

## PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTION: BADIOU'S INFIDELITY TO THE EVENT

Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos

**ABSTRACT:** Our aim in this paper is to give reasons for thinking that Badiou's philosophy is not prepared to follow through all the consequences of the historical retreat of the political event. We want to suggest that it is important to come to terms with the implications of this retreat as no less a revolutionary aspect of the revolution. Whereas fidelity to the event demands that we not be selective in following the consequences of an event, fidelity to the event's retreat points to a more direct relation of philosophy to the event than Badiou allows. In the first section of our paper we outline the philosophical orientation that informs our encounter with Badiou's thought. In the second we examine the relationship between philosophy and the political event in order to set the context for the elaboration of our claim in the third section that fidelity to the event calls for attention not only to the demands of its emergence but also to those associated with the event's retreat. In the final section we indicate how the retreat of the political event might give rise to the philosophical subject and to the requirements of a philosophy of the event.

**KEYWORDS:** Badiou; Hegel; Philosophy; Revolution; Fidelity; Subject; Event; Political Event

### INTRODUCTION

This paper offers some preliminary thoughts that spring from a first encounter with Badiou's philosophy.<sup>1</sup> They are also preliminary in a second, more fundamental sense, given that any encounter with genuine thinkers is always a deferral that takes the form of a promise for, and anticipation of, what will become a more radical and revealing engagement in some future reading. Indeed the practice of revisiting the intellectual landscapes of our fellow thinkers would not eventuate but for the recognition of the essentially preliminary and preparatory nature of previous visits.

This said, where do we encounter a philosopher philosophically and why do we do so in a certain way rather than some other? This is an unavoidable question especially when one tries to come to terms with the thought of philosophers like Badiou whose work addresses fundamental questions. It is unavoidable no less because Badiou's work encourages us to move beyond merely external or arbitrary encounters to what is properly philosophical. This is why the question we pose is also one of the hardest to answer.

---

1. We would like to thank Paul Ashton for introducing us to the work of Alain Badiou.

Heidegger teaches that the encounter with other thinkers becomes necessary through the question of being and the thinking associated with it, irrespective of whether they belong to the ‘first beginning’ or whether they are the last metaphysicians. Hegel teaches that such an encounter takes place in the gathering of the ‘we’ whose very idea is paradigmatically articulated by heroes of the pantheon of philosophy. In our encounter with Badiou we follow Hegel largely due to our political history, or in Badiou’s terms, due to our constitution as political subjects through fidelity to the consequences of the event of the Russian Revolution. For Badiou, of course, to become a political subject is to be constituted in relation to an event—a self-founding or unfounded historical entity that breaks radically with the situation from which it erupts—as the bearer of a truth process who is called upon to maintain an enduring fidelity to the event and its commands. But, we also follow Hegel as a result of a certain experience not only of the constitution but also of the ultimate retreat of the revolutionary project and of the collapse of the collective *as such*. This experience situates us within—or perhaps, throws us into—what we conceptualize as a speculative perspective. We read Hegel’s thought as the result and philosophical expression of a combination of the revolutionary explosion of the gathering ‘we’ and the no less revolutionary implosion or retreat of the project of unconditional solidarity that the French Revolution introduced.

It is from within the abovementioned particular form of philosophical engagement with our political being that we come to explore the conceptual spaces that constitute Badiou’s thinking. Here we find something at once familiar and appealing but also something that we suspect ultimately fails to do justice to the radical demands that the political event makes upon us. Very briefly, our aim in this paper is to give reasons for thinking that Badiou’s philosophy does not seem prepared to follow through all the consequences of the historical retreat of the political event. From our perspective there does not seem to be enough room in his philosophy for the accommodation of the ‘darkness’ often encountered in poetry that directly relates the thinker to the historical retreat of the revolutionary project. We want to suggest that it is important to come to terms with the implications of this retreat as no less a revolutionary aspect of the revolution. If, as Badiou insists, the event and one’s loving relation to it unconditionally demand an unconditional fidelity then, contrary to the import of Badiou’s account of evil, this would tell against any show of eclecticism or any insistence on distinguishing between what is and what is not acceptable from amongst the consequences of an event. Fidelity to the event’s retreat also points to a more direct relation of philosophy to the event than Badiou allows. Rather than thinking the conditions that are given to it from beyond itself, if philosophical thinking conceptualizes the evental nature of the event then it must think itself as its own condition. In what follows we will develop these points in four sections. Whereas the first section outlines the philosophical orientation that informs our encounter with Badiou’s thought, the second examines the relationship between philosophy and the political event in order to set the context for the elaboration of our claim in the third section that fidelity to the event calls for attention not only to the demands of its emergence but also to those associated with the event’s retreat. In the final section we

indicate how the retreat of the political event might give rise to the philosophical subject and to the requirements of a philosophy of the event.

