

PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE WORKS OF BADIOU AND LACLAU

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## Abstract

No theory of social change can circumvent the task of specifying the process that transforms the existent order into a different order, and determining that which accounts for the *difference* between those two orders. This thesis examines whether the theories of social change found in the works of Alain Badiou and Ernesto Laclau succeed in fulfilling this task. Badiou contends that a political process transforms the situation in which it unfolds in so far as what it produces is a ‘truth’. Certain implications of the set-theoretical ontological discourse through which Badiou conceptualizes truths, however, prevents an unambiguous appraisal of their socially transformative character. Although Badiou stipulates that the transformative potential of a truth lies in its ‘generic’ universality, this universality becomes indistinguishable from particularity when its transformative effects are limited to a situation—but it is precisely the interplay between situations, in the plural, that is not adequately reflected in set-theoretical ontology. Whilst Laclau’s theory of hegemony can be interpreted as providing an account of this interplay between pluralities of situations, it has its own shortcoming: the transition between different social orders cannot be thought under hegemony theory as anything other than a transition wherein the to-come is conditioned by the present to an extent that is theoretically underdetermined, resulting in the blurring of the distinction between social transformation and social reproduction. The final part of this thesis explores the possibility of bringing together the Laclauian notion of the ‘simplification’ of the social space through hegemonic articulation and Badiou’s theorization of truth procedure, in an attempt to conceive the particular kind of situation in which a political process would potentially have far-reaching socially transformative consequences.

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## Introduction

In ‘Tactics and Ethics’, George Lukács writes that vacillating ‘aimlessly between *Realpolitik* devoid of ideals and an ideology without real content’ is a perennial risk of a revolutionary practice whose ‘ultimate objective’ is ‘socio-transcendent’.<sup>1</sup> Lenin addresses the issue of revolutionary tactics and their actual efficacy in *Left-Wing Communism*. While acknowledging that it may appear ‘extremely “dangerous”, incomprehensible and wrong to “permit compromises”’ as it would seem to undermine revolutionary purity, Lenin nevertheless notes—in a section titled ‘No Compromises?’—that ‘the entire history of Bolshevism, both before and after the October revolution is *full* of instances of changes of tack, conciliatory tactics and compromises with other parties, including bourgeois parties’.<sup>2</sup> The maintenance of revolutionary purity at the cost of refusing engagement with existing social forces runs aground on a practical contradiction because the revolutionary objective is unachievable without such engagements. This point can be schematically expressed as follows: a process of radical social change must take place across both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ axes. The former is characterized by attentiveness to historical circumstances and attempts to mobilize social forces within the existing social order. But if a process of social change were to work only across the horizontal axis, it makes itself vulnerable to the possibility of missing the socio-transcendent objective. On the other hand, a process that takes place solely across the vertical axis is characterized by a singular commitment to its cause—it neglects existing social forces and its historical situatedness, and risks practical inefficacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, ‘Tactics and Ethics’, in *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings 1919-1929*, ed. by Rodney Livingstone, trans. by Michael McColgan (London: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 3–11 (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, 1920  
 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/>> [accessed 2 September 2014].

This thesis proposes to examine the works of two theorists, Alain Badiou and Ernesto Laclau, in the context of the problem of integrating the vertical and the horizontal axes in an account of social change. What makes—in addition to their shared theoretical background and commitments that allow for a productive a comparative reading—the examination of the accounts developed by Badiou and Laclau in terms of this problem particularly interesting is the fact that each account can be construed as emphasizing one of the two axes while leaving some aspect of the other axis undertheorized, as indicated by the responses that the different visions of politics presented in the works of Badiou and Laclau have elicited.

Observing an affinity between the approaches of Badiou and Laclau in their theorization of social order and politics which transforms it, Oliver Marchart has placed their approaches (along with those of Claude Lefort, Jean-Luc Nancy, and others) under the rubric of ‘post-foundationalist political thought’. This label points to the premise shared by Badiou and Laclau that no social order is a transparent realization of a harmonious whole—there is *something* that escapes it, potentially creating disruptive effects.<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek has similarly remarked that there is a ‘deep homology’ that unites the theoretical edifices of Laclau and Badiou in their attempt to think the dimension that undermines the order of being—a positive social order—as a self-enclosed consistency.<sup>4</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis has placed Žižek, Laclau, and Badiou under the broad heading of the ‘Lacanian Left’, finding influences of Lacanian theory in Laclau’s theorization of the limits of discourses and Badiou’s theorization of the ethical and political implications of an event, to name just two.<sup>5</sup>

However the theoretical background Badiou and Laclau share may be construed, what remains the case is that theoretical affinities have not translated into affinities in their vision

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<sup>3</sup> See: Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

of political practice. Reflecting the experiences of Latin American populism into his political thought, Laclau holds that social change requires forming ‘a common project’ out of different social elements—with identities and demands taking primacy in his analyses—through a process of linkage that he terms ‘articulation’.<sup>6</sup> The structure that emerges from this process of articulation is called a ‘hegemonic formation’, and Laclau maintains that any process of social change—irrespective of its particular normative orientation—will involve the construction of hegemonic formations. Badiou, on the other hand, regards politics as a process of annulling the prevailing stratification of a social order on the basis of particularistic properties and qualifications conferred on individuals. Politics is a matter of actively applying a universal and egalitarian maxim that, in its most general formulation, reads: whoever belongs in a situation belongs in exactly the same way as anyone else. Badiouian politics, then, is one of de-relating, or the undoing of whatever identitarian classifications the ‘state of a situation’—a regime of representation, which Badiou often associates in his ostensibly political writings with the empirical state—has imposed on a social order.

The kind of criticisms that each political vision has elicited already provides a hint as to which of the two axes is inadequately reflected in the theories of Badiou and Laclau. Oliver Marchart argues that what is missed by Badiou—who prefers, according to Peter Hallward, ‘a politics of disciplined purification [...] over a politics of alliance and negotiation’<sup>7</sup>—is the fact that politics takes place ‘between a multiplicity of struggling actors (or subjects), all placed at different positions on an uneven, intransparent and power-ridden terrain’.<sup>8</sup> Marchart suggests that Badiouian politics is sustained by an ethics of pure conviction—and he is not alone in

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<sup>6</sup> David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis’, in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemony*, ed. by David Howarth, Aletta J. Norval, and Yannis Stavrakakis (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1–23 (p. 15).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Marchart, p. 129.



making this point. Daniel Bensaïd, who has forcefully asserted this point against Badiou, writes:

‘God preserve us from socio-political programs!’ exclaims Badiou [...]. Carried by a pure maxim of equality, [the Badiouian politics of truths] is entirely concentrated in the present of its declaration: ‘The only political question is: what is it possible to achieve in the name of this principle through our militant fidelity to this declaration?’ Such a politics is supposed to be a matter of ‘prescriptions’ rather than programme, prescriptions illustrated by unconditional commands such as ‘every individual counts as one’; ‘the sick must receive the best care without conditions’; ‘one child equals one pupil’; ‘anyone who lives here belongs here’. These maxims, which have the dogmatic form of religious commandments, provide principles of orientation that counter the unprincipled accommodation of *Realpolitik* or naked opportunism.<sup>9</sup>

In lieu of engaging with ‘profane politics, with its impurities, uncertainties, and wobbly conventions’, Badiouian politics issues ‘prescriptions’ and ‘dogmatic commandments’ that, for Bensaïd, ultimately is akin to a Kantian morality that allows ‘one to keep one’s hands clean’.<sup>10</sup> But ‘[w]ouldn’t such ethicization of politics prove to be politically disabling’, Marchart asks, ‘if only for the reason that one will always be sure to find oneself on the right side, the side of an ethical, emancipatory politics?’<sup>11</sup>

Laclauian hegemonic politics appears to avoid the potentially disabling ethicization that abovementioned commentators note apropos Badiouian politics. It accepts the premise that ‘in the so-called real world politics cannot simply be about fidelity’, and that ‘compromise, strategy, and a political realism in the Machiavellian [...] sense’ are necessary dimensions of

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, ‘Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event’, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Hallward (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 94–105 (pp. 102–3).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, ‘Permanent Scandal’, in *Democracy in What State?*, by Giorgio Agamben and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. pp.16–43 (p. 42). And: Bensaïd, ‘Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event’, pp. 102–3.

<sup>11</sup> Marchart, p. 130.

political practice.<sup>12</sup> Yet, it is also for its ‘Machiavellian’ political realism that Laclau’s thought has come under criticism. Geoff Boucher, for example, offers the following judgment:

Hegemonic politics is theorized in radically “Machiavellian” terms, as a neutral technology of manipulation and domination that the Left would be well advised to learn to control. Because all social formations are fundamentally constructed upon exclusion and marginalization, the real question becomes one of how to swap the leading personnel, rather than whether to transform the social order.<sup>13</sup>

Even a more sympathetic reader of Laclau such as Simon Critchley has questioned Laclau’s reluctance to advance any concrete normative ethical claims even though certain normative commitments (for instance, a commitment to the so-called ‘radical democracy’) underlie his—as Critchley perceives it—mostly ‘descriptive’ theoretical endeavour.<sup>14</sup> But if Laclau’s theory of hegemony is in fact, as Boucher claims, ‘an ethically indifferent political calculus designed to secure ascendancy for any group prepared to utilize this political technology’,<sup>15</sup> it is, for better or for worse, one that has achieved the rare feat of having actually been taken up by political movements with mass support.<sup>16</sup>

It is not difficult to see which of the two axes the readers of Badiou and Laclau named above would find to be inadequately reflected in their political visions: the horizontal and the vertical, respectively. However, the construal of the problem of integrating the two axes in practical or ethical terms—as a tension between Badiouian *Gesinnungsethik* and Laclauian

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<sup>12</sup> Marchart, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek* (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2009), pp. 231–32.

<sup>14</sup> See: Simon Critchley, ‘Is There a Normative Deficit in the Theory of Hegemony?’, in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 113–22.

<sup>15</sup> Boucher, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘The Heirs of Gramsci’, *New Left Review*, II.100 (2016), 71–97 (pp. 80–81). One such movement which has made explicit use of Laclauian thought is Spain’s Podemos.

In the introduction to the 1998 edition of *The Retreat from Class*, Ellen Meiksins Wood wrote that ‘post-Marxism’—Laclau being one of its representatives in the book—is a ‘now defunct intellectual tendency’. In retrospect, that judgement appears to have been hasty, given the political effects that Laclau’s work has generated in the years after. See: ‘Introduction to the New Edition’ in Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New True Socialism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1998).

*Realpolitik*—as the abovementioned readers have done in the passages that have been cited is neither the only way to construe the problem nor the most productive one. The problem can be construed differently, in a way that makes the advances made by Badiouian and Laclauian approaches toward the theorization of the two axes clearer, as well as opening a path toward a more interesting comparative examination of the two approaches.

