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Towards A Politics of Truths: The Political Theory of Alain Badiou

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Towards A Politics of Truths: The Political Theory of Alain Badiou

Abstract

Alain Badiou, a French theorist, philosopher and political activist, has been receiving increased attention in the beginning of the 21st century. This paper provides an analysis of his major works and an attempt to display and critique what some might call, and what Badiou certainly hopes, a contemporary, generalized account of politics and the political. It focuses on three fundamental concepts that are central to Badiou's politics--the political subject, the political event, and the political ethic.

Keywords

Badiou, politics, truth, ethics, Social Sciences, Political Science, Anne Norton, Norton, Anne

Disciplines

Political Theory

**Towards A Politics of Truths:
The Political Theory of Alain Badiou**

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis
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University of Pennsylvania
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INTRODUCTION

In his philosophical writings, Alain Badiou takes on a difficult task. He seeks to simultaneously open and close the political sphere through a rethinking of politics that unlocks the political potential of real situations, radical events, and substantive change while closing the political sphere to opinion, dogma, institutionalized knowledges and hegemonic ideologies. The European Graduate School's website contains a more succinct and all-encompassing statement of Badiou's philosophical project. "Badiou's most general goal can be described...as the effort to expose and make sense of the potential for profound, transformative innovation in any situation."¹ Keeping these short statements of Badiou's philosophical fixation on the innovative potential of the situation as the endgame of his project in mind, I will use the space of this thesis to tease out the implication of Badiou's radical thought on politics, political theory, and the political as such. I will do so through a systematic explanation and critique of Badiou's philosophy, focusing primarily on the political aspects of both his philosophical and polemical texts. Through this analysis of Badiou's primary texts and a limited review of some commentary on Badiou's political philosophy, I will attempt to establish the importance and novelty of Badiou's conceptualization of politics and the political, its implications for the broader study of political theory and its possible utility to the theorization of politics.

A few preliminary remarks on the scope and limitations of this project are in order. As Bruno Bosteels² has pointed out, Badiou's work has only recently begun to receive significant

¹ European Graduate School, "Alain Badiou: Biography," European Graduate School, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/badiou.html> (accessed February 04, 2009).

² Dr. Bosteels is a professor of Romance Languages and Spanish Literature at Cornell University. Without meaning to offend academics in that field, I find it remarkable in itself that one of the few articles from the American

attention—critical and otherwise.³ A significant proportion of the explanatory work that deals with Badiou in a rigorous way is written, not in French, but in Spanish, and is primarily concerned with particular political situations such as the Zapatistas or Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.⁴ Indeed, as of 2004, large collections of Badiou's work still remained unedited and unpublished in their original French.⁵ What is most interesting and significant in what Bosteels says is not where Badiou's work has not been considered, but rather where it has been considered, translated, read and utilized. In the tumultuous Latin American political climate peppered with resistance to authoritarian regimes and popular uprisings, Badiou's work has been used as an inspiration towards political practice. The importance of this fact, especially for a philosopher whose work is as intellectually demanding as Badiou's, is that his message of the politicization of philosophy is beginning to come to fruition in a way that makes a close reading of his work necessary both for the understanding of his impact on political philosophy, but also for a better understanding of how his work has and will continue to influence the political landscape which we inhabit.

To accomplish a better understanding of his work, I will focus chiefly on the primary texts of the author in question. Because of the fact that there is a dearth of secondary material and commentary written explicitly to legitimize certain interpretations of Badiou, or to point out conflicting interpretations and their relative merit, I am unable to draw on a vast knowledge and interpretation of Badiou's thought from the academic community. Being able to employ these resources might have led to a more sophisticated account of the way in which Badiou's political

academy regarding the relationship of Badiou's work to politics was written by a professor of Romance Languages and Spanish Literature.

³ Bruno Bosteels, "Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics," *Positions* 13, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 577.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

thought fits within the broader category of his philosophy. However, there being a relative lack of secondary material on Badiou allows for a focus on the primary texts and the unraveling of a complicated and intricate political philosophy from within the framework of a more multifarious collection of philosophical writings.

This point brings me to the scope of the paper. Badiou's work, particularly his seminal treatise *Being and Event*, is challenging and sometimes "studded with equations and theorems that may frighten off the scholar who fled to the humanities to escape mathematics."⁶ It is not my purpose here to give a thorough explanation of Badiou's method, his use of set theory and philosophy of mathematics, or his subtractive ontology. While those concepts may occasionally be referred to out of necessity, I would recommend a close reading of Badiou's texts as the best source for gaining a better and more exhaustive account of them. My project here is simply to make an argument about the consequences of Badiou's work for political theory.

What is this argument? Principally, it is that Badiou's work *does have consequences for political theory and political practice*. Badiou's political philosophy contains theories, opinions and reconceptualizations that touch on issues that are essential to politics: the concept of truth along with his idiosyncratic definition of truth; a concept of metapolitics; eventual politics; fidelity to the event; and opprobrium for parliamentary democracy. Coupled with his commitment to radical equality, his fresh reworking of philosophy from the ground up makes him a figure both novel and significant in political thought.

However, while Badiou does make important contributions to the understanding of various concepts in a unique way, it is not immediately apparent that his admittedly prestigious contribution to the study of ontology translates into a rigorous system for understanding politics,

⁶ Charles Byrne, "Being M. Badiou: The French Philosopher Brings His Ideas to America, Creating a Buzz," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Research and Books, March, 24, 2006.

the political subject, or the political event. Indeed, the initial excitement of having completed the laborious task of sifting through Badiou's carefully laid out arguments against many of the prevailing paradigms of what is good in politics eventually wears off. Then, the choice of whether or not to assign the title of a generalized system of thinking about and doing politics to what Badiou presents is upon the reader. This task proves to be difficult.

Although he often writes in abstract terminology, the binding rigidity of the conditions under which an event or series of events is called "politics" in his philosophy proves to be an astringent to the very notion of the political event. Paradoxically, while the political event is constricted to the revolutionary context, political space is opened to the ubiquitous situation. Because of the philosophical precision with which Badiou approaches his work, and his Pauline commitment⁷ to the idea of the philosopher-revolutionary dedicated to the propagation of the truth to which he has committed himself, it is worth the exercise to engage in a dialogue with Badiouean ideas and concepts of the political. By striking at the very fundamental concepts on which the contemporary order is founded (things like parliamentary democracy and universal human rights), Badiou helps to elucidate the philosophical contradictions involved in the thought and action of political thinkers/actors which should lead to a thorough reexamination of the fundamental principles of today's political system(s).⁸

To argue the point that Badiou's work is noteworthy and consequential in the field of political theory, I will address three major concepts that are fundamental to his political-philosophical project and how they are linked to the political as such. First, I will explain the

⁷ It is worth noting here that his reinterpretation of the Pauline texts of the Christian tradition place him within a subgenre of poststructuralist thinkers who link usually radical politics with religion e.g. Antonio Negri, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida –and in the Anglo-American liberal academy, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer.

⁸ Although, It should be noted that Badiou's political philosophy does not grow out of the contradictions of the present order, but rather out of a genuine commitment to the innovative potential of the situation.

concept of the subject in Badiou. I will pay particular attention to the political subject—above the amorous, scientific and artistic, for obvious reasons—what designates the political subject as political, and the process of becoming a political subject. This discussion will not only provide some elementary insight into Badiou’s ontology, but also a thorough explanation and critique of the concept of the subject as it relates to the broader category of being in Badiou.

Second, I will deal with the concept of the event. The event is of particular interest to me, because politics largely takes place under the auspices of the evental. Because of the centrality of this notion to the concept of politics, I have saved the most substantial critiques of Badiou’s political philosophy for this section. Predominately, the critique that I will offer of Badiou’s conceptualization of the event will take aim at the destabilizing force of the event, which, by my own reading, precludes the existence of a durable political order. I will also explore the extent to which Badiou’s explanation of the political event can offer a normative account of the political, as Badiou largely avoids discussing the normative in traditional terms.

Third, I will deal with Badiou’s concept of ethics. Choosing to deal with Badiou’s theory of ethics in a paper focused on his political thought may seem a strange choice. Moreover, since the central concepts of truth and fidelity along with the questions of normativity and ethics arise in the context of my critique of the event and the subject, it may seem that this section is ill placed. However, saving the discussion of Badiou’s ethical theory—particularly his notion of an ethics of truths and the role that truth-processes play in the event and in the process of subjectivation—allows Badiouean texts to account for the criticisms leveled against them through a more penetrating explanation of truths and truth-processes. Thus, the discussion of ethics allows another avenue into the exploration of the concepts fundamental to the political in Badiou.

Through the analysis of the subject, the event, and ethics in Badiou's work, I will show that Badiou's theory of politics strikes at the heart of conventional understandings of concepts that are fundamental to the study of politics. His work touches the boundaries of such important concepts as truth, justice, equality, and freedom, which are essential to the theorization of politics. Furthermore, he approaches these concepts with a novelty and rigor that makes him both an interesting and controversial figure in philosophy and political theory.

CHAPTER I: THE POLITICAL SUBJECT

I. Being in Badiou: A Political Theorist's Guide to Ontology in Badiou

A central concept in Alain Badiou's philosophy is being. Indeed, it shares titular space with the event in Badiou's seminal work *Being and Event*. However, the most important places where being is discussed in Badiou's work for my own purposes are not in the extensive meditations of *Being and Event*, but rather in the texts that discuss subjectivation, the induction of the political subject, politics and ethics. While *Being and Event* is certainly important, it is only in these texts, such as *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, and *Metapolitics*, that the political subject and what it means to be political is allowed to escape from the circumscribed area of theory, and the reader is given a glance at what Badiou's politics and political subject would look like if put into practice.