## I. READING BADIOU WITH HEGEL

Bearing in mind our comments above concerning Hegel and the gathering of the ‘we’ as the condition of philosophy, we can begin by noting that Plato is possibly the first philosopher as such precisely because, in dramatizing Socrates’ dialogical encounter with his friends, Plato identified the aim of philosophy with the problem of revealing the meaning of the gathering and its form with the gathering itself. It is no accident that in *The Republic* the gathering of Socrates and his friends presents justice as the very meaning of gathering, a gathering whose depth enables us to relate our collective being to the world as a whole. Of course Plato comes after Socrates, who is not only the one who does not write (Nietzsche) but is also the one who gathers in the public spaces of the city. In his uniqueness Socrates becomes a public thinker by creating the space of thinking within the city in which, his friends, the lovers of the philosopher, gather and dwell.

Still we have to wait until Aristotle for philosophical thought to leave behind Socrates’ gathering in the actual space of the city, and Plato’s theatrical dramatization of the gathering, in order to enter the genuine form of philosophy, the philosophical ‘we’ that identifies the soul of the thinker in exile from the city—an exile that Plato already highlighted in *The Republic*—as its proper and only place. We should stress that when in his deliberations the philosopher pronounces the ‘we’ he does not just reveal the inherently democratic or egalitarian space of philosophy. Rather, in the philosophical pronouncement of the ‘we’ by the singular subject whose horizon is the already alienated practice of the gathering of the collective from the democratic space of the city, the ‘we’ actually becomes or happens in its very idea or principle. Ultimately the philosopher produces the ideal of the collective as a direct articulation of the principle of the gathering ‘we’ and this process achieves a relation of critical understanding between the philosopher and reality. From the beginning then, philosophy explores the conceptual spaces beyond the positivity of the given world and attempts to make sense of the relation between the ideal of the revolutionary vision and the essentially lifeless reality of the polis. One can find traces of this tendency in Heraclitus’ thought as well. So according to our story, under political conditions that deny the ‘we’ its reality, the exiled philosopher explores the ‘mystery’ associated with what is absolutely singular, namely the subject who can also pronounce and announce the ‘we’. In the words of the poet, Tasos Livadites: ‘the beautiful mystery of being alone, the mystery of the two, or the great mystery of the gathering of us all.’<sup>2</sup> How is it that the subject can make such an announcement? In our view this has to do with the power to withstand the tension between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ that is indispensable for functioning as a genuine ego in the sense of being the place of dwelling and gathering of every other ego. Indeed, singularity, contra Levinas, is encountered as the power of universal love to accommodate a world, the world of the gathering ‘we’.

2. Tasos Livadites, *Small Book for Large Dreams (Greek)*, Athens, Kethros, 1987, p. 17.

Elsewhere we have analysed this power in terms of the idea of (e)merging selves who unceasingly form as the collective in the processes of their merging/emerging.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Greeks, western history can be understood as the yet to be resolved tension between a world that produces the revolutionary idea of the gathering 'we' and at the same time constructs itself as the reality that denies the idea its actualization. Again Plato's *Republic* is the first philosophical work that registers this tension. In this history we can discern three stages that are characterized by three great commands of the gathering 'we'. The first and second stages are respectively associated with Greek philosophy and Christianity and they respectively invoke the commands 'know yourself' and 'love each other'. The third that was marked by the French Revolution invokes the command 'be as free and equal in a manner that is determined by solidarity' or what we can reformulate as 'be as a world'. What we want to suggest is that the constitution of the collective as such should be understood as the response of mutually encountering subjects to the command 'be as a world' that the encounter itself is. Here we have the ideal of the unconditional solidarity of people who dwell in each other and who equally and freely involve themselves in the project of creating a world. Other forms of encounter, for example love, are equally important but limited responses and formulations of this command.

It is important to stress at this point that the essence of the command 'be as a world' is to be eternal, and eternally revolutionary, that is indeterminate or *skotimos* (dark). In its absolute indeterminacy or simplicity it helps to constitute the collective but it says nothing about how to actually create a world. In other words the collective that is constituted as a response to the command is the formless gathering of the 'we' whose aim is to create form out of such formlessness. This creation of form is a radically open process because its telos is not to overcome formlessness but to remain informed by it. In this sense the command is eternally revolutionary because it takes the collective beyond the created world in order for it to recognize its source and thus always to be creatively recreated as the sole responsibility of the participating subjects. Against this background we turn to Badiou's philosophy and to the questions that his thought raises for us.

