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Beyond formalisation an interview Alain Badiou

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introduction

peter hallward

Born in Rabat in 1937, a student of Althusser's at the École Normale Supérieure, Badiou taught philosophy at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes/Saint Denis) from 1969 to 1999 before returning to the École Normale to take up Althusser's former position. Much of Badiou's life has been shaped by his dedication to the consequences of the May 1968 rebellion in Paris. A leading member of the *Union des jeunesses communistes de France (marxistes-léninistes)* in the 1960s, he remains with Sylvain Lazarus and Natacha Michel at the centre of *L'Organisation Politique*, an organisation dedicated, at a principled "distance from the state," to the pursuit of a "politics without party" – one concerned with direct popular intervention in a wide range of issues including immigration, labour and housing. He is the author of several novels and plays as well as more than a dozen philosophical works, of which the most of important are *Being and Event* (1988), *Logiques des mondes* (forthcoming 2005) and *Théorie du sujet* (1982).

Very broadly speaking, Badiou seeks to link, on the one hand, a formal, axiomatic and egalitarian conception of thought (as opposed to any close association of thought with language, with the interpretation of meanings or the description of objects), with, on the other hand, a theory of militant and discontinuous innovation (as opposed to a theory of continuous change or a dialectical theory of mediation). The two principles connect, from time to time, in exceptional affirmative sequences through which an instance of pure conviction comes to acquire a universal validity. Such sequences are what Badiou calls

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*translated by bruno bosteels
and alberto toscano*

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"truths." Truths are affirmations to which in principle we can all actively *hold* true, in excess of our ability to prove that what we thereby affirm is correct or justified in any demonstrable sense. Truths are not to be confused with matters of knowledge or opinion, they are not subject to established criteria of adequation or verification. As Badiou explains in detail in his major work to date, *Being and Event*, truths are militant processes which, beginning from a specific time and place within a situation, pursue the step-by-step transformation of that situation in line with new forms of broadly egalitarian principles.

Badiou's most general goal can be described, in other words, as the effort to explore the potential for profound, universalisable innovation in any situation. Every such innovation can only

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begin with some sort of exceptional break with the status quo, an “event.” Though events are ephemeral and leave no trace, what distinguishes an event from other incidents that might ordinarily take place in a situation is the fact that its implications, themselves illuminated by the consequences of previous events, make it impossible for those who affirm them to carry on as before. An event can occur at any time but not in just any place; events are located at the edge of whatever qualifies as “void” or indistinguishable in the situation, i.e. in that part of the situation where for literally fundamental reasons the prevailing forms of discernment and recognition cease to have any significant purchase. A truth then expands out of this “evental site” [*site événementiel*] in so far as it elicits the militant conviction of certain individuals who develop the revolutionary implications of the event, and by doing so constitute themselves as the subjects of its truth. A subject is thus anyone carried by his or her fidelity to the consequences, as rigorous as they are haphazard; the laborious, case-by-case application of these consequences will then serve to transform the entire way the situation organises and represents itself, in keeping with the implications of the event.

An ordinary individual or “some-one” only becomes a genuine subject (or part of a genuine collective subject) in so far as he or she is caught up in a radically transformative procedure of this kind. By the same token (for reasons sketched in Badiou’s most accessible short work, *Ethics* (1993)), subjects only remain subjects in so far as their fidelity is in turn equipped to resist the various sorts of corruption it must inevitably face: fatigue, confusion and dogmatism. Every genuinely universal principle has its origin in an active and precisely situated *taking* of sides; every true affirmation of the universal interest begins as divisive, and persists without concern for the “ethical” coordination of opinions or differences. A subject, in short, is someone who continues to adhere to a cause whose ongoing implications relate indifferently to all members of the situation, and which thereby considers these members as elements of a properly indiscernible or “generic” collection.

Badiou distinguishes four general fields of

truth, or four domains of subjectivation (which in turn operate as the four generic “conditions” of philosophy itself): politics, science, art and love. These are the only four fields in which a pure subjective commitment is possible, i.e. one indifferent to procedures of interpretation, representation or verification. Badiou provides his most concise overview of the generic procedures in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989). True politics is a matter of collective mobilisation guided by a “general will” in something like Rousseau’s sense, and not the business of bureaucratic administration or the socialised negotiation of interests or identities. Within the limits of the private sphere, genuine love begins in the wake of an unpredictable encounter that escapes the conventional representation of sexual roles, continues as a fidelity to the consequences of that encounter, and is sustained through an unrepresentable exposure to what Lacan famously described as the impossibility of a sexual relationship. True art and true science proceed in somewhat the same way, through a searching experimental fidelity to a line of enquiry opened up by a new discovery or break with tradition. Mathematics is then the most “truthful” component of science because, thanks to its strictly axiomatic foundation, it is the most firmly abstracted from any natural or objective mediation, the most removed from our habitual ways of thinking, and by the same token the most obviously indifferent to the identity of whoever comes to share in its articulation.

For the same reason, Badiou explains in the difficult opening meditations of *Being and Event*, mathematics is the only discourse suited to the literal articulation of pure being-as-being, or being considered without regard to being-this or being-that, being without reference to particular qualities or ways of being: being that simply *is*. More precisely, mathematics is the only discourse suited to the articulation of being as *pure multiplicity*, i.e. a multiplicity subtracted from any unity or unifying process. Only mathematics can think multiplicity considered without any constituent reference to unity. Why? Because the theoretical foundations of mathematics ensure that any unification, any consideration of something as one thing, must be thought

as the *result* of an operation, the operation that treats or counts something as one; by the same token, these foundations oblige us to presume that whatever was thus counted, or unified, is itself not-one, or multiple.¹ A “situation,” as Badiou defines it, is simply any instance of such a counting operation whereby a certain set of individuals or things are identified in some way as members of a coherent collection or set – think, for example, of the way in which citizens count and are counted in national situations, or the way employees count (or do not count) in economic situations, or how students count (or are discounted) in educational situations.

Pure multiplicity itself is a medium in which no decisive change or innovation is possible. Every truth must therefore begin with a break in the fabric of being-as-being – an event is precisely “that which is *not* being-as-being.”² And as Sartre (Badiou’s first and perhaps most influential mentor) understood with particular clarity, truly radical change can in a certain sense only proceed *ex nihilo*, i.e. from something that apparently counts as nothing, something whose being is indistinguishable from non-being, from something uncountable. Every situation includes some such uncountable or empty component: its *void*. In situations which count only property, wealth or consumption, for instance, human capacities which cannot be counted in such terms will remain empty or indiscernible as far as the situation is concerned; so too, within the ordinary routine of situation of parliamentary democracies, will popular political capacities whose expression is indifferent to the business of electoral representation. Marx conceives of the proletariat, to take the most obvious case, as the void of the developing capitalist situation. An event, then, will be something that takes place at the *edge* of its situation’s void, within the orbit of that element that itself seems to have no attribute other than this void – that working class that “has nothing other than its chains,” for instance. What Badiou’s philosophy is designed to demonstrate, in short, is the coherence of processes of radical transformation that begin via an encounter with precisely that which appears as uncountable in a situation, and that continue as the development of ways of counting or grouping

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the elements belonging to the situation according to no other criteria than the simple fact that they are all, equally and indistinctly, members of the situation.

As a result of the non-ontological status of the event, being and truth cannot be said in one and the same discourse. By consigning the tasks of ontology to mathematics, Badiou frees philosophy proper from its ultimate coordination with being (a coordination maintained in their different ways by Spinoza, Hegel, Heidegger and Deleuze). Any actively inventive philosophy, Badiou insists, is conditioned by the varied truth procedures operative in its time, rather than by an ultimately timeless mediation on being.

Badiou’s own examples of such truth procedures are varied enough to include both St Paul’s militant conception of an apostolic subjectivity that exists only through proclamation of an event (the resurrection of Christ) of universal import but of no recognisable or established significance, and the Jacobin or Bolshevik fidelity to revolutions that exceed, in their subjective power and generic scope, the various circumstances that contributed to their occurrence. Mallarmé, Schoenberg and Beckett figure prominently among the practitioners of a suitably subtractive or generic art, which is always an effort to devise new kinds of form at the very edge of what the situation considers monstrous or devoid of form. After Galileo and Descartes, Cantor and Cohen demonstrate what inventive scientific formalisation can achieve, at the limits of mathematical consistency.

In the end, every truth is founded only on the fundamental “inconsistency” that Badiou discerns as the exclusive and insubstantial being of any being – the generic being of all that is simply in so far as it is, but that is only *exceptionally* accessible, through the rare commitment of those who become subjects in the wake of its eventual exposure.

notes

1 Very roughly speaking, the general stages of this argument run as follows: (i) being can be thought either in terms of the multiple or the one; (ii) the only coherent conception of being as one ulti-

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mately depends on some instance of the One either as transcendent limit (a One *beyond* being, or God) or as all-inclusive immanence (a cosmos or Nature); (iii) modernity, and in particular modern science, have demonstrated that God is dead, that Nature is not whole, and that the idea of a One-All is incoherent; (iv) therefore, if being can be thought at all, it must be thought as multiple rather than one; (v) only modern mathematics, as founded in axiomatic set theory, is genuinely capable of such thought. See Badiou, *L'Etre et l'événement*, mediations 1–8.

