

AN ETHICS OF MILITANT ENGAGEMENT*

Ernesto Laclau

I

I find Alain Badiou's ethical reflections most congenial. There are three aspects of them, in particular, which I find clearly appealing and close to my own theoretical approach. In the first place, his attempt to articulate ethics within an emancipatory project. Against the prevailing contemporary trend, which presents ethics as a purely *defensive* intervention – that is, as a reaction to the violation of human rights – Badiou roots his ethics in an essentially affirmative discourse. Secondly, the universality of the ethical address does not depend, for Badiou, on the presumed universality of its place of enunciation: on the contrary, ethics is constitutively linked to the fidelity to an event which is always concrete and situated. Finally, Badiou scrupulously avoids the temptation to derive the ensemble of moral norms from the ethical as such – the former belongs, for him, to what is countable within a situation which is strictly heterogeneous vis-à-vis the latter.

My own theoretical approach is, from this point of view, at least comparable to Badiou's, and the fact has not gone unrecognized. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, writes:

A series of obvious differences notwithstanding, the theoretical edifices of Laclau and Badiou are united by a deep homology. Against the Hegelian vision of the 'concrete universal', of the reconciliation between Universal and Particular (or between Being and Event) which is still clearly discernible in Marx, they both start by asserting a constitutive and irreducible gap that undermines the self-enclosed consistency of the ontological edifice: for Laclau, this gap is the gap between the Particular and the empty Universal, which necessitates the operation of hegemony (or the gap between the differential structure of the positive social order – the logic of *differences* – and properly political antagonism, which involves the logic of *equivalence*); for Badiou, it is the gap between Being and Event (between the order of Being – structure, state of situation, knowledge –

* I would like to thank Peter Hallward for his careful reading of the draft version of this chapter and for his many comments which helped me more clearly and precisely to present my argument.

and the event of Truth, Truth as Event). In both cases, the problem is how to break out of the self-enclosed field of ontology as a description of the positive universe; in both cases, the dimension which undermines the closure of ontology has an 'ethical' character – it concerns the contingent act of *decision* against the background of the 'undecidable' multiplicity of Being; consequently, both authors endeavour to conceptualize a new, post-Cartesian mode of *subjectivity* which cuts its links with ontology and hinges on a contingent act of decision.¹

In spite of these many real points of convergence, there are also, however, several aspects in which our respective approaches fundamentally diverge, and it is these that I shall address in the following pages. The fact that our approaches are indeed comparable, however, has its advantages: opposite theoretical decisions can be presented as alternative routes whose divergence is thinkable out of what had been, up to that point, a relatively shared theoretical terrain. One last preliminary remark: I will mainly refer, in what follows, to Badiou's ethics, without any comprehensive discussion of his ontology, a task in which I hope to engage in the not too distant future.

Let us first recapitulate some basic categories of Badiou's theory. The main distinction, from his perspective, is that between *situation* and *event*. Situation is the terrain of a multiplicity corresponding to what can be called, in general terms, the field of objectivity. Being is not one – oneness is, for Badiou, a theological category – but multiple. Presentable or consistent multiplicity corresponds, essentially, with the field of knowledge, of the countable, of the distinct. The ensemble of objective distinctions corresponds to a structuring principle that Badiou calls the *state* of the situation. What we usually call morality – the normative order – is part of this state and is organized by this structural principle. A distinction has to be established here between *presentation* of a situation in which structuration – order – shows itself as such, and *representation*, the moment in which not *structure* but *structuring* comes to the fore. The event is grounded on that which is radically unrepresentable within the situation, that which constitutes its *void* (a category to which we will come back later). The event is the actual declaring of that void, a radical break with the situation that makes visible what the situation itself can only conceal. While knowledge is inscription of what happens within pre-given objective categories, *truth* – the series of implications sustained in the wake of an event – is *singular*: its evental nature cannot be subsumed under any pre-existing rule. The event is, thus, incommensurable with the situation, its break with it is truly foundational. If we tried to define its relation with the situation we could only say that it is a *subtraction* from it.

The ethical is intimately linked to the notion of event. Once the event takes place, the visibility that its advent makes possible opens an area of indeterminacy in relation to the ways of dealing with it: either we can stick to that visibility through what Badiou calls a *fidelity* to the event – which involves transforming the situation through a restructuring which takes the proclaimed

truth as its point of departure – or we can negate the radically evental character of the event. When it involves the perversion or corruption of a truth, this latter option is *evil*. In Badiou's account evil can take one of three main forms: the form of *betrayal* (the abandonment of fidelity to the event), the form of the *simulacrum* (the replacement, through naming, of the void in the fullness of the community), and the form of a dogmatic *totalization* of a truth.

At this point we have to address a series of interrelated questions. Is an event, which defines itself exclusively through ability to subtract itself from a situation, enough to ground an ethical alternative? Is the distinction void/fullness a solid enough criterion for discriminating between event and simulacrum? Is the opposition situation/event sufficiently clear-cut as to ascribe to the evental camp everything needed to formulate an ethical principle? My answer to these three questions will be negative.

