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Badiou, Political Nihilism, and a Small-Scale Solution

by

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*All resistance is a rupture with what is. And every
rupture begins, for those engaged in it, through a rupture
with oneself.*

(Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* 7)

Abstract

In *Badiou, Political Nihilism, and a Small-Scale Solution* I argue that Badiou's presentation of politics, exclusively on a large scale – that of the nation-state – betrays his underlying set-theoretic ontology. The consequence of presenting politics on this scale is that political events, opportunities for genuine political engagement, are extremely rare. This leaves potential political actors with little reason to believe they will have the opportunity to engage in politics. The absence of meaningful engagement, along with Badiou's unique conception of truth, gives rise to the problem of political nihilism. But, just as sets are both composed of sets and couched within others, situations too should be viewed as scalable. Re-presenting politics on a multiplicity of scales overcomes the worry about nihilism, while better capturing the real complexity and texture of political commitments.

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Introduction

A) Badiou's Work and The Literature

In the preface to the English edition of *Being and Event*, Badiou says that at the moment when he first published this book, he “was quite aware that he had written a ‘great’ book of philosophy”¹. He “knew” that he “had inscribed [his] name in the history of philosophy, and in particular, in the history of those philosophical systems which are the subject of interpretations and commentaries throughout the centuries.”² After the past fifty or so years of apologies, hesitations, and qualifications characteristic of continental philosophy, I find this attitude refreshing, and in some sense, empowering. Of course, the likes of Aristotle or Hegel would probably like a word with Badiou on this point. Although they might have a case, this unashamed arrogance of Badiou is not wholly unwarranted. Ours is also a tradition of hierarchical relations organized around names. Philosopher X was a student of Y, and he was a colleague of Z, etc... In the current configuration of French philosophy at least, there is no bigger name than Badiou. Badiou is the current master figure of French philosophy, and the “trajectory” of his “increasing popularity” is “reminiscent of the French titans of the recent past”³. The influence Badiou has had on contemporary philosophy can first be accounted for by the increasing number of recent secondary analyses

¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006), xi. (Originally published in French in 1988).

² Ibid.

³ Brent Vizeau, “Review of Alain Badiou’s *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*”, *Symposium*, 13:2 (2009).

of his work, including Bartlett and Clemens' *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*⁴, Norris' *Badiou's 'Being and Event' A Reader's Guide*⁵, Feltham's *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*⁶, Riera's collection *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*⁷, and Peter Hallward's *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*⁸, which, even though the first of this series of commentaries and introductory guides, remains the best source available. There is also a boom-industry centered, in one way or another, on Badiou's thought in the blogosphere⁹. From the sheer wealth of ideas traded online among graduate students and younger academics we can feel the influence Badiou is having on the next generation of thinkers in the continental tradition.

Even preeminent philosophical figures have entered into dialogue with Badiou's work. Perhaps most notably in this regard, is the effect Badiou has had on the work of fellow celebrity philosopher, Slavoj Žižek¹⁰. In each philosophical text from *The Ticklish Subject*¹¹ through to the recent *In Defense of Lost Causes*¹², Žižek has taken up some aspect of Badiou's work, moving closer to Badiou each

⁴ A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens, eds. *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

⁵ Christopher Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event: A Reader's Guide*. (New York: Continuum, 2009).

⁶ Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*. (New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁷ Gabriel Riera, ed. *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2005).

⁸ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁹ Some of the better blogs that host substantial discussions of Badiou's work are: "Larval Subjects": <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/>, "Planomenology": <http://planomenology.wordpress.com/>, "Poetix": <http://codepoetics.com/poetix/>. The blogs centered more generally around the Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology are also very heavily influenced by Badiou and have some interesting discussions of his work.

¹⁰ For a more detailed tracing out of the relationship between Badiou and Žižek, see: Bruno Bosteels, "Badiou without Žižek", *Polygraph*, 17 (2005): 221-44.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*. (New York: Verso, 1999).

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. (New York: Verso, 2008).

time. As an example, Žižek had suggested that authentic political activity corresponded with the experience of going to the end of analysis, that is, the conclusion of psychoanalysis according to Lacan. As a result of his dialogue with Badiou, Žižek does not “believe any more that the conclusion of psychoanalysis is ... the authentic form of political engagement”¹³. In fact, Žižek has had cause to aggressively criticize Jacques-Alain Miller, an heir to Lacan’s psychoanalytic legacy, to which Žižek still very much subscribes. Miller thinks that “revolts,” that is, shocks that bring creative, subversive energy to a situation, are good, whereas “revolutions” are bad since they introduce a new order altogether¹⁴. Insofar as for Žižek, as well as for Badiou, politics must be revolutionary, the former now sees Miller as a kind of conservative sympathizer.

Of course, not all of the engagements with Badiou’s work are supportive. Certain kinds of traditional communists, Lotta and Duniya, for instance, criticize Badiou for being stuck in a bourgeois mode of politics¹⁵. Others criticize Badiou’s supposedly anti-democratic “heroizing” as mere decisionism¹⁶. Still others criticize Badiou’s mathematical ontology and his first principles, or axioms¹⁷.

¹³ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelmann, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 103-4.

¹⁵ Raymond Lotta and Nayi Duniya, “Alain Badiou’s Politics of Emancipation: A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World”, in *Demarcations*, no.1 (2009).

¹⁶ See, for example, Carsten Strathausen, “The Badiou-Event”, *Polygraph*, 17, (2005).

¹⁷ For an example of one who takes issue with the details of Badiou’s mathematical ontology, See: Jean-Toussaint Desanti, “Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou” in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (New York: Continuum, 2004): 59-66.

Prior to his ascendancy in the philosophical world, Badiou wrote books on a number of topics including mathematics: *The Concept of Model*¹⁸, Ideology: *De l'idéologie*¹⁹, and Subjectivity: *Theory of the Subject*²⁰, all of which have an implicit political tendency. These earlier works contain much of the material that will be reworked and formed into a full-on philosophical system with the publication of *Being and Event*. This latter text marks the culmination of Badiou's early period and contains most of the ideas for which Badiou is famous. It is here that Badiou delivers his mathematical, set theoretic ontology in full detail and traces out the consequences of this starting point in the realms of art, science, love, and most importantly, politics. Following the publication of *Being and Event*, Badiou felt as though he was "filled with new resources," and "able to produce a new vision of all kinds of things"²¹. This fruitful period in Badiou's work is where he undertakes many of his interesting explorations of the four conditions of philosophy, or what is the same, procedures of truth. Many of the explorations of this period are collected in *Conditions*²². Toward the end of this middle period in his work, Badiou produced two of his more influential texts. The first one is *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*²³, the text that has

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *The Concept of Model*. ed. and trans. Zachary Luke Fraser and Tzuchien Tho. (Melbourne: re.press, 2007). (Originally published in French in 1970).

¹⁹ Alain Badiou and François Balmès, *De L'idéologie*. (Paris: Maspero, 1976).

²⁰ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*. trans. Bruno Bosteels. (New York: Continuum, 2009). (Originally published in French in 1982).

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*. trans. Norman Madarasz. (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), ix.

²² Alain Badiou, *Conditons*. trans. Steven Corcoran. (New York: Continuum, 2008). (Originally published in French in 1992).

²³ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. trans. Peter Hallward. (New York: Verso, 2001). (Originally published in French in 1993).

likely contributed most to the general awareness of Badiou's ideas, and one that I have found heavily influential for my work. Here Badiou undertakes a criticism of that form of ethics that measures good and bad in terms of how much evil one is subject to, that is, of an "ethics of victimization", offering an "ethics of truth" in place. This book, however, contains more than a criticism of contemporary ethics; it also presents us with a mature distillation of Badiou's systematic development of his concepts of subjectivity, truth, and politics. The value of this text as an entry point into this labyrinthine field of ideas is unmatched. The second of these influential texts is *Briefings on Existence*. I mark this as one of the two most important texts from this period, not so much for the influence it has had on readers, as it seems to be one of the least cited of Badiou's major works, but for the influence it seems to have had on Badiou's own thought. In *Briefings*, Badiou has come to the point where he has many questions about his own work and begins to explore directions of thought that will lead him to his second opus, and the text that marks his later period of thought, *Logics of Worlds*²⁴. Again turning to mathematics for the basic resources of his philosophical thinking, Badiou extends his system into the terrain of phenomenology – this time on the basis of category theory. The scope of my project is such that I will not consider this latest major work. Instead, I will primarily focus on the Badiou of *Being and Event* and *Ethics*, and utilize texts from other periods only insofar as they seem relevant for understanding the ideas in the works of primary focus.

²⁴ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. trans. Alberto Toscano. (New York: Continuum, 2009). (Originally published in French in 2006).

B) My Project

Before I became interested in the political potential of Badiou's ideas, I had been trying to think of ways to conceive of an "outside" to what I had been calling "total systems". From considering more radical ideas about ideology – here I was heavily influenced by the work of Jean Baudrillard²⁵ – I started to wonder how it is that we can transform an all-encompassing ideological climate from within. Žižek's concept of the "Parallax View", two necessary, but mutually exclusive, perspectives on one object²⁶, seemed to provide the kind of structural gap that could harbor the sort of transformative potential I was looking for. Already, by looking for structurally present political possibilities, I was interested in the relation between ontology and politics. My first contact with Badiou, his text *Ethics*, made clear that in Badiou I would find some interesting possibilities for thinking through this relation. Beyond the pages of Badiou's own texts, others are taking up these problems by engaging with Badiou's highly original ideas on politics. Nick Srnicek²⁷ and Levi Bryant²⁸ respectively take up the degree to which one can or must take preparatory measures to bring about an event. Others take up Badiou's political thought through a comparison to that of other thinkers. Two such examples are Calcagno's *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and*

²⁵ See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, "The Hyperreality of Simulation" in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 1993), 70-6.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. (New York: Verso, 2006), 4.

²⁷ Nick Srnicek, "What is to be Done? Alain Badiou and the Pre-Evental", *Symposium*, 12:2 (2008): 110-26.

²⁸ Levi Bryant, "Symptomal Knots and Evental Ruptures: Žižek, Badiou and Discerning the Indiscernable", *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 1:2, (2007).

*their Time*²⁹, and Johnston's *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*³⁰. Though there are many taking up problems that they see in Badiou's work, none have discussed the problem of nihilism that I will raise in this essay. Like some of the other critical supporters of Badiou, I think that it is possible to overcome this problem without rejecting Badiou's general framework.

I will begin my essay by explicating the fundamentals of Badiou's ontology along with its central concepts. In the first chapter, I will explicate the fundamentals of Badiou's ontology, explain the link between ontology and politics, show how social situations map onto the ontology, and propose an interpretation of the specificity of the political event with regard to other kinds of events. In Chapter two, I will raise the problem of nihilism that I see stemming from Badiou's own presentation. It would seem that political events only happen on very large scales. This leads to the impression that events are extremely rare, which in turn leads to a situation where there may be an absence of opportunity for meaningful political engagement. In this chapter, I will also discuss other notions of nihilism from Nietzsche to more contemporary figures in order to best situate and understand the problem as it applies to Badiou. In chapter three, I will return to Badiou's ontology and offer a corrective to the way politics is presented in a way that is fully consistent with the underlying set-theoretic ontology. My suggestion is that since socio-historic situations must map onto the underlying ontology, and since the sets they map onto are multiple and scalable, we should

²⁹ Antonio Calcagno, *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events and their Time*. (New York: Continuum, 2007).

³⁰ Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*. (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

present politics also on a multiplicity of scales from the very local to the very grand. This presentation opens the possibility of many more opportunities for meaningful engagement. I will also discuss how the resulting view of politics is similar in some ways to popular accounts of politics as everyday occurrences, but avoids the problem these latter accounts face, namely the evacuation of the revolutionary significance of politics. Finally, in chapter four, I will suggest some interesting ways to trace out the consequences of my re-presentation of Badiou's politics, and suggest avenues for further research.

C) Badiou the Militant

Badiou makes a clear distinction between the philosopher on one hand and the militant (political subject) on the other. He is somewhat famous for both, though never both at once. Though my thesis will focus on Badiou's philosophy, it is interesting to consider how his own political commitments fit into his philosophical vision, if only for the purpose of speculating to what degree each informs the other. Ultimately, I will leave the decision open to the reader.

One of the primary examples of a political event Badiou uses in his philosophical texts is also one that has formed Badiou's political subjectivity such that he has been engaged in tracing out the consequences ever since. Badiou was a student, along with other famous philosophers including Jacques Rancière and Etienne Balibar, at the time of the student riots and occupations of May 1968 in Paris. At the time of this event, all three of the aforementioned were students of Louis Althusser, who was himself a sort of ideologue for the French Communist

Party. In a typically Marxist fashion, Althusser's position on the student movement was that the time was not right for revolution, thus he was opposed to the protests. Balibar remained faithful to his teacher, whereas the other two committed themselves to the truth of the event and broke from their teacher. Rancière and Badiou share much of the same view on politics, and it seems clear that the event to which they remain faithful is a driving force. In Badiou's case, he remains one of twelve members of the post-party organization *L'Organisation Politique*³¹. This group promotes and undertakes direct political intervention into situations in which an inequality is systematically produced and maintained by the state. The principal elements of concern for Badiou the political actor are the *sans papiers*, or those immigrant workers who have no residency papers. As such, they are an exploited underclass that receive no state rights and can be deported whenever they become a nuisance or cease to serve a purpose (for which they are undercompensated). Resurrecting the classical figure of the worker, Badiou insists that they be counted as workers and not immigrants. Immigrants have a proper place, and it is not here. His motto is, therefore, "everyone who is here is from here"³². As a political actor, Badiou's own actions are directed against the state, but are also an intervention in a situation structured by the state, and are done in the name of the workers who do not belong according to the state.

The philosopher can think the possibility of political change in the abstract, but has nothing to say about the practical details of political engagement. It is not

³¹ Specific information about *L'Organisation Politique* used to be available on their website, which is now inoperative. It seems as though there may be a reconfiguration of this group under the leadership of Sylvain Lazarus, although this is unclear at present (Wikipedia).

³² Alain Badiou, *Polemics*. trans. Steve Corcoran. (New York: Verso, 2006), 150n14.

the role of the philosopher to prescribe specific interventions on the ground. As philosopher, one can outline the ontological character of an event, but cannot tell when it is correct for a trade union to negotiate with the government or when it is correct to throw paving stones. Insofar as Badiou intervenes in a situation in either of these ways, he is doing so as militant and not philosopher. This is political thinking, an engaged thought-praxis, and the mode of the militant subjectivity. Badiou's own commitment to tracing out the consequences of the political event to which he is subject has a lasting Maoist character. A self-proclaimed Maoist, Badiou retains many of the classical categories of politics, which is why it is not surprising that his own political efforts are focused on the "worker". It is clear that many political positions have considered themselves representative of Mao's thought, so much so that the name is now obscure³³. Badiou suggests that Mao himself is responsible for the variance, as he represents a contradiction between an extreme form of statism and a revolutionary dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs³⁴. Ultimately for Badiou, Maoism "will have been the experience of a capital transition", of the last revolution "in the motif of classes and of the class struggle"³⁵, so ultimately Badiou's attachment to Mao will be more an attachment to revolutionary class struggle, again, in the name of the worker, and not a struggle for a Maoist (communist) party state.

