

REVIEW

Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (New York: Continuum, 2009), ISBN: 978-0826496737

(1) Badiou's Post-Political Ontology of the Subject

Alongside Jacques Ranciere, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze and Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou is one of the most influential and productive French philosophers of our times. Contemporary French post-foundational philosophy is split into a Lacanian and a Heideggerian stream. The Lacanian stream is more relevant than ever today, as it has been predominant in the works of, amongst others, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek and, more recently, Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis. Marchart has observed the 'Heideggerian' influence above all in the works of Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.¹ Alain Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* (French: *Théorie du Sujet*), published for the first time in 1982, combines both Lacanian and Heideggerian philosophy and, in this regard, reflects some of the most central philosophical ideas in recent French post-foundational philosophy.

In today's globalized post-cold-war neo-liberal world, the developments in communist China and the Soviet Union described in *Theory of the Subject* appear out of time. This anachronism does not, however, account for Badiou's thought as such. Based on the works of Hegel, Heidegger and Lacan, *Theory of the Subject* provides a universal ontology of the political subject. Despite its slightly misleading title, *Theory of the Subject* is a book about politics as a particular truth event, which makes the political subject appear as the promise of the truth to come. Badiou is highly sceptical about the modern conception of political philosophy and demands a new way to link intellectual works of philosophy and political practice. (xl-xli) In order to avoid the scientifically and intellectually legitimized atrocities of modernity, Badiou argues that a theory of the political subject must commence from a position beyond politics. Badiou develops a post-political theory of the subject, whose point of departure is located in "a previously unthinkable political topology." (xlii)

Badiou's notion that "[e]verything that exists is thus at the same time itself-according-to-its-place" also implicates that every being is split between the 'actual' and the 'potential' being. (xlii) Every substantial way of being is contingent on the placement of that being irrespective of the placed element itself. Badiou's primary interest is not to elaborate different ways of 'determination' (*Bestimmung*) of the being of elements. Rather, the greatest attention is paid to

¹ Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

the logics of the 'space of placement' (i.e. splace) of objects and the ontological preconditions of the capacity and the force of placement. Every actualised placement depends on the "illusory repetition of its closure onto itself..." (11) Badiou sets out from an "empty place"; from the ontology of the "pure being" in contrast to the ontical "being-placed." (7) The reciprocity between control of the force of placement and the place of placement assigns subjects the decisive role in determining any being. Badiou argues that every actualised being is external to objects of being since "[l]imit and limitation are the essence of the labour of the positive." (7) Every being is merely a "structural figuration without any historical reality." (12) In *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou tries to accomplish a seemingly impossible task, on the one hand to avoid determination of the natural essence of the subject and, on the other hand, to develop a theory of the subject.

(2) The (S)place of the Subject

In line with post-foundational thought Badiou argues that "[t]he foundation of politics... is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order."² Badiou assumes Lacan's negative ontology of the real and observes the difference as the form of being for all social objects. Every actualized mode of being consists of a correlation between a subset of positioned elements. The 'splace of the subject', i.e. the mode of being of the subject, is located in the incommensurability between the 'form' and the 'content'; between the ontology of the place of being and the actualised ontical mode of being. Badiou identifies the subject as a binary ontological function *firstly* between the form and the content, and *secondly* between the in-place and the outer-place in the content of the form. In this second respect, the outer-place symbolises the excluded and non-actualised being. Every excluded other exists only as an exclusion conducted within a structural horizon. (cf. 119) Badiou argues therefore that "the splace" is "the general foundation of the dialectic, of which the outplace is the motor, but only fictively speaking." (20)

If every social bond originates from historically contingent decisions about limits and limitations of the space this also means that "every subject is political" at the core. (28) Dialectical ontology indicates that every mode of social organisation is essentially a dialectical unity, such as that of "the unity of contradiction bourgeoisie/proletariat." (29) Politics is the practice that structures the dialectical unity without being capable of releasing itself from its own contingent nature. Politics exists only insofar as there is an event in which "every subject surpasses its place by force, inasmuch its essential virtue lies in being disoriented." (36) For Badiou, subject exists only insofar as it alters the existing structural configuration. The subject is never internal but always external to the structure. The structure is ultimately the result of the ontology of the subject, but there is no permanent correspondence between the two orders. It is the distance between the two in which the subject "is born in the violent and for the subject internal distance of the law to itself, and it names the process through which the order... comes into being as other than itself." (156; cf. 291)

² Marchart, 120.