## II. PHILOSOPHY AND ITS POLITICAL CONDITION

According to Badiou,

The specific role of philosophy is to propose a unified conceptual space in which naming takes place of events that serve as the point of departure for truth procedures. Philosophy seeks to *gather together all the additional-names*. It deals within thought with the compossible nature of the procedures that condition it. It does not establish any truth but it sets a locus of truths. It configures the generic procedures, through a welcoming, a sheltering, built up with reference to their disparate simultaneity. Philosophy sets out to think its time by putting the state

---

3. Toulou Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, 'Inquiry into Hope', *Critical and Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 1-7.

of procedures conditioning it into a common place. Its operations, whatever they may be, always aim to think ‘together’ to configurate within a unique exercise of thought the epochal disposition of the matheme, poem, political invention and love [...]. In this sense, philosophy’s sole question is indeed that of the truth. Not that it produces any, but because it offers access to the unity of a moment of truths, a conceptual site in which the generic procedures are thought of as compossible.<sup>4</sup>

Badiou’s philosophy belongs to the great modern tradition of theorizing the constitution and the historical significance of the collective, a collective that takes shape in response to a radical break with the status quo. For Badiou this theorizing is a matter of making possible the ‘saying together’ of the truths seized from philosophy’s conditions. Indeed, ‘philosophy is the locus of thinking within which ‘there are’ truths is stated along with their compossibility’ (M 141-142). So it is the supply of just this sort of ‘welcoming’ space equally to all four conditions that distinguishes philosophical thought.

Yet, if we read Badiou’s four conditions of philosophy—politics, love, art and science—as forms of the gathering, politics turns out to be primary for philosophy. Politics, according to Badiou, does have a special distinction as evidenced by those rare political orientations in recent history ‘that have had or will have a connection with truth, a truth of the collective as such.’<sup>5</sup> In his *Metapolitics* Badiou notes that whereas ‘science, love and art are aristocratic truth procedures’ in that they require only ‘the two’, or no one in the case of the artist, ‘politics is impossible without the statement that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that constitutes the post-evental political subject.’<sup>6</sup> Indeed, ‘that the political event is collective prescribes that all are the virtual militants of the thought that proceeds on the basis of the event’ (M 142). The political event is thus the event whose material is collective in an ‘immediately universalizing’ sense. In acknowledging that it ‘belongs to all’ the political event manifests the intrinsic universality peculiar to this condition: ‘only politics is intrinsically required to declare that the thought that it is is the thought of all. This declaration is its constitutive pre-requisite’ (M 141-142). So, in our terms we can say that even though love is no less a form of gathering it is radical politics that introduces and practices the very idea of the gathering ‘we’ as a universal collective. Here we are reminded once again of the words of the poet, Livadites cited above.

Now if we focus on philosophy in so far as it is thinking in relation to political thought and if thought is understood as a ‘capacity which is specifically human’ and defined as ‘nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal’ (IT 71), what is the precise relation between politics and philosophy? For Badiou philosophy depends upon the unfolding of radical politics (just as it does on the other three conditions) in order for it to think. However, radical political orientations can per-

4. Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 37 (henceforth MP).

5. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2003, p. 70 (henceforth IT).

6. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London, Verso, 2005, p. 142 (henceforth M).

form the role of a condition for philosophy's thinking, not because they 'trace a destiny' or because 'they construct a monumental history' but because they have 'a connection with a truth, a truth of the collective as such' (IT 70). If it is indeed correct that the political understood in terms of the procedure that generates 'a truth of the collective as such' is a paradigmatic expression of thought then there must be something more primordial in philosophy's association with politics as compared with its other three conditions. Philosophy's thinking can be practiced unconditionally only if it is directed to thought as such just as it is politics' association with philosophy that can affirm politics' thought as being universal or the thought of the collective as such. Badiou articulates the relation between politics and philosophy via a 'general axiom' that bears some resemblance with the command 'be as a world'. He insists 'for a political orientation to be worthy of submission to philosophy under the idea 'justice', its unique general axiom must be: people think, people are capable of truth' (IT 71). So, the specific political orientation is suitable to be elevated to a condition of philosophy in that it bears the general axiom. Through this association political thought can be affirmed in philosophy's thinking and presumably the criterion for submitting one political orientation to philosophy rather than some other must be a matter for philosophy rather than politics since the actual practice of radical politics does not depend upon philosophy. Indeed philosophy's evaluative role is its distinctive service to thought according to Badiou. In particular:

the distinctive service that philosophy renders thought is the evaluation of time.  
The issue is whether we can say, and according to what principles, that this time,  
our time, has value.<sup>7</sup>

Now, if we can test the radicality of a political orientation by submitting it to philosophy's thinking this raises the question: what is the test for the radicality of philosophy's thinking? Badiou's own criterion of adequacy for philosophical thought seems modestly oriented. For him 'philosophical concepts weave a general space in which thought accedes to time, to its time, so long as the truth procedures of this time find shelter for their compossibility within it' (MP 38). So, Badiou's focus is on maintaining a certain relation between the truth procedures. We might say that philosophy does well when it ensures that truth procedures are not placed so as to cancel each other out.