Politics, for both Badiou and Laclau, emerges as a process of change from a disruptive, dislocating ‘event’ in the ‘social’—the regime of existing norms, institutions, and practices. Jason Glynos and David Howarth write that ‘insofar as political movements are successful in challenging norms and institutions in the name of something new, political practices bring about a transformative effect on existing social practices’.<sup>17</sup> Accepting the Laclauian proposition that a political process articulates into a common project the potential for change ‘across a variety of social spaces and sites of struggle’, the authors assert that a political process that succeeds in doing so will be able to ‘exercise a transformative effect on an entire regime of practice resulting in the institution and sedimentation of a new regime and the social practices that comprise it’.<sup>18</sup> If *this* is whatever that merits the name ‘revolution’ must *at least* be, the contention of this thesis, to state it succinctly, is that the Laclauian approach, despite theorizing the conditions of the extensiveness of change, leaves the newness of the transformed social order ambiguous, whilst the Badiouian approach, despite developing an elaborate conception of the novelty that a political process carried by ‘the name of something new’ produces, leaves the extensiveness of its transformative effect undertheorized. The difference between the Badiouian and Laclauian approaches construed in this way pertains not to the kinds of political practice advocated by Badiou or Laclau, but to a theoretical problem of conceptualizing social change arising from, in the case of Badiou, an underdeveloped

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<sup>17</sup> Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> Glynos and Howarth, p. 105.

account of how a transformative process could reach beyond—under a concrete historical circumstance—the initial situation or site of struggle from which it originates, and, in the case of Laclauian theory, the persistence of an ambiguity between socially reproductive aspects and socially transformative aspects of a political process. The contributions and shortcomings of Badiouian and Laclauian accounts of social change thus illuminate the challenge of theorizing a political process that produces socially transformative effects that are both extensive *and* new—the challenge, in other words, of theoretically integrating both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ axes. As should be expected, granted that thinking social change that merits to be called ‘revolutionary’ must at least answer to this challenge, the problem of integrating the two axes is not at all alien to the discourse of radical politics. Two instances in which the problem posed in this thesis via the works of Badiou and Laclau is clearly discernible are the account of group praxis elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Jacques Rancière’s reflections on ‘democratic’ politics. A brief overview of the two shall thus serve to both highlight the strengths of Badiouian and Laclauian accounts of social change and prefigure the claims that this thesis will advance apropos their shortcomings.

### I. Sartre, group praxis, and the totalization of history

The solipsistic vision of praxis and its disconnection from material conditions—which Merleau-Ponty had found to be the limitations of Sartre’s early political thought—were what Sartre attempted to rectify in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Reflections on material conditions take centre stage in the first volume of the *Critique*. There, ‘scarcity’ is proposed to be the basic material condition that shapes social relationship. While acknowledging that it cannot be asserted that scarcity will be an eternally untranscendable human condition, Sartre nevertheless observes that ‘the whole of human development, at least up to now, has been a

bitter struggle against scarcity’ and that a human being ‘is a practical organism living with a multiplicity of similar organisms in a field of scarcity.’<sup>19</sup> Beginning with this premise, Sartre proceeds to describes everyday being-with-others as a scene composed of individuals who are at best indifferent to each other and at worst antagonistic, as a situation wherein others are competitors under the condition of scarcity that entails that the satisfaction of everyone’s needs cannot be guaranteed. In one of his characteristically illustrative examples, Sartre explains that a collective of people waiting to board a bus at a bus stop consists of no more than atomic and isolated individuals who are gathered there simply due to the contingent fact that they need to board the same bus. Reciprocity of recognition is absent at the bus stop, a place wherein one has his back turned ‘on his neighbour, who, moreover, has not even noticed him’.<sup>20</sup> Whilst the purpose of each individual standing at the bus stop is the same, there is no *common* purpose, because under the condition of scarcity, an individual has to regard the others as competitors, not as someone with whom he can cooperate to achieve his purpose.

The kind of gathering described above exhibits the characteristic of what Sartre calls a ‘series’, which he contends is the dominant mode of human gathering in everyday situations. And for Sartre, ‘in order to achieve even the smallest common result’, seriality must be overcome.<sup>21</sup> The overcoming, or in Sartre’s terms, ‘dissolution’, of seriality may occur when some stimulus, an exigency of circumstances, brings individuals of a series to the realization—to quote the dramatic formulation from Sartre’s account of the storming of the Bastille—that ‘*the impossibility of change* is the very object which has to be transcended if life is to continue’.<sup>22</sup> In those circumstances to which a series cannot adequately respond, there is a chance for the emergence of a ‘group-in-fusion’, in which freedom, mutual recognition, and

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume I: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. by Jonathan Rée, trans. by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), p. 735.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 687.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 350.

common praxis replace un-freedom and non-recognition that are the definitive characteristics of serial collectives. Yet, according to Sartre's analysis, the 'apocalyptic' dissolution of seriality does not persist. Although the *Critique* places freedom within the context of historical conditions such that its expression becomes circumstantial, freedom continues to remain for Sartre an irreducibly individual freedom. Freedom is both what makes the dissolution of seriality possible, but also introduces in the fused group the perennial possibility of its disintegration. Whatever unity that is achieved in a group is fragile and contingent, sustained by the commitment of individual members. The long-term sustenance of a group depends on its becoming an 'institution' or an organization, but Sartre could only see this as a return of aspects of seriality, and was led to conclude that '[t]he group whose origin and end reside in an effort by the individuals who are gathering to dissolve seriality in themselves will, in the course of its struggle, actually reproduce alterity in itself and freeze into the inorganic'.<sup>23</sup> The results that a group may have achieved within its lifetime inevitably congeal into the 'practico-inert', or into reified social norms and institutions that come to impose themselves as obstacles to freedom. As Mark Poster writes, for Sartre, 'the group-in-fusion was no more than an island of humanity in a sea of inert series, and it eternally faced dispersion into mechanical unity'.<sup>24</sup>

The first volume of the *Critique* leaves one significant issue unelaborated. Sartre suggests that groups are formed in the face of 'mortal danger'. One of his prime examples of a group is the Parisian populace on the fourteenth of July, 1789, which Sartre argues was a group-in-fusion formed in response to the threat of military action by Louis XVI. But a mortal danger is not the only kind of stimulus that induces the formation of fused groups, for Sartre considers more mundane dissolutions of seriality in a football team, an angler's association, and a system of swapping books set up by old ladies as the emergence of groups that 'in any

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<sup>23</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 591.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 262.

case respond to some very real exigencies and whose objective meaning relates to the total situation'.<sup>25</sup> The stimulus and common purpose that generates and orients a group, then, may range from the most mundane to the most revolutionary. Thus, although the dissolution of seriality is a necessary condition for any social change, it cannot be concluded that the dissolution of seriality is a sufficient condition of *significant* social change, in so far as some substantive difference can be assumed to exist between the mundane and the revolutionary. What seems to be in need of elaboration is the difference that makes one group formation mundane and the other the origination of significant social change—but there is little that is intrinsic to the dissolution of series and the emergence of a group that could serve as a basis for that distinction, not least due to Sartre's decision to sharply distinguish human activity between that which is confined to the repetitiveness of the everyday and that which is needed for achieving *any* transformative ends.

There is a plurality of groups that respond to the exigencies of their particular situations, but no determination of the sense in which any of them would contribute to lasting and far-reaching, or indeed, revolutionary transformation, rather than remaining as local and ephemeral expressions of human freedom that eventually disperse into another series. What had to be fulfilled in order to avoid the profoundly repetitive view of history that this result seems to imply was nothing else than the final objective that Sartre had set for the *Critique* as a whole, namely, to demonstrate 'that there is *one* human history, with *one* truth, and *one* intelligibility'.<sup>26</sup> Stated with simplification, the meanings of particular groups and their discrete praxes are to be apprehended in terms of their place in the broader historical process within which they are parts expressive of the whole. For this to be possible, it had to be shown that an apparently disjointed plurality of praxes compose a single movement of 'totalization',

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<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 350.

<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, p. 69.

but without—and this was what Sartre regarded as his crucial contribution—positing a transcendental ‘totalizer’. Through the demonstration of this point, Sartre’s project of reconciling existentialism and Marxism was supposed to be brought to consummation, establishing finally that no ‘law’ of history needs to be posited to understand the emergence of class struggle—Sartre writes early on in the second volume that ‘Marxism is rigorously true if history is totalization; it is no longer if human history is decomposed into a plurality of particular histories.’<sup>27</sup> However, whether the demonstration was eventually offered in the second volume, which Sartre left unpublished, is dubious. Although Sartre begins to develop an elaborate account of intricate intra-group dynamics in the second volume of the *Critique*, as Ronald Aronson has observed, he ‘never begins his account of how a *multiplicity* of hostile or unrelated *praxes* cohere’.<sup>28</sup> On the reasons that may have led to the abandonment of the *Critique*, Martin Jay suggests that Sartre may have found it difficult, perhaps due to his intellectual dispositions and historical events of the twentieth century, to present history as a totalization toward any end that could be regarded as emancipatory.<sup>29</sup>

## II. Rancière’s democratic politics

In an essay that clarifies his approach (written entirely in the third person), Rancière remarks that he ‘does not say what politics is but what it might be’.<sup>30</sup> Although his notoriously anti-systematic style sets him apart from the system-building approach of the theorists whose works with which this thesis is concerned, both Badiou and Laclau have acknowledged a

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume II: The Intelligibility of History*, ed. by Arlette Elkāim-Sartre, trans. by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1991), p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosophy in the World* (London: Verso, 1987), p.285. Quoted from: Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), p. 354.

<sup>29</sup> Jay, pp. 359–60.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière’, *Parallax*, 15.3 (2009), p.114-123 (p. 119).



certain affinity between their reflections on politics and Rancière's.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as subsequent chapters of this thesis will draw from Rancière's works to illustrate several ideas, his political reflections are of special interest to this thesis.

Rancière proposes that every politics worthy of the name is egalitarian. But for him, equality is not a goal to be reached (equality cannot be instituted, or become a principle by which a society is ordered), nor has it anything to do with an ontological claim about human beings. Rather, equality, Rancière suggests, is a 'presupposition' that enables political action that challenges what he terms 'police [*la police*]', the rule of propriety or the assignment of objective social identities by which society is configured, which relates 'ways of doing, ways of being, ways of saying' to certain 'places and tasks', establishing an order that he describes as a 'partition of the sensible [*le partage du sensible*]'.<sup>32</sup> Politics [*la politique*] is diametrically opposed to police: whereas police 'counts'—gives an account of—the parts (individuals and groups) of society in terms their qualification, social function, and so on, politics challenges the supposed exhaustiveness and naturalness of the police count by asserting a principle that is radically heterogeneous to it, namely, the simple equality of everyone and anyone. 'Every politics', Rancière suggests, 'is democratic in this precise sense: not in the sense of a set of institutions, but in the sense of forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of the police order'.<sup>33</sup>

Although Rancière refuses to distinguish equality in this way, there are two senses in which equality functions in his text: firstly, as the 'transcendental' condition of social order as such and in a more contingent or historical sense, in which the conditions that allow for

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 244–48. And: Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 560–61.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 101.

specific disputes against a police order to be articulated are implied. In the first sense, the construal of equality as the transcendental condition of the possibility of social relations, features in a line of thought that might be summarized as follows. Any hierarchical relation between two parties presupposes that those who are ruled are able to understand the orders issued by those who rule—hence, any affirmation of inequality is presupposed on the basic equality of speaking beings prior to differences in rank and qualification. If so, both inequality and equality are necessary conditions of hierarchy, social relations, and therefore order. However, inequality and equality are contradictory conditions, which makes it impossible for *any* social order to be the expression of a final rational articulation of its conditions of possibility. From this, Rancière draws the conclusion that any particular social order is contingent and disputable. The second sense of equality is prominent when Rancière describes concrete political action, in which equality is enacted or activated to polemically challenge the police count in a particular context. In Rancière’s writings, specific instances of politics are often illustrated with reference to historical cases, such as working-class struggles in which workers constructed their disputation against the police count on the basis of an equality that had been declared (for example, the Charter of 1830, which decrees that all French people are equal before law) but remained merely formal.<sup>34</sup> But the *ur*-illustration that captures the paradigmatic form of politics goes further back in time to the birth of Athenian democracy. After Solon’s reform that prohibited enslavement for debt, the ‘poor’, who have nothing and are in debt, had no entitlement apart from their freedom. Freedom, however, is not a positive qualification to have a share in the community, but an ‘empty’ qualification, that is, a mark of the lack of any other qualification to partake [*avoir-part*] in communal decision-making procedures and in the distribution of material goods. Yet, for no qualitative difference can be made between the freedom of one person and the freedom of another, the freedom possessed

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<sup>34</sup> See: Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), p. 45.

by the ‘poor’ could be turned into an affirmation of their equality with anyone and everyone in the community. On the basis of an empty qualification of freedom, those excluded from the community in any practical sense identify—in a metonymic substitution of a part for the whole—with the communal whole and presents a case against the prevailing count of parts of the community that excludes them.