The reader will find in this brief discussion of Badiou the militant a perfect example of the political subject in the philosophy explicated below. The content

³³ Ibid., 318.

³⁴ Ibid., 321.

³⁵ Ibid.

of political struggle need not be specifically concerned with class struggle or the worker in particular, but it must have the same form in terms of event, subject, fidelity, and so on. It remains open to what degree Badiou's philosophy is erected to justify his political commitments, or to what degree his philosophical thinking informs his political action. It would appear that his fidelity to the events of May '68, and/or the Chinese Cultural Revolution, comes long before he has a fully mature political philosophy, but this need not undermine the philosophy itself. Perhaps, as a matter of course, each will always inform the other, and neither principally so.

1) Politics and Ontology in Badiou

A) Mathematics is Ontology

Philosophy in the tradition that stems from Plato and Aristotle is concerned with beings *qua* beings, with what is only in so far as it is. Badiou situates himself within this tradition that spans from Plato and Aristotle to Heidegger's meditation on Being in *Being and Time*³⁶. While for these philosophers thinking Being is the central task of philosophy as metaphysics, conversely, for Badiou, thinking Being is only central to the project of philosophy insofar as it grounds any properly philosophical thinking³⁷. Even then, it is not the philosopher who thinks Being, but the Mathematician. With that said, philosophers must have access to the thinking of Being so that as philosophers

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962).

³⁷ *Being and Event*, 7-8, 14.

they can properly think the compossibility of the truths of their time³⁸. Holding together in thought the foursome of truth procedures (scientific, artistic, amorous, and political) of our historical situation is the fundamental task of philosophy. Still, insofar as thinking the truth of our time requires the (mathematical) thinking of “what is” as such, the philosopher must begin with ontology. If the Heideggerian adage that a great philosopher really only thinks one great thought, holds true, then the invocation of Set theory to ontology is Badiou’s great thought.

Why Set Theory?

Ontology before Badiou’s philosophical grasping of mathematics as the language of ontology was a matter of thinking Being as some ultimate ‘One’, some absolute or totality³⁹. Ontology was a matter of thinking Being, and “the norm for what is thinkable [including Being] consists in the unification of the singular entity beneath the power of the one,” says Badiou⁴⁰. For as obviously as it seems that Badiou is writing against a backdrop dominated by Heidegger, he says surprisingly little about Heidegger’s ontology directly. Perhaps this is because his sweeping characterization of the ontological thinking that precedes his own is not, strictly speaking, an accurate portrayal of Heidegger’s actual thinking. No matter. Badiou positions his own thinking against a thinking of Being as *One*. Setting himself against this affirmation of the Oneness of Being, Badiou’s own project becomes, in some sense, a negative thinking. Opposed to

³⁸ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*. trans. Norman Madarasz. (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 37.

³⁹ *Being and Event*, 23.

⁴⁰ Miguel de Bestegui, “The Ontological Dispute: Badiou, Heidegger, and Deleuze,” trans. Ray Brassier, in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*. ed. Gabriel Riera. (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 45.

the One is the not-One, or the multiple. This “subtraction” from thinking Being as One yields a conceptualization of Being as a *pure* multiplicity. That is, not a multiplicity of Ones under some ultimate One, as in some kind of onto-theology, not even a “pure” multiplicity consisting of atoms that cannot be further divided. Instead, Badiou conceives of Being as a multiplicity of multiplicities⁴¹. Conveniently, mathematical Set theory offers a robust set of tools for thinking pure multiplicity without overarching unity or basic units (that is, without unity either at the top or the bottom). Finally, since ontology is, for Badiou, a matter of thinking pure multiplicity, and since Set theory is a thinking of pure multiplicity, Badiou can with some plausibility declare that “mathematics is ontology”: that all that can be thought of Being *qua* Being can be thought in terms of Set theory⁴².

With mathematics assuming the lead role in thinking Being, it would seem that philosophy has lost its central focus and task. But this is not so. Mathematics thinks Being, but it is not a self-reflective thinking. The thinking of Being requires an external understanding of what Mathematics achieves in its thinking. Mathematics needs philosophy to declare that Mathematics is ontology, making ontology somewhat secondary to philosophy’s mapping of the terrain of thought. Furthermore, the philosopher has the remaining and overriding task of showing how the truths of her era can be held together in thought without contradiction. It is still the task of the philosopher to make sense of the world, only this requires her to import a foundation of sorts from Set theory.

⁴¹ *Being and Event*, 29.

⁴² *Briefings*, 159.

In Badiou's set-theoretic ontology⁴³, what *is*, purely in the abstract, is a multiplicity of multiplicities: sets with elements and parts. What *exist* are worldly things (broadly construed) that accord with the underlying ontological substructure. For example, the set "France" contains all those objects, people, relations, ideas, and anything else that constitutes the set "France". Anything French, that is, anything that *belongs*, or again, that is *presented*, to the set "France," is an element of the set France. Some of what is contained in the set "France", or better what is *included*, or *represented*, in the set "France," are subsets or *parts*. A part is a sub-grouping of elements that were contained in the greater set. For example, "taxpayer" is a part of the set "France". All those elements that belong to the set "France" who pay taxes are included in the part "taxpayers." With these few examples we can see how Set theory offers a way to build a robust topology of sets within sets ("{"} denotes "set"): France{{taxpayers}, {Eiffel Tower}, {postal workers}, etc}, French Taxpayers{{postal workers}, etc}. We can also see how it is fairly easy to apply this abstract thinking to the social and empirical world. Still, a great deal more detail is required to show how this is supposed to be an ontology of infinite multiplicity with no foundation but the void.

The topology of sets we just created is a fair demonstration of the idea of "decomposition". The larger set "France" can be decomposed into its parts,

⁴³ Badiou's understanding of Set theory is based upon standard ZF Set theory with the axiom of choice. He presents Set theory in a somewhat simplified, and modified form to suit the needs of his project and readership. My explication of the central concepts of Set theory is based on Badiou's presentation in *Being and Event*, esp. Parts I and II. For a more detailed presentation of ZF set theory, see: Patrick Suppes, *Axiomatic Set Theory* (New York: Dover, 1960).

including the set “Taxpayers”, which can be decomposed into a smaller sub-set, perhaps “Postal Workers”, “Females”, and so on. If the sets we are dealing with have a limit to their decomposition, then we will be able to find a foundation. Seeking such a foundation has occupied much of the history of ontology. Perhaps it is fair to say that Aristotle’s “first mover” works in an analogous way⁴⁴. What separates Badiou’s set-theoretic ontology from foundational ontologies, is that there is no term that limits the decomposition of sets. There is literally nothing, or a void, at the basis of Set theory, and sets are infinitely decomposable. Being as a pure multiplicity has no foundation, or better, it has nothing as its foundation. This does not mean that we must jump right into the middle of a system of sets to begin tracing them out with no hope of accounting for their genesis. It will be useful to provide a sketch of how a purely formal topology of sets can be constructed. Insofar as this is only a sketch, it does lack some important details. Still, one should be left with a fair impression of how such a formal topology – one that approximates Badiou’s notion of pure multiplicity – can be constructed.

There are nine axioms or axiom schemas, “the first principles of Being”, that make up the initial “wager” of set theory⁴⁵, as well as two relations. These nine axioms, together with the relations of belonging and inclusion, offer all the tools needed to fully describe the ontology of pure multiplicity in the abstract. Some of these axioms are purely mechanical (extensionality, union, replacement),

⁴⁴ See: Aristotle. “Physics”, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. (New York: Random House, 1941), book 8: 283-6. Also, at the other end of the spectrum there are the atomists (Democritus, Leucippus, etc) who posit uncuttable “atoms” as the foundational unit of all that is. The idea being that if material units were infinitely decomposable, then material bodies would dissolve into nothing.

⁴⁵ *Being and Event*, 60.

and are only of a philosophical interest insofar as they form a functionally necessary part of set theory. Other axioms represent interesting philosophical decisions and make up the terrain upon which the ultimate validity of this theory rests. I will focus only on the latter axioms to describe how it is that Set theory allows Badiou to think Being as pure multiplicity.

The first and most crucial of the axioms is that of the “void set”. The axiom of the void set states, “there exists a set that has no elements”⁴⁶. Insofar as the empty set contains no elements, it is merely a signifier, $\emptyset$, its proper name. Together with the axioms of ‘foundation’ and ‘power set’ we can see how Being is multiple and has nothing as its foundation. The axiom of foundations states, “any non-void set possesses at least one element whose intersection with the initial set is void; that is, an element whose elements are not elements of the original set”⁴⁷. This suggests that any non-empty set contains within it a sub-set whose elements do not belong to the greater set. Effectively, this means that any well-founded set has the void set as an element, and for ZF set theory, all sets are well founded⁴⁸. This will have important political implications when we map the set theoretic structure onto the real world.

The axiom of the power set says that given the existence of a set x , there exists a set $p(x)$ that contains all of the sub-sets of the set x ⁴⁹. This axiom assures us that there is no set of all sets, since for any given set, including what would be

⁴⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 500.

⁴⁸ See: Karel Hrbacek and Thomas Jech, *Introduction to Set Theory 3ed.* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1999), 259.

⁴⁹ *Being and Event*, 62-3.

the set of all sets, there is a greater set that contains all possible subsets of the initial set. There is always another, larger, set that can be formed out of the subsets of any set. Together these three axioms allow us to formally see how a topology of sets extending infinitely can be generated out of the void, or pure nothingness. We begin with an empty set, $\emptyset$, per the axiom of the void set. Next we form a set out of the subsets of the initial set $p(\emptyset)$ per the axiom of the power set⁵⁰. Next we can form another greater set from the set $p, p_1(\emptyset, (\emptyset))$. We are able to form p_1 as we have because, as a power set of p , it will contain all possible subsets of p , in addition to the empty set itself according to the axiom of foundation, since $p(\emptyset)$ is a non-empty set. Thus p_1 includes p and $\emptyset$. This is enough detail to demonstrate how a purely formal topology of sets can be generated, and for the time being, this should be enough technical set theory to begin discussing the interesting philosophical work that Badiou does with it.

Not all sets are the bare, purely formal kind that I have sketched above. On the contrary, the application of set theory will have us thinking about sets with real world content: the set of things in this room, the set of all red things, France, and so on. These sets containing more than formal content are not purely multiple, or what is the same, *inconsistent*. They are in some sense *consistent* sets. With respect to the former kind of set, there is no governing principle, no foundational

⁵⁰ It seems somewhat peculiar that we can form a non-empty set out of an empty set, but the axiom of the power set simply lets us construct a set of all the subsets of any given set. The empty set $\emptyset$ only has one subset: $(\emptyset)$. If we had a set with only one element, x , then it only has one subset of elements, namely (x) , containing the first and only element of the original set x . That is, if you list all possible arrangements of the elements of the set containing only x , you would only have (x) , since there is only one way to arrange a single element. The symbol $\emptyset$ stands in for “nothing”. Since the empty set contains “nothing” or $\emptyset$, the subset of the empty set will also contain “nothing” or $\emptyset$, written $(\emptyset)$. The power set of the empty set is denoted as $p(\emptyset)$, which is not empty because it has one element, the subset of the empty set, even if that subset is “nothing”.

term to structure it (except “nothing”). Sets with content, on the other hand, are structured or “counted-as-one”, to use Badiou’s terminology⁵¹. Oneness *is* not, according to Badiou’s initial wager. Still, elements are presented within a situation according to some principle that groups them together (i.e. redness is a principle according to which elements are presented as belonging to the set of red things). This grouping principle is the operation of the count-as-one. What is not one, strictly speaking, is taken to be one in its presentation within a real world set, or what Badiou calls a “situation”⁵². Similarly, parts or sub-sets of a situation are represented according to the state of the situation⁵³. *Re-presented* because the elements that are presented in the initial situation are re-presented, this time by the state of the situation that counts elements into parts (i.e. red books, red paint, and so on). The power-set axiom showed how the set of parts of an initial set can always be generated, it also shows that the set of all sub-sets of a set will always be larger in terms of the number of elements it contains (its cardinality) than the initial set. In terms of counting and presentation, this means that representation by the state of the situation will always dominate the elements that are presented initially in the situation. The axiom of foundation told us that all non-empty sets, in this case our real world sets, have a sub-set whose elements do not intersect with those of the initial set. That is, there is a void present in all real-world sets, or in Badiou’s parlance, situations.

⁵¹ Ibid., 90-1.

⁵² Ibid., 522.

⁵³ Ibid.

B) Ontology and Politics

As I have suggested, Badiou's political thinking is based on his set-theoretic ontology, which means that his discussion of politics must map onto that of ontology. I will outline the central concepts of his political thinking and explain how they are extensions of the concepts of set theory already explained.

We exist in a multiplicity of situations marked out as sets by a common feature by which all of the elements of that situation are counted as belonging to it. As with the example of sets above, France is such a situation. Sub-sets of France, for instance, taxpayers, insofar as they form a set, are also a situation. This is the first, most obvious, mapping of our understanding of the real world onto its formal basis. The concept of situation is a fairly straightforward one that should help to orient an understanding of the more complicated features to come. We know that, for instance, department life in the academy is only a part of a life more broadly construed, but is in some sense different from life away from work. These different spheres are different situations both socially and ontologically. Yet, with all of their differences, they are both part of the same person's life, and as such belong to a greater situation. Although constructed out of pure multiplicity, situations are presented as consistent multiples⁵⁴. This is due to their being counted-as-one in their presentation. Although they come to be for us as ordered and structured according to some principles of inclusion and belonging (citizenship, proximities both spatial and social, etc...), they still have the ever-

⁵⁴ Ibid.

present breach of consistency as their basis. That is, situations, as well-founded sets, contain a void.

