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### Seven Variations on the Century

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## Seven Variations on the Century<sup>1</sup>

Alain Badiou

Today we are forced to endure the dominance of an artificial individualism. In France, in 1995, millions of people demonstrated, rallied by the one slogan: ‘together!’ – what Paul Celan, in his poem *Anabasis*, named the ‘tent-word’. In Seattle and Prague, the rights of collectivities have been declared against the transnational institutions of global finance. In response to all of this, propaganda offers us the ‘self-evident’ rights of the individual caught up in the competitive search for happiness and success. Even in the literary world, the production of biographies and autobiographies is saturating the market. Nothing is considered as worthy of interest except what the Chinese, who adore lists, would call ‘the three relations’: the relation to money, the relation to economic and social success, and the relation to sex. The rest is nothing but archaic abstraction, and very likely totalitarian. What is modern is the generalisation, as Ego-ideals, of the three relations. Behold! ... not what in fact *is*, but what, with a sort of vengeful obstinacy, they are attempting to impose upon us as what *must be*.

At the very least, we can foster the awareness that this propaganda, far from pertaining, as it claims to, to the nature of the things and subjects democratically inscribed within the media, constitutes instead an act of forcing, achieved through the extraordinarily brutal inversion of everything that the century had managed to desire and invent. The current of thought which effectively marks the epoch that is coming to a close – whatever its often violently opposing variants may be – maintains that every authentic subjectivation is collective, that every vigorous intellectuality implies the construction of a ‘we’. This is because, for this current, a subject is necessarily measured by its historicity. In other words, it is a subject who resonates, in its composition, with the power of an event. This is one of the forms of what I call ‘the passion for the real’: the certainty that, issuing from an event, the subjective will can realise unheard of possibilities within the world; that, far from being a powerless fiction, the will intimately affects the real.

On the contrary, today’s propaganda wants to impose upon us the conviction that willing, under the domination of a crushing reality principle whose distillate is the economy, must prove itself extraordinarily circumspect if it is not to expose the world to grave disasters. Violence must not be done to the nature of things. At base, the spontaneous philosophy of modernising propaganda is Aristotelian: let the nature of things manifest its proper ends. We must not do, but let be. Just think of the gap

between this stance and the conscience of those who used to sing, beneath red flags: 'the world is going to change from below'.

If you think that the world can and must change absolutely, that there is neither a nature of things to be respected nor pre-formed subjects to be maintained, you thereby admit that the individual can be sacrificed. This means that, by itself, the individual is not endowed with any intrinsic nature that would merit us striving for its preservation. It is with reference to this theme of the unnaturalness of the human subject – more, of the inexistence of man, and thus the vacuity of human rights – that today I would like to propose some variations.

**First Variation: Philosophical.** In varying guises, philosophers, between the Thirties and the Sixties, worked with the idea that the real of an individual – the constitution of an individual as a subject – is entirely modifiable. Obviously, this constituted a sort of philosophical accompaniment to the theme of the new man. For example, one of Sartre's first texts, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, develops the intuition of an open and constitutive consciousness, whose concrete manifestations as 'me' or as 'ego', and therefore as an identifiable individual, are nothing but external ephemera. The immanent being of consciousness is not grasped through the transcendence, or the identifiable objectivity, of the Ego. Later, Sartre would draw the rigorous ontological consequences of this intuition by posing that the being of consciousness is nothingness, which means absolute freedom, thus rendering any idea of a subjective nature impossible. In psychoanalysis, and singularly in the way it was recast by Lacan, the Ego is an imaginary instance, and the subject as such can no longer be either a nature or a being, because it is (and this is what is meant by 'unconscious') ec-centric with respect to its own determination. Lacan names this point of eccentricity 'the Other', so that every subject is something like an Alteration of self. This is what Rimbaud had anticipated: 'I is an other'. Here, it is once again impossible to think the individual as an objective nature.

To the extent that the century has contributed innovations to the theory of the subject, it has conceived the subject as a separation from self, as an interior transcendence. In my own doctrine, the subject is dependent on an event and only comes to be constituted as a capacity for truth. Since its 'matter' is a truth procedure, or generic procedure, the subject cannot be naturalised in any way. Adopting Sartre's vocabulary, we will say that the subject has no essence (this is the meaning of the well-known formula 'existence precedes essence'). Adopting Lacan's vocabulary, we will say that a subject is only identified at the point of lack, as a void or lack-of-being.