2 Badiou, *L'Etre et l'événement* 193.

beyond formalisation: an interview¹

alain badiou

Peter Hallward: We'd like to start with some questions about the book you've just finished on the twentieth century, then talk about your current lecture series on aspects of the present historical moment, before finishing with a few points relating to your major work in progress, Logiques des mondes [forthcoming].

Starting then with The Century:² what is your basic thesis in this book? In particular, can you explain the relationship between the "passion for the real" [passion du réel] you describe as characteristic of the truly inventive or innovative sequences of the last century, and the various programmes of radical formalisation that this passion inspired?

Alain Badiou: I should begin by saying that my lectures on the twentieth century were devised in reaction to the mass of prevailing opinion, against various campaigns regarding the meaning of the last century. In France, the question of the twentieth century has been dominated – in the official record – by the ideas of totalitarianism, of the great massacres, of communism as crime, and the equation of communism with fascism. The twentieth century has been designated as the century of horror and mass crime. My lectures on the twentieth century sought to propose a different version of what happened – different, though not necessarily contrary as regards the facts. It is not a question of opposing facts with other facts, but of finding another path, an inroad or a way of thinking, so as to approach the century. This path had to be constructed. In order to do this, I sought out certain theses that the twentieth century proposed in the realm of thought – theses that would be compatible with the unfolding of the major political, artistic, and scientific experiments that have taken place in this century.

In the end, I identified as the possible centre of the century's experience something I've called

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the passion for the real. What is this passion? It is the will to arrive – at all costs – at a real validation of one's hypotheses or programmes. This passion for the real is a voluntarism. It marks a break with the idea that history carries with it, in its own movement, the realisation of a certain number of promises, prophecies, or programmes. Rather, a real will is needed to arrive at the realisation of this promise or that programme. The nineteenth century was by and large the century of progress, of an idea of progress tied to a certain idea of history. The twentieth century was fundamentally a century of the real, of the will to the real [*la volonté de réel*]. A century in which it was necessary to have precise and practicable projects concerning the transformation of the world.

I then saw that this passion of the real – the idea that things had to take place, here and now, that they had to *come about*, to *realise* themselves – implied a whole series of other notions. For instance, the notion of a new humanity, or that of a total revolutionary overthrow of existing societies, or the creation of a new world, etc. And I saw that these consequences were themselves conditioned by a process of uninterrupted purification of the real. In order to arrive at the real, to produce it, a method was needed to eliminate the old world, to eliminate all the habits and things of old. In my view, a large part of the violence of the century, the extreme political cruelty that has dominated its first sixty years or so, is rooted in the conviction that ultimately no price is too high for an absolute beginning. If it is really a matter of founding a new world, then the price paid by the old world, even in the number of deaths or the quantity of suffering, becomes a relatively secondary question.

In this sense the relation to the real is not a matter of realism, but is instead expressed through a powerful will to formalisation. Indeed, it is a matter of attaining a radical simplification that would allow one to extract the kernel of the opposition between the new and the old in its purest form. One can only extract this kernel by proceeding through a series of extrications or disentanglements, through a series of axiomatic, formalising, and often brutal simplifications that allow one to operate this distinction without

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too many nuances or complications. Because if one re-establishes nuance or complexity, the pure idea of creation and novelty is in turn enfeebled.

The major consequence of my hypothesis is that there is no contradiction, but rather a relation of complementarity, between, on the one hand, the idea that the twentieth century was the century of the passion of the real, and, on the other, the obvious fact that the century's avant-gardes were fundamentally formal ones. The idea that the avant-gardes were concerned with creation in the domain of form is evident in the case of art, but if you think about it it's no less clear in politics. What was called Marxism-Leninism, for instance, when you look at it closely, is nothing but an extremely formalised view of Marxism itself. Today this type of stance is said to be "dogmatic," but in reality it was not lived or practised as a dogma or a belief. Rather, it was lived and practised as an effective process of formalisation. Needless to say, with regard to a large number of issues Leninism proceeded by way of extremely stark simplifications. But these simplifications should not be understood in terms of a stupid dogmatism. In the final analysis, they bear a great affinity to the paintings of Mondrian or Malevich, which are themselves projects that pursue radical simplifications of the project of painting.

You see, I tried to get a sense of the profound unity of the century's aesthetic adventure (understood as an adventure governed by formal abstraction and all its consequences, by defiguration [*défiguration*] and the consequences of defiguration) and the century's political adventure, which was that of a radical and revolutionary simplification guided by the idea of an absolute beginning. We could add that the movement of radical formalisation is equally dominant in the history of mathematics. The creation of modern algebra and general topology is situated in this same space of thought, and was inspired by the effort to begin the whole of mathematics all over again, by way of a complete formalisation.

P.H.: How then are we to understand the opacity, so to speak, introduced by the state appara-

tus (the police, the army) into this political project to formalise or simplify society, to make it transparent? Can this be dismissed as a merely contingent perversion of the communist project?

A.B.: One day, someone should write a new history of the state in the twentieth century, a history that would not entirely subordinate the question to the opposition between democracy and totalitarianism, or between parliamentarism and bureaucracy. I believe that the twentieth century has indeed been the century of state power. But I also believe that the state itself really embodied, in the most extreme instances, something like the omni-potence of creation. We must understand where the *possibility* of these figures of the state comes from – for example, of states of the Stalinist type. It is obviously absurd to reduce these states to their extraordinary police function, a function which they certainly exerted. But we must enquire about the conditions of possibility of these functions. We know very well that a link must be found between the policing and dictatorial pressures, on the one hand, and, on the other, the general system of the subjective factors that made them possible. Everyone knows that in Russia as well as in the rest of the world, the Stalinist state was endowed with a real aura. It was not merely the sinister figure that we otherwise can and should associate with it. Where did this aura come from? I think that the state itself was experienced as the formalisation of absolute novelty, that it was itself an instance of formalisation and thereby also a violently simplified state as regards its operational capacity. Think of the general directives of these states, the five-year plans, the "great leaps forward," the powerful ideological campaigns. This formalising function, which was also one of purification [*épuration*]³ and simplification, is also perfectly evident in what was called the cult of personality, the extraordinary devotion accorded to the supreme leader. This is because this cult is nothing but another formal conviction. It comes down to the idea that the state should be able to present itself in the *simple* figure of a single will. To reduce the state to the figure of a charismatic leader is ultimately an

effort related to the dialectic of singularity and universality: if the objectives of the state are formally universal, if they embody universal emancipation, then the state must itself be absolutely singular. In the end, this absolute singularity is simply the singularity of a single body, a single will, and a single leader. Thus, the dialectic between singularity and universality, considered with respect to an absolutely formal agency [*instance*], ends up – in a way that is consistent and not at all paradoxical – in such Stalinist or otherwise despotic figures of the state.

The problem is that there is obviously something mistaken in this line of reasoning. The truth is that there can never be any genuinely absolute beginning. Everything is ultimately a matter of procedure and labour; truths are always plural and never single or unique [*uniques*] even in their own particular domain, and so on. Consequently, state formalisation (and this will be true of the other formalisations as well) is prey to the real in a way that always partially differs from how it pretends to be. In other words, it differs from what it presents as its own absolute capacity without reserve, it differs from the absolutist character it attributes to its own inauguration, to the unhindered pursuit of its project; it differs in short, from the entire thematic of the resolute march towards socialism. This “march,” in fact, doesn’t exist. There is always only a localised becoming, irreducible to all totalisation, which in turn must be thought only as a singular point within this local becoming.

To my mind, this last remark is of great importance. The formalisation organised by the passion for the real leads to a kind of crushing of the local under the weight of the global. Each and every localisation of the procedure is immediately thought as an instance of the totality.

Such a relation to the real cannot be sustained indefinitely. Hence the massive inversion that progressively takes place, which shifts the terrain onto the side of non-transparency, secrecy, and hidden operations. Those who know what’s really going on, those who have knowledge of the singularity of the situation, are supposed to keep quiet, and all the rest of it. Thus, little by little, a sort of general corrosion of the situation occurs

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which, whilst announcing the absolute formal transparency of a grandiose project, is turned on its head and becomes an extremely defensive procedure. Everything that is locally produced seems at all times to threaten the aim of global transparency. Thus (and this is something very striking when you read serious studies of Stalinism, which are generally written by British scholars, or scholars from the USA, who have a less ideological relation to Stalinism than do the French or the Italians) the conviction held by the leaders of these revolutionary states is in fact nothing but the awareness of an absolute discrepancy between the situation and the means at their disposal. They themselves have the impression of being absolutely precarious figures. Any circumstance whatsoever gives them the impression that their own overthrow is imminent. On top of the police violence and the reciprocal surveillance of everyone by everyone, this subjectivity generates as its own guiding rule the circulation of lies and secrets, together with the non-revelation of what’s really going on. But this rule can in turn be explained from the vantage point of the relation between the real and the formal, as well as of the relation between singularity and universality. That is to say, a universality that should remain local and prudent (as is always the case of true universality) is forced instead to bear an absolutely formal globality, and one is immediately obliged to refer this to an all-powerful singularity, to a will as inscrutable as God’s – to take up a comparison that you [Peter] often draw between evental absolutism and the theory of sovereignty.⁴

I wanted to clarify this entire matter by showing that in the political, aesthetic, and scientific adventures of the twentieth century we are not dealing with pathologies of gratuitous cruelty, or with some kind of historical sadism – a ridiculous hypothesis – but rather with significant intellectual operators [*opérateurs*]. That is why I adopted the method of always restricting myself as closely as possible to that which the century itself said about the century, so as to avoid getting caught in retrospection, in the tribunals of history or judgement. The twentieth century interrogated itself with particular intensity regarding its own nature, its own singularity. I

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wanted to remain very close to this interrogation, as well as to the intimate reasons of that which remains cloaked in shadow from the point of view of retrospective judgement – I mean the remarkable enthusiasm that surrounded all these developments. The widespread popular enthusiasm for communist politics, the creative enthusiasm of the artistic avant-gardes, the Promethean enthusiasm of the scientists ... To reduce this enthusiasm to the domain of the imaginary, to mere illusions, to misleading utopias, is to engage in a completely vacuous argument.