It makes sense to start with a consideration of the three forms of evil to which Badiou refers. The main question is: to what extent does he smuggle into his argument something that he had formally excluded at its very beginning? As we said, the basic ontological opposition that he establishes is that between situation and event, whose only ground is given by the category of 'subtraction'. This also sets up the parameters within which the distinction is thinkable. We have to forget everything about the material, ontic contents of the situation and reduce it to its purely formal defining principle (the organization of the countable, the differential, as such). In that case, however, the only possible content of the event as pure subtraction is the presentation or declaration of the unrepresentable. In other words, the event also can only have a purely *formal* content. As a result, the fidelity to the event (the exclusive content of the ethical act) has to be, as well, an entirely formal ethical injunction. How, in that case, to differentiate the ethical from the simulacrum? As Badiou himself makes clear, the simulacrum – as one of the figures of evil – can only emerge in the terrain of truth. So if Badiou is going to be faithful to his theoretical premises, the distinction between event and simulacrum has also to be a formal one – i.e. it has to emerge from the form of the event as such independently of its actual content.

Is Badiou true to his own theoretical presuppositions on this point? I don't think so. His answer to the question of the criterion distinguishing event from simulacrum is that the event addresses the *void* of a situation. 'What allows a genuine event to be at the origin of a truth – which is the only thing that can be for all, and can be eternally', he writes, 'is precisely the fact that it relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void. The void, the multiple-of-nothing, neither excludes nor constrains anyone. It is the absolute neutrality of being – such that the fidelity that originates in an event, although it is an immanent break within a singular situation, is nonetheless universally addressed' (*E* 65/73). The simulacrum – Nazism, for instance – relates to the situation as plenitude or substance. According to the logic of a simulacrum, the pseudo-event 'is supposed to bring into being, and name, not the void of the earlier situation, but its plenitude – not the universality of that which is sustained, precisely, by no particular characteristic (no particular multiple), but

the absolute particularity of a community, itself rooted in the characteristics of its soil, its blood, and its race' (E 64–5/73).

What is wrong with this solution? Several things – to which we will refer later – but especially one which, to some extent, anticipates the others: the distinction truth/simulacrum cannot ultimately be formulated because it does not have any viable place of enunciation within Badiou's theoretical edifice (at this stage of its elaboration, at least).² There are only two places of enunciation within Badiou's system: the situation and the event. Now, the situation is no possible locus for a discourse discriminating between true and false events, between void and fullness, because the void is precisely that which the situation cannot think. But that place of enunciation cannot be constituted around the event either. The 'truth' that, over time, develops the implications of the event cannot contribute a discriminating capacity between true and false events that the event itself does not provide. All that the subjects engaged in a truth procedure can do, *once they accept the event as a true one*, is to be clear about what perverting an event would consist of – but this by itself does not establish a criterion for distinguishing truth from simulacrum. *It is only by appealing to a third discourse which is not itself easily integrated into Badiou's theoretical system that the distinction truth/simulacrum can be maintained.* This is hardly surprising: if the event constitutes itself through a pure and simple subtraction from a situation conceived as a given contingent embodiment of the formal principle of counting (such that its concreteness has to be strictly ignored) there is no way for the subjects affirming that event to discriminate between types of interruption of that situation – let alone of attributing a differential ethical value to those types.

It is clear that, on the basis of the asserted premises, we cannot advance beyond establishing the formal components of a militant ethics, and that we cannot legislate anything concerning the content of the latter – except by smuggling a third (as yet untheorized) discourse into the argument. This appeal to a third discourse as a sort of *deus ex machina* is not peculiar to Badiou alone. Žižek's analysis of Nazism proceeds along similar lines. It starts by subscribing to Badiou's distinction: 'In contrast to this authentic act which intervenes in the constitutive void, point of failure – or what Alain Badiou has called the "symptomal torsion" of a given constellation – the inauthentic act legitimizes itself through reference to the point of substantial fullness of a given constellation (on the political terrain: Race, True Religion, Nation . . .): it aims precisely at obliterating the last traces of the "symptomal torsion" which disturbs the balance of that constellation.'³ The analysis of Nazism which follows from these premises offers few surprises:

The so-called 'Nazi revolution', with its disavowal/displacement of the fundamental social antagonism ('class struggle' that divides the social edifice from within) – with its projection/externalization of the cause of social antagonisms into the figure of the Jew, and the consequent reassertion of the corporatist notion of society as an organic Whole – clearly *avoids* confrontation with social antagonism: the 'Nazi revolution' is *the*

exemplary case of a pseudo-change, of a frenetic activity in the course of which many things did change – ‘something was going on all the time’ – so that, precisely, something – that which *really matters* – would *not* change; so that things would fundamentally ‘remain the same’.⁴

The advantage of Žižek’s over Badiou’s formulations is that they make quite explicit that third silent discourse which is present in Badiou’s texts only through its theoretical effects. Žižek makes no bones about the nature of his exercise: he robustly asserts a crude theory of ‘false consciousness’ which makes it possible for him to detect the fundamental social antagonisms, what ‘really matters’ in society and how things could change without any meaningful change taking place.⁵ What is wrong with all this? Not, obviously, the concrete content of his assertions – I agree with most of it – but the role that those assertions play in his theory and, in a more subtle way, also in Badiou’s theory. For they are a set of ontic assertions the ambition of which is to establish distinctions between *ontological* categories. ‘Situation’, ‘event’, ‘truth’, ‘generic procedure’, have an ontological status in Badiou’s discourse.⁶ Likewise the ‘void’ and its opposite, i.e. a full particularity convoked as the substance of a situation. So, in that case, how are we to determine which is the true void of a concrete situation? There are only two possibilities: either to reabsorb, in a Hegelian fashion, the ontic into the ontological – a solution that Žižek flirts with but that Badiou most scrupulously tries to avoid; or to name the void through the axiomatic postulation inherent to a truth procedure – in which case there seem to be no available means of discriminating between true and false events, and the principle of the distinction between event and simulacrum collapses.

