

## EMBLEMS AND CUTS: PHILOSOPHY IN AND AGAINST HISTORY

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*Alain Badiou's theory of the subject has consistently opposed a vision of History as meaning and totality, for the sake of an internal, subjective and discontinuous grasp of the periodisation of political "sequences." This article examines the theoretical trajectory that leads Badiou to dislocate the historical dialectic, generating a comprehension of political time which is no longer bound to an ordered matrix of expression and development; it also considers Badiou's relation to various strands of anti-humanist anti-historicism and tackles the theoretical tensions that inhere in his disjunction of nature and history. The article concludes by discussing the effect of Badiou's notion of periodisation on the very historicity and mutability of his own philosophical apparatus, and the immanent threat posed to his thinking of the event by an 'absolute historicism.'*

In his 1997 novel, *Calme bloc ici-bas*, Alain Badiou tells the story of Julien Oldenay, Professor of the Philosophy of History in the imagined country of Prémontré—a country set apart from that of the reader not simply by fictive space but by its time and calendars, born of founding, constitutive events and, therefore, incommensurable with our own. The tale is one of 44 that make up approximately half of the novel, all of them beginning with classic *incipits* such as “*C'est l'histoire de ...*,” “*Je conte de ...*,” “*Ce conte est ...*” and in this case a simple “Once upon a time ...,” “*Il était une fois ...*” The irreverent portrayal of Oldenay is indicative of Badiou's philosophical instincts when it comes to history, as both concept and discipline. Aside from his unkempt appearance, Oldenay is portrayed as combining a certain degree of self-satisfaction with a “chronic intellectual hesitation,” as well as a rhetoric marked by nuance, retraction and interminable self-criticism. Lecturing on the history of Prémontré, Oldenay tentatively declares:

... [T]his History, if we provisionally accept that the word “History” is legitimate, which would require elaborate argumentation, I would say, with all the precautions that this concept de-

mands of us, that it is very clearly dialectical. Of course, “very clearly” is a manner of speech, since the History of Prémontré is anything but clear. And as I have already said, “dialectical” is also a manner of speech, until we have distinguished between the seven possible senses of the word ...<sup>1</sup>

Oldenay perseveres in these comical, scholastic convolutions. Among Oldenay’s students, there is one, David Monvoisin, who intends to put a twist in this infinitely qualified and typologically differentiated dialectic: “It seemed to him,” writes Badiou, “that one could ‘cut’ through the conceptual uncertainties of his professor by mentioning some symbolic events, on the basis of which one could then reconstruct, without looking for a continuous characterisation, the general sense of Prémontré. He fixes his grey gaze, his thin athlete’s beauty, on Julien Oldenay, and all of a sudden asks him if “dialectics” should not be understood in terms of the contrast of violent cuts, or emblems.”<sup>2</sup> Monvoisin then draws such punctual emblems from the history of Prémontré, in the form of a series of events and dates, which are then followed by the consternation of the other students and Oldenay’s own rigorously inconclusive reply, which slowly lulls our young, radical dialectician to sleep.

In more than one respect this vignette dramatises one of the central stakes in Alain Badiou’s decades-long confrontation with the concept of history. Mediated by the heterodox allegiance to Marxism that still marks much of his thought, this is, of course, the problem of dialectics—to be understood, at least in a first moment, as a dialectic of the break and the period of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>3</sup> But, of course, it can never suffice to juxtapose the cautious professor’s dialectics of continuity and hesitation to the impetuous student’s dialectics of emblematic violence. Even if we opt for the latter, it behoves us to ask what new notions of continuity and periodisation are generated by an emphasis on the break, what are the internal criteria of these “cuts” that Badiou-

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Calme bloc ici-bas* (Paris: P.O.L., 1997), 302.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 23. The choice between the break and the period, discontinuity or continuity marks, according to Jameson, “an absolute historiographic beginning, that cannot be justified by the nature of the historical material or evidence, since it organizes all such material or evidence in the first place.”

