

## THE PERSISTENCE OF THEORETICAL ANTI-HUMANISM, OR, THE POLITICS OF THE SUBJECT IN ALAIN BADIOU AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK<sup>1</sup>

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In an interview with Peter Hallward on the demise of the Lacano-Althusserian journal *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* Alain Badiou remarks that he is the only one of the original group to remain true to the journal's initial anti-humanist project, that is to say, the correlation between a theory of the subject and a formal theory of structures.<sup>2</sup> Post '68, he notes, the editorial team underwent a three way split: those "renegades," as he calls them, who turned to psychoanalysis (Miller, Milner and their followers) and cut off the project from any form of radical politics, re-institutionalizing the theory;<sup>3</sup> those who got caught up in the general reactionary political drift of the 1970s, waging war on "totality" and totalitarianism; finally the Lacano-Maoism of Badiou himself, who believes that the philosophical conceptual space opened up by the journal continues to have relevance today (with the proviso that he is no longer strictly Lacanian or strictly Maoist). Indeed, the belated translation of some of the key texts from the *Cahiers*, interviews with the journals main participants and critical assessments of its project,<sup>4</sup> as well as Badiou's own oeuvre, including the early Lacanian influenced *Theory of the Subject*, has given a renewed impetus to this Lacano-Althusserian anti-humanist project. In this chapter I will set out Badiou's critique of the humanist subject and his own notion of the subject, a subject that is clearly inspired by Lacan but moves beyond the Lacanian subject of lack. I then turn to Badiou's comrade in the anti-humanist camp, Slavoj Žižek, and his Lacanian critique of Badiou. It is, I contend, their differing interpretation of the Lacanian real that accounts for the underlying dispute between them. Whereas Žižek's subject is "groundless" Badiou's conception of "forcing" the real confers upon the subject a degree of consistency that facilitates the articulation of specific political projects.

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, "Theory from Structure to Subject: An Interview with Alain Badiou", in *Concept and Form, Vol. One, Key Texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, eds. Peter Hallward, and Knox Peden (London: Verso, 2012), 288.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 289.

<sup>4</sup> Hallward, Peter, and Knox Peden, eds. *Concept and Form, Vol. One, Key Texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso 2012); Hallward, Peter, and Knox Peden, eds. *Concept and Form, Vol. Two, Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012).

## **An ethic of truths**

As Badiou reflects in the concluding section of *Logics of Worlds*, it is the notion of the subject that provides the unifying theme of his life's work. Indeed, his wonderful book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* is dedicated to reading Paul not as an apostle or a saint but rather using Paul as a vehicle to redefine the philosophical category of "the subject" as a "universal singular."<sup>5</sup> Badiou's project, in reading St Paul is nothing less than a refounding of:

[A] theory of the Subject that subordinates its existence to the aleatory dimension of the event as well as to the pure contingency of multiple-being without sacrificing the theme of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

In another relatively late work but the first book translated into English, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), published in France in 1998, Badiou advanced a biting critique of the ethical turn in the humanities and a robust defense of the legacy of the 1960s anti-humanism. The ethical turn, he noted, organizes practical existence around the category of the Good and governs how we relate to "what is going on".<sup>7</sup> Ethics relates to the domain of human rights and, as such, presupposes the existence of a universally recognizable human subject that is the bearer of these "rights," rights that are in some way naturally endowed. For Badiou, the re-emergence of this old doctrine of human rights is closely linked to the collapse of Marxism as a critical discourse and as a political project and the corresponding rejection of the anti-historicist, anti-humanist project of Lacan, Althusser and Foucault. It was precisely the goal of the Lacano-Althusserians to contest the idea of a natural or spiritual identity of "man," on which any ethical discourse could be founded and which is today rejected in the name of the human. From Badiou's perspective:

[T]he thematics of the 'death of man' are compatible with rebellion, a radical dissatisfaction with the established order, and a fully committed engagement in the real of situations ... while by contrast, the theme of ethics and of human rights is compatible with the self-satisfied egoism of the affluent West, with advertising, and with service rendered to the powers that be.<sup>8</sup>

For Badiou, then, the heart of the problem of contemporary ethics (and by this he means the ethics of otherness or the ethics of difference) is the assumption of a universal human subject. He outlines three objections to this idea, first: it reduces "man" to an animal status; second, it assumes that Evil precedes Good and that every aspiration to Good will result in Evil; and third, it prevents people from thinking the singularity of situations. Such ethics, however, simply evades the question of truth. As

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans Ray Brassier (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 7.