I find this argument just as weak and false, by the way, when it is used with reference to religion. Even today, it is an aberration to explain the subjective power of religion, at its highest moments, in terms of the logic of imaginary alienation. It is infinitely easier and more truthful to understand that there really is a genuine subjective dimension present in that which ultimately, in my own jargon, resembles a confusion between event and truth, i.e. something that reduces the considerable difficulties involved in maintaining fidelity to an event to a matter of pure insurrection. These difficulties require an infinite series of local inventions. It is always tempting (and moreover it is partially correct) to claim that these local inventions are anticipated by the primordial figure of the sequence, by the pure power of the pure event – for instance the figure of the revolution, in politics, and I think that we could prove the same holds in art and in the sciences. It is beyond doubt, for example, that the project of a complete formalisation of mathematics by Bourbaki in France, which in one respect led to something grandiose, at the same time also failed (if one must really speak of failure) as dramatically as did the construction of socialism in the USSR. It was something grandiose, which generated true enthusiasm and renovated mathematical thinking, but nevertheless it never proved possible to show that the actual development of mathematics was really *anticipated* by a stable axiomatic foundation. All the evidence points to the fact that the movement of mathematics also includes the need to modify the axioms, to transform them, to introduce new ones, and sometimes even to accept that the general position to which one adhered

had to be abandoned. No formalisation can claim to encompass the totality of the consequences of the event that it draws upon. However, the idea that it could be otherwise is not simply an illusion or an alienation. It is a powerful and creative subjective disposition, which brings to light new strata of the real.

I think the same is true of art. The various manifestos and new orientations proposed during the century sought to lead art back to the expression of its own conditions. The end of art was declared on the basis of an integral formalisation of art's own possibility. Everything that had to do with art's relation to empirical reality, to the contingency of representations, to imitation, was proclaimed to be nothing but a form of retardation [*arriération mentale*]. This whole movement was formidable, enlightening and creative. By and large, it has defined the century – but it could not anticipate the development of art for an indefinitely long time. In fact, the question today instead concerns the identification of formal conditions for a new realism.

Bruno Bosteels: To what extent does your own itinerary reflect a growing critical distance from this effort of the century? I am thinking in particular about your continuing debts to Maoism. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, the passion for the real was indeed exceptionally strong and often included an extremely violent tendency to purify the revolutionary attitude from all remnants of so-called revisionism – the tendency to annihilate the old and to develop the new. Does your current work on the twentieth century then amount to some kind of self-criticism in this regard? After all, you devote a central chapter in The Century to the sequence of the Cultural Revolution and you seem to want to re-evaluate the significance of the famous idea that “One divides into two.” To what extent does your conception of “subtraction,” as opposed to what you used to call “destruction,” offer a genuinely alternative conception of radical innovation, subjective sacrifice, purification, and so on?

A.B.: If I felt that I needed to make a self-criticism I would make one, but I don't think it's the

case. Maoism really was an epic attempt, as Mao himself would have said, to re-launch the subjective process of the revolution. But this re-launching took place within the framework of categories inherited from Leninism and Stalinism, i.e. essentially within a figure of the party-state conceived as the only *formal* figure of power available. The idea of the Cultural Revolution was that the mass dynamics of the revolution were to be re-launched as a process of renovation, reform, and transformation of the party-state. Mao himself, however, observed that this was impossible. There are some texts of Mao's in which he accepts unequivocally that something in the Cultural Revolution did not work. The mobilisation of the masses, among the youth and the workers, was indeed immense. But it destroyed itself through divisions, factions and anarchic violence. The desperate preservation of the party-state framework in the midst of this storm finally led to its restoration in completely reactive conditions (the ubiquitous reintroduction of capitalist methods etc.). This is why we can define the Cultural Revolution as a saturation. It saturates the form of the party-state inherited from Lenin and from the Russian Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was an experiment at the farthest reaches of the truth procedure that had been initiated by the October Revolution.

Perhaps the issue needs to be considered on an even larger scale. The Cultural Revolution was perhaps also the last revolution. Between the October Revolution and the Cultural Revolution, or even between the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution, there takes place a saturation of the category of revolution as a singular form of the relationship between mass movement and state power.

The word "Revolution" designates an historical form of the relation between politics and the state. This term first of all sets the relation politics/state – or politics/power – in a logic of antagonism, contradiction or civil war. In the second place, it sets this relation in a logic of sublation [*relève*], i.e. it aligns it with the project of a new state that would be entirely different: a revolutionary, republican state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, etc. It's this figure of the sublation of

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the state by another state under the decisive pressure of the – popular, mass or class – historical actor which the word "Revolution" designates. Let's say that the Cultural Revolution constitutes the extreme limit of the age of revolutions.⁵

P.H.: And the turn to subtraction, as opposed to destruction, is part of this new, post-revolutionary orientation?

A.B.: For the time being I don't want to accord a metaphysical privilege to subtraction. I call "subtraction" that which, from within the previous sequence itself, as early as the start of the twentieth century, presents itself as a possible alternative path that differs from the dominant one. It's not just an idea that comes "after" antagonism and revolution. It's an idea that is dialectically articulated with those of antagonism, of the simplifying formalisation, of the absolute advent of the new, etc. Malevich's painting, for example, can be interpreted in two different ways. We could say that it expresses a destructive radicalism: starting out from a destruction of all figuration, Malevich allows the purely pictorial to arise in the form of an absolute beginning. But we might also say that, in fact, such painting finds its point of departure in what I've called the minimal difference, the minimal gap – for instance the gap between white and white – and that it draws considerable consequences from the capture of this minimal difference. These two interpretations do not contradict one another. There is something like an ideological decision involved here, one that gives priority to subtraction (or minimal difference) rather than to destruction (or antagonistic contradiction).

Is it really productive, today, to fix the determination of politics within the framework of a global antagonism? Can we, except in a completely abstract way, call upon a massive Two, a Two capable of structuring all situations: bourgeoisie against proletariat, or even republicans against aristocrats? Once again, I do not repudiate any of this, but it seems to me that we are obliged, at least for the moment (I also don't wish to anticipate the course of things), to consider the consequences of that which is given

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as a local difference, that is, to think and to act on *one* point, or at most a few. For instance, in terms of the organisation of workers without official residency papers [*prolétaires sans papiers*]. Or on the question of Palestine. Or on the “Western” and American aggressions against Serbia, against Afghanistan, against Iraq. And we must construct, on the basis of these points, an adequate political logic, without a preliminary formal guarantee that something like a contradiction within the totality necessarily structures this local differentiation. We can rely only on principles and we can only treat, on the basis of these principles, local situations in such a way as to pursue singular political processes within them. Based on this minimal, local, or punctual differentiation (or as the Lacanians would say, based on this point of the real) you will begin experiments to ascertain if the general system of consequences (that is, the political logic thought in terms of its results) is homogeneous or heterogeneous to the disposition of the state of your situation. Let’s call “state logic” that which pretends to convey the meaning of the totality of the situation, and which therefore includes governments and ordinary “political” apparatuses, as well as the economy or legal system.

In Maoism itself there are elements of a subtractive type, if only because the revolutionary history of the liberated zones is different from the history of insurrections. Insurrectionism is the concentration in one point of a global deliberation; it is a certain relationship of the local and the global where you globally force the issue on one point. But, in the history of the Chinese Revolution, insurrectionism failed. The uprisings in Canton or in Shanghai were drowned in blood. The alternative logic proposed by Mao sets out a wholly different relationship between local confrontation and the situation as a whole. This is what Sylvain Lazarus has called the “dialectical” mode of politics. When you find yourself in Yenan for years, with a popular army and an independent administration, you do not stand in a metonymic relation to the global state of things. Yenan does not present the punctual test of strength in which the fate of global confrontation will be decided. You are

somewhere, a place in which you have managed to remain, perhaps a place to which you were eventually obliged to retreat, as in the case of the Long March. You were somewhere else, then you came here, and you have tried to preserve your strength by moving from one point to another. The temporality involved in this movement is not at all that of insurrection. The whole problem is that of endurance. This is what Mao calls “the prolonged war.” So the Maoist experiment was different, and I’d say that something in the liberated zones was already rather more “subtractive” than antagonistic in the traditional sense of the term. In particular, I’m thinking of the idea of holding out on one point in such a way as to have the capacity to preserve your forces, without necessarily engaging them immediately in a global confrontation. Much the same could be said regarding Mao’s quite remarkable idea of limiting an antagonism [*économiser l’antagonisme*]. Mao often repeated that it is better to treat all contradictions as if they were secondary ones, i.e. contradictions that operate in the midst of the people, rather than between the people and their enemy.