Monvoisin speaks of, and indeed what concept (if any) of history may be reconstructed in their wake. To begin, we need to interrogate the manner in which historicity and temporality have been affected by Badiou's recastings of the dialectic—a question that cannot avoid some assessment of the legacy of Hegelianism within Badiou's philosophy. Secondly, the issue of a dialectics of periodisation, which emerges out of Badiou's confrontation with Hegel in his 1982 *Theory of the Subject*, should be confronted both with Badiou's stance vis-à-vis the existence or otherwise of "objective" historical periods (ages, centuries, or even meta-historical categories such as "modernity") and his thinking regarding the periodisation that is immanent in the trajectory of a subject. Third, and following from this issue of periodisation, the conflictual articulation and scission of politics and history needs to be considered, together with the diverging status of history as viewed from the vantage points of philosophy and of politics (or other truth procedures). Fourth, we must address the question of how Badiou's struggle with the question of history is affected by his demarcations (which are often also appropriations) from his intellectual forebears and contemporaries, namely, Sartre, Althusser and Foucault.

I would like to tackle this last question first by exploring Badiou's stance vis-à-vis accounts of historical ruptures that do not identify the bearers of such ruptures (or of their systematic consequences) as subjects, that is, positions that adopt the theme of transcendental transformations but avoid the formalism of decision and militancy. This is a matter taken up by Badiou in a recent paper on Foucault, tellingly subtitled "Continuity/Discontinuity." In dealing with Foucault's own archaeological treatment of epistemic discontinuities, Badiou qualifies such a thinking of history as fundamentally non-philosophical.<sup>4</sup> Why? To begin with, because of Foucault's disdain for great names and great inventions—his construction of refined archival periodisations in which Descartes features as a footnote and Marx as a minor Ricardian economist. Alluding to the figure of the eighteenth century emerging from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Badiou starkly proposes that such a history is unacceptable for a philosophy which, by his definition, is concerned with the eternity and transmissibility of revolutionary truths. One of the insistent themes of Badiou's thinking—most prevalent perhaps in the first lesson from his book *The Century*—is that historical time (in the

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, "Foucault: continuité / discontinuité" in *Le célibataire: Revue de psychanalyse* 9, 2004. Quoted from the original manuscript.

guise of periods, epochs, ages, or indeed events) only exists for philosophy to the extent that it presents singular but immortal (atemporal) truths, moments of subjective exception that explode their spatio-temporal particularity and are available for universalisation. Indeed, philosophy itself is defined as the exercise of sheltering the heterogeneous truths of a given “time,” of rendering these plural and singular truths compossible. Thus, it is in a sense up to philosophy to produce a time, to give rise to the concept of a period in which certain truths are contemporaneous to one another, in a kind of localised network of universalities (of the kind that might conjoin Einstein, Cantor, Lenin, Picasso and Freud, for instance ...). Thus, an eighteenth century filled with minor but momentous scientists, infamous men and imperceptible, clandestine transformations, but deprived of Lavoisier or Lagrange, Rousseau or Goethe, is simply in Badiou’s eyes a non-philosophical century. It is worth noting here the preponderance in Badiou’s concept of history not just of the emblematic dates so dear to his character Monvoisin, but of proper names. Much could indeed be said, especially at the level of the thinking of eventality delineated in *Being and Event*, of the periodising function of proper names (and of their necessary duality: Freud/Lacan; Marx/Lenin; or even Plato/Badiou...) as representatives of the unrepresentable, opaque markers of the transcendental transformations that so preoccupy Badiou. But if, as Jacques Rancière noted, “the revolution in historical science [carried out by the likes of Bloch, Febvre and Braudel] wanted precisely to revoke the primacy of events and proper names for the sake of long durations and the life of the anonymous,”<sup>5</sup> then Badiou’s operation, within the field of philosophy, constitutes a kind of partial counter-revolution, albeit one that retains a considerable dose of anonymity within the constitution of the subject and also eschews talk of motives and intentions. Having said that, it is worth keeping in mind the extent to which Badiou’s attachment to names and events obliges him into certain narrative gestures seemingly alien to his overall formalising drive. This might indicate the degree to which his thinking too is determined by the poetics of history, understood as, to quote Rancière once more, the “power of articulation of names and events which is linked to the ontological indeterminacy of the story [*récit*].”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Les mots de l’histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

But, possibly because of the impact of the likes of Braudel,<sup>7</sup> and even more strongly, of his own past, but never repudiated, Marxist allegiances, it does not seem that for Badiou history as a discipline could be conceived in terms of the singularity of the articulation between names and events. This is why he thinks that Foucault, as a non-philosophical thinker of singularities, in the end cannot be co-opted by what Badiou sardonically refers to as the “terrible union of historians,” *le terrible syndicat des historiens*. For history appears to Badiou first and foremost as a search for regularities, which, incorporating a reflection on time (versus Foucault’s immersion of temporal forms into the “spaces” of discourse) has as its “central formal object ... the State/society couple” (where Foucault’s guiding couple is instead the transversal articulation of power/knowledge).<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as Badiou links the very concept of the State to the fundamentally conservative logic of knowledge and representation—such that the State is a domain for him devoid of truth or subjectivity—this appears at first as a kind of indictment, a drastic (and we might even say idealist) separation between history, on the one hand, and philosophy and subjectivity, on the other.