The arena of practice and practical utility of theory must be privileged over the theoretical maxims for a radical and revolutionary philosopher like Badiou. It is all too easy to proclaim that the dictum of political philosophy must be to keep going, despite setbacks, failures, and lessons unlearned. It is much too easy to call for radical change and an embrace of something different in an era marked by political malaise and calls of the end of history culminating in the global acceptance of the legitimacy of liberal humanism and democracy. It is far too easy to stand at the pulpit of philosophy, preaching the ills of modern democracy without acknowledging its benefits, benefactors and beneficiaries. And yet, it is the most difficult task of all. To stand, like Saint Paul, against everything in the prevailing order and to bravely challenge the central tenets of modern democratic government and the State in its current incarnation—certainly these things take more than a modicum of intellectual courage and conviction. The question becomes, is it the conviction of a philosopher or a revolutionary, and is there any

difference? For Badiou, these seemingly contradictory identities are bound together in the political subject, who has his roots in the complexities of being.

Towards an understanding of the question of being, it is first necessary to recognize that being is a complex concept. Acknowledging the intricacies of being, Badiou dutifully provides a detailed, extensive and sometimes labyrinthine mathematical and written account of the processes and discourses surrounding his account of ontology. Indeed, a brief scan of *Being and Event* will likely leave one who is a political theorist by training scratching his head and wondering what possible purpose mathematical equations, axioms, and formal logic could have in a treatise fundamentally concerned with ontology; furthermore, what purpose could these mathematical descriptives serve in the study of politics, political theory and philosophy? To answer these questions, we can look to a somewhat lengthy quotation from Jon Roffe's review of the English edition of *Being and Event* in which he explains Badiou's philosophical project vis-à-vis mathematical discourse and ontology quite accurately:

“[T]he claim that is really at the root of the book is this:

The thesis that I support does not in any way declare that being is mathematical, which is to say composed of mathematical objectivities. It is not a thesis about the world but about discourse. It affirms that mathematics, throughout the entirety of its historical becoming, *pronounces what is expressible of being qua being...*

Badiou...sees the task of philosophy as the commitment to elaborating an encyclopaedic[sic] vision of the existence of truths, and thus the maintenance of the category of Truth....”⁹

What one can glean from this quotation is that Badiou's central task in *Being and Event* is not to limit the scope of philosophical inquiry to mathematics (evidenced by the fact that he complements the

⁹ Jon Roffe, “Alain Badiou's *Being And Event*,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 2, no.1-2 (2006): 330-331. All italics in original text.

mathematical sections of *Being and Event* with sections discussing poetry, literature and non-mathematical philosophy), but, rather, to establish philosophy in its rightful place. The coupling of the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophical treatment of literature and poetry in *Being and Event* is not only necessary for the aim of the work, but also symbolic of what Badiou sees as the necessary return of philosophy to the category of truth from a sole preoccupation with opinion and meaning. The task of philosophy for Badiou is the defense of the category of Truth. Let me be clear on this point. For Badiou, the task of philosophy is truly the *defense*—not simply the *maintenance*—of the category of Truth, with all the accoutrements that come with the use of the metaphor. Badiou sees the contemporary philosophical world and its laity as “doubly hostile to truth procedures.”¹⁰ Badiou’s philosophical war in defense of truth against those who would attempt to replace the concept in favor of meaning or the “‘culture-technology-management-sexuality’ system, which...constitutes the modern nominal occlusion of the ‘art-science-politics-love’ system, which identifies truth procedures typologically,”¹¹ is, to follow Carl von Clausewitz’s legendary slogan, the continuation of his political commitment to the concept of truth by other means. Reading Badiou this way, politics is of central importance to the considerable catalog of Badiou’s work.

Understanding Badiou’s ontological project in this manner allows the political theorist to get right to the politics inherent in Badiou’s philosophical work without wasting much time learning the intricacies of set theory and theoretical mathematics. By Roffe’s explanation, Badiou’s real purpose for philosophy is not the explanation of a philosophical approach to ontology, but rather to show that mathematics is, simply, ontology.¹² Political theorists need not concern themselves with this ontology as mathematics, but should follow Badiou’s own opening remarks from *Being and Event*. “In a reversal of the Kantian question, it [is] no longer a matter

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Roffe, 330-331.

of asking: ‘How is pure mathematics possible?’ and responding: thanks to the transcendental subject. Rather: pure mathematics being the science of being, how is a subject possible?’¹³ From the outset, Badiou tells us “what-is-not-being-qua-being is organized round two affiliated and essentially new concepts, those of truth and subject.”¹⁴ Following this, in *Meditation 18*, Badiou proclaims, “[t]he event belongs to that-which-is-not-being-qua-being.”¹⁵ Since “mathematics is the guardian of being qua being,”¹⁶ it is not unreasonable for the political theorist to approach the question of being in Badiou not from the ontological usage of being, that verb which designates existence, but rather from the standpoint of the singular being—the subject. .

II. Being a Subject: The Hunt for the Political Being in Badiou

The question of the subject is one that has been discussed and answered by philosophers and philosophical schools from the Ancient Greeks to the poststructuralists. While there are many answers as to what counts as a subject, this central figure in the study of politics and its theorization remains aloof and nebulous. For his part, Badiou begins his investigation with a clear definition of the contemporary subject on the initial pages of *Being and Event*. “The contemporary Subject is void, cleaved, a-substantial, and ir-reflexive. Moreover, one can only suppose its existence in the context of particular processes whose conditions are rigorous.”¹⁷ The particular areas where the strict conditions for truth-processes are met include only the following four fields: love, art, science and politics.¹⁸ The rigorous conditions of these four areas come not necessarily from the inherent difficulty of subjectivation, but rather from the favored

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ Peter Hallward, translator’s introduction to *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*; or, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), xi.

position of truth's obfuscation within their realm. Badiou makes the claim that the homogenizing forces of global market capitalism have resulted in the nominal occlusion of the art-science-love-politics system in favor of the culture-technology-management-sexuality system which, instead of privileging those categories which provide avenues for true breaks with what-there-is within a given area, represent a homogenization towards what-there-is and "designate a category of commercial presentation."¹⁹ In line with the above-noted philosophical goal of making room for innovation in every situation, Badiou sets these four categories apart because they provide the space for truth-processes, and "only truths (thought) allow man to be distinguished from the human animal that underlies him."²⁰ Because these areas provide the space for truth-processes to take place, the properties of truth, which are fundamental to Badiou's novel conception of the political subject, can take root. The concept of truth, which constitutes the very essence of both the subject and the event in Badiou's work, "neither claims authority from, nor (this is obviously the most delicate point) constitutes any identity."²¹ Rather, truth, while remaining contextual to the situation, universalizes and "is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address."²² Thus, the conditions set forth, which allow the truth-process to break radically with what-there-is, construct an un-territorialized space where the subject is marked not by difference or belonging solely to the particularity of the situation, but by sameness²³ in fidelity to the universality of the truth in question.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 12.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid. Here, Badiou follows Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, with the important caveat of the universality of the interpellative call of the evental truth.

²³ While normally used to denote the eradication of all differences, sameness in Badiou is actually more akin to the radical promulgation of difference in the real world. For Badiou, reifying difference is the real problem. The logic is as follows: if infinite alterity is simply what there is, individual differences are devoid of meaning—we are the same in difference.

Additionally, these four seemingly peculiar and arbitrary areas were chosen because “they mark out the possible instances of the *subject* as variously individual or collective.”²⁴ This distinction between the individual and collective subject is critical to Badiou and I discuss it further below. For now, it is sufficient to mark out the territory of each space. Love, concerning two individuals guided by fidelity to the experiential truth of love circumscribes the subject(s) as individual(s). For politics, in contrast, the subject is the collective of those with fidelity to the truth, addressing all in principle but never institutionalized within the State structure. Art and science represent mixed situations with individual vehicles and collective importance.²⁵

Returning to the task of the search for the subject, it is necessary to further narrow the parameters to focus explicitly on the political. I am not in search of a definition or example of the subject in general, but rather that particular delimitation of the subject that can properly be called political. Luckily, Badiou schematizes the potential areas of subjectivation in a way that allows one to easily and immediately locate the area to which the political subject would belong. Because Badiou organizes subjectivation in this manner, prior to the discussion of subjectivation and the political subject more generally, it is useful for the political theorist to have at least one broad, explanatory statement regarding the category of politics in order to understand what subjectivation in the political realm is seeking to accomplish vis-à-vis the subject.

In one of his more recent pieces published in *New Left Review*, Badiou posits a definition of politics as follows. Politics, for Badiou, can be understood as “collective action, organized by certain principles, that aims to unfold the consequences of a new possibility which is currently repressed by the dominant order.”²⁶ This statement of politics has important implications for the

²⁴ Hallward, translator’s introduction to *Ethics*, xi. Italics in original.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49 (Jan.-Feb. 2008), 31.

frame of possibility of the political subject in Badiou. First, it should be understood that the instance of the political subject is one of a collective, as opposed to an individual subject. This statement follows from noting that the various arenas for subjectivation are marked by their possibility for instances of the subject as collective or individual, and that politics, as defined by Badiou, is collective action. This claim is nothing short of the utmost importance. It marks out the space of politics as the space of collectivity not individuality. Coupled with the knowledge that the subject is induced by the universalizing force of the political event, which terminates the “predicative particularity” of the priorly territorialized subjects,²⁷ the political sphere in Badiou becomes a space of sameness, not difference, with respect to the political subject. Furthermore, the space of politics is the space of action, but, more significantly, the space of action seeking the actualization of a new possibility. The political subject, then, must be a collective subject working towards the creation of something new against the repression of the dominant order. From the very outset, the rigorous conditions of the political in Badiou dictate that the political subject be a revolutionary!

However, it is not just within the context of the political that offers a radical rethinking of the subject. In *Ethics*, Badiou lays out the framework for the conceptualization of the human subject by proclaiming that “man is *the being who is capable of recognizing himself as victim.*”²⁸ For Badiou, it is the very status of victim that creates the subject of man as precisely an animal organism. “[B]ecause of the status of victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying body...[man is reduced] to the level of a living organism pure and simple.”²⁹ Nevertheless, as Badiou points out, this fact is not the distinguishing characteristic of humankind—it is not what

²⁷ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 57.

