

‘DECLARES BY THE VOID...’:<sup>1</sup> BRUNO BOSTEELS, *BADIOU AND POLITICS*. DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011, AND AJ BARTLETT, *BADIOU AND PLATO: AN EDUCATION BY TRUTHS*. EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011.

Bryan Cooke

Not so long ago, the allegedly deleterious influence of French philosophy on Anglophone academia was one of those topics—like childhood obesity or How the Semi-Colon Became Lost Knowledge—which would be seasonally bemoaned in the kind of lower-middle-brow newspapers which have weekend literary supplements and middling phone-hacking capabilities. While the melange of more or less worthy intentions which can be found at the root of such complaints (invariably linking, as they do, the apparent Gallic menace with a mostly imaginary intellectual vogue cum civilisational rising damp known as “post-modernism”) makes such screeds at once too numerous and too diverse to allow for easy summary, there was (and is) at least one fact at the heart of every angry op. ed. on this topic which cannot be dismissed as the simple product of ignorance or prejudice. This is the truth, occasionally acknowledged, that the relationship between French philosophy and humanities education in the English-speaking world has been (and remains) decidedly odd.

Today as twenty years ago, European (and particularly French) philosophy is both marginalised (if not actively derided) in philosophy departments everywhere from Harvard to New Delhi, while, at the same time, leading another, perversely successful second life, as something rarely understood, but nonetheless compulsively invoked in dissertations on everything from ethnography to Theatre Studies.

In Australia, like Britain and the U.S., European philosophy’s “inclusive-exclusion” can be traced back to the 1970s and particularly to English and Cinema departments, both of which were prominent in bringing about the heyday of “theory” in the 1980s and 90s. As anyone who studied humanities at a university during this time knows, this was an epoch when names like Derrida and Foucault were mentioned everywhere from seminars on the Victorian novel to barely coherent pub arguments about gender roles in recent anime depictions of the Roman Republic. But while “theory” (as it was then called), was constantly (if glibly) mentioned, it would have been virtually unthinkable, at this time, that the average undergraduate should have been exposed to (let alone have read) Heidegger’s *Being and Time*; Hegel’s *Science of Logic*; Canguilhem’s histories, Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*; Mallarmé’s poems, or any other number of works (including novels, plays, paintings, languages,

histories, textbooks on differential calculus) that might have seemed a *sine qua non* for understanding the authors whose names were dropped with such metronomic frequency.

According to a recent review by Nicholas Dames in the journal *n+1*, there is even evidence that semi-autobiographical *Portraits of the Artist as Recovering Theory Student* are becoming a kind of rite of passage for neo-realist American novelists of a certain age:<sup>2</sup> an opportunity for the Jonathan Franzens of this world to look back in semi-affectionate superciliousness to the days when their silly younger incarnations could be found constantly invoking Big Name Thinkers with that mixture of possessive fondness and weary contempt that people usually reserve only for talking about their oldest friends with their newest. The fact that the names, along with certain out-of-context technical terms, were rarely used to deliver much beyond a kind of adolescent catechism of late-capitalist platitudes (cultures are different; meaning is slippery, people see things differently, judging other people's opinions is Unfair, belief in truth leads to Judging; Judging leads to Fascism; Fascism gets in the way of Life, Sex and Fun) contributed greatly to both the fame and the infamy of so-called "Continental" thought, thereby adding further evidence for a case that history (and particularly the history of ideas) has never stopped making—namely, that something can be simultaneously lauded and castigated from sea to oil-slicked sea without anyone having to even the vaguest intimation of what they were talking about.

A few decades on, the extent to which the situation has changed is debatable. Certainly, the "analytic" tendency in philosophy departments retains something like its old hegemony, despite any number of attempts to expose the extent to which Anglophone philosophy's great divide is propped up by ignorance, parochialism, prejudice and misunderstanding.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, today, perhaps even more so than thirty years ago, it is common to hear graduate students in education, English literature or art history with little to no prior interest in philosophy nevertheless breezily asserting that they are "using" a given "theorist" in their theses or for the purposes of teaching undergraduate classes. As a result, the verb 'to use' when followed by the name of a philosopher is arguably coalesced into a fully-fledged graduate-student idiom. In context, "to use [x] in one's thesis" means simultaneously something like "I don't really know anything about x" (such knowledge being, after all, little more than a train-spotter's epaulette, i.e. of interest only to other Aspergics), but that, at the same time, no-one should be too coy about associating my own work with the aura of the aforementioned Big-Name, given that I have, after all, almost definitely slightly surpassed her in putting her to work in a process that actually culminates in a certificate.

However, if (as is indisputable) the names of European philosophers, along with a handful of their "signature" concepts, have been debased into a colourless, phatic jargon suitable primarily for the breathless vacuities of arts and education bureaucrats, this is not, of course, as the literary supplements once sniffily suggested, because there is nothing more to "Continental" philosophy than modish vacuity—the vacuity of the modish notwithstanding. Instead, the fact that philosophy has a cringe-inducing bureaucratic afterlife in what I'm tempted to call, after Lacan, the "discourse of the curator" ("Her work explores notions of Space and the Body through Deleuzean motifs of de-territorialisation") has far more in common with the ethos of would-be *New Criterion* or *Spectator*-subscribing enemies of "fashionable French nonsense" than the latter would like to admit.

In fact, what the breathless theory-"user" and the disdainful *Observer* reading theory-skeptic have in common is that they are both in the position of avoiding (taming, confining, positioning, reducing) that which precisely *as* philosophy, i.e. as thought, resists being put into the service of any complacently pre-existing dogma about what constitutes utility or good sense. Put differently, the person for whom the likes of Lacan, Virilio, Rancière, Deleuze or Laruelle are *a priori* charlatans (pied pipers who are alleged to have led "our" youth away from the rigours of analytic philosophy, metrical poems, or faith in the two-party parliamentary system) *and* those who glibly embrace such thinkers so as to better position themselves on the intellectual cutting edge of something which they weren't previously aware was a knife; both ultimately perform the same function, i.e. they serve to defend against an actual encounter with a body of thought. Further, the fact that such defences should be

---

erected by those who are otherwise ideologically or at least sartorially opposed is not surprising when we consider that (as both Spinoza and Socrates knew) all rigorous, unfettered thought is anxiety-provoking (as well as the source of strange joy) precisely because it has no obvious place within either our bureaucratic/professional/everyday language games or the equally uneventful ideological tennis-matches whose alternately posthumous and still-born progeny make up the majority of political discourse in an age where (it would seem) only investment bankers believe that the world can be shaped by their will. (Mark Fisher has given an incredibly pithy and useful account of this latter phenomenon under the apt label of ‘capitalist realism.’)<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the irony of the anti- “theory” position is that its objections simply do not fit the famous French philosophers which it greets with an exaggeratedly arched eyebrow. Instead, the real target of such criticisms is something which owes its existence to the assiduous institutional avoidance (either in the mode of execration or celebration) of precisely those spurs to thought which exist in every book of philosophy worthy of the name. For this reason, whether the antipathy for philosophy comes from card-carrying Leavisites (if any still exist); devoted Medievalists or Classicists who (wrongly) suspects that the likes of Foucault, Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben betray rather than fulfil Aby Warburg’s dictum that “God is in the Details”; or a first-time reader of Alan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (with its surprisingly cogent jeremiad against ‘openness’ as the ‘last virtue’ of a complacent and senescent polity), the animus of the critic is misguided, not because the everyday sophistries these polemics oppose do not exist, but because these latter are not a product of, but a prophylactic against, the philosophy which the theory skeptic condemns by association.

To the extent that 20th and 21st century European philosophy is worthy of its name, it is, contrary to the slanders of its critics, because, both in its parts and as a whole, it points to something that is distinct from (and operates diagonal to) the received wisdom and the specialist knowledges of our time. For this reason, the tepid, compulsory “theory component” that tends to be gratuitously appended to the final years of so many undergraduate humanities courses should not be thought of as marking the hegemony of European philosophy in the universities as much as a kind of massive auto-immune reaction against it—something whose purpose is to ensure—as in a famous spoof of sex education by *The Simpsons* that now that the children know what it [i.e. rigorous, imaginative, unfettered thought] is, they should be sure to “never do it.”

But if the tendency to make *de facto* compulsory the invocation of barely read thinkers is mainly designed to make what Deleuze called “thought aiming at infinite speed” into a minor bureaucratic hurdle on the endless path of certifying Career Competence, the story of Anglophone encounters with European philosophy is, like the history of thought generally, the story of a series of fortuitous misfirings, i.e. of moments where the machine breaks down, the stock-market speaks in *villanelles* and the police join the people on the other side of the barricades. Put differently, the story of Anglophone encounters with French philosophy is, in fact, a dizzying multitude of untold tales whose oneiric genre would sit uncomfortably between drama and farce, Gothic and Lovecraftian horror, epic poem and lyrical ballad. But what links all of these stories together is an event (common to every story about education in any epoch) in which what was ultimately supposed to inoculate the individual permanently against thinking somehow leads to an outbreak of exactly that which was supposed to have been contained. In the process, as with anything that constitutes an event, worlds are turned upside down, neuroses engendered, terrible beauties are born and education departments are forced to confront something that they are professionally required to find incomprehensible, namely, the desire to be educated, as something over and above the development of a specialist-knowledge, vocational competence, or the vague promotion of currently venerated ‘values’.

In any case, the untold story of how any number of young Anglophones came to philosophy (and thus to a wondrous and mortifying glimpse of something (to quote the title of a selection of Fernando Pessoa’s poems) “a little larger than the entire universe”, arguably reflects an aspect of the story of education in all epochs. This is because education has always been about the way in which a body of knowledge which was transmitted to a variety of young people to achieve a finite and familiar purpose (e.g. the production of good, ideologically sound citizen-consumers; sufficiently polished second-sons of the European bourgeoisie ready to rule the

Colonies, mandarin-bureaucrats et cetera) every now and then produces something shocking, unprecedented, i.e. *subtracted* from the world in which it is supposed to play a drab and desultory part. We know this story, because it has been played out again and again: of how the outworn clothes of forgotten epochs are displaced from the historical strata in which they are embedded, blasting open, as Walter Benjamin says, the continuum of history.<sup>5</sup> But what is important is that this displacement of past categories occurs to mark something in that is irreducible to and unrecognisable in terms of the concept and the categories *of* that present. As Benjamin implies, the displacement of the past therefore provides names in the present for a present-effulgence which itself serves as the harbinger of a future whose afterglow in our own time goes by the name of an “event”.<sup>6</sup>

Through processes such as these, cultural artefacts that were intended to be no more than ornaments for aristocrats (or curiosities for cultural taxidermists) have time and again become the forges in which revolutionary ideas were tempered, in which dull texts that were supposed to be quickly digested on the way to Better Things start to eat their way out of the student from the inside like an Alien who brings stupefaction, melancholia, and (black) fire “leashed in like Hounds” in its wake: the night-stalker deliriums of study; the barren places between the world as it is and the world as it might be.

In this sense, if philosophy has been, as has been pointed out to the point of tedium, an occasion for fashionable nothings, it has also been to thousands of young people, the basis of an awakening to something which had no precedent in their experience or their expectations: something anomalous without being subjective, universal without being ubiquitous, irreducible to “culture” and its language games and yet profoundly connected with the desire that animates both the creation and reception of art.