Now I think it’s clear that these general ideas continue to exercise a real influence. Every interesting political experience today takes place along these lines. This is also the reason why the “planetary” demonstrations against globalisation, such as the one in Genoa, demonstrations whose model is clearly insurrectional (even if in them the insurrectional schema is considerably weakened), are absolutely archaic and sterile. All the more so to the extent that they congregate around the meetings of their adversary. What’s the point of concentrating one’s forces, not in the place decided according to the needs of a long-term and independent political strategy, but rather in precisely those places where governments and global banking institutions hold their economico-political ceremonies? Here is another subtractive imperative: never appear where you are most expected. Make sure that your own action is not undertaken on terrain decided by your adversary. It’s also the case that the “anti-globalisation” movements dedicate themselves to a systemic and economicist identification of the adversary, which is already utterly misguided.

P.H.: I certainly see the strategic value in such a “guerrilla” approach to politics, one that asks what can be done here and now, with these particular people, these particular resources, etc. But how can we think such an approach together with Marx’s basic insight, that each of these individual “points,” as you describe them, are indeed structured by global, systematic processes of exploitation or domination?

A.B.: I’m not saying that we cannot think of each point as being determined by the global situation. But when we think of them that way we do nothing to enhance the strategic capacity of the point in question. We need to distinguish here between the analytical view of the situation and its political view. This distinction is of considerable importance. In approaching a singular point, one must always begin with its singularity. This does not mean that singularity is incompatible with a general analysis. However, it’s not the general analysis that gives this singular point its political value, but rather the political deployment, experienced as a possibility, of its singularity. Today, for instance, we can always state that the world is polarised, that we should analyse the various manifestations of US sovereignty, the question of wars, the renewed forms of capital, etc. But all this doesn’t determine anything effective in the field of politics. In my own philosophical vocabulary, I would say that these analyses are truthful [*véridiques*] but not true [*vraies*]. Consider the example of Chiapas. It’s clear that, from the moment when it was constituted, this new arena of political activity could not be derived from any general analysis. If we stick to the general analysis, we can immediately and quite reasonably conclude that this attempt is destined to fail. Exactly in the same way, here in France those who devote themselves to global analysis conclude that it’s necessary to participate in elections, that representative democracy must be upheld, because that is what the consensus deems to be the only acceptable space in which to negotiate political relations of force. The conclusion will thus be that any truly independent politics is impossible. *L’Organisation politique*, for example, is impossible.

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Objective Marxist analysis is an excellent, even indispensable, practice but it’s impossible to develop a politics of emancipation as a consequence of this analysis. Those who do so find themselves on the side of the totality and of its movement, hence on the side of the actually dominant power. To my mind, the “anti-globalisation” movements, or the Italian autonomists who follow the analyses of Toni Negri, for example, are only the most spectacular face of recent adaptations to domination. Their undifferentiated “movementism” integrates smoothly with the necessary adjustments of capital, and in my view does not constitute any really independent political space.

In order to treat a local situation in its political terms, that is, in its subjective terms, something more is needed than simply an understanding of the local derived from the general analysis. The subjectivation of a singular situation cannot be reduced to the idea that this situation is expressive of the totality.

This issue already sets Mao apart from Lenin. Or at least from what Lenin could still believe in abstract terms. When Lenin says that consciousness comes from outside, what he means is that the scientific knowledge of the inclusion of a particular situation in the general situation – in the situation of imperialism as the superior stage of capitalism – *creates* revolutionary consciousness. Today, I don’t think (and already Mao and a few others had some insights here) that a reflexive and systematic Marxist analysis of the general distribution of capitalist and imperialist phenomena in the contemporary world constitutes a consciousness that is sufficiently subtracted, precisely, from this distribution.

P.H.: But is there a danger then that you might simply presuppose, in a less explicit way, the criteria that define a political situation, or the circumstances in which political subjectivation can take place? That you effectively treat each such singular point as if shaped by less precise (because less explicit) patterns of domination or inequality, and each mobilisation as inspired by a prescription that in each case is relatively predictable: the militant refusal of domination, or the subjective assertion of political equality?

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That despite your professed interest in the singularity of a situation, you affirm a conception of political truth which is always formally, fundamentally, the same?

A.B.: For a philosopher, political thinking is always the same and it is always different. On the one hand, it's always the same because it's based on principles. Politics, like all active thought, is axiomatic. It's true that, in my conception of them, these axioms are relatively stable. They are always egalitarian axioms. Notwithstanding this axiomatic stability, in politics you have what we might call directives [*mots d'ordre*], which are singular inventions. The distinction between principles and directives is as essential in politics as the distinction in mathematics between the great axioms of a theory and its particular theorems. The directives express the way in which the principles, which are largely invariable, might become active in a situation. And their activity in the situation is also their transformation; they never simply stay the same. Just as we cannot maintain that the determination of political singularity is transitive to global analysis, it isn't simply transitive to axioms of the will or to strictly egalitarian maxims. I'm neither objectivist nor subjectivist with respect to these questions. In the end, what happens is the constitution of the situation *into a political situation* through the emergence of directives. When these emerge they also give some indication of the political capacity of the people in the situation.

Take the Palestinian situation, for example. We can say that this situation today is clearly defined: it is a colonial situation, perhaps even the last colonial situation. In this sense, it has a particular status: it figures as a sort of summary or consummation of a much larger sequence, the sequence of colonial occupations and the wars of liberation. This is also why the situation is so violent and so exemplary. From the point of view of subjective principles the situation is not especially complex. The axiom in question, in the end, is: "a country and a state for the Palestinians." On the other hand, as things stand today, what are the exact directives for this situation? To my mind this question is far more complicated, and this is one of the reasons for

the relative weakness of the Palestinians. This isn't a criticism (which would be ridiculous), it's an observation. Today, the actual directives that might be capable of really attracting a universal sympathy to the Palestinian cause are precarious or badly formulated. It's in this sense that the situation in Palestine is both a situation that is objectively and subjectively eminent and well-defined [*éminente et constituée*], and at the same time, politically speaking, it is a rather confused and weak situation.

B.B.: *Now that we are talking in terms of objective and subjective conditions, I'd like to ask you about your current understanding of dialectics. It's clear that in Théorie du sujet [1982] you maintain a broadly dialectical position, and as late as Can Politics be Thought? [1985] you suggest that terms such as "situation," "intervention," "fidelity" and so on, can lead to a renewal of dialectical thought. Being and Event [1988], however, seems to abandon or sidestep this tradition in favour of a strictly mathematical approach, even though you continue to speak of a "dialectic" of void and excess. Then again, in what I've had a chance to read of the first chapters of Logiques des mondes, you continue to measure your approach alongside, and against, Hegel's Science of Logic, in particular against Hegel's understanding of the negative. Through much of The Century, finally, your analysis is indebted to what Deleuze called "disjunctive synthesis." Much of the inventive force of the twentieth century would have privileged a type of non-dialectical solution: disjunctive resolutions of the relation, for example, between politics and history, between the subjective and the objective, between beginnings and ends, or between the real and its appearances. So where do you stand vis-à-vis the dialectic now? Would you say that the last century's penchant for disjunctive synthesis indicates a lasting exhaustion of dialectical thought? Or do the failures of the last century suggest that the dialectic is perhaps incomplete, or still unfilled, but not in principle over and done with?*

A.B.: That is a major question. You could almost say that my entire enterprise is one giant

confrontation [*démêlê*] with the dialectic. That is why sometimes I declare myself a dialectician and write in defence of the great dialecticians (but I mean the French dialecticians,⁶ which is not exactly the same as the Hegelian dialectic), while at other times I declare myself an anti-dialectician. You're absolutely right to perceive a certain confusion in this whole business.

First of all, I'd like to say that the nineteenth century was the great century of dialectics, in the ordinary sense of the term. Fundamentally, dialectics means the dialectics of progress. This is already the case with Hegel. In the end, we go towards the Absolute, however long it may take before we get there. And if negation does not exhaust itself, if negativity is creative and is not absorbed into itself, it is because it is pregnant with finality. The question of the labour of the negative is not simply the question of the efficacy of the negative; it is also the question of its *work*, in the sense of an artisan of History. This great nineteenth century dialectical tradition of thought allows us to think a sort of fusion between politics and history. Political subjectivity can feed on historical certainty. We might say – and in any case this has always been my conviction – that *The Communist Manifesto* is the great political text of the nineteenth century. It is the great text of that fundamental historical optimism which foresees, under the name of “communism,” the triumph of generic humanity. It's well known that for Marx “proletariat” is the name for the historical agent of this triumph. And I remind you that in my own speculations, “generic” is the property of the True.

What happens at the beginning of the twentieth century? We go from the promise of a reconciliation or emancipation borne by history (which is the Marxist thesis) to the will, animated by the passion of the real, to force the issue, to accelerate the victory of the proletariat. We move to the Leninist idea according to which everything is still carried by history, of course, but where in the end what is decisive is precisely the decision, the organisation and the force of political will. As my friend Sylvain Lazarus has shown, we move from a consciousness organised by history to a consciousness organised by the party.