A third solution is conceivable: that the *marks* of a true event are already ontologically determined (or, if you like, transcendently preconstituted). For Badiou these marks exist and are inscribed in the *exclusive* alternative of either relating to a particular situation from the bias of its void, or naming the presumed ‘fullness’ of a certain situation. If we could demonstrate that such an alternative is truly exclusive and that it is constitutively inherent to any possible concrete situation, our problem would be solved.

This demonstration is, however, impossible. Let us look at the matter from the two sides of this potential polarity. From the void, in the first place. What figures as void is always, for Badiou, the void of *a* situation. Whatever counts as void, or as nothing, is scattered throughout a situation and is necessarily included in every sub-set of a situation; since there is nothing ‘in’ the void that might serve to identify or locate it, any such operation is impossible. Each situation, however, contains a minimally identifiable element, a group or individual located on the ‘edge’ of whatever counts as nothing for the situation – an element that counts only as an indiscernible ‘something’, with no other identifying characteristics. This element, for Badiou, has no elements of its own in common with the situation, i.e. no elements that the situation itself can recognize or discern. The inhabitants of this liminal space are presentable in two very different ways, the articulation of which is crucial for the question that we are discussing. Firstly, they can be *named* in a *referential* way: the *sans-papiers*

in today's France, the working class in capitalist society, the death of Christ in Saint Paul's discourse in its opposition to Hebrew Law and Greek wisdom, etc. In the second place, however, that name remains *empty* because what it designates, and proclaims through the event, does not correspond to anything that is representable within the counting of the situation – it would be, to use a different terminology, a signifier without a signified.

The problem which immediately arises concerns the precise way these two dimensions are to be linked. If referential designation and non-representability within the situation did exactly overlap with each other, there would be no problem: the edge of the void would be precisely located in a site defined by the parameters of the situation. But there are neither logical nor historical reasons to make this simplifying assumption. Let us suppose that a society is experiencing what Gramsci called an *organic crisis*: what confronts us, in that case, are not particular sites defining (delimiting) what is unrepresentable within the general field of representation, but rather the fact that the very logic of representation has lost its structural abilities. This transforms the role of the event: it does not simply have to proclaim the centrality of an exception vis-à-vis a highly structured situation, but has to reconstruct the principle of situationality as such around a new core.

This, in my view, radically changes the void/situation relationship. It is precisely at this point that my approach starts to differ from Badiou's. Within Badiou's system, there is no way that the void can be given any content, as it is and remains empty by definition. The 'evental site', on the other hand, always has a certain content. This is what we call 'referential designation'. This distinction makes perfect sense within the set theory approach within which Badiou operates. The possibility that we have raised, however – that the logic of representation might lose its structuring abilities – raises questions which can hardly be answered within Badiou's system. For in that case what becomes uncountable in the situation is the principle of countability as such. So the truth procedure in which its subjects engage themselves consists, in one of its basic dimensions, in reconstructing the situation around a new core. The consequence is that there is no longer any question of a linear development of the implications of the event: the latter has to show its articulating abilities *by going beyond itself*, so that the drastic separation between evental site and void has to be necessarily put into question. Consequently some filling of the void – of a special kind which requires theoretical description – becomes necessary. (Needless to say, the very idea of such a filling is an anathema for Badiou: any filling of the void is, for him, evil.)

How might this filling proceed? Badiou thinks that the void, having no members of its own (in the situation presented by set theory it figures as the empty set) does not belong to any particular situation – which means that it is included in them all – but that, as far as human situations are concerned, the subjects of a truth that affirms the event address universality pure and simple. This means, indistinct humanity – in the sense that Marx for instance asserted that the proletariat has only his chains. I can only go half way along this argument. There are two insurmountable difficulties. The first is that the

category of the void – of the empty set \emptyset – is only empty when it operates within mathematics. When it is transposed to social analysis it is filled with certain contents – thinking, freedom/consciousness, ‘only chains’, etc. – which are far from being empty. What we have here is a hopelessly metaphorical exercise by which emptiness is equated with universality. It only takes a moment to realize that the universal content is not empty. We are simply confronted with an attempt at an ethical defence of universality which proceeds through an illegitimate appeal to set theory. So much for Badiou’s claim that any filling of the void is evil. In the second place, we are sometimes presented with the argument that the subjects of a truth have means of differentiating between truth and simulacrum – criteria such as strict equality, universality, indifference to all qualities and values etc. But it is clear that the validity of these criteria entirely depends on accepting as a starting point the equation between void and universality. So the argument is perfectly circular.

Let me be clear: mine is not an objection to universality as such but to Badiou’s way of theoretically constructing it. In one sense it is true that a radical interruption of a given situation will interpellate people across and beyond particularisms and differences. Every revolutionary break has, in that respect, universalizing effects. People live for a moment the illusion that, because an oppressive regime has been overthrown, what has been overthrown is oppression *as such*. It is in that sense that the void, in Badiou’s sense, not having any distinctive content, addresses something which is beyond all particularity *as particularity*. But the other side of the picture, the moment of referential designation, is still there, doing its job. For – and at this point I definitely disagree with Badiou – I do not think that the particularism inherent in that local reference can be simply eliminated from the picture as a site having only relations of exteriority with the void. The *sans-papiers*, as an indiscernible element within their situation, *may* come to articulate a position that holds true for all members of that situation (e.g. ‘Everyone who is here is from here’), but they are also constituted as political subjects through a series of particular demands which could be granted by an expansive hegemony of the existing situation and, in that sense, individual *sans-papiers* may come to be counted in their turn, i.e. become normal members of the situation.