I will return to the void in a moment. First, just as elements belong to sets and as parts are included in sets, elements of a situation belong insofar as they are presented as belonging to the situation, and parts or sub-sets are included insofar as they are represented. The first counting-as-one presents the elements of a situation. This, translated into real world terms, plays out in very tangible ways. If an element is in France, where ‘in’ is used only very loosely, then it belongs to the French situation. All things French belong to the situation insofar as they are present. Badiou will continuously remind us of this by making this one of his main political slogans, “if you work here, you are of here”⁵⁵. Yet, some elements included in the French situation, that is, some represented elements are not also presented to the situation. Some groups of excluded or uncounted elements are a part of the situation, and so are included, but something extra is required so that the individual elements of those groups can be counted as belonging to the situation. This something extra will be the model of political action for Badiou. The French government creates and enforces laws about citizenship and who belongs in the French situation by representing those elements of the situation in terms of sub-groupings. Elements of the French situation are not first encountered as simply here, as simply presented; rather they are encountered in terms of how they are included. I am not merely here, but I am here as a citizen, a taxpayer, a jerk, or however else people and things are represented. This is a secondary

⁵⁵ Alain Badiou, “Interview with the Ashville Global Review”, *Lacan.com* (April 2005). Available at: www.Lacan.com/badash.htm

counting-as-one that structures the situation in terms of the representation of parts. The second count is performed by the structuring principles of the situation known as “the state of the situation”.

The state of the situation has its ontological basis in the power-set axiom. This axiom allows us to form a set out of the parts of the initial set. First, elements are collected to form a group. Second, they are arranged into sub-groups, and then all possible groupings are counted by the power-set. The real world extension of this is to rearrange presented elements (for instance, individual people) through the representation by the state of the situation (French citizens or foreigners), structuring the situation and forming a power-set out of it. Understanding things thusly shows how, even though presentation, belonging, and elements are primary, the situation is dominated by representation, inclusion, and the structuring state of the situation. The terminological choice, state of the situation, is a loaded one. Badiou’s contention is that the State (nation-state) always dominates its members by representing them in terms of sub-groups, and thus political action concerns members or elements and must take place at a distance from and against the state. Not coincidentally, the key to political action will be to break with the structure of the state of the situation, and the enabling condition of this break is found in that part of the situation that is not counted by the state: the void.

The void of the situation, like the void- or empty-set, is the point at which counting breaks down. A set cannot be decomposed into nothing, though nothing is, in some sense, its “foundation without foundation”. The set of all red things

counts elements according to the binary of red or not-red alone. Yet, the void-set is present as an element, while escaping the counting rule. Clearly “nothing” is neither red nor not-red. Still, the fundamental assumption, better, the fundamental wager for Badiou and for Set theory, is the axiom of the void-set. It is upon this starting point that Being as multiplicity can be thought. It is the thinkability of pure multiplicity predicated on the void that justifies it as a fundamental axiom of our philosophical thinking, and not because we can venture out and encounter it first hand. (What we encounter in what I call the void of a situation is something Badiou at times calls “the edge of the void”; the pure void is, strictly speaking, not an object of experience). Further to enabling the thinking of pure multiplicity, the void also allows us to think the possibility of radical political change.

A situation, a real world set, has its void in the part that is represented as having no elements. The *Sans Papiers* of France, and the Spanish-speaking underclass of Southwestern United States are two examples of such groups. These groups are represented by way of the notion “the problem of immigration”, or “illegal aliens”. Thus, these groups are *part* of the greater situation (i.e. *included* in), for instance, France or the United States. Yet, insofar as they are not citizens, the individuals (elements) that constitute these groups (parts) are not counted as *belonging* to the situation. There is acknowledgement of these groups by the laws that exclude them (state of the situation), but also by the ways that their presence is taken advantage of, i.e. in cheap labour. Still, from the perspective of the state of the situation, these groups are simply “cheap labour” and “illegal immigrants,”

and not individual French or American people. As individuals, as elements, they remain a blind spot for the structure of the situation.

A further illustration that may be helpful comes from the artistic condition. Imagine for a moment what someone who was well integrated into the art community would have thought when they first saw something like a cubist painting. There was a pre-existing artistic situation structured by accepted principles of aesthetics. Now, the production of a cubist painting brings about a “new” element of the situation or set “art”, but since it cannot be interpreted as art, or counted as belonging to art-things according to the pre-existing standards of art, it is not considered a work of art, it is “nothing”⁵⁶, or “no work of art”. Anticipating our discussion of event, we can see how for the early cubist painters, and then for the early followers of the movement, something special had happened, something new, an event, that eventually, through the commitment of these painters, would come to transform what counts as “art”.

The void is the blind spot of a situation that holds the potential for a radical break to occur. For Badiou, such a break with the situation is called an “event”. An event is the creation of a new possibility by way of a subjective decision and a continued fidelity to and maintenance of the truth of that decision⁵⁷. A happening that is thoroughly accounted for in terms intelligible from the perspective of the dominant state of the situation is just that, a happening. It

⁵⁶ Presentation is an ontological operation. It is a name for the counting-as-one of some multiplicity, and not a presentation by or for a subject. A cubist painting is presented, insofar as it is a one and not purely multiple. It is not counted by the operation that structures the “French art scene”, for instance. It may be counted as just some more “junk” that poseurs produce, and as such will be represented in the French art scene as junk, no different from the rest.

⁵⁷ *Being and Event*, 20-5; and, *Ethics*, 67-9.

makes sense and can be categorized by all those with access to the encyclopedia of knowledge⁵⁸ of the situation. Badiou makes an important distinction between politics as a principled intervention and politics as the mere negotiation of interests, or what we might call “politic-ing”⁵⁹. The debate of politicians over policies that are more or less the same offers nothing radical, nothing that breaks with the situation in which the negotiating takes place. Politics, should, on the other hand, be creative and novel. A political event opens a procedure of truth-making or of becoming-true: it opens a subjective wager. The attempt at a Liberal-lead coalition against the Harper government in Canada in December 2008⁶⁰ is what might ordinarily be considered a political event. For Badiou, on the contrary, this is a mere happening, mere politic-ing, as nothing essentially new is created in this somewhat clever maneuver. In the game of negotiating interests, it makes perfect sense to gang up on the party in power to seize power for your party and allies. Once this happens, it is back to business as usual, and the next series of power plays can begin. The game remains essentially unchanged, with a slight swing in power and possibly public opinion won or lost. A true event would inaugurate something essentially new, and something that is not just another turn in the same old game. For this to happen, the happening must be at the edge of the

⁵⁸ The encyclopedia of knowledge is that body of knowledge, opinion, and ideology that is generally agreed upon by the people of a situation and on the basis of which disagreements occur and are settled. For example, it was true for a historical situation (we “knew”) that there are men and there are women, without remainder. With the introduction of more sophisticated conceptions of gender and sexuality, this is no longer such an obvious truth.

⁵⁹ *Ethics*, 31, and 98-9

⁶⁰ For some details of the opposition coalition and the public reaction, see: The Canadian Press, “Pro- and Anti-coalition Rallies Planned Across Canada”, Wed. Dec. 3, 2008. Available at: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20081203/coalition_rallies_081203?s_name=&no_ads=

void, exploiting the potential for action and commitment outside of the reach of the understandings available to the situation. If a happening can be made sense of in terms available from the perspective of the state of the situation, then it will be absorbed or translated into another happening *of* the situation, and not as an *event* that breaks with it. Politics must operate at a distance, and the political procedure comes to be in and through its own breaking from the state⁶¹. Thus the potential for novelty lies in the empty part of the situation, the unintelligible or uncounted elements that make up the void.

Historical examples of events show that in the post-evental period, the very game itself has changed. Badiou's favorite example of May 1968 in France, though considered by many to be a decisive failure⁶², is an event that brought about a massive ideological shift to the left. From the point of view of the state, the student strikes and occupations, and eventually the national labour strike, were enacted by hooligans or troublemakers. Their behaviour is taken to be indicative of the decay of conservative morality or some other such sentiment. What the state was unable to grasp, by virtue of being the state, was that there was an undercurrent of discontent and a coming of age of those who experienced the world differently from the generation in control. Truths about equality and freedom were being created in and through the efforts of those who made up the collective subjectivity of May '68. These people had decided upon the truth of what was at stake in their strikes, and through their fidelity to that truth, they

⁶¹ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*. trans. Jason Barker. (New York: Verso, 2005), 143-5.

⁶² For a discussion of the "failure" discourses surrounding May 1968 in France, see: Kristin Ross, *May 1968 and Its Afterlives*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. ch.2 "Forms and Practices".

brought about a shift in the dominant ideology. Of course, this kind of shift did not happen over night. In fact, the conservative (perhaps “centrist”) de Gaulle regime was re-elected with an even stronger majority. Yet, even with the strengthening of the power of the conservative government, we could maybe say that the cultural and ideological climate of France has never returned to such conservatism as was present pre-1968. As a coup, this movement failed since they were unable to overthrow the government. Yet, as an event that inaugurated a new procedure of truth, it was a success.

In giving the example of May ’68, two key concepts remain to be explicated, namely, truth procedure and subject. Badiou offers very original and strikingly new conceptions of truth and subjectivity, and since they are intimately tied together, I will deal with them together. A truth procedure is inaugurated in a decision that retroactively determines an event as such, as more than a mere happening, while a subject is created in and through this decision. So, a truth procedure, an event, and a subject all come into being together. As I suggested above, if a happening is intelligible in terms available from the perspective of the situation, that is, if the happening makes sense, than it is not an event. This is because truth is distinct from knowledge, and truth does not aim at sense making. There is a body or encyclopedia of knowledges available in the situation. Truth is a creative procedure that breaks away from this established body⁶³. In other words, truth isn’t found in the traditional ways of understanding. As Badiou explains,

⁶³ *Being and Event*, 328, 331.

Truths have no sense. Sequential, suspended from the chance of an event, truths (including political truths) are the effects of a conceptless fidelity in a situation. They do not trace any general trajectory to which sense could be ascribed. Truths occur in making-holes in, in the deflection of sense. Because sense is only ever something the situation itself administers.⁶⁴

Truth is not knowledge, and it is not sense making or understanding. It is also, contrary to contemporary epistemology, not a matter of adequation or the value of propositions. Truth is not a judgment but a process of becoming or creation⁶⁵. For a truth to come to be as something new, something new must happen. “What there is,” says Badiou, “generates nothing but repetition”⁶⁶. There must be a supplement to what there already is, and this is the chance event – that happening that hails one to make a decision. Of course, an event is strictly speaking “undecidable”. This is because if, when presented with this happening, one is able to decide for certain (using the available knowledge) whether this happening belongs to the situation or not, then it is not an event. If, when encountering that cubist painting for the first time, one was able to discern its artistic merit, then nothing essentially new will have happened. To be the subject of an event, this painting has to be encountered as something to be decided upon without appeal to available standards. The decision required is a sort of declaration: “this is art”. The consequences of that declaration, if successful, will change the artistic situation such that this will be art. In other words, what it means to be art will be transformed.

⁶⁴ *Conditions*, 165.

⁶⁵ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*. ed. and trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. (New York: Verso, 2005), 45.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

If you can calculate the significance of a happening, then it already falls under the categories for knowing or understanding that are the structures of the situation. The decision required in the case of an event is more a wager, which is why Badiou says, “a truth begins in *an axiom of truth*,” and further, that “it begins with a groundless decision – a decision to *say* that the event has taken place”⁶⁷. In and through this decision, a subject is brought into being. By fixing the undecidable, deciding upon what is properly undecidable, one has opened up a procedure of truth. What is opened is “an infinite procedure of verification of the true,” and “this procedure is the examination, within the situation, of the consequences of the axiom that decided upon the event... such a procedure is an act of fidelity”⁶⁸.

My own description of a truth procedure is: the tracing out of the material consequences of the evental decision. This wording is preferred to that above, where Badiou says that the procedure is an examination of the consequences of the decision. As a creative process of becoming, a truth procedure is a commitment to materially change the world according to the evental decision, as there are no consequences unless you do something. I see the post-evental procedure playing out in a kind of Marxist fashion of changing the world: in this case not according to one’s will, but according to one’s fidelity to the truth of an event. With no concrete concept to guide it, truth is open-ended and its course uncertain. There is an ethics of truth implied in Badiou’s understanding of truths

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47.

and events (and made explicit elsewhere, see *Ethics*), which charges one with maintaining a commitment to one's decision. I see this charge to maintain fidelity to mean actively tracing out the consequences of this decision by intervening in the world. The charge to the young painter is to continue to produce your works, even in the face of ridicule. Continue to share your art with the world, and perhaps another some-one will see what you see and join you in your subjectivity to the truth of your work. In deciding on the significance of the happening, this work of art, for instance, and in tracing out the consequences of that truth, one becomes subject. A subjectivity is born in and through this decision made by a person (or persons), someone who is not yet a subject (at least not to *this* truth).

Badiou's conception of subjectivity then is not in any way similar to a classical or Cartesian conception of subjectivity as something like a "thing" having first-person intentional states. Rather, a subject is always a subject to a truth, a part of the procedure of tracing-out or making-real the truth of the initial wager. Since the subjectivity does not correspond with the person or self, it can be composed of many people in a collective subjectivity to the truth of the event. We see examples that at least approximate what Badiou is suggesting in the fervor of collective action, perhaps in a strike or a protest. The students in Paris in May 1968 seemed to share a certain something, a bond, a goal, a togetherness in their aims and actions that is the stuff of collective subjectivity in the sense that I think Badiou has in mind. It behooves me to note that a collective subjectivity need not be completely in agreement as to how to proceed with the tracing out of their commitment. It may be the case that two people both fundamentally subject to the

same event disagree about practical details, for instance, whether they ought to occupy the school and protest or sit at the bargaining table and negotiate. Also, in conceiving of truth as subjective, we should not understand it as radically subjective in the sense that absolutely anything goes. There is always a risk that what one is committed to is not an event, but a simulacra of an event. A happening similar to an event, perhaps the Nazi simulacra of an event, does not address universally in the way the truth of a genuine event does. Instead, simulacra create an inside/outside dynamic by creating an other to which our truth does not apply. For example, if Jews are not human, then human rights do not apply. There are thus criteria for genuine events, even if few and obscure from within the situation.

We should be able to see how out of the void of a situation, excluded from the count by the state of the situation, a happening can occur that, if decided upon, that is, wagered upon, will have been an event, and will have inaugurated a truth procedure and created a subjectivity.

C) What Makes a Political Event *Political*?

What is specifically *political* about political truth procedures?

Since Badiou claims that there are four and only four political truth procedures (political, scientific, artistic, and amorous), we ought to be able to clearly explain what separates each from the other, or at least what is unique about each particular form of truth procedure apart from truth procedures in general. This is not always as obvious as it would seem. Often, in his discussions

of politics, Badiou discusses truth procedures in the generic and then supplies examples of political truth procedures to fill in the reader's understanding⁶⁹. But, since I will be providing a different set of examples, and also because many of Badiou's examples can be disputed, we ought to have some parameters beyond mere examples for what constitutes a political truth procedure. To do this we will have to go beyond what Badiou says about truth procedures in general. My focus here will only be on what makes a political event political, that is, what can we say about these truth procedures in particular apart from what applies to all types of truth procedure.