In its most paradigmatic form, then, politics exists when a ‘part of those who have no part [*une part des sans-part*]’, those who are excluded because they are deemed to lack the qualifications needed to partake in the community, disputes this count—hence the identities assigned to them—in the name of an enabling equality. Through the enactment of a dispute over the police count, those without a part constitute themselves as a ‘figure of a specific subject, a supernumerary subject in relation to the calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society’,<sup>35</sup> as a collective formed on the basis of equality that has not been accounted by the police. The sharp dichotomy between those who have a part and those who have no part, or between the interruptive politics and institutionalizing police, presupposed in the paradigm, however, is qualified. Rancière explains that the distinction between politics and police ‘takes effect in a reality that always retains a part of indistinction’. Accordingly, ‘there is never any opposition between two opposed sides, with the realm of police institutions, on one side, and the forms of pure demonstration of authentic egalitarian subjectivity, on the other’.<sup>36</sup> Rancière writes:

From the moment that the word *equality* is inscribed in the texts of laws and on the pediments of buildings; from the moment that a state institutes procedures of equality under a common law or an equal counting of votes, there is an effectiveness of politics, even if that effectiveness is subordinated

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Use of Distinctions’, in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 205–18 (p. 207).

to the police principle of distribution of identities, places and functions.<sup>37</sup>

One might ask whether, by admitting this much imbrication of politics and police, Rancièrian account of politics loses some of its edge by opening the door to the ubiquity of politics, as something that is always already *there*. Although the valorisation of momentous insurrections may be a temptation to be resisted, one may nevertheless wish to avoid the other extreme that would render politics mundane or even inconsequential. And it is on the matter of consequences that Rancièr appears to have the least to say. Politics, as Rancièr sees it, is essentially a process of dis-identification from identities to which individuals are assigned—but despite its being a process in which a different ‘ways of doing, ways of being, ways of saying’ is glimpsed, politics *itself* cannot be a process of instituting another order, for that remains strictly the remit of police, not of politics. Although more sensitive readers of Rancièr have explored the implications of the intertwinement of politics and police,<sup>38</sup> at least in Rancièr’s text—including *Disagreement*, wherein the category of police features prominently (the term ‘police’ appears far less frequently in Rancièr’s interventions in the years following *Disagreement*, such as *The Hatred of Democracy*)—the process of establishing an order as reconfigured remains largely unexplored. Although he writes that ‘police’ is a term that is used ‘nonpejoratively’ and ‘there is a worse and a better police’,<sup>39</sup> he leaves without much explanation how ‘better’ and ‘worse’ police are to be distinguished, and indeed, whether a better (or worse) police is an *achievement* of politics.

Nothing is in and of itself political for Rancièr, and he insists that there is no predetermination of where politics takes place and who the political subject will be. But precisely because politics has no condition other than that it is a disputation of a police count by an egalitarian count in some given context, anything can become political. Politics can be

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<sup>37</sup> Rancièr, ‘The Use of Distinctions’, p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: Samuel Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancièr* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Rancièr, *Disagreement*, pp. 29–31.

‘a popular uprising staging the manifestation of a still unheard of subject; but it can also be a modest meeting of nine persons creating in a London tavern a “Corresponding Society” open to unlimited number of members’. Alluding to his archival study of nineteenth-century worker writings, Rancière remarks that ‘even a slight modification of the timetable of a worker’s evening’ is politics, in as much as this transgresses the normally assigned division between day and night, times that are tied in the police partition of the sensible to labour and sleep respectively, by replacing them with labour and writing works of literature.<sup>40</sup> However, by confining politics almost entirely to the negative moment of disruption and dis-identification without a predetermined place and objective while leaving the lasting transformative effects of disruption rather undertheorized, Rancière’s position comes close to endorsing the following proposition: *that* some group of people challenge the police count and the identity to which they are currently tied is the *end* of politics.

### III. Synopsis

The issues apropos the theorization of social change that have been identified in Sartrean and Rancièrian approaches can be expressed in terms of the schema of vertical and horizontal axes. In Sartre’s *Critique*, the distinction between mundane and revolutionary change remains ambiguous because the position from which that distinction could be made has been left without determination. In this respect, the vertical axis is undertheorized. But if this outcome is tied, as it has been suggested, to the ambiguity of whether Sartre has succeeded in providing an account of how ‘a *multiplicity* of hostile or unrelated *praxes* cohere’, or more generally, to the incompleteness of its theorization of totalization, it can also be said that the weakness of the theorization of the horizontal axis is implicated in the weakness of the

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<sup>40</sup> Rancière, ‘A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière’, p. 117.

theorization of the vertical axis. Rancière proposes that equality, as a principle that is heterogeneous to police, is able to support the creation of an internal distance within a given order, between *what is* and *what can be*, which is manifested by the emergence of a political subject that cannot be subsumed under any established social identity—the vertical axis is to be located here. And there is a place for the horizontal axis in proposing that politics exists in the activation of equality that allows a part to identify with the whole under a particular police order. However, absent in Rancière’s reflections is the thought of a process by which the distance between *what is* and *what can be* is closed, such that the order that will have been reconfigured could be said to be one in which the effects of politics (egalitarian by definition) are realized.

Given the characterization of Sartrean and Rancierian approaches above, the aspects of the Badiouian and Laclauian approaches that harbour the promise of overcoming some of the issues that are identifiable apropos the integration of the two axes can be summarized in the following manner. Badiou’s *Being and Event* may be seen as providing an account of the vertical axis, via a conceptual determination of both the distance between the existing order and the transformed one, and the *process* that leads from the former to the latter—something that is arguably missing in Rancière’s approach. Despite the formidable theoretical distance between Sartre and Laclau, it might nevertheless be said that latter picks up on the issue of the horizontal axis that the former had left unresolved. For Laclau’s theory of hegemony elaborates an account of how the plurality of social forces cohere to shape a social order as a systematic totality, based on which a transformative process that acts on the social space as a whole, thus a kind of change that is significant, far-reaching, or extensive, may be conceived. But despite their having moved toward a theory of change that better reflects the two axes, this thesis hopes to show that there is in each approach an aspect of one axis that is undertheorized, which potentially undermines the account of social change that it proposes.

The first two chapters will engage with the Badiouian approach. In the first chapter, a reading of *Being and Event* from which implications of Badiou's intricate system for thinking social order and social change can be drawn shall be offered. Some of the methodological questions that are involved in transposing the propositions of *Being and Event* onto concrete social situations shall be discussed in the first chapter. It will be shown over the course of the first two chapters that although the Badiouian theory of an interruptive event and the process of unfolding its consequences—termed a 'truth procedure'—is able to conceptually determine a process of transformation as the production of something *new* in a situation, the extent of transformation this process is able to achieve is made ambiguous in face of questions that can be raised concerning the distance between situations as conceived under Badiou's general ontology and particular, concrete, specifically social, situations.

By the end of the second chapter, it will have been shown that accounting for how particular, concrete, social situations are structured, related, and sustained—in short, for the 'interplay' of a plurality of situations that Badiou himself states is a feature of concrete situations—requires theoretical resources beyond what set-theoretical ontology alone provides. It is precisely this aspect that Laclau's theory of hegemony attempts to theorize. In the third chapter, hegemony theory will be presented in a way that retains a sense of continuity with the reading of *Being and Event* in the first chapter. It will be seen how Laclau's social ontology elaborates the constitution of a social order as a totalization of different elements into a hegemonic formation, which pays explicit attention to the issue of how different elements are constituted, related, and sustained. This foregrounding of relationality and totalization allows the account of the process of social change offered by Laclau—as the construction of an alternative hegemonic formation—to be in a better position to respond to the question of the extensiveness of socially transformative effects. Laclau's view that there is 'no place for

Lycurguses of the social order’,<sup>41</sup> thus, that there is no total break and complete reconstitution of society, has its strengths: it reflects in the process of change the limits of what is decidable, thinkable, and achievable under a particular historical circumstance. The fourth chapter further examines the way in which this view is incorporated in hegemony theory, namely, in the postulation that the ‘content’ of any hegemonic project is constrained by a sort of reciprocal circuit between a political project and the prevailing order, which can be construed variously as power, social imaginary, or *Sittlichkeit* of the community. It will be argued that hegemony theory leaves an ambiguity concerning the *newness*—precisely that singular quality to whose conceptualization the Badiouian theory of truth is devoted—that is achieved in the transition between hegemonic formations, and renders the conceptual determination of a process that leads to a transformed social order difficult under its theoretical framework.

The fifth and final chapter is more hypothetical and tentative in nature: it will explore the possibility of addressing some of the issues that have arisen in the course of investigating the Badiouian and Laclauian approaches by attempting to co-articulate their insights. By incorporating certain insights of hegemony theory, the specificity of a situation wherein a truth will have consequences that is not confined to just *any* one situation amongst an infinite plurality of situations. The Badiouian account of truth procedure allows the vertical axis that is underdetermined in hegemony theory to be determined. For this co-articulation to deliver the benefits that it promises, it will be suggested, the configuration of social situations need to be made further analysable through the introduction of ‘pre-evental’ subjectivity—modelled after the Laclauian subject—that accounts for the construction of situations and identities. In part, the attempt to bring the two approaches together is inspired by a remark that Laclau had made in his essay on Badiou, that set-theoretical ontology can be ‘absorbed and described as

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<sup>41</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 44–89 (p. 82).



a special case' within his theoretical framework.<sup>42</sup> Laclau never offered such a demonstration—and it appears implausible that there is a way to achieve a total systematic cohesion of the two theoretical approaches, for this would be only possible either by completely reducing one approach to the other, or by creating a new theoretical framework that encompasses both. Nevertheless, the degree to which the two approaches may be made compatible to yield a productive result toward conceptualizing social situations and social change is perhaps a matter that is worthy of exploration. In the end, it will be suggested that it is possible to conceptualize, by drawing from both approaches, the production in a social situation of an element that is radically new as something that will have established itself as a new social identity, but the transformative effect of its establishment ripples across a plurality of social situations. It is hoped that the steps taken toward the demonstration of this possibility will carve a path toward the integration of the horizontal and the vertical axes beyond the extent to which they have been in either Badiouian or Laclauian accounts of social change.

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<sup>42</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Hallward (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 120–37 (p. 137).

## Chapter 1. The ontological schema of society and its transformation

### 1.1 From the ontological to the social

The objective of this chapter is to show that *Being and Event* provides a theoretical framework for understanding the structure of social situations as well as a conceptual determination of both the distance between the existing situation and a transformed situation and the process by which that distance is traversed. As is the case with any highly systematic text, it is not possible to discuss aspects of *Being and Event* without referring to the entirety of the system that it builds. Although a thorough reconstruction of set-theoretical ontology will not be attempted, a synopsis of its fundamental premises shall be provided in section 1.2. This will be followed by an interpretation of set-theoretical ontology as providing a schema for analysing social situations, wherein terms such as ‘social identity’ and ‘social imaginary’ will be redefined by drawing from the resources of set-theoretical ontology. Sections 1.3 and 1.4 outline—or rather, apply to the account of social situation developed in 1.2—the theory of event and post-evental transformation. It will be shown that the theoretical framework of *Being and Event* enables a conceptual determination of a process that introduces something new into a situation. Some methodological disclaimers with regard to the approach that this thesis takes with respect to Badiou’s work should be offered before proceeding, since Badiou’s political interventions, of which are legion, will not feature prominently in this chapter despite the fact that politics and social change are its central themes. A brief discussion of Badiou’s philosophy shall be offered to defend this approach.