The conclusion is obvious: the frontiers between the countable and the uncountable are essentially unstable. But this means that there is no locus, no site within the situation, which has inscribed a priori within itself the guarantees of universality: that is, there is *no natural name* for the void. Conversely, no name is a priori excluded from naming it. Let us give an example. The Solidarnosc movement started as a set of particular demands of a group of workers in Gdansk. However, as those demands were formulated in a particularly repressive context, they became the symbols and the surface of inscription of a plurality of other demands which were uncountable within the situation defined by the bureaucratic regime. That is, it was through the articulation between themselves that these demands constructed a certain universalism which transcended all particularities. This especially applies to the central symbols of Solidarnosc: a certain remnant of particularism cannot be

eliminated from them, but because those symbols served to represent a large set of democratic equivalential demands, they became the embodiment of universality as such. It is through this equivalence/transcendence between particularities that something like the name of the void can be constructed. This is what in my work I have called hegemony: the process by which a particularity assumes the representation of a universality which is essentially incommensurable with it.

Two capital conclusions follow from this argument: (1) universality has no a priori sites of emergence, but it is the result of the displacement of the frontier between the countable and the uncountable – i.e. of the construction of an expansive hegemony; (2) if articulation is given its proper central role, naming the void is constitutively linked to the process of its filling, but this filling can only proceed through an uneasy balance between universality and particularity – a balance which, by definition, can never be broken through the exclusive domination of either of its two poles. Filling a void is not simply to assign to it a particular content, but to make of that content the nodal point of an equivalential universality transcending it. Now from the point of view of our original problem, which was the determination of a true event (whose precondition was the naming of a pure void – i.e. a universality not contaminated by particularity), this means that such a pure universality is impossible. Its place is always going to be occupied/embodyed by something which is less than itself.

Let us now move to the other side of the polarity: the particularistic filling of the void that Badiou and Žižek discuss in connection with Nazism. Let us remain within that example which, being extreme, presents the best possible terrain for Badiou to argue his case. Badiou cannot be accused of trying to make his case easy: on the contrary, he stresses without concessions the structural parallels between event and simulacrum. “Simulacrum” must be understood here in its strong sense’, he admits:

all the formal traits of a truth are at work in the simulacrum. Not only a universal nomination of the event, inducing the power of a radical break, but also the ‘obligation’ of a fidelity, and the promotion of a *simulacrum of the subject*, erected – without the advent of any Immortal – above the human animality of the others, of those who are arbitrarily declared to belong to the communitarian substance whose promotion and domination the simulacrum-event is designed to assure. (E 66/74)

How does Badiou establish, on these premises, the distinction between event and simulacrum? Not surprisingly, through a drastic opposition between the *void* and what stands as the *substance* of the community – precisely the distinction that we tried to undermine. ‘Fidelity to a simulacrum – unlike fidelity to an event – regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the close particularity of an abstract set (the “Germans” or the “Aryans”)’ (E 66/74). To assess the viability of Badiou’s solution we have to ask ourselves some questions which are the opposite of those we were dealing with

in the case of the void: to what extent is the particularism of the Nazi discourse incompatible with any appeal to the universal (to the void)? And to what extent does the abstract set that regulates the break with the situation (the 'Germans', the 'Aryans', etc.) function in the Nazi discourse as a particularistic instance?

Let us successively consider these two questions. Regarding the first there can be no doubt at all: the void is as much addressed in the Nazi discourse as in any socialist one. Let us remember that the void is not in our view universality in the strict sense of the term but that which is uncountable in a given situation. As we have argued, and I think Badiou would agree, it does not have a single and precise site in a critical situation, when the very principles of counting are threatened and the reconstruction of the community as a whole around a new core comes to the fore as a fundamental social need. That was exactly the situation that prevailed in the crisis of the Weimar Republic. There was not then a clash between an uncountable presence and a well-structured situation (between a proclaimed event and the state of the situation), but a fundamental destructuring of the community which required that the named event became, from its very inception, a principle of restructuration. It was not a matter of substituting a fully-fledged existing situation by a different one deriving from a new principle subversive of the status quo, but of a hegemonic struggle between rival principles, between different ways of naming the uncountable to see which one was more capable of *articulating a situation* against the alternative of anomie and chaos. In this sense there is no doubt that the void as such was clearly addressed in Nazi discourse.

What, however, about the particular set (blood, race, etc.) that Nazism convoked as the event breaking with the situation? Is not this particular communitarian substance incompatible with the universality of the void (of the empty set)? We have to consider the matter carefully. In our discussion of the naming of the void we have distinguished between the referential designation of the edge of the void and the universality of the content that that site embodies. We have also argued that that universality will depend on the extension of the chain of equivalences which is expressed through that name. This means that no name having a certain political centrality will ever have a univocal particular reference. Terms which formally name a particularity will acquire, through equivalential chains, a far more universal reference while, conversely, others whose denotation is apparently universal can become, in certain discursive articulations, the name of extremely particularistic meanings. This means that: (1) there is no name of a pure, uncontaminated universality (of a pure void); (2) a purely particular name is also impossible.⁷ What we have earlier called hegemony consists, precisely, in this undecidable game between universality and particularity. In that case, however, the distinction between true event and simulacrum collapses: it is simply impossible to conceive evil as a result of a particularistic invocation against the universality of truth. For the same reason, the sharp distinction between generic set and constructible set cannot be maintained either as far as society is concerned.