²⁸ Badiou, *Ethics*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

separates humanity from the rest of the animal kingdom, but rather it is precisely what makes it the same as the rest of living organisms.³⁰

Yet, this declaration of consistency with other organisms is not the endpoint for man in Badiou. There is something more to the character of man that almost all philosophy since the ancients has sought to pinpoint and describe which makes this particular organism different from dogs, horses, rodents, insects and all other manner of living things. Since the ancient philosophers, man has been described variously as the animal with rational capacities, or, as Aristotle famously remarked, “man is by nature a political animal.”³¹ Badiou, however, does not take this line of argument when distinguishing humanity from the rest of being; it is not some particular characteristic that proves to be the differential marker, but rather it is something intrinsic to humanity’s very mode of being. For Badiou, the peculiar characteristic of man as a being lies in the potential for resistance “achieved precisely through enormous effort.”³² In the realm of Badiou’s philosophy, man is “precisely something other than a victim, other than a being-for-death, and thus: *something other than a mortal being*.”³³

This claim is certainly a radical one, and one that deserves some explanation and careful consideration. Badiou claims that the worst situations that can be imposed upon human beings allow insight into the immortal character of human beings and that “in order to think any aspect of Man, we must begin from this principle.”³⁴ This statement implies that immortality is so fundamental to the character of man that to think the subject of man one must begin with the statement of his immortality. Still, it should be noted that Badiou states that only the “worst

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a3

³² Badiou, *Ethics*, 11.

³³ Ibid., 12.

³⁴ Ibid.

situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be” immortal,³⁵ and even then his true character is shown only through “enormous effort acknowledged by witnesses....as an almost incomprehensible resistance on the part of that, which, in them, *does not coincide with the identity of victim.*”³⁶ How can this be, that the fundamental characteristic of Man’s being reveals itself only in conditions so extreme as to prevent anything other than docility and animal survival in humankind? Why, then, is this considered to be the most important principle, prior to any attempt to think of Man as subject? How can it be that the crucial focal point of Man as a subject can only manifest itself in conditions that simultaneously reveal the worst aspects of the human condition?

Alain Badiou does not give an immediately accessible answer to these questions. Thus, it is necessary to delve deeper into an exegesis of the texts. To begin with, one can glean several things from the foundation of the subject in extraordinary circumstances and situations. First, the true subject is something that is rare. The particular processes where the rigorous conditions necessary for subjectivation can be found are obviously exceptional. They are instances of the extreme, the radical and the revolutionary. The subject, then, like the immortal gods of Mount Olympus, exists on the edge of the possible at the dividing line between the worlds of the mortal and the immortal. It is only in this space where the subject can exist, on the cusp of what-there-is and presented with the possibility of breaking through into what-there-is-not, blazing a trail of figurative immortality.

Here, it must be recognized that the immortality of Badiou’s subject is figurative and not actual. This point is of importance because it allows insight into the workings of the political in Badiou’s philosophical system. The political is one of four areas in which subjectivation can

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 11.

take place. Politics, being one of those spaces, presents the human being with the opportunity to transcend the commonplace nature of his condition and gain a kind of secular immortality, or immanence. Naturally, as politics is the realm of the subject as the collective, the immortality that is gained by the individual is mediated by his or her entrance into the collective. It is here where the individual becomes part of something larger and exceeds the limits of individual action and potential by becoming part of a cause greater than the individual subject. Immortality, then, is achieved in much same way that the revolutionary god Prometheus achieved it through the annals of mythological history in Hesiod's *Theogony*—by the accomplishment of something rare and praiseworthy that changes the face of what-there-is.

III. What Makes the Political Subject Political?

This is an important question without a clear and precise answer given directly by Badiou. On the one hand, the political subject seems to be distinguished from the scientific, artistic and amorous subject quite simply. The political subject is the subject for whom the eventual subjectivation that takes place is in the context of a collective of everyone. Indeed, as Jason Barker points out in his introduction to *Metapolitics*, the political subjects are interested primarily with political prescriptions that offer no definite end to the revolt against contradiction and the dominant order.³⁷ These prescriptions represent a kind of singularity not beholden to a broader system of thought, but rather to the particular context of the situation. As Barker points out, for Badiou “politics has no substantiality or community beyond the real transformations it manages to bring about in any given situation.”³⁸ Importantly, the word situation is left without definite content, a consequence of Badiou's ontology of pure multiplicity.

³⁷ Jason Barker, translators introduction to *Metapolitics*; or, Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2006), xiv.

³⁸ Ibid.

In avoiding the mathematical underpinnings of Badiou's philosophy, I have also avoided an explanation of the concept of pure multiplicity. For the scope of this paper, it suffices to say of pure multiplicity that it is a concept born of set theory, in an attempt to salvage the concept of the subject. For Badiou, the existence of infinite multiplicity as simply what-there-is becomes essential to his project of atheistic transcendence. At the facile level, which is adequate for the purpose of understanding the conceptualization of politics and the political subject in Badiou, we can understand the argument as follows. If finitude is what-there-is, death is the marking characteristic of being—being comes to an end. What man is, under finitude, is a being-for-death in a way that cannot separate him from any other living organism. This proposition is unacceptable, because, as was highlighted above, man, in his most dire circumstances, proves himself instead to be altogether other from a being-for-death. The second proposition that might be entertained is that there is an infinity that is singular in nature. This singular infinite must represent something like God or truth, as opposed to truths in the multiple. It is this kind of thinking which pushes towards the flawed teleological conception of politics, ultimately leading to a conservative and homogenizing principle of what is known outside of Badiouean philosophy as politics. It is also what leads to the victimization of the Other, which constricts the Other's ability to become a subject and fulfill his humanity. In essence, the theory of the singular infinity is at root a theory of reified difference and not a theory of egalitarianism or equality. Opposed to these two hypotheses is the theory of infinite multiplicity, or infinite infinities. What Badiou points out at this critical juncture is that no matter which hypothesis is to be accepted, it must necessarily be an ontological choice. It is an axiom that has at its root a historical decision.³⁹ Thus, the choice of the infinite as the one infinite structures being in a way that

³⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 149.

requires difference, that trends towards the conservative and homogeneous in politics, and that supports the victimization of the Other as different than the One.⁴⁰ Therefore, in search of transformative and emancipatory being, event and subject, Badiou adopts the third maxim, which allows him the opportunity to resolve contradictions inherent to the prevailing system that privileges the One to the detriment of the Other.

To return to the previous point (the lack of content in the word situation), a direct correlation to the above discussion of multiplicities is immediately apparent. It is precisely due to Badiou's commitment to infinite alterity and infinite multiplicities that the word situation is left ambiguous in Barker's explanation of Badiou. Indeed, as Barker later comments, the prescriptive statements made by political subjects are not "programmatic. Their singularity represents no one in particular and engages whoever happens to be in the situation at any given time."⁴¹ In fact, what binds the situation is not spatial or temporal constraints, but rather a principled truth concerned with fidelity. As Barker highlights, politics does not engage within the bounds of spatial, temporal, or systematic constraints, but rather with "everyone in principle, not just those with the power and resources to implement a particular policy."⁴² Politics in this epoch, for Badiou, must necessarily evacuate the identitarian political situation of the women's movement, of the proletariat, of the student movement, and others in favor of a politics of fundamental equality, which represents a radically revolutionary statement of inclusiveness in a way that "extends the [political] situation beyond the bounds of ordinary commonsense."⁴³ That is to say, contemporary political common sense is that the politics of difference seeks equality

⁴⁰ Ibid.; Badiou, *Ethics*, 25-27. This conclusion is taken from a conjunction of statements in Badiou's *Being and Event* regarding infinities and statements in *Ethics* regarding infinite multiplicity and alterity.

⁴¹ Barker, translator's introduction to *Metapolitics*, xv.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

and does so effectively. In contrast, Badiou sees identitarian politics as having served a purpose at one time, but now it does nothing but provide avenues for the prevalence of difference and act as an impediment to the truly universal political subject of humankind.

Indeed, it is precisely these identitarian politics that Badiou excoriates as incompatible with a universalizable singularity and subjectivity in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Here, it is worth quoting Badiou at length in order to understand exactly what he identifies as counter-revolutionary in a politics based on difference:

“...[E]ach identification (the creation or cobbling together of identity) creates a figure that provides a material for its investment by the market. There is nothing more captive, so far as commercial investment is concerned, nothing more *amenable* to the invention of new figures of monetary homogeneity, than a community and its territory of territories. The semblance of a non-equivalence is required so that equivalence itself can constitute a process. What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge—taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities—of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a god-send! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, special magazines, improved shopping malls, “free” radio stations, targeted advertising networks, and finally, heady “public debates” at peak viewing times. Deleuze put it perfectly: capitalist deterritorialization requires constant reterritorialization. Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action: identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities from an articulated whole.

This articulation plays a constraining role relative to every truth procedure. It is organically *without truth*.”⁴⁴

It is now clear what exactly Badiou takes issue with in identitarian politics. The social prescription of non-equivalent identity prevents radical change by allowing a systematic co-optation of subgroups of people relative to their identity and the development of a discourse for

⁴⁴ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 11.

them within the system that they, prior to their co-optation, blamed for their very oppression. Importantly, it is not a particular group that Badiou caustically rebukes for this; it is the entire idea of identity-based political and social subgroups. This point illuminates a consequential facet of the position that Badiou takes regarding politics and the political subject. The political subject must, by definition, be non-exclusionary. The subject is the subject of a universal principle. Like the Pauline assertion of Christianity as “Christ and Him crucified” at I Corinthians 2:2, the political subject must proclaim a militant truth that is at once opposed to the prevailing dominant order and universalizable to all of mankind.

This statement of the universalizability of the subjective situation and the driving principle of the event leads one in the direction of the political subject and towards what truly makes him political. The political subject is political by virtue of the universalizability of his political prescription and of the universalizability of the situation, in principle, to the whole of humankind. In this sense, the collective subject is the whole of humankind, in principle, who can ascribe to the eventual prescription of the individual subject in question.