If the subject is constituted as a lack-of-being, the question of its real remains open, since this real is neither an essence nor a nature. It is then possible to maintain that a subject 'is' not, but rather advenes, under certain determinate conditions, where instead Lacan would simply say: 'it is lacking'. Nietzsche's imperative, 'become who you are', finds a worthy echo here. If one is to become a subject, it is because one isn't one yet. The 'who' that you are, as subject, is nothing but the decision to become this subject.

You can see here the emergence of a link between the thesis that a subject is of the order, not of what *is*, but of what *happens* – of the order of the event – and the idea

that the individual can be sacrificed to a historical cause that exceeds it. Since the being of the subject is the lack-of-being, it is only by dissolving itself into a project which exceeds it that an individual can hope to attain some subjective real. Whence the fact that the 'we', constructed in and by this project, is the only thing that is truly real, the only thing that is subjectively real for the individual who supports it. The individual, in truth, is nothing. The subject is constituted as the new man, emerging at the point of a lack to self. The individual is thus in its very essence the nothing that must be dissolved into a we-subject.

The affirmative reverse of this sacrificial evidence of the individual is that the 'we' that a truth constructs – the stakes as well as the support of which are to be found in the new man – is itself immortal. It is immortal by virtue of the fact that it exists, not according to a perishable nature, but according to an eternal occurrence, as eternal as Mallarmé's dice-throw.

**Second Variation: Ideological.** How did the century re-organise the three great signifiers of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity? The dominant thesis today, under the mandatory name of democracy, is that the only thing that counts is liberty. A liberty, moreover, so affected by the contempt the other two terms are held in (equality is utopian and anti-natural, fraternity leads to the despotism of the 'we') that it becomes purely regulative or juridical: the liberty for all to do the same things, under the same rules.

This idea of liberty was incessantly reviled during the short 20th century, the one that goes from 1917 to 1980. It bore the name of formal liberty, and it was opposed with real liberty – note the pertinence of the adjective. Formal liberty means this: a liberty that is neither articulated through a global, egalitarian project, nor practised subjectively as fraternity.

Throughout the century, equality was the strategic aim: politically, under the name of communism; scientifically, under the name of the axiomatic; artistically, under the imperative of the fusion of art and life; sexually, as 'mad love'. Liberty, as the unlimited power of the negative, was presupposed, but not thematised. As for fraternity, it was the real itself pure and simple, the sole subjective guarantee of the novelty of experiences, since equality remained programmatic and liberty instrumental.

I insist: fraternity is the real manifestation of the new world, and thus of the new man. What is experimented – in the Party, in action, in the subversive artistic group, in the egalitarian couple – is the real violence of fraternity. And what is the content of this fraternity, if not the acceptance that the infinite 'we' prevails over the finitude of the individual? This is what is named by the word 'comrade', which today, for all intents and purposes, has fallen into disuse. My comrade is one who, like myself, is only a subject by belonging to a process of truth that authorises him or her to say 'we'.

This is why I hold fast to the conviction that this is not in the slightest a question of utopia or illusion. The set-up for the emergence of the subject is, quite simply,

complete. In Lacan's terms, equality is the imaginary (since it cannot come about as an objective figure, even though it is the ultimate reason for everything), liberty is the symbolic (since it is the presupposed instrument, the fecund negative), and fraternity is the real (or what is sometimes encountered, here and now).

**Third Variation: Critical.** The risk incurred in always articulating the constitution of the subject onto a collective, and thus universalizable, transcendence, is that of transferring onto the collective the natural or at least objective properties that the proponents of *laissez-faire* assume to be the prerogative of the human individual. The century hardly spared itself this deviation. The fascisms did not fail to replace the subjective universality of the truth procedures (political invention, artistic creation, etc.) that they detested with the definition of great collectives of reference: the nation, the race, the West. We can call 'Stalinism' the substitution, pronounced on the basis of the Soviet State's position of power, of entities of this sort (Working Class, Party, Socialist Camp ...) for the real political processes of which Lenin had been the foremost thinker, and which Mao in turn attempted to identify.