In his assessment of Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended*, Badiou salutes Foucault’s attempt to move beyond the epistemic discontinuities set out in *The Order of Things*, and to introduce, in the wake of the events of ’68, an element of genealogical continuity predicated on the notion of subjective struggles. According to Badiou, Foucault’s later texts can be read in terms of the desire to think politics and history together, and of thinking their bond without subsuming it under the classical categories of sovereignty or the Marxist critique of political economy. Badiou’s negative judgment of this attempt, however, is based on the idea that in the last instance Foucault cannot surpass the horizon that subordinates both politics and history—or, more precisely, the historicity of politics—to the paradigm of the State. Foucault’s turn to strategy as the binding concept between politics and history—founded, in the narrative of *Society Must Be Defended*, on the convergence of historical narratives of struggle and the bio-political transformation of the State into an agency for the government and management of life (a convergence which is in turn anchored in the concept of “race”)—fails, according to

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, “Some Replies to a Demanding Friend”, tr. A. Toscano in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. P. Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> “Foucault: continuité/discontinuité”.

Badiou, to fulfill Foucault's own philosophical desideratum, which consists in being able to think the very activity of politics from a subjective point of view. In other words, Foucault's two equations, according to which politics = the State = power, and history = war, end up, in Badiou's estimation, subordinating the invention of political forms to the train of historical becoming. Badiou's indictment, which resonates with a very significant bone of contention within the Marxist tradition<sup>9</sup>, is that Foucault collapses into historicism. The consequence of such a historicism is that, having stuck politics in the narrow space between "the theory of powers and the tactics of struggles," Foucault is incapable of producing "an affirmative theory of politics"—of politics defined by Badiou as an "irreducible thought/practice."<sup>10</sup>

This theme of anti-historicism, echoing in part Althusser's famous critique of Gramsci in *Reading Capital*, is one that has marked much of Badiou's thinking of politics. In his very sympathetic treatment, in *Metapolitics*, of *Anthropology of the Name*, a book by his friend and political comrade Sylvain Lazarus, Badiou is most explicit in linking the aim of thinking the affirmative and irreducible singularity of politics (or more precisely, of a political sequence) to a critique of historicism and indeed a separation from history itself, of the kind that might indeed warrant Hallward's estimation that Badiou's philosophy is grounded in "the radical subtraction of politics from history altogether."<sup>11</sup> According to Lazarus then, "it is only possible to think the singularity of a thought by evacuating time."<sup>12</sup> The reason for this stark verdict is that predicating the singularity of thought and politics on time introduces a dimension of heteronomy, such that politics is constantly obliged to refer to something (a context, a base, a motor...) beyond itself, leading to a capture or reduction of that very dimension of singularity that was sought in the first place. This politics of singularity is not simply pitted against the recuperative dialectics of totality proper to a Hegelian lineage but also repudiates historical-materialist critique, which, according to Lazarus, undermines Hegelian absolute-subjective time by making it circulate be-

<sup>9</sup> See Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism" in *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 2: *The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> "Foucault: continuité/discontinuité".

<sup>11</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, tr. J. Barker (London: Verso, 2003), 35.

tween two heterogeneous realms (objective-material and ideological-subjective), and is therefore incapable of thinking singularity. The temporal substance of historical change is thus replaced with a primacy of names (such as “worker”) that determine the singularity of a politics. As Badiou puts it, in Lazarus there is an “abolition of time by the name.” And yet, as Rancière suggests, the names of politics cannot simply be sundered from their articulation with events and, therefore, from their affinity with some notion of time. Hence, the prominence in the thinking of both Lazarus and Badiou of the notion of a sequence, to be understood in the first place as a temporality that is immanent to the singularity of a politics. As Lazarus himself puts it, “the work of identification [of a singular political thought] is carried out through the delimitation of a sequence and its dating.”<sup>13</sup> Whence a certain calendrical obsession that almost replaces a traditional concern with political history, and returns us to the “emblematic” thinking (or “monumental” history, to use a Nietzschean term) dramatized in the tale from *Calme bloc ici-bas*.

