

# Truth, Being, Practice: On Badiou's Immanence of Truths<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: This response to Badiou's 2018 book *Immanence of Truths*, the third volume of *Being and Event*, raises some questions about its investment in the 'absolute' dimensions of being and truth.

Keywords: Alain Badiou, ontology, revolutionary practice, psycho-politics, infinity, transcendence.

On the first page of the imposing third volume of the *Being and Event* trilogy, Badiou offers a distilled summary of what he calls his general 'philosophical strategy.' He explains that his priority is to 'create the effective possibility of affirming that truths exist as concrete universal exceptions,' adding that 'this allows us to escape Kant's dilemma' (IdV, p. 13/19).<sup>2</sup>

Immanuel Kant doesn't figure prominently in *The Immanence of Truths*, but this brief allusion offers a useful way of approaching the book's guiding aim: an unqualified affirmation of the absolute that is grounded, ultimately, more in ontological more than in practical let alone 'psychological' terms. If commitment to a truth involves participation in a unending project or cause that might hold true for all the members of a situation, Badiou's aim here is to secure the infinite space of such participation more on the basis of its being than of its willing or doing. The priority is to ensure that truths can be forever affirmed as absolute—i.e. as absolutely or universally or unconditionally true, as true without compromises or concessions—primarily on account of what they *are*, on account of what can be said about the quality of their infinite being. Badiou has at least this much in common with Heidegger or Deleuze: for all three, ontology, rather than any sort of psychology, is the properly *fundamental* discipline of philosophy.

Compared to pre-critical thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza or Plato, Kant doesn't play an important role in *Immanence of Truths*, of course, or indeed in Badiou's work more broadly.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that Badiou discusses Kant here at all, it is as one of the thinkers who seeks to problematise and to question 'metaphysics, that is, any rigorously thought or conceived testimony of the absolute [*tout témoignage pensé de l'absolu*]' (IdV, p. 99/93). Here as elsewhere, Badiou associates Kantian critique with the abject limitations of 'modern relativism,' i.e. with a prevailing suspicion of the very notion of truth. Kant is the figure who deflates any attempt to present or affirm an actually-*existing* truth as itself dogmatic and excessive, as exceeding the bounds of human cognition and the strict conditions that limit all human experience. Here as elsewhere, Badiou condemns 'the empiricist—and Kantian—obsession that seeks to reduce everything, as the fundamental basis of all possible knowledge, to "experience," that is, to our perceptual capacities' (p. 467/408).

Filtering sensory intuition through concepts, whatever counts as Kantian knowledge depends on merely empirical demonstration.

Nevertheless, Badiou acknowledges Kant is still a philosopher and not merely a sophist or anti-philosopher or ideologist. Like any great philosopher Kant retains *some* notion of truth in the proper sense of the term, i.e. truth as distinct from mere knowledge, truth as universal, as unconditional, as endowed with intrinsic dignity and incomparable worth, etc. For all their differences, Kant and Badiou both refuse to align their thought with the prevailing demands of what Badiou here calls the logic of *recouvrement* or re-recovery i.e. a logic that recovers or recuperates subjective agency by orienting it towards reproduction of the status quo, by fostering a deep internalisation of the necessity and norms of the established order of things—and with it, a profound scepticism regarding the very possibility of defiance or of radical change.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, true thinking or thinking truth, for both Badiou and Kant, instead brackets all the prevailing ways of this world so as to embrace an affirmation of the true and of the truly infinite as both (a) ‘unconstructible’ (and thus as inaccessible from within the limited confines of finite existence) and as (b) immanently self-affirming, grounded in ‘the power of internal determinations,’ themselves sustained by their ‘intimate relation to Absoluteness as such [*l’Absoluité comme telle*].’<sup>5</sup>

Badiou explains that as a general rule, ‘for me, what makes a great philosopher recognisable is their determination to save, I would even say to save *at all costs*, the concept of truth’ (p. 530/462). Kant is surely a great philosopher—but the price he’s willing to make us pay for truth is too high.

## I

What then was Kant’s dilemma, as Badiou describes it in his opening paragraphs? Since he is indeed a philosopher rather than a sophist or an anti-philosopher, Kant remains committed to the category of truth, but given the limits he sets on human cognition and experience, given our apparent dependence on sensation, he concedes that truths must be thought in either a hugely deflating or else a supremely inflated sense. For Kant, truths must be treated either as ‘merely subjective modalities of judgment’ (i.e. as little more than expressions of opinion, more or less justified by the accumulation of reliable experience) or else ‘we must grant them a kind of transcendence’ (i.e. attribute to them a kind of being beyond all experience and thus beyond all cognition) (IdV, p. 13/19). If an absolute truth *is* true, in the Kantian universe, it is as supra-thinkable or unthinkable. The truly true, for Kant, exists not as an immanent ‘concrete exception’ to what ordinarily prevails; it can only be postulated in excess of phenomenal reality altogether. For Kant the being of a truth can only be noumenal, beyond the reach of all possible understanding.

If Badiou’s reference to Kant here is clearly very thin, I think his strategy for escaping Kant’s dilemma helps to clarify what is arguably the central question of this new book: in order properly to ground the thought

of the true, must we ultimately refer to what we can grasp or articulate of its *being* through our capacity to think and formalise being-as-being? Or might we appeal more to what we are capable of willing and of doing, in short, of putting into *practice*?

To put it another way: if Badiou's philosophy is of course a philosophy of the subject, and if his account of truth is an account of something that subjects intervene to uphold and impose, what provides the ultimate ground for such an account? Ontology? Or might we consider instead the practical domain of 'psychology' broadly and indeed 'classically' understood—i.e. understood not as that set of recently-invented techniques of normalization and supervision condemned by the likes of Canguilhem, Lacan, Foucault, and so many others (including Badiou himself), but as that part of philosophy which (as the younger Sartre might have reminded us) addresses actors or acting subjects from the perspective of their motivations, desires, intentions, wills, commitments, actions, and so on.

For Kant this is indeed a stark alternative, and as everyone knows it is one that he resolves decisively with his embrace of transcendental idealism. If Kant wants to limit and humble any pretension to discuss metaphysical questions in the theoretical realm (including the realm of a 'rational psychology' or doctrine of the soul) this is precisely because he aims to secure the answers to such questions by setting them on an exclusively practical foundation. If he insists that we can know nothing about what we most truly *are*, about our being as a thing in itself—and therefore about whether or not we are free, immortal, destined to be saved by a benevolent god, etc.—it is because he is convinced that our practical abilities are perfectly sufficient for the imperative demands of action. Our capacity to engage in the practical exercise of reason demonstrates that we can act freely, willingly, etc., without needing to understand what such abilities are.<sup>6</sup>

For Kant, in other words, we prove that we are capable of moral action, of engaging in pure reason in its practical exercise, just by actually acting or more precisely by *willing* morally (e.g. by treating all persons as ends in themselves, as co-participants in the making of a kingdom of ends, and so on). As Kant prescribes it, moral practice requires no theoretical foundation, no understanding of what it *is*. To be a moral actor, all we need is actually and deliberately to engage in willing what any and every rational being ought to will. (Rousseau might have added: to be *political* actors, all we need is a sufficient account of what it means to participate in an actively egalitarian and generalising collective will). For both Rousseau and Kant, freedom is obscure in theory but luminous and sufficient in practice.