In Alain Badiou’s language, philosophy is, as it has always been, something “inexistent” to the “state of the situation”, i.e. to what counts as “knowledge” or as useful, laudable, worthy, sensible.

Amongst living European philosophers, Badiou is not only (along with Agamben, Rancière and Žižek) one of the most renowned, he is also, I maintain, the figure whose thought best lends itself to explaining what education is (and isn’t) and therefore, by extension, for giving an account of how exactly the Anglophone encounter with French philosophy should never be mistaken for its most visible (and tawdry) avatars.

There are several reasons for this. One is that in both his systematic and popular works (the latter of which include books like the two manifestoes for Philosophy, *Ethics*, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Radical Universalism* and the magisterial lecture course *The Century*) are directed explicitly against the mixture of maudlin, moralistic, pragmatic, relativist, “ethno-sentimental”<sup>7</sup> and, ultimately, managerial world-views that Badiou sees as linking together such old enemies as post-modern prophets of difference, liberal-humanitarians, reactionary defenders of capital and its seigneurial rights; as well as those strange reactionaries for whom the post-Galilean sciences, feminism, or modern egalitarianism is a virus attacking some pure body of theological dogma.

Second, Badiou also has the distinction of having been singularly well-served by his English interpreters. Adroitly translated (particularly in Oliver Feltham’s exemplary English edition of *Being and Event*), Badiou has been the focus of a number of discussions of psychoanalysis, art, politics and mathematics, without having attracted the kind of media-circus that once attached to a figure like Jacques Derrida who had the misfortune, at the height of his fame, to be both rarely read and frequently denounced as both an enemy of civilisation and someone too shallow and frivolous to be worth mentioning.

In contrast, Badiou has not only been the subject of some excellent introductory works and essay collections, but the last 10 years have also seen the publication of such monographs as Ray Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound*, Nina Power’s *One Dimensional Woman*, Alberto Toscano’s *Fanaticism*, Jon Roffe’s *Badiou’s Deleuze*, Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* and Peter Hallward’s *Damning the Flood*, all of which (in very different ways) attest to the fact that Badiou’s influence is both wide and deep enough to be evident in works where he is scarcely mentioned, continually criticised, or translated into contexts very different from those explicitly addressed in his work.

Badiou's recent announcement of a third volume of *Being and Event* will have provoked both great excitement as well as quickly-shaken-off groans that there is more work to do, new mathematical models to learn, in short, a new labour of thought if we are to keep one of the present ages's very few contemporary philosophers within the horizon of our vision.

While the philosophical community waits for *Being and Event III*, it is worth pausing to examine two of the most recent works on Badiou: each of which gives a different answer to the question: what does it mean to think, philosophically, now with Badiou: to respond to his unique challenge to contemporary thought?

To begin with the figure who is perhaps most familiar to the readers of *Parrhesia*: Bruno Bosteels is, along with Peter Hallward and Alberto Toscano, one of the best known of Badiou's English-language interpreters. The translator of Badiou's important early work *Theory of the Subject*, Bosteels is also known for a number of significant articles on and interviews with Badiou as well as a series of closely related writings on Hegel, radical political movements and the literature of both Europe and the Americas. In addition, Bosteels has translated and written introductions to some of Badiou's recent publications *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (2012), and *Wittgenstein's Anti-Philosophy* (2011) among them.

Bosteels's *Badiou and Politics* (2011) offers to be his most substantial and wide-ranging book to date, bringing as it does Bosteels' considerable erudition and familiarity with Marxist politics, French philosophy and Romance language-literature to bear on Badiou's corpus.

The results are mixed and, at times, remarkably disappointing.

The problems begin with the introduction. After describing his first personal meeting with Badiou in "his country house in Saint Gaudens, just South of Toulouse,"<sup>8</sup> his role in organising Badiou's first trip to the U.S., early discussions with Slavoj Žižek in which both men agreed that Badiou's lack of fame in the Anglophone was something that desperately needed to be remedied, Bosteels goes on to outline what he sees as *Badiou and Politics*' unique contribution to the study of Badiou's philosophy.

While doing so, Bosteels mentions several times that his own book lacks the mathematical focus of other works on, or inspired by, Badiou. Unexpectedly, he then devotes a considerable portion of his introduction to arguing why this should not be regarded as an oversight on his part, but instead as a necessary corrective to an unfortunate tendency within Badiou's reception.

Thus, early on in the book Bosteels says that:

Many readers will argue that this [Badiou's engagement with axiomatic set theory and the theory of *topoi* –B.C.] is precisely the most distinctive feature of Badiou's work, so that mathematics *would actually meet, if not exceed, the importance of politics as the principal condition of philosophy*" [my italics] (Bosteels, xvii)

Here, as elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> Bosteels paraphrases an imagined critic objecting to the fact that *Badiou and Politics* hardly ever discusses mathematics, or at least only discusses it in the context of saying that it is vaguely salutary *not* to do so. The problem, however, is that Bosteels's portrait of his potential critic makes the latter seem so fumbling and incoherent that Bosteels's inevitable "refutation" of this figure is hard to take seriously.

Thus, in the sentence quoted above, Bosteels implies that certain unnamed scholars, not content with taking the mathematical component of Badiou's thought seriously, have advanced (what would indeed be) the truly egregious suggestion that, for Badiou, mathematics is more important or ranked higher than love, art or politics (what Badiou famously names as the remaining three out of four of philosophy's "conditions"<sup>10</sup>). As Bosteels knows very well, to elevate mathematics to the state of such an *Ur*-condition, even to the status of *primus inter pares* would involve disregarding everything Badiou has ever said on the topic of the conditions; shutting one's

eyes through most of *Being and Event* and probably randomly excising or displacing words like ‘not’ from key passages in anything else Badiou has written.<sup>11</sup>

The only reason that the position to which Bosteels objects can be excused is that it has, (to my knowledge), never been maintained by anyone ever. Certainly, if anyone did assert that mathematics was, for Badiou, the *principal* condition of philosophy, this person should indeed instantly be dismissed for not having bothered to achieve even the most superficial familiarity with the philosopher’s thought. But Bosteels names no names by which his reader might identify the guilty parties in this affair. Nor does he offer any citations by which the reader might identify why such a fundamental mistake could have been made by even one of Badiou’s commentators, let alone spread (as Bosteels implies) like an airborne super-virus amongst those studying the philosopher’s corpus.

Nonetheless, in a two-page disquisition called “Whither Mathematics?” Bosteels goes on to characterise his own project in terms of saving Badiou from Badiou scholarship by uncovering “an iceberg of emancipatory politics that is all but hidden—if it has not already suffered a complete meltdown as a result of global warming—below the arctic waters of mathematical formalization”. (Bosteels, 43). This is a curious choice of image, first of all for the fact that it seems to count against rather than support what I take to be Bosteels’s point. After all, if Badiou’s mathematical formalisation is supposed to be identified with the “arctic waters”, and “emancipatory politics” with the iceberg, wouldn’t the best way to run into the politics-iceberg be to traverse the “icy waters”, as opposed to, say, hoping that the iceberg is amphibious? Conversely, wouldn’t a journey through the waters be destined, Titanic-style, to end in the (in this case, desirable) conclusion of boat-meets-iceberg, especially because (as per the conventional use of an iceberg metaphor) the bulk of the iceberg is *below the surface of the ocean which it nonetheless inhabits*? In direct opposition to such an interpretation, Bosteels’s intention in this passage appears to be to say that the mathematical formalisation *obscures* the politics, an obfuscation which *Badiou and Politics* then explicitly sets out to remedy.

In pressing his charge against what he calls the “die-hard fans” of Badiou’s “otherwise undeniable mathematical tendency”, (Bosteels, 35), Bosteels does name a number of figures such as Tzuchien Tho who have undeniably... written about Badiou’s mathematics. However, Bosteels offers no evidence at all as to how the patient work of a scholar such as Tho has served to obscure rather than to illuminate Badiou’s sustained and uncompromising reflections on politics. The only way that such a proposition might make sense is if (as is surely not the case) that the discussion of Badiou’s mathematics were caught in a kind of zero-sum rivalry with his politics such that every attempt to clarify of the one could only result in the obfuscation of the other. But as Bosteels, of all people, surely knows, while there is absolutely nothing in Badiou’s work to vindicate the vision of such an either/or there is an absolutely overwhelming amount of evidence to dismiss it out of hand.

To use just one example: at the beginning of his *Metapolitics*, Badiou explicitly states that “Philosophy, which requires the deployment of four conditions, cannot specialise in any one of them.”<sup>12</sup>

Given this, it is inconceivable that Bosteels could be suggesting (in an Arendtian/Aristotelian, i.e. *anti-Platonic mode*) that there exists a fundamental incompatibility between mathematics and politics.<sup>13</sup>

To make such a claim would be to ignore not only Badiou’s strange and beautiful remarks about Jean Cavaillès in his *Metapolitics*,<sup>14</sup> but also everything that Badiou has ever said about Plato, Lacan or Cantor. More importantly, it would involve a kind of hermeneutic deafness to the way in which Badiou’s work perfectly conforms to his own prescriptions for philosophy as a revived Platonic enterprise. Particularly from the “high watermark” of *Being and Event* onwards, practically every sentence of Badiou’s shows the mark of truth-procedures that are operative with regard to each of the four “conditions.” In the face of this, the most that Bosteels could possibly mean by his talk of mathematical excess is that Badiou *scholarship* has become narrowly mathematical in a way that Badiou’s work patently isn’t.

Even if the claim is restricted to secondary literature on Badiou, it is, however, much easier to demonstrate the opposite of what Bosteels is claiming than to find support for his position.

For example, in 2006 Badiou published *Logiques des Mondes* [Logics of Worlds] the long-awaited “second volume” of *Being and Event* (the English translation by Alberto Toscano following relatively quickly in 2009.)

As is reasonably well known, *Logics of Worlds* takes the set-theoretical ontology of *Being and Event*, and attempts to offer what Heidegger might have called an “ontic” supplement to the earlier book. This supplement takes the form of a formal theory of appearance that attempts to think phenomena and (indeed phenomenality) while totally detaching the notion of appearance from the idea of a finite subject who would represent the world in her mind. Instead, Badiou draws on aspects of category theory (developed in the 1940s by Samuel Eilenberg and Saunders MacLane on the back of the work by Alexander Grothendieck) to construct something that could be legitimately compared to a “phenomenology” if and only if it is understood that we are dealing with a phenomenology not only shorn of the transcendental subject (as in Heidegger) but also of the subject-object “correlate” which remains operative in the “hermeneutic” phenomenologies of Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>15</sup> In *Logics*, Badiou has recourse to this new mathematical paradigm in order to address a fundamental (if deliberate) limitation of *Being and Event*. In the earlier book, one of the advantages of ZFC set theory for ontology was its capacity to allow for a formal description (i.e. a mathematical *inscription*) of anything at all with recourse to only a single, equally formal relation—‘belonging’.<sup>16</sup> Category theory, by contrast, allows Badiou to perform the more difficult task of modelling situations (“worlds”) which, in their “ontic” rather than ontological dimension, are principally composed of relations, transformations, inter-connections (the “arrows” of category theory) whose “transcendental” “minimum” and “maximum” of appearance Badiou will demonstrate can nonetheless be shifted, or indeed, inverted under the pressure of an event.