Hallward notes, for Badiou, “a truth is something that *takes place* at a particular time and under particular circumstances”.<sup>9</sup> An ethic based upon the notion of truth, therefore, will have to take into account the singularity of this “taking place”. In contrast to the ethics of otherness, Badiou outlines what he calls an “ethic of truths” based on three alternative premises: first, “man” is to be identified by his affirmative thought; two, “man” is to be identified by his capacity for Good; and finally, all humanity has its roots in the identification in thought of singular situations. The central problem for Badiou is not to think difference - difference is what there is- the challenge is to think the Same. The Same is what may come to be through a fidelity to truth. Since infinite alterity is what there is and a truth is the “coming-to-be” of what there is not yet, truth is indifferent to differences; what defines us as subjects in Badiou’s sense is our capacity for truth, our capacity to be the Same. Consequently, there is not a single subject but as many subjects as there are truths and as many subject types as there are truth procedures, that is to say, four: science, art, politics, and love.<sup>10</sup> A truth procedure breaks with “the axiomatic principle that governs the situation” and organizes its repetitive iterations according to the logic of the market, that is to say, the proliferation of subjectivities as simply so many equivalent identities according to the uniform prerogatives of the market. For Badiou, on the other hand, a truth procedure cannot be rooted in an identity:

[E]very truth erupts as singular, its singularity is immediately universalizable. Universalizable singularity necessarily breaks with identitarian singularity.<sup>11</sup>

Another term for this universal singularity is “the subject,” a subject whose fidelity to the singularity of the event constitutes itself as a subject of truth. It follows from this that the subject does not preexist the event it declares, indeed the declaration is crucial insofar as truth is a process, and not a moment of illumination. Furthermore, truth is “of itself indifferent to the state of the situation”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the “other” from Badiou’s perspective cannot be an ethical category. Radical difference is simply ethical indifference, in the sense that, a human being only becomes a subject through a specific engagement in a truthful decision.

### **The subject as lack and force**

Badiou has consistently reformulated his notion of the subject since his first major work, *Theory of the Subject*, but, as he acknowledges in *Logics of Worlds*, he has never completely abandoned the problematic, or, some of the key formulations of that earlier work.<sup>13</sup> *Theory of the Subject* is Badiou’s most Lacanian inflected work but even here he insists on the necessity of traversing Lacan in order to avoid lapsing into religion or scienticism (Badiou’s primary target in the book *Ethics* is Levinas and his

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Hallward, introduction to Badiou, *Ethics*, xxxi, emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 14.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 523.

assertion of alterity over identity). To traverse Lacan, however, is to go beyond him and not to reject the insight of the the Lacanian subject *per se*, thus, Badiou makes a crucial distinction between the processes of “subjectivisation” and “subjective process”. Both processes can be found in Lacan. The former obeys the logic of the signifier and the structural law of lack and it can be found in Lacan’s work up to the mid-1960s. The latter is governed by the topological logic of the Borromean knot, the real as excess and consistency and can be found in his work post-1968. Badiou diverges from Lacan in two respects: first, he argues that the real confers on the subject a degree of consistency; and second, that Lacan does not have a conception of *force*. The subject emerges out of the crossing of these two operations or temporalities; subjectivisation is an interruption of the state of things and is distinguished from the subjective process through the anticipation of its own certainty. The subjective process operates *après-coup* to confer consistency on the effects of subjectivisation: “the subjective process amounts to the retroactive grounding of the subjectivisation in an element of certainty that the subjectivisation alone has made possible.”<sup>14</sup> The subject is the product of this dialectical division of destruction and recomposition, of Lacan’s structural law of lack, the empty place and the excess of the real which exceeds this place. As Badiou writes:

[T]he subject proceeds from a subjectivisation by forcing the empty place, which a new order grounds retrospectively *qua* place, by having occupied it. ... Any place [the place of the subjective] is thus the after effect or *après-coup* of the destruction of another. Subjectivisation is the anticipation whose structure is the empty place; the subjective process, the retroaction that places the forcing.<sup>15</sup>

The subject *is* the *splace*, which comes from what has been destroyed. As Bruno Bosteels puts it, the appearance of a new structure, in which a subject not only occupies but exceeds the empty place in the old structure, results in the first becoming obsolete.<sup>16</sup> Badiou’s subject is at once the empty place and that which comes to fill the place. What differentiates this subject from Lacan’s is that the real confers on the subject a degree of consistency that allows it to reconfigure the consequences of its initial act of destruction. As Badiou will put it in *Being and Event*, a “subject is nothing other than an active fidelity to the event of truth”.<sup>17</sup> It is this that gives consistency to the subject and facilitates its affirmative agency.