Yet, if we say with Badiou that philosophy activates its thinking when its conditions are available it must equally be correct to say that philosophy's thinking must nevertheless affirm the authenticity of its conditions as a precondition for its activation. So philosophy must already include within itself, quite apart from its conditions, criteria of adequacy for what is to be thought in order to prepare the space of the thinking 'together' of its conditions. Consequently just as philosophy depends upon the readiness of its conditions in order to think them, so too these conditions presuppose philosophy's prior readiness.

If this is correct then philosophy must have access to its adequacy criteria prior to

---

7. Badiou, Alain & Sedofsky, Lauren, 'Being by Numbers', *Artforum*, Oct, 1994, <http://www.highbeam.com/library/docFree.asp?DOCID=1G1:16315394>

engaging in the act of seizing its truths. This we suggest is possible when philosophy has direct access to the political event unmediated by its four conditions. The political event has primacy here in so far as philosophy's thinking is primarily the thinking of the collective as such in which case access to the command or the general axiom becomes crucial for the constitution of such thinking. In other words philosophy must have a more primordial relation to the political event, the event that harbours the 'great mystery', as a pre-requisite for its activation.

Accordingly, if philosophy is the general theory of the event, as Badiou insists, it must also be *of* the event in the sense that it belongs to the event. From our discussion so far we can note that any articulation of what happens in the practice of philosophical thinking presupposes some account of how this thinking is activated and where it takes place. That is, the question of philosophy's own site and the process of its own generation becomes a pressing issue. Here our attention is directed away from the conditions of philosophy whose compossibility philosophy must think to the condition of philosophy understood as that *in which* philosophy happens. So, in the first instance, the primary challenge is to determine not what philosophy thinks or how it 'welcomes' its multiple conditions but where one encounters philosophy or, in Badiou's terms, how the subject of philosophy is constituted.

Like Badiou we believe that radical philosophy, or a properly philosophical project, relates somehow to the radicality of the event. From our perspective the activation of a philosophical orientation is a matter of appreciating the command 'be as a world' and the indeterminate gathering 'we' that is constituted as a response to this command. This means that the collective as such—the collective that the political event manifests—must be available to philosophy as its place of activation. So, the would-be philosopher is somehow related to a real process of fidelity to a singular political event. This is important because it is only through such relating that one is exposed to the experience of the collective as such. One can participate in poetry by appreciating a poem someone else has written but one cannot have the fundamental sense of the collective without being engaged, at some level, with the being of the collective in its different manifestations.

To be sure, mere involvement in the usual forms of political activism is not sufficient. The radical personal transformation that Badiou rightly thinks is associated with revolutionary politics is directly connected, we believe, to a certain dynamic interaction between life and death. Ultimately fidelity to the political event, in Badiou's sense of thinking the situation according to the event, is grounded on one's deeply held belief that, if the need arises, one is prepared to die for the cause and one's comrades. To put it more dramatically, one is able truly to imagine that one has already died for the cause even if this might not actually eventuate when the opportunity arises. This is important for two reasons.

On the one hand, the political event and fidelity to it claim one as a whole. Consequently nothing, not even life itself, can be taken as a given. Life, in the radical sense of committed presence as such as a precondition for engagement with anything specific, is claimed through death. Thus the conviction that, given the need, one will die for the

cause is the point of entry, so to speak, into the truth process. Indeed, with the poet Livadites we can say ‘and if we don’t die for each other we are already dead.’<sup>8</sup> This conviction decisively characterizes a fundamental aspect of the process of fidelity to the political event.

On the other hand, death is the ultimate site of gathering for the living. In the collective ethos of those who respond to any form of the command ‘be as a world’ sacrifice becomes the ultimate realization of the subject as a place of dwelling and of others’ gathering. In these circumstances even one’s absolute absence is significant as a place of gathering. It is no accident that the three commands we mentioned above are directly associated with sacrifice (Socrates, Christ, and so on). So, a certain political participation functions as a precondition for becoming philosophical in so far as the latter relies upon the experience of the collective as such. In order to elaborate our claim that the political subject becomes philosophical as an outcome of remaining faithful to the full implications of the emergence of the political event, in the next section we turn to an exploration of Badiou’s claims regarding the ethic of perseverance that informs the political subject’s fidelity to the event.

### III. THE RETREAT OF THE POLITICAL EVENT AND THE EVENT AS RETREAT

There is always only one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?<sup>9</sup>

The Immortal that I am capable of being [...] must be *directly* seized by fidelity. That is to say: broken, in its multiple being, by the course of an immanent break, and convoked [*requis*], finally, with or without knowing it, by the evental supplement. To enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that *happens to you* (E 51).