Badiou asserts that ‘[w]hat can rationally be said of being qua being, of being devoid of any quality or predicate other than the sole fact of being exposed to thought as entity, is

said—or rather *written*—as pure mathematics’.<sup>1</sup> The claim is not that being equals mathematical objectivities. Rather, mathematics ‘is the discourse of Being, not Being itself, and it is the discourse of mathematics, not mathematical objectivities, that Badiou hypothesizes to be identical’.<sup>2</sup> This means that *what* can be said of being-qua-being varies with the development of the resources of mathematics. In *Being and Event*, it is the standard ZFC axiomatic set theory that serves as the ontological discourse—Badiou proposes that Cantor, Gödel, and Cohen are his Hölderlin, Trakl, and Celan.<sup>3</sup> Since mathematics is the discourse of being-qua-being, strictly speaking, there cannot be *Badiou’s* ontology, and whenever that expression is employed hereafter, it shall denote the ‘metaontological’ attempt carried out in *Being and Event* to determine, based on what ontology speaks of being, philosophical concepts of multiplicity, void, situation, truth, and subject. But if the proposition that mathematics is ontology is ‘not a thesis about the world but about discourse’,<sup>4</sup> this means, strictly speaking, taking Badiou’s set-theoretical theorization of ontological structure as describing ‘the way things are’ would elide the distinction that Badiou makes between ‘thesis about the world’ and ‘discourse of being-qua-being’. What arises, then, is an ambiguity concerning what to do with the concepts elaborated in *Being and Event* once one steps outside the system of rational immanence that Badiou’s theoretical discourse is, and into extraontological situations, such as the socio-historical situation wherein any actual political processes take place.

For any transposition of the insights of ‘set-theoretical ontology’—this expression shall be used hereafter to refer to the entire system elaborated in *Being and Event*, with the

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Being and Appearance’, in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. by Alberto Toscano and Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 163–76 (p. 168).

<sup>2</sup> Burhanuddin Baki, *Badiou’s Being and Event and the Mathematics of Set Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 24–25.

<sup>3</sup> Badiou acknowledges that set theory is neither the ‘most “interesting”’ nor ‘significant in the current state of mathematics’ as mathematics has already ‘followed its course well beyond it’ (Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 14.). To give a short answer as to the reason why Badiou opts for ZFC set theory: he sees it as having tackled the same problems with which philosophy has struggled in thinking being.

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 8.

caveat mentioned above—to socio-historical situations to be legitimate, it needs to be established, minimally, that those extraontological situations are such that their being could be thought under the intricate architecture of being-qua-being conceived within *Being and Event*. It is precisely this linkage, which pertains to what could be called the *quid juris* question, proves difficult to conceive. This is a difficulty noted by both highly critical and more sympathetic readers. Peter Osborne observes that Badiou's decision to sever ontology from 'all phenomenological relations to objects' leaves him with 'the awkward task of restoring the connection between his set-theoretical mathematical entities, philosophically received ontological concepts (like nature and history) and the world'.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear whether there is a place for 'ordinary ontic reality' in the universe conceived under the set-theoretical universe of 'multiples of multiples'. The problematic relationship, or lack thereof, between ontological and extraontological situations in Badiou's speculative philosophy leads Ray Brassier to pronounce, after delivering a series of trenchant criticisms, that '[Badiou's] philosophy simply stipulates an isomorphy between discourse and reality, logical consequences and material causes, thinking and being. Thinking is sufficient to change the world: such is the ultimate import of Badiou's idealism'.<sup>6</sup>

As the question of whether concepts of Badiou's metaontology (metamathematical concepts) can be legitimately 'applied' in extraontological situations admits of no straightforward answer, delving into the corners of his philosophy that concerns politics calls for an interpretive choice apropos the weight placed on set-theoretical ontology. In the introduction to *Badiou and Politics*, Bruno Bosteels remarks that 'as soon as we exit the

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*', *Radical Philosophy*, 142 (2007), 19–29 (p. 24).

<sup>6</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 113.

domain of strict ontology [...] the role of mathematics becomes heuristic at best'.<sup>7</sup> Bosteels writes:

Metamathematical concepts are rigorously formal, and they hold true according to an intrinsic rationality only within the ontological situation; anywhere else, they are just helpful tools that by analogy, through a symptomatic reading of mathematical names [...] or in a metaphorical transposition, may help us formalize situations that are not in and of themselves ontological in the strict sense.<sup>8</sup>

The choice by Bosteels to regard set-theoretical ontology as 'helpful tools' or 'heuristic' for thinking transformative processes that must unfold in situations that are not strictly ontological is no doubt one—and perhaps the only—way to approach aspects of Badiou's philosophy that pertain to politics, political events and political truth procedures. Although more sophisticated ways to understand the relationship between ontology and extraontological situations have been proposed by readers of Badiou, this thesis will avoid a direct engagement with this matter.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it proceeds by assuming a certain interpretation of the following remark from Badiou:

We have a concrete [i.e. extraontological] situation. We can think the ontological structure of that situation. [...] It is very difficult sometimes, but we can. So we can think about infinite multiplicity, something about the natural multiplicity, something about the historical character of the situation, something about the evental site and so on. There is an ontological schema of the situation. With this schema we can understand the situation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. xviii.

<sup>8</sup> Bosteels, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Tzuchien Tho, 'The Consistency of Inconsistency: Alain Badiou and the Limits of Mathematical Ontology', *Symposium*, 12.2 (2008), 70–92.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou', in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, ed. by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 169–93 (pp. 178–79).

It shall be proposed that ‘thinking’ the ontological structure of a concrete situation is to assume a certain perspective from which the situation is analysed. What that situation concretely is, set-theoretical ontology is indifferent. Just as semiotics, as the viewpoint from which the totality of social life could be redescribed was made possible by the liberation of abstract system of formal rules governing the combination and substitution between elements from any particular substance that was still present in Saussure’s concept of sign (as the distinction between ‘conceptual mass’ and ‘acoustic substance’), the formalism of set-theory, its non-reference to a particular object, is what allows it to be the basis of an ontology that is ‘perfectly general, nonspecific theory of what *is*, inasmuch as it *is*, and inasmuch as it is nothing in particular’ that is ‘as valid for nature as it is for culture’.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequent sections of this chapter will outline how set-theoretical ontology could be interpreted as providing a way to understand social situations and social change. The aim of the first and second chapters taken together could be described as that of examining what set-theoretical ontology allows to be said about social situations and social change, or the extent to which set-theoretical ontology is able to support a thought of far-reaching, extensive social change. The interpretation of set-theoretical ontology that will be offered in this chapter, as a schema by which social situations can be understood, is not something that is reached from a completely immanent point of departure, and it will bring presuppositions that are not Badiou’s. It is unavoidable that some preconceived idea of social situations condition the particular way in which the ontological schema is formulated, because any attempt to transpose the insights of *Being and Event* onto an extraontological domain will require postulations that allow for a ‘translation’ between ontology and concrete situations that are not inferable from the text. But if the admission of certain presuppositions in the translation

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<sup>11</sup> Patrice Maniglier, ‘The Structuralist Legacy’, in *After Poststructuralism: Transitions and Transformations*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti, The History of Continental Philosophy, 8 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), VII, 55–81 (p. 69).

attempted in this thesis is nonetheless permissible, it is because—owing to the fact that there is no unproblematic means of transition from the ontological to the ontic—the insights of set-theoretical ontology can be brought to bear on analyses of extraontological situations in more than one way. The theoretical innovations of *Logics of Worlds*, the sequel to *Being and Event*, will be left aside. *Logics of Worlds* opens the possibility of engaging with greater sophistication a number of questions and criticisms that can be advanced against Badiou's prior works, including the question concerning the relations between situations (or 'worlds') that will, in fact, be pursued in this thesis. While it can be noted that its innovations may not ultimately resolve the kind of questions that will be posed in this thesis, and that the compatibility of set-theoretical ontology developed in *Being and Event* and 'objective phenomenology' developed in *Logics of Worlds* has not been unchallenged,<sup>12</sup> there is, in the end, no philosophical justification for limiting the scope of this thesis largely to *Being and Event*. The choice to focus on a particular phase of Badiou's thought is primarily motivated by aims of this thesis, namely, to examine the extent to which set-theoretical ontology supports the thought of social change and to explore the possible confluence of set-theoretical ontology with the Laclauian theory of hegemony, as well as the practical limitation that a detailed examination of both works is a task that would be difficult to fulfil.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 Drawing an account of social situations from set-theoretical ontology

### 1.2.1 Presentation, representation, void

This section will outline some of the basic categories of set-theoretical ontology, with the aim of illustrating a social situation—one that is mundane and normalized, and in this

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<sup>12</sup> See: Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism*. (London: Continuum, 2013), pp. xxiii–xxvi.

<sup>13</sup> Although the present thesis will not engage with *Logics of Worlds*, Colin Wright's ambitious study of Jamaica's anti-colonial revolt is worth noting for bringing the insights of *Logics of Worlds* in an analysis of actual historical sequences. See: Colin Wright, *Badiou in Jamaica: The Politics of Conflict* (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2013).

respect close to a ‘natural’ situation in Badiou’s typology of situations—based on those categories in section 1.2.2. In later sections of this chapter, the normalized social situation, which is essentially static, will be set into motion in accordance with the theory of event and post-evental change.

That ‘the one is not’ an inaugural metaontological decision of *Being and Event*.<sup>14</sup> Badiou stipulates that whatever oneness—determinacy or objectivity—there is, it is a result of an ‘operation’ of what he calls ‘count-as-one’. If oneness is an operational result, not-one must be posited as anterior to the one-effect of the count-as-one. In Badiou’s theoretical approach, that which is posited as preceding oneness is called ‘inconsistency’. Inconsistency is sheer being, and it is called ‘multiplicity’ in as much as it is not one: ‘inconsistent multiple is solely—before the one-effect in which it is structured—an ungraspable horizon of being’.<sup>15</sup> The operation of count-as-one is an ordering into a minimal order of sheer inconsistent being, about which nothing can be said except that it must precede any determinate objectivity, difference, and order. The resultant of a count-as-one is termed ‘consistent multiplicity’ (which the ontological discourse inscribes with the strokes of { and }), or *presentation*. A *situation* is defined as ‘any presented multiplicity’, and Badiou proclaims that ‘[t]here is nothing apart from situations’.<sup>16</sup> There does not appear to be an intrinsic distinction between a presentation and a situation. However, the present interpretation proposes that a semantic distinction between a situation and a presentation be introduced. The proposal implies a divergence from the strict definition of structure and the primitive status accorded to the relation of belonging in the discourse of being-qua-being, but this divergence is defensible when thinking about social situations, due to the fact that that every extraontological situation

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<sup>14</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 25.



is doubly structured by presentation and representation—a point that will be elaborated later.

To begin with Badiou's remark:

Granted the effectiveness of the presentation, a situation is the place of taking-place [*le lieu de l'avoir-lieu*], whatever the terms of the multiplicity in question. Every situation admits its own particular operator of the count-as-one. This is the most general definition of a *structure*; it is what prescribes, for a presented multiple, the regime of its count-as-one. [...] When anything is counted as one in a situation, all this means is that it belongs to the situation in the mode particular to the effects of the situation's structure.<sup>17</sup>

'To exist', Badiou says, is 'to be an element *of*'. There is no other possible predicate of existence as such'.<sup>18</sup> And 'being an "element"', Badiou explains, 'is not a status of being, an intrinsic quality, but the simple relation to-be-element-of, through which a multiplicity can be presented by another multiplicity'.<sup>19</sup> If a situation is a 'place of taking-place', a kind of field of objectivity, then it shall be said that it is so in the following sense: a situation is an order—that is, a multiple that has its own regime (or rules) for presentations therein. The particular regime of count-as-one is the structure of a situation that makes a situation extensionally different from other situations. To exist is to be presented in a situation, which is also to say that whatever that exists in a situation *belongs* therein as an element. Allow it to be said, then, that every presentation—every objectivity—is situated.