IV. Critique of the Subject In Badiou

The subject is treated with a rare freshness in Badiou that can be attributed to the radical nature of his philosophical project. Indeed, while continental philosophy was declaring that the subject is an archaic construct dating back to the Cartesian model, Badiou was already engaged in an attempt to salvage the idea of the subject from its naysayers. However, the novelty of Badiou’s subject and his ability to establish it inside of a new schematization of subjectivation can be somewhat puzzling. Nevertheless, one cannot allow the nostalgia for and identification with the colloquial and antiquated notion of the subject, with which Badiou’s subject shares

nomenclature, or the predetermined notion that the subject is a historical and social construct without relevance to contemporary philosophical discourse sway a genuine, reasoned and open-minded critique of Badiou's concept of the subject and of being. With limited space and a focused goal, I will leave a critique of Badiou's ontological project regarding set theory and philosophy of mathematics to others; instead, I will focus my critique on the issue of the subject and its political instance.

Within the space of politics, Badiou presents a subject that is at once individual and collective—not just collective, but universalizable. The political subject is nothing more than the whole of humankind, due to the necessarily universalizable characteristic of the political prescriptions made by the subject. This proposition must unavoidably limit the use of the term politics. Politics, under Badiou's system, would no longer properly refer to intranational politics, identitarian politics, rights groups focused on underprivileged minorities in only that situational context, and many other partitions of what is currently known as politics. Indeed, Badiou not only wishes to see a radical emancipatory politics come into practice, he is actively engaged in bringing that about through his work. As Barker points out, “[a]gainst political philosophy, metapolitics seeks to politicize, beyond the acceptable limits of political theory, philosophical practice.”⁴⁵

Certainly, those philosophers and political theorists committed to judging the political from the sidelines will cast a suspicious eye on this undertaking, and they have good reason to be skeptical. One must wonder if it is Badiou's commitment to fundamental truth that logically drives him to argue that the political sphere is constricted in the way that he claims and that the vast array of activities that we presently call politics are not actually politics at all. An equally

⁴⁵ Barker, translator's introduction to *Metapolitics*, xi-xii.

compelling explanation would point out that it is Badiou's commitment to a radical and emancipatory politics that leads him to schematize politics in a way that the only thing that could count as politics is a principled revolution against parliamentary politics and its contradictions, and that the only possible political subject could be the entirety of humanity in principle. One must also wonder if these two motivational accounts are mutually exclusive.

I, for one, do not take issue with Badiou's supposedly conflicted motivation, though I recognize that some, especially those remaining anti-communists among us who may recoil at the very mention of Badiou's prior and perhaps continued commitment to the Maoist and communist project, may object to the ambiguity of Badiou's motivation in schematizing politics as he does. I do not think that Badiou's categorization of the political subject as ultimately linked to infinite multiplicity means that Badiou's fundamental commitment is to radical emancipatory politics and the revolutionary moment. Contrarily, his choice of infinite multiplicity as the basis for political ontology betrays a fundamental commitment to equality born out of the liberal and democratic traditions. This is to say, the choice of infinite multiplicity opens up the possibility for potential innovation in the situation by providing a path towards something altogether other from what-there-is. The political situation is decentralized from the totalizing narrative of the singular infinite by the historical choice of infinite multiplicity, allowing equal access to political truth and a procedural sameness that deconstructs contemporary political boundaries.

Reading Badiou this way, his philosophical commitment becomes not a radical call for a neo-Maoist revolution, but rather a call for a radical democratic revolutionary moment that will unhinge the entrenched interests of nation states, political action committees and corporations who seek to reterritorialize difference in a way that is intrinsically anti-democratic. In this way,

Badiou escapes the facile characterization and dismissal that a communist or leftist philosopher might receive, and instead receives the proper intellectual consideration that a philosopher of his caliber and obvious rigor indubitably deserves.

CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICAL EVENT

I. Introduction to the Event in Badiou

The centerpiece of my argument about politics in Badiou, and the implications of Badiou's work on political theory and philosophy, is that of the event. It would be difficult to overstate the importance and centrality of the event in regards to the implications of Badiou's work on politics and political theory. To be sure, it is the political event, inextricably tied to the political subject and truth, which provides the space and mechanism for the truth-processes necessary for radical change and the coming to be of what-there-is-not from what-there-is.

In this chapter, I will give a detailed account of exactly what Badiou means by the event. I will also give an account of why the political event is a unique case of the more general concept of the event that provides for the implosion of the dichotomies of particularity/universality and the real/the transcendent in politics. Once I have given adequate time to the explanation of the concept of the event, I will analyze the concept of the event, as defined by Badiou. In this examination of the political event, I will underscore the destabilizing effects of the event while defending Badiou against those who would critique him as simply delivering an “axiomatics of resistance”⁴⁶ instead of a generalized theory of politics and the political event.

Before any critique can be leveled against Badiou and his political event, the concept of the event must be attended to in the abstract. That is to say, one must have a clear grasp of what the event is at its most abstract level before the evental subset of the political event can be discussed intelligently. This task, unfortunately, is no easy one. The most straightforward definition of the event given by Badiou comes near the beginning of the space assigned to it in his seminal work, *Being and Event*. “The event belongs to that which-is-not-being-qua-being.”⁴⁷ One must be ever vigilant to make sure that this statement is understood correctly, because it would have disastrous consequences if one were to misinterpret what Badiou has said here. One is not to take this statement as saying that the event *is* that which-is-not-being-qua-being. This interpretation is incorrect. Following set theory, Badiou has posited that the concept of the event belongs to the set of those things that are not being-qua-being. This proposition does not necessarily imply that the event and that which-is-not-being-qua-being are coextensive. And yet, following the analogy of the discourse of ontology (mathematics, set theory in particular) it is

⁴⁶ Daniel Bensaïd, “Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event,” *Think Again*, ed. Peter Hallward (New York: Continuum, 2004), 105.

⁴⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 189.

already obvious how Badiou works to implode the dichotomy of the particular/universal. If one thinks about the set of that which-is-being-qua-being, we can think of that which-is-being-qua-being as one infinite set. Thus, being, totalized in the one infinite, proclaims that the event is not.⁴⁸ The event, as a particular instantiation of the set of that which-is-not-being-qua-being, draws on aspects of both the particular and the universal simultaneously. Each event is a particular “point of impossibility of the discourse on being-qua-being,”⁴⁹ while allowing for the possibility of a new universal, a new infinite set of what-there-is.

At the most abstract level, which has been presented thus far, the event is an elusive concept. To glean a definition of the event that is more elucidatory and practical from Badiou’s work, it is necessary to turn to other texts which offer a less technical definition of the concept. Looking first to Badiou’s *Ethics*, the concept of the event becomes ever clearer. Badiou defines the event in *Ethics* as follows: “*the event*, [...] brings to pass ‘something other’ than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges; the event is a hazardous [*hasardeux*], unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears.”⁵⁰ This definition provides more of a concrete explanation as to what the event is. The content of the event is a happening that punctures what-there-is (the situation) and brings about something other than that—what-there-is-not. This quotation also points already to the political nature of the event, which represents a real and particular rupture with the situation, considered as the state/State of what-there-is. However, it must be noted that the event “vanishes as soon as it appears.”⁵¹ The event is placed on the cusp of change, and is not “what must arrive so there can be something else.”⁵² Instead, the event comes as a

⁴⁸ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Badiou, *Ethics*, 67.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 48.

happening, and as a “self-sufficient sequence of political-truth.”⁵³ This truth-process, as a particular instantiation of a universal political truth, is elusive and often reduces truth to knowledge, allowing the event to vanish as soon as it appears.

II. The Political Event As The Anti-State

Understanding the event in this manner allows for an almost immediate political consequence for the generalized account of the event. It is clear, from the above definition, that the event positions itself in a context that is opposed to mere opinion, and, by extension, is in a position that aligns it with truth against both opinion and institutionalized knowledges. One may object to this point immediately, and with fair reason. To eliminate opinion and institutionalized knowledges in favor of the truth allows for the possibility of a majoritarian tyranny of truth(s) to rise to the surface in the face of democratic mores. This point is especially valid within a philosophical system that adopts a notion of infinite multiplicity and multiple truths. Badiou himself does not hide his disdain of contemporary parliamentary-democratic politics. On the subject of the current incarnation of this political system, he says the following: “[i]t is clear, then, that what politics is the name of concerns, and only concerns, *public opinion*. What is overtly eradicated here is the militant identification of politics (which, for me, is nevertheless the *only* identification which can ally politics and thought.”⁵⁴

The audacity of the claim presented here is double-pronged. First, politics, in Badiou’s thought, is a process that is not only revolutionary but militantly so. The mere persuasion of a group of people to think radically differently than they have previously is not a political event; indeed, this transformation is antithetical to the political event as it represents an

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 13.

institutionalization of a different knowledge still contained within the prevailing system. In many ways, one can be sympathetic to this viewpoint. Merely thinking about the gains made in civil rights, women's rights, and homosexual rights in American history can lead one to a similar stance. It is easy to point to the struggles for gains and to denote points of departure, points of progress, along with happenings that represented successes and failures, but the *event* is elusive. There has not been an event signaling the abrupt end of racial, gender, or sexual-preference based classifications. Certainly, we have observed militant moments what a non-Badiouean might very well call a political process, but the process is not fulfilled in the egalitarian flattening of the subject that is the marker of the Badiouean political event.