This problem of the linkage between history and politics, and of the capacity for the latter to achieve real autonomy as a truth procedure, is also the guiding idea in Badiou’s reckoning with Althusser, whose seminal attack on historicism does not suffice, in Badiou’s eyes, to provide him with the means to develop a real thinking of insurrectionary and emancipatory subjectivity, which is to say, a thinking of politics. Whence Badiou’s question: “How are we to distinguish politics from the science of processes without a subject, that is to say, from the science of history, in the form of historical materialism? How do we distinguish politics from (the) science (of historical materialism) without, quite obviously, reducing it to ideology?”<sup>14</sup> For Badiou, Althusser’s solution is dependent on a certain understanding of philosophy, which, as an agent of demarcation, is aimed at indicating the space of politics (the space of the subject, of militancy, of contingency and antagonism) without allowing it to be fully colonised by the theory of science or the logic of ideology. “Philosophy is guarded from the danger of confusing history and politics (therefore science and politics) on account of itself lacking history. Philosophy authorises a non-historicist perception of political events.”<sup>15</sup> This last sentence provides us with an apposite characterisation of an im-

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *Metapolitics*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Metapolitics*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> *Metapolitics*, 62.

portant aspect of Badiou's own research program. Significantly, Badiou's own attempt at generating an anti-humanist theory of the subject was first announced in his 1967 review of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, which ended on the promissory note of complementing the Althusserian grasp of the epistemological break constituted by Marx's discovery of the continent of history, with a militant and subjective focus on a Sartrean "theory of historical sets."<sup>16</sup> However, though Badiou commends Sartre for holding fast to the question of the subject in the middle of structuralist "objectivism," and for providing guidance in the thinking of a radical upsurge of emancipatory novelty, he cannot ignore Sartre's own historicism, which is to say, his temporalised thinking of social totality. Thus, in the pamphlet he wrote on the occasion of Sartre's death in 1980, Badiou looks back on his old mentor, and more specifically on the project outlined in the massive *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in the following terms:

But in the end we can say the following: the Subject, which is necessarily in question today is not the subject of History. The idea of a historical totalisation is not admissible. It is the political subject, an altogether particular subject, which is in question. So Sartre's question is not exactly the right one.... But Sartre remains an awakener of Marxism. He precisely invites us to reflect on politics and on History, because he has taken to its limit a purely historical and revolutionary conception of Marxism.<sup>17</sup>

In the work produced following the high period of his "militant" philosophical production, Badiou appears to radicalise the Althusserian attack on historicism and on theories of expressive totality and jettison the very notion of historical totality altogether, severing him from much of what would pass for Western Marxism. In *Theory of the Subject*, the text that concerns me here, this detotalisation is extracted from a heterodox or anti-synthetic reading of Hegel, as well as from Lacan's theses on the Real as the impasse of the symbolic. In more recent work, it will depend more heavily on mathematical logic and the set-theoretical axio-

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<sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou, "Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique" in *Critique* 240 1967, 466–7. See also Nina Power, "Towards an Anthropology of Infinity: Badiou and the Political Subject" in *Cosmos and History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2006, 186–209.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Éditions Potemkine, 1980), 8, 16.



matic, though Hegelianism will remain both the target and touchstone of Badiou's thinking.<sup>18</sup> In a painstaking endeavour to disarticulate the circularities and redundancies of the Hegelian dialectic, Badiou seeks to generate a materialist dialectic that is capable of including the unpredictable irruptions and interventions of organised subjects, to affirm radical novelty at the very point where the Hegelian dialectic maintained not just a structure of expression but one of recollection, such that any novelty is always-already a kind of unfolding, if not a mere return. It is this attempt to force political novelty into the dialectic that obliges Badiou to face the question of periodisation, of the time, and indeed the timing of politics. The paradox that dominates this theoretical moment, and to some extent his more recent work as well, can perhaps be formulated as follows: in order to avert the absorption of politics by History, Badiou must think through the historicity proper to politics.