Inconsistent multiplicity is not presented in a situation and therefore does not exist for the situation. But it cannot be the case that inconsistent multiplicity is simply non-being, given the philosophical stipulation that it is from inconsistency that any situation as a consistent

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<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 24. Every situation is ontologically infinite, because '[w]hat belongs to a multiple is always a multiple'. A situation is an infinite multiplicity of multiplicities. In the end, however, the decision to regard the being of a situation as infinite is an axiomatic decision. See: Badiou, 'Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou', p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou and Peter Hallward, 'Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou', *Angelaki*, 3.3 (1998), 113–33 (p. 130).

<sup>19</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 45.

multiple must have arisen. In the structured presentation that a situation is, the inconsistent being from which it has emerged lingers as what Badiou describes as a ‘phantom remainder’. To phrase this in a Heideggerian manner: the occlusion of *being*—pure inconsistent multiplicity—in its disclosure as *beings*—consistent multiples, presentations, situations—does not annihilate the former. Inconsistency subsists in the situation as unrepresentable. Every situation, in so far as it admits into itself the inconsistency that it unrepresents, is simultaneously—to borrow an expression employed by Roland Végső in his rendition of set-theoretical ontology—a ‘failed presentation’.<sup>20</sup> This failure is not a failure to present something that could have otherwise been presented, but is a necessary and constitutive failure. In so far as a situation is always an operational result of count-as-one, no situation can be a situation without the subsistence of the inconsistency of which it is an operational result within itself. Because it is unrepresented, inconsistency is nothing from the perspective of the situation—the ‘inhabitants’ of the situation do not register inconsistency. But its unrepresentable subsistence in a structured presentation can be thought, and be inscribed in the discourse of ontology, not as inconsistency as such (as it precedes any ‘set-ness’), but as the letter  $\emptyset$ , the empty set. To this letter, Badiou confers the name ‘void’. The void thus designates the point through which a situation comes to be a particular situation—hence the void is said to be the ‘suture’ of a situation to its being—but that which must be unrepresented, thus count as nothing, for the consistency of the situation. A unique characteristic of the empty set allows the key implications of the void to be thought under the ontological discourse. The empty set is a set that is included in (that is, it is a subset of) any set, even if it is not an element of (that is, presented in) that set. This characteristic allows to capture in set-theoretical ontology the thought that although inconsistency is unrepresented and excluded (or ‘subtracted’) from

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Végső, *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture* (New York: American Literatures Initiative, 2012), p. 21.

presentation (or situation), it is nonetheless ‘included’ as the underlying pure being of every presentation. Badiou writes, the ‘insistence of the void in-consists as de-localization’.<sup>21</sup> Though it is never locatable in a situation because it is unrepresented, the void of that situation is nevertheless dispersed everywhere in that situation. In extraontological situations, what the void is for a situation will depend on what the situation is, or *of what* it is a structured presentation. Apropos social situations, Rancière’s reflection on equality may serve as an example of the void—though it should be acknowledged that Rancière himself rejects any ‘transcendentalization’ or ‘ontologization’ of equality, and calls his reflections on equality a mere ‘opinion’. According to Rancière, what is concealed by social distribution of places and functions is the simple equality of humanity qua beings with the capacity to speak rationally, on which, he argues, makes possible every social order and whatever hierarchical relations it imposes. Equality in this sense can be seen as the void of the social situation. It is universal in as much as it is empty, it is what remains when all the particular differentiating features of different individuals and groups are bracketed—as Badiou puts it, ‘[t]he law of the void is indifference’.<sup>22</sup> Closer to Badiou’s own vocabulary, the void of any social situation can be termed ‘generic humanity’, an infinite multiple that is not marked by any qualification other than being human. The void, in either case, is that from which any social order is woven, but simultaneously that which is subversive, thus must remain foreclosed from presentation if order—or the consistency of a social situation—is to be preserved.

It had been mentioned earlier that every extraontological situation is doubly structured. One way to understand why Badiou proposes that a situation is structured again through a second count, a ‘count-of-the-count’, is to see the second count as an operation that makes the aforementioned ‘failure’ of presentation to continue to remain undisclosed, such that the

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<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 203.

situation may persist in its oneness, as a consistent multiple. The second count reduplicates the oneness of a situation by re-counting, firstly, the presented elements of the situation, thus affirming the initial count-as-one by which those, and only those, elements are situationally presented. Secondly, the second count counts all the ways in which presented elements of the situation could be arranged, thereby rendering the situation complete or whole, assuring that nothing more can be made out of the situation. The count-as-one is the operation of situation. But what maintains the consistency of the situation by keeping inconsistency unpresented, hence what accounts for the sustenance of a certain regime of count-as-one, is the second count, which is the operation of what is called the ‘state of a situation’.<sup>23</sup> What comes to fore with the state is the structuring of a situation beyond the minimum that it, conceived simply as structured presentation, itself does not impose. For example, a plate on which there is a variety of fruits is a situation whose regime of count-as-one is such that its presented elements are fruits. But seeing that there is nothing apart from certain number of fruits on the plate and categorizing those fruits into different types of fruits call for additional work—it is this additional work that is performed by the state. What the state of the situation, itself conceived as a set, admits into itself is not the presented elements of the situation as such—which pertains to *of what* the situation is an order—but subsets (or ‘parts’) of the situation. For a situation  $S$ , its state is its power-set  $\wp(S)$ . If  $S$  were a three-element set,  $\{\alpha, \beta, \gamma\}$ , its subsets, in addition to  $\emptyset$  (which is a subset of every set, thus universally included) and itself, would be the following:  $\{\alpha\}$ ,  $\{\beta\}$ ,  $\{\gamma\}$ ,  $\{\alpha, \beta\}$ ,  $\{\alpha, \gamma\}$ ,  $\{\beta, \gamma\}$ . Therefore, the set of all existing parts of  $S$ ,  $\wp(S)$ , is:  $\{\emptyset, \{\alpha\}, \{\beta\}, \{\gamma\}, \{\alpha, \beta\}, \{\alpha, \gamma\}, \{\beta, \gamma\}, \{\alpha, \beta, \gamma\}\}$ . About the element  $\gamma$  of the situation  $S$ , the following can be said:  $\gamma$  *belong* to  $S$ —this is to say that  $\gamma$  is counted-as-one in  $S$ ; but  $\gamma$  is also *included* in  $S$ , in so far as it is re-counted by the state of the situation, which means:  $\{\gamma\}$  is an element of, hence belongs to,  $\wp(S)$ . A multiple (an element) that both belongs

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<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 97.

to and is included in a situation is said to be both *presented* and *represented* in that situation. In Badiou's typology, such a multiple is called 'normal'. It will also be said that any multiple that belongs to the state of the situation is a representation. Already from the example of a three-element set, it can be observed that there are always more parts of a set than elements of that set. Set-theory teaches that the cardinality (number of elements of a set) of  $\wp(S)$  exceeds the cardinality of the initial set  $S$ , and immeasurably exceeds, in the case that the initial set is an infinite set. And as Badiou stipulates that every situation is indeed 'ontologically infinite',<sup>24</sup> the cardinality of the state of any situation immeasurably exceeds the situation of which it is the state. The excess of inclusion (representation) over belonging (presentation), however, leaves the door open for anarchy—if the number of possible arrangements of a situation is immeasurable, it defies the goal of the state, which is to render a situation complete. If the necessity of the state of the situation derives from the need to secure the consistency of the situation, it will need to police—the Rancièrian reference is suitable here—the excess of representation by imposing certain constraints on the ways in which a situation could be ordered. It could be said, then, that the *space* of representation needs a *regime* of representation—or a 'law', as Badiou might prefer—that ensures both that the void remain unrepresented and the excess of representation over presentation be tamed. Let it be said, then, that every extraontological situation, in as much as it is an order and not chaos, is under the influence of a regime of representation unique to it that maintains the situation as it is.

### 1.2.2 An illustration of a normalized social situation

The task in this section is to illustrate how social situations could be understood in terms of the ontological categories outlined in the preceding section, as well as to define the

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<sup>24</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2006), p. 143.

terms to which this thesis will continue to refer beyond the present chapter. There is no intrinsic definition of ‘social’ derivable from set-theoretical ontology. To proceed, then, a concrete situation that can reasonably be qualified as social must simply be selected. Although, strictly speaking, it does not matter how ‘large’ or ‘complex’ the situation is, for the purpose of exposition, let it be supposed that Indonesia is a social situation. This situation requires that there be at least one unique membership criterion which would ensure that it be a structured presentation extensionally different from other situations. There is at least one uniquely ascribable regime of count-as-one to the social situation chosen, such that it will be possible to say that whoever that belongs to the situation, in so far as he or she belongs, is an Indonesian citizen.

An ‘inhabitant’ of the Indonesian situation would be placed in a situation where there are infinite number of multiples populated by other inhabitants of Indonesia (such as families, universities, baseball teams), which are themselves a multiple of multiples (a university, for example, will have classrooms, offices, and so on). The relationship between the social situation and the various multiples—which, figuratively, might be seen as ‘smaller’ social situations—encountered in the social situation, is that the latter are subsets, or parts, of the former. A baseball team, for example, would be a part of, or be included in, Indonesia if all the individuals that belong to the baseball team also happen to be Indonesian citizens, hence belong to the Indonesian situation as well. In this case, the baseball team, which in the typology of multiples is a ‘normal’ multiple, is a presented multiple that is also represented, and the same can be said of all its individual members.

The arrangement of the parts of a situation is regulated by the state of the situation, in accordance with a particular regime of representation. Badiou’s usage of the word ‘state [*état*’ alludes to the empirical state, but the terminological resemblance should not be taken too far. It is implausible to regard the Marxist projection of the withering away of the state as a social

institution to be an ontological impossibility—but it would be, if the state of a situation were simply the ontological schema of the empirical state. In his mathematically-oriented reading, Burhanuddin Baki suggests that the state should be seen as ‘Badiou’s version of the Lacanian symbolic’.<sup>25</sup> The comparison not is unjustified: the particular arrangements of parts proceed through the deployment of an apparatus that Badiou calls the ‘language of the situation’—to be discussed below—that mediates presentation and representation. It might also be added that the goal of the state is to foreclose the situation’s ‘encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency’<sup>26</sup> through governing the relationship between presentation and representation in a particular way to produce an illusion of completeness or wholeness of the situation, and that in this respect, it is comparable also to the Lacanian imaginary, with the void, unnameable by the situation’s language and foreclosed from presentation, comparable to the Lacanian real. The state of the situation regulated by a regime of representation is the closest that the ontological discourse is able to offer as a schema for what may be called a ‘social imaginary’, understood as the set of representations of what the inhabitants of the situation can become, but whose actualization would not disrupt the situation’s apparent harmony in so far as they can be anticipated from how the situation already is. The significance of the second clause shall be further developed in the rest of this section.

The primary sense given to the term ‘language’ by the ontological discourse is the ‘language of the situation’—this, in the present interpretation, can be understood as the mechanism by which a regime of representation works to constrain the space of representation. The two operations constitutive of the language of the situation are ‘discernment’ and ‘classification’. Discernment, Badiou explains, ‘concerns connection between language and presented or presentable realities’, whereas classification concerns ‘the connection between

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<sup>25</sup> Baki, p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 93.

the language and the parts of a situation, the multiples of multiples'.<sup>27</sup> In the illustration of social situations, the mechanism of language may be understood as follows. As Badiou's ontological discourse is extensional set theory, a property cannot be defined without prior existence of a multiple whose extension just is the extension of that property. Badiou regards as the materialist postulate of his ontology that '[b]eing is anterior to language'<sup>28</sup>—it is a prescription of set-theoretical ontology, ensconced in the axiom of separation, that 'language cannot induce existence' and that 'a predicate only determines a multiple under the supposition that there is already a presented multiple'.<sup>29</sup> This means, in turn, that the existence of at least one baseball team in the social situation guarantees an extension for the property of being a baseball player: it is simply all the individuals that belong to baseball teams. In so far as a property can be defined extensionally, that is, in so far as a property 'discerns' a multiple in the situation, it is legitimate to mobilize that property, along with other definable properties, to then predicatively define some other set. This allows all presented multiples and inhabitants of the situation to be defined in terms of certain set of properties—this is what Badiou is calling 'classification'. A regime of representation does not induce presentations, but names, defines, and classifies already presented multiples, and these determinations serve as the basis on which statements about the situation that can be verified as veridical or erroneous are made. Such statements, made possible with the language of the situation, are statements of 'knowledge'. An additional proposition shall be made in the present interpretation. Classifications might be based on gender, race, occupation, religion, and so on, but as every predicate in the language of the situation is liaised with presentation, every classification can be traced to whatever is already presented in the social situation, which, in the broadest sense, would be the material practices of human individuals. Multiples that are defined via the

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<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 328.