Does this mean that the very notion of evil has to be abandoned, that everything goes and that it is not possible to pass an ethical judgement about

phenomena such as Nazism? Obviously not. The only thing that *does* follow from our previous argument is that it is impossible to ground ethical options at the abstract level of a theory dominated by the duality situation/event, and that these categories – whatever their validity in other spheres – do not provide criteria for moral choice. This also means that the terrain in which these criteria can emerge is going to be a much more concrete one. This much Badiou himself would be ready to accept: truth for him is always the truth of a situation. In that case, however, what I have called the silent third discourse implicit in his approach – the one that would actually provide him with a legitimate position of enunciation for his discourse on evil – needs explicitly to be brought to the fore. This operation, nonetheless, is not possible without introducing some changes in Badiou's theoretical apparatus. This is the question that I will address next.

II

Let us summarize our argument so far. Badiou, quite correctly, refuses to ground ethics in any a priori normativism – the latter belonging, by definition, to the situation as a countable *given*. The source of ethical commitment should be found in the implication or consequences drawn from the event conceived as *subtraction* from that situation. In that case, however, any distinction between true and false events cannot be based on what events actually proclaim – firstly, because that would smuggle into the argument the normativism which was axiomatically excluded and, secondly, because it would require a judging instance external to both situation and event (what we have called a 'third discourse'). The latter is what makes Žižek's argument hopelessly eclectic, and it is what Badiou tries to avoid. Things being so, the only course open to him is to attempt to ground the distinction event/simulacrum in the very structural differentiations that his dualistic ontology has established. He finds this ground in the duality void/plenum. This does not entirely eliminate the problem of the third discourse, for Badiou has still to explain why to give expression to the void is good while to give it to the plenum is bad, but at least a step in the right direction has been taken. The cornerstone of the argument thus relies on the distinction void/plenum being unambiguous. But, as we have seen, Badiou's distinction is untenable. Firstly, because, as we have argued earlier, the void – as far as the category is applicable to a human situation – is not for Badiou really empty but has already a certain content – the universal. And, secondly, because the arrangement of the elements of the situation brought about by the subject out of the generic inconsistency revealed by the event requires, if the notion of 'arrangement' is going to make any sense, some consistency between the universality *shown* by the event and the new arrangement resulting from the subject's intervention. In what does this 'consistency' consist of? One possibility is that it is a logical consistency. But Badiou – and also myself – would reject this possibility because in that case the gap between event and situation would be cancelled and the notion of an ontology grounded in multiplicity would no longer make any sense. The *only* other alternative is

that the consistency between event and new arrangement results from a *contingent* construction – and it necessarily has to be so, given that it starts from the terrain of a primordial inconsistency. This simply means that the consistency of the new arrangement is going to be, through and through, a constructed one. Ergo ‘truth procedure’ and ‘contingent construction’ are interchangeable terms. Now, what else is this but *filling in* the void? If my argument is correct, the distinction void/plenum falls – or at least establishes between its two poles a far more complex system of mutual displacements than Badiou’s sharp dichotomy allows.

What we will now go on to argue is that, paradoxically, the blind alley we are discussing is not unconnected to what is perhaps the most valuable feature of Badiou’s ethics: his refusal to postulate any kind of a priori normativism. This refusal, however, has been accompanied by the *assertion* of some ontological presuppositions which are the very source of the difficulties that we are dealing with. Let us make one last remark before embarking on this discussion. Of the three figures of evil to which Badiou refers, only the first – the distinction between truth and simulacrum – is intending to discriminate between true and false event. The second, as Badiou himself recognizes, would be seen as evil not only from the perspective of the true event but from that of the simulacrum (a fascist as much as a revolutionary would consider evil any kind of weakening of the revolutionary will). As for the third figure, it presents problems of its own that we will discuss presently.

As I said at the beginning, I do not intend in this essay to discuss in any detail the complex – and in many respects fascinating – ontology developed by Badiou. But some reference to it is necessary, given that his ethics strictly depends on his ontological distinctions. The most important categories structuring the latter are as follows. Situation and event, void and plenum, we have already explained. Let us add that, the situation being essentially multiple, a new category – the ‘state of the situation’ – has to be introduced to bring about a principle of internal stabilization – i.e. the possibility that the structuring resources of situation can themselves be counted as *one*. The borders between the situation and its void are conceived in terms of ‘edges’, that is ‘sites of the event’. The latter, although belonging to the situation, will provide a certain degree of infrastructure to an event should one take place – I am calling it infrastructure in a purely topographical sense without, obviously, any kind of causal connotation.

I have already raised the possibility of some displacements within Badiou’s categories which could go, I think, some way in the direction of solving some of the difficulties that his ethical theory presents at the moment. I will now review, in sequence: (1) the precise nature of those displacements; (2) the extent to which they put the ethical argument in a better terrain; (3) the consequences that they would have – if accepted – for Badiou’s ontological perspective.

I have attempted an initial deconstruction of the stark opposition void/plenum. I have suggested that the edge of the void is not a precise place within an otherwise fully ordered (countable) situation, but something whose very presence makes it impossible for a situation to be entirely structured as such. (It

is like the Lacanian real, which is not something existing *alongside* the symbolic, but which is *within* the symbolic in such a way as to prevent the symbolic from being fully constituted.) In that case, however, a distinction has to be introduced between the *situation* and what we could call with a neologism the *situationness*, the former being the actually ontic existing *order* and the second the ontological principle of *ordering* as such. These two dimensions never fully overlap with each other. This being the case, the *event* – whose unpredictability within the situation, asserted by Badiou, I fully accept – has from its very inception the two roles that we have mentioned earlier: on the one hand, to subvert the existing state of the situation by naming the unnameable; on the other, I would add, to restructure a new state around a new core. Mao's long march succeeded because it was not only the destruction of an old order but also the reconstruction of the nation around a new core. And Gramsci's notion of a 'becoming state' of the working class – against any simplistic notion of 'seizure of power' – moves in the same direction. In that case, however, situation and event contaminate each other: they are not separate locations within a social topography, but constitutive dimensions of any social identity. (One central consequence of this assertion is, as we will see, that the event loses, in some respects, the exceptional character attributed to it by Badiou.)