By 'practice,' Kant explains in his first *Critique*, 'I mean everything that is possible through freedom' (CPR, A800), adding that 'it is in the power of freedom to pass beyond any and every specified limit' (CPR,

A317/B 374). More precisely, ‘freedom in the practical sense is the independence of the power of choice [*die Willkür*] from necessitation [...]. There is in man a power of self-determination, independent of any coercion through sensuous impulses’ (CPR, A534). Understood in this sense, ‘freedom is the intrinsic value of the world, the *summum bonum*,’ the supreme good.<sup>7</sup> We are free to act morally, and therefore to desire, decide, assert, and commit ourselves freely, even if we have no idea how we are free in this way, even if we could never know what it means to *be* free.

In short: for Kant, theoretical understanding cannot grasp the being of the free actor, but this actor’s rational willing and doing is sufficient for an account of moral practice that upholds those criteria Badiou associates with truth, i.e. of truth as absolute commitment without compromise or qualification. If ‘Kant’s dilemma’ implies that anyone who seeks to affirm absolute truth has to try to ground it either in being or in practice, in what actors are or what they do, then clearly Kant resolves his dilemma by affirming the primacy of practice.

## II

How does Badiou address this alternative in his new book? At first glance, we might think that he merely chooses the opposite path. We might think that where Kant opts for practice, Badiou simply sides with being and more specifically with ontology as the discourse that articulates what can be said of being as vertiginously infinite multiplicity. We might think this all the more readily since Badiou concedes all actually-existing or ‘real capacity ultimately operates within a register of finitude’ (IdV, p. 100/93). We might then think that the key move of *Immanence of Truths* is simply an affirmation of being, and in particular of being’s absolutely infinite and open- or non-ended character, and thus its absolute openness to any new truth. After demonstrating, in the first two volumes of *Being and Event*, the exceptional universality and singularity of truths, here he is especially concerned with their *absoluteness*, the way they express, participate in, or approximate the absolute as such (515/451), and therefore ‘the irrefutable permanence of their being-true’ (p. 530/462).

*Immanence of Truths* is certainly emphatic on this point. To refute the ideology of finitude, to escape all those myriad forms of *recouvrement* or re-covery that condition us to accept what is established and to submit to what exists, he devotes most of this book, and its most innovative parts, to consideration of the mathematical consequences that can be deduced (i.e. that have been deduced, by mathematicians like Dana Scott, Johan Jensen, Kenneth Kunen, etc.) from the existence of new infinities, i.e., very large cardinals, and in particular from what Badiou renames here a ‘complete’ or ‘measurable’ cardinal. ‘There is no doubt,’ Badiou proclaims, ‘that the concepts of a Ramsey cardinal and a complete cardinal stand at the threshold of all emancipation of thought [*toute émancipation des*

*pensées*]' (p. 472-3/413). The mere names of these hyper-infinite numbers are evocative of what's at stake—a partial list includes cardinals that are 'indescribable, ineffable, strong, super-strong, strongly compact, super-compact, enormous, super-enormous...' (p. 281/248).

As Badiou presents it, the demonstrated existence of such cardinals seems to offer us, in effect, a kind of ontological and thus definitive refutation of the whole logic of finitude, in all domains—and thus, in effect, a pre-emptive refutation of scepticism, of relativism, of pessimism, and of any mortifying 'realism.' Moreover, the vertiginous unfolding of the un-ending hierarchy of great cardinals, in their dizzying ascent towards the absolute as such, seems to offer human subjects of truth, in all pertinent fields (i.e., in politics, in love, in the arts and in the sciences), a kind of ontological validation of what they are trying to do, a kind of guarantee that it is indeed forever possible to uphold an immortal truth. Demonstration of the absolutely infinite dimensions of being seems to offer a kind of certainty that what these subjects want to do can indeed happen—can indeed come into being. Recent work in set theory, in other words, reassures us that there is at least an irreducible and uncompromised place for absolute truth in the inexhaustibly infinite expanse of being.

Badiou repeatedly insists on the literally decisive place and space of the absolute in the affirmation of truth as such. For a truth to be affirmed as eternal and universal, it is not enough here to demonstrate that it applies to all elements of a situation, nor to indicate that it has the power to change the world in which, one day, following an event, it begins to appear and to impose itself. It is now also, and above all, necessary to insist on its unconditionally *absolute* aspect, its capacity absolutely to transcend both its worldly existence and the limits of its situation. What is true can forever held to *be* absolutely and unendingly true.

To ground this idea as a general principle of truth in general, Badiou devotes some crucial and demanding sections of his book to a demonstration of how mathematical truths concerning the existence of large cardinals prove their absolute nature by the fact that they ultimately touch on the absolute as such, or that they express an attribute of the absolute itself. While the detail of these demonstrations (from 'elementary embedding' to 'ultra-filter') certainly transcends my own understanding of the mathematics involved, we can at least try to summarise what's at stake. Badiou's priority here is show how a truth 'can claim a form of absoluteness' and receive 'a kind of imprint of absoluteness' (p. 681/589), 'a "touch" of the absolute' (p. 35/38). Badiou calls such a touch of the absolute the '*index*' of a true act, procedure or work (p. 682/590; I'll come back to this point in my final section below). Affirmation of a truth finds its ontological foundation in the attestation of 'the existence of a true infinity,' which confirms 'the relationship of a truth, not to the situation in which it was produced, but to this or that attribute of the absolute' itself

(p. 515/450). Such attestation illuminates it with a definitive and irrefutable ‘flash [éclair] of a certainty,’ and ‘the flash that touches upon the assumed complete cardinal is simply that by which the work absolutises itself.’<sup>8</sup> The priority is to secure ‘the fragile works of truth,’ ensuring they can resist any ‘mortifying falling back into finitude’ by protecting them behind a ‘thick barrier of infinities, of kinds of infinities that are still rare or even still unknown’ (p. 468/410).<sup>9</sup>

In the first volume of *Being and Event*, Badiou had already grounded the elementary dimensions of his ontology in the familiar and uncontroversial precept that there can be no set of all sets, i.e. no largest possible infinite number. For all mathematicians who accept the principles of Cantorian set theory, the series of infinite numbers is an ascending ladder with no stopping point. In *Immanence of Truths* Badiou develops the implications of this precept much more fully.

In the technical terms he adapts from recent set-theoretical work on enormously infinite numbers, Badiou wants to show that ‘all creation [in all fields] that sustains a relation with the absolute has as its witness a complete [or measurable] cardinal’ (p. 405/354). Parts five and six of the book, drawing on theorems demonstrated by Scott, Jensen and Kunen, show how, once affirmed, non-constructible or inaccessible infinities escape all possible *recouvrement*, i.e. cannot be covered-over and replaced in a constructible universe, even while their affirmation belongs to one and the same universe of thought (pp. 495-6/431-2). A truth thus demonstrates its absolute quality through its possession of what Badiou calls a ‘complete index’:

Metaphorically, we can say that the complete index is the subjectivised result, or the result caught up in the dynamic of the truth procedure, of a sort of friction [*frottement*] or flash between the intrinsic infinity of the work and the existence of a complete cardinal. This friction between two infinities produces locally, in and through the work, in accordance with the theorems proposed by Scott and Jensen, the possibility of a permanent protection from re-covering or covering-over, and therefore the possibility of the un-ending or “infinite” pursuit of the infinity of the work [*la poursuite “à l’infini” de l’infinité de l’œuvre*], seized in the dynamic of the truth procedure. Consequently, the work then deserves to be called truth; it is a truth (p. 525/459).

In more general parlance, Badiou seeks to show how ‘being in person [*l’être en personne*], for the Subject who creates as well as for the one who contemplates, rises absolutely to the surface of appearance. Or almost...’ (p. 393/343). It remains an *almost*-absolute being, even at this limit, because otherwise the absolute itself might be relativised by its expression, and thus compromised by what it touches, or what it allows

to touch it. According to a logic reminiscent of apophatic theology, the truly and utterly absolute must remain ultimately and forever out of reach: if it can be touched it cannot be grasped, and it touches us from a height we can never reach. The series of infinite numbers can never end, i.e. this series can never exhaust the absolute space in which it unfolds.