<sup>28</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 501.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 47, 34.



language of the situation, through operations of discernment and classification, are said to be ‘constructible’. These multiples can be understood as providing the ontological schema of subject-positions or social identities (there is no theoretically salient distinction to be made between social identities and subject positions—objective social identities—in the set-theoretical account of normalized social situations, as there are no subjects but only objects determined by the externally imposed counting operation in such situations).

The state of the situation of the social situation,  $S$ , is its power-set  $\wp(S)$ , which is an infinite multiple whose cardinality is greater than the cardinality of  $S$ . But, importantly, in so far as it has as its elements subsets of  $S$  that are definable using the language of the situation, the state of the situation will only contain multiples that can be discerned and named in the situation with its language, its discursive resource, namely, multiples that are constructible. Thus, although the number of ways of arranging the situation—the space of representation—always exceeds, immeasurably, what is presented, it is possible for a specific regime of representation to keep the excess to a minimum by governing what enters into the space of representation. Badiou elaborates:

It is [...] this *proximity* that language builds between presentation and representation, which grounds the conviction that the state does not exceed the situation by *too much*, or that it remains commensurable. I term ‘language of the situation’ the medium of this commensurability. Note that the language of the situation is subservient to presentation, in that it cannot cite any term, even in the general sense of ‘there exists...’, whose belonging to the presentation cannot be verified. In this manner, through the medium of language, yet without being reduced to the latter inclusion stays *as close as possible* to belonging.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 288.

Following the definitions that have been proposed earlier, it may now be said that the social imaginary of this regulated social situation is limited in the following sense: it does not go beyond what is already being said and done in the situation, in so far as the only kind of subset that it admits into itself always relates back to what is already being said and done in the situation. And from the stability of the situation, it can be inferred that its regime of representation is effective in providing the inhabitants of the situation an experience of their world as orderly and intelligible.

To close this section with an anticipation of what is to come: if there is a subset that is absent in the state of the situation regulated by a regime of representation, it would be a non-constructible subset of  $S$ . No predicate or combination of predicates of the language of that situation circumscribes such a subset. If the state of the situation regulated by a regime of representation is the schema of social imaginary, then that subset may be ineffable or even vaguely menacing to the inhabitants of the situation, who can, in any case, neither describe nor know what it really is. Such a subset is said to be an ‘indiscernible’ part of the situation. This part can, under certain conditions, be termed ‘generic’, which also denotes the being of what will be called a ‘truth’. The second half of *Being and Event* is an attempt to demonstrate that the supplementation of the situation with this generic multiple is capable of inducing the situation’s transformation. But something beyond imagination can only appear as an unpredictable, aleatory occurrence from the perspective of the situation.

### 1.2.3 The absence of the subject and the atemporality of situation

Having outlined in the previous section how a social situation might be conceived under the schema of set-theoretical ontology, it is necessary to discuss one issue prior to proceeding to outline Badiou’s theory of change. The rather ambiguous status of the concept

of anonymous ‘operation’ of counting by which presentations and representations result has been noted by several commentators. Jean-Toussaint Desanti, in what is one of the earliest substantive reviews of *Being and Event*, quotes Badiou’s declaration that ‘[w]hat has to be declared is that the one, which is not, solely exists as *operation*. In other words: there is no one, only the count-as-one’. But proceeds to write: ‘It seems clear to me that the project of a pure ontology (an intrinsic theory of being as being) would stumble here with its very first step, were one to ask oneself this “preliminary” question: what is it to operate? Who operates here and in what realm?’<sup>31</sup> Eduardo Acotto, similarly, asks: ‘Badiou defines [count-as-one] as an *operation*. But who is, concretely, the *operator*? This is one of the mysteries of the philosophy of Badiou, and of its exclusion of perceptual and cognitive mechanisms from ontological discourse.’<sup>32</sup> The question of the ‘counter’ in the operation of count-as-one—to which ‘transcendental subjectivity’ cannot be an acceptable response for Badiou—challenge Badiou’s philosophy (apart from demanding a more robust account of the transition from inconsistency to consistency) to account for the genetic question of how *particular* situations come to be. A question—to a rephrase a point made by Paul Livingston in another context—that is also relevant, especially for thinking social situations, is that of *to what* particular social situations that result from regimes of counting-as-one owe their ‘*force*’ in persisting as they are. Although Livingston raises this point apropos the concept of ‘transcendentals’ elaborated in *Logics of Worlds* (in which an ‘objective phenomenology’ that accounts for how things appear is developed), the point that he raises applies equally for *Being and Event* (if only because the concept of transcendentals is partly designed to alleviate some of the mysteries of

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Toussaint Desanti, ‘Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou’, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 59–66 (p. 60). The translation of the passage from *Being and Event* quoted by Desanti has been modified in accordance with the English translation of *Being and Event*: Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Edoardo Acotto, ‘Alain Badiou et l’ontologie du monde perdu’, in *Écrits autour de la pensée d’Alain Badiou*, ed. by Bruno Besana and Oliver Feltham (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2007), pp. 83–100 (p. 117). Quoted in: Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 117.

the anonymous operation of count-as-one). The point is this: irrespective both of what Badiou intends to achieve philosophically (such as avoiding recourse to subjective or linguistic idealism), it is ‘very difficult to avoid the natural assumption’, at least apropos social situations, that what is operative in the persistence of their presentational and representational regimes ultimately alludes to ‘structures of linguistic or conventional practice, established and held in place by the behavioural regularities of a specific cultural or language community’.<sup>33</sup> It may be conceded both that for set-theoretical ontology to be a general ontology, its account of structuration cannot be inextricably tied to any particular ‘counter’, *and* that a general ontology founded on set-theoretical axioms is able to consistently deny any intrinsic definition of what a situation is, thus refrain from providing a general condition for what ‘counts’ as a situation and why. Yet, questions such as ‘who does the counting’, ‘what is an operation’, and—to cite Terry Eagleton—‘[w]hat is to count as a situation, and who decides’,<sup>34</sup> seem to be pertinent when one begins to consider the specificity of particular situations or types of situations. Although the problematic distance between situations in general and social situations will be examined in more detail in the next chapter, it must already be noted that apropos social situations, Badiou himself appears to be willing to allow linguistic and conventional social practices to be implicated in their presentational and representational structures—this is attested by several of Badiou’s own examples, one of which will be quoted later in this chapter. If, however, it is the case that operations of counting, at least in social situations, could be understood in terms of linguistic or conventional practices, then the conspicuous absence in the account of social situations depicted in the previous section of any sort of ‘agent’ or some

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<sup>33</sup> Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 245.

<sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Alain Badiou’, in *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 246–53 (p. 252).

form of subjectivity that such practices, in the end, may need to presuppose appears to be a serious omission.

The depiction of social situations as asubjective can be contrasted with accounts offered by theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. In the entirely asubjective action of structure postulated by the discourse of set-theoretical ontology and the depiction of social situations based on it, there seems to be little room for the thought, important in Laclau's approach, that there is a distinction between identification and identity that corresponds to the distinction between the moment of the subject and that of subject-position, instituting an order and an instituted order, or between the political and the social. In the set-theoretical account of social situations, it seems that human inhabitants are passively captive to anonymous operations of counting, hence relegated to the status of structurally determined objects. For Laclau, however, a structure cannot fully constitute itself and its 'elements' as objects. It is precisely this failure of 'structural objectivity' that opens the 'space of the subject'.<sup>35</sup> It is because social agents construct and identify with certain subject-positions as an attempt to overcome the failure of structure that a social order is configured and reconfigured in some particular way—in this picture, subjectivity is implicated in how a social situation is structured and restructured. But neither such 'creative' acts of identification nor what compels such acts has a place in the set-theoretical account.

However, there is a rationale that can be offered from the Badiouian perspective for the absence of consideration of human agency in normalized (that is, pre-evental) social situations. One of the key objectives of *Being and Event* can be said to be the conceptual determination of processes by which 'situations *necessarily* transform themselves to accommodate the existence of something that had not been acknowledged until that point'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 67.

<sup>36</sup> Sam Gillespie, *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou's Minimalist Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), p.

There is, in Badiou's system, a distinction between two types of change, namely, between a change that occurs as an immanent development of the situation, which is regulated by the state, and a change that begins from the interruption of that development. The former kind of change is one that Badiou associates with the constructivist orientation, which has been adapted as the defining character of normalized situation in the illustration in section 1.2.2. In the constructivist orientation, '[w]hat is called "change" in a situation is nothing more than the constructive deployment of its parts. [...] A new nomination takes the role of a new multiple, but such novelty is relative, since the multiple validated in this manner is always constructible on the basis of those that have been recognized'.<sup>37</sup> To borrow a line from a theorist who has made a claims similar to Badiou's apropos classical structuralism (termed 'logicism' in his text), Cornelius Castoriadis, the 'change' that occurs in normalized situation is 'no more than a spreading out' of the situation, such that what counts as 'the new is, in every instance, constructed through identitary operations by means of what was already there'.<sup>38</sup> Within the normalized situation, identification harbours no transformative potential regardless of the 'agent' behind it, in so far as it merely unfolds in accordance with the situation's representational regime. Attempts to produce 'new' identities or subject-positions are applications of the discursive resources of the situation—its language—to produce 'new' constructible multiples, without such productions composing a process that necessarily brings something new into the situation, in as much as they are redeployments of what is already presented in the situation and to what already is being said and done. This renders identification *per se* irrelevant for the theorization of change as the emergence of new, unanticipated possibilities in a situation.

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<sup>37</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 290.

<sup>38</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 173.

The spatial metaphor of ‘spreading out’ in the line from Castoriadis is appropriate as the kind of change that a normalized social situation undergoes, as it is a situation that is not exposed to something other than what it already is or what is anticipatable from within it. Normalization is the spatialization of temporality, and a normalized situation is one of stasis in which the synchronic prevails over the diachronic. Terminologies introduced in *Logics of Worlds* may be adopted to distinguish two types of change that may occur. Regulated novelties can be said to ‘modify’ the situation. Modification is to be distinguished from change proper that effects a ‘transformation’ of the situation. Constructivist in their orientation, the regime of representation and its discursive apparatus cannot be the source of novelty. They modify but do not transform a situation. Whatever ‘new’ identity defined with the situation’s language, it will already have been represented. In a normalized social situation, ‘everyone is included in advance’, as Rancière had aptly said apropos the policed distribution of social roles.<sup>39</sup> There is no subject prior to an event in Badiou’s system because the subject is ‘the real presence of change in a situation, or the actual existence of the new’.<sup>40</sup> For Badiou, subjectivation, the process by which a subject emerges in the situation, is subsequent to the interruption of a normalized situation in an ‘event’.