### **The human animal and the inhuman subject**

In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou reaffirms the dialectic of the *splace* he outlined in *Theory of the Subject*.<sup>18</sup> What is new in the later book, he argues,

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<sup>14</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 251.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 264, emphasis in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 45-6.

is an “entirely original theory of the subject-body”.<sup>19</sup> The contemporary *doxa* is that “there are only bodies and languages”,<sup>20</sup> a *doxa* that Badiou names “democratic materialism” and rejects because it reduces humanity to a form of animality or bioethics. To be sure, the human is an animal species. For Badiou, we have a biological, physical, substrate, but an animal is a mortal being; it lives, it survives and it dies. A body is nothing but that which has the potential to bear a subjective form and facilitates the appearing of truths in the world. To be human, or better to be a subject in Badiou’s sense is to be immortal, it is to refuse the status of the victim, to reject mere survival and transcend our particular situations. To *think* the concept of the human is to think what lies beyond the fragility of the body, of our animal substrate, or as Badiou rather nicely puts it “a ‘biped without feathers,’ whose charms are not obvious. ‘Man,’ or the human, in Badiou sense, is “*something other than a mortal being*”,<sup>21</sup> something other than a being-towards-death. As Badiou writes in *Being and Event*, a “human is that being which prefers to represent itself within finitude, whose sign is death, rather than knowing itself to be entirely traversed and encircled by the omnipresence of infinity”.<sup>22</sup> It is in this sense that we can understand Badiou’s rejection of the current emphasis on human rights as too limiting, they amount to little more than the rights against death, the rights to survival against abject misery. The rights of man proper must be the rights to immortality, the affirmative rights to infinity against the contingency of suffering and death that defines our animal status.

Against this “Western” notion of democratic materialism Badiou opposes the materialist dialectic and the proposition that “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths”.<sup>23</sup> The “except that” in this proposition “*exists qua subject*”,<sup>24</sup> that is to say, if a body is capable of producing effects that exceed the hegemony of body-languages then this body will be said to be *subjectivated*, it becomes a subjectivized body or body-of-truth. Truths, in Badiou’s sense, are incorporeal bodies, languages devoid of meaning, generic infinities, they emerge and remain suspended between the void and the event; in short, “truths exist as exceptions to what there is”.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as a truth has no substantial existence, it insists as an exception to what “there is.” The subject of truth is also, in Žižekian terms, not a substance; “[t]o the extent that it is the subject of a truth, a subject subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation”.<sup>26</sup> This notion of the subject or subjectivizable body is what is at stake in *Logics of Worlds*.

According to Badiou, there are three dominant forms of the subject today: the phenomenological or descriptive; the moral or normative; and the ideological or critical. For Badiou, however, a theory of the subject must be axiomatic, in the sense that a subject affirms itself. At the same time, if truths exist then there must be an active identifiable form

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid 99.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 1.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 12, emphasis in the original.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 45, emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 9, emphasis in the original.

of their production. This *form* is the subject, and as such it cannot be empirically verified. Thus, any theory of the subject is formal in the sense that “subject” designates a system of forms and operations, which involves the support of a body, a theory of operations or figures and of destinations or acts. The outcome of this operation is the production of specific types of subject: the faithful subject (who maintains a fidelity to truth and is nothing less than the activation of the present of the truth);<sup>27</sup> the reactive subject (who denies the truth, and Badiou cites his old adversaries, the “new philosophers” of 1970s, as exemplary here); and the obscure subject (who occludes the truth, and here we could cite all forms of religious fundamentalism). For Badiou, then, the subject is a rather rare occurrence that emerges in relation to a truth procedure. The subject come to be through its recognition of the singularity of the event and its fidelity to the truth of this moment. Let me now turn to that other figure who has maintained the legacy of Lacano-Althusserianism today, Slavoj Žižek. In an endnote to *Logics of Worlds* Badiou observes that they both share a certain residue of Stalinist culture and form a “politburo of two,” the last faction of the anti-humanists and partisans of desire.<sup>28</sup> Some fundamental philosophical and political differences between the two persist, however, not least in their respective theories of the subject and its relation to the Lacanian real.

### **The subject prior to subjectivisation**

Žižek’s critique of Badiou’s theory of the subject turns on the distinction between subject and subjectivisation I discussed above and the pivotal function of the death drive in this process. From Žižek’s perspective, Badiou’s subject, the *subject of truth*, only emerges post-event through a truth procedure and thus fails to take into account the distinction between subject – as lack, gap, void, nothingness – and subjectivisation as a process of interpellation. Thus, the subject of truth is, in a sense, secondary to the Lacanian subject as lack. For Lacan, argues Žižek, the subject prior to subjectivisation “is the pure negativity of the death drive prior to its reversal into identification with some new Master-Signifier”.<sup>29</sup> The subject is simultaneously the ontological gap in the symbolic order and that which comes to fill the gap:

*‘Subjectivity’ is a name for this irreducible circularity, for a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately ‘is’ the subject itself.*<sup>30</sup>

The subject’s endeavour retroactively to fill the gap sustains and generates the gap itself. Badiou refuses this identification of the subject with the gap and thus, according to Žižek, restricts the contingent act to a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid 72.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 563.