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In the nineteenth century, both historicism and dialectical thinking (in the Hegelian sense) share a common destiny. Hegel's principal thesis was that “truth is the same as the history of truth,” and this thesis endures through any number of materialist reversals and elaborations.

But what are the consequences for dialectics, when we arrive at the moment that recognises the supremacy of the political principle of organisation, the moment that celebrates the party as the source of political truth (a moment that is fully reached only with Stalin)? Which aspects of the dialectic are retained, which aspects are dropped? I think that what is retained is certainly the antagonism, and hence the negativity, but in a purely disjunctive sense: there is conflict, there is violence. What is preserved from history, and from its metaphor, is the figure of war. I'm perfectly prepared to say that Marxism in the twentieth century was, deep down, a Marxism of war, of class warfare. In nineteenth century Marxist thinking, this conception of class warfare was supported by the *general* figure of history. In the twentieth century, what is preserved and stressed is war as such. So what is retained from Hegelian finality, from the Absolute, in war? The idea of the ultimate war, the idea of a final war, a war that in a sense would itself be the Absolute. What happens, in the end, is that the Absolute no longer figures as the outcome of conflict. The Absolute as “goal”: nobody has any experience of this, nobody seriously announces that this will come to pass. The Absolute is rather the idea of the final conflict, of the final struggle, very literally. The idea of a decisive war. The twentieth century presented itself to people's minds as the century that would bring the decisive war, the war to end all wars. It's in this sense that I speak of disjunctive synthesis. Instead of a figure of reconciliation, that is, a figure of the Absolute as synthesis, as that which absorbs all previous determinations, we have the presentation of the Absolute itself in the guise of war.

From this point of view I would like to reply to an objection that Bruno has often made to me. Don't I now have too pacified a view of things? Was I right to give up the central place of destruction? I would answer these questions as

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follows: I think that the idea that war is the absolute of subjectivity is now saturated, it is an idea that no longer has any political intensity. That's all I'm saying. I don't think that implacable conflict is a thing of the past, or that there will be no more wars. It's the idea of the war to end all wars that I criticise, because, in the end, in the field of politics, this idea was the last figure of the One. This idea, the idea of the "final struggle," indicates an inadequate acknowledgement of multiplicity. The ultimate war is the moment when the One takes possession of war, including war within the domain of the state. The Stalinist state was evidently a state of war, a militarised state, and this was also true at its very heart. It is one of the very few states that coldly decided to liquidate half of its military hierarchy. This is war against oneself. Why? Because here, in the end, the only instance of the absolute that one can take hold of is war. Such is the outcome, within dialectical thinking, of the passage from the historicist dialectic to the voluntaristic, partisan or party dialectic: self-immolation in the absolute of destruction.

This tendency, which is related to the intellectual transformations that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, is not limited to so-called totalitarian politics. We could observe how, in the arts or sciences, there was also a passage from a constructive dialectic, one tied to the history of progress, to a dialectic of experimental immolation [*brûlure expérimentale*], of disjunction and destruction. This is why, in the end, the outcome of the experiment becomes indifferent. There is something in the century's thinking that says: "the process is more important than the product." In politics, this means that war is really more important than its result, that the class struggle is more important than its product, that the terrorist socialist state is more important than communism (which never arrives). The transition is itself interminable and, as a war-like transition, it is all that matters. We should recall Stalin's thesis, according to which the class struggle intensifies and becomes even more violent under socialism. This means that socialism, which was once anticipated as a peaceful outcome of the violent revolution, becomes in reality only one of several stages of

conflict, and an even more violent stage than the previous one.

I think that today we need to learn what politics means in times of peace. Even if this politics is a politics of war. We need to invert the way we think about these questions. We must find a way to subordinate the politics of war to a subtractive understanding of politics, i.e. a politics that has no guarantee either in history or in the state. How can we understand emancipatory politics in terms other than those of the absolute of war? Mao, more than any other political thinker, was a military leader. Nevertheless Mao already sought to subordinate the absolute of war to something else. He considered that the principal tasks of the people's army were political. We too are experimenting with a politics that would not be entirely implicated with the question of power. Because it is the struggle for power that ends up leading revolutionaries to the absolutisation of war. What does it mean to construct, preserve and deploy one's forces, what does it mean to hold firm on one point, in the domain of peace? This is our main question, so long as no one forgets that when it's necessary to fight, we'll fight. You don't always have the choice.

P.H.: To what extent does your distance from dialectics, your determination to pursue a wholly affirmative conception of thought, push you towards an ultimately abstract conception of truth, or at least one whose subjective integrity is largely detached from the objective or concrete circumstances of its situation? In other words, just how radical is the process of subtraction? A thinker like Foucault (himself hardly a disciple of Hegel) works insistently towards an evacuation of all the things that fix or determine or specify the way people think or act in a situation, precisely by paying close attention to what he called the "microscopic" processes of its regulation or specification. By comparison, your conception of politics seems to leave very little scope for a dialectical relation with the historical or the social dimension.

A.B.: Abstraction is the foundation of all thought. However, the procedures of truth should not be reduced to abstraction. Yes, we

start with the affirmation of a principle, with an axiomatic proposition. But the whole question is to know how and at what moment the axiom becomes the directive of a situation. It can do so only if something from the situation itself passes into it. It's obvious that a demand, for example, for the "unconditional regularisation of all workers without residency papers [*ouvriers sans-papiers*]" implies the existence of workers without papers, the pertinence of the question of their papers, the effect of certain governmental policies, etc. Above all, it's necessary that the *sans-papiers* themselves speak out about the situation, that they speak about it politically and not just by bearing witness to their own misery or misfortune. (It's time we recognised, by the way, that in politics misfortune does not exist.)

As for Foucault, I think that he completely underestimates the importance of separation [*la séparation*]. Among his disciples this tendency only gets worse. If there is now a convergence between "Foucauldianism" and "Negriism," if Agamben relies on Foucault, etc., it's because they all share the philosophical axiom that resistance is only the obverse of power. Resistance is coextensive with power itself. In particular, you begin thinking politics through consideration of the forms of power. I think that this is completely wrong. If you enter politics by thinking the forms of power then you will always end up with the state (in the general sense of the word) as your referent. Even the famous "multitudes," which is only a pedantic word for mass movements (and in particular petit-bourgeois mass movements) are thought as "constituent" *with regard* to domination. All this is only a historicism painted in fashionable hues. It's striking, moreover, that, besides Foucault, the philosophical sources for the "Negrist" current are to be found on the side of Spinoza and Deleuze. Both these thinkers are hostile to any form of the Two: they propose a metaphysical politics, a politics of the One, or what for me is a politics of the One. This is an anti-dialectical politics in the precise sense that it excludes negativity, and thus, in the end, the domain of the subject, or what for me is the subject. I am entirely opposed to the thesis according to which it is presumed possible, merely by isolating

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(within the orbit of domination and control) that which has a constituent value, to create a space of liberty cut from the same cloth as that of the existing powers themselves. That which goes by the name "resistance," in this instance, is only a component of the progress of power itself. In its current form, the anti-globalisation movement is nothing other than a somewhat wild operator (and not even that wild, after all) of capitalist globalisation itself. In any case, it's not at all heterogeneous to it. It seeks to sketch out, for the imminent future, the new forms of comfort to be enjoyed by our planet's idle petite bourgeoisie.

B.B.: We were talking about some themes in Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's Empire a few days ago. The most important of these is the reversibility between power and resistance, or between Empire and multitude – both appearing as a bloc, in a global and no doubt much too structural way, in a relation of immanent and thus anti-dialectical reciprocity. However, this relation of immanence explains that, in some way, Empire also always already means the power of the multitude. This imposes, then, merely a certain reading strategy, and perhaps it doesn't even allow for anything else. We remain, therefore, in spite of everything, in an interpretive, even hermeneutic approach. You've already analysed this in your book on Deleuze, in terms of the doctrine of the "double signature": every thing, for Deleuze, can be read both as an entity and in some sense as signalling being itself. With Negri and Hardt, this double signature is deployed in political terms. In an extremely seductive manner, especially for our times, dominated as they are by the homogeneity with no escape from the laws of the market and of war, it then becomes possible to read even a most brutal instance of domination by way of a sign of the very thing it represses, that is, the creativity and effervescence of the pure multitude, which for them in the end is nothing but the political, or politico-ontological name for Life. Is this how you would reply to the theses expounded in Empire by Hardt and Negri? Aren't there more profound affinities, for example, with your On Metapolitics [1998]?