### 1.3 The conditions of real transformation

#### 1.3.1 Complicating the account of social situations

The situation depicted in 1.2.2 has been proposed as a model of a normalized, ‘natural’ situation, wherein its regime of representation has established a close proximity between presentation and representation. A ‘historical’ situation is defined by the existence of at least one non-empty multiple of the situation that is presented but not represented. In Badiou’s

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<sup>39</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> Ed Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), p. 118.

typology, such a multiple is called a ‘singular’ multiple. A historical situation, then, is characterized by a failure of representation—this characterization will need to be qualified further, but is nonetheless apt, because a historical situation, in the first instance, is a situation in which there is a multiple that is presented but not represented. To begin with what Badiou provides as an ‘image’ of a singular multiple:

Here is an image (which in truth is merely approximate): a family of people is a presented multiple of the social situation (in the sense that they live together in the same apartment, or go on holiday together, etc.), and it is also a represented multiple, a part, in the sense that *each* of its members is registered by the registry office, possesses French nationality, and so on. If, however, one of the members of the family, physically tied to it, is not registered and remains clandestine, and due to this fact never goes out alone, or only in disguise, and so on, it can be said that this family, despite being presented, is not represented. It is thus *singular*. In fact, one of the members of the presented multiple that this family is, remains, himself, un-presented *within the situation*.<sup>41</sup>

According to this ‘image’, Indonesia would possess a singular multiple if one of its presented multiples had as its member an individual who is not an Indonesian citizen. If a group of workers in a port, for example, had, amongst its members, several undocumented individuals, that group would be a singular multiple in Indonesia. The *group* of workers itself is presented in (belongs to) the Indonesian situation, but the group is not included in the situation, because some of its members do not belong to the situation. A set  $\alpha$  is included in—i.e. a subset of—set  $\beta$  if and only if all of the elements of  $\alpha$  are also elements of  $\beta$ . Strictly speaking, then, the group is not represented. However, as Badiou claims that this is ‘merely approximate’ without hinting what a complete picture might be, it would be appropriate to consider how the category

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<sup>41</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 174.



of singular multiple could be understood in line with the illustration of social situations being offered in section 1.2.2, in a manner that is slightly more than a mere approximation.

Badiou claims that what distinguishes historical situations from natural situations (under which falls situations such as a piece of rock, the Pacific Ocean, and the planet Mars) is the ‘omnipresence of singularity’ in the former and the ‘omnipresence of normality’ in the latter.<sup>42</sup> This statement can be understood in a way that adds a twist to the illustration of social situations. Suppose that there is a group of individuals who are baseball players in Indonesia. That there is an extension for the identity of a baseball player implies that there be a situation of baseball. When one considers the situation of baseball, it seems plausible to hold that an individual who is presented in the situation of baseball according to its presentational and representational regime is not presented in his ‘entirety’—or as Badiou puts it, the ‘concrete infinity’ that he is—but as a being capable of playing baseball, because for the situation of baseball, whatever other qualities that the individual might possess do not count as ‘proper’ or relevant properties for membership. If this is right, it can be said that in the Indonesian situation, the social identity ‘baseball player’ is a representation of individuals as they are presented in the baseball situation—it is a representation of individuals in their capacity to play baseball. Other capacities or qualities of individual baseball players, therefore, are not represented—not re-counted—in their identity as baseball players. Following this line of thought, in social situations, wherein multiples that are both presented and represented are social identities always defined via particular set of predicates (capacities, qualifications, and so on), it seems reasonable to say that there is a pervasiveness of what might be termed ‘underrepresentation’ or ‘misrepresentation’.<sup>43</sup> In social situations, there is always something

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<sup>42</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> The interpretation proposed here seems to be to be compatible with Badiou’s assertion—although his usage of the term ‘state’ in this context is meant to refer to the empirical State—that the state reduces the ‘concrete infinity’ of the individual ‘to the *One of the count*’, that is, ‘to the subset of which the individual is an element’. See: Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 168.

that escapes representation, such as to render every representation—therefore social identity—of an individual an underrepresentation. In the last instance, what escapes representation is the void of all social situations, the generic humanity as proposed by Badiou or perhaps empty equality in the quasi-Rancièrian sense, neither of which are presentable, hence indiscernible and unrepresentable, for, they are the unpresented latent inconsistency of any social situation. Even if this twist to the illustration of social situations is added, however, it must be said that from the perspective of the situation and its inhabitants, there should be no such thing as underrepresentation, because representation is without failure as long as all multiples presented *for it* have been re-counted. The registry office in Badiou's example does not know—it does not 'register', one could say—that the family is not represented but—applying the term introduced above—underrepresented, in so far as it does not know that one of its members is undocumented. Granted that the situation remains stable, from the interiority of that situation, the space of representation appears saturated and gapless for its inhabitants, who do not register the distance between the omnipresence of singularity the omnipresence of normality. The presentation in the situation of something that is not already represented, it may be surmised, is the first sign of malfunction in the mechanism that preserves the situation as it is.

Once a singular multiple has been characterized as underrepresented, it is possible to define another type of multiple that alludes to a radical failure of representation. This multiple is the 'evental site'. Although Badiou qualifies that 'strictly speaking, a site is only "evental" insofar as it is retroactively qualified as such by the occurrence of an event', this detail may be set aside for the present exposition<sup>44</sup>—it needs only to be noted that the existence of an evental site is merely a necessary condition for an event, and it is always possible that no event actually occurs. An evental site—or simply, a 'site'—is a type of multiple that is a *totally*

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<sup>44</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 179.

singular multiple: none of its elements belong to the situation despite the multiple itself being presented. It should be said about the elements that belong to the site that they are unrepresentable in the situation. According to the situation's regime of representation, there is no element to be represented (or discerned and classified) in the evental site: 'Just "beneath" [the evental site]—if we consider the multiple from which it is composed—there is nothing, because none of its terms are themselves counted-as-one'.<sup>45</sup> As a presented multiple that appears from the perspective of the situation as containing nothing that needs to be represented, an evental site is said to be 'on the edge' of the situation's void. It might be said that an evental site is a kind of localization of the situation's void. The void of an ontic situation is not an ontological void—as Adrian Johnston writes, 'the void lurking within the evental site, haunting the re/presentational structures of the situation and its corresponding state, isn't an absolute void à la the non-specific nothing or negativity of non-being per se'.<sup>46</sup> Rather, each extraontological situation has its own 'specific' void. What is denoted by 'void' in extraontological situations is a 'structural' position, a position that is retroactively generated as that which is not counted-as-one and sustained as such, by the operation of count-as-one and the statist operation of representation that reduplicates that initial count. For an extraontological situation, if there is something that belongs to its evental site, it occupies 'level' of the situation's void—this is to say that whatever elements that belong to the evental site, from the perspective of that particular situation, count as nothing. Badiou claim that the *sans-papiers* compose an evental site for the French situation. It is not unreasonable to ask in what sense, in social situations, a concrete individual could count as 'nothing'. This is a question that is easier to answer in ontological terms: no element of the evental site belongs to the situation, which is to say that the evental site shares nothing in common with the situation.

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<sup>45</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 175.

<sup>46</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 26.

But a slightly more detail seems to be in need when discussing concrete social situations, if only for the fact that elements of the evental site called ‘*sans-papiers*’ are, like those who belong to the French situation, human individuals. The sense of ‘nothing’ might be understood by appropriating a point from Rancière: the regime of representation does not count the capacity for speech and thought as a *proper* property in the distribution of social roles.<sup>47</sup> Suppose that there is a group of people who compose a situation’s evental site. The sole ‘property’—which, as will be seen, is not a property for the situation, hence the quotations—these ‘inhabitants’ of the evental site possess, qua their being human, would be that of being capable of speech and thought. And this is a ‘property’ that every human individual in the social situation has in common (the same point can be made using ‘generic humanity’). But the inhabitants of the evental site are not counted-as-one for the situation whose regime of count-as-one, its membership criterion, is not ‘individuals with capacity for speech and thought’, but those that possess further qualifications for membership in the situation—citizenship, the capacity to play football, and so on. The only ‘property’ the inhabitants of an evental site possesses is a non-property for the situation. Since the representational regime of the situation re-counts multiples that are already presented in the situation, the capacity for speech and thought cannot be the basis on which multiples are defined or constructed in the situation—in the construction of identities within the situation, that capacity is irrelevant. Given the references to aspects of Rancière’s thought through which several Badiouian concepts have been illustrated, it might appear that the Badiouian concept of evental site and what Rancière has called the ‘part of those without a part [*la part des sans-part*]’ are rather similar. Setting aside other details of Rancière’s thought, the distinction between those individuals composing an evental site and the part of those without a part may seem to be a terminological one: in Badiouian terms, the those composing an evental site do not yet

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<sup>47</sup> See: Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 13, 14, 123.

constitute a part—a subset—of the situation, provided that a part is taken to imply a relationship to the whole, which is established with reference to the state of the situation (via the language of the situation) that has been proposed as the ontological schema for the space of representation. This is because if whatever elements that compose an evental site, in as much as they do not count-as-one, is not underrepresented but radically unrepresentable, then there is no relation between the elements that belong to the evental site and the situation that would be discernible by the situation's regime of representation. Although an evental site, as it itself belongs to the situation (hence is an element of the situation), must have some kind of presence in the situation, and recognizable to the inhabitants of the situation, it would be present only as a name that refers to no one in particular. 'Commies' in a right-wing autocracy or 'Jew' in an anti-Semitic society are not identities: they are merely placeholder names for those who are excluded from their respective situations. The seemingly minor point about the non-relationality between whatever elements that compose an evental site and the situation, however, accounts for the need, in the theoretical architecture of *Being and Event*, of the concept of event. In the statement that an evental site is the 'point' from which '[e]very radical transformational action originates',<sup>48</sup> this origination is a passage from unrepresentable to some possibility of representation that logically must precede the initiation of any process whose ultimate endpoint will be the representation of what would have remained radically unrepresentable had the situation and its regime of representation remained the same. If, for Rancière, 'political subjectivation' is this passage, Badiou seeks to conceptualize the passage differently, so as to leave subjectivation as a process that is subsequent to the passage. He does so through the formulation of an event as a moment of 'direct' presentation—a self-presentation, as will be suggested—of what is nothing for the situation that is required because the passage between the unrepresentable to the representable cannot be induced by the

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<sup>48</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 176.

situation's prevailing regimes of counting, in which case the passage would be an immanent development in the situation. If there is no natural passage between the former and the latter, an event is the short circuit at which this impossible passage occurs.

### 1.3.2 Event and intervention

Badiou has remarked that his 'fundamental question is a very simple one: What exactly is something new? What is novelty? What is creation?' The order in which he proceeded, he explains, is not from an abstract thought of being qua being, or of truths, but rather, from 'a living experience of what is something absolutely new and a vivid experience of when something happens. [...] And I first experienced this point in my life and only after had to create the concepts to justify and clarify this point'.<sup>49</sup> In spite of all its intricacy, set-theoretical ontology by which the order of being—situations and states—is thought is something of a propaedeutic to addressing matters that are of genuine interest to Badiou.

An event is that point from which the possibility of genuine change and novelty—that is, transformation, as opposed to modification—in a situation transpires. Badiou proclaims that an event is 'that-which-is-not-being-qua-being'.<sup>50</sup> That an 'event' is not part of the order of being, or of existence, in itself, is neither an unfamiliar nor a particularly mysterious proposition (Peter Hacker had remarked once that 'the "being" of events is to take place, happen, occur—but not to "exist"<sup>51</sup>). Although the event itself is beyond ontology's grasp, because an event must realize any consequences that it may have acquired the opportunity to realize in the order of being, the theorization of its consequences—around key concepts of 'truth', 'subject', 'fidelity', and 'forcing'—will need to find a way to be accommodated by the

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<sup>49</sup> Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley, 'Ours Is Not a Terrible Situation', *Philosophy Today*, 51.3 (2007), 357–65 (pp. 361–62).

<sup>50</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 184.