It is this incommensurability and distance to the law of the structure that compels Badiou to ontologize the subject as something located beyond the structure. Badiou conducts the ontologization of the subject by using several sources of post-foundational philosophy, among whom Jacques Lacan has the greatest influence on Badiou. However, contrary to Lacan's definition of the subject as lack, Badiou materializes the subject as the truly "other of the [symbolic] Other." (156) Being "an 'other of the Other'" subject does not replace a structural order with another but "the first Other now appears as nothing more than an unenlightened mode of the same." (156) Badiou seems to conceive of the subject as a force external to the symbolic structure. For Badiou, the subject's "thrust of the real" is the sudden experience of a "deficit in the symbolic... [which] turns the radical absence of any security into its force." (160) The subject introduces a supplement into the structure in the form of an unprecedented structural consistency. Insofar as this consistency exceeds and transgresses the anterior structural order, the subject must be considered as the force of the truth upon the structure. This exteriority of the subject to structure and its seeming capacity to question and ponder its historical determination gives Badiou reason enough to ascribe to the subject the ethical responsibility to political practice.

(3) Subject as the Force and the Source of Truth

In a manner similar to Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, Badiou also distinguishes between the subject of structure (subjection) and the subject of the excess of the structure (subjectivization). Badiou argues that "We must reserve the name *subject* for that which cannot be inscribed on the spaced ground of repetition except destructively as the *excess* over that which keeps it in place." (141; cf. 159; added italics) Yet, for Badiou, excess is never long-lasting but a moment deemed to disappear when the 'lack' of order is replaced by the confidence in the existence of another order. The structured space originates from subject's annulment of its 'lack of being', thus it also "gives being to the lack." (141) Badiou defines the source of the new being as 'force' that 'complements' the place by means of transforming itself from a pure force to a 'placed force.' (141) In line with Lacan, Badiou describes the force as originating from an initial anxiety of the lack of the lack, which brings the subject to "the ravaging of all symbolic points of reference." (146) Whereas Lacan described the new construction of a structure as the result of *Jouissance*, Badiou locates the origin of order in the trust and confidence in the inner consistency in the structure. The subject effect is accordingly located on the level of the psyche of the subject, and its affinity toward consistency is the very origin of the 'simulacrum' of the one (the structure) as the superior structure (the one one). (214)

For Badiou, like other post-foundational philosophers, there are two different structurally destructive and constructive dimensions of subjectivity. The first type "breaks up the order of things", while the second type is "a 'lamp-bearer', carrier of this light..." of the truth. (108) This second and structurally constructive side of the subject enables the recognition of a new truth in the shape of 'justice.' For Badiou, justice is nothing substantial itself, but – similar to Jacques Derrida – actually marks the never-ending conviction of the good or the better to come. Justice is a universal axiom of the subject that surfaces in the moment of historical upheaval but likewise in its quiescence. At this point, something of a contradiction emerges. If

subject is the force that “interrupts the repetition,” (70) the substance of the force, the expectation of a new justice to come, is no longer part of the force, but symbolises the force (i.e. time) transformed into substance (i.e. space). (170) Every reversed space gives way to another historically contingent and willed space. Therefore, for Badiou, only the destructive effect of the subject has an ethical value. The proletarian revolution is an ethical moment of truth, but the following dictatorship of the dictatorship has no more value than any other type of social bond. Badiou appreciates only the destructive side of the event while, at the same time, mistrusting its social consequences. Historical upheavals are not ethical moments due to their introduction of a qualitatively better social order, but rather because they introduce a difference to the existing order. Badiou’s depreciation of any substantial social bond implies that the subject fails to fulfil its ethical role as it supports the materialization of the (political) mass movement in the form of an idea or content. Even though the ‘content’ implicates betrayal of the ‘form’, in the last chapter of the book Badiou endeavours to move from the pure formal ontologization of the subject towards an ethics of the subject.

