for a reduction in emissions and a halt in biodiversity loss exemplifies a methodical navigation of the topological complexity associated with prescriptions. The demand is a concrete prescription made in the name of a vision that ‘stretches beyond our own lifespan, to a horizon dedicated to future generations’, which also serves as proof of its infinite being. In 2019, shortly after XR made its demands clear, UK Parliament signed into a law a commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 (different from the previous commitment to

⁴⁸ George Monbiot (2019, n.p.) writes that XR is ‘too white and too middle class’; however, this is a predictable reaction in an era during which identity politics are the norm. His claim is unrelated to XR’s formal constitution which is indifferent to particular identities.

⁴⁹ Extinction Rebellion, *This Is Not A Drill*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Recall the axiom of subsets. The novelty of truth can be apprehended solely if it exists against a background of ‘ontologized’ knowledge. In this sense, one might argue that the state serves a negative necessity for the truth procedure in a disavowed way.

⁵¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago, University of Chicago, 2005.

an 80% reduction in the *Climate Change Act*).⁵² While Parliament did not capitulate on the proposed year 2025, this remains a celebratory success which signals XR's nascent potency.

... AND A FIGURE OF AFFIRMATIVE DIALECTICS

The final point to delineate regarding Badiouian politics is that true politics will not address situational contradictions by way of excision or destruction, different from the approaches of the 20th century communist regimes. It will do so intra-situationally in an affirmative way. One must rely here on the standard Platonic metaphysical opposition between truth and semblance and assert that a politics which enlists destruction as one of its essential tactics is but a semblance. Subtractive politics seeks 'to purify reality, not by annihilating it, but by withdrawing it from its apparent unity so as to detect in it the miniscule difference, the vanishing term that is constitutive of it'.⁵³ Having the promotion of non-alienated collective existence at its core, an *affirmative* dialectical logic underpins true politics.

Badiou's affirmative dialectics, in contradistinction to the negative dialectics of Marx, upon whose models many current political-ecological movements' models are still built, do not commence with the productivity of the negative moment but with the Event, which discloses a positive possibility absent of any immediate necessitation of negation. This aversion to destruction is key for any ecological politics whose form is to remain congruent with its content, given that destructive logic has only contributed to ecological ruin.⁵⁴ Thus, inscribed into Badiou's dialectical logic itself is a formalist ecological ethic.

Although destruction does not hold primacy for Badiou, if a wholesale transformation of the situation is to be in order, it follows that some of the old will necessarily be incongruent with the new. Regardless, Badiou suggests that change can be accomplished not with destructive tactics but with the acts of *disqualification*

⁵² Roger Harrabin, 'Climate Change: UK Government to Commit to 2050 Target', *BBC*, n.p. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-48596775>, 2019 (accessed 16 April 2021).

⁵³ Badiou, *Le Siècle*, 2005 in Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 2003, p. 162.

⁵⁴ Both of capitalist and communist regimes, as evidenced by the Soviet Union and China's extreme environmental degradation. Even communism informed by negative dialectics is incongruent with any conception of an environmental politics.

and *displacement*. In supplementing the situation with elements of its own immanent truth, politics can disqualify and gradually displace certain existing elements deemed non-truthful. Insofar as these non-truthful elements get displaced, it could be said that they simply go out of fashion in relation to the way of being instituted by the truth procedure and consequently begin to vanish without being directly destroyed.⁵⁵ Of course, scientifically determined deadlines for fossil fuel divestment necessitate an element of timely negation vis-à-vis the existing order; however, perhaps such necessities might better be apprehended as technicalities which ensure the maintenance of the landscape within which the truth unfolds rather than ontologically constitutive of the truth procedure itself.

In reference to these final points, XR's third demand for a Citizen's Assembly (CA) requires the last of our attention. While the State does not feature as a norm in XR's agenda, the implementation of a CA effectively forces the State to maintain the gap wrested open by the emergency declaration, allowing for a contingent group of ordinary citizens, a vector of generic humanity, to meet and determine the collective existence of the whole. As the CA gains traction and expands, it will displace the situation's current alienating structure, vis-à-vis its ecologico-ontological constitution and social organization in accordance with the generic will, resultantly causing it to wither significantly.

It is the effects of this demand, a trial of which the UK Parliament agreed to in 2019, that constitute XR as a true Badiouian truth procedure. Badiou holds that the figure of a rebellion becomes political when it has its required personnel to be self-sufficient.⁵⁶ Despite that it is not presently in autonomous control of much, with Parliament still having the final word of authority, the CA nevertheless demonstrates XR's incipient arrival at this stage. XR affirms that the CA will be 'run by non-governmental organizations under independent oversight. This is the fairest and most powerful way to cut through party politics. It will empower citizens to actually work together and take responsibility.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For example, when a new trend garners attention and participation, such as the transition from MySpace to Facebook to cite a commonplace, there is a transfer of being from the old to the new. The old is not negated, but merely *displaced* such that its salience withers and goes out of style, as it were, being incompatible with the new.