Ontologically speaking, the requirement of a periodising dialectic is founded on the statement that "history does not exist," for it would otherwise be a "figure of the whole,"<sup>19</sup> and the whole is seen by Badiou, already a thinker of the radicality of transformation, as synonymous with a ban on the new. Moreover, such a detotalisation is explicitly concerned with the issue of communism, which as we saw, dominates, at least in a first phase, Badiou's thinking on history. The inexistence of history-qua-totally is explicitly linked to a Maoist conception of communism, which refuses to consider it as a domain of the pure and simple realisation of equality, as an end of history—and which thus opens onto the ineluctability of periodisation and the need to think the trajectories of the subject (what Badiou refers to, following Lacan, as the subject's "topology"). The lesson that Badiou draws from this militant critique of totality is summed up in the words: "Periodise, and move beyond."<sup>20</sup> From success to failure to new success to new failure, the political subject journeys through linked but discontinuous conjunctures, every one of which is relative to the sequence in question, such that the subject is not allowed any horizon of final victory. Making show of a kind of "Beckettian" communism, Badiou thus declares: "Every victory is the beginning of a

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<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, "Hegel and the Whole" in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. R. Brassier and A. Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004), 227–38.

<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

new type of failure.”<sup>21</sup> Struggles may be final, but final relative to the sequence, and this finality is the internal mode of historicisation or temporalisation proper to a given sequence, what Badiou calls its “saturation.”<sup>22</sup> This is the sense in which the theory of the subject as a theory of Marxist politics (as opposed to historical materialism) depends for Badiou on overturning the traditional image according to which Marxism is founded on a thinking of capitalist society as a totality. If history as totality—as the history of the totality and the totality of history—does not exist, what is the element in which the subject traces the arduous path of its novelties (and its destructions)? For Badiou only historical epochs, or better “historicisations” are given, not History.

The subject of these historicisations, wrested from the repetition that governs any order, is identified by Badiou with novelty, with the struggle between the old and the new. This forms what we could call the heroic frame underlying much of his thought. As Badiou emblematically declares, “every rightness (*justesse*) and every justice are in principle novelties, and everything that repeats itself is unjust and inexact.”<sup>23</sup> Such a novelty can only be attested by its consequences, and these consequences can only be gauged in terms of how a novelty traverses and transforms (or destroys) the situation or world whence it arose. Looking beyond the dates that punctuate a sequence, there is thus a need of thinking the historicity internal to a truth procedure or a process of subjectivation. In the earlier works, this can be found in the theme of purification, such that “in every contradiction, force manifests its impurity by the aleatory process of its purification.”<sup>24</sup> In the more recent writings, this temporality or historicity is provided by the extraction of a generic set, which is impervious to (or technically speaking, “indiscernible”) to the knowledge of the situation, and which generates a truth of the situation in what Badiou refers to as a “future perfect” (*futur antérieur*).

Though the temporality or historicity immanent to a subjective sequence has perhaps not received sufficient attention in Badiou’s work—excepting perhaps his two recent treatments of the Paris Com-

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See the interview with Alain Badiou in *Carceraglio*, available at: [http://scentedgardensfortheblind.blogspot.com/2006\\_10\\_15\\_scentedgardensfortheblind\\_archive.html#116103479719156657](http://scentedgardensfortheblind.blogspot.com/2006_10_15_scentedgardensfortheblind_archive.html#116103479719156657).

<sup>23</sup> *Théorie du sujet*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

mune and the Cultural Revolution, now collected in the book *Polemics*—as I have noted already his thinking has struggled quite consistently with the issue of periodisation. Indeed, in *Théorie du sujet* the very task of history is defined as that of finding “the right period.” Badiou thus presents periodisation in the *Théorie du sujet* as a dialectical alternative to the Hegelian absolute, understood as a thinking that closes the dialectical process. According to Badiou, the Hegelian notion of the absolute depends on the idea that a “dialectical sequence approaches its closure when the practical process carries the theory of its own trajectory (*sil-lage*).”<sup>25</sup> But, it is vis-à-vis this question of closure that dialectics splits into two. The Hegelian option is that of “theological circularity, which, presupposing the absolute in the germs of the beginning, leads us back to this very beginning once all the stages of its effectuation, exit-from-itself, or alienation have been deployed.” It is a theological circularity, which finds its explicit model in the relationship between God and his Son, such that the sundering of the former is ultimately evidence and guarantee of his eternal unity and totality. The path of periodisation is instead marked by the violence of discontinuity, by a “pure passage from one sequence to the other, in an irreconcilable and unsuturable lag, in which the True of the first stage is only given as a condition of the fact of the second, and leads to nothing but the deployment of this fact.... The second sequence gets into gear when the condition for the theoretical balance-sheet of the first are ready.”<sup>26</sup>