The second prong of Badiou's claim is that not only does Badiou conceive of politics as a militant exercise, he claims that bellicose political action is the *only* way that politics and thought can be allied. This statement is both bold and confusing. At the most fundamental level, one must question how thought and politics are aligned in militant action. As Badiou points out consistently throughout his work, the distinguishing characteristic of the militant political actor is fidelity to the new and radical truth of the event. And yet, to allow the event to work towards puncturing the power of institutionalized knowledges and opinions, constant critical thought and openness to change is necessary. If the event is to be accurately described as a self-sufficient process of political truth while maintaining separation from the constrictions of the State apparatus, the truth of the event must remain unfixed and non-institutional allowing the event to continue to occupy the space of what-is-not-being-qua-being. It is transparent, then, that the alignment of thought and politics necessary to the event in Badiou remains antithetical to ideologies of all sorts, which ultimately serve to stifle critical thought, instead relying on the

prism of orthodoxy to interpret with an eye towards meaning instead of assess with an eye towards truth.

Perhaps here, at this revelation, the elusive event has been uncovered. Thinking back to the earlier example of the struggle for equal rights across the spectrum of the American experience, an argument can be made that the event of civil rights has taken place. Because Badiou's work seeks to politicize philosophy, and unite politics with thought,⁵⁵ perhaps one can pinpoint the political event of such processes as civil rights as the moment where the truth comes to a group or individual as something new that punches a hole in the prevailing institutional knowledge. It is here that the radical, militant moment reveals itself in the revelation that all men and women are fundamentally equal despite the prevailing knowledge that differences of color or gender require fundamental differences. The consistent struggle, despite seemingly insurmountable odds and institutionalized barriers, provides for particular instantiations of the political truth of fundamental equality in the real situation of the day while still drawing on the more universal claim of the event of equality realized through critical thought.

Returning to the place of ideology in Badiou's political event, the patent inconsistency of ideology and the political event is best laid out in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*. In this text, the incompatibility of the event and ideological rigidity is demonstrated through a focus on a few key political events that Badiou views as central to the current epoch. "In order of the political, the event is concentrated in the historic sequence which stretches from about 1965 to 1980, and which has seen the succession of what Sylvain Lazarus calls 'obscure events,' that is: obscure from the point of view of politics."⁵⁶ . The events which are properly named by Badiou include

⁵⁵ Jason Barker, translator's introduction to *Metapolitics*, xii.

⁵⁶ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 84.

“May [19]68 and its aftermath, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Iranian Revolution,⁵⁷ the working class and national movement in Poland (‘Solidarity’).⁵⁸ One must wonder why these events, above all others, are exalted as the political events of this epoch. The significant aspect of each of these events, certainly, is a militant challenge to the prevailing order not beholden to a homogenizing or politically stabilizing principal, except, it could be argued, for those ideologies that proved to be at least somewhat central to the cause. Indeed, Badiou sees the problems and injustices associated with these political events as inextricably related to the eventual actors’ professed connection to Marxist-Leninism and “often archaic Islamic preaching, whereas the core of popular conviction and its symbolization exceeded this preaching from all quarters.”⁵⁹ Instead of focusing on the ideological underpinnings of these events, as they are considered insofar as they are instances of the political event, they should be characterized by the spirit of the resistance and the rupture that occurs with the prevailing political order. Indeed, earlier Badiou remarks that to understand these events, one should not seek first to judge “whether these events, in terms of pure facts, were favorable or ill-fated, victorious or vanquished.”⁶⁰ For Badiou, the ideological discourses surrounding these events are of little importance. What is of more consequence for Badiou is not the representation, the purported cause, but, rather, the obvious intervention that takes place. These noteworthy events represent the possibility of transparent representation of the event (in the form of ideological adherence to Marxist-Leninism

⁵⁷ Note that Badiou does not term it an Islamic Revolution, but rather an Iranian Revolution, freeing him from entanglement in a normative, rather than structural question

⁵⁸ Badiou, *Manifesto*, 84..

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

or fundamentalist Islam), coupled with an opaque intervention,⁶¹ ultimately doing a disservice to the spirit of the eventual intercession.

Now that there are some practical examples of the political event and its interpretation outlined, the exact definition and conditions for the political event can be thoroughly understood. Badiou lays out this definition in the final chapter of *Metapolitics*, “Politics as Truth Procedure.” For Badiou, an event counts as a political event only under certain conditions. These conditions are as follows:

“1. An event is political if its material is collective, or if the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity... ‘collective’ mean[ing] immediately universalizing.”⁶²

“2.The effect of the collective character of the political event is that politics presents as such the infinite character of situations...politics summons this infinity immediately, as subjective universality.”⁶³

“3[...]whenever there is a genuinely political event, the State reveals itself. It reveals its excess of power, its repressive dimension. But it also reveals a measure for this usually invisible excess. For it is essential to the normal functioning of the State that its power remains measureless, errant, unassignable. The political event puts an end to all this by assigning a visible measure to the excessive power of the State.”⁶⁴

From Condition One, Condition Two is immediately apparent as a corollary. For the collective material to be universal means that it touches upon the political situation on a human level. That is to say, the political event strikes at the heart of a political situation that is common and collective to all of mankind. Thus, if the political event happening in Iran is has sufficient eventfulness,⁶⁵ it should be a political event that is potentially universalizable and actually universalized to the whole of humanity. Yet, this universality is not to the exclusion of the

⁶¹ Ibid., 85.

⁶² Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 141.

⁶³ Ibid., 142-3.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 145. Badiou begins this condition with an introduction, thus the bracketed ellipsis after “3.”

⁶⁵ Although this term is not quite right because something is either a political event or not, it is a useful shorthand for now that will be quickly discarded.

particularity of the real situation in the context of Iran. The universal aspect of the political truth is only accessible through the particular reality of the situational context, remaining consistent with Badiou's philosophical goal of allowing for radical change in every situation and the politicization of philosophy that attempts to unify political thought and political practice. Condition Three is a bit more disconnected from the first two, but underpinning it is the distinguishing real world characteristic of the political event that was emphasized above—intervention. If there is a revolutionary intervention into the state of political affairs within a given political situation,⁶⁶ the State will attempt to suppress that break with its legal authority. Importantly, and as Badiou points out, the State's authority is generally immeasurable. That is to say, the power of the State knows no practical limitations because it is rarely tested. It is not measured, because to measure the power of the State, the power must be tested. This act is precisely what is involved in the militant intervention of the political event, which brings about something other than the State.

The hostility inherent in the relationship between the event and the State becomes perspicuous when looking at Badiou's analysis of the development of communism. First, it is evident that Badiou would not view as legitimate the argument that communism has shown its face, and it has manifested itself as an authoritarian regime. Although, contrary to the standard argument that these materializations of communist thought in the form of the communist State were imperfect representations of communist ideas, Badiou signals a subtly different argument in his essay "Philosophy and the 'Death of Communism.'" Here, he says that the problem is not that the political truth of communism was manifested incorrectly or untruly, but rather that the political subjectivity induced by the political event of the communist moment "has become

⁶⁶ Here using situation not as a technical term, but rather to mean within a particular spatial, temporal and political reality.

unable to support, by itself, in thought and in act, the singularity of its trajectory (and thus also its philosophical connection to emancipatory eternity.”⁶⁷ Because of the inability of thought and action (political theory and political practice) to be coordinated and sustained, the State becomes the representative of the event, as there is no other referent.⁶⁸ Yet, the State *does not* represent the political event in its true form. The State, as a political institution that is inherently exclusionary, cannot meet the requirements of either Condition One or Condition Two of Badiou’s political event.

It is of no little importance that the political event in Badiou is centered around the rupture with what-there-is, considering that what-there-is at the time that Badiou is writing is precisely the State in the widespread incarnation of a parliamentary democracy.⁶⁹ Certainly, criticism may be leveled against Badiou for his measured approval of the Iranian Revolution,⁷⁰ and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The methods of these political events were reprehensible and their ultimate results were repressive political regimes. It may also be said that Badiou avoids the normative questions inherent in the judgment of these events, which is to his detriment. In fact, Badiou does this purposefully, in order to deal with the structural problems and the issue of the intervention. For those committed to parliamentary democracy, Badiou offers this upbraid, “[the vote] conceal[s] massive irrationality. For why would number have any political virtue?...Such approximations are simply not tolerated in other domains where human

⁶⁷ Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and the ‘Death of Communism,’” *Infinite Thought*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2005), 103.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Note that Badiou speaks in terms of parliamentary democracy, not liberal democracy. This distinction is important as it prevents Badiou from entanglement in the normative questions of liberalism as opposed to the meta-level questions of a parliamentary political structure.

⁷⁰ See note 57 for the importance of this formulation

thought is at stake.”⁷¹ In fact, it is not Badiou’s political event that makes a mockery of political virtue and principle; rather, it is the homogenizing forces of contemporary political discourse that prize opinion above truth and the pursuit of it. The rupture that Badiou proposes for the current generation is a rupture with the State structure as such, which prefers ideology, opinion and “knowledge” to truth.

Following this line of argument, Badiou’s meaning becomes plain when he claims that the event is a self-sufficient process of political truth. Considering the annals of history, one is hard-pressed to give an example of real political change that has come as a result of the vote. Within just the American context, one can look at several significant political happenings including the founding of the United States, the Reconstruction Amendments, the Nineteenth Amendment, the end of Jim Crow segregation, and others and wonder whether the fundamental political truths that these represent would have been approved if a majority vote had been held. The answer is almost assuredly not. Thus, the political event for Badiou, in a somewhat idealized manner, stands in stark contrast to the contemporary state structure of Western-democracy,⁷² as an occurrence of a true political ethic.

III. Critique of the Event in Badiou

To begin the critique of the concept of the event in Badiou, it is necessary to return once again to the political events that he lists as the concentration of politics in this epoch. Furthermore, it is necessary to quote Badiou’s manifesto for politics, found in his *Manifesto for*

⁷¹ Alain Badiou, “On Parliamentary ‘Democracy:’ The French Elections of 2002,” *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006), 93.

⁷² In Badiou’s writing, what is translated as West in English is the French word *occident*, which carries a religious and political connotation, tying it to a religious-ideological stand.