Once composed, the subject must struggle to maintain her infinite dimension, the dimension brought into being by a truth procedure, and for Badiou this struggle is informed by the maxim ‘keep going’ (E 52). Fidelity to the event, moreover, calls for a ‘decision to relate henceforth to the situation from the perspective of its evental [...] supplement’ (E 41). ‘An evental fidelity is a real break (both thought and practiced) in the specific order in which the event took place’, a break that produces a truth in the situation:

Essentially, a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the evental

8. Livadites, *Small Book for Large Dreams*, p. 43.

9. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, London, Verso, 2001, p. 52 (henceforth E).

supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break*. ‘Immanent’ because a truth proceeds *in* the situation, [...] ‘Break’ because what enables the truth- process—the event—meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation (E 42-43).

In introducing something new an event always emerges in a specific situation and is dependent for this on the edge of the void or more specifically what Badiou terms an ‘evental site’. By this he means:

an entirely abnormal multiple; that is, a multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation. The site, itself, is presented, but ‘beneath’ it nothing from which it is composed is presented.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst it is the situation’s evental site—in Badiou’s sense of a site that at once belongs to the situation without also having discernable elements in common with the latter—that ensures its specificity, the unnameable of the situation, that which falls beyond its knowledge regime, ensures the continuation of truth processes.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, for Badiou fidelity to the political event calls, not only for perseverance in following through the consequences of the event, but also for an acceptance of the unnameable orientation of a truth such that the subject cannot properly define the collective as a matter of engaging in politics or thinking as the collective. For a subject to name the collective therefore is to practice an evil in Badiou’s sense of a corruption of the truth of the given political sequence. By linking the occurrence of political evil to a specific subject’s orientation through the specific relation to a truth, Badiou provides a rationale for his ethic of perseverance as expressed in the maxim ‘keep going’ that by-passes the worry that the political evils of recent history might be evidence of a flaw in the very character of the political event understood as the idea of the revolutionary project itself.

Now, if we can imagine the subject of politics, say the revolutionary party, to fail to remain faithful to the event to which it owes its origin, through an act of corruption of the truth of which it is the bearer, is it also conceivable that fidelity to the event may call for a faithful response to the fact of *the event’s retreat* no less than to the overwhelming seizure associated with its emergence? If political truths escape the logic that structures the specific situation through processes of subtraction from the particularity of the known, as Badiou insists, they must nevertheless remain true to the event from which they originate even when the evental supplement has receded historically and not for want of willing truth bearers. We suspect that because Badiou’s theory of the event does not propose an account of the political event’s *retreat* in the sense of the collapse of the revolutionary project but only of its emergence, his discussion of the questions of fidelity in the circumstances of today’s world ultimately leads him to lose sight of that which was at the heart of the revolutionary project, namely bringing about a new world in response

10. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005, p. 175.

11. See Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 255-70.

to the current circumstances of the world. Instead, on his analysis the world is reduced to a stage, whatever the circumstances, for the perpetuation of the revolutionary subject's thinking (doing). We would like to lend some force to this critical observation by attempting to outline an account of the possibility of philosophy as a response to the retreat of the political event.

Bearing in mind our discussion in the first section of our paper we can pose the following question. What if in modern times, our times, in so far as it relies on an evental site in a specific situation every political event sequence also explicitly or implicitly invokes a tension between the source of the command 'be as a world' and that of the prevailing logic of the situation to which every political truth sequence poses its challenge? Let us follow through the implications of this suggestion along with Badiou. Viewed from the regime of knowledge that structures the specific situation of liberal-capitalism the political event and what this event signifies for its revolutionary subjects is nothing tangible, nothing that the cognitive net of the situation can get a hold of. But could the significance of this 'nothing' lie in the fact that instead of challenging the situation by way of an 'immanent break' this 'nothing' constitutes an integral part of the situation in the sense that the situation relies upon it for its completion? How might we differentiate between a challenge to the situation in Badiou's sense of an immanent break and the situation taken as posing to itself the historical challenge to accommodate that which presents to it as 'nothing'? If, as we suggested in the first section of our paper, we understand the political event as the gathering 'we' then from the perspective of the situation we can understand the evental site's 'abnormality' in terms of the form of gathering that the event is. If the situation is itself a response to a kind of gathering from whose perspective what the political event signifies is 'nothing', how can the specific situation of liberal-capitalism be understood, on the one hand, as a response to a certain idea of the gathering and, on the other, as consisting of sites that make possible the emergence of the gathering of the political event?