<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism: The Case of Alain Badiou” in *Psycho-Marxism: Marxism and Psychoanalysis Late in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Miklitsch, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97.2 (1998), 257.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 159, emphasis in the original.

moment of decision, the moment of subjectivisation, or, the subject's commitment to the truth of an event and subsequently their fidelity to this moment. From Žižek's perspective, the whole Kantian opposition within Badiou of the universal order of being and the contingent excess that punches a whole in this universal order is thus a false dichotomy. "The subject is the contingent emergence/act that sustains the very universal order of Being," in other words, the subject is a paradox, the particular element that sustains the universal order.<sup>31</sup> Badiou, in short, is too Kantian and not Hegelian enough.

For Žižek, Badiou's failure to distinguish between the subject and the moment of subjectivization derives from his rejection of the Freudian death drive and the radical negativity that this inscribes at the heart of subjectivity. It is the repetition of the death drive that accounts for the emergence of novelty. Žižek rejects the traditional reading of the Freudian drive that links it to human biology and an organism's tendency to return to an inorganic state:

The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny *excess* of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never 'just life': humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things.<sup>32</sup>

For Žižek, then, it is the Freudian death drive that lies at the root of Badiou's immortality, it is the death drive that makes us more than animal, that makes us alive. The death drive has nothing to do with a will to self-annihilation, but is the reason that this will is never realized and the subject gets "stuck" on partial objects. If the metonymy of desire is the infinite pursuit of a lost object, then the drive designates how desire becomes "fixated" or "stuck" on a specific object, "condemned to circulate around it forever".<sup>33</sup>

It is the mute, repetitive, rotary motion of the drive, contends Žižek, which is primary and ultimately the *groundless* ground of human freedom.<sup>34</sup> The death drive is beyond human mortality; it is a "vanishing mediator" between being and event in Badiou's terms, or the mortality of the individual and the immortality of the subject. As Adrian Johnston puts it, the death drive "is a name for subjectivity qua the void of a radical negativity irreducible to any and every form of positive inscription or representation".<sup>35</sup> The death drive facilitates Žižek's distinction between the subject as void, as pure negativity, as nothing, and what he calls *subjectification* – in Badiou's sense of a subject-of-the-event – as secondary to this moment of pure negativity. The elementary act of freedom, then, is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid 160.

<sup>32</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 62, emphasis in the original.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 32-35

<sup>35</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 157.

negation. It is saying “No” to the big Other; it is breaking out of the closed repetitive circuit of the death drive and asserting a minimal distance, a parallax gap, between the real and the symbolic. The radicalism of the Freudian drive lies in this negativity behind all affirmation. The death drive is a self sabotaging structure and the minimum prerequisite for subjective freedom. In this sense the death drive decentres the subject and opens up the minimal space for a subject to act.

Žižek develops this critique further in his *magnum opus*, *Less Than Nothing* (2012), noting that we should add to Badiou’s triad of Being/World/Event a fourth term, that is to say, the “night of the world” or death drive:

Badiou [writes Žižek] distinguishes man qua mortal ‘human animal’ from the ‘inhuman’ subject as the agent of a truth-procedure: as an animal endowed with intelligence and able to develop instruments to reach its goals, man pursues happiness and pleasure, worries about death and so on; but only as a subject faithful to a Truth-Event does man truly rise above animality.<sup>36</sup>

But what happens to this distinction if we introduce the Freudian notion of the unconscious? What distinguishes human from animals (including the human-animal) is not consciousness. We can accept that animals have some degree of self-awareness, but animals do not have an unconscious. From a Freudo-Lacanian perspective it is this that distinguishes humans from animals:

[T]he Unconscious, or, rather, the domain of the ‘death drive,’ this distortion or destabilization of animal instinctual life, is what renders a life capable of transforming itself into a subject of Truth: only a living being with an Unconscious can become the receptacle of a Truth-Event.<sup>37</sup>

Freud’s great insight, according to Žižek, is that not only is there no human being but there is also no human animal. Indeed, Žižek takes this a step further to suggest that there is no animal *tout court*, if by animal we mean a living being fully fitted to its environment. From its birth the human being is wrenched from its animal constraints and its instincts are denaturalized by the endless circularity of the death drive, by the “undeadness” or “excess of life”.<sup>38</sup> Žižek’s anti-humanism appears, at first, to be even more radical than Badiou’s rejection of the democratic materialist conception of bodies and languages but, as I will argue below, by grounding the subject in the “groundlessness” of the death drive Žižek’s subject is unable to configure the consequences of its actions.

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<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso 2012), 823.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 824.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 824.