Philosophy. “[T]he events in question *are not yet named*, or rather that the work or their naming (what I call the *intervention* on the event) is not yet complete, far from it. Today, politics is, among other things, the capacity to faithfully stabilize this naming, and for the long haul.”⁷³

Primarily, this quotation, with its preoccupation with finding some way to stabilize the political event, points directly to the destabilizing effect of the political event. Because of the destabilizing tendencies of the political event, it is unclear what it would look like in political practice for there to be a Badiouean style evental politics. The notion of the political event espoused by Badiou is so radical and antithetical to orthodoxy and political structures as they are currently known, it is difficult to imagine what a self-sufficient and perpetual political state of resistance to institutionalization, co-optation, and orthodoxy would amount to. Fundamentally, the political event is something that finds its meaning in being *opposed* to the current incarnation of the state/State. It is easy to imagine what it would look like were there to be sudden political truth-process manifested as particularized instantiations in real political situations across the globe. In fact, this hypothetical circumstance would likely look something like the events of May 1968 and its global counterparts. It is more difficult to conceive of how these instantiations might perpetuate themselves once they have succeeded, deprived of anything to direct their resistance towards. Perhaps the constant threat of institutionalization of a political truth as knowledge or ideology would suffice.

Badiou turns to the aforementioned events of May 1968, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the Iranian Revolution as examples of the political event that require stabilization for the long haul. On how these movements failed to stabilize themselves, Badiou is explicit—they ascribed power to outdated and archaic ideologies, which the popular uprisings

⁷³ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 85.

that were representative of the interventional feature of the political event far exceeded. On how the political event can stabilize itself, the reader of Badiou is left to draw his own conclusions. From the depiction of the political events of this era that Badiou gives, it is obvious that, in these instances, the political subjectivity and universalism that is present in these occasions of resistance was subjugated to divisive rhetorical devices. The transcendence beyond ideological rigidity is ultimately rooted in the fidelity to the event, which ideology suppresses by limiting the space for critical thought and institutionalizing political truth as political orthodoxy. Consequently, it seems, what is needed to stabilize the event is more fidelity to the spirit of the event, embodied in resistance.

This fidelity is ultimately rooted in an event without any obvious moral content. There is little mention in Badiou's work of traditional normative concepts. This absence serves two functions. First, it allows the political event to evade inflexible and facile characterizations of the good often shaped more by regionally or nationally entrenched interests than honest dialogue about the good or true. Second, it allows Badiou's event to focus on meta-level problems of political structure involving concepts like the vote, mentioned in the previous section. Indeed, when Badiou does take up the traditional political question of justice, he defines it as "the name by which a philosophy designates the possible truth of a political orientation."⁷⁴ This disinterested conceptualization of justice, instead of a distributive concept, is a state of being coincidental with politics as an "axiom of the collective."⁷⁵ Justice, then, is a concept that is prior to the political event. That is to say, by the very conditions laid out for the political event, justice becomes the marker of the truth of a particular political orientation; a political event

⁷⁴ Alain Badiou, "Philosophy and Politics," *Infinite Thought*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2005), 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

based on political truth must necessarily be rooted in a concept of justice. What ultimately caused the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Iranian Revolution to fail was the dissolution of the justice inherent in the political event brought about by a professed commitment to ideology above the political truth instantiated in the resistance.

Through this very move, Badiou also accomplishes the politicization of political philosophy by denying philosophy and philosophers the legislative role of naming the event as just or unjust.⁷⁶ At first, it seems reasonable that political philosophers and theorists would want to make moral judgments about political events. Perhaps there is something to be said for judging political events based on a principle or value independent of the political event. It may keep philosophers from laudatory assessments of revolutions that ultimately have effects detrimental to certain principals of liberty, freedom and justice. There is good reason to view Badiou's philosophical move a propos justice as hazardous to traditional political thought. However, Badiou not only takes away the legislative perch of philosophy, but takes political philosophy a step further and creates a space for judging the political event that dismisses the politically independent concept of justice even more harshly than the label of injustice. Because justice is an essential characteristic of the political truth-process, any political event that abandons justice for ideology is no longer a political event and no longer an evental space for subjectivation. Not only does this mean that the event in question is apolitical in Badiou's terminology, it is also restrictive of the human experience. As the political event disposes of justice and equality, that which allows man to transcend the human animal that underlies him is expropriated. This constriction is definitively worse than a simple injustice, showing that the

⁷⁶ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 10-13.

ostensible lack of normative clarity in Badiou's political event provides for an even stronger normative content than the legislative philosophy that precedes it.

CHAPTER 3: THE POLITICAL ETHIC

I. Ethics and the *Ethic-Of* Politics

The previous section ended with a discussion of the normative content of Badiou's politics and the political event. There is no concept more fundamental to understanding the normative than ethics. In this section, I will explain the concept of ethics as it applies to Badiou's political philosophy, the event and his overall philosophical project. I will also look more closely at the way that truth and fidelity are utilized throughout Badiou's work. Finally, I will offer a critique of the ethic(s) of politics in Badiou.

Alain Badiou places politics in the category of those things that can be referred to as "fields of truth."⁷⁷ Together with love, science and art, politics provides a "possible instance[] of the *subject*."⁷⁸ To understand the way that Badiou thinks about politics, one must also understand one of the more general and fundamental problems that guides the search for truths in Badiou's work—ethics.

The study of the ethical has long been connected to the study of the political. Indeed, the essential question of ethics and politics could be said to be the same: "How should one live?" Plato laid the groundwork for this method of understanding political inquiry in his famous work of political philosophy, the *Republic*, by having Socrates address the problem of how best to organize a city as a quandary originating in the dilemma of how best to organize one's soul. Because politics and ethics are arranged around some of the same fundamental principles (good, right, justice, etc.), it makes sense that Badiou's major work on ethics would give the reader insight into how he thinks about the political.

If one were to think of ethics in the most general and common use of the term, one would likely be drawn to the questions of applied ethics, a particular subsection of ethics that has more to do with opinion than truth. Applied ethics is that subfield of the broader discipline of ethics

⁷⁷ Hallward, translator's introduction to *Ethics*, xi.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

that deals with prescriptive statements regarding what is good or right. However, as was mentioned above, Badiou goes to great lengths, with philosophical precision and rigor, to avoid the conditions of applied ethics.

Against any notion of applied ethics, Badiou claims that, “every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good, let alone to identify Man with projects of this kind, becomes in fact the real source of evil itself.”⁷⁹ He takes this declaration as his starting point in defining his own ethics. Analyzing this statement, one can instantly observe that Badiou makes a radical break with the way that previous philosophies and philosophers have thought about the good in relation to the political. Badiou boldly claims, “Ethics does not exist. There is only the *ethic-of* (of politics, of love, of science, of art),”⁸⁰ in an astounding repudiation of those philosophers who have tried to link principle-based prescriptive analysis to the analysis of the political. Yet, this examination of his repudiation goes a step too far. While Badiou rejects a generalized ethics across four broad categories, he does not seem to renounce a generalized ethics *within* each of these categories. This point is of central importance to the understanding of the political event and politics. By avoiding a generalized ethics, Badiou places ethics in the realm of the particular and the realm of practice. This move positions ethics in the realm of practice, and not of theory, furthering his goal of uniting thought and action in the political realm.

To understand what Badiou means by an *ethic-of* politics as opposed to a generalized ethics, it may be helpful to give a bit of history of ethics in the twentieth century. Beginning with G.E. Moore’s famous “open question argument,” ethicists began to explore a new direction, away from the regulatory questions of applied ethics and towards an “attempt to understand the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, [*sic*] presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice.”⁸¹ This novel objective, taken on by many prominent ethicists, led to the development of the field of metaethics. Metaethicists began to discuss such questions as, “Are there moral truths?” “What are moral properties?” and “What is the function of ethics?”⁸² Noticeably, the questions asked by metaethicists generally do not have to do with substantive moral judgments at the level of the moral dilemma. Rather, they question the nature of the process that moral agents implicitly accept by making moral judgments.

With this brief history of ethics in mind, one can more clearly understand the project that Badiou is embarking upon when linking politics to ethics while simultaneously denying a generalized ethics. Fundamentally, Badiou, as a philosopher,⁸³ is not as interested in the substantive material of an ethical truth as he is in the process and method gone through to arrive at the constitutive fabric of a truth.⁸⁴ In the same way that metaethics goes beyond the elements of applied ethics to look for the fundamental presuppositions of all moral judgments, so does Badiou’s political philosophy go beyond the mere defense of a particular political system or political organization to the basic elements of the political experience. As the parallel between Badiou’s work and that of the metaethicists becomes more translucent, one important caveat must be highlighted: just as the metaethicists’ original claim that their work did not have implications for applied ethics proved to be dubious, so would any analogous claim regarding Badiou’s philosophy. The basic principles that he regards as the underpinning for ethics and politics are chosen by Badiou and should not simply be accepted without an argument in favor of

⁸¹ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Metaethics,” Stanford University, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaethics/>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ I note “as a philosopher” because as a human being he is perhaps more concerned with the substantive material of truths.

⁸⁴ N.B.: not *the* truth, but *a* truth.

them. They *do have* implications that are far-reaching, as was seen in the above discussion of justice in relation to the political event.

It is now necessary to return to the principal that drives Badiou's analysis of the ethics of politics—truth—in order to understand why his approach is both novel and important. Badiou's own definition of truth is, “the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation... Essentially, a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the eventual supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break*.”⁸⁵ To unpack the meaning of this statement it is first necessary to further complicate it. One should notice that in this definition Badiou refers to a truth as both “the real process of a fidelity to an event” and as “an *immanent break*.” A truth's relationship to time seems to be different in the first definition than in the second. That is to say, a truth seems to happen over a course of time (as it is a process) while simultaneously happening in an instant (as an “*immanent break*”). This realization allows one to understand the complexity of a truth within Badiou's philosophy. A truth is at once totally contextualized within the specific happening of an immanent break, but also objective, universal and long-term because of the procedural property that it must maintain.