As far as I’m aware, however, in the six years since the publication of *Logics*, no sustained or substantial treatment of the mathematical core of this work exists in the English language. Early reviews of the book set the trend for what would come, as Peter Hallward,<sup>17</sup> Zizek,<sup>18</sup> and others focused primarily on Badiou’s critique of ‘democratic materialism’; his new typology of the ‘reactive’ and ‘obscure’ subjects and above all, on offering slightly patronising (not to mention) vague congratulations to the effect that Badiou had apparently brought a (much-needed) degree of ‘mediation’ to his system which was apparently lacking in his previous *opus*.<sup>19</sup>

Doubtless, the coyness of *Logics*’ reviewers’ has something to do, not only with the confines of a review article, but also with the inherent difficulty of non-mathematicians coming into contact with a new (and fearsome) mathematical field. In addition, while the least attentive reader of *Being and Event*, is likely to have gleaned a first-rate introduction to axiomatic set theory alongside one of the most original philosophical works of the last century (‘Come for the set theory primer/stay for the overturning of Everything You Thought You Knew About Philosophy!’), *Logics of Worlds* does not explain category theory with anything like the degree of clarity (or detail) that marks the equivalent account of set theory in *Being and Event*. In addition, and symptomatically, there is, at present, no treatment of Badiou in English that deals with category theory with anything like the depth with which Hallward’s *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* treats of set-theory. How then can Bosteels suggest a kind of mathematical *hegemony* in Badiou scholarship that might have muscled out all of those whose interests were less rarefied and more practical?

After all, even if such a major aspect of Badiou’s work had received the exhaustive treatment that it transparently has not, a glance through the literature would quickly demonstrate that the few articles dealing explicitly with Badiou’s mathematics are easily outnumbered by essays, books, and interviews which—while possibly *mentioning* Badiou’s mathematics—are largely devoted (as is, for instance, Adrian Johnston’s book on Badiou and Zizek)<sup>20</sup> to Badiou’s political interventions: to Badiou as unapologetic *soixante-huitard*; as the intransigent defender of the “communist hypothesis”; as the scourge of Sarkozy and *les nouveaux philosophes*, and generally, as a member of the “Lacanian Left” and generally as a thinker whose thought is all the more

potent for its total refusal to concede to the political pieties of the present age.

It is, of course, well and good that what is, after all, such a fundamental and emphatic aspect of Badiou's thought should be emphasised by those who talk about it. But is it really the case, as Bosteels insists, that Badiou's mathematics is in danger of covering over, dominating, or somehow holding back the political discussion of Badiou's work? The closest that Bosteels gets to providing evidence for the alleged trend is his quotation of a statement by Sam Gillespie (the author of an exceptional early treatise on Badiou's work called *The Mathematics of Novelty*) in which the latter can be found claiming that:

...however open Badiou's theory of truth may be to non-mathematical interpretations (such as found in Žižek, Critchley, Bruno Bosteels), it is in fact only through a thorough exposition of Paul Cohen's generic set theory that we can adequately grasp what Badiou is doing with the classical category of truth." (Gillespie, quoted in Bosteels, 33)

There is, of course, as Bosteels is surely aware, nothing in this statement that can be interpreted as an affirmation that, for Badiou, 'mathematics is *more important* than politics'. There is only the (surely unobjectionable) suggestion that if we are to understand Badiou's theory (and, in particular, what he says about truth), we must pay attention to the formal, mathematical dimension of Badiou's philosophy through which his concept of truth is elucidated. The difference between the former thesis (what Bosteels imputes to Gillespie) and the latter (what Gillespie actually says) is the difference between the idea of philosophy "sutured to a single condition"—a vision ridiculously, inexplicably and above all *explicitly* out of step with Badiou's whole enterprise and a position which, as Gillespie points out, performs the basic courtesy of taking what Badiou says seriously.

If, as we can assume, Bosteels is aware of this, his argument for the existence of an excessively and narrowly mathematical focus in Badiou scholarship must lie elsewhere than in Gillespie's claim that "truth", in Badiou, is not an intuitive concept upon which Badiou imposes an unhelpfully arcane mathematical analogy. After replying to the statement from Gillespie with a series of increasingly incoherent rhetorical questions,<sup>21</sup> apparently supposed to represent the voice of a Potential Critic, Bosteels goes on to reply to Gillespie by making the supremely unobjectionable statement that: "It is important to be precise, however, about the function of mathematics in Badiou's thought." (Bosteels, 33)

In the name of this goal, Bosteels then makes, what I take to be, three major points. These are:

1) That Badiou's interest in and commitment to politics is lifelong, unmistakable and never far from his mind whether he is talking about set theory or Wagner, Beckett's novels or Lacan's reading of Antigone.

2) That many of Badiou's mathematical categories (e.g. his decision to use the term 'state' in reference to the power set) have avowedly political overtones that have a precedent in the radical political tradition that runs from Marx to Mao via Lenin and Trotsky.<sup>22</sup>

And, finally, 3) That Badiou explicitly restricts the use of mathematics to ontology, on the one hand, (axiomatic set theory as that which formally inscribes being-qua-being as inconsistent multiplicity) and the logic of appearance, in the name of which Badiou martials the topos/category theory of *Logics of Worlds* is deployed.<sup>23</sup>

While a) and b) are undeniable (as well as obvious) it is still not at all clear how either Badiou's fidelity to an intransigently egalitarian politics, nor his unbroken dialogue with a political tradition result in a forced choice between the scientific (i.e. mathematical) and the political conditions of Badiou's philosophy. C) is trickier. On the one hand, Bosteels is certainly right to suggest that Badiou's use of mathematics is restricted in the sense that his philosophy neither practices nor permits an *arbitrary* application of mathematical concepts to anything and everything. (In the absence of such a restriction, Badiou's critics would have every right—as they, in fact, do not—to shout the words "Sokal hoax" whenever they hear third-hand rumours that this Gallic interloper has dared to mobilise mathematics for the sake of philosophy.)

At the same time, however, Bosteels's warnings to whichever mysterious person are supposed to have been forcing Badiou's mathematics into inappropriate contexts grossly underestimate the role of mathematics in both *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, by implying that they are for Badiou no more than the language of a couple of 'regional ontologies' in the phenomenological sense of the term.

*Pace* Bosteels, Badiou does not only argue that set theory in its Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatisation inscribes the "presentation" of inconsistent multiplicity which he calls 'being qua being'. Badiou also puts this ontological schema (and the ZFC axioms in particular) to work in deriving a formal theory of the "subject" that is not an individual or (worse) an *ego* in Lacan's sense, but rather as "any local configuration of a generic procedure from which a truth is supported".<sup>24</sup> The point of such an enterprise, to which the entire second half of *Being and Event* is devoted, is to give such fundamental concepts as "generic extension", "forcing", "subject" and "condition" a mathematical inscription, which, given the argument of the first half of the book, means a connection to ontology without which these concepts would be mere analogies—devoid of any anchor in reality. The purpose of Badiou's meditations is *not*, therefore, to find a mathematical *analogue* for politics—as if he were responding to the not terribly reasonable demand of a few strange mathematicians that the revolution be explained algebraically—instead, Badiou attempts to demonstrate how the set of concepts that constitute his mature 'theory of the subject' are grounded in a reality that, though vertiginous, is nonetheless accessible to formalisation (and thus, ultimately, to thought). The whole point of Badiou's labours on this point is to demonstrate, not only how something new might be possible *within* a situation, but also how there might be, on the basis of this *real* rather than merely apparent novelty, a universe that is composed, to invoke the motto of *Logics of Worlds*, not only of bodies and languages, but also truths.<sup>25</sup> The icy waters of formalisation, are not therefore, supposed to replace or even supplement the *praxis* (which is to say also the thought) that Badiou consistently maintains that politics *is*: instead they are supposed to inscribe the possibility of subjects and of truths in something other than (as one of Badiou's "finitist" or hermeneutically-inclined opponents might say) the mere preferences or prejudices of an author, or a culture, or a life-world.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, I realise that it may seem strange or even malicious that I should have devoted so much space to criticising Bosteels for what is essentially his pre-emptive reply to a harsh (if strangely incoherent) imaginary critic, a reply that, moreover, occupies only a relatively small portion of a book of over 300 pages.

The reason for doing so, however, is that, as we will see, this aspect of Bosteels' introduction both contains and prefigures a problem that suffuses his book as a whole.

To explain: after promising to retrieve the emancipatory-politics-iceberg from the surrounding mathematical ocean, *Badiou and Politics* launches into a discussion of Louis Althusser: his fundamental concepts ("structural causality", "over-determination", the relationship of science to ideology); the various *aporiai* of his thought and their importance for later Marxist theory; the connection between Althusser and Lacan's psychoanalysis; the young Badiou's role in the Althusser-Lacan encounter; the attempt (exemplified in the works of Jacques-Alain Miller and the Slovenian Lacanians) to connect Marxist and Freudian notions of over-determination via the creation of a kind of Lacan-Hegel axis; and finally a defence of dialectical materialism that emphasises (with Žižek) the links between psychoanalysis and Marxism as two theories/praxes of struggle.<sup>27</sup>

The next two chapters deal, respectively, with Badiou's response to Althusser and Lacan and his position in the history of French Maoism.

These chapters contain what (with the exception of an extraordinary final interview in the appendix of the book) are by far the best moments of *Badiou and Politics*.

However, while Bosteels succeeds in illuminating-through-contextualising he falters when he attempts to link his various comparisons and contrasts (which are so wide-ranging as to consist in such things as comparisons between Badiou and the French Heideggerian philosophy)<sup>28</sup> to a coherent reading of Badiou's contribution to political thought. This is because Bosteels is at his best in providing (or narrating) context, i.e. in offering

impressive quantities of information which will undoubtedly help any number of readers get a sense of Badiou's influences, his 'invented predecessors' and, ultimately in answering the not insignificant question about where and how Badiou might be placed with regards to those of his peers who remain dedicated to universalistic, egalitarian politics, as well as those, like *les nouvelles philosophes* who have noisily betrayed these ideals in the name of *bien pensant* notions about the moral obligation of rich and the powerful to alternate in bringing (to borrow an image from Žižek) either bombs or food to the billions of human beings who consistently lose at the tables of capitalism's planetary casino, without ever being invited to sit at them.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, if *Badiou and Politics* were shorn of its introduction and conclusion and consisted only of its first three chapters it might have been an admirable book on "Badiou in context". In addition, however, Bosteels also presents *Badiou and Politics* as an argument about how Badiou should be interpreted. And it is this, far more than the afore-mentioned (and helpful) contextualisation which is supposed to constitute Bosteels's unique contribution to the (vast) territory of politico-philosophical arguments with which *Badiou and Politics* is concerned.