## Splitting the Real

The debate between Badiou and Žižek on the question of the subject ultimately turns on their respective readings of the Lacanian real and the subject's relationship to the real. The lesson that Žižek draws from this is that the Lacanian subject is "an answer to the real," it emerges at the limit of the symbolic and, as such, "is totally de-substantialized; coinciding with its own failure-to-be, it is a mere cut, a gap, in the order of being".<sup>39</sup> However, Žižek's insistence on the primacy of negation and the subject as lack raises the problem of how we can account for the degree of consistency the subject requires for affirmative action and political projects. Žižek, as he has often noted himself, offers an extraordinary critique of the phantasmatic structures of capitalist society, he is much less clear on how we might confront those structures today. It is here that Badiou's subject of truth has a stronger political purchase. The early formulation of *splitting* and *forcing* the real in *Theory of the Subject*, I believe, provides the subject with a degree of consistency that addresses some of the *aporias* of the Lacanian subject.

Over the course of his two-decade engagement with the work of Badiou Žižek has "precisely" identified the gap that separates Badiou from Lacan and psychoanalysis a number of times. In his first extended explication of Badiou's philosophy "Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism: the Case of Alain Badiou" he identified the domain "between two deaths, the domain of lamella" as that which crystallizes the gap between Badiou and Lacan.<sup>40</sup> In the revised version of this essay in *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek insisted that it is the distinction within Lacan between the subject and subjectivization that distinguishes him from post-Marxists, such as Badiou. In a subsequent essay "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real" Žižek argues that it is the "relationship between the shattering encounter with the real and the ensuing arduous work of transforming this explosion of negativity into a new order" that marks the ultimate difference between Badiou and Lacan.<sup>41</sup> More recently Žižek has argued that what finally distinguishes Badiou's notion of the Event, in contrast to the radicalism of Lacan's act, is his refusal to accept the primacy of the pure negativity of the death drive.<sup>42</sup> What links these discrete differences between Badiou and Lacan - the domain between two deaths, the subject as lack, the pure negativity of the death drive, the encounter with the real - is the status of the real itself. It is their respective conceptualization of the real, I argue, that is the nodal point for their multiple points of contention.

### Žižek: in the desert of the real

Žižek has undoubtedly done more than any other contemporary theorist to reorient our understanding of Lacan around the concept of the real, but that real, as Žižek fully acknowledges and exploits, is an inherently

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid 831.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, "Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism," 247.

<sup>41</sup> Žižek, "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real," in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed.

Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 177.

<sup>42</sup> Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), 139.

paradoxical notion. Let me begin, then, by broadly sketching the main contours of the real within Žižek's work, highlighting just some of the major shifts the concept has undergone in the past twenty years. In his early work Žižek stressed the impossibility of the real, the real as a hard impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization, and insisted on the necessity of maintaining the gap separating the real and the symbolic.<sup>43</sup> From this perspective "*the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream*" or symptom,<sup>44</sup> a view that Žižek restated three years later in *Looking Awry*, "it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire".<sup>45</sup> At the same time he emphasized the importance of the real as an inherent internal limit of the symbolic, a fold within the symbolic, which prevents it from achieving its identity with itself:

Therein consists the fundamental paradox of the relation between the symbolic and the Real: the bar which separates them is *strictly internal to the symbolic*, since it prevents the Symbolic from 'becoming itself'. The problem for the signifier is not its impossibility to touch the Real but its impossibility to 'attain itself' – what the signifier lacks is not the extra-linguistic object but the signifier itself, a non-barred, non-hindered One.<sup>46</sup>

The function of the real as the inherent internal limit of the symbolic is crucial for Žižek facilitating his critique of subject positioning in Ernesto Laclau,<sup>47</sup> sexual difference in Judith Butler<sup>48</sup> and Badiou's theory of the subject.<sup>49</sup> The real as internal limit provides Žižek with a kind of default position to out-radicalize all competing theories.

The real is essentially ambiguous. It erupts into our daily lives in the form of trauma, destabilizing the balance that we keep, but at the same time, as an internal limit, it serves as support for this balance. The real arises as an answer to a question or crisis and as such must appear to be "found" whereas it is "produced" by crisis itself:

The ambiguity of the Lacanian real is not merely a nonsymbolized kernel that makes a sudden appearance in the symbolic order, in the form of traumatic 'returns' and 'answers'. The real is at the same time contained in the very symbolic form: the real is *immediately rendered* by this form.<sup>50</sup>

In *Tarrying with the Negative* Žižek addressed this paradox through the question of the substance of the real; "the real designates a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and, simultaneously, it designates the left-over, which is posited or 'produced'

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<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 47, emphasis in the original.