The same goes for the duality event/site of the event. (The site would be, for instance, in Christian discourse, Christ's mortality, while the event would be his resurrection.) For Badiou there is an essential exteriority between the two. It is only at that price that the event can be truly universal – i.e. it can reveal the void that does not belong in any part of the situation although it is necessarily included in all of them. In the Christian notion of incarnation, again, no physical quality anticipated, in the particular body of Mary, that she was going to be the mother of God. I cannot accept this logic. As in the previous case, the relationship between event and site of the event has to be conceived as one of mutual contamination. The demands of the *sans-papiers* are clearly, *in the first instance*, particular and not universal demands. So how can some kind of universality emerge out of them? Only insofar as people excluded from many other sites within a situation (who are unnameable within the latter) perceive their common nature as excluded and live their struggles – in their particularity – as part of a larger emancipatory struggle. But this means that any event of universal significance is constructed out of a plurality of sites whose particularity is equivalentially articulated but definitely not eliminated. As we tried to show earlier with the example of Solidarnosc, one particular site can acquire a special relevance as locus of a universal equivalent, but even at that site the tension between universality and particularity is constitutive of the emancipatory struggle.

The consequence of this is clear: a hegemonic universality is the only one that any society can achieve. The infinity of the emancipatory task is very much present – it is not a question of denying it in the name of a pure particularism – for the struggle against an oppressive regime can be constructed, through equivalential chains, as a struggle against oppression in general, but the particularism of the hegemonic force (however diluted its particularity might be) is

still there producing its limiting effects. It is like gold, the function of which as general equivalent (as money) does not cancel the oscillations inherent to its nature as a particular commodity. There is a moment in Badiou's analysis in which he almost approaches the hegemonico-equivalential logic that we are describing: it is when he refers to 'investigations' (*enquêtes*) as militant attempts to win over elements of the situation to the event (*EE* 334). But his attempt is rather limited: it is not conceived by him as the *construction* of a wider evental site through the expansion of equivalential chains, but as a process of total conversion in which there is either 'connection' or 'disconnection' without possibility of any middle. Although the result of this piece-by-piece construction is as much for Badiou as for me a widening of the evental site, there is not in his account any deepening of the mechanisms underlying the operations of 'connection' and 'disconnection'. In the end, the process of conversion, seen at its purest in the case of religion, remains, for Badiou, the model paradigm for any description of the process of winning over.

So where are we left, as far as our ethical question is concerned, if we accept this set of displacements of Badiou's categories (and I am sure Badiou would not accept them)? Firstly, it is clear that all ground for the distinction between truth and simulacrum has collapsed. That ground – in Badiou's discourse – was given by the possibility of a radical differentiation between void and plenum. But it is precisely that distinction that does not stand once the filling of the void and the naming of it have become indistinguishable from each other. However, this very collapse of the distinction opens the way to other possibilities that Badiou's stark dichotomy had closed. For the edge of the void not only has no precise location (if it had it would have a *proper*, unambiguous name) but names the absent fullness of the situation – it is, if you want, the presence of an absence, something which can be *named* but not *counted* (i.e. which cannot be represented as an objective difference). If, on top of that, we accept that the void is constitutively included in any situation – and this is something I very much agree with, from a different theoretical perspective – the possibility of *naming* it, which Badiou quite rightly sees as its only possibility of discursive inscription, *would be to attribute to a particular difference the role of naming something entirely incommensurable with itself – i.e. the absent fullness of the situation.*⁸ In that case, naming the void and naming the plenum become indistinguishable from each other. The only other possibility, that the site of the event *qua site* determines what the event can name, is excluded *de jure* by Badiou's argument – and, anyway, it would again raise the spectre of the 'third discourse'. In that case, however, blood, race, the nation, the proletarian revolution or communism, are indifferent ways of naming the void/plenum. Let us be clear: from a political viewpoint it makes, of course, which signifier will name the void makes all the difference. The problem, however, is how discursively to construct such a political differentiation. Badiou's implicit answer would be that – *malgré lui* – the void has potentially a certain content: the universal. For me – given the subversion that I have attempted at the ontological level of the distinction truth/simulacrum – this solution is not available. In what follows, I will present an outline of what is, for me, the right way of dealing with this problem.

How to get out of this impasse? In my view the answer requires two steps. Our first step involves the full recognition that, under the label of the 'ethical', two different things have been put together which do not necessarily overlap – in fact they usually do not. The first is the search for the unconditioned, i.e. that which would fill the gap between what society is and what it ought to be. The second is the moral evaluation of the various ways of carrying out this filling role – as far, of course, as this filling operation is accepted as a legitimate one (which is not the case with Badiou). How do these two different tasks interact with each other? A first possibility is that the distinction between the two is denied. Plato's search for the 'good society' is at one and the same time the description of a society which is both without gaps or holes and morally good. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* pursues a similar conjunction of spheres. The problem emerges when it is perceived that the filling function can operate through many different fillers and that there is no way of determining the latter through the mere logical analysis of the former. To return to our previous terminology: the void undermines the principle of countability in society (what we have called the situationness of the situation) but does not anticipate how to choose between different states of the situation. In a society experiencing an organic crisis the need for *some kind* of order, whether conservative or revolutionary, becomes more important than the concrete order fulfilling this need. In other words: the search for the unconditioned prevails over the evaluation of the ways of achieving it. Hobbes' sovereign drew its legitimacy from the fact that it could bring about *some* order, regardless of its content, against the chaos of the state of nature. Or again: what in those cases is the object of ethical investment is not the ontic content of a certain *order* but the principle of *ordering* as such.