Bosteels' argument, in essence, is that Badiou is a dialectical thinker who, at no point, (and notwithstanding some of the latter's own rhetoric), should be regarded as positing a gulf between, on the one hand, the universe of 'truth' (and the 'subject') and that of the situation(s) on the other. (This is, incidentally, a point which Bosteels has made in print several times prior to the release of *Badiou and Politics*.)<sup>30</sup> To elaborate: for Bosteels, Badiou's reference to "Being", on the one hand and [the] "Event" on the other, does not point to the existence of two incommensurable orders of reality whose possible connection then becomes mysterious, but rather to two aspects of the *same* reality that are to be regarded as fundamentally imbricated in a dialectical fashion. Put differently, Badiou is not and has never been a "Kantian", at least not in the pejorative Hegelian-Marxist use of the word where this means "someone who divides the world into two orders (duty vs. inclination; phenomena vs. noumena; post-evental grace and pre-evental situation) whose interconnection would then seem to hinge on a kind of *deus ex machina*."

The most notable thing about this part of Bosteels's argument is that it is absolutely, indubitably correct.

Here, in contrast to his earlier argument about mathematics "die-hards" and their (ostensibly) unfortunate influence on Badiou scholarship, Bosteels has ample evidence to suggest that, first, the mistake that he imputes to others has in fact been made (mostly by critics, but also by some defenders of Badiou's work)<sup>31</sup> and, second, that it is indeed a fundamental misunderstanding of Badiou's work.

Many passages could be cited in defence of Bosteels' point.

For instance, in his *Ethics* Badiou states that:

A truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the evental supplementation. It is thus an immanent break. Immanent because a truth proceeds *in* the situation, and nowhere else—there is no heaven of truths."<sup>32</sup>

Many more passages could be cited in support of this (important) claim, but Bosteels himself offers something much better, i.e. the following lapidary formulation which is taken from the first of two very rich interviews between Badiou and Bosteels which form the appendix to *Badiou and Politics*. Thus, Badiou:

the principal contribution of my work does not consist in opposing the situation to the event. In a certain sense, that is something that everybody does these days. The principal contribution consists in posing the following question: What can we derive or infer of this from the point of view of the situation itself? Ultimately, it is the situation that interests me. I don't think that we can grasp completely what a trajectory of truth is in a situation without the hypothesis of the absolute, or radical, arrival of an event...But in the end what interests me is the situational unfolding of the event,

---

not the transcendence or the entrenchment of the event itself.....” (Badiou in Bosteels, 306)

The problem that I find with Bosteels’s attempt to sew together the various threads of *Badiou and Politics* via his insistence on a “dialectical Badiou” is not that Bosteels is wrong about the importance of the dialectic for Badiou—even if it must be stressed, as Bosteels does, that for Badiou the dialectic is a dialectic of scission and not of reconciliation.<sup>33</sup> (“One”, as Badiou likes to say, divides into “Two”<sup>34</sup>.) Instead, it is precisely *because* Bosteels is correct on this point that his laboured suggestion that those who would learn from Badiou must search for and, as it were, recover Badiou the dialectician seems super-erogatory.

To elaborate, Bosteels’s claim that Badiou is a ‘dialectical thinker’ is absolutely accurate if it is understood negatively, i.e. as a *caveat lector* against a certain (sloppy) interpretation of Badiou’s work. Thus Bosteels can be seen to reject, but also to ward off a false, “Kantian” image of Badiou whose prevalence Bosteels plausibly traces to both certain passages of Hallward’s *A Subject To Truth* and even more to Žizek’s disastrous coinage of the term ‘Truth-Event’ in his 2000 book *The Ticklish Subject*.<sup>35</sup> By implying a conflation between truth and the event, Žizek’s Badiou starts to look like precisely the kind of ‘Kantian’ theorist whose thought would be mired in the problem of how to connect the secular grace of the event to the banality of (actual) situations. Instead, as Bosteels is right to point out, Badiou’s real interest is not in the mere possibility of an event (whose tremulous anticipation is a staple of precisely the kind of “weak Messianisms” which Badiou has on more than one occasion derided)<sup>36</sup>, but instead in how a “subject” proceeds—rigorously—“point by point”, *and in this world*, in the afterglow of an event’s “fragile scintillation”. In other words, what really interests Badiou is how what he calls a “subject” *proceeds*, where this procedure will involve connecting together elements (bodies, affects, fragments of already-existing languages) that were always, already present in a situation, but whose “generic” inter-connection is invisible to the situation’s principle(s) of “inclusion” (what Badiou calls the situation’s “state”).<sup>37</sup>

But if Bosteels correctly identifies that what interests Badiou is the “situation”, i.e. with how “a subject” acts *within* a situation, according to a principle that is *alien* to that same situation, it is not clear why it becomes urgent (as Bosteels seems to think it does) to look beyond (or rather behind) *Being and Event*, to Badiou’s earlier *Theory of the Subject*, to the history of the European Radical Left, or even (as Bosteels suggests) to a possible *detente* between Badiou and the French Heideggerianism of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in order to find the more robustly dialectical Badiou that Bosteels himself (accurately and continually) announces as being both already and explicitly present within Badiou’s corpus.

Given that the criticisms of *Being and Event* as a Kantian or (as Bosteels puts it) an “absolutist” work are false in that they involve ignoring great swathes of Badiou’s work (even, and especially *Being and Event*), in favour of a single aspect of his rhetoric, why, the reader wonders, does Bosteels spend so much time bringing Badiou into the company of more traditionally dialectical thinkers, as if the aura of “Cartesianism” or of “Sartreanism” needed to be exorcised before Badiou was fit for company and that this exorcism could be achieved by simply pushing Badiou into the company of acknowledged dialecticians. Badiou’s own suggestion, in the same interview quoted earlier, is that his interest in situations leads him to assert that the “fundamental” categories of his work are those of “genericity and of forcing” (Badiou in Bosteels, 306), i.e. two central concepts of *Being and Event* which a) have no parallel in either Marx or Hegel and b) which are inextricably caught up with Badiou’s with the formal, mathematical side of Badiou’s work which Bosteels seems to find embarrassing.

The danger of the exercise in which the bulk of *Badiou and Politics* is engaged does not, therefore, derive from any risk of falsely identifying Badiou as a dialectical thinker. Badiou *is* a dialectical thinker, at least in the slightly glib sense in which this would mean that he most definitely does not think in terms of metaphysical gulfs or ostensibly Kantian dichotomies. And Bosteels is also right to suggest that Badiou has been constantly occupied with the dialectic for the duration his philosophical life.

However, in attempting to prove this by constantly positioning Badiou within what (for the average student of continental philosophy) will be more familiar political and philosophical frameworks, *Badiou and Politics* continually risks minimising what is, in fact, singular and unprecedented in Badiou's thought, by making it "just another" feature in the field of European thinkers whose family resemblances in the matter of political attitudes apparently demands that they should be more brought into dialogue rather than opposed.

In saying this, I am not, of course, suggesting that Badiou should only ever be spoken of as if he were an ineffable being of infinite alterity, incomparable to his philosophical contemporaries, nor that there is anything wrong about attempting to place his thought in its historical, political or national-academic context. On the contrary, I have already said that there is real worth in Bosteels's attempts to clarify Badiou's relationship to both of the above. However, the more Bosteels engages in the work of *positioning* Badiou within a broader philosophical situation, the more that Badiou's actual contribution to that situation seems elided.

At this point, the whole issue of Bosteels's attitude to mathematics re-emerges.

Thus, while I have mentioned that I can find no evidence for Bosteels's claim that mathematics dominates Badiou's reception, there is of course a very old stereotype (going back at least as far as Aristophanes' satire of Socrates in *The Clouds*) that associates philosophy with a kind of Laputan adoration of abstraction, which allegedly leads to incalculably deleterious political effects. Because of this tendency, so the story goes, the philosopher constantly needs to be dragged back to the real world of "concrete" struggles, by those with a more pragmatic, humane, sensible, or in a Marxist idiom, more robustly "materialist" attitude.

The problem, however, as Hegel (and even more so Adorno) have pointed out, is that it is not always obvious where the "concrete" lies, particularly when it comes to those who would make themselves its spokespersons, advocates, or privileged initiates.<sup>38</sup> One correlate of this is that there is nothing to suggest, for instance, that *The Science of Logic* is, *a priori*, of less relevance to a series of concrete political struggles than a book with the title: "Urgent Political Events of the Present and my Extremely Significant Contribution to Them."<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the advocacy of "immediacy" can often be understood as precisely the kind of false concretion of the sort that Hegel condemns with regards to Early German Romanticism and which Adorno finds in both phenomenology and existentialism. For both thinkers immediate reality ("this night, here now, with her breath on my cheek") is an abstraction, precisely because its presentation *as* immediate relies on the systematic obfuscation of everything that allows the taken-for-granted "thisness" of a moment, a feeling, an experience, to have emerged, to have become (as Hegel will point out paradoxically) *identifiable* as a singularity.<sup>40</sup> This, of course, applies *a fortiori* to mere *appeals* to immediacy which Hegel rightly identified as utterly compromised by a Romantic (impossible and vaguely reactionary) nostalgia for the putatively pre-lapsarian world before the vivisection of the concept.

To put this less technically, whereas stupefaction and melancholia might be the concomitants (as Giorgio Agamben points out) of "study"<sup>41</sup>, the problem of thought's distance from "concrete" struggles is vitiated rather ameliorated by the academic habit of pre-emptively deflecting the charge of Ivory Tower irrelevance by overt suggestions that, say, my reading of *Pride and Prejudice* should have the aura of a street battle just because these are mentioned in my monograph, whereas all other such interpretations are so much...literary criticism. At its worst, this gesture recalls the moment in *1984* when Winston Smith shouts out 'Do it to Julia!': i.e., it says: "I may be a privileged academic engaged in abstruse discussions, but aren't there even less 'relevant' figures out there whose service to various popularly accepted 'goods' is even *less* obvious than my own? Why not single *those* people out for punishment?"

But while I'm certain that Bosteels is aware of exactly this problem of false concretion, the rhetorical organisation of *Badiou and Politics* consistently suggests otherwise. In the end, the book is far too deferential to some real or imagined sceptic who, demanding assurance that there is more to Badiou than nerdy mathematical enthusiasms, believes that she is entitled to a protracted defense of Badiou's Marxist credentials. However,

given that such “concerns” about Badiou’s political *bona fides* are likely to be based either on ignorance or on the kind of bureaucratic literal-mindedness that thinks that the most politically useful parts of a thinker’s work must be identical with the moments where she talks explicitly about politics, it is hard to see why it is necessary to have a book that refutes these charges by uncovering a more respectably dialectical (read: “political”) Badiou.

As a final, related, point, I cannot end the review without saying something about Bosteels’s style. Bosteels is, of course, capable of writing both elegantly and eloquently and this capacity is on display in the majority of his articles. However, in a number of passages of *Badiou and Politics*, Bosteels descends into an equivocating mode that (combined with the sheer number of discussions of philosophies distinct from Badiou’s own) has a tendency to hollow out his book’s centre, preventing its myriad threads from being integrated into a coherent whole.