In brief, a truth receives the imprint or ‘seal of absoluteness, without however being created or absorbed by the absolute itself’ (p. 405/354). A life-long disciple of Plato, Badiou here readily accepts an analogy with his famous allegory of the cave: the thoughts of this world receive their clarity from the sun as a worldly figure of the supra-worldly absolute, of an Idea that transcends existence, thus receiving their ‘trans-ideal illumination [*l’éclair trans-idéal*] from the Idea that is too powerful to exist, the Absolute Idea, the Idea of Ideas, the Truth...’ (p. 537/468). In doing so, we indicate ‘the place where a truth “touches” its absoluteness, and the absolute itself, the relationship in the name of which it makes sense to speak of the near-absoluteness of this truth, which will distinguish it “absolutely” from any opinion in actual situations’ (p. 400/348).

This is how Badiou proposes to meet the challenge he has set for every great philosopher—the challenge of ‘saving, at all costs, the concept of truth’ (p. 530/462).

### III

If we might linger for a moment on this point, it seems to me that we could trace a broad evolution in Badiou’s thinking, from the *années rouges* that followed May ’68 to *Immanence of Truths*, one that centres on the fundamental category of *confidence* [*confiance*].

(a) Badiou’s watchword in the 1970s was adopted from the ongoing mobilisation of Maoism as a world-making project: ‘be confident in the masses,’ ‘be confident in the Party’ (Badiou 1976, p. 128). In his first great book, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), Badiou retained confidence in the masses insofar as they represented a revolutionary (albeit evanescent) force that made history, and he retained confidence in the party (exemplified by the party as it might have emerged from the Cultural Revolution in China) insofar as it gave political form to this force without freezing it into a new state order. In the late 1970s, Badiou remained confident in the revolutionary proletariat as a subject of dis-placement, precisely in its difference from any notion of a working class defined by its social place. As a classed or classified group in the ordinary sociological sense, the workers remain confined within the static algebra of place, in the arranged inertia of a situation (Badiou 1982, pp. 252-253); they only become *subject* when they contribute to the process that blows this imposed arrangement apart. The proletariat is not that class which seeks an improvement of its place, and still less, a class that merely aims to

usurp the privileged place of the bourgeoisie; it is that insurgent force beyond class whose coming into existence destroys the very concepts of class and of social place in general. The proletariat is the unique historical subject which overcomes and destroys its objective basis.<sup>10</sup> The proletariat anticipates the more general possibility, to adopt a phrase from the later Badiou, of a 'subject finally without object' (Badiou 2008b).

Rather than any merely 'objective' science of history, rather an analysis of the machinations of capital or of commodification, Badiou's first great book reminds us that 'Marxism is the discourse which supports the proletariat as subject. This is a principle we must never abandon' (Badiou 1982, p. 62). Here 'the political subject is the class party' (p. 259), or more precisely, 'the party supports the complete subject, whereby the proletariat, erected upon the working class, seeks the dissolution of the algebraic framework in which this class is placed' (p. 254). In other words, the proletarian class party consists only so as to dissolve class and to dissolve itself, and to continue dissolving itself. Since 'the party has no proletarian reality other than in the tumultuous history of its own termination [*résiliation*],'<sup>11</sup> so then if 'the fundamental concept of the ethics of Marxism is confidence' (Badiou 1982, pp. 327, 337), this is because Marxism upholds a rigorously subjective rather than an objective discipline. Badiou could then say: 'I have confidence in the people and in the working class in proportion to the degree to which I do not believe in them.'<sup>12</sup> Confidence in proletarian victory, for the younger Badiou, did not require belief in the qualities, virtues or achievements of any actually-existing working class.

Such a commitment, nevertheless, had to contend with the cumulative and accelerating experience of political defeat that came to characterise the mid-1970s, and the end of the decade in particular was of course marked by a generalised crisis of revolutionary confidence, together with the renegation of many erstwhile Maoists (cf. Badiou 2008a). The Khmer Rouge catastrophe in Cambodia was the most extreme manifestation of a wider crisis of post-Maoist revolutionary purpose. The old imperatives—'be confident in the masses,' 'be confident in the Party'—no longer seemed to ring true, at least not beyond increasingly narrow and embattled circles of what might be called (in a formulation that jars with Badiou's whole theory of the subject) 'true believers.'

(b) In *Being and Event* (1988), and the books that quickly followed it, Badiou was able to resist renegation by effectively reframing confidence as a commitment to confidence itself, i.e. by affirming the confidence and fidelity of subjects who uphold a universalisable truth, and who did so in ways based on nothing other than their practical affirmation or commitment. A subject intervenes to affirm an event and draw conclusions from it, and an event is nothing more than an ephemeral indication of the void of the situation, i.e. of that which normally counts for nothing in a situation. An event thus opens up the dimension of what

is precisely *not* reducible to the discourse of being-as-being, a dimension of pure affirmation, the wager of an intervention that takes the form: I commit, I will participate, I will act, and I will do so on the basis of an occasion that itself appears (to me) to be based on nothing at all. An event thus serves as occasion for the self-organisation and progressive self-assertion of a subject, of a subject's successive investigations, the development of its organization, etc., i.e. of all those forms of practice that set a truth procedure in motion.

As for ontology, in *Being and Event* it is precisely the excess of event over being that is decisive, an excess secured by paradoxical status of an event as an interruption and violation of the axiomatic or rule-bound order of being. The only ontological foundation for a truth procedure is itself unrepresentable and non-constructible. (In the slightly more technical terminology of *Being and Event*, a truth procedure rests or relies on the unrepresentable or 'inconsistent' multiplicity of pure being, an inconsistency which is only conceivable by indirect implication: since any consistent or representable multiplicity is the *result* of an operation or a 'counting-as-one,' so then, by implication, this operation must have been performed on something that was or rather *is* not itself consistent<sup>13</sup>). *Being and Event* urges any subject of truth to rely only on inconsistencies, and Paul Celan's formula recurs in several texts of this period: *sur les inconsistances s'appuyer*.<sup>14</sup> (This is surely the moment when Badiou's philosophy of the subject invites at least some comparison with Kant's practical philosophy).

c/ So it might seem that with *Immanence of Truths* (2018), Badiou has confronted a further crisis of confidence, and that he has responded to it by investing his confidence in something that might warrant and justify *absolute* certainty. Only the absolute seems adequate to the task of refuting or overcoming the relatively lure of *recouvrement* in all its manifestations. The ontological absolute, i.e., the space presupposed by the inconceivable 'whole' that would be a set of all possible sets, again appears here as 'inconsistent' and beyond any presentation. The aim now, however, is to demonstrate the absoluteness of the absolute as such, insofar as it can be approached.

As Badiou is clearly well aware, such an aim invites comparison with other neo-Platonic projects, including avowedly theological projects. Badiou's ultimately inaccessible absolute is approached here via a series of approximations reminiscent of an angelic hierarchy, a series of figures that ultimately recede into a point that transcends all figuration. 'Access to infinity,' Badiou explains in strikingly emphatic terms, is here secured

through a kind of process of infinitisation, whereby infinity is approached in such a way that it orients or guides the process itself. This path invites to participate in a hierarchical way of thinking, since there are degrees of proximity to the One-infinity as

inaccessible absolute. But it animates this structure with a kind of mystical ecstasy, insofar as the polarity of the ascending series of degrees is also an approximation of annihilation in ecstasy. We find precise indications of this point in the angelology of the scholastic theologians and in its paradoxical correlation with mysticism.<sup>15</sup>

(This unabashedly Neoplatonic aspect of *Immanence of Truths* reminds me first and foremost of the argument presented by one of Badiou's erstwhile comrades, Christian Jambet, in a discussion organized to mark the publication of the first volume of *Being and Event*, back in 1989: countering Badiou's assertion of a multiplicity-without-one, Jambet proposed that the infinite transcendence affirmed by certain stands of Islamic thought was best understood as an aspiration towards the absolute One, a one beyond all approach or approximation [Jambet, 1989]).