First, a few comments about truth procedures in general. A truth procedure is a generic procedure maintained by a subjective fidelity, and sourced in the evental decision and commitment. Following some happening, the significance of which is decided upon by some person or group, a procedure of tracing out the truth of that significance is opened. The task of tracing out the truth is an infinite task insofar as the task of tracing out the material consequences of the event is always incomplete. Situations are composed of an infinite number of elements, that is, each situation has a cardinality (a size of infiniteness). It is not really important to fully explain this complicated point for our purposes here. It is enough to know that the situations out of which events occur are infinite situations, and thus the material transformation of the situation is never complete. It is interesting to note, however, that were we to treat the situation as finite (so

⁶⁹ Perhaps the one place where this is not the case is in pages 339-43 of meditation 31 in *Being and Event*. Examples of where Badiou discusses truth procedures in general followed by examples meant to clarify what is appropriate to the procedure in question see: *Ethics*, 41-3 and *Metapolitics*, 72-5.

completely transformable), our trying to force complete transformation of the situation in the name of the event would be committing a form of evil that Badiou calls “the forcing of the unnamable”⁷⁰ or “disaster”⁷¹. The danger of trying to force a total restructuring of the situation is that it would amount to wiping out the animal element of humanity by its infinite element⁷². The infinite is always supported by and made possible by the animal element: “truths make their singular penetration only through the fabric of opinions”⁷³. A truth is inaugurated in a naming of the event, but something must resist this nomination. This “unnamable” part guarantees the infinity of the truth, “such that every attempt to impose the total power of a truth ruins that truth’s very foundation”⁷⁴. Or, as Peter Hallward so succinctly puts it, “in order for a truth to continue as the truth of its situation the subject of that truth must stop short of investigating everything within the situation... the lover must stop short of a jealous possession of the beloved; political subjects must resist the temptation to define the boundaries and characteristics of their egalitarian community...” and so on⁷⁵. Not only is it impossible to accomplish a total transformation by truth, but it is an extreme act of violence to try to do so. By giving a name to the void, trying to mark their own void by defining the boundaries of their community, the Nazis committed this form of evil. Giving the name “Jew” to the void was an attempt to name the

⁷⁰ *Ethics*, 86-7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 84-5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 259.

unnamable, in this case in a radically exclusionary way with disastrous consequences.

Before turning to examine political truth procedures in particular, a few words about the other three procedures. Love, science and art are the other forms of truth. Every truth procedure will have a subjective maintenance, or “means”, that is either individual or collective, as well as an effect on the situation. Badiou’s mathematical ontology is itself a certain faithfulness to the “Cantor” event, the event in which set theory came to structure the very field of mathematics. There is a shared character of scientific and artistic truth procedures. Insofar as a truth is either of these, “its means will be individual, but the transmission and effects concern the collective”⁷⁶. The products of these procedures are works of art and scientific inventions, and will always be indiscernible. The indiscernability of an event means that it will, in some sense, be unknowable or beyond understanding according to the terms available. Badiou suggests there is no knowledge of art or science. It might be better or clearer to say there is no artistic or scientific knowing. We can know that this piece is a Renoir and not a Monet, but we cannot “know” artistically. This is contrasted with politics, since politics is a thought-praxis, a thinking in and through a doing. In and through committed political engagement, the terms for understanding the truth of the event are created. The political subject “knows” their truth by creating it. The indiscernability of science is somewhat less clear. It seems best to understand the products of scientific truth procedures as not so much producing

⁷⁶ *Being and Event*, 340 (emphasis removed).

knowledge, but producing “inventiveness”, novel ways of producing knowledge. Perhaps there is more to science, but that is best discussed elsewhere. Finally, the trickiest procedure – as so many can attest – is love. It is enough to suggest that the means of love and those it concerns are both individual. “Love concerns no-one apart from the individuals in question”⁷⁷, and so its product or effect will be individual. The truth of a love event is not something discerned from within. Lovers can never know they are in love. This fits a common experience. If you ever ask someone how they know that they are in love, they’re likely to tell you that “they just do”, which is to say they do not know, but believe. Having said all of this about truth procedures, it remains to be asked: what is particularly political about political truth procedures?

I could describe the political truth procedure as having collective means and an effect on the collective, I could describe its product as being indiscernible, since the situation, literally the State, out of which the procedure springs forth is blind to it, and so on. Instead, I want to go beyond the minimal definition of politics to understand the character of politics as it seems to operate in Badiou’s work more broadly. I want to focus on a sort of implied anthropology in Badiou’s work: a humanism of sorts. Of course his ontology is not merely anthropocentric. His ontology attempts to go beyond any form of suture to human-Being. Being is in no way correlated to how it appears to human beings. It is in no way correlated to the “understanding of Being”, as is the case for Heidegger. Heidegger’s *Dasein* is in some sense the opening to Being, whereas for Badiou, Being can be thought

⁷⁷ Ibid.

as not being sutured to human-Being (though of course the thinking of Being-as-such is so sutured). The element of humanism that I identify in Badiou's work concerns his overt and frequent emphasis on the difference between humans and animals. Each animal functions according to the particularities of its species of animality. Dolphins communicate through a seemingly sophisticated language, male penguins care for their eggs, rams butt heads, and so on. For Badiou, the human practice of negotiating our different interests in the bazaar that is usually thought to be the "political" sphere is a behaviour particular to our species of animality: the human *animal*⁷⁸. There is nothing particularly exceptional in our bargaining over lower taxes or better health care. This is one element of our particular version of animal behaviour. What is exceptional, what separates humans from animals in general is our ability to open and enter into truth procedures, or what is the same: to become subjects. This is the infinite element in humanity that separates us from the finitude of animality. This infinite element will be the basis for my account of what is political about political truth procedures. My big claim here is that political truth procedures concern the opportunity for humans to realize their humanity in and through their participation in truth procedures.

In *Ethics*, Badiou offers a controversial argument against the major trends in contemporary ethics. He sees our time as one in which ethics has been reduced to the ethics of victimization, that is, one in which we measure what is right only

⁷⁸ *Infinite Thought*, 53.

insofar as we can measure the degree to which we are, or are not, made victim⁷⁹. In the course of making his case, he offers an example of how oppressed humans are reduced to “their animal substructure”⁸⁰, and how in such extreme cases as the Nazi camps, those who remain what I would call “fully-human” are only able to do so through exceptional means. This figure of the courageous hero is very much a source of controversy, as it seems to imply that those who are reduced to bare animality are somehow worse humans, or, at very least, weaker humans. I think that the one who is tempted to go down that road is likely to miss the point. Badiou wants to illustrate how forces of oppression can reduce humans to their human-animality. We are all always animals. What is interesting here is how these forces of oppression can prevent humans from realizing their infinite potential, that element of their being that sets them apart, in unique instances, from animals. It may be the case that Badiou’s illustration is to blame for misleading readers. It has to be noted that people who live what we would normally see as free and happy, generally unoppressed, lives, still may not participate in that exceptional element of their being. Not everyone becomes subject to truth. That some people in the camps are reduced to bare life and others heroically maintain their subjectivity, their exceptional humanity, does not speak to the weakness or lack in some humans apart from others. We see from Badiou’s example how forces of oppression can lock us into that basic animal level of our being. I would go so far as to say that we do not need such extreme examples as

⁷⁹ *Ethics*, 10-11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the holocaust to make this point.

To use an example that I am fond of, we can imagine the fairly typical case of a homeless person living somewhere in or near each of our communities, a person who toils full-time trying to stave-off hunger and, at least in Canada, where I live, to avoid freezing to death on the street. This person lives in such a way that she is extremely unlikely to become subject to a truth. This person is a human animal, like us all; only hers is a context less open to being hailed by what will have been an event. We can make a similar case for the employed class of oppressed factory workers in numerous countries, and any number of other groups of people who live in such a way that they are not as open to the possibility of realizing their infinite human potential. Politics concerns the inclusion of these people, along with the rest of their human brethren, in the sphere of possible truth procedures. Inclusion of this sort is predicated upon the difficult and exceptional case of those who manage to become subject. By becoming subject, they realize their human potential for truth, and in so doing, they likely change the conditions for others to be more open to a possible call. It is enough that those who, through a kind of secular miracle, become subject realizing their exceptional potentiality. They do not need to achieve the kind of transformation that would benefit others, though it is unlikely that transformation – at least on larger scales – would not improve the context for others. We cannot consciously set up the situation such that someone will necessarily become subject, but it seems reasonable to assume that there are better and worse circumstances. In talking about education, Badiou suggests that the teacher's job is to rearrange "the forms of knowledge in such a

way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them”⁸¹. Perhaps more needs to be said about exactly what it would mean to arrange a context to make it more likely that one become subject to truth, but it remains a plausible suggestion.

Badiou’s politics distinguishes itself from more classical views in at least the two following ways. First, the main principle of politics, classically speaking, has been “Justice”. This is often understood as realizing a measure of equality, where equality has something to do with the leveling of life circumstances, or at least of opportunities. Justice, if this is what we are to call the central principle of Badiou’s politics, cannot concern equality in terms of particular life circumstances. Equality, instead, is something *declared* axiomatically from the start. Justice for Badiou would have to be something like belonging, where to do justice to an element of the situation is to count it as belonging. In the classical sense, justice can more or less be completely realized by equalizing the distribution of wealth or opportunity. That is, in principle, we could imagine a society where everyone has a similar quality of life, or similar access to opportunity. This is perhaps Marx’s great communist vision. For Badiou however, this could not be the case. The situation is structured in such a way that there will always be uncounted elements who are part of the situation, but not counted as belonging to it. There will always be those who, although fundamentally equal according to our assertion, do not belong in the situation of which they are a part. In other words, there will always be a void.

⁸¹ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9; cited in Kent den Heyer, “Education as an Affirmative Invention: Alain Badiou and the Purpose of Teaching and Curriculum”, *Educational Theory*, 59:4 (2009): 442.

Another way in which Badiou's vision of politics differs from a more classical idea is in his distinction between politics proper and the negotiation of interests. Those thinkers who present a view of politics as happening in some public sphere where we meet to discuss our interests, perhaps someone like Hannah Arendt, for instance, are the targets of many of Badiou's criticisms. He explicitly mentions Arendt in *Ethics*, suggesting that she problematically defines politics as the stage of "being-together"⁸². The collective space where politics happens is an interior maintained through the creation of an exterior. According to this approach to politics, only those who have voices in the bazaar get to be political. In other words, politics is located within the situation as a matter *of* the situation. Instead, for Badiou, those without voices hold the latent political potentiality of social situations. Politics is located in a rupture with the situation and operates against it. In and through being political, those who escape the count aim at breaking down, or at least changing, the barriers that define the collective space.

In what I call Badiou's political anthropology, there seems to be a unifying principle of inclusion that colors all political truths. All political truths aim at opening the possibility for people to partake in what is uniquely human: truth itself. For Jacques Rancière, politics is a kind of open conversation where, in order to function – and it does function, however well or poorly – there must be some kind of basic equality. This equality is for Rancière a basic shared

⁸² *Ethics*, 65.

understanding⁸³. A true democracy then would be a situation where all those affected could, in principle, have their voices heard⁸⁴. Similarly, I think that for Badiou, politics is about those who are part of a situation, but who do not belong. It is about those who are not counted opening a procedure of truth that aims at changing the situation to include them, so that the political conversation, so to speak, will include their voices. In order for this to happen, the situation itself must change in a way that affects how elements are counted. This is more than just adding elements to the current count. Badiou gives an apt example to demonstrate this character of political events:

Considering the fate of the *sans-papiers* in this country [France], a first orientation might have been: they should revolt against the state. Today we would say that the singular form of their struggle is, rather, to create the conditions in which the state is lead to change this or that thing concerning them, to repeal the laws that should be appealed, to take the measures of naturalization [*régularisation*] that should be taken, and so on.⁸⁵

In this sense, politics is inclusive. Badiou again uses the *sans-papiers*, this time after hundreds of African immigrants occupied a church for several months in protest of their status as “illegal aliens”, to illustrate this point when he says,

If we consider the movement to occupy the Saint Bernard church, well, as far as the occupants are concerned, they have, by and large, received their residency papers. After being told no, they were told yes – without, as today’s discussions show, any real

⁸³ Jacques Rancière, “Politics and Aesthetics: an Interview w/ Peter Hallward”. *Angeleki*, 8:2, (2003): 197.

⁸⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 100.

⁸⁵ *Ethics*, 98.

change in the laws or the legal perspective. It was done because the new conditions required it to be done.⁸⁶

These people, the void of their situation, created a collective subjectivity in and through their making true their right to live and work in France. It is important to emphasize that it is not simply a matter of integrating the elements who make up the void into the situation that excludes them. It is more fundamental. “I would call political,” suggests Badiou, “something that – in the categories, the slogans, the statements it puts forward – is less the demand of a social fraction or community to be *integrated* into the existing order than something which touches on a *transformation of that order as a whole*”⁸⁷. From this it is clear that we are justified in seeing politics as directed toward changing situations out of which events occur, or as I have been suggesting, as creating a new situation that counts as belonging the subjectivity that initiates the change. Badiou’s politics is not an emancipatory politics as opposed to some other kind of politics. Rather, politics itself is emancipatory. In other words, this emancipatory movement of opening up space to participate in that special feature of humanity is what designates truth procedures as political. For someone like Marx, for example, emancipation is first emancipation from the exploitative relation of workers to those who control the means of production. It is a matter of realizing a part of the workers’ humanity from which they are alienated by capital. In and through this emancipatory transformation, it is also a betterment of life conditions. For Badiou, emancipation has a similar double character of first

⁸⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 109 (emphasis mine).

realizing an exceptional human potential while likely improving life conditions for those uncouneted elements of society, whether or not they are subject themselves.

The situation > event > new situation model that I have outlined resembles a kind of Hegelian view of history, which may or may not be a welcome comparison for the reader of Badiou, but appears to be borne out by these passages. It is Hegelian *only* insofar as it resembles the latter's structure of tensions, resolution, new tension, and so on. Hegel's system has a final resolution in spirit's realization of perfect self-knowledge. On the contrary, the model I attribute to Badiou here has *no such resolution*. Though this view of political change may seem somewhat teleological in that it has a sort of direction, we should be clear that there is, by virtue of the structure itself, *no end* to the process. If every situation, in its very ontological structure, has a void, then there will always be the possibility of an event that could upset the structure of the situation out of which it arises. In other words, there would be no perfectly inclusive situation. The change from an old to a new situation can be seen as an improvement from within the new situation. But, since the new situation will harbor its own exclusions, there will be perspectives from which the situation may be no better, or perhaps even worse.

Still, if all political truths are of this sort, if they all have this element of creating or expanding the "inside", they seem to point toward universal inclusion in what is properly human. Whether or not we can practically realize this principle is not at issue. It is enough to understand this universal inclusion as the principle

that structures political truths as such. There is another way to put this point. As a subject to truth, one traces out the consequences of their commitment. This has the character of realizing human potentiality in that one is subject to truth, and may have the concrete consequence of creating a situation more conducive for others to become subject themselves. Their tracing does not explicitly or consciously aim at any higher formal truth. What I call a “unifying principle” is a sort of way of seeing something common to all political truths from a kind of God’s eye view.