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 1st ed. (London: Verso 1991) 112, emphasis in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Appendix: Beyond Discourse-Analysis," in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1990) 249-60.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 273-79.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 158-61.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 39, emphasis in the original.

by symbolization itself".<sup>51</sup> The central paradox of the Lacanian real is that this left over is not secondary to some primary cause or substance but the "*substance is a mirage retroactively invoked by the surplus*".<sup>52</sup> The Thing is no-thing; there is nothing behind the mirage. It is precisely the function of the illusion to invoke the impression that there is a substantial real behind it. The real in this sense designates a remainder which resists reversal into the thing itself, the real is that X on whose account any "squaring of the circle" is doomed to fail.<sup>53</sup> In Althusserian terms, the real "is the absent cause of the symbolic", something that we can only know through its effects and at the same time something that does not pre-exist its effects.<sup>54</sup> The real is retroactively posited and involves a kind of temporal loop whereby "through its 'repetition', *through its echoes within the signifying structure ... the cause retroactively becomes what is always already was*".<sup>55</sup>

Over the years Žižek's deployment of the real has changed but, as with Lacan, he never completely abandons his prior formulations. In his debate with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau Žižek controversially identified the real with capital, insofar as the real marks the absolute limit to resignification. Moreover, he began suggesting the possibility of "touching" the real, when the symbolic markers that distance us from it are suspended.<sup>56</sup> Žižek elaborated on this aspect of the real in an interview from the same year; the real is not some kind of non-historical essence or foundation, he insisted, but is that which "is generated by being foreclosed from a certain (historically specific) symbolic formation".<sup>57</sup> In this sense, class struggle is real, real insofar as it is non-symbolizable, there is no neutral position from which you can symbolize it. Class struggle is the non-historical kernel of a historical situation. The real is the unnamable background or foundation that sustains the struggle itself and that we "silently accept" as the sphere of struggle. In short, "the Real is that which, when you are engaged in the struggle, is *presupposed* as the very domain of the struggle".<sup>58</sup> Žižek is at pains to stress in this interview that the real is not immutable but open to change through a "true act". Indeed the definition of a true Lacanian act, as distinct from pseudo activity, is whether or not it touches and disturbs the real:

The Lacanian Real is not some eternal essence, but strictly an historical Real. Not a Real that is simply opposed to quick historical changes, but the Real that generates historical changes while at the same time being reproduced by these changes.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 36.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 36, emphasis in the original.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 43.

<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994) 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 32, emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 223.

<sup>57</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Interview." *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*. 7 (2000): 193.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 192, emphasis in the original.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid 194.

In *The Parallax View* Žižek distinguished between the Lacanian and the “parallax real”, as “the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted; it is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access, the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing”.<sup>60</sup> The parallax real is not the Lacanian real that “always remains in its place” and neither is it the hard impenetrable kernel beyond the symbolic. The parallax real is the gap itself, the gap which renders two perspectives radically *incommensurable*.<sup>61</sup> The impossibility of the real is now conceptualized as “the cause of the impossibility of ever attaining the ‘neutral’ non perspectival view of the object”. In other words, the Lacanian real is not only the distorted object but the principle of distortion itself, and in this sense the real is *within* the symbolic.<sup>62</sup>

Today, Žižek argues that the real is not an abyss that forever eludes our grasp or an inaccessible Thing, but “the *gap* which presents our access to it”.<sup>63</sup> It is this real, as the principle of distortion that, according to Žižek, Badiou fails to grasp in his opposition of being and event. Badiou, insists Žižek, “sublates” the exploding negativity of the encounter with the real into a new consistent truth, while “for Lacan, every Truth displays the structure of a (symbolic) fiction, i.e. no Truth is able to touch the Real”.<sup>64</sup> The problem with this formulation, notes Žižek, is that it opens up Lacan to the charge of postmodern relativism and therefore he invokes the notion of the real in all three of Lacan’s orders – the imaginary, the symbolic, the real – and in a strictly homologous way he invokes three modalities of the real within the symbolic. Žižek has elaborated the different modalities of the real more fully in his new introduction to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Want to Do* (2008) and I follow this presentation below.<sup>65</sup> The weakness of his first and perhaps most widely read book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, reflects Žižek, is that it “endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan focusing on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself”.<sup>66</sup> The problem with this, as many of Žižek’s critics have noted including myself, is that it leads to a celebration of failure and the idea that a proper ethical act is to heroically accept this failure.<sup>67</sup> What he failed to articulate, continues Žižek, is the “complex interconnections within the triad Real – Imaginary – Symbolic: the entire triad is reflected within each of its three elements”.<sup>68</sup> That is to say, there is the real Real (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object), the symbolic Real (the real as consistency, the signifier reduced to a senseless formula) and the imaginary

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<sup>60</sup> Žižek, *Parallax View*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 281.

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *Defense of Lost Causes*, 319.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, “Purification to Subtraction,” 168. In *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012) Žižek provides the same description of the parallax real but here ascribes it to Lacan (25).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid 177.