Let us note in passing, so as not to be in tune with the vulgar equation of nazism and supposed communism (what in effect was the Stalinist State) under the name of totalitarianism, that these two political set-ups remain entirely opposed to one another, even in what concerns the genesis of their entities of reference. For it is precisely *against* the political processes of emancipation linked to the word 'proletarian' – processes they correctly perceive to be unbound, unassignable, cosmopolitan, and anti-State – that, in a perfectly explicit manner, the various fascisms preach submission to national and/or racial totalities of reference and to their putative representatives. The Stalinist state is instead the reification of these real political processes, a reification that comes from the impossibility, encountered by Leninism, of integrating into its conceptual system the question of how the power of the State is to be exercised. Whilst the State has always been the alpha and omega of the fascist vision of the political – as a State based on the supposed existence of great closed collectives – it has never been, in the history of Leninism, and later of Maoism, anything but the obstacle posed by the brutal finitude of the operations of power to the infinite mobility of politics.

The absolute opposition of these political doctrines within the century can be given a more philosophical expression. Fascism's attempt to oppose, to the infinite of emancipation, the bloody obstacle of a predicable finitude, the denumerable properties of a supposed substance (the Aryan, the Jew, the German ...). Communism's experiment with the antinomy (indicated by Marx, with his customary genius) between the finitude of the State and the infinite immanent to any truth, including above all political truth. The mythical entities of reference accompany the victory of fascisms, and signal the inevitable defeat of communisms.

And yet it is true that, whether they are idealised and turned from the outset into the subjective support of a politics of conquest, or considered as nothing but the pompous names of political stagnation, there is indeed a remarkable production of imaginary macroscopic entities and hyperbolic names. These large entities do not constitute the we-subject discussed above. They do not have their origin in an

occurrence or an event; they are inert collectives. They are seen by their devotees as necessary conditions of subjectivation, as the objective matter that the we-subject either reflects or enacts in practice. I propose to name these entities *the passive body* of subjectivation.

Why, even in the experience of State control, should one not rest content with the real 'we', the 'we' that envelops the 'I' in the effective becoming of an invention of thought? Why is it that the determination of an acting singularity so often has had to represent itself as the consciousness or experience of objective entities, of mythical hypostases? Why endow action with a passive body? We shall have occasion to see that this formidable objectivation intervenes in the problem of the *naming* of processes, in the theory of names. For now, we can ask ourselves if the great macroscopic totalities are not summoned, when they belong to communism, as names (proletarian politics, bourgeois art, socialist camp, imperialist camp, State of the workers and peasants ...) whose only value is to provide the cheap universalisation of a process, at the very moment when this process falls into sterility or is fixed in the State form. The name is what allows a singularity to be asserted beyond itself. The century's treatment of names is also a prisoner of the Two, of the non-dialectical synthesis. On the one hand, it is important to love the acting singularities alone (this is fraternity); on the other hand, these singularities must be historicized, even during those moments when invention is lacking – those moments when, as the French revolutionary Saint-Just once said, 'the revolution is frozen'. The universality of these moments must be rendered evident by names that easily convey identifiable objectivities.

In the end, the problem is the following: why do we need, in this century, great (objective) collectives in order to name? Why do the political processes of emancipation always take the name of supposedly objective social entities, such as the proletariat, the people or the nation?

I believe it can be shown that this question is related to the tribute that the century paid to science, and therefore that it is related to what survives of the scientism of the 19th century in the midst of the voluntarism of the 20th. Objectivity is in fact a crucial scientific norm. The legitimacy of adequate names for the we-subject was sought within the more or less certain sciences, such as historical materialism. Even nazism is a racial mythology which presents itself as scientific. To attain its ends of submission and extermination, it thought it could rely on the racialist anthropological jargon that had accompanied the imperial expansion of Europe ever since the 18th century. That this jargon was a tissue of laboured and criminal fictions is as plain as day. The science of race is purely imaginary. It will be noted that an imaginary Marxist science also existed, even if it did not itself determine the revolutionary subjectivities of the century. This Marxism, devoid of a correlate in the real, claimed to be a scientifically legitimate fraternity pure and simple, and here lay its strength.

**Fourth Variation: Temporal.** The century proposed its own vision of historical time. It had a very broad genealogical vision of political confrontations, following Marx who wrote that the entire history of men was one of class struggle. Academic historians, on their part, worked on long durations, holding the scale of a human

life to be a negligible quantity with respect to the flux of significations. It is clear that this history was by no means a 'humanist' one.