It is not difficult to realize that a militant ethics of the event, as opposed to the situationally determined normative order, has to privilege this moment of rupture over the ordering resources of the situational dimension. But with implacable logic, this leads to a total uncertainty about the normative content of the ethical act. We can easily end in Žižek's exaltation of the ruthlessness of power and the spirit of sacrifice as values in themselves.⁹ Badiou tries to avoid this pitfall through a strict distinction between void and plenum. But, as we have shown, this is an untenable distinction. In order to avoid this cul-de-sac we have to perform a first ascetic operation, and strictly separate the two meanings that the label ethics embraces in an unhappy symbiosis: 'ordering' as a positive value beyond any ontic determination and the concrete systems of social norms to which we give our moral approval. I suggest that we should restrict the term 'ethics' to the first dimension. This means that, from an ethical point of view, fascism and communism are indistinguishable – but, of course, ethics no longer has anything to do with moral evaluation. So, how can we move from one level to the other?

It is here that our second step has to be taken. The ethical as such, as we have seen, cannot have any differentiating ontic content as its defining feature. Its meaning is exhausted in the pure declaring/filling of a void/plenum. This is the point, however, in which the theoretical effects of deconstructing Badiou's dualisms can be brought into operation. We have already explained the basic

pattern of that deconstruction: the contamination of each pole of the dichotomies by the other. Let us go to the ontic/ontological distinction that we have established between situation and situationness. There is no event which is exhausted, as far as its meaning is concerned, in its pure breaking with the situation – i.e. there is no event which, in the very movement of this break, does not present itself as a potential bearer of a new order, of situationness as such. This implies that the meaning of the event *per se* is suspended between its ontic content and its ontological role or, to put it in other terms, *that there is nothing which can proceed as a pure subtraction*. The breaking moment involved in an event – in a radical decision – is still there, *but the site of the event is not purely passive*: going back to Saint Paul, there would have been no resurrection without death.

Where does this leave us as far as ethical theory is concerned? At this point: the ethical as such – as we have defined it – has no normative content, but the subject which constitutes itself through an ethical act is not a pure, unencumbered subject, but one whose site of constitution (and the lack inherent in it) are not done away with by that ethical act (the event). That is, the moment of the ethical involves a *radical investment*, and in this formula its two terms have to be given equal weight. Its radicalism means that the act of investment is not explained by its object (as far as its object is concerned, the act proceeds truly *ex nihilo*). But the object of the investment is not a purely transparent medium either: it has a situational opaqueness that the event can twist but not eliminate. To use a Heideggerian formulation, we are *thrown* into the normative order (as part of our being thrown into the world) so that the subject who constitutes him/herself through an ethical investment is already part of a situation and of the lack inherent in the latter. Every situation deploys a symbolic framework without which even the event would have no meaning; the lack implies that, since the symbolic order can never be saturated, it cannot explain the event out of its own resources. ‘Events’ in Badiou’s sense are moments in which the state of the situation is *radically* put into question; but it is wrong to think that we have purely situational periods interrupted by purely evental interventions: the contamination between the evental and the situational is the very fabric of social life.

So the answer to the question of how we can move from the ethical to the normative, from the unconditional assertion inherent in any event to the level of moral choice and evaluation, is that such a choice and evaluation have largely been already made before the event with the symbolic resources of the situation itself. The subject is only partially the subject inspired by the event; the naming of the unrepresentable in which the event consists involves reference to an unrepresented within *a* situation and can only proceed through the displacement of elements already present in that situation. This is what we have called the mutual contamination between situation and event. Without it any winning over by the event of elements of the situation would be impossible, except through a totally irrational act of conversion.

This gives us, I think, the intellectual tools to solve what would otherwise be an aporia in Badiou’s analysis. I am referring to the issues related to what is for him the third form of evil – the attempt to totalize a truth, to eradicate all

elements of the situation which are foreign to its implications. That this totalitarian attempt is evil is something I am fully prepared to accept. The difficulty lies in that, in Badiou's system, there are no adequate theoretical resources to deal with this form of evil and, especially, with the alternative social arrangement in which situation and event are not in a relation of mutual exclusion. What does it exactly mean for a truth not to attempt to be total? Badiou's partial answer in terms of a necessary recognition of human animality is certainly less than convincing. For what a truth which is less than total will be confronted with is other opinions, views, ideas, etc., and if the truth is *permanently* non-total it will have to incorporate into its form this element of confrontation – which involves collective deliberation. Peter Hallward has quite rightly pointed out, in his introduction to the English edition of Badiou's *Ethics*, that it is difficult, given Badiou's notion of an event, to see how this element of deliberation can be incorporated into his theoretical framework.¹⁰ I would add: it is not difficult, it is impossible. For if the proclaimed truth is self-grounded, and if its relation with the situation is one of pure subtraction, no deliberation is possible. The only real alternatives as far as the elements of the situation are concerned are total rejection of the truth (disconnection) or what we have called conversion (connection) whose mechanisms are not specified. In these circumstances, that the truth does not attempt to be total can only mean that deliberation is a deaf dialogue in which the truth just reiterates itself in the expectation that, as a result of some miracle, radical conversion will take place.