<sup>65</sup> Slavoj Žižek to *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid xii.

<sup>67</sup> See Ian Parker *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), chapter 5 and Sean Homer *Slavoj Žižek and Radical Politics* (London: Routledge, 2016), chapter 5.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek, Introduction, xii.

Real (the mysterious *je ne sais quo*, the unfathomable “something” on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object). The Lacanian Real is, in effect, “all three dimensions at the same time: the abyssal vortex which ruins every consistent structure ; the mathematized consistent structure of reality; the fragile pure appearance”.<sup>69</sup>

Žižek’s deployment of the real is always subtle and illuminating but at the same time one may have sympathy here for Badiou’s view that this comedy of symptoms ultimately rules out the possibility of an adherence to specific political positions.

### **Badiou: forcing the real**

In a brief footnote to *Logics of Worlds* Badiou notes that Žižek’s conception of the real is “so ephemeral, so brutally punctual, that it is impossible to uphold its consequences”. He continues: “The effects of this kind of frenzied upsurge, in which the real rules over the comedy of our symptoms, are ultimately indiscernible from skepticism”.<sup>70</sup> For Badiou, the fundamental impasse of Lacanian psychoanalysis and its weakness in thinking political transformation lies with its conception of lack and Lacan’s failure to follow through on his insight in to the real. As I mentioned above, Badiou’s most sustained engagement with Lacan is to found in his early, although only recently translated, work *Theory of the Subject*. It is important to the argument that I am developing here that in *Logics of Worlds* Badiou notes that subsequent developments in his thought have not invalidated the insights of the earlier book.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Badiou has retained a fairly consistent understanding of the Lacanian real as the impasse of formalization and, thus, of the necessity of *forcing* the real since this early work. It is in *The Century* that Badiou really focuses on the real, as he identifies the “passion of the real” as the key to understanding the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> In this work Badiou foregrounds the horror and barbarism of the real, insofar as the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of extreme violence. Lacan always recognized that the experience of the real was in part an experience of horror but, crucially for Badiou, the fascination and even exaltation of violence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was always accompanied with a belief that a better future would arise from this horror.<sup>73</sup> If the negative aspect of the passion for the real was its destructive element, there was equally a heroism to this passion; the passion for the real is also the passion for the new.<sup>74</sup> Contrary to Žižek’s notion of the real retroactively becoming what it always already was through repetition,<sup>75</sup> Badiou insists that the real interrupts repetition in order for the new to emerge.

The real is also a central category in the book on *Saint Paul*, as a truth procedure is universalizable only insofar as it is supported “at that

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid xii.

<sup>70</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 563.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 523.

<sup>72</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press 2007), 32-4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid 19.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid 55.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 32.

point through which it indexes the real, by an immediate subjective recognition of its singularity”.<sup>76</sup> If we are not to fall into postmodern relativism we need to acknowledge that the truth of an event derives from its relation to the real, from its ability to touch the real, however, fleetingly. According to Badiou, Paul reduces Christianity to a single point, “Christ is resurrected,” or what he calls the “Christ-event”.<sup>77</sup> This event, for Paul, renders all previous teachings of the church obsolete, furthermore it is dependent upon a specific site “*in-its-being*” (the crucifixion) but at the same time it must become independent of this site if it is to produce truth effects and found a universalism. Thus, we have three issues at stake, the interruption of a situation, a fidelity to the truth of the event and a new inscription of that truth; the subject, the subject of truth, emerges at the intersection of these three concepts.<sup>78</sup> Badiou’s critics, including Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, have pointed out that the “pure event” of the resurrection is predicated on a prior death and therefore the positive affirmation of the event is grounded in an *a priori* negativity.<sup>79</sup> Badiou rejects this criticism arguing that there is a complete disjunction between Christ’s death and his resurrection. The event is always supernumerary to the situation and “presents itself as pure givenness”.<sup>80</sup> The subject is always a divided subject, divided between death and life, between the flesh and the spirit, or, to put it another way, the subject of truth emerges through the suspension of the path of the flesh and the affirmation of the path of the spirit. Crucially, for Badiou, death “cannot be constitutive of the Christ-event,” death is central to the construction of the evental site but the resurrection alone is a *given* of the event. The resurrection cannot be inferred from death.<sup>81</sup> I will now explore Badiou’s conception of the real further through *Theory of the Subject* and his notion of *forcing*. There are two notions of the real in Lacan, according to Badiou: first, the structural understanding of the real as a vanishing cause or the lack of being, and second, the late topological Lacan, the real of the Borromean knot or the being of lack, and it is this second formulation that gives the real a minimum of consistency.<sup>82</sup> Badiou is in accord with Žižek insofar as the real is a fundamentally paradoxical concept. To “think the real [he writes] amounts to thinking the self-annulation of that which makes the real in general possible”.<sup>83</sup> But this does not go far enough, he argues: “if, as Lacan says, the real is the impasse of formalization ... we must venture from this point that formalization is the impasse of the real”. He continues:

We need a theory of the pass of the real, in the breach opened up by formalization. Here, the real is no longer only what can be lacking from its place, but what *passes through by force*.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 73.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 23.