⁵⁶ Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, p. 47.

⁵⁷ Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth>, n.p.

Similar to Badiou's *L'Organisation Politique* which advocates for the *sans-papiers* in France, this type of independent body does not aim to overthrow of the State but work subtractively alongside it and supplement it with truth.

XR avoids formulating a pre-determined, quixotic telos, thereby warding off partisan critique and keeping it aligned with Badiou's formal criteria for politics. XR states that they 'do not put forward specific solutions — it is down to the Citizens' Assembly to come up with solutions, having first heard from various experts'.⁵⁸ The open-ended trajectory sustains participants in a state of equality and self-determination such that the generic will's formation will not be subordinated to a transcendental teleological determination. The particular solutions will be generically agreed upon but, more importantly, the rule of deliberation by which consensuses materialize will be invented by the collective as part of its continuous subjective self-invention.

Suspicion toward collective self-determination is commonly expressed, especially when it comes to matters such as ecology, but Badiou stands firmly against such contentions: he contends that it is 'the subject's weakness and the absence of signs and proofs' which must be conceived as supreme proof of the truth at stake.⁵⁹ The only proof the subject has is its declaration. We ought to keep in mind the total uncertainty among both 'experts' and non-experts regarding how to address ecological crises and re-constitute politics in an ecologically sound way — despite any perceived ignorance or ideological entrapment of the masses, there is no master to whom anyone can turn for a clear solution about what is to be done. Hence, collective self-determination, with a view toward infinity, is the most that lies within our capacity. XR states that 'we must accept living in a world that we will never fully understand. The unbelievable complexity of the Earth is something before which we should be humble'.⁶⁰ It is with this that an old aphorism gains renewed significance: it is the *truth* — collective self-determination — that will set us *free*.

The discourse of 'results' is not compatible with Badiouian politics, as such a discourse measures outcomes with statist methods, indexing them to situational

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 51.

⁶⁰ Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth>, n.p.

logic and norms; however, I must conclude by acknowledging the first CA in Oxford, a result which signals XR's potency. The CA consisted of 50 Oxford residents who deliberated on issues such as waste reduction, biodiversity, transportation, and energy, concluding that the city and country ought to reach net-zero before 2050 and must displace the financial burden from the laps of working families to the corporations and governmental agencies most responsible.⁶¹ The results were published and influenced further local government decisions. XR's investment in the generic will, as illustrated by the success of this CA and the presumable success of those to come, is what permits one to conceptualize it in properly Badiouian terms and render it a fecund emancipatory vehicle. Conversely, insofar as it is rendered as such, one can reaffirm the promising of Badiou's political thought vis-à-vis modern life.

CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated how Badiou's philosophy and XR's environmental politics circularly legitimize one another. Badiou insists that in a world of infinite multiplicity (and radical ecological precarity, of course), it is a grassroots construction of Sameness-in-being toward which we ought to aspire. For this to come to fruition, a subject of truth is requisite to declare that a new generic possibility, disclosed in the Event which has revealed the unsustainability of the immemorially existing divide between politics and 'nature', is a tenable alternative and that its inner substance can be collectively constructed in an affirmative way. The ontological identity of the Event and the truth procedure must be preserved to sustain the latter's infinite character, its inaccessibility to the State, and its capacity to include all beings. Paramount it is that these imperatives are integrated into emerging environmental-political theories and praxes. While one must be cautious not to equate the purely presentative truth procedure with a return to a state of nature, as it is not a mere dissolution of the existing political order, it is nonetheless conceivable that its unique ontological status — a 'hole' within the densely determined mathematical-ontological fabric of the State — might enable a refashioning of the historically anthropocentric notion of what

⁶¹ Oxford City Council, 'Oxford Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change', *Ipsos Mori*, 2019. https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20011/environment/1343/oxford_citizens_assembly_on_climate_change (Accessed 16 April 2021).

constitutes a political community and who it includes.

In the words of Bruno Latour, ‘ecology movements have sought to position themselves on the political chessboard without redrawing its squares, without redefining the rules of the game, without redesigning the pawns.’⁶² As I have illustrated here, XR is one of the inaugural mass ecology movements successfully beginning to ‘redraw the squares’ in a uniquely and incontestably Badiouian way. Piloted by the people and its generic will, XR is altering the very coordinates of politics themselves and labouring, in the words of Badiou, ‘*to displace the barren imperative of our world.*’⁶³

Athabasca University
Canada
esupple1@athabasca.edu

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⁶² Latour, *Politics of Nature*, p. 5.

⁶³ Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 150.

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