Some readers of the new book will surely focus on the apparent religious connotations of Badiou's approach here, just as other readers have emphasised the apparently 'miraculous' qualities of his notion of an event. On the face of it, Badiou's project remains as resolutely and expressly atheist as it's ever been. What seems new, however, compared to his earlier affirmations of generic as *opposed to* transcendent conceptions of being (cf. Badiou 1988, meditation 36), is this recourse to the absolute itself as a horizon of being that seems to give a kind of sanction or authorization to the unfolding of a truth, a kind of guarantee of authenticity—a guarantee which seems to *prove*, irrefutably, that an infinite truth really *is* true, that it really is, absolutely, forever and for everyone, infinite. We can only definitively refute finitude and re-recovery, Badiou seems to be telling us, if we can rely on this guarantee.

#### IV

This is indeed one way of reading *The Immanence of Truths*, and one way of accounting why so much of it develops an ontological i.e. mathematical approach to the absolute. It helps to account for why Badiou devotes so much care, in its final sections, to a formal reconstruction of the way in which works of truth might claim to receive, from the absolute, irrefutable proof of their infinity. If we read the book this way we can certainly read it adopting an approach diametrically opposite to that of Kant, as affirming theory over practice.

But of course it's not so simple. If the ontological absolute, the being of the absolutely infinite, might here seem to give a certain sanction to works of truth, still we cannot avoid the obvious question: what ground this absoluteness itself? What does it mean to think or acknowledge or refer to the infinitely absolute?

Badiou's answer to this is clear. In theoretical *practice*, precisely, we approach the infinitely absolute by thinking and addressing it. More

specifically, we approach the absolute through mathematical thought insofar as such thinking allows us to affirm the existence of a complete cardinal number and other cardinalities that depend on it. We approach this absolute more and more adequately, more and more ‘closely,’ to the extent that we can posit or affirm new and ever-more-infinite existences on the basis of this initial affirmation. Complete or inaccessible cardinals cannot be constructed, they can only be posited or affirmed. ‘Ultimately we must affirm that there is infinity [*il faut affirmer qu’il y a de l’infini*]—infinity in the strict sense, that is, infinite multiplicity that cannot be constructed’ (IdV, p. 265/234).

The being of the infinite is therefore literally an affirmed being. Ultimately, Badiou here affirms affirmation itself, beyond any demonstration or monstration. Wrapping up his dialogue with the ‘finitist sceptic’ at the end of chapter 14, Badiou concludes that ‘between what is and what can be shown, there is a serious difference. Showing the infinite? That’s difficult. Thinking it? Practicing it? To subjectivize it? To create it? Yes, a hundred times yes. Down with the finitude of demonstration!’ (IdV, p. 366/319).

Already in *Being and Event*, when it came to measuring ‘the complete vagueness of the state of a situation’ with Easton’s theorem, and following Cohen’s refutation of the continuum hypothesis, Badiou insisted that wherever axiomatic thought encounters a point of genuine decision we must ‘tolerate the almost complete arbitrariness of a choice’; in this way ‘quantity, that paradigm of objectivity, leads to pure subjectivity’ (Badiou 1988, p. 309). Once we conceive of ontology in a way that equates thought and being there is nothing to separate its properly ‘subjective’ character on the one hand from its universal or abstract character on the other. (Hence Badiou’s proximity to Hegel or Deleuze on the one hand, and his distance from Benjamin or Adorno on the other).

In *Immanence of Truths* this emphasis is even more marked, in the domain of ontology and more generally. As for ontology, this is the key point of chapter 10 section 3 (‘A crucial choice: Gödel or Cohen?’ [IdV, p. 262/232]), which acknowledges that it is consistent to conceive of the entire universe of sets *either* as constructible, and therefore well-ordered, *or else* as generic, and therefore as confronted by a constitutive disorder. A choice must be made. It is by definition impossible to construct and therefore demonstrate the existence of a complete cardinal number, and a fortiori the still more enormous indeed ‘ineffable’ cardinal numbers that will exceed it; to refer to any such excess or existence it must be affirmed.<sup>16</sup> As for the book’s overall strategy, the entire book presents itself as an invitation to engage or participate in the truths that are at work, or that are renewable, in the worlds we inhabit. Dare to live a real life, Badiou urges us, before it’s too late. Dare to affirm, dare to act, dare to organize; prefer the new to the old, the unpredictable to the established, revolution to reform. In this sense *Immanence of Truths*, like all of Badiou’s work, is

yet another exhortation to have confidence and to remain confident, to cultivate the confidence required to begin and to continue.

Drawing on Scott's Theorem (which demonstrates that the existence of a complete cardinal implies the existence of non-constructible sets) and Jensen's Theorem (showing that such a cardinal further implies the existence of sets that no constructible set can cover), Badiou comes to 'posit the following definition: the index of a work is said to be complete if the dynamic of the work within the truth procedure generates the certainty, even if only for an instant, that a complete cardinal exists.' But to avoid any misunderstanding, he quickly adds the following caveat, which aligns the status of such a conclusion with the 'supra-ontological' subjectivism affirmed all through the *Being and Event* trilogy. 'We are not suggesting here that the existence of a complete index logically implies that of a complete cardinal. We are not, after all, in the order of ontology but in the always subjectivized order of the consequences of an event. We are merely saying that, in the case at hand, between the infinity threatened with being covered, which is the infinity of the work, and the existence of a complete infinity, a sort of spark of certainty passes' (p. 525/459).

Of the three volumes of *Being and Event*, the third seems the most intensely exhortative—and insofar as the criteria for exhortation are ultimately philosophical, and based on philosophical assertions, it is not surprising that in this volume, the relationship between philosophy and its several concrete conditions appears more convoluted than it did in the more unilateral formulations of the 1990s, with philosophy, and the philosopher himself, here playing a more openly prescriptive role than before.

This then may be the best way of understanding the difference that separates Badiou from Kant. Kant had to choose between being and practice in order to support his theory of absolute freedom, a freedom that transcends all limits. He opted for practice. Badiou, by contrast, seeking to support the absolute quality of the truths he asserts, rejects the dilemma and instead defends a theory whose foundations are *both* practical and ontological. He is free to do this since his ontology, subtracted from any mediation of experience, absolves him of any need to pay attention to Kantian restrictions on theoretical metaphysics. Axiomatic thought is indifferent to matters of perception or experience. Even if he adapts it from the 'paradigm of objectivity' par excellence, Badiou's mathematical ontology is nevertheless sustained wholly and simply by rigorous subjective practice.

## V

I will end this article with three reservations about Badiou's strategy for resolving Kant's dilemma.

(a) First, as Badiou readily accepts, to equate ontology with mathematics is certainly an ingenious and thoroughly 'irrefutable' way of investing ontology with the capacity to say all that can rigorously be said of being as pure multiplicity—but it also and for the same reason limits ontology to the articulation of abstract multiplicity per se. Mathematics may say all that can be said of such multiplicity, but it can say nothing at all about the other dimensions of being that have regularly concerned metaphysicians and ontologists (e.g. the dimensions of materiality, actuality, potentiality, contingency, particularity, vitality, mortality, etc.).<sup>17</sup> In particular, a mathematical discourse of pure being-as-being can say nothing about the relation between being and *beings*, between *l'être* and an *étant* or being in its ontic particularity—i.e. it can say nothing about what is arguably the great ontological question that Kant still shared with Spinoza and Leibniz on the one hand and with Hegel on the other, and the question that more recently Heidegger, Deleuze or Agamben will all explore in one way or another.