Albeit enriched by his attempt to recast the Hegelian dialectic as a dialectic of irreducible division, Badiou’s model of periodisation here is explicitly political. It is a matter of grasping, from within the history of Marxist politics, how revolutionary politics is itself periodised by the non-expressive relation between sequences. This discontinuity marks the fact that we are not dealing with a seamless and cumulative tradition, where later sequences would simply learn from the lessons of the old, but with the notion that it is in the impasses and impossibilities of a previous sequence, a first moment, that a second sequence intervenes, generating the kind of novelty which does not simply solve the problems of the first, but generates an entirely new evaluation of the requirements of novelty and emancipation. It is this creative retroaction, according to Badiou, that permits us to periodise, and to understand the act of periodisation as im-

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

manent in the deployment of a subject (and thus incommensurable with any objective chronology). The dialectic of cumulative completion and resolution is thus replaced by a dialectic of failure and innovation, where what stood as an impasse and remained unthinkable in a previous sequence is not the germ, but merely the site for the inventions of a later one. It is thus that “Lenin’s Bolshevik party is the active bearer of the failures of the Paris Commune. This is what Lenin marks by dancing on the snow when power has been held in Moscow in 1917 for one more day [73] than in Paris in 1871. It is the break of October which periodises the Paris Commune, turning a page of the history of the world.”<sup>27</sup> This periodisation, made up of “deferred and differing retroactions,” whereby nothing can be deduced in the passage from the first sequence to the second, is at the heart of Badiou’s attempt to recast dialectics in the *Théorie du sujet*. Against the single time of the Hegelian dialectic, Badiou, by taking the evaluations of the Commune by Marx and Lenin respectively as his material, points us to the splits internal to the very notion of periodisation, and *a fortiori*, to that of novelty:

Every periodisation must embrace its dialectical double time, to contain, for instance, October ’17 as the second, and provisionally final, scansion of the balance-sheet [of the Paris Commune]. Whence the embarrassment of historians: according to the relation between force and place, the Commune is new (Marx). According to the relation between the objective and the subjective, it is instead October that is new, and the Commune is that edge of the old whose practical perception, by purifying force, partakes in the engendering of its novelty.<sup>28</sup>

In other words the dialectical criteria of periodisation are themselves split (at least) into two, thus demonstrating the complexities of subjective periodisation—which here depends on the retroactive intervention of the Bolshevik sequence (a thinking of the party and of the subjective “art of insurrection”)—and its irreducibility to any criteria of objective chronology.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. See also the more recent appraisal in “The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics” in *Polemics*, tr. S. Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 257–90.

<sup>28</sup> *Théorie du sujet*, 64–5.

Though, as I have noted, the problem of periodisation, and of the articulation between politics and history, is one that has remained with Badiou, the more recent work, with its attempt to bolster a *Theory of the Subject* with a set-theoretical ontological infrastructure, has found itself obliged to grapple with, and substantially reinvent, the demarcation between nature and history. Without delving overmuch into the technical details, “nature” in *Being and Event* (1988), is understood as the form of homogeneity of the (structured) multiple, or multiple-in-situation. History is instead recast by Badiou as a meta-ontological category; it enters the fray with the issue of “what-is-not-being-qua-being,” with the interruption of the natural order, or the excess vis-à-vis the normalcy of nature. In other words, where his earlier *Theory of the Subject* found it necessary to declare the inexistence of history to make room for the discontinuous historicity of periodisations, in *Being and Event* “history” stands for the untotalisable and the singular. As Badiou writes:

The place of thought of that-which-is-not-being is the non-natural; that which is presented other than natural or stable or normal multiplicities. The place of the other-than-being is the abnormal, the unstable, the anti-natural. I will term historical what is thus determined as the opposite of nature.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, whereas even in texts like the recent talk on Foucault, history is equated with a thinking of the State, in *Being and Event*, the category of “history” is used to very different ends, to indicate those multiplicities which are singular, in other words one of whose terms is presented in a situation but not represented by the State (Badiou’s example is that of a “singular” family, one of whose members—a clandestine lodger, for instance—cannot be counted or recognized by the state, understood as the agent of re-presentation). A situation is defined as historical, then, when it includes not just singular multiples but what Badiou calls an “evental site,” to wit a multiple none of whose parts is accounted for in representation.

