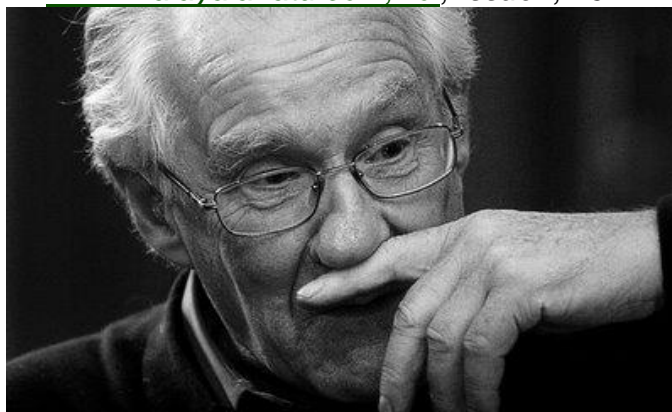


Alain Badiou: The Philosopher of Subtractive Ontology

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Alain Badiou is a prominent French philosopher (1937—) who has taken up a strong critical position against certain presumed aberrations of post-modern philosophy chiefly centered on the question of being and subjectivity. In this effort he relocates himself in a novel philosophical site whose singular feature should be the incorporation of a mathematical method (set theory) in his philosophy. But the use of such a mathematical method is definitely distinct from the symbolic-algebraic or syllogistic-logical method followed by the Analytical Philosophy. To be sharply put, his philosophy bridges some of the vital mathematical aspects of Analytical Philosophy and certain metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of Continental Philosophy in an exceptionally brilliant manner. Definitely such a fusion of ideas from apparently opposed systems could divulge eclecticism and critical flips which gets further complicated by the Marxist convictions (of the Maoist variety) he upheld especially in the early phase up to the mid-1980's. But proving the fault finders naught, his philosophy has turned out to be a highly original and inspiring one. He has been a prolific writer throughout and we may not be able to scour through all of his writings here. The main works on which this short discussion here is based are three: *Theory of Subject* (1982), *Being and Event* (1988), and *Logics of Worlds* (2005). His magnum opus is of course *Being and Event*.

Despite certain ritual vicissitudes in his political stances and positions on social action his commitment to a purist notion of philosophy never wavered. He is a hardliner to an extent in this respect. He believes that many "sutures" and illegal miscegenations were made on philosophy with other schools of thought which have made it inadmissibly disfigured and even ugly. His singular motto in this respect is "save philosophy" from such undesirable entanglements and he shares this crusading spirit with Gilles Deleuze. For Badiou philosophy as such is a pure discipline. "Philosophy has no partners, but only disciples", he asserts very strongly. Certain other disciplines with which it is identified of late like Political Philosophy, Positivism, Marxism etc are only its "conditions" and not its content as such. We have to heal philosophy of the many wounds it has suffered from such illegal liaisons and this is possible only by basing philosophy in its proper ontological pedestal, which is mathematics.

His enthusiasm for mathematics renders an overall aura to whatever he took up intellectually and politically. "Subtraction" therefore becomes an important conceptual and political category in his system in contrast to deduction, synthesis, contradiction, opposition, purification or transcendence articulated by other schools like Phenomenology, Marxism and Kantianism. Hence his relations with other philosophers are also many a time one of "subtraction" and not opposition or overcoming. Insights from other philosophers and thinkers are "subtractively" embedded into his system with peculiar modifications and that range from Platonism and Set Theory to Psychoanalysis and Maoism. His system becomes a strong subtractive blend of ideas from these major schools. From Plato he incorporates the notion of "Truth" and multiple. Equally unfashionable and out-of-date in the eyes of Postmodernism, truth nonetheless comes to constitute an important category in his system. Again, his theory of multiple as against the One of Greek metaphysics is directly adopted from Plato's Parmenides. In Plato though there occurs a tacit privileging of the One, it is the same conjuncture that dialectically introduces the problem of multiple also; multiple as an "infinite self-dissemination" becomes one of the cornerstones of Badiou's philosophy. Along with Truth and multiple Being is another major category "subtractively" incorporated mainly from Heidegger and Hegel. "Subject" is the third major axis and this he draws from the Psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. He calls Lacan "his master and the greatest among the dead". Lacan is famous for his non-essentialist and "anti-identitarian" notion of the subject. The famous Lacanian riddle-like definition of the subject which has influenced Badiou in an important way is prominently highlighted in Being and Event: "I am not, there where I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am, there where I do not think I am thinking" (p.431).