It is very striking to see that today we are practically bereft of any thinking of time. For just about everyone, the day after tomorrow is abstract and the day before yesterday is incomprehensible. We have entered an atemporal, instantaneous period; this shows the extent to which, far from being the shared experience of individuals, time is a construction, and even, we could argue, a political construction. For a moment, let us reconsider, as an example, the five-year plans which structured the industrial development of the Stalinist USSR. If the plan could come to be extolled even in works of art, such as Eisenstein's film *The General Line*, it is because, over and above its economic significance (a dubious one, as we know), planning designates the determination to submit growth to the political will of men. The five years of the plan are much more than a mere number, they are a temporal material in which, day after day, the collective will comes to inscribe itself. This is clearly an allegory, in and by time, of the power of the 'we'. The entire century, in varying ways, saw itself as a constructivist century – a vision that implies the staging of a voluntary construction of time.

There was once the immemorial time of the peasantry, an immobile or cyclic time, a time of labour and of sacrifice, barely offset by the rhythm of the seasons. Today, we undergo the marriage of frenzy and total rest. On the one hand, propaganda tells us that everything changes by the minute, that we have no time, that we must modernise at top speed, that we're going to 'miss the train' (the train of the Internet and the new economy, the train of the cellular phone for everyone, the train of countless stockbrokers, the train of stock-options, the train of pension funds – I could go on ...). On the other hand, this racket cannot conceal a kind of passive immobility or indifference, the stubborn perpetuation of what there is. This time is thus one upon which the will, be it collective or individual, has no hold. It is an inaccessible mixture of agitation and sterility, the paradox of a stagnant febrility.

Even if – as often happens in the heat of invention – it was handled with clumsiness and dogmatism, the century's powerful idea of time must continue to inspire us, at the very least against the modernising temporality that annuls any subjectivation whatsoever. The idea is that if we wish to attain to the real of time we must construct it, and that in the end this construction depends entirely on the care that we take in becoming agents of the procedures of truth. Let us praise the century for having borne the epic proposal of an integral construction of time.

**Fifth Variation: Formal.** What were the century's dominant forms of collective materiality? One can propose, I believe, that this century was the century of the demonstration. What is a demonstration? It is the name of a collective body that uses public space (the street, the square) to display its power. The demonstration is the collective subject, the we-subject, endowed with a body. A demonstration is a visible fraternity. The assembling of bodies into a single moving material form has the function of saying: 'We are here, and they (the powerful, the others, those who are not part of the "we") should be afraid and take our existence into consideration.'



Throughout the century, the demonstration can only be understood against the subjective horizon of a 'we' that could change everything. It legitimates, within the sphere of the visible, the line from the *Internationale*: 'We are nothing, let us be everything'. The demonstration sketches out the totality aspired to by a collection of nothings, a collection of isolated individuals.

The century was the century of demonstrations, and for a long time these demonstrations were haunted by the figure of insurrection that is politics. Insurrection is the final celebration of the body that the 'we' bestows upon itself, the final action of fraternity. Yes, the century's conception of the feast, being subject to the paradigm of demonstration and insurrection, required that this feast must always come to brutally interrupt the ordinary regime of things. Today, the feast – harmless and consensual – is typically what diverts us away from every political concern. We see government experts with furrowed brows report that the people want strong signs of festivity. We see serious newspapers compare the celebrations that accompanied France's victory at the World Cup to the demonstrations that followed the liberation of Paris in 1945. Why not compare it to the taking of the Bastille, or the Long March? Today, the feast names something like a counter-demonstration.

The philosopher must here recall that 'manifestation' is a key Hegelian word, a word belonging to dialectics which designates the 'coming out of itself' of any reality whatsoever. One of Hegel's fundamental theses is that it is the essence of being to manifest itself. The essence of essence is appearance. On this point the century, otherwise so profoundly anti-dialectical, was very dialectical indeed. For any fraternity, and so for a we-subject in the process of being constituted, to demonstrate is to manifest oneself. The being of the 'we' is displayed, but also exhausted, in the demonstration. There is a great dialectic confidence in this form of manifestation. This is because the 'we' is, in the end, nothing but the set of its demonstrations. In this sense, the real of the 'we', which is the real itself, is accessible to each and every one in and by the demonstration. To the question: 'what is there that is real?', the century responds: demonstrating. That which does not demonstrate is not.

**Sixth Variation: Critical (once again).** One of the great weaknesses of the century's thought, or at least one of its zones of uncertainty, is that it entertained a conception of legitimacy based on representation. In politics, for example, it largely supported and practised one of Lenin's later maxims, a maxim presented by its author as the ABC of Marxism, but which nevertheless remains doubtful: 'The masses are divided into classes, the classes are represented by parties, and the parties are directed by leaders. Parties and leaders draw their legitimacy from an operation of representation'.