An event cannot be planned or made to happen. It springs forth organically. Not everyone who is able to become subject to a truth will realize this capacity. In the moment of the evental decision, one can always decide that the happening is only significant in terms available from within their situation; one can rationalize and make sense of the happening, thereby closing this evental or novel potentiality. So when I suggest that political truth procedures aim at opening up the possibility for people to be political, to participate in truth, I am not suggesting that people will instantly become subject to truth. Those who are subject to the truth that opens up space obviously are realizing this part of their human potentiality. But they do not make others political *per se*. What they can do is remove barriers to participation in truth that others are subject to, so that if they are open to the opportunity to become a subject, they will be able to decide upon the significance of an event, name it, commit to it, and bear the responsibility for tracing out the consequences of this infinite commitment.

Much like how it is often thought that the Christian subject must be open to the possibility of revelation, I would suggest that people must be open to the possibility of being induced into subjectivity. There are a number of barriers that can make it unlikely that one would be open to participating in a procedure of truth. For instance, apart from what I suggested about the holocaust and the homeless person above, many workers in some of the worst conditions of life, those whose sole aim is to provide basic sustenance for themselves and their families, are not likely to take notice of a workers' demonstration underway in their community. (To be fair, a couch potato, subdued by dominant ideologies, probably does not have much chance to be political either.) Certain people are not as able to "play" truth procedure as others. Political events, insofar as they are political, will try to open the space necessary for the involvement in truth of their collective subjectivity, and in so doing, I would suggest, they are likely to open the space for others to realize their potentiality as well. If the situation is successfully transformed, such that the exploitation of workers is no longer a lived possibility, then it will also improve the condition for those workers not swept up by the event. They too will have circumstances more hospitable to the possibility of being induced into subjectivity in the future. So, whatever truth may have been revealed in a factory strike, the spark that inaugurated an event, it will have this character.

Finally, in a more abstract sense, the guiding axioms of Badiou's political thinking, as highlighted by Nina Power⁸⁸, are the coextensive axioms that humans are fundamentally equal and that humans think. What Power calls "two axioms" can be seen as one and the same axiom: namely, humans are equal insofar as all humans think. Badiou, in describing the fundamental political axiom of equality, says, "people think, people are capable of truth"⁸⁹. For the most part, when equality is invoked as a political principle, it tends to mean equal in some measurable sense. Badiou is clear that "'equality' signifies nothing objective... it is not a question of social status, income, function, and still less of the supposedly egalitarian dynamics of contracts or reforms... Moreover it has nothing to do with the social"⁹⁰. Continuing, he offers the positive definition of equality as "a political maxim, a prescription... it is that which we declare to be, here and now, in the heat of the moment and not something that should be"⁹¹.

Emancipatory politics then aims at realizing this fundamental assumption about humans, that we are equal in a fundamental way, which has to do with our capacity for thought. The maxim of our political action is not something realizable. Equality is not strictly brought about through leveling life circumstances. Rather, on the basis of our equality, we can seek to transform the

⁸⁸ Nina Power, "Towards an Anthropology of Infinitude: Badiou and the Political Subject", *Cosmos and History*, 2:1-2, (2006): 205.

⁸⁹ *Metapolitics*, 98.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 98-9. Any discussion of the axiom of equality in Badiou will go hand in hand with discussions of this axiom in the work of Jacques Rancière. Both thinkers seem to mean essentially the same thing and offer extremely similar formulations. For example, "Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality... it is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices of implementing it" (*Disagreement*, 33).

world in which we exist. This idea is elaborated, in another work, with regards to the role of thought in our equality as humans: “Equality means that the political actor is represented under the sole sign of his specifically human capacity. Interest is not a specifically human capacity. All living beings have as an imperative for survival the protection of their interests”⁹². This specifically human trait is “thought”: “and thought is nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal”⁹³. In other words, it is via our participation in truth that we transcend our basic animality. Political emancipation, emancipation from a limited animality, is then a matter of promoting or providing opportunity for humans to think, to participate in truth procedures.

2) The Problem of Nihilism

A) The Problem

Having understood the theoretical background and the “what” of Badiou’s politics, I want to turn now to a problem that I see arising from his presentation of politics. In Badiou’s political thinking, a potential political actor has two options for meaningful political engagement: either one happens across an event in the making, that is, some happening out of the void that holds some significance and hails one to become subject to its truth; or, one can enter into the subjectivity of an already open truth-procedure, inaugurated in a past event. First, let us look at

⁹² *Infinite Thought*, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

the latter possibility. In and through an evental decision a “some-one” becomes “subject”⁹⁴. Typically, we have in mind that first some-one or some-ones who decide upon the significance of a happening in the evental moment. This is not the only way to become subject to the truth of an event however. Badiou leaves open the possibility that one can enter into an already open procedure of truth. Admittedly, it is not entirely clear how this works, but he suggests that, a “some-one [induced into subjectivity] can be [a] spectator whose thinking has been set in motion”⁹⁵. I imagine there being a political movement of some kind, perhaps student protests inaugurated in decision about the significance of a conservative policy implemented in the university. As students are collectively induced into the subject to the truth of their cause, they bear the task of tracing out its consequences. As they protest and otherwise seek to inform others of what is going on, other “some-ones” may get drawn into the subjectivity of this movement. We saw this in France in 1968 when a small-ish student strike grew into a nearly national worker strike. People who were not the initial bearers of the truth of the event became subject after the fact. I think this is what Badiou has in mind in leaving open the possibility to enter into an already open truth procedure.

Still, it may not be possible for every potential actor to engage in an open truth procedure, since for many, especially younger, people, the truth of the event has been sufficiently crystallized in a situation. As a subject to the truth of an event, I have the task of tracing out the material consequences of my wager. I

⁹⁴ *Ethics*, 45.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

explained this above in terms of transforming the world according to one's commitment. When I say, "transforming the world," I literally mean bringing about a new situation. If, like Badiou, I write books informing others about injustices, promote and support worker's movements on the ground, draw other intellectuals into my cause and so on, then I have already effected a change in and to the situation out of which the procedure of truth to which I am subject sprang. If others join into the subjectivity to this truth—keep in mind that this kind of subjectivity is collective—, then they too will have the task of tracing out their commitment, and will (perhaps, can) too have an effect on the situation. As this process changes the initial situation, what is alive as truth becomes crystallized in the structure of the new situation. That is, the new situation is such because of the force truth had in forming it. But, insofar as the new situation accommodates the once-outside truth in its very structure, the truth no longer stands outside the situation as *truth*, but is now in and of the situation as *knowledge*⁹⁶.

For those who are subject to the truth of May '68, their task is not complete (as it is infinite), and they still have the task of further tracing out its consequences. But, as Badiou says, "we must suppose... that whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something *extra*, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for"⁹⁷. It is the case that for a young French student today, what was novel and open about May '68 is now delivered to them, and accounted

⁹⁶ *Being and Event*, 328, 331.

⁹⁷ *Ethics*, 41 (emphasis mine).

for, in stale textbooks, old movies, and other elements *of* their situation as young students⁹⁸. Since the teachings of those subject to the truth of May '68 are another part of the situation for French students, these teachings do not stand outside and against the situation for these young people. These young people *know* about May '68 in such a way that it seems to preclude them from becoming subject to its truth. In other words, the truth of May '68 is a truth for another situation, that of the '68 generation. A new situation has been brought into being, that of the next generations, for whom it is no longer an open and available procedure. Considering the rarity of political events on Badiou's presentation of political events, a point I will discuss further, we are likely to have long periods of time without a new event – Badiou gives five examples of political events spread over a period of roughly two hundred years. If the material consequences of these old events have been sufficiently traced out by its collective subjectivity so that the

⁹⁸ I should note that just because students learn about May '68, or any other political event, from textbooks and such, this does not mean that it cannot motivate students. Often it seems like we learn a great deal about social injustice and different political possibilities through these avenues. It is not hard to imagine a student being motivated by the texts of Marx or Rousseau. It is just that these ideas - or at least a certain interpretations of them - are already thoroughly accommodated in the situation in which these students learn. For real political engagement in Badiou's sense, something essentially *novel* must occur and be traced out through one's engagement. Now, to complicate the matter: it may be the case that there is a latent political force in some works that have been integrated into the knowledge of the situation. As parts of the procedure of truth that bring into being a new situation, artifacts may become crystallized in knowledge. But, works that could have been part of the evental process may become integrated into the situation as a means of sterilizing them from the outset. It has been pointed out to me that Noam Chomsky makes this point with respect to his presence as a radical philosopher in an otherwise conservative institution. Sometimes integrating something into the institution is the best way to remove its subversive edge. So, these writings, for instance, may be closed off to potential political actors for either of two reasons: they are part of a process that brought about a change to the situation in which the potential actor exists, or they have been integrated as a means of reducing the "hailing" effect these works might have. Either way, it is problematic for one who wants to engage meaningfully in politics.

situation out of which they arose has been transformed, then the possibility for us today to enter into the subjectivity of those truths is limited.

If I am correct in my suggestion about the way truths become crystallized in the knowledge – read: structure – of a new situation, then for at least some people the option of entering into the subjectivity of an already existing truth procedure might be unavailable. For a motivated potential political actor, there would have to be another way to engage meaningfully. This other way seems to be to happen across an event in the making.

The most straightforward way for someone to engage politically on the Badiouian model is to decide or wager on that initial moment that inaugurates the truth procedure, names the event, and induces the subject. Badiou gives a series of examples of political events, which he reiterates throughout his various discussions of politics, and where each exemplifies a political event occurring at the level of the nation-state. His examples are the French revolution, the Paris commune, Lenin's Bolshevik revolution, the student, and eventual national, strikes of May 1968 in France, and sometimes the Chinese Cultural Revolution⁹⁹. It is reasonably clear how a slave uprising or even the rising up of the proletariat class could be read as a political event rooted in the void of a situation dominated by a state that excludes these under-classes. This applicability makes Badiou's account attractive. But, his list of political events is very brief, too brief. The problem is that with five events in the past two hundred years (or some other very

⁹⁹ He gives these examples in many places including the following: *Conditions*, 163; *Ethics*, 41-2; and, *Metapolitics*, 72-5.

small number¹⁰⁰), there is reason to believe that the opportunity for meaningful engagement will not arise – and it may not. In the absence of a new truth procedure in the making or an open procedure of truth to which one may become subject, the potential political actor both faces an absence of truth, in Badiou's terms, and has no reason to believe that they will have opportunities for meaningful engagement. Thus, the problem of political nihilism arises for Badiou¹⁰¹. Political nihilism is problematic for the Badiouian framework insofar as politics is a good thing. Both in terms of the character of Badiou's humanism and the emancipatory effect of genuine politics, we should have no trouble concluding that it is good to have opportunities for political engagement.

B) Other Nihilisms

To be clear, what I mean by “political nihilism” is the absence of opportunity for meaningful, perhaps “real”, political engagement. Within the Badiouian framework, this is equivalent to saying that political nihilism is the absence of political truth, since political engagement is always a subjective engagement in a procedure of truth. As a means of justifying my definition and choice of terminology here, as well as a way of arguing that political nihilism as I have described it is undesirable, I will offer a brief discussion of other theories of nihilism. My discussion will in no way approach exhaustion of the subject, but I want to show how what I am describing as a problem above is similar to accepted

¹⁰⁰ It may be the case that Badiou's examples exclude other historical events (i.e. the American Revolution, the Prague Spring, etc...). This actually seems fairly likely. Even if we were to grant that this was the case, it is not likely that there are enough other political events to diminish the thrust of my argument on this point.

definitions of nihilism. I also want to contrast my position with others that may see political nihilism as a positive or desirable condition.

First, it seems prudent to start with the horizon against which any contemporary discussion of nihilism takes place: Friedrich Nietzsche. Nihilism was for Nietzsche result of the process of decay or dissolution of the pillars of truth that allowed for a shared meaning in European society. In *Beyond Good and Evil*¹⁰², and more famously in the “Madman” parable¹⁰³, Nietzsche suggests that God is dead, and that we’ve killed him. This gesture is symbolic of the active degeneration of the authority of those truths taken to be universal that had once guided our understanding of the world, especially our shared social reality. The point is not that some actual entity, God, has passed away, but that the symbolic status of God has been displaced and is crumbling. The state of nihilism, this state of lost meaning, thus presents both a negative aspect: we no longer have the signposts of meaning we once used to orient ourselves; but also a positive aspect: insofar as these pillars have more or less crumbled, we have a void that needs filling, and we can fill it according to our own will. It seems that Nietzsche is suggesting that we have the task of creating meaning in our world in place of the meaning once prescribed by the old pillars of truth or guarantors of meaning (though of course we had to invest meaning in those pillars in the first place, and do so somewhat continuously, in order for them to serve as the pillars they were). A state of nihilism seems for Nietzsche to be in and of itself negative, that is, he

¹⁰² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §108, p.109.

¹⁰³ Ibid., §125, p.119-20.

seems to think we cannot passively resign ourselves to the loss of meaning that his (and possibly our) era experiences. He is critical of those who succumb to this folly. Instead of passively accepting meaninglessness, or what he calls “a will to nothingness”¹⁰⁴, he suggests that we overcome our state of nihilism by becoming *Übermensch* (over-man, or super-man): creators of our own foundations of meaning. Thus, nihilism, via a somewhat moralizing appeal to be supermen, ultimately has a positive character for Nietzsche.

Simon Critchley picks up on this notion of a passive nihilism, and contrasts it to its opposite “active nihilism”. In the face of a shared experience of disappointment – political, religious or otherwise – most people resign themselves to being wrought with apathy, frivolous aestheticism, and (in jest) yoga with “tastefully chosen ambient music”¹⁰⁵. When those pillars of meaning that were to be our way toward, say, a good life, eternity, or an existence that seems just – perhaps a world that “makes sense” – continually turn out to not be what they were supposed to be (dissolved faith in the Church, corruption in government in place of serving the people, etc), people are left with selfishness and simple pleasures, or with an empty spiritualism, in what Critchley calls, after Nietzsche, “European Buddhism”¹⁰⁶. The increasingly popular alternative to this passivity in the face of disappointment is equally problematic. The character of active nihilism is terror. If the world lacks this kind of assured meaning, then we “will destroy

¹⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 66.

¹⁰⁵ Simon Critchley feat. Alain Badiou, (Audio) “Democracy and Disappointment,” *Slough Foundation presentation* (2007). Available at: <http://slought.org/content/11385/>

¹⁰⁶ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, (New York: Verso, 2007), 3.

this world and bring another into being”¹⁰⁷. That is, the active nihilist, for Critchley, is someone who wants to destroy the world of the liberal democrat and all that it entails, in favor of some kind of essentialism, most likely of the extremist religious variety.