Of course the relation with Marxism cannot be escaped as his early intellectual career spanned the period of the Cultural Revolution in China in the late 1960's and the May 1968 student uprising in Paris. The influence of Louis Althusser and his Structural Marxism is most important. Althusser is noted for his re-interpretation of Marxism in the light of Structuralism and Psychoanalysis. He was highly critical of the Hegelian dialectical model of Marxism based on linear causality, notion of history, transcendence and its teleological finality. As an aftereffect of such a vulgar humanist and causal thinking Marx's system came to be rigidly dichotomized into a two-tiered system of economic substructure and ideological superstructure. Althusser tried to redeem Marxism from this mono-causal straitjacket by re-envisioning social reality as an ensemble of multiple structures with the economy as the determinant one "in the last instance". Borrowing the theory of overdetermination from Freud and the binary opposition from Structuralism he propounded a non-Hegelian Marxist social model. The linchpin of his new interpretation is what he formulates as "structural causality". That social reality is not singularly determined by the forces of a preceding historical epoch but constituted within a set of synchronous structures which exert mutual influence. The structural ensembles become their own mutual constitutive condition; inevitably none of them are equal or balanced at any point of time and hence the presence of a "structure in dominance" (and logically the "weakest link" of Lenin too) among them. Among the many structures that constitute the synchronous structural ensemble four become

important for Althusser: economy, ideology, science and politics. What Badiou emulates from Althusser is his spirit of anti-historicism and the notion of social reality as structural ensemble. For Badiou also history is a null category of interpretation while reality becomes a series of “presented multiplicity of multiples”. The difference is that while Althusser develops the notion of an ideologically “interpellated” subject as part of the conspiratorial project of capitalism Badiou diverts his attention to the contingent aspects in the interrelation between the structures which finally culminates in his famous theory of the “event”.

Beyond Metaphysics and Maoism

Being, Truth and Subject become the three central constitutive axes of Badiou's system. This is elaborated through a set of concepts like multiples, event, fidelity, intervention, generic set etc which combine a peculiar form of mathematical thinking with a clear agenda of subjective action. The engagement with mathematics could be suspected for resulting in dry abstractions and the consequent devalorization of the subjective factor and social action. But it works the other way in Badiou. He completely abandons the end-of-history or end-of-philosophy pessimisms of postmodernism and the “eternal return” thesis of Nietzsche and Deleuze. He builds up a new theory of militant subjectivity and forward action that befit Marxism and later Sartre. How this is possible becomes clear once we understand his system that link event, subject and truth in a peculiar manner. We can only go very briefly into it.

Since there is no One (which is tantamount to the death of God) reality is constituted of “self-disseminating” multiples. The notion of multiple is directly derived from set theory since for Badiou “mathematics is ontology” itself. While for Aristotle or Spinoza it is the substance that constitutes the ultimate being and its ontology, it is mathematics that articulates the dynamics of being for Badiou. Being is an empty set peopled with elements that follow an “axiomatic” logic. The multiples in being are infinite and they become a random assortment also at the same time. A poem, a knife, a fish, a car accident or for that matter anything with a definable modality can constitute these multiples. In Badiou's terms they are elements in an empty set. But such random infinity does not serve a philosophical purpose as such. So an “intervention” is called for. A certain selection of multiples has to be inevitably made. Or in philosophical terms though there is no fundamental One, the multiples should be put into a certain “form of one” or “one-ified” for feasible philosophical results. Such putting into one is a counting for one or is a “count-as-one”. Such a count-as-one creates a definable set with a certain “structure”. So in this count anything can be an element. For example the set that contains all the people living in India constitutes a definite structure. With same valency and logical structure we can constitute all the teak woods in a forest or all the plastic chairs in a hall. There is no exceptional ontological privilege for one over the other whether the element is a tree or a man or a chair. It is at the second stage of the axiomatic operation of the sets that the differences set in. Over and above the first count there is a second count undertaken from a privileged quarter or by an agency with certain vested interest. For example, if the Indian state makes a count from its perspective not all the people living in India are of equal status. An immigrant

Bangladeshi or Pakistani doesn't enjoy the status of a normal Indian citizen. Or if a count is undertaken from the perspective of so-called ritual purity, the people of India get divided into different unequal castes. Further subsets set in with the second count. So there occurs a "count-of-the-count" in the second instance. The second count creates a "situation" or a "meta-structure" different from and in excess of the structure of the first count. This is a simple principle of the set theory. If a set has three elements they can combine into what we call a "power set" of eight elements. In all such power sets there is a common null set also. What it means is that in a second count the elements in an initial set can combine to form difficult combinations in excess of what belonged to the initial set. So the elements under the set of people of India get combined and recombined into various forms of "inclusion" much beyond the simple "belonging" under the initial set. Analyzing social reality from such an axiomatic mathematical perspective instead of dialectical, functional or historical-causal perspectives opens up a different set of problems as well as the possibility of new forms of analysis in social sciences.