Thus, at one point Bosteels attempts a criticism of Alberto Toscano’s suggestion that Badiou’s 1985 essay *Peut-on penser la politique?* marks a transition in the latter’s work from a paradigm of destruction to a paradigm of ‘subtraction’:

Toscano’s analysis nonetheless seems to waver somewhat in the attempt to draw a neat conceptual boundary between the operations typical of the transitive mode of politics (reappropriation, destruction, purification) and those that presuppose a certain deconstruction of the metaphysics of transitivity...At the same time, *such resonances do not necessarily signal an inaccuracy [my italics]* in Toscano’s account of Badiou’s philosophy. In fact, many of the operations that were pivotal before actually do continue to be important today, albeit in different ways with a different emphasis. Thus, in more recent statements, Badiou’s supposedly linear shift from destruction to subtraction or from purification to the play of minimal difference, gives way to the complex reordering of simultaneity. Toscano’s hesitation bears witness to the possibility of such a combination, which only recently has become a reality for Badiou. (Bosteels, 151)

The reader is left wondering not only what a “complex reordering of simultaneity” and a “certain deconstruction” might mean, but also about which things Bosteels is calling “pivotal albeit in different ways and with different emphases.” Also, what does it mean to “waver *somewhat*” (as opposed to the already non-committal activity of wavering?) Most importantly, isn’t Bosteels’s *ultimate* point in this paragraph simply that Toscano is, in fact, *wrong* to suggest that there is a definitive break (or as Bosteels puts it a “linear shift”) between Badiou’s focus on “destruction” and his later focus on subtraction? Why then does this criticism need to be expressed in the form of a conciliatory (but, as such, strangely patronising) suggestion that Toscano, far from “signalling an inaccuracy” [sic] is to be praised for a degree of “wavering” that apparently anticipates Badiou’s own future blurring of a distinction and trajectory which Toscano once expressed clearly?

Ultimately, the problem with *Badiou and Politics* is that it is simply too interested in *positioning* both Badiou and its author in regards to extant academic debates. It is, in this sense, far too attentive to alliances, rivalries, filiations and (by extension) to clearly distinguishing between those figures (like Toscano, Žižek, or Jean-Luc Nancy) who apparently require the author’s deference or circumspection and those who do not.

Admittedly, as I’ve mentioned, some of the book’s best aspects definitely come from the tendency to try and position Badiou’s work in a broader context. At its best, *Badiou and Politics* is a helpful, erudite and illuminating companion to Badiou’s work. However, as the book progresses, the attempt to position Badiou with respect to other thinkers is vitiated by the sheer number of comparisons, analyses and digressions that Bosteels seems to take as in some way authorised by his (in itself unobjectionable) thesis about a ‘dialectical Badiou’.

But with so many fine introductions to Badiou’s work already available (by Hallward,<sup>42</sup> Feltham,<sup>43</sup> Barker<sup>44</sup> and Pluth to name just the most prominent)<sup>45</sup>, the problem with Bosteels’ book is that it remains too much a book

## BOSTEELS, *BADIOU AND POLITICS* AND BARTLETT, *BADIOU AND PLATO*

---

about “Badiou and Politics”, rather than (what it might have been) an actual intervention into political thinking that is grounded in Badiou’s thought. What is unfortunate about this is that Bosteels’s knowledge of French philosophy, radical politics and Romance language literature puts him in an excellent position to write just such a book. Unfortunately for us *Badiou and Politics* isn’t it.

To find something that comes much closer to achieving the goals that Bosteels’ book only promises, it is necessary to now turn to the next book under review, A.J. Bartlett’s *Badiou: An Education by Truths*.



In almost every respect, Bartlett’s book could not be more different from Bosteels’s.

Where *Badiou and Politics* devotes much of its 400 page bulk to more or less interesting attempts to position both Badiou and his own argument in terms of contemporary academic trends (telling anecdotes about philosophical bloodlines, shouting out to friends and colleagues, noting lines of filiation, ruptures, clandestine continuities) Bartlett’s book, by contrast, is marked by an obvious but unostentatious *disinterest* in its own place in the contemporary Continental philosophy scene.

Thus, Bartlett never flaunts his bona fides, never calls upon allies to bolster his argument and never so much as approximates the suggestion that he has (or more importantly could have) a personal mandate from the master that could confer authority on his statements. Instead, *An Education by Truths* is a terse, trenchant, in many ways ‘classical’ work of philosophy that is notably ‘generic’ in its address. This does not mean, as the conventional use of the word might suggest, that the book is populist, demagogic or that the author contents himself with the circulation of inoffensive platitudes. On the contrary, Bartlett has about as much in common with the likes of Alain de Botton as Bletchley Park under Alan Turing has with a monologue by Michelle Bachmann. Instead, by “generic”, I mean that the address is, in Badiou’s sense, universal without being “empirically universal”. Put differently, *An Education by Truths* is, like Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, “a book for everyone and no-one”, not because (as with Nietzsche) Bartlett’s book awaits the advent of future *Übermenschen* to find a suitable audience, nor because he adopts the opposite (sinister and ingratiating) strategy of never making a statement that has not already been marked out as blandly innocuous by the appropriate focus groups. Instead, everything about Bartlett’s book (from its structure, to its style) is staked on the idea of truth (in Badiou’s sense) and thus on the belief that there exist elements already present in our world (in Badiou’s terminology: immanent to the present situation, albeit indiscernible to the situation’s “state”) whose principle of inter-connection or community must be constructed, fought for, endlessly invented and continually organised in ways that break with the divisive predicates by which identity and difference are usually measured.” For Badiou, this “construction of the generic”, is the fundamental task of art, politics, science, philosophy and, as Bartlett will demonstrate, education. But where Bosteels attempts to play down the importance of Being and Event and its more difficult mathematical sections, Bartlett, gives the lie to Bosteels’s dilemma (mathematics or politics), by simply deploying the very categories of Being and Event that Bosteels eschews (forcing, the generic, the operator of fidelity) in a context which renders the power of these categories —and their properly political importance—unmistakable.

Fundamentally, to read *An Education by Truths* is to experience an encounter with a fierce, occasionally furious, and above all, exemplary piece of philosophical writing which cannot be understood as a book about Badiou, but rather, as Ray Brassier (hardly the most gushing or sentimental of Badiou’s readers!) says on the book’s jacket, must be understood as an intervention into the contemporary discourse on education, designed to show the void at the latter’s heart, or, what is the same thing the infinite orders of infinity that this discourse excludes and obscures. In order to appreciate the importance of Bartlett’s book (both within and beyond the field of Badiou studies) it is necessary to first understand the fact that there are three distinct “sites” into which its argument intervenes.

The first, and most obvious, site of intervention is the (relatively small, but rapidly expanding) field of Badiou scholarship. The second, and arguably the most significant, is what Deleuze and Guattari might call the “existential territory” of the Platonic corpus, insofar as this means not only the dialogues and their interpretation, but also the but also the schisms, truisms, heresies and orthodoxies that have marked and continue to mark the dialogues’ reception not only within academic (i.e. “state”) philosophy, but within philosophy per se (from Porphyry to Bernard Stiegler). Here, above all, what is at stake in Bartlett’s work is the dialogues’ capacity to say something about, but also to the present that is monstrously in excess of that strange mixture of reverence, indifference and condescension which so often marks contemporary attitudes to “classics”<sup>46</sup>.

The third site into which Bartlett intervenes (which cannot be separated from the other two) is the field of “education”, which, with some notable exceptions, is rarely addressed by contemporary academic philosophers, despite or more likely because of their dependence on the vagaries of the neo-liberal university.

In intervening in all three fields simultaneously, *An Education by Truths* takes as its point of departure an isolated remark of Badiou’s that “the only education is an education by [or through] truths.”<sup>47</sup> [*par les vérités*]

In attempting to establish what this might mean, Bartlett does not take the predictable (and all-too-easy) route of simply grabbing a handful of Badiou’s categories and then glibly “applying” them to what might pass for contemporary “debates” on education.<sup>48</sup> Instead, Bartlett does something that is, as far as I know, completely unprecedented in Badiou scholarship, i.e. he treats Badiou’s repeatedly avowed Platonism seriously enough to actually engage the Platonic corpus.

In claiming that this move is unprecedented, I am aware that almost every account of Badiou mentions the philosopher’s avowed (if “post-Cantorian”) Platonism. And indeed, what discussion of Badiou’s work could be complete or even coherent without a discussion of his principled rejection of modern “sophistry”, his defence of the category of truth, his outright rejection of the pathos of finitude that he declares marks contemporary philosophy in its analytic, post-modern or hermeneutic modes,<sup>49</sup> his insistence that being, politics, art and love can be *thought*; that science is a condition for philosophy even if “suturing” philosophy to science (or art) is a form of philosophical suicide;<sup>50</sup> that human beings are *not* perpetually shackled to the cave of their cultures, traditions or language-games, but are in fact capable of living (as opposed to merely existing) by coming into contact with that which is properly (though without concession to any theology) called “eternal?”<sup>51</sup> However, this standard acknowledgement of Badiou’s Platonism, is frequently accompanied by mention of Badiou’s (apparent!) predilection for rhetorical extravagance.<sup>52</sup> Apologising for this purported “tendency”, the commentator could not unreasonably suggest that while the name of Plato might serve Badiou well in his attempt to smash the idols of the age (the *bien pensant*, ‘anti-Platonism’ of ‘postmodern relativists’, democratic pragmatists, or analytically-inclined neo-Wittgensteinians), to *actually* treat Badiou as a “Platonist” would, surely, involve ignoring the extent to which Badiou is a) both manifestly and avowedly a ‘thinker of the multiple’—the author who declares at the beginning of his most systematic work that the “One is not”; and b) someone who is obviously indebted to modern (and even modernist) figures like Sartre, Cantor, Lacan, Paul Cohen, Althusser, Albert Lautman, Heidegger, Schoenberg, Mallarmé and Beckett, none of whom (apart from maybe Lautman and, in a perverse way, Lacan) could be regarded as anything like “Platonists.”

Given this, it seems perfectly reasonable that someone might hesitate about calling Badiou a Platonist without qualification. But if we are to assess whether and to what extent Badiou’s “Platonism” is genuine (as opposed to merely rhetorical), surely we have to have some prior understanding of what a Platonist is. But if there is, after all, more to Plato than simply hoary (and second-hand) clichés about a pious believer in supra-uranian chairs to whom the most vacuous under-graduate can feel instantly superior? Do we not, equally, have reason to question the other images that have been handed down by a philosophical tradition whose Great Figures’ attitudes to Ariston’s most famous son have often (as Bartlett shows glossing Whitehead’s famous remark) been symptomatic of their own most fundamental ideas?

But Bartlett does not waste time wrestling or engaging with arguments of this sort. Instead, adhering as he does to an enhanced version of the screenwriter's maxim of never telling when you can show and never showing when you can set fire to a complacent scholarly orthodoxy, Bartlett (while never forgetting that Badiou is a post-Cantorian, nor what he has learnt from Lacan) simply turns to the Platonic dialogues armed with the concepts and categories of *Being and Event*. The result of this, remarkably, is that the dialogues open up to these categories like a treasure-chamber in the Arabian Nights to the person who has pronounced the magic word. Instead of proffering a Badiouian "reading" of the dialogues, Bartlett sets up a collision between two philosophical planets which, at the moment of what all good sense dictates should be their disastrous impact, do not explode, but merge into something larger than either entity before their collision. In other words, what Bartlett will demonstrate is not only that Badiou is (really) a Platonist, but that Plato is a "Badiouian", even though this identity is not literal, so much as it is essential.