The process by which a truth becomes objective in the real world is what links it to both ethics and politics and, at the same time, what provides for the double understanding of a truth as both subjective and objective. A truth, for Badiou, is the result of what fidelity produces in a situation, which is nothing more than the process of fidelity to an event.⁸⁶ An event is something that happens which “cannot be reduced to [the] ordinary inscription in ‘what-there-is.’”⁸⁷ The event, as a radical departure from what-there-is, compels the animalistic nature of human beings

⁸⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*, 42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

to exceed itself and “decide a *new* way of being.”⁸⁸ When thinking about politics or ethics in relation to Badiou, it is helpful to understand the event in this way—as the supplemental material needed to induce subjectivity from the animalistic being whose material course is traced within the framework of what-there-is.⁸⁹ It is thus evident that truth can be considered both objective and subjective in Badiou’s theory. This conclusion is the result of the way that the event can induce the subject through the “immanent break” while still maintaining the formal qualities of a process. Because each truth is inextricably tied to the fidelity of a subject to a new way of being that allows him to trace his material being outside of what-there-is, a truth is necessarily a subjective phenomenon. In addition, insofar as a truth maintains the formal properties of a process that is repeated, it is objective. Therefore, one can accurately maintain that truth is both a subjective and objective phenomenon.

This is the point at which the novelty and genius of Badiou is particularly evident. The conceptualization of truth *as a phenomenon*, rooted in events, processes and subjectivities breaks from notions of truth that are passive in nature. A truth, then, cannot be a simple statement like “ $2+2=4$,” but rather must be related to the very essence of a subjectivity within a given situation. Here again, the link between the theoretical and the practical comes to the forefront. A truth, as a militant process that breaks with what-there-is in the realm of the real situation, requires the work and practical struggle that reveals the true character of humanity in the immortal, transcendent and immanent break. The understanding of truth as an active phenomenon is vital to comprehending the implications that Badiou’s work has for ethics and politics because in it lies the foundation for politics.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ While this is a helpful shorthand, in the actual theory of the event, it is less clear which way the arrow of causation runs. It is more accurate to say that the entire process of the occurrence of an event and the inducing of a subject is interdependent and simultaneous.

To understand truth as active, and to understand politics as a “field of truth,”⁹⁰ one must understand politics as a realm of activity. Yet, this is not all. One cannot simply say that politics is a realm of activity because it is a field of truth. There is something more profound in Badiou’s notion of truth that points towards a truly radical demarcation of the political. Following Badiou’s definition that a truth is something that is an immanent break with what-there-is, a political truth or a political event must be some occurrence that achieves this break for a community. True politics must break radically from what-there-is, induce the subjectivity of a community, demand fidelity to the event in the form of tracing the material course of the subjective community outside of what-there-is, and, through these feats, achieve a new way of being for the community wholly outside the previous situational status quo.

To understand more fully how Badiou understands the relationship between truth and politics, and why the stringent conditions for the political are necessary, one should look to his *Metapolitics* and *Ethics*. Reviewing the conditions for politics from above, Badiou outlines the political event as follows. First, “[a]n event is political only if its material is collective, or if the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity.”⁹¹ Second, “[t]he effect of the collective character of the political event is that politics presents as such the infinite character of situations.”⁹² Finally, “Politics summons the power of the State. Moreover, it is the only truth procedure to do so directly.”⁹³ As was noted in the previous chapter, the summoning of the power of the State comes from the real world experience of fidelity to the event represented by the active *ethic-of* politics. To gain a more comprehensive grasp on the relationship between politics and truth as represented by the *ethic-of* politics, it is helpful to think of politics in the

⁹⁰ Badiou, *Ethics*, xi.

⁹¹ Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 141.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

shorthand that Badiou gives: “What singulari[z]es the political procedure is the fact that it proceeds from the infinite to the 1. It makes the 1 of equality arise as the universal truth of the collective by carrying out a prescriptive operation upon the infinity of the State....”⁹⁴ In other words, politics is characterized by the move from the infinite to the one as the one is able to understand himself as an individual with the power to carry out change against the State. Moreover, this realization comes as the result of political action—an instantiation of truth in the political realm—that unites political thought and political action.

What is peculiar to Badiou’s theory of politics is that the final form of political transcendence is not found in the one realizing he is a part of the whole, but rather that the whole recognizes that there are ones that are constitutive of it. The infinite transcends to the one. If one thinks back to the definition of truth offered by Badiou in his *Ethics*, the whole picture comes together quite well. A truth must induce a subject and must represent an “immanent break” with what-there-is. For the infinite to exceed itself into the realization of the one recognizes this immanent break; that is, the collective recognizes and embraces the immanence of the one. The one, then, is the marker of the final product of politics. But, it is the one of equality not the one of difference. The one of equality must mean a double-being both as one and as a member of the collective—as an equal member of the collective being, maintaining individuality.

Taking this point to a more abstract level, the notion of the particularity of the situation and how it relates to the universal political truth is also brought into a clearer light. The singular political situation is of the utmost importance, because it represents the individual instantiation of the human political situation. As a particular group, like the actors in the Iranian Revolution, rise

⁹⁴ Ibid., 151.

up in an immanent break with what-there-is with fidelity to the principle of justice, the infinite of the collective of humanity, which lives in a state of injustice, exceeds itself into the one of the particular event of the Iranian revolution.

II. Critique of the *Ethic-Of Politics*

Badiou's theory of politics and truth is novel and inventive, no doubt. But the question remains to be asked: does it accurately reflect the way things actually work, and is it helpful in analyzing politics and the political?

First, the conceptualization of truth offered by Badiou should be taken up. This is the concept that underlies the entirety of Badiou's work in ethics and politics and provides for the ontological turn of the infinite exceeding itself into the one. The truth as an active concept is no doubt a brilliant one, yet it does seem to keep some things normally considered to be truths out of the realm of truth. For example, how should we describe statements like " $2+2=4$ " if not as a truth? " $2+2=4$ " does not represent an immanent break with what-there-is and force human beings to decide a new way of being, thus it does not meet Badiou's requirements for a truth. Yet, one would normally say at least that " $2+2=4$ " is true, if not that it was a fundamental mathematical truth.

The most likely explanation that would allow Badiou's notion of truth to remain intact in light of the above difficulty is that he has committed himself to a new meaning of the word "truth" and is willing to accept the consequences. Indeed, in the opening pages of *Saint Paul*, Badiou remarks that Saint Paul would be the guide towards a foundation of universalism precisely because he sought to reconnect the truth to the subject and accepted the consequences

of such an act.⁹⁵ Thus, it is likely that Badiou sees himself in this same mold. In direct opposition to modern philosophers like Kant, who sought to establish transcendental categorical maxims that held universally in the same manner as mathematicians, Badiou, establishing his philosophy and politics through the philosophy of mathematics rejects the banality of mathematically derived truths in favor of an active concept that has ontological and political consequences.

However, it should be noted that there are extreme effects of Badiou's notion of active truth-processes on the way human beings can experience political life. Adopting this idea of truth means that politics as stability is not politics. This conclusion follows from the fact that a truth must be an immanent break from what-there-is resulting in a fidelity to the event. That is to say, political truth must result in a radical alterity from the current political state. What Badiou perceives as politics then, is nothing more than a state of eternal revolution; anything short of the perpetuation of radical revolution cannot be called politics if one is to remain faithful to Badiou's definition of a politics of truth.

While it is true that Badiou does spend time criticizing the current state of politics in such a way that some would likely agree with him, it is also true that a definition of politics that calls for infinite revolution without prescribing content to said revolution may be disastrous if acted upon. As was discussed above, without a general ethics, but only an *ethic-of*, with the only content of this *ethic-of* being the fidelity to a truth in the event, there is no moral content to such a revolution. In light of the current discussion of the concept of truth, this point deserves further examination. It may appear that Badiou would be just as happy with a fascist revolution as he would be with a Marxist or democratic one. However, if one gives Badiou a charitable reading

⁹⁵ Badiou, *St. Paul*, 5-10.

and thinks subtly about what he is saying, this cannot be the case. In fact, his philosophy actually privileges democracy above all else as the only true form of politics.

If one looks carefully at Badiou's characterization of politics, it requires a commitment to truth, but also to a political material is collective and related to the infinite. This stipulation, while not providing content for revolutionary activity, does provide a normative restriction if followed to its logical conclusion. That is, for the material of the event to be collective means that it has to do with equality and universalism as opposed to otherness and difference. This constraint provides a revolutionary restriction that is normative in character. For instance, if one were to think of a fascist revolution in terms of Badiou's politics, it could not be considered to be political in light of the fact that politics is connected with fidelity to the evental truth and the collective subject. A fascist regime is concerned with national pride and focused on the uniqueness of a particular collective vis-à-vis other collectivities, identities, cultures, nationalities or individuals. Hence, a fascist revolution does not provide for the possibility of the infinite to move towards the one because its subject matter is never the infinite. It begins with a fundamental flaw—it has demarcated its collectivity in such a way that it could never be accepted by the larger collectivity of humanity.

Here, one can see the true character of Badiou's politics. The genuinely Badiouean politics must not only provide for the transcendence of the individual towards the collective, but this collective must be infinite. Again, the double-placement of truth as contextual and universal is shown to be essential to politics. A political truth must necessarily be collective because it is tied to activity and the event. It must induce a subject, and this subject is a being in the real world doing real things and has a real fidelity to the truth within the framework of the event. Yet, to fulfill the stipulation that politics must allow for the infinite to move towards the one, for

the possibility of politics as a unification of the infinite in the individual, the truth disclosed and held to with fidelity must be universally acceptable. Therefore, the fascist revolution could not participate in a politics of truth. In fact, for Badiou, it seems likely that the only authentic politics of truth would be a democratic politics of equality. A politics that embraces moral and ethical symmetry and equality among all people without dictating moral content is the only Badiouean politics.