Towards Generic Truth and the Politics of Void

Of course the mathematical model is not bluntly copied into the philosophy's terrain or applied into the social midst. There occurs critical filtering and re-definitions. Badiou therefore calls his philosophy "metaontology". Accordingly, being gets rechristened as "inconsistency" in his philosophy which in turn is articulated on the notions "void" and "event". The primal being for Badiou is not an inchoate substance or an underlying element or an equivalent of nothingness (as in Hegel). It is just a plenitude of modal multiples segregated with void that almost become similar to the theory of the Atomists. But unlike the Atomists who dynamise their atoms through physical motion Badiou makes his multiples fall into the axiomatic logic of mathematics and specifically that of set theory. Void becomes important here. Void is a sort of virtuality or primal emptiness in which elements in a structure or multiple get congregated; only qua void they assume any form or modality. The intervening void is what creates the "structurality of the structure" and in Badiou's words it is the "subtractive suture" of multiples to being. For Badiou what "happens" is more important than what "is" in relation to being. This brings in the important notion of the "event". It is the event that singularizes the ontology of the inconsistent being and this is most important. He qualifies the notion of event in unequivocal terms. A car accident or a natural calamity like flood is not an event in his philosophical terms. An event should have an emerging "Truth" in it and it is the bringing out of this truth that makes the event philosophical and historical. Event and truth have a complex relation. An event is not a normal historical happening, It is momentary and disappears-as-it-appears. It is constituted of multiples, but among them there are certain multiples which are new and unpredictable that defy the normative logic of conventional theories like Hegelianism or Marxism. An event, apart from normal multiples, also contains a "generic set" of undecipherable or 'indiscernible' elements. The truth of an event depends on the fixing or "forcing" of the meaning of such a generic set. These generic elements initially exist as unintelligible since they are bordered on the underlying void. The normal logic of truth and its chronological order get reversed in Badiou's schemata. In the other philosophies with a historical bearing like Hegelianism

and Marxism historical happenings are consequent upon a preceding historical dynamic whether it is the will of the Geist or the materialist productive forces realized through the working classes. But for Badiou truth is post-factum and post-evental.

This truth creates the subject for Badiou. In other words, the subject is the one who declares “fidelity” to an event and searches out the truth with the paramount signpost of the void before him or her. There are no permanent subjects; there are only subjects of events. Once the event is constituted of its truth the subject disappears. The truth procedure undertaken by the subject is termed “generic truth procedure” since truth itself is not reified but generic. Badiou also identifies four major areas in which events occur and truth procedures are undertaken: love, science, art and politics. Again, the nature of subjects is also different according to the areas of generic truth procedure. In love there are only “individual subjects” as it is an affair between two persons. In science and arts there are “mixed subjects” as both men and women can undertake scientific and artistic activities. Also it is a relation between individual creators and a mass of people who appreciate or get benefit out of such creations. On the other hand, in politics there are only “collective subjects” since politics affects not the individual but the social collective as a whole. The truth procedures become equivalent to militant action in the realm of politics but ironically get divorced from the destruction and purification endemic to conventional politics. In Badiou’s agenda political truth procedure gets grounded in a subtractive logic and in the identification of the void. The “politics of void” and “subtraction” is best exemplified by Gandhiji’s struggle against the British in the case of India. He formulated a new form of resistance based on peaceful means which was unique in the history of political struggles anywhere in the world. While the Marxists and other militants were racking their head on finding the chinks in the British imperialism based on class theory and international bourgeois conspiracy for a plan of action, Gandhiji “subtracted” his truth procedure or “experiments with truth” from the normal canons of political resistance based on confrontation and destruction and relocated it in an unexpected “void site” of non-violence and militant inaction. Gandhiji becomes a true Badiouan in every sense. Hence there should be more explorations into the philosophy of Badiou especially in the Indian context. Unquestionably, Badiou becomes one of the most important philosophers of modern times ; his efforts to contest the confusions of postmodernism along with Slavoj Zizek and Giorgio Agamben definitely becomes an important episode in the traumatic ontology of modern philosophy..