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A.B.: In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx already praised capitalism in an ambivalent way, based on a double reading. On the one hand, capitalism destroys all the moth-eaten figures of the old world, all the old feudal and sacred bonds.⁷ In this sense, it is the violent creator of a new leverage point for generic humanity. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie is already organised in such a way as to maintain its domination; in this sense, it is the designated enemy of a new creative cycle, whose agent is the proletariat. Negri and his friends are desperately looking to re-establish this inaugural vision, in which the “multitudes” are both the result of capitalist atomisation and the new creative initiator of a “horizontal” modernity (networks, transversalities, “non-organisations,” etc.). But all this amounts only to dreamy hallucination [*une rêverie hallucinée*]. Where is this “creative” capacity of the multitudes? All we’ve seen are very ordinary performances from the well-worn repertoire of petit-bourgeois mass movements, noisily laying claim to the right to enjoy without doing anything, while taking special care to avoid any form of discipline. Whereas we know that discipline, in all fields, is the key to truths. Without the least hesitation Marx would have recognised in Negri a backward romantic. I believe that deep down, what truly fascinates these “movementists” is capitalist activity itself, its flexibility and also its violence. They designate by “multitude” flexibility of a comparable sort, a predicate which their fictions attribute to “social movements.” But today there is nothing to be gained from the category of movement. This is because this category is itself coupled to the logic of the state. It is the task of politics to construct new forms of discipline to replace the discipline of political parties, which are now saturated.

P.H.: Nevertheless, one of Foucault’s fundamental ideas was precisely that the localisation of a possible break is always ramified, that it cannot be concentrated in a singular and exclusive point. In order adequately to think one such point – injustice in prisons, for example – you need to treat it precisely as an over-determined instance within a wider network. In this specific

case, it’s obviously a matter of understanding that the operation of punitive or disciplinary power is located, not only in this point which is the instance of the prison as such (itself a point that, as you well know, Foucault treated for some time in as “punctual,” as focused, and as militant a fashion as you could wish for), but also in the general configuration of power at issue in the organisation of work, the education of children, the surveillance of public health, sexuality, etc. And he says this not so as to lose himself in the complexity of the network but, on the contrary, in order to analyse it in detail, to understand its effects, the better to clarify and undo it – and therefore very much in order to keep himself, to borrow from your vocabulary, at a distance from the normalising effects of power (since, unlike Deleuze, Foucault did not believe that you could ever escape absolutely from the networks of power). For example, I think that when you treat the question of the sans-papiers by considering the question of immigration along with the question of the organisation of work, you are in fact being quite faithful to Foucault.

A.B.: But the actual content of the political statements made by those who claim to be following in Foucault’s footsteps does not localise this break [*la coupure*] anywhere. Of course, a given situation must be envisaged within an open space. There is a topology of situations, to which Foucault himself made important contributions. But in the end you need to find a way of crystallising the political break into differentiated statements. And these statements must concentrate the political rupture upon a single point. It is these statements or directives that are the bearers of discipline, in the sense that politics is nothing other than the constitution of the power of statements and the public exploration of their consequences. Now, “power” and “consequences” mean organisation, perseverance, unity and discipline. In politics, and likewise in art and in the sciences. It seems to me that the people I’m criticising here – let us call them the third generation of Foucauldians – abhor every crystallisation, and retreat to the idea that creative power will be “expressed” in

the free unfolding of the multitudes. On this point, the organised logic of power is opposed to the expressive logic of power. Or perhaps you might say that axiomatic thought is opposed to descriptive thought. Plato against Aristotle.

P.H.: Can we move on now to look more closely at the way you propose to understand the "Images of the Present Time," to borrow the title of your current lecture series at the Collège International de la Philosophie? Has this new three-year series picked up where the previous series on the twentieth century left off?

A.B.: The lectures on the twentieth century aroused considerable interest. I decided that it was worth continuing the project by angling it towards the present time. Can we think the *present* philosophically? Can we reply to Hegel, who argued that philosophy always comes after the fact, that it recapitulates in the concept that which has already taken place?

For the moment, I'm guided by two main ideas. The first is that, in order to think the contemporary world in any fundamental way, it's necessary to take as your point of departure not the critique of capitalism but the critique of democracy. To separate thought from the dominant forms of ideology has always been one of philosophy's crucial tasks. Philosophy is useless if it doesn't allow us to criticise consensual and falsely self-evident ideas. Today it's easy to see that the consensual category is not at all that of liberal economics. In fact, lots of people are perfectly happy to criticise what Viviane Forrester, in a superficial and successful book, referred to as "the economic horror."⁸ We are constantly being reminded of the cynicism of stock markets, the devastation of the planet, the famine in Africa, and so on. At the same time, this denunciation is in my view completely ineffective, precisely because it is an economico-objectivist one. The denunciation of objective mechanisms leads at best to reformist proposals of an entirely illusory nature. By contrast, no one is ready to criticise democracy. This is a real taboo, a genuine consensual fetish. Everywhere in the world, democracy is the true subjective principle – the rallying point – of liberal capital-

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ism. So my first idea was to think about the role of the word "democracy" in the framework of a functional analysis: what exactly is its function, where is it situated, how does it operate as subjective fetish, etc. I've incorporated within this aspect of the project a careful re-reading of Plato's critique of democracy.

The second idea is the obverse of the first. It's a matter of identifying what I call contemporary nihilism; in other words, today's ordinary regime of subjectivity. I say that an ordinary subject, today, is nothing but a body facing the market. Who is the citizen of the market? This is a necessarily nihilistic figure, but it's a singular nihilism, a nihilism of enjoyment.

In the end, the goal is to clarify the coupling of nihilism and democracy as a politico-subjective configuration of the present time. Speaking in the terms of *Being and Event*, you could say that this coupling constitutes the "encyclopaedia" of the present time. It's what organises its regime of production, its institutions, its system of judgement and naming, its validations and counter-validations. Today, truth procedures involve finding a passage – which is always local, difficult, but creative – through the encyclopaedic coupling of democracy and nihilism.

Today's truth procedures will figure as "authoritarian" (because they must exceed democratic consensus) and affirmative (because they must exceed nihilistic subjectivity). This correlation of affirmation and authority is a particular characteristic of the present moment, because the encyclopaedia of this present is democratico-nihilistic. There have been times when things were different, of course, for example times in which nihilism figured as part of the cross to be borne by those who sought to proclaim a truth. This was the case, for example, during the end of the nineteenth century.

P.H.: Could you give us some examples of today's truth procedures?

A.B.: This is my project for next year: to identify the sequences that escape from the democratico-nihilistic encyclopaedia. For example, it's from this angle that I read your work on post-colonial literature.⁹ I read it and ask myself: isn't

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there something here that anticipates, as a result of the postcolonial situation, something pertaining to affirmation and authority? And I think that other artistic examples can be found, in a certain return to musical constructivism, in the tentative experiments of contemporary writers trying to get past postmodernism, in the way some painters are now abandoning the formalism of the non-figurative, etc. I'm also very struck by the great debate in contemporary physics that sets those pursuing the axiomatic renewal of physics on the basis of a generalised doctrine of scalar transformations (and therefore an even more generalised relativity than the currently available version) against those who defend a configuration cobbled together from developments in quantum mechanics (a configuration which is extraordinarily sophisticated, but nonetheless trapped in a hopeless empiricism).

B.B.: Did your work on anti-philosophy – your lectures on Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan and Saint Paul, among others – prepare the ground for this analysis of our contemporary nihilism? Are anti-philosophy and nihilism part of the same configuration? What precise role does anti-philosophy play in the organisation of today's nihilism, as you describe it?

A.B.: The analysis of what I called anti-philosophy offered a sort of genealogy of this nihilism's dominant operators [*opérateurs*]. Although you certainly couldn't say that Lacan was a nihilist, and still less a democrat (in fact, you couldn't call Wittgenstein a democrat either, to say nothing of Nietzsche who was an overt anti-democrat), I nevertheless think that these anti-philosophers anticipated a fundamental trait of contemporary nihilism, namely the thesis that in the last instance there is nothing but bodies and language. I equate contemporary nihilism with a certain position of the body – in this sense, our nihilism is all the more in so far as it presents itself in the guise of a materialism. Such would be the materialism of democratic multiplicity, which is nothing but the multiplicity of bodies. Spinoza already proposed systematic arguments that work along these lines, which you still find among the theoreticians of the multi-

tude – even in Balibar. Everyone believes that the starting point is the multiplicity of bodies. We might say that this idea – that there is nothing but bodies and language – traverses all of contemporary anti-philosophy. Ever since Nietzsche, contemporary anti-philosophy wishes to have done with Platonism. But what is Platonism? Fundamentally, and this is why I always declare myself a Platonist, Platonism says that there is something other than bodies and language. There are truths, and a truth is neither a singular body (since it is generic) nor a phrase (since it punches a hole in the encyclopaedia of the situation).

The critical examination of anti-philosophy is already the examination of those who maintain that there is nothing but language and bodies. What I want to show is that, beneath its materialist surface, this thesis does nothing but prepare the way for the contemporary consensus, the democratico-nihilistic consensus. This is why in my seminar I presented a reading of Pierre Guyotat, in particular of the *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats*.¹⁰ Guyotat is the most radical writer of an atomistic vision of bodies. In the real [*réel*] of colonial war there is nothing but bodies and between these bodies there is only sexual attraction, which operates like a sort of deathly consumption. The only relief to be found in this universe is in linguistic sublimation. Let's say that for Guyotat, all there is are sexed bodies and the poem. Incidentally, this is precisely Lucretius' position, at least in the version that Jean-Claude Milner and Guy Lardreau are today trying to revitalise, the first explicitly against Plato (and against me), the other by cobbling together a "materialist" Plato (precisely in the sense of our nihilistic materialism).