Yet, the question remains as to the stability of such a political system given the importance of truth and the event in Badiou's philosophy. To achieve such a democratic system would definitely require an immanent break with what-there-is, but once achieved, the function of politics and its revolutionary character would perhaps have to be tempered. It seems that Badiou's characterization of politics in such a system may need to be amended to include the ability to maintain a political system of equality and truth once it has been established. Or, perhaps, Badiou is much more skeptical about the ability to achieve such a political system that maintains true to the principals that it set out to propagate than he leads the reader to believe. Alternatively, the raw potential of the event could be tapped into as a stabilizing factor. The commitment and fidelity to the political truth of justice, equality and moral symmetry opens the door to infinite progression, as eventual politics constantly improves upon itself and moves forward.

CONCLUSION

Alain Badiou's work provides a novel way to look at the theory of the political. Through the eyes of a radical in an age of consent, Badiou's philosophical and polemic writings are able to highlight the taboo subjects that much work today leaves untouched. Indeed, Badiou's devotion to the concept of truth strikes at the very heart of parliamentary democracy in its current incarnation. It is parliamentary democracy, through an electoral system that creates the illusion of substantive choice in the general public but instead follows the heterogeneity principal that underlies the entire system, which begins with the ignoble lie. It is the current political system that sees politicians falling to their knees before the poll numbers and worshipping at the oft ill-informed opinions of the masses of the polity with no regard for truth. Particularly in the context of American politics, truth has taken second seat to spin. We need look no farther than news stations and newspapers proliferating opinion as fact to see that this is the case. In this epoch, we have reached an especially appropriate time for a "really heterogeneous [manifestation of an other] idea of politics, for example, a politics of emancipation, a politics decided by ordinary people and not by the guardians of the state, a politics not concerned with elections."⁹⁶

This radical reconceptualization of politics is exactly what Badiou offers. In Badiou, we can see a unified theory of politics, the political event, truth and the subject—all, by his estimation, rare occurrences. On the one hand, we have the subject: Man. As pointed out above, Badiou offers two initial understandings of the subject Man. First, man is that animal which can conceive of himself as victim, as mortal, as being-for-death. Despite the knowledge of impending death, Man does nothing to distinguish himself from other biological forms of life here. He is mortal; he has an instinct towards survival and the completion of daily tasks and chores like any other beast. Yet, for Badiou, Man's true character is revealed in his

⁹⁶ Badiou, "On Parliamentary 'Democracy,'" *Polemics*, 88-89.

immortality—his subjectivity. It is through the mediation of the event that subjectivity can be induced. It is within the context of the event, which punches holes in what-there-is to bring new truth to the situation, that we observe man as a subjectivity. Only in the space of the event can man achieve his true character as immortal. Likewise, it is in the context of a politics of truth that the subject is defined collectively, as the collective of mankind.⁹⁷ The political event that necessitates a break with current paradigms of the political making way for new possibilities is where we can, according to Badiou, find man at his fullest, truest mode of being. Here, he is something altogether other from the being-for-death described in Badiou's *Ethics*. He is a being-for-life; not just his own but the life of all humanity.

Yet, the question must be posed here: What good is a theory of politics that rests on the idea of the event? Does Badiou's politics really boil down to an "axiomatic of resistance?"⁹⁸ If so, what use can this be in thinking about politics in general? Must politics always be in resistance to something? Perhaps there cannot be an escape from a dominant order that institutionalizes itself in order to resist the hegemonic ideas of the day. Certainly, history would point towards the veracity of this claim. On a cursory glance, they are few and far between the truly radical political changes that have not come about from an organized and sustained struggle against what-there-is from within the framework of what-there-is. And yet, the argument can be made that, while significant political progress is often made in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the form of the dominant order, relegating politics and the political to these rare events that are marked by truly radical change is overly restrictive. After all, with this definition of politics, what is one to label the electoral process that results in the election of

⁹⁷ As opposed to the collectives of love or science, which are marked by finite considerations.

⁹⁸ Bensaid, "The Miracle of the Event," *Think Again*, 105

world leaders? One can incontrovertibly assert that this cannot be politics in Alain Badiou's philosophy.

Under Badiou's schematization of politics, much of the colloquial and even scientific usage of the term "politics" could no longer be considered politics. This is no small matter, but it seems a position that is almost to be expected from a radical, a polemicist, and a philosopher of revolution. However, expected or not, it is a complication that cannot simply be ignored if one is to take Badiou's work seriously for its implications on politics and political theory. Here, as was noted earlier, is the major distinction between Badiou and other political philosophers. Badiou comes to us not as a philosopher of the political, but of politics. The political, in Badiou's universe, is quite simply the place where political events happen. It is where subjects face the hegemonic influences of the dominant order so that they may make way for new truths. In Badiou, the reader bears witness to the unification of thought and practice, of political theory and politics. Like St. Paul, who is the central focus of Badiou's text on universalism and truth, Badiou sees the link between the declarative act of a truth and fighting for its implementation through political policies.

This is where Badiou's work can be of particular use for contemporary political theorists. Badiou sees, with a radical's eye, a definite connection between thought, truth and struggle, something that is largely seen as unthinkable in the American academy. In fact, the foreign nature of this idea even contributed to the highly publicized dispute between Cornel West and then Harvard President Lawrence Summers that led to Dr. West returning to Princeton, as reported by West in his 2004 publication *Democracy Matters*. If one is to follow on Badiou and West's recommendations, one would likely see a revival of interest in political theory as a subject not bound to the obfuscations and esoteric vocabulary of the academy, but rather as a

subject with implications for the way that the political world works. Badiou's work, then, comes to political theory with a mission of emancipation of philosophy from the cramped offices of the ivory towers of academia. His message comes to political theory as an adaptation of the metaethical notion of internalism—political thoughts that come from political theorists should, in fact, supervene on the actions of those same political theorists and philosophers.

Of course, this assertion will likely leave many taken aback. Nevertheless, this is precisely what Badiou's work prescribes for the world. It will then be asked of Badiou: "Are you a philosopher or a revolutionary? Choose one, for you cannot be both. Not at the same time. You must choose." And yet, this dichotomy is precisely antithetical to Badiou's materialism, as well as to his broader philosophical project. It is the idea that the mind and body must maintain a connection ultimately leading to the suggestion that thought and action cannot be separated from one another that ultimately proves to be an underlying principle of Badiou's politics and philosophical project. If one cannot take the monist step with Badiou, following Spinoza, then one can follow him no farther and his philosophy must be rejected. The dualist question becomes, in Badiou, nothing short of the inquiry into whether or not one can be both philosopher and revolutionary, intellectual and radical, political theorist and political activist.

While, due to Badiou's personal biography, this question is obviously of the utmost importance to him, it is not at all clear that this is a desirable unification for the population at large. Conceivably, the union of philosophical clarity and political action could result in cataclysmic and truly horrendous consequences. Imagine, for instance, a fascist revolutionary bent on world domination and genocide with the philosophical clarity to carry out his mission with the assurance that he was on the path of the truth and simply needed to persevere whatever obstacles were set in his path with fidelity to the cause. Indeed, it is this same kind of vigor that

one can observe in terrorists as well as more benign or agreeable revolutionary and radical activists.

Of course in Badiou's world, where the concept of truth is taken seriously and where the conditions for the production of such truths are extremely rigorous and well thought out, the notion of a political-philosophical revolutionary fascism is absurd. Badiou devotes a chapter of his *Ethics* to the refutation of the idea that Nazism could be considered politics. While it is certainly true that under the conditions that he sets forth for politics, Nazism or any fascist variant would not qualify as politics, it is nevertheless the case that empowering philosophers as revolutionaries might cause more trouble than it is worth. The notion that people should be accountable for their ideas and that deeply held convictions should provide motive for action is certainly a valiant one. It is also one only able to hold the prescriptive power that Badiou places on it within the context a largely democratic system where people have liberal humanitarian values. Thus, while on the one hand he rails against the idea of parliamentary liberal democracy, the prescriptive power of his philosophy must depend on institutionalized respect for human rights, or a fundamental belief in the transcendent rationality of the proposition of human rights, in order to avoid a complete bloodbath. Ultimately, this may prove to date Badiou as a philosopher of these times—calling for a new revolutionary moment which looses humanity from the self-imposed fetters of their own contradictions and questions the commitment to purported values in face of subservience to the entrenched power interests of the West.

The idea that there must be an ironing-out of the inconsistencies of the contemporary regime of liberal humanists, mock multiculturalists, and leaders and citizens who maintain a stunning lack of principled commitment to their ostensible ideals is ultimately the driving force behind the narrowed scope of Badiou's politics. What he describes in tedious mathematical

detail and abstract terminology in hopes of uncovering a generalized notion of the event is in actuality nothing more than the specific article would suggest: *the* event. In a rehashing and rethinking of the Marxian world-historical moment, Badiou offers a generalized account of the political with contingencies and conditions so stringent that the space of politics becomes little more than the space of revolution. It is a Badiouean revolution, to be sure—a revolution of truths and fidelities to those truths. And yet, while it is certainly a worldwide revolution that Badiou calls for, the stringent conditions upon which the notion of the political event depend and the centrality of particularity to his project avoids a Marxian teleology. It is by no means certain that this revolutionary moment will come, or that it will come from a certain place. Indeed, the moment that Badiou hopes for relies on the actions of real people in real situations—it opens up the possibility of radical change in every situation, allowing access to the universal and the true experience of what it means to be a human.

In the end, Badiou's political theory opens up the political as much as it constrains it. While the conditions for the political event are constrictive, the political situation is almost omnipresent. Badiou's politics is a politics of action within situations, not of general rules, transcendental maxims, or principles that allow for sitting on the sidelines. The reader of Badiou is left with the excitement that comes from hearing that the time is now, and that abstract principles of justice and equality and their exegesis cannot be left to their own devices and expected to change what-there-is in the world of politics. Where Badiou stumbles is in his inability to offer a clear explanation of how a politics of events could be stabilized without becoming institutionalized and betraying political truth. Ultimately, the possibilities that are opened up by Badiou's conceptualization of politics as a radical unification of thought and practice with the promise of continual progress towards truth at the expense of political opinion

should prove an overpowering temptation for the political theorist and political philosopher concerned with the place of truth in contemporary politics and political discourse.

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