Of course Critchley suggests a “third way” (which is a cleverly ironic reference to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who it is clear Critchley does not support): namely an ethics predicated upon an infinite demand, the weight of which is bourn through tragicomic self-irony, or humor¹⁰⁸. Politics must have, at its centre, an ethics capable of motivating people to overcome their apathy without turning to extremism. Only an ethics based upon something like a Levinasian experience of demand from or for the Other can sufficiently motivate political actors. This demand of the other is, for Critchley, an infinite demand – necessarily unfulfillable. The demand in itself is not sufficiently motivating, but the particular kind of experience it entails is. It is “that by virtue of which a self decides to pledge itself to some conception of the good”¹⁰⁹. It is the kind of experience that compels a response; and since the demand is of the other, the kind of response it compels cannot be to turn oneself into an island or blow the other up. This infinite demand “runs the risk of chronically overloading – indeed masochistically persecuting – the self with responsibility”¹¹⁰. Here we are referred to Lacan’s notion of sublimation of the subject. The ethical demand is not

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 78-9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

something I give myself in consciousness. Rather, in Critchley's psychoanalytic rewriting of Levinas, the demand comes from my unconscious. It is a demand from myself to myself. Insofar as it is me who "approves" the demand, gives the demand, and it is me who experiences it as infinite and unfulfillable, my subjectivity is divided. Sublimation is the realization of a passion, or in this case, a demand, without repression¹¹¹. The sublimated subject maintains the demand without crumbling under its weight. "*Humour* can be conceived of as a form of minimal sublimation that both maintains and alleviates the division of the ethical subject"¹¹², the subject overcome by their responsibility. Following Freud, Critchley notes that humour is always wrought with "unhappy black bile"¹¹³. Interestingly, humour is said to "have the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous"¹¹⁴. In humour, the self is able to laugh at its puny limitedness, to laugh at the burden of its unfulfillable demand, and thus bear the burden.

No more detail is required about Critchley's project here. I simply want to highlight that for Nietzsche nihilism is not obviously bad, as it seems to be liberating along the lines of the great existentialist theme of self-making. Still, for Nietzsche there is a sense in which simple meaninglessness is to be overcome. For Critchley too, and now with a more overtly political tone, nihilism, either active

¹¹¹ Ibid., 70-1.

¹¹² Ibid., 11.

¹¹³ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

or passive, is certainly to be overcome. However, not everyone defends the view that nihilism must be overcome.

Inspired and heavily influenced by Nietzsche, Italian philosopher and E.U. politician Gianni Vattimo offers an account of political nihilism in stark contrast to the sort of position I discussed above. Instead of something to be overcome, he plays up the side of Nietzsche for whom nihilism has a liberating, if not emancipatory effect. He is aware of the negative possibilities present in a post-metaphysical epoch: “a tradition characterized by the dissolution of principles.”¹¹⁵. If our response to this tradition of destructed foundations is an affirmation of some specific defining characteristic, perhaps race or religion, then we fall back into the game of the old metaphysics, and suffer the consequences that were, at least in part, a reason why metaphysical foundations crumbled in the first place. This road leads to what Critchley described as “active nihilism”, a nihilism that will impose its vision of a foundation upon the world – often in the form of terror. We also ought not swing all the way to the other poll, affirming instead an “anything goes” attitude. Without the guarantors of meaning in place, it can be argued that anything really is as good as anything else. In politics, this can have equally disastrous consequences. Vattimo is aware of these pitfalls, and thus, what he proposes by way of a nihilist politics of the left takes a different road.

One of the first benefits of his pro-nihilistic approach is that it has an inbuilt skepticism or critical stance toward anything put forward as ultimate or

¹¹⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*. trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 41.

universal¹¹⁶. This is obviously of benefit insofar as we are in a situation where fundamentalisms of all stripes are real possibilities. It also opens up a certain “‘supermarket’ of ethics, religions, and visions of reality”, the fear of which, “we all feel to a degree... can be unmasked, with a little help from Nietzsche, as a residual neurotic need for paternal authority”¹¹⁷. The vision is that these supermarket items can be held together as options without an ensuing disaster only if we see them all as *styles*, and not truths. In other words, on this model, aesthetics must trump truth. Vattimo’s suggestion is that the sort of emotion appropriate to this marketplace is that of irony toward the self, and the claims to truth inherent in our chosen style. A familiar theme, as it is irony toward the self, coupled with humor, that allows one to bear the infinite demand required of Critchley’s way out of nihilism. What this all leads toward for Vattimo is a political principle made possible by the nihilistic approach: politics ought not aim at equality (understood as equality of life circumstances, or something close to this) predicated upon some essential or universal characteristic (i.e. race or gender), but instead aim at the reduction of violence¹¹⁸. The key concept, violence is not simply physical harm of others, but the “assertion of an ultimacy that, like the ultimate metaphysical foundation (or the God of philosophers), breaks off dialogue and silences the interlocutor by refusing even to acknowledge the question ‘why?’”¹¹⁹. This formulation bears a striking resemblance to Rancière’s

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

conception of democracy as a conversation where all those affected can, in principle, have their voices heard¹²⁰. In a similar way to Rancière, on the basis of the axiom of equality, Badiou's is a politics that aims at a kind of inclusion. We could say that both Vattimo and Badiou seek a certain openness of the political "conversation", and thus a reduction of violence. It is clear too, then, that the question of violence, in these terms, is addressed by Badiou's politics of truth. The latter's is a kind of middle ground, in that it aims at a reduction of violence – inclusion – but it retains the category of truth.

It ought not be surprising that, though nihilism has a positive political potential for Vattimo, it is problematic for Badiou. Nihilism is a lacking: of meaning, of truth, of foundations, universals, etc... In my raising the problem of nihilism, I focus on truth and meaning, and present a worry about a possible nihilism arising out of Badiou's presentation of politics. It is however a worry that can be overcome. Following Nietzsche, Vattimo characterizes ours as a situation where truth as guarantor of meaning no longer functions as it once did. That is, people no longer, if things are as he says they are, get to treat their principles as absolute, universal, natural, or foundational. Badiou on the other hand rejects this kind of relativism. Truth in Badiou is a return to a strong sense of truth. Of course, his account is unique. Truth is absolute from the perspective of the emerging and creative subject. It is the truth-in-creation of a situation coming to be. It will not be recognized by the state of the situation out of which it arises, but that makes it no less true. Truth is not, for Badiou, "true for some and not for

¹²⁰ *Disagreement*, 100.

others”, but, equally, it is not something out there to be discovered. That is to say, truth is not relative in the sense of being a matter of opinion, but it is also not objective, as it is not subject independent.

A situation characterized by a generalized nihilism will present political possibilities only if politics is separated from truth, as it must for Vattimo, and simply cannot for Badiou. For the latter, politics *is* a process of truth. An absence of political truths is an absence of politics full stop. The reason why Vattimo is able to advocate for a nihilist politics is because he is stuck in the mode of politics as a marketplace of interests, a vision of politics that Badiou is highly critical of¹²¹. With very different ideas of what politics is, one sutured to truth and the other operating in the absence of truth, it is inevitable that nihilism will both mean different things for each, and that it will stand in a very different relationship to their views of politics. And yet, the end goal of each is arguably very similar. Insofar as Badiou’s politics opens the possibility for greater opportunities to realize the exceptional aspect of humanity, it overcomes Vattimo’s worry about violence. The difference is that for Badiou, nihilism must be overcome to do so.

So, having raised the worry about nihilism for Badiou’s presentation of politics, I will next turn to outlining a way to present politics that is both consistent with Badiou’s ontology, and avoids the worry to a significant degree. I call this a “small-scale solution”.

3) A Small-Scale Solution

¹²¹ Apart from the many things I have already said about Badiou’s politics, one can find a sustained criticism of this sort of politics in chapters 1-4 of *Ethics*.

A) A Return to Set Theory

We understand that the formal underlying structure of our reality is to be rationally understood in set theoretic terms. Thus, we must be able to map our world onto the ontological structure that Badiou presents. I have already shown how situations are just sets with worldly content. I should be more precise. A situation, strictly speaking, is “any consistent presented multiplicity”¹²², which means that not all types of situation will map onto the outline of ZF set theory that I have provided. Situations of the sort we find filled with “worldly content” are what Badiou calls, “historical situations”¹²³, or “historical-social situations”¹²⁴. This type of situation is such that it will always have at least one evental site¹²⁵, and is the only kind of situation that interests us here¹²⁶. Situations with political potentiality, really, with any evental potential at all, are of this type. As a historical situation (from now on, just “situation”) France, or the French situation, for instance, is a set that contains elements marked out by geographical boundaries, citizenship laws, and so on. Because France is a situation that maps

¹²² *Being and Event*, 522.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 511.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 511.

¹²⁶ An example of a non-historical situation is that of the “natural situation”. A natural situation is one where all of its terms are normal, that is, all of its terms are both presented and represented, and so there is no void (*Being and Event*, 515). Historical situations, on the other hand, always have some elements that are represented – they are counted insofar as the group to which they belong is counted – but are not presented as elements belonging to the situation. Peter Hallward illustrates the difference by reference to a piece of metal. A piece of metal is a natural situation, as it is a material that is divisible into smaller parts that are still metal (perhaps it is enough that they are still matter), and further divisible until the division approaches something like “zero matter”. A historical situation on the other hand can be divided, but the division must at some level encounter a foundational “irregularity”, where the decomposition encounters a set that yields nothing upon division. This is the void, where the elements of a subset are not counted by the structure of the situation. See: *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 119-20.

onto the notion of “set”, it contains sub-sets, for instance “French postal workers.” Following through the mapping, there is also a part of the situation whose elements are not counted, what was called the void set, and here just the “void”¹²⁷. If we can map our understanding of our socio-political world onto the underlying set theory, then what is true of one ought to be true of the other. This leads us to wonder why Badiou discusses political events only at the level of nation-states and not on other scales?

Since we can always understand sets as “within” other sets, and “containing” sub-sets, and since situations are just real world sets, we should be able to understand situations as parts of larger situations, as well as being composed of smaller sub-situations. If France is a situation, then we can always find a number of sub-situations, perhaps cities, neighborhoods or local groups. Each of these decomposes further into its sub-sets, and so on. Conversely, we can start at the very local level, my apartment for instance, and expand outward always finding larger sets of which the more local sets are a part. Here we find one of the attractive features of Badiou’s ontology: from the ontological perspective, there is no privileged point where one must begin. Of course there is the void, at the “foundation”, but we need not begin there, and in fact, it is never clear exactly where or what the void is in any social situation; at least not from the perspective of the situation itself. To continue the mapping, we can of course infer that if each set contains the empty or void set, then likewise, each situation will too. In France the *sans papier* make up such a void: the group is included – my

¹²⁷ *Being and Event*, 501, 526.

suggestion was that they are included as the problem of illegal immigration – but no individual *sans papier* belongs to, or is recognized by, the situation “France”. Likewise then, each smaller-scale situation (and also each larger situation) will have a similar structural void, or “part of those who have no part,” as Jacques Rancière puts it¹²⁸.

The political potential implicit in each situation, the potential evental site, is present in each smaller situation, since they share the same formal or structural characteristics. If we can reasonably suggest that what allows for a break with the situation in Badiou’s examples of political revolutions is similarly present in smaller situations, then ought we not find examples of events on scales other than that of the nation-state? My wager, obviously, is that there is nothing in the structuring ontology that prevents there being events on a multiplicity of scales. One caveat: because an event requires a subjective maintenance, the scale must be appropriate for at least one person to become subject to the truth of the event. Thus, though very tiny scales are structurally the same, if no one can decide upon the significance of the event and so on, then no event can occur. Likewise, galactic-scale events cannot really happen, since the happening would (presumably) be beyond the purview of anyone who would become subject to it. Thus, there are subjective bounds within which there can be events. That said, it seems fairly easy to give examples of the kind of local or small-scale event that I find missing from Badiou’s presentation of politics. I will offer only two.

¹²⁸ *Disagreement*, 15.

To illustrate my point, first let us imagine that I live in a dense urban area where I encounter homeless people daily. When I meet someone I usually ask how they are, and maybe give some spare change. But, one time, I come face to face with a homeless man and something is different in this encounter. Something inside me “clicks”, so to speak. There is something more “human”, and a greater injustice in this man than in the others I had bumped into before. In the seizure of this moment¹²⁹, I find something significant, something not yet effable, and I have the choice to decide upon its importance – understood as a kind of affirmation I am, in some sense, hailed to make. If I declare it an event, I become subject to the truth of the encounter, perhaps something about fundamental equality or humanity (that which transcends our animality), and I am charged with the responsibility of tracing out the consequences of this truth. It is quite common to encounter homeless people. It is not common, however, to have a fundamental shift in our understanding of that person in such a way that we are transformed: in such a way that we become “subject” in Badiou’s sense. This encounter would be structurally identical to the larger scale events that Badiou allows, only on much smaller scale. There are boundaries maintained by the state of the situation, of which I am a part, that mark out who belongs in my community and who does not. This person *in* my community is not *of* my community, and goes uncoun ted. That is, he goes uncoun ted until that evental encounter where I am seized by a recognition of his belonging. Here it is prudent for me to make clear that what is revealed in and through an event, those uncoun ted elements of a situation, need not be people. In

¹²⁹ For an interesting discussion of the “hailing” effect of an event, see: Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 42-9.

the *sans papiers* example, we see a group that is included in the situation where the individual members of that group are excluded from belonging. The homeless man may be included in the situation insofar as he represents “homelessness”, much in the way the *sans papiers* did, but in this case, what is revealed not so much that homeless person, but the humanity, dignity, suffering or some other exceptional feature not counted when we count the man as “homeless guy”. The elements of a situation can be people, objects, ideas, relations, names, and so on. Uncounted elements can thus be of any of these types. To make the point clearer, we could perhaps say that the homeless person is counted as “homeless”, but in and through the event I encounter him as “person”, or something along those lines. Strictly speaking, I cannot say in advance of such an event what would be revealed in the evental encounter or “what will have been true” after tracing out the truth of the encounter. I used these examples to give an idea of the sort of thing that I think could happen in the event. I would suggest that what is revealed in encountering this person – in these special circumstances – is that this person is something in addition to, or different from, the minimum characterization through which he was represented by the situation prior to the evental encounter.

The direction the tracing out of consequences takes is a subjective determination. It is up to the elements of a subjectivity to trace their own way, which may or may not be in accord with all or any of the other elements. Those subject to the truth of May ’68 were all engaged in some kind of movement, but it is clear that they did not all agree as to how to proceed in the situation.

Disagreements are evident in the philosophies of some, and the political allegiances of others (for instance, not all were Maoists).