Now if we move to our own perspective, which involves the contamination between situation and event, the difficulty disappears. Firstly, social agents share, at the level of a situation, values, ideas, beliefs, etc. that the truth, not being total, does not put entirely into question. Thus, a process of argumentation can take place that justifies the situational rearrangements in terms of those situational aspects that the truth procedure does not subvert. Secondly, the void requires, in our view, a filling, but the filler is not a necessary one – that is why the event is irreducible to the situation. In that case the process of connection ceases to be irrational as far as it presupposes an identification which proceeds out of a constitutive lack. This already involves deliberation. But, thirdly, the edges of the void are, as we have seen, multiple, and the event is only constructed through chains of equivalences linking a plurality of sites. This necessarily involves deliberation conceived in a wide sense (involving partial conversions, dialogues, negotiations, struggles, etc.). If the event only takes place through this process of collective construction, we see that deliberation is not something externally added to it but something belonging to its inherent nature. The aspiration to make of truth a total one is evil as far as it interrupts this process of equivalential construction and turns a single site into an absolute place of the enunciation of truth.

There is one last point we have to deal with. We have suggested a series of displacements of the categories informing Badiou's analysis. Can these displacements take place within the general framework of Badiou's ontology – i.e. within his attribution to set theory of a grounding role in the discourse concerning being as being? The answer is clearly negative. Let us cast our question

in a transcendental fashion: how must an object be so that the type of relation that we have subsumed under the general label of ‘contamination’ becomes possible? Or, what amounts to the same thing: what are the conditions of possibility of such a relation? Let me be clear that we are not speaking about any regional ontology; if something such as an ‘articulation’, or an ‘equiv- alential relation’, or the ‘construction of the universal through its hegemonic taking up by some particularity’ is going to take place at all, the very possi- bility has to be given at the level of an ontology dealing with being qua being – especially if, as we think, these operations are not superstructural expressions of a hidden deeper reality but the primary terrain of the constitution of objects.

Now, it should be clear that set theory would find serious difficulties in dealing with something such as a relation of articulation, especially if it is grounded in the postulate of extensionality. Needless to say, I am not advo- cating the return to any kind of intensional grounding which would present all the difficulties which are well known since Russell’s paradox. As far as set theory is concerned extensionality is fine. What I am putting into question is that set theory could play the role of a fundamental ontology that Badiou attributes to it. I think that set theory is just one way of constituting entities within a much wider field of ontological possibilities. If we take the equiv- alential relation, for instance, it involves an articulation between universality and particularity which is only conceivable in terms of *analogy*. But such a relation cannot be properly thought within the framework of Badiou’s math- ematical ontology. The same happens with the ensemble of phenomena known in psychoanalysis as ‘overdetermination’. And I insist that it is not possible to sidestep this incompatibility by attributing it to the level of abstraction at which we are working¹¹ (set theory operating at such a level that all the distinctions on which our theoretical approach is based would not be pertinent or representable). The true issue is that the emergence of any new field of objectivity presupposes ontological possibilities which are the task of philo- sophy to uncover.

Is there a field that is more primary than that uncovered by set theory which would allow us properly to account *ontologically* for the type of relations that we are exploring? I think there is, and it is *linguistics*. The relations of analogy through which the aggregation constructing an eventual site are established are relations of *substitution*, and the differential relations constituting the area of objective distinctions (which define the ‘situation’, in Badiou’s terms) compose the field of *combinations*. Now, substitutions and combinations are the only possible forms of objectivity in a Saussurean universe, and if they are extracted from their anchorage in speech and writing – that is, if the separation of form from substance is made in a more consequent and radical way than Saussure’s – we are not in the field of a regional but of a general or fundamental ontology.

I would even add something more. This ontology cannot remain within the straightjacket of classical structuralism, which privileged the syntagmatic over the paradigmatic pole of language. On the contrary, once equivalential relations are recognized as constitutive of objectivity as such – i.e. once the paradigmatic pole of substitutions is given its proper weight in ontological description – we

are not only in the terrain of a linguistic ontology but also of a rhetorical one. In our previous example of Solidarnosc the 'event' took place through the aggregation of a plurality of 'sites' on the basis of their *analogy* in the common opposition to an oppressive regime. And what is this substitution through analogy but a metaphorical aggregation? Metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche (and especially catachresis as their common denominator) are not categories describing adornments of language, as classical philosophy had it, but ontological categories describing the constitution of objectivity as such. It is important to see that this does not involve any kind of theoretical nihilism or anti-philosophy¹² because it is the result of a critique which is fully internal to the conceptual medium as such and is, in that sense, a strictly philosophical enterprise. Many consequences follow from taking this path, including the ability to describe in more precise conceptual terms what we have called the contamination (a better term might perhaps be overdetermination) between the evental and the situational.¹³

The huge question that remains is the following: could the ensemble of relations that I have described as rhetorical be absorbed and described as a special case within the wider categories of set theory, so that the latter would retain their ontological priority; or, rather, could set theory itself be described as an internal possibility – admittedly an extreme one – within the field of a generalized rhetoric? I am convinced that the right answer implies the second alternative, but this demonstration will have to wait for another occasion.

THINK AGAIN

**ALAIN BADIOU AND THE
FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Edited by
PETER HALLWARD**

 **continuum**
LONDON • NEW YORK

Continuum
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

15 East 26th Street
New York
NY 10010

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 0-8264-5906-4
PB: 0-8264-5907-2

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