We might wonder what is the strategy or reasoning behind this equating of history with singularity, especially if we take into account the detotalising character of the dialectic as presented in *Theory of the Subject*. To an extent, this strategy is dictated by the parameters of *Being and*

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<sup>29</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, tr. O. Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 173–4.

*Event* as a historically specific philosophical intervention. Writing in 1988, and no longer preoccupied directly with salvaging a kernel of dialectic novelty from Marxism and Hegelianism, Badiou is really trying to usurp, with the aid of his formidable meta-ontological capture of set theory, the ontological mantle from Heidegger. Hence the new formalisation of the notion of “historicity”: “The multiple-form of historicity is what lies entirely within the instability of the singular; it is that upon which the state’s meta-structure has no hold. It is a point of subtraction from the state’s re-securing of the count.”<sup>30</sup> Where historicity is linked to singularity, “history,” as a non-totalisable domain, is related to the idea of the entirely abnormal multiple, the eventual site—a concept that Badiou had coined in order to maintain the idea of a rational grasp of the sources of emancipatory politics, drawn from the Marxist notion of the proletariat, whilst abdicating any notion of historical totality or direction.<sup>31</sup>

The void of the proletariat as a historical exception is now transferred onto a void in the situation, and history—inasmuch as it is linked to multiples whose elements are unrepresented, excluded—is always in a sense a history of, or from, the void (whilst if we remain within the situation as it is ordinarily represented all we have is knowledge and its repetition). In Badiou’s definition, a “historical situation is therefore, in at least one of its points, on the edge of the void. Historicity is thus presentation at the punctual limits of its being.”<sup>32</sup> History and historicity are thereby withdrawn from the domain of meaning and totality, and rendered over to an interventionist notion of singularity, whereby subjectivity is what forces the unrepresented, that which is foreclosed from the situation, into appearance, in other words, what gives body and voice to what was, viewed from the standpoint of the state of the situation, a nullity. This also means that the Hegelian notion of the absolute in history, of an absolute history—already attacked by the earlier theory of periodisation—is further distanced. As Badiou writes, in his most succinct definition of the nature/history dichotomy:

Nature is absolute, historicity relative. One of the profound characteristics of singularities is that they can always be normalized:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See my “Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou’s Turn” in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. J. Bidet and S. Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> *Being and Event*, 177.

as is shown, moreover, by socio-political History; any evental site can, in the end, undergo a state normalization. However, it is impossible to singularize natural normality. If one admits that for there to be historicity evental sites are necessary, then the following observation can be made: history can be naturalized, but nature cannot be historicized. There is a striking dissymmetry here, which prohibits—outside the framework of the ontological thought of the pure multiple—any unity between nature and history.<sup>33</sup>

But this very notion of the relativity of history is what allows Badiou to incorporate, into the speculative fabric of *Being and Event*, the declaration of *Theory of the Subject*, according to which “history does not exist.” For in this new schema, there is no such thing as History conceived as a trans-situational site for the emergence of the new, as a global context of subjectivation. As argued above, historicity can only be defined situationally, never intrinsically (unlike nature): “there are situated evental sites, but there is no evental situation.”<sup>34</sup> This is why the criterion for defining a historical situation is always “local” according to Badiou.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the idea of an absolute or total domain of history is chimerical, since it would be the idea, in Badiou’s terms, of a domain, a region of absolute abnormality. That is why he can declare: “We can think the historicity of certain multiples, but we cannot think a History.”<sup>36</sup> This thesis is then at the heart of Badiou’s distancing from what he now regards as the largely imaginary idea of revolution—as the “idea of an overturning whose origin would be a state of the totality”—and the obverse move to what he calls a “differential topology of action” in which every “radical transformational action originates in a point, which, inside a situation, is an evental site.”<sup>37</sup> Though this seems to radically limit the purview of history, there is a sense in which Badiou seems to resuscitate a notion of history as revelation, a notion which is far more immediate than Hegel’s expressive dialectic of historical revelation. As Badiou writes in *Being and Event*, inasmuch as history and historicity are linked

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

to the pivotal notion of the evental site, it is “solely in the point of history, the representative precariousness of evental sites, that it will be revealed, via the chance of a supplement, that being-multiple in-consists.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, it is only in “history” that the inconsistency which Badiou argues is at the heart of being makes itself felt through the irruption of novelty and the construction of the generic by a subject. This means, however, that history is once again—albeit outside of any figure of totality, as a kind of flash and aftershock—the arena for the revelation of being (inasmuch as what is not being qua being, the illegality of the event, is the only thing that allows the thinking of being qua being, i.e., inconsistency).