By dissociating ontology from any engagement with what can be known of beings in their distinctive ways of being, Badiou doesn't so much answer Kant's question about the apparent gap between knowledge of phenomenal and speculation about noumena as disregard it altogether. As I've tried to show elsewhere, even in the book that most directly and fully addresses the question of the relation between being and appearing (*Logics of Worlds*, 2006), Badiou indeed offers a detailed account of model how the things or beings [*étants*] that make up a world appear more or less clearly and intensely in that world—but the status of an *étant* per se, along with the gap between what set theory might say of an infinite number and what any empirical science might say of a thing or a being, seems itself to be something he takes for granted (Hallward 2008).

(b) Second, even if we accept an equivalence of thought and being in the domain of ontology, i.e. of mathematics, don't we need a fuller and more explicit demonstration of how this equivalence might apply to other and altogether more material and embodied domains of practice, such as politics or love, to say nothing of those all-too-embodied or empirical conditions of experience that preoccupied Kant as he wrote his first *Critique*? I know that Badiou is often confronted with versions of this question, and in this book he responds to them with what he calls 'Cartesian serenity [*placidité*]': 'Since there is a rational and ramified thought of the infinite, it is meaningless to support the thesis of finitude,' however 'empirical' its support might seem to be. For the same reason, roughly speaking, Badiou is satisfied 'that the theory of large cardinals is certainly as real, if not more so, than the Big Bang of the universe, or

global warming' (IdV, p. 280/248). End of discussion, more or less.

When in *Immanence of Truths* Badiou moves from a mathematical demonstration to a political sequence or principle, it is often by analogy, or to offer an illustration. Obviously, he does not mean that Robespierre or Lenin needed to reassure themselves of the existence of complete cardinals in order to strengthen their political confidence. It is nevertheless striking that Badiou spends much more time and energy expounding on the ineffable majesty of these enormous numbers than he does considering those decisions and ultimately those crises of confidence that preoccupied people like Robespierre and Lenin themselves, and so many of those who sought to follow their example.

To put this point another way: if what confirms the quality of a truth is both ontological and practical, and if practice indeed depends quite directly on 'psychological' issues such as motivation, intention, inspiration, affirmation, confidence, etc., it is striking that Badiou seems much more interested in the fruitful consequences of exhorted affirmation than in the psycho-existential drama that must be confronted in order to respond to such exhortation, and thus to affirm a truth in the way its truth or project demands. In their respective practical philosophies, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel developed a whole theory of the will and its determinate motivations; by contrast Badiou has relatively little to say about the complexity of motives or intentions, and often seems content to sketch enticing visions of the happiness awaiting those who, in one way or another, do manage to subjectify themselves in ways that are worthy of the truth that induces them. To evoke the terms of Pascal's famous wager, this sometimes seems a bit like telling someone who may have come to doubt the existence of God that they might overcome their hesitation simply by reflecting on the delightful qualities of the paradise promised to them, if only they could affirm it.

If Badiou avoids Kant's dilemma by upholding a conception of truth that is both ontological and practical (and thus also 'psychological'), the sophisticated elaboration of the former dimension is not matched by a comparable concern for the latter. Rather than address what might be at stake in wanting or willing a truth, Badiou generally emphasises the abrupt and absolute exceptionality of a truth in its being and production. Only if it's wholly at odds with prevailing norms or opinions, it seems, can such a truth really *hold true* in an unconditional, trans-historical and trans-worldly way. 'Absoluteness is produced in a world as an exception to the apparent "truths" of that world, and it is only as an absolute exception that it can be validated in worlds other than the one to whose laws it is an exception' (IdV, p. 63/63).

Such exceptional criteria would seem to narrow the field of truths dramatically, presumably to the exclusion (e.g. in the domain of literature) of works by figures like Sophocles, Shakespeare or Balzac. Rather than demonstrate the utterly exceptional quality of works of truth, however

Badiou tends instead to celebrate ‘remarkable sequences’ in passages that can sometimes read like the inventory of a museum of great works and revolutionary affirmations. The effect combines a mix of subversion and conservation, of radicality and canonisation. If most attempts at truth are re-covered [*recouverts*] or tossed out as *déchets*, nevertheless great human achievements here endure and seem to speak for themselves:

There remain a great many exceptions—and after all, in light of the difficulty of absolutisation, there is an impressively large number of them—, exceptions which nothing can diminish and which are the glory of our species, that of the featherless bipeds of the Neolithic era. Astonishing mathematical theorems and famous physical laws; paintings, sculptures, music, poems, novels, films, all of them unforgettable; fragments of communism attempted and experienced, if only for a short time; experiences of love, sometimes as discreet as they were absolute: all this has been forever inscribed beyond re-recovery, and under the protection of an attribute of the absolute (p. 460/527).

Unforgettable is one thing but actively remembered is often another, and it’s hard to work out just how such experiences might be forever inscribed and protected, without a fuller account of how their inscribing itself occurs and persists. Revolutionary affirmation is unquestionably a world-making power, but so is counter-revolutionary distortion or erasure.

(c) My third reservation is a bit more specific, and concerns the way Badiou refers the absolute quality of an infinite or unending truth to what he calls its *index* [*indice*]. In general, the index ‘concentrates the immanence of a truth to the absolute’ (IdV, p. 517/452). By distilling its irrefutable and indestructible absoluteness, an index is what guarantees that a work of truth, although finite in its actual practice and its worldly existence and temporality, nevertheless ‘ceases to be [finite] in the sense of re-recovery or *recouvrement*,’ and thus protects, absolutely, any real work from the risk of being eventually discarded or thrown away as the historical equivalent of disposable junk or waste [*déchet*] (p. 517/452). More technically, as we have seen, Badiou defines ‘the complete index of a work as that which brings the work into communication with a complete cardinal. This communication, this friction [*frottement*], this subjectivised flash, guarantees the possibility, for the work, of being indefinitely protected against successive forms of re-recovery, and therefore against finitude, the ontological form of oppression.’ Such is Badiou’s definition of ‘the absoluteness of a work: it possesses a complete index, and in so doing, it has participated, even if only for a moment, in an attribute of the absolute’ (p. 526/459). In other words, indices ensure that a truth is indeed and thus forever true.

To illustrate what he means, Badiou gives the examples of a painting by Vermeer, Dante's love for Béatrice, and 'Mao's creation of a communist peasant Red Army finally promised victory on its own terms [*enfin promise à une victoire qui soit la sienne*]' (p. 526/459). Or again:

The index, for example, is what literary criticism seeks to grasp as determining the exceptional greatness of a novel, and which is found in the text being analyzed even though it cannot be identified with any of the textual components of that text. It is also what is expressed in the phrase 'I love you,' which, if it is not a lie, encompasses the dynamic totality of love without being reducible to any particular episode. In the case of a proposition of theoretical physics, which can be transmitted in its entirety in the form of mathematical statements, the index is experimental, in the sense that the real 'external' point enveloped by the theoretical formalism is validated or rectified by observation.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of political works or projects, Badiou proposes that the index is provided by the proper names of certain subjects closely associated with the sequence, for example Robespierre, Toussaint Louverture and Lenin, for the French, Haitian and Russian revolutions respectively (p. 675/585). More precisely, via the name of its most commanding leader, the index of a political truth names its practical orientation towards victory or fulfilment, whether or not this is actually achieved in the situation itself. A political index refers to 'the consciousness of a victorious orientation or direction, the demarcation of an historical "path," one that cannot be reduced to any tactical successes, however great they may be (such as the seizure of power), as these remain empirically finite' (p. 517/452). It's in this sense that names like Mao and Robespierre remain the indices of the truths they helped to articulate.