I allow for the possibility that a one-on-one encounter may be a political event, but there is another evental encounter between two individuals, namely the love encounter. One may wonder why the evental encounter of a singular other, a “person”, and not a particular other, “homeless guy”, is not a love encounter. After all, the “means” of a love event are said to be “two individuals”, and the happening is an “encounter”¹³⁰. Amorous and political events, especially in the case of a one-on-one encounter, do share some characteristics. Besides being an encounter between two individuals, the productions of each procedure are indiscernible. All events have this in common, but the nature of the indiscernability is not the same for them all. The production of love is indiscernible from the inside. Those in love cannot “know” they are in love. This is particularly apt, since it is an all too common question to ask lovers how they know they are in love. The better attempts at an answer usually resemble something like, “I just do.” It turns out, if we follow Badiou, they do not, and cannot. From the outside, love is knowable, that is, we can ascribe a loving relation to couples without too much trouble. People fall in love all the time, in some sense, and we can often identify people who function in the situation as a “couple” in love. The subjectivity of love is “the two”¹³¹, which is contrary to most common sense notions. It is often said that in love “two souls become one”,

¹³⁰ *Being and Event*, 339-40.

¹³¹ *Conditions*, 182-3.

when in fact, the loving subject is a perspective on the world with two points of view and not one. Of course the subject cannot be one for Badiou as this is what he fundamentally rejects. The situation can count them as one, as *a* couple, but what *is* is always not-one. The two, this split-but-connected perspective is certainly not something shared with the subjectivity of a political event predicated on the one-to-one encounter. The political subjectivity is, to risk the terms, a “commons” or “collective”. This is misleading on the surface. The political subjectivity of Badiou’s examples always ends up being constituted by multiple people. Yet, there need not be more than one person subject to the truth of an event. The exemplary figure of a militant, that is, of political subjectivity, is the Christian Paul¹³². Before Paul had followers, the early Christians, there was a faithful subject comprised of one individual. We should note that each person is a set or situation unto her or himself. In this way, one can be subject to the political truth by oneself and we can still understand the subjectivity as, in some loose sense, a “collective” subjectivity. A subjectivity of one individual is not at all possible in the “two” of love. Moreover, in politics the production is indiscernible from without, whereas, lovers cannot know that they are in love so it must remain a wager from within. Thus, political truth functions differently for Badiou. What is indiscernible is so from the perspective of the situation. As I illustrated above, the artistic situation at the time of the early cubist paintings could not understand the cubist productions *as art*, whereas those faithful to this movement were

¹³² Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2.

creating what it “will have been absurd *not* to have believed”¹³³. In a likewise fashion, political truths are never knowable as such from the perspective of the situation. Instead, they are interpreted under the names of assimilable occurrences. One such name today is “protest”. “That’s just another protest,” is an all too common way of understanding a happening in terms readily available to those of the situation. This sort of interpretation functions to take the radical edge off happenings, in some circumstances, by giving people a lens through which to make sense of it. If however, the happening escapes all available lenses for someone or ones, then it has a chance at being political.

As I want my example to be understood as a potential political event, I understand that the responsibility for tracing out the consequences of this small-scale event is still present. Is it enough to give the homeless person a bowl of soup and a place to sleep? Probably not. Practical details like this can be part of the ways in which a subjectivity realizes the truth of the encounter, only insofar as these measures function in the larger project of creating something essentially new – or according to my emphasis: transforming the situation so as to allow for the possibility of greater participation in truth. In order to be able to change the situation in such a way that homeless people in my community are always counted as people, and not “numbers”, abstractions, or “problems”, I may find it necessary to involve this person in some kind of awareness raising effort, protests, or other engagements. To this end, soup and a bed are reasonable efforts. It may

¹³³ Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Quoted in: Kent den Heyer, “Education as an Affirmative Invention: Alain Badiou and the Purpose of Teaching and Curriculum” in *Educational Theory*, 59:4 (2009): 442.

be the case that I never interact with this person again. I may take on the task of changing the situation for many other people in similar circumstances without offering any of these practical measures to this person here and now.

What exactly is produced in the procedure following a commitment is not something I can spell out. Rather, it is a subjective creation – a line of action or inquiry that requires a subjective investment of meaning according to which objective changes are sought. Since I am describing my homeless encounter example as political, I can say that whatever character the fidelity takes, it will bring about an improvement of the opportunities for the realization of what transcends the human animal through a radical restructuring of the situation in and through tracing out the consequences of having the void revealed. Whether this means helping *this person* achieve the life-circumstances necessary to be open to the possibility of becoming subject by changing the situation, or changing the situation such that the homeless *in general* are better able to participate in procedures of truth is to be determined in and through the subjective tracing of truth.

On a scale only slightly larger than that of my previous example, we can imagine political events in the classroom. This could take place in a number of ways. It could be that there is a student or students who, either themselves or vicariously through their family, are elements of a situational void in the community outside the classroom. Something could signal this in an importantly profound way, inducing a certain response from the teacher or fellow students. Events can begin in local settings and grow to encompass a very large situation. It

is likely that most of Badiou's grand examples, May '68 for instance, began in very local parts of a larger situation. Perhaps, however, there is a student whose existence, as an element of the void, has not to do with the void of some greater or external situation but that of the classroom itself. An event could spring forth in such a way that a subjectivity-in-becoming comes to be. It is fairly unproblematic to imagine how these could be examples of events that fit all the criteria of larger events, but on a much smaller scale. Some happening in the classroom reveals something unseen prior. Maybe a student is picked on or ignored. Happenings can have the external appearance of very mundane occurrences. From the state of the situation, it's another case of exclusion or bullying – nothing new, “move along”. But, from within the subjectivity that declares this significant, something more is at stake. Something is realized, in the sense of “coming to see what was not seen”, and a commitment to realize it by transforming the situation, “making it real”. If the nature of the truth procedure is such that it aims at including the student (students, or students in general) in ways that allow that student greater possibilities to become subject to truth, then it is political. I could give more details of the sort I gave in my previous example to draw this point out. There is, however, a more interesting case concerning a classroom event.

I have suggested that once a certain threshold of transformation is reached, a new situation will come into being shaped by a once-truth. I call this the crystallization of truth into knowledge. This once-truth, having brought about a new situation according to the tracing out of the truth, will now be “crystallized” as knowledge in this new situation as it is integrated into the new situation that is

being brought about. We teach from works of knowledge, once-truths in their own rights, in many if not most of our classes. If a student is appropriately inspired by elements of their education, there is a sense in which they can be induced into subjectivity. Perhaps Marx would be a more lucid example, but I will use Mao as an example because his teachings are more obviously parts of one of Badiou's examples of a political event: the Chinese Cultural Revolution. If I teach my students about Mao, a student might find a profound truth in the work before her, and commit to it, as one would do when entering into an open procedure of truth. I have suggested that this work is crystallized as knowledge insofar as it is now *of* this student's situation. If we accept that the procedure opened in the name of the Chinese Cultural Revolution is no longer an open procedure for a young student to enter into, as it seems is the case, I would like to suggest another possibility for becoming-subject. I would like to leave open the possibility that a second event in the name of Mao (perhaps in the name of "me teaching her about Mao") could occur – this time in the classroom, and this time in another situation altogether. The eventual decision is with respect to something in one's own situation, the truth of which cuts across situations and addresses universally. Those faithful to the Cultural Revolution were engaged in a singular procedure of tracing out consequences particular to their situations. My student could have the same kind of moment of being seized or hailed, this time charged with tracing out a different set of consequences particular to her situation. Perhaps, her maintenance of this truth will have the character of informing other students about her insights,

suggesting assignments that accord with her insights¹³⁴ or challenging procedures that do not, and so on. The event to which she has become subject is no longer the large-scale Chinese revolution, but a small-scale educational event, what is more correct: a political event in the *educational situation*. A certain transformation of the education process of which she is a part could be undertaken as a matter of fidelity to a transformative experience in the classroom situation. Here, I am perfectly comfortable with the possibility that the truth procedure inaugurated in this event could grow to extend beyond the classroom situation alone. It seems reasonable that more widespread educational reconfigurations could be instigated, or perhaps initiatives that transform the community (situation) in which the educational situation is couched. It need not, however, have such an extension in order to be a genuine event. In the end, how we delineate exactly which sort of political event this is (which scale, from which instigation moment, and so on) is not of practical importance. The important point illustrated in the education example, I would suggest, is that there are a variety of scales upon which one can be politically engaged, and on which we can trace the consequences of an event, so events need not lead to larger scales.

If we include events on a multiplicity of scales into the political picture, then we can at least seriously lessen then worry about nihilism that I posed above. This is, we can say, a “weak” solution to the problem of nihilism as I have raised it above (not to be confused with a “poor” solution). As strictly aleatory, events are unpredictable. Still, we can add to whatever likelihood there is of a large-scale

¹³⁴ For more about curriculum development inspired by Badiou, see: den Heyer (2009): 441-463.

event the likelihood of each subsequently smaller-scale events, and find that if there is any chance of events happening on other scales (and innumerable anecdotal examples like the ones given above give us good reason to believe that there is) then we have an increased likelihood that we will have opportunities for meaningful political engagement. This increased likelihood does not just add meaning or significance to politics, insofar as a potential political actor has reason to believe they will be able to engage meaningfully, but also increases the possibility of more already-open procedures of truth to which one can become subject. This recasting of politics actually improves the situation for the potential political actor on both fronts: more new events, and more opportunity for joining the subjectivity of open procedures of truth.

Presenting political events as happening on a multiplicity of scales gives us a more robust, albeit a more complex, picture of politics. The same actor can engage in national or global movements, participate in community interventions, and trace out the consequences of looking into the eyes of a singular other. I have shown how, in principle, each of these happenings can be a political event so long as each arises out of the void in a break with the state of the situation. This new presentation raises the further question of how one is to maintain one's commitment to multiple and perhaps conflicting procedures of truth, but need not put my presentation itself into question. This added complexity and tension seems consistent with real-world political commitment. People really do have to negotiate between their commitments and the various places where they find political truths. In this way, what I propose passes, at least in this instance, the

empirical plausibility test. My presentation is thus more consistent with actual existential commitments, as well as with Badiou's own underlying ontology, than his exclusive focus on large-scale political events.

B) Small-scales vs. Politics of the Everyday

From the perspective of certain theoretical positions, the rarity of Badiou's political event can be seen as problematic. I gave the problem of nihilism as an example, but another ought to be raised. Political thinking over the past number of decades has tended away from viewing politics as a special thing, restricted to specific actions (passing laws, voting, etc.) located in specific places (parliaments, assemblies, voting booths) and performed by specific actors (deputies, voters). Instead, there is a tendency toward a "politics of the everyday", where everyday interactions – the "little details" – are thought to be political acts as such. A number of varying theories and perspectives belong to this general characterization. For those who put forth some kind of identity politics, for instance, it is said that "the personal is political"¹³⁵. The second wave of feminism, as an example of identity politics, teaches us that patriarchy, beauty norms, and other ideologies work in a policing fashion, opening certain doors while closing others. Seemingly "normal" activities, such as washing dishes or dieting, are "submissive" political acts conditioned by the ideologies of patriarchy. Following third-wave feminism and its Foucauldian influence, we can say that the deployment of everyday discourses is a negotiation of meaning

¹³⁵ It appears that this slogan first appears in early feminist Carol Hanisch's short essay, "The Personal is Political" in *Notes From the Second Year*, ed. Shulamith Firestone (Radical Feminist Publishing [Pamphlet Newspaper], 1970): 76-78.

between people who are differently positioned in matrices of power. This kind of struggle is political insofar as people are positioned and position themselves differently within these discourses or networks of power. When I refer to “that woman standing in line”, to whom or what do I refer? Who or what is “woman”? I answer these questions in and through “normal” use of language, but in doing so certain discourses are at play in place of others. Another, contemporary understanding of the “everyday” approach to politics is the current tide of discourses around “ethical consumerism”: each dollar we spend is like a vote we cast. When we buy GMOs we vote for monopolies like Monsanto and against local organic farms. In this case, political engagement happens all the time, in the most mundane acts like grocery shopping, whether or not we want it to.

The upside to this view of politics, something lost on Badiou’s presentation, is that there are ample opportunities for political engagement. Small actions, interactions or discourses are seen as having important impact on the quality of lives of other humans: the distribution of wealth, the state of the planet, etc. Through this butterfly effect, small things are seen as political and gain in importance. When these small-scale interactions and relations are labeled “political”, they acquire a certain weight and become worthy not only of theoretical consideration, but also of practical transformation. Obviously this is not a thorough treatment of the many positive aspects of this sort of thinking. What I want to suggest is that there are good insights lost when we view politics as exceptional, rare, and operative on grand-scales, that is, when we limit political action to the major revolutions in human history. For Badiou, most of what is

discussed under the heading of a “politics of the everyday” is reduced to behaviour of the human *animal*. It would seem that Badiou would situate most of what is considered from this perspective in the sphere where we acquire knowledge, calculate consequences, and negotiate between our various interests. The seriousness of the everyday for philosophical or sociological consideration is consequently evacuated. This is not to say that Badiou thinks that these aspects of social life are ultimately unimportant, but they are simply what the human animal does, and not genuine political engagement.

On the other hand, if everything is political all the way down, then nothing is importantly political. If even the most minute details of our everyday lives are political, then what remains of the revolutionary power of politics? More radically stated, if I act politically to transform the world every time I buy vegetables, why should I bother with the proletarian revolution? It can be argued that the force behind the political event is lost when each word I speak and every dollar I spend is considered a political action. Badiou, on the other hand, invests the concept of politics with revolutionary force: in and through politics we bring about a radically new world – or, at least, a new situation. Politics is never in the everyday details. Rather, it is a supplement to the situation that consists in these everyday details. Badiou has an important point to make here. All of this talk about everyday discourses, actions and relations being political, along with trends such as ethical consumerism, makes up what Badiou would call contemporary

“sophism.” This sophism reduces philosophy “to a conversation”¹³⁶. In the case of my few examples, the conversation is about: who or what is “woman” and in what manner should I address her? Ought we buy this item or that? Domestic or foreign? And what is at stake when I prefer this or that style of dress? Conceiving of politics as everywhere in all of the everyday details is another way of covering over the potential for something more revolutionary – something that goes beyond the either/or options presented to us in our everyday choices. In order for something essentially different to come about, which it seems to me is the goal of those who seek opportunities for meaningful political engagement, something must break with the everyday situation and its options. Politics is not a matter of routine choice or of debates between various options or positions. The emphasis on the radical nature of politics sets Badiou’s thinking (and those who think along with him, Rancière, for instance) apart.