Finally, and to complicate even further the history of Badiou’s relation to history—which as we have seen is also full of anticipations, retractions, and impasses, which is to say of periodisations—we must note that ontology itself (which is to say mathematics) is itself open to historicity, in a way which we could provocatively say turns Badiou into something like an absolute historicist. As he writes in *Being and Event*: “Our goal is to establish the meta-ontological thesis that mathematics is the historicity of the discourse on being qua being.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, far from being a static eternal formalisation of abstract being, ontology (mathematics) is itself structured by radical events. Indeed, it was one of these events, the invention of irrational numbers against the background of Pythagorean mathematics, that in Badiou’s *Being and Event* served as the paragon of subjectivation, understood as that which forces an impossible into the field of the possible, and draws the consequences of this new inclusion.

The real is the impossible, to wit the resistance of the innumerable, of what is not a natural number. The subject presents, in the failure of the imaginary [the philosophical wish for the simple order of natural numbers], the numerable to the innumerable: it effectuates itself as the mathematical desire to number the innumerable, to legalise the impossible.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> *Théorie du sujet*, 219.



Badiou's own thinking of periodisation, not just of mathematics, but of politics, is explicitly founded on this model, on this gesture of historicising mathematics and mathematising history, in order to retain both the absoluteness of truth and the contingency of its emergence.

I want to allude to at least one of the problems opened up by such a powerful gesture, when its own criteria are dialectically applied to itself. In a superb commentary on some of the possible impasses and paradoxes generated by such a historicisation of ontology via mathematics, Quentin Meilliasoux, author of *After Finitude*, defines the fundamental tenets of Badiou's philosophy in terms of two statements, to wit that "mathematics is ontology" and that "every truth is post-evental." The consequence of the first statement, as noted, is rather momentous for the relation between philosophy and history:

To assert that mathematics is ontology comes down to attributing to ontology a history, and a history which is moreover independent of any philosophical postulation. This history is the history of mathematics, which no one can anticipate, which makes ontological novelties to come into essentially unpredictable emergences.<sup>41</sup>

According to the second statement, since all truths are post-evental, the very structure of the historicity of mathematics will remain faithful to the schema of eventual truth—as laid out by Badiou's philosophy. However, Meilliasoux argues, the tension between the two statements—born of the fact, confronted by Badiou himself, that not all mathematical ontologies are compatible with his thinking of truth—results in the subordination, in Badiou's work, of the first to the second. In other words, the philosophy of the event filters mathematics, and legislates in a way over how the history of ontology may "turn out." Meilliasoux instead proposes to invert the subordination and—by affirming the tendency in Badiou's work to absolutising the history of ontology—to problematise the very thinking of history borne by his most recent intellectual production. The option proposed by Meilliasoux consists in saying that "since nothing can be anticipated about the becoming of ontology—including its future compatibility with the philosophy of the event—the eventual status of truths itself

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<sup>41</sup> Quentin Meilliasoux, "Nouveauté et événement" in *Alain Badiou. Penser le multiple*, ed. C. Ramond (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002), 39.

must be able to succumb under the weight of a new ontology” (which is to say that ontological novelties might no longer be truths).<sup>42</sup> This possibility of a novelty that dislocates Badiou’s own concept of novelty (qua post-evental subjectivation and construction of a generic truth) is a risk which a philosophy that began by breaking open the Hegelian circle for the sake of an unpredictable spiral of periodisations cannot avoid. It is perhaps in this sense that Badiou’s philosophy, by holding fast to its anti-historicist impetus in order to save the singularity of the event and the emancipatory potentials of novelty, cannot help but confront the challenge and threat that an absolute historicism poses to the concept of truth.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> In Jameson’s terms, this designates the Marxian scandal of “the conjunction between an absolute scientific truth and its enabling situation in contingent, empirical history.” “Marxism and Historicism”, 164.