The left wing of the movement in China used Mao's writings and thinking, and ultimately the words 'Mao' and 'Maoism,' just as my comrades and I used them during the 'red years' after 1968: as an index for transmitting a way of thinking that could be used, when faced with the unprecedented situation of the degeneration of other 'communist' parties, to overcome the impasses and to rediscover, to reinvent, in the real [*dans le réel*], a political orientation that genuinely broke with capitalist domination. That is why I state here that, just as Robespierre and Saint-Just are the indexes of the living part of the French Revolution, just as Toussaint-Louverture is the index of the Haitian Revolution, Lenin of the Russian Revolution, and Castro of the Cuban Revolution, Mao is the index of the Cultural Revolution. This, I insist, is not a question of power or of the cult of personality, but of collective thought of absolute and immortal value,

even if it was often defeated in its historical moment, as was the case with Robespierre and Mao (pp. 675-6/585).

As usual it's clear that Badiou has anticipated the likely resistance of some readers on this point. Even if tied to a particular individual, what is thus named is presented as a collective capacity and a collective thought; the name *per se* serves only as a shorthand, a way of referring to a wider work of organization and action that went far beyond the leaders of any given moment. The name 'is not a person but the signifier of a person' (p. 649/562). But why, then, personal proper names, instead of collective names such as *sans-culottes*, patriots, Jacobins, etc., or Soviets, Bolsheviks, Tricontinentalists, Cuban internationalists, etc.? And why *these* names? Why Saint-Just more than Marat on the one hand, why Robespierre more than Danton on the other? Why not all four, along with the famously complicated feelings each held for the other? Why Toussaint rather than Dessalines (or for that matter, rather than someone like Hyacinthe Moïse)?

The point isn't to raise the sort of pedantic questions that can be raised to undermine the selection of any name at all, but to ask more about what is involved in the actual process of such selection. Can the recognition and canonisation of any name be isolated from the consolidation of official histories and state-sanctioned narratives? More importantly, why these proper names as *names*, in the absence of an assessment of what these figures actually did or most *wanted* to do—especially in those moments when an initial and wider confidence in the revolutionary project might have begun to waver?

For my part, I fully share Badiou's admiration for his three revolutionary figures, as well as for many others who appear in the pages of his book. Who could dispute their importance? But if we are to propose, for example, even if only in a rather perfunctory way, that Toussaint's name provides the index of the absolute and therefore eternal truth of the Haitian revolution, it seems to me that in addition to appreciating the obvious significance of Toussaint's contribution to the victories of the revolution, we should also consider his rather complex and sometimes compromised relation to that revolution, and (following the example of C.L.R. James) consider why and how Toussaint, before Leclerc's invasion, and so before Haiti's emancipation from France, had lost the support of many of his compatriots, perhaps especially the support of many peasant farmers and ordinary soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Again, if we are to argue that Robespierre's name is the index of the French Revolution, and therefore of this revolution as an infinite and eternally renewable project, then along with an appreciation of his many inspiring and indeed heroic qualities we should also attempt a critical assessment of what he wanted and what he did in the last and most consequential months of his life. It's easy to acknowledge Robespierre's reputation as a central

figure in the drama that was the French Revolution, and in some quarters, at least, his enormous contribution to that drama duly receives the respect it deserves. I think it's also important, however, to recognise that decisions he made in the last six months of his life helped quite directly to demobilise mass support for the revolution, precisely at a time when the question of how best to continue the revolution had become critical. (I am thinking, for example, of Robespierre's disastrous attempt to eliminate the 'factions' in March-April 1794, and then his indefensible decision, in June, to accelerate and consolidate the work of the Revolutionary Tribunal through the Law of Prairial. It's precisely these measures that make it so easy for Robespierre's many critics to characterise him less as the incorruptible and immortal index of the revolution than as the name most closely associated with its degeneration).

Rather than address the complexity of what these actors did or wanted to do, Badiou's priority is to acknowledge the way the unforgettable names of great revolutionaries testify or indicate the absolute and eternal truth of the revolutionary idea in general. But does the bracketing of the psycho-political or moral-psychological dimension of these actors, in short, really help to clarify the trans-historical significance of this idea? Or does such bracketing serve more to simplify and thus evade the work of political assessment and historical interpretation?

What should we prioritise: the absolute or the relational? If our aim is to remember and embrace the inspiring importance of these revolutionary sequences, should our priority be to secure their *absolute* and effectively transcendent value? Or should we rather participate in both appreciative and critical recollection of them as extraordinary but also constrained and compromised relational projects, projects that can only be understood as relative to their time and place, to the obstacles they faced and the capacities they developed?

Confronted with this sort of question, Badiou has a ready answer. Responding to my reservations about the status of the index in politics (and echoing previous discussions about the 'absolutism of truth' that began some thirty years ago), Badiou writes:

You would like the index to be more democratic, less exposed to the cult of personality; to evoke *sans-culottisme* more than Robespierreism. And to be more empirical, ultimately. You ask: what did Robespierre do to deserve his status as an index? Only the index is not a question of fact or deed [*question de fait*] in the sense that you understand it. Entire libraries have been written on what Robespierre did or did not do! But they have never succeeded in removing Robespierre from his position as an index, any more than they have been able to do so for Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Fidel Castro, Aristide, Lumumba, Lenin, Mao, and a few others. Because the index is a question that relates to a connection between the

symbolic and the imaginary imposed by the real [*le réel*], and not to the *empiricité* of historical studies. But such is the timeless core of our discussion over these many years, and I am glad to see that this discussion continues.<sup>20</sup>

Point taken, and I appreciate its post-Lacanian connotations, but this line between the real and the empirical, in any historical sequence, seems very difficult to draw. What *really* ensures that some names will forever remain on one side of this line? Can we be confident that counter-revolutionary projects will remain forever incapable of blurring if not erasing the absolute status of any name, no matter how popular or illustrious?

The humbly ‘empirical’ dimensions of such questions are not easily put to one side. Summarising his definition, Badiou says ‘the index of a political work refers to one or two proper names, rarely more, which simultaneously designate: (a) the fulfilment of the universal conditions of a work, in particular the prolonged immanence of a leading intellectual figure in a mass process opposed to the dominant order; (b) the local singularity of the creation of the work in question’ (p. 652/565). Even so abstract a definition still raises some unavoidable questions. Why just ‘one or two’—why not only one, or many? Why rarely, rather than always, or intermittently? Badiou occasionally hints at some suggestive uncertainty on this score.<sup>21</sup> In the Cuban case, for instance, why Castro and not also if not especially Che Guevara? Given his distinctive association with the futural dimensions of Cuba’s revolution in particular, is the latter’s omission from Badiou’s list of indices deliberate, or just an inconsequential oversight?

Why, in particular, should the trans-historical dimension of a revolutionary sequence imply only one single path to victory, rather than the intertwining of several more or less complementary, more or less contested conceptions of how to advance and how to continue, all of which might retain some share in the truth of the sequence? Is there only one way of pursuing or ‘realising’ a revolution? What if a great part of the drama and eventual tragedy of the Russian Revolution consists in the fact that *both* the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, both Lenin and Martov, were right about certain things—just not in ways that could ‘hold true’ at the same time and along the same line? How far might the same be said of Lenin and Pannekoek, or of Bukharin and Trotsky, and so on?