After having contrasted these approaches to politics, we are left with the sense that there are genuine insights on either side. It seems to me that we can hold on to Badiou’s general revolutionary framework, while extending it to include the possibility of small-scale events, as I have done, netting some of the best of each, while avoiding some of the worst from either. As a Badiouian presentation of politics, my account will not fully accommodate the desire to locate politics in all of the micro-level details that is possible on other accounts. Politics remains importantly exceptional for me. But, in allowing events on small-scales, we can find meaningful political interventions in places seemingly

¹³⁶ Badiou: *A Subject to Truth*, 16.

inappropriate to Badiou's presentation. Some of these places will overlap with, and, to some degree, capture the intuitions of "everyday politics". It is not the case that every time I make use of a particular term I am investing it with a political meaning. It may be the case that every dollar I spend is a 'vote' of some kind, but this is not enough to call it political. When I choose an outfit in the morning, I am not likely engaging in politics. Still, we can imagine a certain choice of dress instigating a real political procedure. Drawing out these examples is always problematic, but it is possible to suggest the sort of thing that might count. Perhaps a white, western, professor wears a burka to school some day. Could we imagine this experience shaking up some student(s)'s ability to take for granted their own clothing selection? Perhaps someone is induced by a faint apprehension of a truth in this experience, maybe about the imprisoning effects of western norms, which leads them to reinterpret their situation and work to change it in some way¹³⁷. For me, this kind of example is not the same as it would seem from the perspective of everyday politics. The instructor cannot bring about an event as a matter of will. She can create a context wherein students have the opportunity to learn an important lesson. She can hope that they learn something and change and grow as people in and through her teaching. If an event occurs out of this purposeful behavior, it will not be because the teacher wanted it to or because she did the right things. The event happens when the elements are present

¹³⁷ My speculation about the sort of thing that constitutes the void here could be something as simple as our being blind to the operation of certain oppressive norms. In and through the experience of having these revealed, one becomes subject, and so on. There are a wide variety of elements of a situation, only some of which are people. It is not clear that what is revealed in the event must be a group of people. What is revealed is something unseen, or unaccounted for.

in such a way that an unpredictable subjective catalyst sets off the creation of something new. Many events happen out of purposeful behavior (students meant to bring about political change when they occupied French universities in the spring of 1968), to a degree, but one cannot bring about an event on purpose (that this action was the start of an event could not be predicted).

This kind of experience overlaps parts of many of versions of the general everyday approach to politics, while remaining consistent with Badiou's ontology of the political event. Again, my account cannot capture all of the intuitions of this other approach, but in capturing some, we are arguably better off than Badiou himself. Now, while capturing some of those insights, I also avoid the problem of reducing the force of being political. Not everything is political or politicizable. For me, politics must remain a subjective creation born out of a situation's void. It must to some degree open the possibility for a greater realization of the exceptional element of humanity by transforming a situation. Insofar as my burka example is political, it is such for the same reasons as my homeless encounter, classroom revolution or any of Badiou's choice of examples. Politics, even on small-scales, will always harbor a transformative potential realized in and through a subject's efforts. It is not the case that I am always "doing" politics whether I know it or not. Perhaps my presentation of politics does not capture the best of both worlds, but it certainly seems to extend the viability of Badiou's toward the everyday without succumbing to the evacuation of the significance of the political.

4) Consequences and Future Research

A philosophical system is a whole whose parts all fit together just so. Whenever you change one aspect of the system, there are bound to be ripples felt throughout the entirety. I had envisioned tracing out the consequences of my representation of Badiou's politics in this final chapter, but realized that such a feat would amount to a revision, if even only slightly, of all aspects of Badiou's robust system. This is surely untenable within the limitations of this project. Instead, I want to discuss a few important directions for further research that I feel would yield interesting results.

The core concepts of Badiou's system are (in no particular order): event, truth, subject, and situation. There is a sense in which much of what I attempted here was a rethinking of the first of these. Of course I only focused on the political event, but I would venture to suggest that the artistic and scientific might benefit from a similar treatment. In the case of science, Badiou very much seems to subscribe to a position resembling the "paradigm shift" view of science. For someone like Thomas Kuhn, there are periods of normal science, where there is a general agreement about the character and assumptions that mark out the current paradigm and how we are to operate therein¹³⁸. This normal period is followed by a revolutionary period where the paradigm is challenged, new ideas swirl, and it becomes unclear what we can assume is shared in terms of both knowledge and practice. Eventually a new paradigm is established, disputes are settled, terms agreed upon, and a return to business as usual occurs. Badiou's "event" captures

¹³⁸ Thomas Kuhn's massively influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). is a sustained discussion of this view of science.

this spirit precisely. There is a scientific situation structured by a certain body of knowledge, which allows for a regular proceeding with the daily business of the scientist. An event ruptures this situation and opens a procedure of creation – the creation of new means of scientific investigation – which may eventually bring about a new scientific situation. I wonder, however, if it is enough for Badiou to claim that our era is the one, e.g., where the field of mathematics (the basis of the current “scientific” situation) is structured by set theory¹³⁹? Perhaps this is true in a sense, as set theory has been reasonably central in many areas since the “Cantor event”. Still, there are pockets of work and schools of thought for which this is no longer, or never was, the case. Badiou now extends his thinking to include “Category Theory”, and other ideas or theories literally dominate sub-situations within the broadly projected category of science in general. For these sub-situations, is it true that they are characterized by set theory? I think we could make a case that scientific events can happen on a multiplicity of scales much like politics. Smaller situations can be transformed by discoveries that remain local, and these are still revolutionary events. I feel as though the same can likely be said of art, and it would be a worthwhile effort to examine these procedures and their relation to various scales in more detail. Love, on the other hand, seems to be bound to a specific scale, so perhaps my attempt at scalability would stop at the other three forms of truth.

Perhaps the most interesting thing to think through going forward would be the consequences of admitting political events on multiple scales for the

¹³⁹ *Briefings*, 40-3.

concepts of “truth” and “subjectivity”. I touched upon this complexity only briefly earlier when discussing an event that begins in the classroom. I think that the situation out of which the event springs can be a small, local situation, and the tracing out of the truth can likewise happen in and against this smaller situation. I also note, however, that most large-scale events seem to begin in some smaller part of the larger situation. So, in the event of May ’68, the student response to problems they had with their education started the events that eventually lead to a whole nation in turmoil. The situation relevant to the event here is France, and yet the event began with a particular part of France, namely Parisian students. I am comfortable calling this a large-scale event, as the situation of reference is ultimately the larger France of which the students are a part. Some events begin and remain smaller and local, and are still events, while others begin as, or grow to become relatively larger, and are thus large. An interesting question to ask here is whether or not there can be parallel truths operating on different scales, or whether the involvement on the larger-scale necessarily encompasses the smaller.

What I mean to ask is whether there could be a relationship between a procedure of truth born out of the void of a smaller situation, whose subjectivity is charged with tracing out the consequences for that situation, and a procedure of tracing out the truth of a larger situation by a subjectivity that may include some of the same elements of the smaller. A subject for Badiou is not necessarily a person. In most political subjectivities there are a number of persons who form collectively one subject. One person can, in principle, become subject to more than one truth, so I wonder if there could be, in the point that is an individual, a

subjective link between truth procedures operating on different scales. To use an example, whatever the details of the particular event, we could imagine as its consequence a movement to transform the situation for female students in Canadian universities. The subjectivity here would be composed of many individuals. *Some* of these individuals may be part of a collective subjectivity trying to trace out the truth of sexual equality in a much larger situation – perhaps sexual equality in general. These parallel subjects may be different in that there can be a part of the elements of one subjectivity that is not a part of the other. Those students who understand their commitment as one of educational/bureaucratic transformation in a smaller situation are not necessarily subject to the larger procedure of sexual equality in general. So, since some elements are not subject to both procedures, there is a disjunction. But, insofar as they are both realizing what would appear to be the same truth, in some sense, they trace out the consequences of the “same” truth, only with different coordinates; and, since some members overlap, there is a sense in which they are the “same” truth(s). If this suggestion is somewhat clear, the question becomes: can one truth operate across multiple scales if there is this kind of splintered subjectivity to maintain it? A deeper analysis of these concepts in light of my representation would be required to give a positive response.

The final line of inquiry that I would like to suggest concerns, again, the concepts of truth and subjectivity. Because there are four types of truth procedure, there are four types of subject. The individual does not correspond to the subject, as often mentioned, and so one can become subject to multiple truth-events. A

fairly obvious question one might ask is whether some of my commitments can ever clash with other of my commitments? In the case of truths of different kinds, I think that because they are not of the same quality, there is no worry in principle. Perhaps my fidelity to a political event will have me going to war, when my commitment to a scientific breakthrough will have me parked in the laboratory, and thus a practical – and not philosophical – tension may arise. I think that in cases of this sort, we can refer to Sartre's example from *Existentialism as a Humanism*¹⁴⁰. The individual in this example is subject to a moral imperative to take care of his sick mother, and also an imperative to go war for his country. There is no principle within morality that can tell him how to overcome this tension, since he is obliged to do both, yet he cannot. The suggestion is that an individual must decide for his or herself. I think in cases where we have competing commitments, decision about what to do becomes a matter of existential choosing.

To complicate this further, imagine we admit different scales of the same type of event. Can one individual then be subject to more than one political truth? I think it is worth asking whether or not one can have a conflict in their commitments in a way more significant than one's finite limitations with respect to the practical tracing out of consequences. Could it be that there is a conflict not in the measures I choose to take, or not to take, to realize this truth, but in the very truths themselves? It would seem likely that there could be no obvious and direct contradiction taking the form of both A and not-A, both vote and refuse the vote.

¹⁴⁰ J.P Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. trans. Carol Macomber (Yale University Press, 2007), 30-2

But, it may be more likely there could be logical consequences of certain commitments that preclude me from having others. While it is true that all political truths have the character of opening possibilities for the realization of an exceptional human capacity, is it true that the truth of one situation is necessarily consistent with that of another? It is not clear to me that sharing a certain character with one another automatically means that they can both hang together without contradiction. If I am committed to finding a way out of capitalism, perhaps due to its universally exploitative nature, it may be the case that many people lose their jobs and even starve. This large-scale truth procedure does not seem consistent with a more local commitment to allow fundamentally equal workers to hold jobs, perhaps since those jobs are part of the capitalist problem. With eventual potential co-existing on different scales, this kind of conflict might be a real possibility. If so, then there is another factor to consider with respect to Badiou's notions of evil. It is evil to try to force a total transformation of a situation, to become "subject" to a simulacrum of an event, or to betray your fidelity to an event. Badiou thinks a good way to characterize the ethical imperative of truths is to remain faithful to your fidelity; in the light of interests or duress, we must always "keep going!"¹⁴¹. Turning your back on a commitment, slipping out of your subjectivity to truth is evil. This last worry becomes even more evident if it is possible to become subject to multiple political truths, especially if it is possible for them to come into conflict. How one would navigate such a scenario likely falls back to Sartre's point, which is rather straightforward,

¹⁴¹ *Ethics*, 79.

but it would still serve to further complicate an already increasingly complicated picture of political engagement. In the interest of theoretical simplicity, this may end up being a strike against my presentation of politics.

Conclusion

I began this essay with an explication of Badiou's major concepts. Any such hermeneutic exercise will always be both a "reading" and a "writing". My interpretations are not innocent, and certainly not obvious. There are two places in particular where I think my reading may be at odds with that of other commentators. First, my ruminations about what is specifically political about political truth procedures is, admittedly, somewhat speculative, and somewhat open to discussion. That said, I think that my reading is supported by the passages to which I refer. Badiou is a prolific writer who, in saying as much about as many things as he does, sometimes creates tensions in his own work. As a student of his, one must latch onto some ideas while generously overlooking or downplaying others. It would be no surprise to me to find that many choose to downplay Badiou's emphasis, especially in *Ethics*, on the distinction between the finite human-animal and the infinite human subject to truth. This humanism, however, is an important part of Badiou's project, insofar as he turns the table on the dominant philosophical discourses about human finitude. In a public lecture and exchange with Simon Critchley, Badiou admits that people often have a hard time accepting their finitude, but highlights that people also have a hard time

embracing their infinitude¹⁴². Our capacity for truth – for the new – is something exceptional, and I would argue as a matter of politics, access to this element of our humanity is the stuff of emancipation.

The second point where I think an interesting discussion about my interpretation can take place is with regard to the sort of conception of history it implies. I make mention, but only briefly, of a sort of teleology and a kind of Hegelianism I attribute to Badiou. I emphasize the way in which events and their subsequent procedures of truth have a transformative character. In tracing out a political truth, we try to change the situation such that the truth, in negating itself as truth, becomes a structuring principle in a new situation. We want to create a situation from the perspective of which it will have been absurd not to account for elements of the new situation. If we are successful, someone in the new situation can say of those who were excluded that “obviously those people belong here”. We live in a world where embracing slavery is absurd. But ours is a situation structured by a truth that was born out of a situation in which slavery was normal. My insistence, faithful to Badiou’s axiomatic assertion, that socio-historic situations always include a void leads to a view of change that is always open-ended. Upon bringing into being a new situation, we also bring into being a structural absence, a void. The count is always incomplete, and thus there is always the potential for another transformation. This view of history is then one where we have a situation, S_1 , followed by a rupture (event) that may bring about a new situation, S_2 , that may have a rupture to bring about S_3 and so on. There is

¹⁴² Alain Badiou in discussion with Simon Critchley in: Critchley, Simon, (Audio) “Democracy and Disappointment,” Slought Foundation presentation feat. Alain Badiou (2007).

situation, a tension, and a resolution in a new situation. This is a very Hegelian way to see history, but again one that seems borne out by Badiou's own work, and one that helps makes sense of the concept "event". Of course, the Badiouian view of history is not ultimately the same as Hegel, for at least one important reason. History *has* a final resolution for Hegel in Spirit's perfect self-knowledge. My Badiouian picture of historical change *cannot have* such an end. It is teleological in the sense that it has a directedness, but it is not merely progressive. A restructuring of the situation will improve things for some previously uncared part, but it will not necessarily reduce exclusion on the whole. There will be a void, and there is no guarantee that the restructuring of the situation will lead to less exclusion. All that is ever guaranteed is that it will be a different exclusion. As tensions are overcome, if we can use this language, we do not tend toward a peaceful final resolution, even if politics is always, in some sense, aiming toward one.

Ultimately, the problem I raised in my thesis is not critical. It is not as though I find a stark contradiction in Badiou's work. What I see is an unnecessary consequence of a presentation of politics that seems informed by certain pre-philosophical dispositions, or, perhaps, a kind of inertia. Badiou only talks about large-scale revolutions, likely because this is what is at the heart of the communist vision of proletarian revolution that has colored leftist politics in Europe to a greater or lesser degree for more than a century. Still, given the set theory at the heart of Badiou's own philosophy, there is no reason why we cannot admit of political events that scale. In smaller-scale events, we find the resources for

important, revolutionary, interventions not captured by Badiou's presentation. On my picture, we find all kinds of new opportunities to engage meaningfully; that is, politically. For this, I would suggest we are better off.

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