Now it is indeed absolutely necessary to maintain that there is nothing but language and bodies if one wants subjects to be subjects of the market. Such a subject is someone who identifies him- or herself as a consumer, someone exposed to the market. The consumer can be rich or poor, accomplished or clumsy – it doesn't matter. The essential thing is that everybody stands before the market, whether or not one resents it or assents to it. But you can only reach this point and hold this position in so far as you are essen-

tially a desiring body summoned by the general language of advertisement. The consumer is a body of (nihilistic) enjoyment submitted to a (democratic) linguistic injunction. The only obstacle to this injunction is the Idea, the intractable element of a truth. This is why the only truth of the pseudo-materialist thesis “there is nothing but bodies and language” lies in the presumption that every idea is useless. When all is said and done, the democratic imperative becomes: “Live without any Idea.” Or if you prefer: “Buy your enjoyment.”

P.H.: I'd like to conclude with some questions about the changes to your general system proposed in your forthcoming Logiques des mondes. Being and Event obviously dealt with the question of being, among other things; with Logiques des mondes you are moving on to the question of appearing and appearance.¹¹ What is the relation between the one and the other? What is the relationship between being and what you present in terms of being-there?

A.B.: We should start from the way *Being and Event* sets out its most basic category, the category of situation. In *Being and Event* there are two fundamental theses regarding being-as-being. First thesis: being is pure multiplicity, and so the science of being is mathematics, mathematics as they have developed over the course of history. Second thesis: a multiplicity is always presented in a situation. The concept of situation is designed to think being-as-being not only in its internal composition as pure multiplicity but also as having to be presented as the element of a multiplicity. The fundamental operator in the ontology of the multiple is *belonging* – $A \in B$, which reads “A belongs to B.” Obviously this operator cannot be symmetrical (it does not have the same sense for A as it does for B). Multiplicity can be thought either as a constitutive element of another multiplicity, or else as a collecting together of other multiplicities (as its elements). This distinction does not have any great philosophical importance in *Being and Event* because that book remains on a very formal level. The only thing that needed to be axiomatised, via the axiom of foundation,

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was the rule which ensures that the situation can never be an element of itself.

The question then of how we should think this particular dimension of being-as-being – the fact that being-as-being can be deployed as truth only to the extent that it belongs to a situation – remains absolutely open. It's this obligation to belong to a situation, the fact that every multiple-being must be localised, that I have decided to call “being-there.” By treating such localisations as “worlds,” what I'm trying to propose is a way of thinking being-there.

So – and now I'm getting to your question – it's clear that you cannot pass directly from being-as-being to being-there. Were I to pass from the one to the other by rational deduction I would simply be engaged in a reconstruction of Hegelianism. I would be drawing a figure of being-there directly from the being of multiplicity. Against this Hegelian inspiration, I assume the contingency of being-there. But, at the same time, I defend a variant of the thesis according to which it is of the essence of being to be-there. The two statements must be asserted together: being-there (or belonging to a world) pertains to the essence of being, but being-there cannot be drawn out or inferred from the essence of being. Every being is presented in a world, but no singular world can be drawn out from the system of multiplicities of which it is composed. It remains impossible to deduce the singularity of a world. But we can and must examine the conditions of possibility of being-there, the logic of worlds. The approach is more phenomenological, or critical, than is that of pure ontology. I'm trying to describe the laws under which appearance can be thought.

P.H.: If it's not possible to move smoothly from the one to the other, are there then two irreducibly distinct operations at work here? First, a being (or a multiplicity) is in so far as it belongs to another multiplicity, i.e. in so far as it is presented in a situation or set. And second, this same being then appears in so far as it appears as part of a world (which is obviously a much larger notion than a set). Or do these two actions, belonging and appearing, overlap in some other sense?

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A.B.: With Hegel, I assume that it's of the essence of being to be there, and therefore that there is an intrinsic dimension of being that is engaged within appearance; but at the same time there is a contingency to this appearance, to this being-there-in-a-world. Our only access to being is in the form of being-there. Even when we think being-as-being in the field of mathematics we must recall that historically constituted mathematics is itself a world, and therefore a dimension of being-there. I hold absolutely to the thesis that figures expressly in *Being and Event*, that ontology is a situation. We can therefore say the following: *there are only worlds* [*il n'y a que des mondes*]. So what is a world? This is the question with which the book is concerned, at least in its first movement.

P.H.: *One of the arguments that can be made against Being and Event is that you simplify the actual mechanics of domination and specification – the mechanics conceived, for instance, in terms of hegemony by Gramsci, and in terms of power by Foucault – by referring them back to a single operation, the re-presentation performed by the state. Might a comparable argument be made against Logiques des mondes, that you now refer everything back to what you call the transcendental regime [le transcendental] of a world, which determines the relative intensity with which different things appear in a world? Isn't the whole question one of distinguishing and analysing the various processes that shape this transcendental regime? I can easily see the descriptive value of such an operator, but its explanatory value is less obvious.*

A.B.: Strictly speaking, the transcendental regime cannot be reduced to the measurement of degrees of intensity of appearance, even if these degrees constitute the basis for the ordering of appearance. The transcendental regime includes singular operations, like the conjunction or the envelope, along with immanent topologies, like the theory of points etc. The transcendental regime will account for two things that are formally essential. First, what does it mean to say that two entities appearing in a given world have

something in common? Second, how does it happen that a region of the world possesses a certain consistency? And what is this consistency? I answer these questions by means of what I believe to be a quite original theory of objects. This theory is not exclusively descriptive, it also accounts for *why* there is an object. That is, it accounts for why and how the One comes to be in the domain of appearance [*pourquoi et comment y-a-t-il de l'Un dans l'apparaître*]. This is why, in this book, I equate the laws of appearance with a logic. What is at stake is thinking consistency in general, the consistency of all that appears.

P.H.: *What is the precise role that relation plays in your new conception of things? In Being and Event you effectively exclude relations from the domain of being, or presentation, and tend to consider them exclusively from the perspective of the state, or of re-presentation.*

A.B.: Relation is defined very precisely in the *Logiques des mondes*. In pure being, there is only the multiple, and therefore relation is not [*la relation n'est pas*]. In the domain of appearing, on the contrary, there is relation, precisely in the sense that there is existence. I make a distinction between being and existence, inasmuch as existence is being in its specific intensity of appearing, being such as it appears "there," in a world. Relation is not between two beings, but relation exists between two existents. It is a fact of the world and not a fact of being.

P.H.: *And what happens then when an event takes place? Does an event suspend the prevailing rules that govern the way things appear in a world?*

A.B.: This is precisely the question I'm working on at the moment. I would like the theory of the event to be at once logical and ontological. I would like to maintain, if at all possible, the essential aspects of the ontological definition of the event. The essence of this definition is that the event is an un-founded multiplicity: it does not obey the axiom of foundation, because it is

its own element, it belongs to itself. This is why, in *Being and Event*, I said that the event is an “ultra-One.” I would also like to retain the theory of the event-site [*site événementiel*]: the event in some sense is always a surging forth of the site, or an insurrection of the site, which for a moment comes to belong to itself. But I would also like to introduce the idea that the event is a deregulation of the logic of the world, a transcendental dysfunction. An event modifies the rules of appearance. How? This is empirically attested by every genuine event: something whose value within the world was null or very weak attains, all of a sudden, in the event, a strong or even maximal intensity of existence. Within appearance, the core of the question of the event is really summed up by the idea that “we are nothing, let us be everything” (in the words of the *Internationale*). An element that prior to the event was indifferent, or even non-existent, which did not appear, comes to appear. An existence – the political existence of the workers, for example – that the transcendental regime had measured as minimal, that was null from the vantage point of the world, all of a sudden turns out to have a maximal intensity. Therefore the event will conserve its ontological character as a surging forth of the site in a moment of self-belonging [*auto-appartenance*] and, at the same time, it will produce a brutal transformation of the regime of intensity, so as to allow that which was inexistent to come into existence.

P.H.: Will an event figure as maximally intense within the existing limits of its world, or will it appear above and beyond the pre-established maximum level of intensity?

A.B.: These are complicated technical details that to my mind do not really have important consequences. If an element finds itself absolutely modified in its transcendental degree of existence, then slowly but surely the transcendental regime in its entirety will no longer be able to maintain its rules. Everything will change: the comparisons of intensity in appearance, the existences involved, the possibility of relations, etc. There will be a rearrangement of

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the transcendental regime, and therefore, strictly speaking, a change of world.

The truth procedure itself will also receive a double status. I certainly aim to conserve its status as a generic production, its horizon of genericity. But, on the other hand, it will proceed to reconstruct – locally, to begin with – the whole set of rules by which things appear, in keeping with the fact that something that previously did not appear now must appear. Something that was invisible must now become visible. Therefore, a truth procedure will also consist in a rearrangement of transcendental correlations, around this passage from inexistence to existence. In particular, given that every object possesses its own inexistent aspect [*un inexistant propre*], if this inexistent aspect acquires a maximal value then another element will have to take its place. All of a sudden, the question of destruction reappears, ineluctably. It's in this sense that I hope to satisfy our friend Bruno with a synthesis of *Théorie du sujet* and *Being and Event*. I am obliged here to reintroduce the theme of destruction, whereas in *Being and Event* I thought I could make do with supplementation alone. In order for that which does not appear in a world suddenly to appear within it (and appear, most often, with the maximal value of appearance), there is a price to pay. Something else must disappear. In other words, something must die, or at least must die to the world in question.