Badiou himself considers the most famously controversial question associated with the Russian sequence, when he asks ‘whether Stalin was the index of a political movement [...], and if not, why did millions of people cite him as one for such a long time?’ (p. 653/566). Badiou recognises, of course, that if in the 1920s and 30s, and indeed still in the 1940s and 50s, you had asked most communist militants in most places about the enduring names of the Russian Revolution and its international legacy, they would surely have joined Stalin’s name to that of Lenin. Insofar as

the emergence of a truth's index is bound up with the determination of its path to victory, surely Stalin's name could make a strong claim for consideration right through to the late 1950s, if not indeed to the late 1980s and after. Why not now, why not forever? If Badiou's consideration of this point is broadly convincing it's only because here—unlike his discussions of e.g. Robespierre and Toussaint—he concedes that it is indeed necessary to address at least some of the empirical complexity of the case:

In reality, what does Stalin represent? He is the proper name for a process of reversal [...]: seizing the work of truth whose index is 'Lenin,' he transformed it—mainly through violence, and especially from 1936 onwards—into state policy. Stalin's most important statement is undoubtedly that the revolution is 'finished [*terminée*].' What is the real meaning of this assertion in the USSR of the 1930s? It essentially meant that from now on, the driving force of historical movement no longer springs from political debate among the people, so much as the consolidation of absolute unity around the state, which has now become the 'proletarian state,' and, at the international level, around the USSR, which has become the 'homeland of socialism.' The Stalinist process is one of depoliticizing the effects of the political work he inherited. [...] Essentially, 'Stalin' refers to an accelerated development of production, achieved through enormous pressure from the state and the state alone. The support of the masses, their enthusiasm, also existed, there is no doubt about that. But it was in no way a matter of politics, of a political work (p. 655/568).

Yes indeed, Stalin should be credited with leading the national effort, sustained at an incomprehensibly exorbitant cost, to repel the Nazis and turn the tide against fascism. Still, when all is said and done, Badiou concludes, a true 'political work cannot be attributed to Stalin, who, with cunning and cynicism, depoliticised his nation. He can be defined as the statesman who halted and blocked, under the frozen emblem of the "socialist state," the work whose name was "Lenin"—all the while organising the worship of that work, as one might commemorate an ancestor whose artistic legacy you have cynically exploited in the form of a profitable museum, in which nothing is created anymore' (p. 656/569).

Badiou is surely right about the stifling effect of Stalinist repression, but is the line he draws between such repression and state consolidation on the one hand, and the continuation of any true political work on the other, as sharp and as clear as he suggests? Can such a line be clearly established without addressing the nature of *ongoing* mass fidelity to Stalin in all its empirical complexity, precisely, or without addressing the post-1924 rivalry with Trotsky, the later tensions between the USSR and

Mao's China, the relentless Western campaign against the USSR, and so on? Do the stark and emphatically absolute criteria of 'an index of eternity' suffice to illuminate the making and unmaking of such a complex reputation, or help us to account from the process and the timing of Stalin's fall from revolutionary grace, or even to explain why the author of *Théorie de la contradiction* himself retained some respect for '*la pensée forte de Staline*' well into 1970s?<sup>22</sup> Can the difference between Stalin on the one hand and say Toussaint and Lenin on the other be adequately understood within the strictly binary terms that Badiou affirms here? (It's hard not to wonder, in addition, given the circumstances confronting them, whether this indexical question might seem so clear if Lenin and Toussaint had themselves survived to pursue political careers as long as that of Stalin).

In the case of the French Revolution, again, the bare criteria of 'leading intellectual figure' and 'orientation towards victory' might not by themselves be enough to persuade many historians to acknowledge Robespierre as the event's enduring index, rather than say Danton, a name that doesn't appear in Badiou's book. Historians who associate the true 'eternity' of the French Revolution with the proto-liberalism of 1789 more than with the insurgent egalitarianism of 1792 might be more inclined to retain the name of Lafayette—a name widely vilified in the years 1792-94, certainly, but perhaps rather less so, in more conservative circles, by the time some once-revolutionary slogans were revived in 1830. Many other committed partisans of the revolution, of course, in the 1790s and afterwards, might have associated its full realisation, however inconsistently, with that other great figure who proclaimed the ending of a revolution: Napoleon. More importantly, if in the summer of 1793 you had asked the insurgent people of Paris to name the figure they most associated with the enduring principles and ongoing militant practice of their revolution, my guess is that most of them would have proposed Jean-Paul Marat. It didn't take long, however, for a reaction that began the following summer, and that continues to this day via the likes of François Furet and Simon Schama, to scratch his name from the pantheon of revolutionary heroes—and indeed from Badiou's own list of indices. Consider too the symptomatic case of Auguste Blanqui. Walter Benjamin was relatively rare among Marxist thinkers to recognise both his still-obvious importance and its fragility: if 'the nineteenth-century quaked at the sound of Blanqui's name,' notes Benjamin, it only took a couple of decades before the reformist Social Democrats 'managed to erase his name almost entirely.'<sup>23</sup>

More to the point: if Blanqui, Marx, Lenin (and Stalin) were all first and foremost *proletarian* revolutionaries, what happens to such proper names when the basis of their own collective nomination is itself largely effaced, when the very word or name 'proletariat' (to say nothing of the dictatorship that was once associated with it) comes to be obscured

(directly reversing the priorities of Badiou's 1982 *Theory of the Subject*) in favour of the many variations on a sociologically-determinant *working class*? What happens if the revolutionary proletariat comes to be eclipsed by the consolidation, at least in the more privileged and more imperious parts of the world, of a reformist worker-class that in many ways, in the constitutive struggle between capital and labour, so regularly takes the side of capital?

\* \* \* \* \*

The more obvious it becomes that 'the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule,' the more urgently do we need to address the full enormity and implications of this rule. Surely nothing is more important, today, than the renewal of collective confidence in that revolutionary path which offers a way out of our ever more pressing state of emergency. From the 1970s through to the 2020s, Badiou's own confidence has remained indomitable, and I have always envied him his 'Cartesian serenity.' The priority of *Immanence of Truths* is to secure the space traversed by this path as indestructibly infinite, as irrefutably un-ending, and thus as effectively invulnerable to counter-revolutionary assault.

For my part I still find it hard to dissociate strategic renewal of the path from the obstacles and the wreckage that have come to obstruct it. Like many people of my generation, whose political experience has been marked by one defeat after another, I find it easier to relate to Walter Benjamin's anxiety about the past than Badiou's confidence in the our future. 'The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past,' Benjamin famously reminds us, 'is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.'<sup>24</sup> So far.

1 This is a written version of the semi-improvised talk I gave at a conference held in Paris on Badiou's *L'Immanence des vérités*, 1-2 October 2018, entitled 'La Vérité entre l'être et la pratique.' I'm grateful to Kenneth Reinhard and Frank Ruda, and Alain Badiou himself, for their comments on an earlier version of this text.

2 Badiou, *L'Immanence des vérités* (2018), trans. Kenneth Reinhard as *The Immanence of Truths* (2022), abbreviated here as IdV. Page references are to the French edition followed by the English translation, though I have sometimes modified the translation.