From our Hegelian perspective the idea of the gathering to which the situation of liberal-capitalism constitutes a response is to be understood in terms of Hegel's formulation of the abstract principle of the modern world:

To start from the self, to live in the self, is the other extreme of formal subjectivity, when it is still empty, or rather has made itself to be empty; such is pure formalism, the abstract principle of the modern world.<sup>12</sup>

This pure formalism is expressed in the exchange relations of persons in their capacity as property owners. These relations are responses to the command 'be a person, and respect others as persons'.<sup>13</sup> In our terms they express what we can call the formless gathering of property owners. In the last few centuries we have witnessed the unceasing process of expansion and intensification of the gathering of property owners on a

12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Vol. I Greek Philosophy to Plato, 3 vols., Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 152.

13. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, New York, Oxford, 1980, p. 37.

global scale. Accordingly, the situation of global capitalism amounts to a series of forms of gatherings—legal, economic, political, artistic and so on—that are informed by the formlessness of the global gathering of property owners perpetually responding to the command ‘be as a person’. Participation in these processes has become an unconditionally democratic ritual. From this perspective the expansion and intensification of exchange relations has very little to do with capitalism’s drive for profit. Quite the contrary, the need unceasingly to affirm the creation of form from the formless gathering of property owners feeds capitalism.

Now the revolutionary political event comes to challenge the very idea of the gathering of property owners responding to the command ‘be as a person’. What is this challenge, precisely? To begin with, at the heart of the gathering of property owners is the mediation of what Hegel calls the ‘thing’ and the exchange relation that conforms to it. Because this purely negative relating captures only the individuality of the self it gives rise to the negative command concerning respect for persons. In contrast, the mediation of the thing is not relied upon in the gathering ‘we’ that responds to the command ‘be as a world’. Here, the self is expanded, functioning as the place of dwelling of the other selves. This radical understanding of gathering understood in terms of the collective as such marks both a liberation from the conditioned form of the gathering of property owners and a new project, that of the creation of the world of solidarity. From its perspective the gathering of property owners is a particular form of gathering that misrepresents itself as the gathering as such. It is a false universal in this sense.

Yet from the perspective of the gathering of property owners, the ‘collective as such’ means ‘nothing’ in the sense that the claim to be a universal command that meaningfully informs a new world appreciation is incomprehensible. Indeed the idea of the collective as such can only be understood as informing a local form of life within the situation. This is because in so far as the gathering of property owners functions in the situation as that which embodies the very idea of the gathering, the situation must be able to accommodate incompatible materially local forms of gathering. In this case the emphasis is placed on locality and not on universality.

To elaborate on this last point let us consider how eventual sites become available in the situation that is informed by the formless gathering of property owners, the situation of liberal-capitalism. In so far as an eventual site is an element of the situation it conforms to the logic of this situation. Elsewhere we have analysed this logic in terms of the operations of the formal universality of particularity.<sup>14</sup> According to this logic the modern individual (a group, a person, an institution, a system of knowledge) is negatively defined as not being identified with the universal as such, and thus it is distinct from that which gives the specific particular its specificity. Particularity is the mode of being of every modern particular individual irrespective of the content of its concrete existence. Particularity is, therefore universal in the sense that it explicitly supplies the mode of being of every modern particular. This points to a separation between form

14. See Toulia Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, *Hegel and the Logical Structure of Love: An Essay on Sexualities, Family and the Law*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, pp. 9-24.

and content, since each particular emerges and becomes part of the situation through the indispensable moment of differentiation between its universal mode of being (form) and its particular substance (content). This kind of differentiation between the formal universal and the substantive particular translates into a dichotomous division as distinct from a mere differentiation. Firstly, because the substantive particular is defined only in its negative relation to the universal, the two are oppositionally defined. Secondly, given that the formal being of the differentiated universal is not dependent on any substantive particular, unlike the particular, the formal universal is self-determining. For both the above reasons the formal universal takes a privileged position relative to the substantive particular. The principle then of the situation can be appreciated in terms of the following negative imperative: be a particular in accordance with the logic of the formal universality of particularity. Basically this means that in the given form of gathering what really matters is not what happens within its confines but how, those who participate in it are representable in the situation. They must be representable in terms of the property-owning relations that this form makes possible, that is, as integral members of the gathering of formal subjects.

From the above it follows that through the principle of the formal universality of particularity the situation combines that which can be absolutely known and predicted, namely sites according to particularity as the mode of being of the particular, with that which cannot be known precisely because it need not be known, namely the content of the particular, or its internal elements. Take love as an example. We can understand the loving relation as a total disruption of each participant's being as a property owner. The form of subjectivity and recognition to which the relation of love gives rise does not conform to the logic governing property-owning subjects' relations, the logic that relies on the mediation of the property item. Love thus disrupts the command 'be as a person' by supplying its own, radically different imperative: be as the world of the unity that is the loving subject. Yet despite this radical difference and the radical rupture in the property-owning subjectivity of those who come together to form a loving subject, even the constitution of the loving subject ultimately depends on the structure of property ownership for its external recognition. It seems then that the situation demonstrates its strength the moment it is shown to determine what it cannot detect by its cognitive net. By providing the formal space of particularity the situation situates the unknowable in the space of its knowing.