If this conception of legitimacy is tested by the passion of the real it encounters the following obstacle: the real is not represented, it is presented. In its different inventions (the revolutionary political party, the manifesto of an artistic school, the integral didactics of a science, etc.) the century never ceased to come up against the non-correspondence between the real and the represented. The real may be encountered, manifested, or constructed, but it is not represented. Here lies the stumbling block:



if all legitimacy is representative, legitimacy is but a fiction with respect to the real that it lays claim to.

A demonstration or an insurrection, and, more broadly, a political sequence, or even an artistic creation seized in the violence of its gesture, are in no way representable. Fraternity is not representable. As I have already suggested, the unjustified summoning of large, inert, macroscopic, and therefore supposedly 'objective' sets (class-in-itself, race, nation...), interferes with subjectivation by means of its presumed representative legitimacy. This is because only inertia can be represented. We thus pass from the real model of the event and the demonstration to the ideal model of science.

Representation and fictional legitimization on the basis of inert totalities come to fill in the gaps of what is really presented, which is always discontinuous. Philosophically, the ground of the problem is that the real is discontinuous. As Lacan says, by way of an image: 'what exists are grains of the real'. In my own vocabulary: there are only multiple procedures of truth, multiple creative sequences, and nothing to arrange a continuity between them. Fraternity itself is a discontinuous passion. Only moments of fraternity truly exist. The protocols of representative legitimization attempt to render continuous what is not, to give disparate sequences a unique name, such as the great proletarian leader or the great founder of artistic modernity, names that in fact are taken from fictional objectivities. Without doubt, the epic tale that the century revelled in has its dark side. It also demands false heroes.

**Seventh Variation: Anti-dialectical.** I have insisted elsewhere on the singularity of the theory of the Two, which motivates the intellectual life of the century in all of its domains. This is an anti-dialectical Two, without synthesis. Now, in every demonstration of fraternity there is an essential Two: that of the 'we' and of the what-is-not-us. The century forces the confrontation between two manners of conceiving the what-is-not-us. Either we see the what-is-not-us as a polymorphous formlessness, a disordered reality; or else we see it as *another 'we'*, an external, and therefore antagonistic, subject. The conflict between these two conceptions is fundamental; it sets out the dialectics of the anti-dialectical. If in effect the 'we' relates externally to the formless, its task is that of formalising it. Fraternity becomes the subjective moment of the in-formation of its formless exterior. According to this model of antagonism, one will say things like: 'the apathetic must be rallied to the Party'; 'the left must unite with the centre to isolate the right'; 'the artistic avant-garde must find forms of address that everyone can perceive'. This shows that the century sees itself as a formalist century, in the sense that any we-subject is a production of forms. In the end, this means that access to the real is made through form, as was argued by the Lenin of *What is to be done?* (the party is the form of the political real), the Russian formalists after the Revolution, and the mathematicians of the Bourbaki school, or, as we have shown elsewhere, Brecht and Pirandello. If, on the contrary, the what-is-not-us is necessarily *always already formalised* as antagonistic subjectivity, the first task of any fraternity is combat, the object of which is the destruction of the other. One will then say that 'whoever is not with the Party is against it'; that 'the left must terrorise the centre to defeat the right'; or, that 'an

artistic avant-garde must seek out dissidence and isolation, so as not to be alienated within the society of the spectacle’.

At the heart of the century, for reasons that pertain to the anti-dialectics of any primordial duality, the properly dialectical contradiction between formalisation and destruction plays itself out. It is this contradiction that Mao gave shape to, in an altogether innovative text – *On the Just Resolution of Contradictions at the Heart of the People* – by distinguishing the antagonistic contradictions, which are in fact without synthesis or anti-dialectical, from the contradictions within the people, which bear on how to treat the antagonistic contradictions, and in the end concern the choice between formalisation and destruction. Mao’s essential directive is never to treat the contradictions within the people in an antagonistic manner, but rather *to resolve the conflict between formalisation and destruction by means of formalisation*.

This is perhaps one of the most profound lessons, but also one of the most difficult, that the century has bequeathed to us.

*Translated by Alberto Toscano*

#### Note

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**Alberto Toscano** received a doctoral dissertation at the University of Warwick, where he was an editor of *Pli*. He is the translator and interlocutor of Alain Badiou’s *The Century* (forthcoming), as well as the translator of Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford, 2003).