(4) Ethics

For Badiou, just like for Michel Foucault, ethical subject equals a particular kind of self-awareness. Since every attempt to define the social bond in terms of the *one* (nation, liberal democracy, capitalist economy, multicultural society) depends on the totalization of the particular into the universal, ethical subject is the subject that refrains from the totalization of the structure. (cf. 217ff.) Badiou denies the political party the status of an ethical subject since it has historically tended to constitute “the knot made up of the state, the classes and the masses, in the figure inscribed in the party...” (229) Instead, the ethical subject exists in masses such as those of the Paris Commune or the October Revolution. (231) This also means that the working class does not qualify as an ethical subject insofar as it generates a new ‘re-tying’ that “causes *the one* of a different kind, the new class state, organizing a mass consensus.” (243; added italics) The ethical subject prevails only when it rejects the establishment of a new totalizing and universal social bond. (260) When the proletariat occupies the “unoccupiable place” it accepts the same imperialist mode of representation that it once stood up to oppose. (263; cf. 266ff.) However, Badiou considers it ineluctable that “[o]ne always gives in for the sake of some good, one’s own or that of others.” (311) For this reason, ethics does not require rejection of any good whatsoever but it rather invites the celebration of indeterminacy and heterogeneity. Ethical conduct means tolerance of otherness, and Badiou sees heterogeneity and multiplicity to be the social forms that best display the natural formal conditions of being. (273ff.) Ethical conduct implicates fidelity towards the excess since “[t]he logic of excess is *real*.” (273)

(5) Critical Assessment

Badiou is an idealist of the historical eventuality and one who celebrates the moment of social indeterminacy and chaos. Badiou prefers social dystopia to utopian political projects of the modernity. In a manner similar to Jean-François Lyotard, Badiou also tries to create a new philosophical mode of thought which criticizes the modern way of understanding emancipation and politics as means to attain a substantial social good. Badiou criticises the historical

left as a new bourgeoisie and asks “where is the proletariat? Where is it since in the place where it is algebraically prescribed (the party-state), it is the (new) bourgeoisie that is making itself comfortable.” (281) It is unfortunate that Badiou’s contribution to the transgression of the modern paradigm of politics remains on the philosophical level and offers few substantial ideas about politics, which is better elucidated in, for example, Badiou’s *Peut-on penser la politique?*³ Badiou’s disinterest in the *ontical* side of the political also means that *Theory of the Subject* only focuses on the vertical axis between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘real’, while it fails to recognize the essential heterogeneity of the symbolic order and the possible conflicts between different and coinciding historical upheavals. The heterogeneity of the truth-events, which is arguably the case in the contemporary world, requires subjects to choose between different political movements. Therefore, and despite its ahistorical conception of the subject, *Theory of the Subject* says only little about the present insecure and culturally heterodox reality of the subject. *Theory of the Subject* re-actualizes some of the central ideas of the contemporary ‘Lacanian’ and ‘Heideggerian’ thought. It remains yet unclear whether it actually enriches post-foundational philosophy. Ernesto Laclau once pleaded himself “happily guilty” of not having developed any bridge between the ontological and ontical dimensions of politics.⁴ This is obviously also something that goes for the *Theory of the Subject* and that remains one of the general weaknesses of the post-foundational social theory in general. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that *Theory of the Subject* is a fulminant, challenging and intellectually rewarding book well worth reading for the sake of its rich language and philosophical references.

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³ Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1985).

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, “Glimpsing the Future,” in Simon Critchley & Oliver Marchart (eds.), *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 321.