We can extend this analysis to account for the political event and the truth procedures associated with it. Whereas the event of love is limited in the sense that two suffice for its emergence, the political event exhibits an in principle unrestricted universality that directly challenges the formal universality of the gathering of property owners. More specifically, whereas love disrupts only the subjectivity of those involved, the political event disrupts both the subjectivity of those involved and challenges the formal universality of particularity in so far as it counter-poses the command 'be as a world' to the command 'be as a person'. Moreover, it is the situation that provides the opportunity for this challenge to arise and to be contained, whether peacefully or violently, within

the boundaries of its own logic. In this sense the political event can be said to complete the situation. So, we can explain the ‘abnormality’ of the evental site by noting that the event gives rise to something that cannot be known and hence incorporated into the situation in an evental site whose form is nevertheless presentable simply because the situation is interested only in this form and not in what this form accommodates. The fact that the situation cannot know the event means that the situation’s horizon of knowing has already generated a ‘space’ within it for what cannot be known. A priori then the situation accommodates everything necessary for the event to happen.

From the above considerations something quite dramatic follows regarding the political event. In order to take shape that which is in essence formless and the source of the forms given to its truth processes, the collective as such, must rely upon a particular site. Here the form is not created out of what is formless since its own form—the form of the form—is already determined by the situation. So whereas the site as the form of the event expresses singularity, the form or mode of being of the site itself, of any site, expresses universality. In other words, the principle or law of the situation ultimately determines the site. Because of this historical restriction and the situatedness of the political event in an evental site, the event whose own logic it is to question the role of the indeterminate collective of property owners can only challenge what is determinate in the situation such as the state, the authoritarian party, the legal institution and so on.

This sort of challenge effectively overwhelms the political event and its command. Since challenging what is determinate in the situation replaces challenging the indeterminate that informs the situation, ultimately the event is subordinated to its truth processes. The truth of a political sequence, say the Leninist party, performs two roles. Firstly, as a response to the command ‘be as a world’ it expresses the effort to generate form out of the formless gathering ‘we’. But, secondly, due to the fact that the political event depends upon its evental site, the truth process amounts to a challenge to the specific situation. Ultimately then truth processes are activated as this challenge and not as processes of creating forms out of what is otherwise indeterminate. Accordingly, the formless that is understood through and as the challenge of the situation comes to be named. As a result the indeterminacy of the gathering of property owners that informs the situation is lost sight of and its place is taken by specific formations, like the state and so on. Here the truth process comes to articulate the challenge to the situation rather than to the formlessness of the gathering ‘we’. Even though the ultimate source of challenge is the gathering ‘we’ the truth process is forced to take its place or in Badiou’s terms to name the collective as such. In this case what constitutes the collective is not the response to the command ‘be as a world’ but the response to the command linked to the particular truth process. Historically, the state’s or the party’s act of naming the unnameable constituted an inevitable aspect of an effective challenge to the situation. Of course, it amounted to a challenge of force precisely because, although it was informed by the logic of the formal universality of particularity, it nevertheless posited itself as all-determining.

The difference between the challenge implicit in the idea of the gathering ‘we’ that

is posited to the indeterminate gathering of property owners and the challenge posited by truth processes to the situation, can also be understood as follows. Truth processes challenge the historical, whereas the political event challenges history. In so far as we are interested in overcoming the limits of the situation for our political emancipation, as revolutionary subjects we treat the determinations of the situation as historical, that is, as capable of change. However this is a serious limitation since what we want to change is already historical as an outcome of being structured by the logic of the formal universality of particularity and in this case historicity is associated not with future change but with the horizontal and fluid coexistence of particulars. Truth processes are historical in just this sense. Capitalism has replaced the time of the historical with the horizon of history and the indeterminate gathering of property owners marks this horizon along with the intensification of exchange relations for the reasons we already mentioned above. From this perspective change is meaningful if we can move from history to the eternal whose command is 'be as a world'. But since the situation of history totalizes itself by excluding the command and the corresponding indeterminate gathering 'we', the universal and unconditional release of this command demands the collapse, so to speak, of this totality. Precisely because the command is infinitely realisable in the emptiness that such a collapse will bring, the event that transforms us in the true spirit of the revolution must be just such a collapse. This said, for obvious reasons we do not have access to this idea of collapse and its implications in our capacity as political subjects but they are accessible to us through philosophy. We turn in the final section of our paper to the question of the relationship between the political event as retreat and the turn to speculative philosophy.