For example, the moment that something like the proletariat comes to exist within politics, it is indeed necessary to accept the fact that something which prior to this irruption possessed prestige and intensity finds itself annulled or denied – for example, aristocratic values, bourgeois authority, the family, private property, etc. And by the same token, it's this element of new existential intensity – the proletariat – which will now mark all possible political subjectivities, at least for the duration of a certain sequence. Proletarian politics will be defined as that form of politics which assumes, or even produces, the consequences of this modification of intensity. Reactive politics, on the other hand, will be that which acts as if the old transcendental circumstances had themselves produced the conse-

quences in question, as if the existential upsurge of the proletariat was of no consequence whatsoever.

In order to think through all of this, I will need a general theory of change in the domain of appearing. You will see that I distinguish between four types of change: modifications (which are consistent with the existing transcendental regime), weak singularities (or novelties with no strong existential consequences), strong singularities (which imply an important existential change but whose consequences remain measurable) and, finally, events (strong singularities whose consequences are virtually infinite).

B.B.: In your seminar dealing with the "The Axiomatic Theory of the Subject,"¹² you also anticipate a whole segment of Logiques des mondes that will present a typology of various subjective figures, adding the reactive and obscure figures to that of fidelity, which was the only one considered in Being and Event. Concretely, what will be the consequences of this new configuration of things for your theory of the subject?

A.B.: In Being and Event the theory of the subject is reduced to its name, in other words the subject is absolutely nothing more than the local dimension of a truth, a point of truth. Inasmuch as there is an active element to the subject it is to be found entirely in the process of forcing, as you yourself demonstrated in your contribution to the Bordeaux conference.¹³ In Logiques des mondes, the fundamental notion of consequence is introduced – since we are in the realm of the transcendental, or of logic, we can give a rigorous meaning to the operator of consequence. But it will be necessary to locate differentially the subject within a wider virtuality, which I call the subjective space. It's not at all as it was in Being and Event, where all that's described is the truth procedure, where the subject is nothing but a finite fragment of this procedure. It was, I must admit, a compromise with modern notions concerning the finitude of human subjects, notions which I nevertheless try to oppose whenever I get the chance. Bruno made this objection, to which I am quite sensitive, very early on. All

in all, in *Being and Event* the subject is defined as a finite instance of the infinity of the True. What this means, in the end, is that one can only enter into the space of the subject as finite, under axioms of finitude, which is by no means a satisfactory solution.

Hegel's position has some advantages here. He maintains the possibility that the subject dialecticises the infinite in an immanent way; this constitutes the genuine theme of absolute knowledge. Leaving the anecdote about the end of history to one side, what's true in absolute knowledge is the idea that the finite can hold the infinite, that it's possible for the finite and the infinite not to figure as essentially disconnected. This was not exactly the case in *Being and Event*, where it's said rather that the infinite carries or bears the finite, that a truth carries the subject. We come back here to the question of dialectics: I'd like to develop a new dialectic, one that accepts that the distribution of truth and subject need not coincide with the distribution of infinite and finite.

My argument therefore is as follows. I demonstrate that the subject is identified by a type of marking, a post-evental effect, whose system of operations is infinite. In other words, subjective capacity really is infinite, once the subject is constituted under the mark of the event. Why? Because subjective capacity amounts to drawing the consequences of a change, of a new situation, and if this change is evental [*événementiel*] then its consequences are infinite.

In *Being and Event*, subjectivation ultimately fades away no less than does the event. Its status remains somewhat indeterminate, outside the thematics of the name of the event. But as Lyotard asked me from the beginning: isn't the naming of the event itself already fundamentally a form of subjectivation? And isn't there then a second subjectivation that is under the condition of the name fixed by the first subjectivation? Isn't the subject, as is often the case in philosophy, thereby presupposed by its very constitution?

I think that in my new arrangement the infinite capacity of subjects can be maintained in an immanent fashion, because the notion of consequence will be constantly bound to the subject

him- or herself: this subject will need to have been specifically marked by the event in order really to participate in the labour of its consequences.

P.H.: What will the consequences of this be for your somewhat problematic theory of the unnameable?

A.B.: It's quite possible that the category of the unnameable may prove irrelevant. The theory of appearance provides all by itself the guarantee that every object of a world is marked (in its multiple composition) by an inexistent term. Since an event produces the intensification of an inexistence, at the cost of an inevitable price to be paid in terms of destruction, there is no need to limit the effects of this intensification. Once a price has been paid in the domain of the inexistent one cannot act as if this price has not indeed been paid. Disaster will no longer consist in wanting to name the unnameable at all costs, but rather in claiming that one can make something pass from inexistence to existence, in a given world, without paying any price. Ethics will consist instead in the assumption and evaluation of this price. In sum, I'm coming back to the maxim of the Chinese communists during the Cultural Revolution: "no construction without destruction." Ethics consists in applying this maxim with clarity, and with moderation. Of everything that comes into existence or comes to be constructed, we must ask: does it possess a universal value that might justify the particular destruction which its coming into existence demands?

P.H.: Can you describe how this might work more precisely? In the case of love, for instance, whose unnameable aspect was sexual pleasure: in what sense is such pleasure now directly accessible to the subject of love? And at what price, precisely?

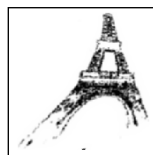
A.B.: I'm not saying that the inexistent will take the place of the unnameable. I'm not saying that sexual desire will become inexistent. The perspective is a different one. The unnameable testified to a point, within the general field in

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question, that remained inaccessible to the positivity of the true. These points of opacity, these resistances to the forcing of forms of knowledge, will always exist. But "unnameable" is not the right word. I've already done away with the moment of the naming of the event. In the procedure of love, it may happen that one is unable to draw all the consequences implied by an encounter (in such a way that the sexual factor might be entirely absorbed in these consequences). This does not mean that the sexual is unnameable. We are no longer in the logic of *names*, but in a logic of *consequences*. We will simply say that there are some things that are inconsequential, that some things do not enter into the field of consequences.

P.H.: Does a subject no longer run the risk, then, of perverting or totalising a truth, as you suggest in Ethics [1993]?

A.B.: The risk does not disappear. But it's no longer of the order of a forced nomination. Basically, by recognising the quasi-ontological category of the unnameable, I made concessions to the pervasive moralism of the 1980s and 1990s. I made concessions to the obsessive omnipresence of the problem of Evil. I no longer feel obliged to make such concessions. But neither do I wish to give up on the general idea of an ethic of truths. What corrupts a subject is the process of treating as a possible consequence of an event something that is not in fact a consequence. In brief, it's a matter of logical arrogance. For there's no reason why the possible consequences of a new intensity of existence should be identical to the totality of the world. To be honest, I have yet to work out these ethical questions in detail. The general idea is to substitute, for the overly moralising idea of a totality marked by an unnameable point, the idea (which is far more closely linked to the concrete practices of truth) of a field of consequences whose logic must be both reconstructed and respected. I'll be taking up these difficult questions in the final chapter of the *Logiques des mondes*.



notes

1 This interview was conducted by Bruno Bosteels and Peter Hallward in Paris on 2 July 2002.

2 Badiou, *Le Siècle/The Century* (2004).

3 *Épuration* means both purification and purging. [Translator's note.]

4 See Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003) chapter 13.

5 For a more detailed account of Badiou's recent interpretation of the Cultural Revolution see his pamphlet *La Révolution culturelle: la dernière révolution?* (2002). [Translator's note.]

6 Badiou is referring here to a group of thinkers made up of Pascal, Rousseau, Mallarmé and Lacan. See his "Généalogie de la dialectique" in *Peut-on penser la politique?* 84–91. [Translator's note.]

7 Cf. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) 82.

8 Viviane Forrester, *L'Horreur économique* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

9 Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001).

10 Pierre Guyotat, *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967); *Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers*, trans. Romain Slocombe (London: Creation, 2003).

11 The verb that Badiou always uses in this context, *apparaître* (to appear), is usually better translated as a noun (appearance, appearing); the most natural rendering is often "the domain of appearing." [Translator's note.]

12 Badiou's seminar at the Collège International de Philosophie was entitled, in the years from 1996 to 1998, *Théorie axiomatique du sujet*; the substance of this seminar will be incorporated into *Logiques des mondes*. [Translator's note.]

13 Badiou is referring to the conference on his work held in Bordeaux in October 1999. See Bruno Bosteels, "Vérité et forçage: Badiou avec Heidegger et Lacan" in *Alain Badiou: penser le multiple*, ed. Charles Ramond (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002) 259–93. [Translator's note.]

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Alain Badiou
École Normale Supérieure
45 rue d'Ulm
75230 Paris Cedex 05
France

Peter Hallward
French Department
King's College London
The Strand
London WC2R 2LS
UK
E-mail: peter.hallward@kcl.ac.uk

Bruno Bosteels
Department of Romance Studies
Morrill Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
USA
E-mail: bb228@cornell.edu

Alberto Toscano
Sociology Department
Goldsmiths College, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW
UK
E-mail: a.toscano@blueyonder.co.uk