Obviously, this latter thesis will be controversial, especially for that majority of contemporary Plato scholars who will not have heard of Badiou and who are therefore likely, in accordance with the territorial and parochial instincts of academic life, to assume that his work is of no importance. At the same time, I feel that Bartlett's reading of the dialogues (at least those on which he can focus), is so unforced and his engagement with Plato scholarship so scrupulous that it is a real tragedy that so few "Platonists" are likely to ever go near *An Education by Truths* on the grounds that it has the name of a contemporary French philosopher in its title.

But how, the reader is doubtless wondering, does Bartlett accomplish all this?

Bartlett begins by attempting to examine the place that the Socrates of the dialogues occupies with respect to the Athens of his (and Plato's) day. Initially drawing particularly, but not exclusively on the *Apology*, Bartlett shows that Socrates and his insistence on the possibility of a "non-sophistic education" is something indiscernible to the "state" of the Athenian situation with its vested and competing interests. By "state", Bartlett, like Badiou does not refer only to the machinery of government (armies, magistrates, et cetera), but to those principles, even and especially, the ostensibly "private matters" (e.g. personal wealth) which determines what matters, i.e. what, in the broad sense, counts in the twilight years of Golden Age of Athens. The ultimate symbol of these beings who belong without inclusion are, of course, the slaves who, while present in the Athenian situation are not included in it in the sense that they *count-for-nothing* once measured against those predicates (wealth, status, fashion, autochthonous origins, markers of nobility) by which the state at once measures and grants varying degrees of appearance to human beings. For the Athenian state as exemplified by Socrates' accusers Meletus, Anytos and Lycon (each of whom, as Bartlett points out, represents a particular interest group within the *polis*):

Socrates is condemned to be singular and, as such, not of the state. *Quite simply, for the state, he is the only figure present to Athens who does not educate or improve the youth of the state.* He is nothing to education. The obverse of this is that every Athenian citizen apart from Socrates (whose citizen credentials are certainly at stake here) does educate: as every Athenian citizen is constitutive of the state, the claim amounts to the fact that the state educates while Socrates alone does not. (Bartlett, 32)<sup>53</sup>

The two famous charges by which Socrates is condemned ("not believing in the gods" and "corrupting the youth") are, therefore, ultimately identical with each other in the sense that they are both finally concerned with the fact that Socrates represents, points to and embodies something that is invisible to the interests of the Athenian "state", where this does not simply mean "State Apparatus", or 'Official Government' but rather everything that "counts" in the city *even and especially* when this refers to "private (read: pecuniary) interests"<sup>54</sup>

In particular, Socrates opposes sophistry, which for Bartlett provides the only kind of education recognisable to the state, i.e. an education marked, first, by what Bartlett calls the sophistic *end* (of preparing the youth with "skills" to make their way in the state'), second by sophistic *practice* (which treats education as a commodity

to be exchanged for other goods) and, finally, by sophisticated *theory*, which is exemplified in the “democratic” relativism of Protagoras’s maxim that “man is the measure of all things.” (Bartlett, 37)

Plato’s Socrates, as someone who points to the possibility of a *non*-sophistic education, is thus presented as engaged in an educational practice that is unrecognisable to the state of the situation (the way worth is measured and “counted” in Athens) and which therefore can only be recognised as an enemy, a parasite, a cancer.

Having thus deployed Badiou’s category of the “state” (along with an exegeses of its formal place in the theory), Bartlett will go on to deal with what Badiou calls the [evental] “site” of the Athenian situation. As readers of *Being and Event* will remember, the site is Badiou’s name for a moment or a point within a given situation which is “on the edge of the void”, an aspect of the situation which, by pointing to what is, paradoxically, both a nothingness (as far as the situation is concerned) and an enormous, uncontainable, immeasurable plenitude, which the situation and its “recount” in the state cannot contain, points to a way of grouping extant elements (be they people, objects, ideas, stars, affects, concepts, colours and/or their named or nameless parts) of the situation together in ways and *into* combinations that are impossible on the basis of the state’s ways of determining (in Badiou’s terms (re)counting) what belongs to the situation. For the state, therefore, the site is the name for nothingness; for a gap or a void.<sup>55</sup>

For Bartlett, the “site” of the Athenian situation is precisely *education* as a “capacity common to all.” (Bartlett, 78). In the Athenian polis, what counts *as* education is certainly not common to all, not only because it is far from accessible to everyone (think: women, slaves, the poor), but because, even if some second Cleisthenes were to suddenly declare a modern-day-democratic “universal right to education”, what passes for education would remain a “state” education, not because it was provided *by* the city (nothing could be further from Bartlett’s intentions than a Thatcherite paean to “privatised” education!) but because what would be taught would only be what *the city already claimed to know*. The knowledge of the city (and we must remember that both Plato and Bartlett understand that most education is civic education, in the sense of being *by* the city even when it is not obviously either funded, organised or directed to *the city*) is equivalent to the city’s values, its prejudices and its myths, in short, to the *Republic*’s famous cave.

At the same time, even the dissemination of less obviously ideological knowledge and techniques are nonetheless subordinated to as well as over-determined by the goal of allowing students to manage (“i.e. get by and get ahead”) in a world marked as well as riven by particular interests, hierarchies, and so much else that is irrelevant (as both Plato and Badiou never tire of reminding us) from the perspective of truth. But it is because, rather than despite the fact that Athens has no place for an “education by truths”, that education as a capacity (always, already common to all) can constitute a site, the “wandering spectre of the void” within the Athenian situation which qua void opens up the possibility of another Athens, the “just city” of Plato’s *Republic*.

Having identified the issue of education as the “site” of the Athenian situation, Bartlett then goes on to declare that each of Plato’s dialogues can be understood as an “event/intervention”, in which the figure of the void (represented by Socrates) encounters different aspects of the Athenian situation and its elements. (Thus, we will have Socrates arguing with military commanders like Nicias in the *Laches*, learning from Pericles’s mistress Aspasia in the *Menexenus*, confronting the great gathering of sophists and their students in the *Protagoras*, taming the ambitious Alcibiades in the *Symposium* by kindling a passion which the latter (for once) cannot satiate through charm or strength; and above all, in a scene that Bartlett turns into a kind of emblem of the dialogues, demonstrating that a slave whose ability to utilise a diagonal to solve a mathematical problem points not only to the indifference of every truth both to the distinctions which the city constantly affirms but to any predicate (any marker of identity or difference) by which one temporary loci of a truth process be distinguished from another.<sup>56</sup>

In every case, Bartlett, says, the point of the dialogues is to confront different aspects of the Athenian situation with that which exceeds it, points beyond it, portends an “in-common” that is unimaginable to the city. This

culminates in the moment where Socrates (significantly) in pursuit of the question of justice will attempt to found a *new city* in speech, a city which is “inexistent” (scandalous, impossible) to Athens and thus requires the “new idea” which Bartlett (as part of an exemplary reading of the *Republic*) sees adumbrated in the torch-race that the participants of the dialogue are promised, but which they do not get to see because the contained or gentrified “novelty” that they are expecting is replaced by an encounter with the genuinely new in the form of the idea of justice.<sup>57</sup> But, as Bartlett will later maintain, Plato’s republic is not a state, it is, rather:

the subjective exposure of its lack. It is not founded on the “prohibition of un-binding” but is instead a labour of love, a supplement to the lack of rapport. The Republic is realised as a counter-state: or, as we say, an ideal non-state. (Bartlett, 201)

Here, Bartlett mixes Lacan’s terminology with Badiou’s to speak of Plato’s Republic, not as an ideal state—which *qua* “state”, would function in Badiou’s terms to curb the excess (the capacity for “unbinding”) that lies at the heart of every situation, but as a name for the “generic extension”, i.e. a mixture of that which visibly belonged to the situation with that which is indiscernible to it in a mixture whose consistency is given only by a new *egalitarian* principle which is indifferent to identity and difference, privilege and its lack. In linking novelty and equality, Badiou’s point, among other things, is to suggest that equality cannot be reached by either the mere assertion of its existence (although this is often of tremendous importance) and especially not by pointing to some allegedly universal predicate *in respect of which people may be equal despite “Real Existing Inequality”*. Instead, Badiou, not only retains a Marxist suspicion of formal (‘liberal’ equality),<sup>58</sup> but like Giorgio Agamben is eminently aware of how the appeal to a “shared essence” (‘we are all human, mortal, fond of sex et cetera’) as a basis for equality often coincides with the common predicate being selectively *denied* as part of a suggestion that Our Enemy (via her mad religion, “culture” or ‘ideology’) should be regarded as *inhuman*—devoid of any trace of humanity and thus able to be killed without this genuinely constituting murder.

In his fourth chapter, called “fidelity”, Bartlett suggests that the “the operator of ‘faithful connection’ (to the Socrates-event) is the statement “I know nothing”. Here, Bartlett is not suggesting that fidelity to Plato (or the figure he will later call “Platocrates”) consists in the disingenuous “democratic” modesty that would profess ignorance as a way of having done with the rigours of inquiry while, at the same time, inviting popular acclaim for affirming the ridiculous, but nigh-on ubiquitous prejudice that thought is the enemy of equality rather than its pre-condition. On the contrary, for Bartlett, the formula “I know nothing” only deserves to be called an “operator of fidelity” (in Badiou’s sense) insofar as it signifies not the glib profession of an individual, but the continuation of a truth-process for which (as we have seen) the individual is a matter of indifference.

By “continuation of the Platonic enterprise” I do not, of course, mean Plato scholarship (however excellent or tedious this might be) but rather an existential and almost of necessity collective practice that begins, as Badiou would undoubtedly note, with the axiom of all Platonism: that there are truths, i.e. something more than either opinion or knowledge, insofar as these latter remain merely “state” concepts. Put differently, for Bartlett following Badiou, finds that both ubiquitous and (today piously fetishised) opinions and expert “knowledge” are always bound to the present state of things and its ways of ordering, accounting for, evaluating. Given this, the Platonic profession of ignorance is as incompatible with modesty as it is with complacent relativism, precisely because “Platonism” exists only to the extent that there are “subjects to truth”. Yes, there are bodies and languages, but there is also that which seizes bodies and electrifies them, that which forces languages into a poetic (or as Deleuze says) a properly philosophical stuttering.