<sup>79</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “An Ethics of Militant Engagement”, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid 70.

<sup>82</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 227-8.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid 23, emphasis in the original.

That is to say, we must think the real as excess, as that which exceeds the structural law of lack.

In order to move beyond what he sees as the impasse of the lacking subject and confer a degree of consistency upon it that would allow us to think radical change as well as the emergence of novelty beyond the repetition of the past, we must think lack with destruction. Destruction lies beyond the law of lack and “consists precisely in the capacity to bring into being the nonrepeatable within repetition”, to bring about the new.<sup>85</sup> Every subject, writes Badiou, “stands at a crossing between a lack of being and a destruction, a repetition and an interruption, a placement and an excess”; that is to say, the real as excess.<sup>86</sup> Lacan’s insight was the role of the real as antagonism, as that which always already fissures the social and means that it can never be rendered whole or complete. But if we think the real only in this way, then we remain caught within the totality of the structure itself and cannot think its potential transformation. Lacan’s “materialist” dialectic is only half the picture; we must not only think the real as impossible, unbearable, trauma but also as something that, on rare occasions, becomes the site for a newly consistent truth, that is to say, the real as novelty. As Bruno Bosteels puts it:

The line of demarcation between idealism and materialism in Lacan’s thought must therefore be drawn through the very concept of the real, splitting its core in order to mark off those aspects that remain tied to a structural lack and those that point at a torsion, or destruction, of the structure itself.<sup>87</sup>

In *Theory of the Subject* Badiou develops this idea through the concept of forcing: it is not enough to merely expose the lack, the absent cause, we must also force or distort the real in order “to give consistency to the real as a new generic truth”.<sup>88</sup> The limitation of Lacan, from Badiou’s perspective, was his failure to recognize the more-than-real of force,<sup>89</sup> that is to say, force as the excess of the real that interrupts repetition and brings about novelty.<sup>90</sup> The theory of the subject is complete only when “it manages to think the structural law of the empty place as the punctual anchoring of the excess over the place”.<sup>91</sup> In short, we have two opposing views of the subject, the subject as consistent repetition, in which the real ex-sists (Lacan), and the subject as destructive consistency, in which the real ex-ceeds.<sup>92</sup> Whilst this might not be strictly Lacanian, it does have the advantage, as I will now argue in conclusion, of allowing us to think radical structural change in ways foreclosed by Lacan himself.

## **The Subject of Truth**

Politics for Badiou, and here I agree with him, requires consistency, or fidelity to the truth of an event, as he will later put it. This in turn re-

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<sup>85</sup> Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 101.

<sup>86</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 139.

<sup>87</sup> Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 87.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid 88.

<sup>89</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 144.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 170.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid 261.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid 239.

quires a certain consistency of the subject. Lacan, he contends, opened the way to this consistency through his late topological conception of the real as the knot; but he could not accept the idea of the consistency of the subject. Lacan's embarrassment with regard to consistency, argues Badiou, "stems from the fact that he holds the cutting (of the knot) to be proof of its truth".<sup>93</sup> Badiou, on the other hand, insists that the opposite of tying the knot is not to cut it but to destroy it and reconstitute something else in its place. As I mentioned above, Lacan's crucial insight was the function of the real as the antagonism that always already fissures the social rendering all symbolic structures incomplete, but if we remain at the level of antagonism then we also remain caught within the structure itself. As Alberto Toscano puts it, the thesis of the *a priori* of antagonism, thus, turns out to concern the existence of an intractable impediment to social revolution, whose foreclosure is inadmissible and even dangerous. This is then compensated for by a mix of strategic populism, sociological description, discursive ontology and cynical liberalism.<sup>94</sup> From Badiou's perspective, it is only if we can confer upon the subject a degree of consistency that will allow it to reconfigure the consequences of its initial act of destruction that we can avoid such populism and cynical liberalism. Contra-Žižek, it is only, argues Badiou, through the excess-of-the-real that a truth might emerge from a situation and through a subject's fidelity to that truth that a reconfiguration of the situation might take place. From the perspective of the excess-of-the real emancipatory politics always consists in making seem possible that which, from within the situation, is declared impossible.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 244. See also Jacques Lacan "Science and Truth" in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 744.

<sup>94</sup> Alberto Toscano, "Marxism Expatriated", in *Prelom: Journal for Images and Politics*, 8 (2006), 155.

<sup>95</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 121.



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