#### IV. THE EVENT'S RETREAT AND SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

We have argued that in our times fidelity to the political event of the revolutionary project calls for a response to the fact of the event's retreat and not only to its emergence. This is a response that forms the basis for the constitution of philosophical subjectivity. Through the relation of the political subject as the bearer of a truth of the event, the would-be philosopher is exposed to the idea of the collective as such, a form of the gathering 'we' that the situation of liberal-capitalism denies in principle. Now, in our view we can appreciate the turn to speculative philosophy as a matter of fidelity to the event's retreat, that is, to the collapse of the revolutionary project as such, by following through the implications of what we can call the liberation of the event from dependence on some evental site.

To appreciate and accept the event's retreat in all its radicality is to insist upon the liberation of the event from the form of particularity that inevitably regulates the announcement of the gathering 'we' to which the political event gives rise. If such liberation is conceivable—we might think of this as a moment of radical skepticism in relation to all the significations that the situation makes possible—then through its retreat the event points to the situation as a whole as the world that denies the event. This is

a denial not merely of the event's power to inform the world, but of the very idea that informs the political event.

Consequently, unlike the truth procedures that despite being constituted in response to the event's emergence are incapable of directly addressing the idea of gathering that informs the situation, namely the indeterminate gathering of property owners, through its retreat the event directs itself to precisely this idea. How is this possible? We have made the point that the gathering of property owners treats itself as the gathering that embodies the very principle of gathering subjects. Accordingly, it functions as the gathering whose command—'be as a person'—restricts the principle of subjectivity to that of formal subjectivity. From this it follows that the retreat of the event can be shown to free the event from what conditions it only if its very idea can become the practice/thought of a subject as the 'abyss' that stirs the world. In citing the words of Paul Celan to articulate the meaning of justice—'On inconsistencies Rest: two fingers are snapping in the abyss, a world is stirring in the scratch-sheets, it all depends on you'—Badiou emphasizes that 'it all depends on you' (E 78) to the detriment of the equally significant observation that for the poet the world's stirring is possible only in so far as everything—and, contra Badiou (E 72-73), not just the political truth procedure—is already situated in the abyss that justice is.

For the emergence of this kind of subject and thinking there need only be one instance of a revolutionary subject through the being of whom the all-determining power of property-owning subjectivity might ultimately be disrupted to the point of its implosion. In this intense moment we have the uttering of the 'we' by the single subject. This uttering is the moment of philosophy that relates directly to the event.

Understood in this way philosophy is activated in the battlefield that the self of the philosopher is, once this self is determined by the power to think of itself as that which has the power to disrupt the pure formalism of subjectivity and thereby to point to something more fundamental. This is a disruption in history itself since, as we noted in the previous section, history is constituted as the indeterminate gathering of property owners. Through this disruption the eternal invades history in a manner that renders it impossible for history to resist. In other words, the retreating event determines philosophy as its truth process that directly intervenes in history by thinking it. Ultimately only an event without evental site, posits the very idea of commanding to which philosophy responds. History is the situation of the event that does not depend on a site. Here, what is to be thought is not an object but the significance for the world of the very possibility of philosophy, since history is created by presupposing this very possibility. As Hegel notes, history is the emptying out of Spirit, that is, of the gathering 'we'. What we have here is the in principle implosion of the world that releases the very idea of the gathering 'we' an idea fully realized as philosophy. Philosophy is its own condition and thus philosophy thinks itself.

From this perspective Badiou's approach to philosophy appears, on the one hand, to refer us to the political event that no longer has the power to shatter us, and, on the other, it remains silent on that which does indeed have this power today, namely the

collapse of the revolutionary project. Consequently, much like some of the philosophers he criticizes, his thinking remains caught in the in between.

Toula Nicolacopoulos  
George Vassilacopoulos  
Philosophy Program  
La Trobe University

#### REFERENCES

- Badiou, Alain, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Badiou, Alain, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, London, Verso, 2001.
- Badiou, Alain, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2003.
- Badiou, Alain, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005.
- Badiou, Alain, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London, Verso, 2005.
- Badiou, Alain and L. Sedofsky, 'Being by Numbers: Interview with Artist and Philosopher Alain Badiou', *Artforum*, vol. 33, 1994, <http://www.highbeam.com/library/docFree.asp?DOCID=1G1:16315394>.
- Hallward, Peter, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Hegel, G. W. F., *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, New York, Oxford, 1980.
- Hegel, G. W. F., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, vol. I Greek Philosophy to Plato, 3 vols., Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Livadites, Tasos, *Small Book for Large Dreams (Greek)*, Athens, Kethros, 1987.
- Nicolacopoulos, Toula and George Vassilacopoulos, *Hegel and the Logical Structure of Love: An Essay on Sexualities, Family and the Law*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999.
- Nicolacopoulos, Toula and George Vassilacopoulos, 'Inquiry into Hope', *Critical and Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 1-7.