In the fifth chapter of *An Education by Truths*, “Subject”, Bartlett turns to Plato scholarship and thus to the question of why Badiou’s work is so indispensable to restoring a vision of Plato, as neither a theologian, nor a “totalitarian”. At the same time, Bartlett mobilises his Badiouian Plato to reject the near ubiquitous tendency in Plato scholarship to oppose (in manner of Gregory Valstos and his [numerous] epigones) a “humanist, democratic” (i.e. good) Socrates—whose inquiries all terminate in *aporiai* and—a (bad) dogmatic Plato whose

“totalitarian leanings” apparently owe—as contemporary neo-Aristotelians are quick to insist—something to the Platonic devotion to mathematics. Contra Vlastos (a major target of Bartlett’s book), Bartlett offers a reading of Plato that affirms the latter’s (devastating) critique of the slave-owning and war-mongering democracy of Plato’s day, but that, at the same time, refuses to turn the author of the *Statesman* and the *Philebus* into either an embittered aristocrat waiting for a “benevolent tyrant” like Dionysos, or an “Aristophanic” defender of the pre-Periclean oligarchy.<sup>59</sup> To both of these visions, Bartlett opposes a *Badiouian* Plato, whose devotion to truth, and whose discovery of mathematics’ power to “punch a hole” (as Lacan says) in knowledge, offends present-day sensibilities as much as the egalitarian doctrines of the fifth book of the *Republic* would have scandalised his contemporaries.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, Bartlett shows, in great detail, but with no accompanying loss of depth, how much contemporary assumptions about what Plato (and even more so “Socrates”) actually says are over-determined by attitudes that resemble the sophistry of Plato’s day. This is not because there is nothing new under the sun, or that “human nature” allows for an unbroken line between Plato’s time and our own. Instead, it is because both the state of the Athenian situation and our own “state” (whose way of counting owes so much to the unfettered power of Capital and its own peculiar obsession with “counting”) both find ways to avoid the “Plato-event”, by attempting to measure the possibility of an “education by truths” in terms of the dominant opinions (and “knowledges”) of their respective epochs. Vlastos, for Bartlett, gives a paradigmatic demonstration of this tendency, insofar as his obvious discomfort with Plato’s refusal to equate justice with democracy, or opinions with truth leads him to perform a kind of Kleinian splitting of the Platonic corpus into Good (“democratic”) Socrates and Bad (“proto-totalitarian” and “overly-mathematical”) Plato. That so many of the great (for Vlastos “late”) dialogues become problematically “Platonic” as a result of this split is a further vindication of Bartlett’s argument for the way that the intervention represented by the dialogues provokes a kind of defensive scramble on behalf of what counts as knowledge in a given society or epoch—an attempt to shore up dominant opinions against their potential Platonic ruin. But though Bartlett is, of course, interested in bringing contemporary readers to take up the challenge of the dialogues, he is not motivated by any kind of antiquarian notion that they contain eternal truths of “human nature”, nor insights that require (in a Heideggerian vein) a “destructive-retrieval” to save us from some perceived epochal destitution.

Instead, Bartlett’s reading of the dialogues through Badiou makes Plato (as Badiou once said of St. Paul) a “poet-thinker of the event”, i.e. neither someone who presents an unassailable doctrine, nor a “predecessor” to whom we can continually embalm, so much the better to blithely ignore. Bartlett’s Plato is instead someone who recognised, in the life of Socrates, the shattering power of an event, which by pointing to the void of the (Athenian) situation, also opened on to the possibility of generic procedures, i.e. to *truths* of the amorous, scientific, artistic and political kind. Moreover, Bartlett/Badiou’s Plato is the first philosopher, to have brought the tension between all four “truth procedures” into a system that not only retains a fidelity to the particular truths which mobilise it, but that sets up a contest with sophistry and with the state that must be prosecuted precisely because truths (as Badiou never tires of pointing out) have a tendency to end their lives as *knowledge*, i.e. as something totally assimilated to a usually later version of the state which *qua* state holds back the paradoxical mixture of infinity and the void on which (for Badiou) the possibility of a truth depends.

In the last chapter, Bartlett turns to the question of education in our own time and its relationship to “The Republic of Plato” understood not so much as the name of Plato’s most famous dialogue, but as the “just city” for which, Bartlett insists, Socrates participates and which, for a subject to truth, is both something possible and worth working towards. (Bartlett, 202). As can be guessed by what has been said so far, on Bartlett’s assessment there are no policies, no tendencies, no extant practices of education in the present that he defends as fitting Plato’s attempt to both describe and make possible (through the dialogues) an education by truths, not least because (as the reader will remember) such an education would have to be generic in the sense that it would neither rely upon, nor serve the extant distinctions (especially of power and wealth) which our present societies love to multiply and render ever more visible and implacable.<sup>61</sup> In the end, however, what Bartlett wants to talk about is the way in which, today, we talk endlessly of education, vaguely approving

it, mechanically celebrating it, occasionally despairing over it; convening endlessly to discuss the reform of yesterday's reforms. In such discussions it is as if the apparently unequivocal good that the word "education" named was constantly on the point of expiring only to be saved at the last moment by a new deference to slogans which must sound shallow even to those who have invented them. Thus, as Bartlett is aware, our politicians never tire of or announcing the near-miraculous capacities of education to serve an ever increasing list of bureaucratically described and approved goods (Values! the Future! Creativity! Prosperity! Enjoyment!). But amidst all this triumphalist, chin-stroking and sloganeering discourse, Bartlett asks in his conclusion, does anyone ever take the time to ask the all-important, Socratic question "*what is education?*"

Responding to this question, Bartlett has no time for either conventionally "conservative" calls for a defence of some apparently glorious body of tradition, nor to "liberal" calls to cultivate "openness", or "respect for diversity"; nor for straightforwardly vacuous calls to cultivate whatever ponderous name for the promotion of Generalised Niceness has been deemed to be essential to the promotion of Imagination, Innovation or The Future of a Changing World. [sic] This is because, for Bartlett, no extant ideology or practice of education escapes Bartlett's verdict that today:

The Academy, at the absolute service of capital's power demands absolute subservience to what is— this *pensée unique*. The Academy today teaches exactly what the sophists of Plato's time did: how to make one's way in the world so that the world remains exactly as it is. (Bartlett, 192 n.33)

*An Education By Truths* is not, however, a book about pedagogy, nor does it seek to either praise or condemn the efforts of different teachers past and present. Instead, it is an "untimely" (in Nietzsche's sense) reminder that education cannot take place without a constant interrogation of what education is and what it is for. And this too is inseparable from the question (which haunts the Platonic dialogues) of who (a city, an individual, a set of laws) may be said, ultimately, to educate. By what right? To what end? For whose benefit?

For Bartlett, following Plato, education is, in the first place, the name for a 'void' in what counts as knowledge, i.e., something meaningless, invisible and, even in its effects, diagonal to what counts in the world as we know it, even and especially to what tends to count as education. But it is because and despite of this, that a genuine education (i.e. to an education by truths), can, like philosophy, be described in terms of the slogan of the old Communist Internationale: "We are nothing; we will be everything."<sup>62</sup> To paraphrase Badiou, education, like philosophy, is "logical revolt" (Rimbauld) wherever it is more than a Rameau's Nephew, i.e. a courtier to what exists as opposed to the void/infinity at the heart of this existence. As revolt, education is something which *begins* with a glimpse of another world at the heart of the one we know. However, what counts is not this initial erotic pull of transcendence, but rather, as Badiou ceaselessly tries to point out the tireless attempt to try and show how this other world consists in nothing more than elements that are already present (though indiscernible) in this one. The gambit of education, what Freud rightly called its "impossibility", rests on the notion that what Badiou has called the "fragile scintillation" of an event could be pursued in such a way that a myriad of things which have been separated by a thousand divisive predicates could find themselves conjoined in unprecedented, nameless and *newly divisive* combinations by which that which had been previously condemned to obscurity would become suddenly radiant in the light of a movement in thought which, without invoking any Absolute Beyond, nonetheless has no other purpose but to give rise to new ways of seeing, thinking and living in defiance of what passes for "fate" or "wisdom" in a world in which what Plato called the doctrine of the unfair share continues to reign supreme.

*There is no education but an education by truths*: this is something that is known to anyone who has ever had the good fortune to encounter a real teacher (whether it took the form of a book or a person, a lover or a work of art, a political struggle or a symphony). And if it takes a dead Greek and an elderly Frenchman to remind us of this, this is because education has always been something that happens to us more often despite rather than because of what goes by that name. For this reason, and only for this reason, it is even possible for suburban, unpolished Antipodeans, in the process of being taught how to mould jargon with which to confuse

those condemned to count for even less in the current state of things than they do, to not only, as they are supposed to, simulate the tawdriest and most hollow contemporary simulacrum of sophistication en route to lucrative careers, but to catch a glimpse, against all odds, of something like *philosophy*: a rock against which all knowledge breaks, a whirlpool in which all opinion is devoured, a properly collective task which neither death nor defeat interrupts.

BRYAN COOKE is the current Secretary of the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy. He is currently completing a doctoral dissertation on Badiou, Agamben, Deleuze and what he calls the Possibility of a contemporary “Rationalism of the Idea”.

NOTES

1. From the opening lines of Paul Valéry's *La Feuille Blanche* as translated by Peter Dale. The full stanza is: "IN TRUTH, A BLANK SHEET/DECLARES BY THE VOID/THAT THERE IS NOTHING AS BEAUTIFUL/AS THAT WHICH DOES NOT EXIST ("EN VERITÉ, UNE FEUILLE BLANCHE/NOUS DECLARE PAR LE VIDE/QU'IL N'EST RIEN DE SI BEAU/QUE CE QUI N'EXISTE PAS), in Paul Valéry, *Charms and Other Pieces: A bi-lingual edition*. Trans. Peter Dale. London: Anvil Press, 2008, 170-171.
2. See Nicholas Dames, "Theory And the Novel" *n+1 Number 14: Awkward Age* (Summer 2012, 157-169)
3. See Simon Glendenning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. The most subtle and profound account of this issue I know can be found in Sherah Bloor, *Sophistry and the Aporiai of Meta-philosophy: A Critical Account of the Analytic-Continental Divide* (unpublished master's thesis). Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2012
4. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009.
5. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* Trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1998, 262
6. This is not an exact quotation, but rather an interpretative collage of a number of motifs from the "theses on the philosophy of history" c.f. Benjamin, "Thesis" 261, 255.
7. I owe this term, which aptly describes a prevalent breathlessness in the face of "cultural" particulars over claims to universality, to Justin Clemens.
8. Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011, ix. All subsequent parenthetical references to "Bosteels" in the text are to this work.
9. c.f. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 33
10. The fourth condition is what Badiou names "science". As several critics have pointed out, Badiou most often uses this term to refer to mathematics, rather than, say, to physics or (even more so) an empirical science like biology. While there are reasons for this within Badiou's philosophy (what might be termed his 'rationalism' over his empiricism), I would argue that it is no accident that Badiou insists on the broader term (science). On the topic of the conditions, a formal, difficult and (without context arcane) account of Badiou's sense of the word can be found in Meditation 33 of *Being and Event* as a preliminary to Badiou's account of the generic extension, see Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* Trans. Oliver Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005, 355-371. For a (much) more straightforward and less formal introduction to the conditions as conditions of *philosophy*, see Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Trans. Norman Madarasz. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.
11. For a luminous argument on Badiou's insistence on the need for philosophy not to 'suture' itself to a single condition, see Alenka Zupancic "The Fifth Condition" *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* ed. Peter Hallward. London and New York: Continuum, 2004, 191-201.
12. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*. Trans. Jason Barker. London, Verso: 2011, xxxi C.f. Badiou's emphasis on the compossibility of the four generic procedures in Badiou, *Manifesto*, 20, 37, 82
13. On Arendt's anti-Platonism see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. New York: Double Day Anchor Books, 1959, 199-203
14. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 2-5
15. Quentin Meillassoux has recently devoted a closely-reasoned and influential polemic against the often-taken for granted notion that thought and experience are (to use Heidegger's formula 'always, already' [*immer schon*] within a subject-object/mind-world correlate of this sort. The remarkable ambition of Meillassoux's text, however, is not only to dislodge a philosophical dogma, but to open the way for a new, speculative philosophy, shorn of what Badiou (Meillassoux's doctoral supervisor) would call 'finist' pieties. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.
16. Like the corresponding category of 'set', which it defines and by which it is defined, 'belonging', as a purely abstract category operates (like most mathematics) without the need to appeal to any intuitive definitions of what it means 'to belong' or what kind of entities are being inscribed as belonging to a given set. The advantage of this is that the laws of set theory apply irrespective of whether we are dealing with stars, cats, portions of a cat's genome, aspects of quarks, unicorn-hallucinations et cetera. Put differently, what makes set theory so utterly useless for describing 'what there is in the world' (i.e. the poorest of poor substitutes for physics, chemistry or metaphysics) makes it perfect for *ontology* in Badiou's sense, because it allows us not to *describe*, but to *inscribe* what Badiou calls the 'presentation' of 'Being' as *such*. By the opening gambit of *Being and Event*, "Being" is defined as 'inconsistent multiplicity', i.e. as 'multiplicity without the one'. What set theory allows us to do is to think this (intuitively mind-boggling) reality, by showing how the 'presentation' (structure, unity, i.e. oneness) that pertains to everything that is manifest as a *being* (of any kind) is in fact the result of an *operation*, what Badiou calls the 'count-as-one' rather than an intrinsic property of reality. For a less cursory account of this see, Badiou, *Being and Event*, 23-48. Note, that the relation of 'inclusion' is dependent upon (and thus secondary) to belonging.
17. Peter Hallward, "Order and Event" *New Left Review* 53 (September-October, 2008, 97-122)