3 I explore Badiou's relation to Kant a little more fully in Hallward 2010.

4 IdV, pp. 228-9. Kenneth Reinhard translates *recouvrement* as covering-over; to bring out the dimension of recuperation, in what follows I will render it as re-recovery. In our neoliberal era a paradigmatic form of *recouvrement* has long been an acceptance, which continues to this day, of Margaret Thatcher's notorious insistence that 'there is no alternative;' for Badiou an ongoing case in point is the capitalist recuperation of China's Communist Party that began with the end of the Cultural Revolution (IdV, p. 645/559). 5 IdV, p. 284/252. As Badiou goes on to explain, 'proximity to the absolute' as such, named 'V' (with its association with *vérité* i.e. truth), 'is the most important case [to consider], the one that really gives us a glimpse of the relationship between the problem of infinity, the critique of finitude, and the absoluteness of truths' (p. 291/257).

6 Kant is satisfied that 'a human being really finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself insofar as he is affected by objects, and that is reason'—while accepting that 'reason would overstep all its bounds if it took it upon itself to explain how pure reason can be practical, which would be exactly the same task as to explain how freedom is possible [...]. We do not indeed comprehend the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative, but we nevertheless comprehend its incomprehensibility' (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AK 4: pp. 452, 459, 463, in Kant 1996: cf. Kant, CPR, Bxxx).

7 Kant 1997, AK 27, p. 344. Heidegger acknowledges the practical foundations of Kantian morality: 'What is genuinely law-giving for willing is the actual pure willing itself and nothing else' (Heidegger 2005, p. 193).

8 IdV, p. 525-6/459: '*l'éclair qui touche au cardinal complet supposé n'est autre que ce par quoi l'œuvre s'absolutise.*'

9 As Kenneth Reinhard explains in the helpful introduction to his English translation of Badiou's book, 'elementary embedding depends on the positing of an extremely large type of infinite number usually referred to as a "measurable

cardinal" by set theorists, and which Badiou calls, using a more intuitive term, a "complete cardinal." Such an "embedding" takes an element of V [the absolutely infinite class of all possible sets] and brings it down into a known lower level or model within V. This involves the "violence" of embedding something absolutely large in something somewhat smaller. And this is the moment, we might say, when, having come into extreme proximity to the absolute, having peered up over the rim of the tunnel leading out of the cave of finitism and having caught a glimpse of the absolute, we go back down. But unlike Plato's prisoner, who, dazzled by the sheer brightness of the allegorical Sun of the Good (or for Badiou, truth) returns to the darkness of the cave with impaired vision and nothing more than stories of some "outside" world, we return from this most strenuous ascent with evidence of the absolute. Not the absolute itself, but some of its attributes, which serve both as witnesses to the actuality of our strange journey and as bits of the real that can be put to work in the finite world of the cave. And it is precisely as illuminating works, or truth procedures, that these newly discovered infinities can operate in our world, as works of art, of science, of politics, and of love' (Badiou 2022, p. 14).

10 I discuss this in a little more detail in Hallward 2003, pp. 33ff.

11 Badiou 1977, 33; cf. Badiou 1982, p. 263.

12 Badiou 1982, 338. Hence the essential lesson of May 68: 'those who, like us, looked first to what was missing (subjective political precarity, the absence of a party) rather than to what appeared full (the revolt, the masses in the street, liberated speech), had what they needed to nourish their confidence [*confiance*], while the others were left only to betray their belief [*croyance*]' (p. 342). If Badiou and his friends are the last of the *soixante-huitards* to be found campaigning outside factory doors, Badiou would go on to say some years later, this is 'not because we're saying and doing the same things as we did twenty years ago.' On the contrary, it is because 'the "others" failed to make and endure the necessary transformation, that they have dropped out' (Badiou 1992, p. 66).

13 I develop this point in more detail in Hallward 2005.

14 Cf. Hallward 2003, p. 116.

15 IdV, p. 285/252. See in particular Quentin Meillassoux's brilliant contribution to the Paris conference on IdV, 1-2 October 2018, entitled 'Polysémie de l'immanence,' and posted online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAHSBQJ57ZY>.

16 IdV, p. 281/248. 'Ultimately, we must affirm that *there is infinity*—infinity in the strict sense of the term, i.e., non-constructible infinite multiplicity. That is to say, at least (though we will see that more is needed...) uncountable infinity,

infinity beyond whole numbers [...]. To adopt a non-constructible subjectivity, whatever the order of thought-practice in which it is done, is to assume the existence of a non-constructible infinity, an assumption that will have to be put to work in real life. This means: looking closely at anything that seems like an exception, defending ourselves against re-covering operations, denouncing the superficiality of the definable, going after the trivial pronouncements of constructibility, which are clearly intended to maintain order... It's quite a job. An impossible job if you haven't first made a fundamental choice, that of opting, in one way or another, for the assumption that there is really such a thing as non-constructible infinity. This assumption about infinity serves as a guide in the search for what, in effect, transgresses the dominant constructible order, because it escapes being re-covered or covered-over' (p. 265/234).

17 'The mathematical theory of pure multiplicity,' as Badiou reiterated in response to an earlier version of this question, 'in no way claims to inform the way we might think everything that is presented in the infinity of real situations, but only the thinking of *presentation as such*. This is what I call, adopting the vocabulary of the philosophical tradition, being *qua being*. Whatever else we do, we must not disregard the *qua*. It's obvious (for me as much as for Aristotle) that if you think the planet Mars from within the ontological situation, then you will give priority to determining what grounds a certain identity between Mars and Jupiter, and not to what indicates their differences. We might even say that, strictly speaking, you are thinking *nothing* about the planet Mars. What you are theorising is rather the general possibility of multiple-presentation. Considered '*qua being*', it's certainly the case that the planet Mars activates a possibility immanent to the mathematical theory of pure multiplicities. You will only arrive at the exact nature of this possibility by taking the planet Mars as your starting-point, and certainly not by beginning from mathematised ontology, in which 'Mars' simply doesn't exist at all. In other words, in its being Mars is ultimately a pure multiple, but we cannot determine this singular multiple that is Mars (insofar as we can think it in terms of its being as such) by moving from mathematical theory to the identification of this singularity. We must proceed the other way around; we must move from an acknowledgement of the appearing of Mars in a world (whose scale, or '*transcendental regime [le transcendental]*', we can establish) to its ontological determination' (Badiou 2004, 233). 18 IdV, p. 517/452. Kenneth Reinhard (in an email to the author) draws attention to Badiou's analysis of Olivier Messiaen's *Blackbird* as an especially good example of an artistic index (IdV, p. 551-60/480-7).

19 See James 1963; Fick 1991.

20 Badiou, email to the author, 4 October 2018.

21 In the case of Vietnam's war of liberation, for instance, Badiou naturally identifies Ho Chi Minh as its index, adding that he belongs 'perhaps in the company of general Giáp' (p. 651/564)—but he doesn't provide an explanation for this uncharacteristic lack of certainty. The concept of an index seems to leave little place for such hesitation. As regards the need for 'one or two' names, and the sort of militant unity or simplicity this implies, Badiou also acknowledges cases in which such unity is never achieved, with fatal consequences. He recognises that 'in the case of an unfinished work, which means one defeated early on by the enemy, its index may be constituted by not one signifier but several. Such is the case of the Paris Commune, for example, which evokes the names of Courbet, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Dombrowski, Lissagaray, Louise Michel, Vallès, Varlin, and many others. Admittedly, this index's fragmentation also reflects the specifically political weakness of the Commune, a mutilated work, a martyr-work, more intense in the symbolic order and that of creativity in terms of projects than because of its real process' (p. 649/563).

22 Badiou 1975, p. 38; cf. pp. 85-9. Domenico Losurdo considers some of the ways Stalin has been demonised across a broad spectrum of opinion in Losurdo 2023.

23 Walter Benjamin 1940, §12, p. 394.

24 Benjamin 1940, §6, p. 391. Among Badiou's contemporaries, Daniel Bensaid and Michael Löwy remain remarkable for their perseverance and conviction on this score.

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