18. Slavoj Žižek "On Alain Badiou and *Logiques des Mondes*". 2007 <http://www.lacan.com/zizbadman.htm>
19. This is a major part of the argument of Hallward, "Order and Event". c.f. John Milbank "The Return of Mediation: Or the Ambivalence of Alain Badiou", *Angelaki* 12:1 (April 2007, 128-143)
20. Adrian Johnston *Badiou, Žižek and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009.
21. "In minimalizing the importance of the mathematical framework, then, am I not disabling a proper understanding of this thinker's singularity, or worse, falling into the traps of vulgar cultural bias for which mathematics is either too hermetic and coldly abstract or else, in a politically correct inversion of the same bias, too masculine, falsely universalist but actually elitist, and at bottom Eurocentric?" (Bosteels, 33). This passage is marked by a strange rhetorical inflation, whereby a serious (and I would argue legitimate) objection to Bosteel's procedure is appended, for no discernible reason, to an incoherent and indeed ridiculous accusation, which distracts from the original objection without answering it. Thus, at the beginning of this passage Bosteels's imagined critic makes the perfectly reasonable objection that by neglecting Badiou's mathematics, the author of Badiou and Politics is in danger of both 'disabling a proper understanding of [Badiou's] singularity' through capitulating to the 'vulgar cultural bias' whereby mathematics is '...too hermetic and coldly abstract...'. But, what is the 'inversion of this bias', whereby mathematics is described as too 'masculine', 'elitist' and 'Eurocentric'? Granting, with some chagrin, that this might constitute somebody's (peculiarly incoherent) objection to discussing mathematics in relation to politics, why would anyone suggest that by neglecting Badiou's mathematics Bosteels must be guilty of supporting this (utterly bizarre) position? Further, and more importantly, what does this have to do with the important issue of whether Bosteels's neglect of mathematics is a serious problem for his reading of and presentation of Badiou on politics? Here, the serious objection is deflected by way of its connection an additional criticism that, as Bosteels is clearly aware, is too silly to deserve a response.
23. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, xviii
24. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 391 c.f. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward, London: Verso, 44-46
25. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum, 2009, 4.
26. I take it as given that much of the grandeur of *Being and Event* comes from precisely the attempt to ground these points as more than a matter of rhetoric. In addition, Bosteels curiously fails to mention the claims of Badiou's extremely important essay "Philosophy and Mathematics: Infinity and the End of Romanticism" see Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, Trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, Eds., London: Continuum, 2004.
27. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 45-76; 77-109
28. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*., 179-186
29. For the context of Žižek's remark ("Perhaps the ultimate image of the 'local population' as *homo sacer* is that of the American war plane flying above Afghanistan: one can never be sure whether it will be dropping bombs or food parcels") see Slavoj Žižek "Are we in a War? Do we Have an Enemy?" *London Review of Books* 24:10 (May 23, 2002, 3-6). The image of the planetary casino, though doubtless too observable to really require citation was a favourite of the late Cornelius Castoriadis.
30. See for instance Bruno Bosteels "On the Subject of the Dialectic" in Hallward, *Think Again*, 150-164. C.f. Bruno Bosteels "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: The Re-commencement of Dialectical Materialism?" *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2001, 200-229) and (2002: 173-208).
31. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 6-7; 141-150 c.f. Daniel Bensaïd "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event", in Hallward, *Think Again*, 94-106. To re-iterate, I consider Bosteels' criticisms of Bensaïd to be entirely justified.
32. Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 42
33. See Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 140-143.
34. See for instance Alain Badiou, *The Century*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007, 58-68.
35. Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 167. C.f. Slavoj Žižek *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999, 155-170.
36. Badiou, *Manifesto*, 51-52. C.f. Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*. Trans and Ed. Bruno Bosteels. London: Verso, 216-222
37. See Badiou, *Being and Event*, 81-103
38. For some examples see Theodor Adorno *Negative Dialectics* trans. E.B. Ashton. London: Continuum, 2007, 11-12, 92-93
39. On this point: why else did Lenin turn to *The Science of Logic* in a moment of revolutionary defeat, rather than say, what must have been the numerous pamphlets directed to the current troubles of the Communist Movement and the situation in Russia in particular. Why did the return of the Medici to Florence provoke Machiavelli's study of Livy's histories?
40. In calling something 'singular', we attempt to designate the fact that it is incomparable to anything else. However, like all concepts which attempt to grasp singularity, the idea of the 'singular' is a formal concept that, precisely as such, could apply to any number of things. Hegel points out this problem in the famous disquisition on immediacy and deixis in the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977

## BOSTEELS, BADIOU AND POLITICS AND BARTLETT, BADIOU AND PLATO

---

41. See Agamben, *Idea of Prose*. Trans. M. Sullivan and S. Whitsitt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 63-64 c.f. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933, 3-22.
42. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
43. Oliver Feltham, *Badiou: Live Theory*. London: Continuum, 2008.
44. Jason Barker, *Badiou: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.
45. Ed Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*. Cambridge: UK, Polity Press, 2010
46. On this topic see Bertrand Russel's remark: "It has always been correct to praise Plato, but not to understand him. This is the common fate of great men. But my view is the opposite. I wish to understand him, *but to treat him with as little reverence as if he were a contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism.*" The paratactical connection between clauses in the last sentence speaks volumes. Bertrand Russel *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1946, 125.
47. A.J. Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato: An Education by Truths*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 1. All subsequent parenthetical references to "Bartlett" in the text are to this work. The original quotation in English is in Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
48. Unfortunately exemplifying the pitfalls of such an approach see Kent den Heyer Ed. *Thinking Education Through Alain Badiou*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
49. Badiou, *Manifesto*, 27
50. Badiou, *Manifesto*, 61-67
51. C.f. Badiou's epilogue to his recent "hyper-translation" of Plato's *Republic*. Alain Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters*. Trans. Susan Spitzer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 337-354.
52. For example, Sean Bowden and Simon Duffy remark in a lucid introduction to an otherwise fine collection speak of how "Plato, Descartes and Hegel are singled out by Badiou, in typical exaggerated fashion, as the only crucial philosophers." (Sean Bowden and Simon Duffy Eds, *Badiou and Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). It is tempting to paraphrase Adorno in saying that in Badiou "only the exaggerations are true."
53. On Socrates accusers see Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 31; n35, 66.
54. On Badiou's use of the term "state" and its relation to the Athenian state see Bartlett, *An Education*, 33-67.
55. Formally speaking, Badiou relates the 'site' to the requirement in set theory, that every set include the null-set as one of its members. For Badiou, the null-set or the void is the 'proper name of Being', i.e. the marker within ontology of being understood as 'inconsistent multiplicity'. The fact that this mark belongs to any and all possible sets is for Badiou a formal inscription of the fact that 'any situation contains within itself its own void, the marker of its own destitution, finitude, in the form of an index to that which exceeds its ways of counting that which belongs to it.' For an excellent political analogy of Badiou's use of the term site, see Oliver Feltham's "Translator's Preface" to Badiou, *Being and Event*, xxv
56. The *Meno*, the slave-boy, and the latter's 'diagonal proof' is, for Bartlett, an absolutely crucial, revolutionary moment in the Platonic *oeuvre*. See Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 135-140, 173; n12, 63. C.f. Bartlett's extraordinarily ingenious reading of the *Cratylus*. (Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 151-155.)
57. Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 104-106.
58. Badiou often points to the importance of political axioms and their declaration, e.g. "All human beings are equal...", "Everyone who is here is from here...", "The capacity to thought is held in common by any and all human beings...", etc. At the same time, he shares the Marxist suspicion that "state" declarations of equality tend to cover over actual inequalities (or injustices) which therefore require other declarations, and other activities to bring out the truth of the original declaration which exists in only a reduced, ossified, obfuscated or repressed institutional or state form. For a pertinent example, consider the pious rhetoric of any and all Western governments about 'the right of all citizen's to education', alongside the awareness that "education", like "income" tends, for the most part, to be distributed along obvious class lines.
59. An attenuated version of the latter position (and not, as a certain popular wisdom has it, the former), seems to be implied in Leo Strauss's *The City and Man*, Chicago: University Chicago Press, 50-139. In contrast to a figure like Vlastos, Strauss's interpretation has the merit of being attentive both to Plato's scathing criticisms of democracy in the *Republic* and the fact that democracy is nonetheless the second-best regime, while also refraining from immediately equating, like Popper, Russell and Vlastos the *Republic* with a blue-print or inspiration for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarian State. However, this break with *bien pensant* opinion does not, from Bartlett/Badiou's perspective go nearly far enough, insofar as it maintains that philosophy is fundamentally about opinion and its clashes, and thus that it is a realm impervious to truth. It is interesting to consider, in the light of Bartlett's work that Strauss's tendency from consigning (in a manner which could not be less like Badiou's) the "communist" aspect of Plato's thought to the realm of satire or "utopia", seems to share with Vlastos's otherwise incompatible liberalism the belief that Plato cannot be taken seriously when he emphasises either mathematics or equality.
60. These doctrines (particularly the claims of communism, equality between the sexes and philosopher-Kings) famously scandalise Glaucon, Adeimantus and the others in attendance during the dialogue. See Plato, *Republic* 457a C.f. Badiou, *Plato's Republic*, 186-196
61. Giving the lie to Bosteels's assertions about a division between politically and mathematically inclined Badiou's scholars,

Bartlett's account of the "generic procedures" is extraordinarily successful in integrating Badiou's mathematical definitions of concepts like 'generic procedure', 'condition' and 'state' into an interpretation of Badiou, Plato, Plato-scholarship and the 'state of education today'. This is particularly manifest in his book's last chapter entitled "Generic" (Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 196-226.)

62. For an exemplary account of how this is more than a slogan, i.e. 'because the movement it prescribes has ontological support', see Bartlett, *Badiou and Plato*, 205