<sup>51</sup> P. M. S. Hacker, 'Events and Objects in Space and Time', *Mind*, 91.361 (1982), 1–19 (p. 3).

ontological discourse. It will nevertheless remain the case that whatever ontological categories that are employed in the theorization of post-evental processes of transformation can neither be intrinsically connected to the occurrence of an event, nor express everything of what a truth as an active process and the subject that is carried by it are, except the fact of their being special kinds of multiples.

What is involved in an event can be summarized in three broad points. First, a process of change that brings something new into the situation begins from a point that escapes determinations of the state that pertains to the representation of what is already presented in accordance with the prevailing regime of count-as-one, which the state itself holds in place. In line with the interpretation offered so far, this is also to say that the new, in its emergence, cannot be a social identity that is, as it is defined via situation's language, both presentable and representable under the prevailing presentational and representational regime. As a condition of possibility of an event, there needs to be a locale of radical unrepresentability within the situation, namely, an evental site. Second, that which is radically unrepresentable has a chance of gaining a presence in the situation, hence introduce the minimal condition of the possibility to disrupting the situation's prevailing presentational and representational regimes, through a moment of 'direct' presentation: an event. The actual occurrence of an event, Badiou holds, is entirely a matter of unexplainable chance. Third, an event occasions those in the situation and affected by it to resolutely decide that it has occurred. In *Being and Event*, the decision in favour of an event is understood as an 'intervention' by which an event is recognized and a name is pinned onto it. For that which can only occur cannot exist, the 'being' of an event is to vanish. What is left by an event, in so far as it has been recognized as having occurred, is merely a new signifier that is its name. It circulates in the situation as a name whose referent is unknown. A full exploration of the 'grammar' of event, be it the original formulation of *Being and Event* or the modified one of *Logics of Worlds*, shall not be

pursued in this thesis. The exposition below traces neither formulations that Badiou has offered exactly (specifically, it will simplify the account of intervention and the somewhat obscure idea of ‘evental recurrence’, which is tied to intervention, shall be left aside), but it should nonetheless be adequate for the purposes of this thesis.<sup>52</sup>

The ‘matheme’ of the event, which expresses the purely formal aspect of an event as a multiple, is written as follows:  $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ . The matheme reads: an event  $e_x$  of the site  $X$  is a multiple such that it is composed of, on the one hand, elements of the site, and on the other hand, itself. An event assumes the form of a multiple that is prohibited by ontology, namely, a set that has itself as an element. This formalization of an event is intended to capture, in addition to its exceptionality, its reflexive (that is, self-referential, self-predicating, or ‘impredicative’) nature. Although all the elements of the site have to be counted-as-one if they are to be presented, in so far as the elements of the site are not presented for the situation, the counting-as-one of the elements of the site can only be achieved in the violation of the prevailing presentational and representational regime of the situation. An event presents the elements of its site—but if it does so by presenting these elements as one multiple, the event itself cannot be an element of the site. It must be said that an event, neither identical to its site nor an element of it, presents itself through the presentation of its site. As Badiou puts it: an event “‘mobilizes” the elements of its site’—which are elements that the situation has hitherto not counted as one—and in addition, ‘adds its own presentation to the mix’.<sup>53</sup> An event is self-presenting and is not a subset of the situation, since it presents unpresented elements, namely, the elements of its site. Hence, an event is neither an internal development of the structure—

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<sup>52</sup> Acknowledging that the formulation in *Being and Event* of intervention and nomination by which an occurrence of an event is recognized and decided is somewhat ‘mysterious’ and vulnerable to accusations of decisionism, Badiou has since made significant changes on his account of how an event, itself nothing but a transient occurrence, leaves a trace in the situation. In his new account, Badiou claims that an event ‘logically implies’ a certain ‘evental statement’. See: Alain Badiou, ‘Eight Theses on the Universal’, in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. by Alberto Toscano and Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 143–52. As for the mysteriousness of his formulation of naming in *Being and Event*, see Badiou’s remarks in: Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 182.



the presentational count-as-one—nor a product of the statist regime of representation. However, despite this disjuncture between the situation and the event, in so far as the event occurs at a site that is a presented multiple of the situation, an event is not an intrusion of something external to a situation.

In concrete social situations, the self-presenting (or reflexive) form of an event might be considered from two sides, from the ‘interiority’ of the evental site and from the perspective of the situation. To begin with an example Badiou offers: the event of the French Revolution, in so far as it is an event, ‘forms a one out of everything which makes up its site’, such as individuals, facts, deeds that one could list as having been present in France between 1789 and 1794. However, merely listing all the facts cannot determine that they actually compose the event of the French Revolution, and runs the risk, Badiou claims, of ‘undoing’ the event ‘to the point of being no more than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things and words that co-existed with it’.<sup>54</sup> Badiou explains that

[t]he halting point [*point d’arrêt*] for this dissemination is *the mode in which the Revolution is a central term of the Revolution itself*; that is, the manner in which the conscience of the times—and the retroactive intervention of our own—filters the entire site through the one of its evental qualification. [...] Of the French Revolution as event it must be said that it both presents the infinite multiple of the sequence of facts [...], and, *moreover*, that it presents itself as an immanent résumé and one-mark of its own multiple. [...] The event is thus clearly the multiple which both presents its entire site, and, by means of the pure signifier of itself immanent to its own multiple, manages to present the presentation itself, that is, the one of the infinite multiple that it is.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 180.

<sup>55</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 180.

It seems that Badiou's illustration allows an event to be understood in a way that resembles the Sartrean account of the emergence of group-in-fusion, or perhaps even the idea of class-consciousness. In the case of French Revolution, the moment of the event's self-presentation can be said to be the moment at which some part of the French population becomes 'self-aware' of their participation in the Revolution. This seems consistent with the thought that an event presents itself through the 'conscience of the times'. Perhaps a better example of self-presentation is the publication of the following manifesto from the undocumented immigrant workers in France, the *sans-papiers*:

We the Sans-Papiers of France, in signing this appeal, have decided to come out of the shadows. From now on, in spite of the dangers, it is not only our faces but also our names which will be known. We declare: Like all others without papers, we are people like everyone else. Most of us have been living among you for years [...]. We demand papers so as that we are no longer suffer the humiliation of controls based on our skin, detentions, deportations, the break-up of our families, the constant fear.<sup>56</sup>

Circulated few months after the highly publicized clash between the *sans-papiers* and the French police at the Church of Saint-Bernard, this manifesto is an exemplary case of self-presentation. Those individuals who do not count-as-one in France and have been indiscernible (in the 'shadows') in the French situation and yet dispersed everywhere in it ('living among you') self-referentially designate themselves as 'We the Sans-Papiers of France', and enjoin the inhabitants of the French situation to count them, not as an indistinct name that names no one in particular, but as individuals ('our names [...] will be known') that are 'like everyone else'—capable of speech, thinking, political action. Because their self-presentation is equivalent to the interruption of operations structuring the situation, the count-as-one as well as that of representation whose remit is to prevent such an interruption, the

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<sup>56</sup> The manifesto was published in the French daily newspaper *Libération* on 25 February 1997. It has been quoted from: Thomas Nail, 'Alain Badiou and the Sans-Papiers', *Angelaki*, 20.4 (2015), 109–30 (p. 115).

‘event’ of the *sans-papiers* is a presentation of something more than the empirical sum of individuals: the void of the situation.

An event should be analysed from outside the interiority of its site and from the perspective of the situation. It must not be the case that an event be the sound of a tree falling in a forest that no one hears, because, strictly speaking, an event *is* only what it *will have been* after it unfolds its consequence in the situation. And the first consequence of an event, or rather, what constitutes an event as an event *for the situation* so that its consequences may unfold, is to recognize an event as having occurred in the situation. Badiou maintains that ‘if there exists an event, its belonging to the situation of its site is undecidable from the standpoint of the situation itself’.<sup>57</sup> An evental site, as explained earlier, is a presented multiple and belongs to the situation. The situation may have a name for it—the ‘*sans-papiers*’ in France, for example—in so far as it is presented, despite the name being a name of the indiscernible, those that do not belong. It follows that even if an event presents the elements of its site, because whatever that belongs to the site is nothing for the situation in which the event occurs, the belonging of the event—as a multiple composed of the event itself and the elements of the site—to the situation cannot be established on the basis of its extension. This is to say that the belonging of an event cannot be decided from what would be from the perspective of the situation and its inhabitants on neutral or objective grounds: namely, knowledge, whose scope is conterminous with the situation’s regime of representation, which only represents what is presented in accordance with the initial regime of count-as-one. Even if the *sans-papiers* were to declare their presence in France, it could be deemed irrelevant and dismissed: they simply are not French. That they are ‘like everyone else’ does not establish their belonging, in as

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<sup>57</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 181.

much as the prevailing regime does not consider this as a sufficient qualification for membership in the situation.

The two ways in which an event can be seen alludes to the two aspects of an event that makes the question of its belonging to the situation into a sort of a differend (although it might be observed that at a conceptual level, there is no genuine differend—in the Lyotardian sense—in Badiou's system, since it stipulates that only from a decision in favour of an event does universality come to be). On the one hand, an event is the presentation of *what counts as nothing* for the situation. On the other hand, an event is irreducible to what is counted as nothing in the situation, for it *presents itself*, in the momentary disruption of the situation's regime of counting. Badiou maintains that an event 'is never shared'—even though the truth whose production an event may initiate will be universal, 'offered to all, or addressed to everyone'<sup>58</sup>—because 'its recognition as an event is simply at one with [a] political decision'.<sup>59</sup> Badiou calls 'interpretive intervention' the decision in favour of an event's belonging to the situation.<sup>60</sup> What an intervention recognizes is not the 'meaning' of an event in and of itself—there is, in fact, no such thing, for reasons that will be mentioned below. Rather, on the reading proposed here, what the decision on the belonging of an event to a situation ultimately affirms corresponds to the double aspects of the event itself, as the suspension of the situation's regime of counting and as the presentation of elements that are indistinguishable from the situation's void: firstly, that the regime that currently determines what count-as-one for the situation is not the only regime by which a situation can be made consistent, and secondly, through the invention of another way of discerning and classifying parts of the situation, that which had hitherto been considered as neither belonging to nor

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<sup>58</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 181.

included in the situation can be made to be included in the situation in as much they are presented. Neither propositions can be verified with existing knowledge, which makes intervention irreducibly a decision. Badiou writes that the ‘essence’ of intervention is that of attaching a signifier to the event as its name (recognizing an event and naming an event are inseparable—one can only name what one recognizes):

The essence of the intervention consists—within the field opened up by interpretative hypothesis [that an event will have taken place in the situation], whose *presented* object is the site (a multiple on the edge of the void), and which concerns the ‘there is’ of an event—in naming this ‘there is’ and in unfolding the consequences of this nomination in the space of the situation to which the site belongs.<sup>61</sup>

The meticulous workaround that is employed in *Being and Event* in order to avoid certain paradoxes involved in identifying an undecidability shall not be discussed here, but one point is worth mentioning. To ensure the status of intervention as a self-grounding, ‘illegitimate’, decision on the ‘there is’ of an event, Badiou stipulates that intervention has to ‘poeticize’: ‘To name a supplement, a chance, an incalculable, one must draw from the void of sense, in default of established significations, to the peril of language’.<sup>62</sup> The language of the situation is unable to name an event *as an event*—the conventional meanings of its predicative and its nominative resources will dissipate the singularity of an event. Thus, Badiou suggests that the interventional nomination of an event requires an invention of a new name, the creation of a new signifier, whose application would not be explainable or legitimated by the situation’s language. Why this must be the case can be understood from a practical standpoint. If there were rules for recognizing, for example, love, the passage from listing of facts—that is, the list of things that have happened between two persons—and the declaration of love would not

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<sup>61</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 207.

<sup>62</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Philosophy and Art’, in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, ed. by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 91–108 (pp. 99–100).

require a decision (as Sartre said: ‘One *decides* because one is ignorant; were one to know, the *act of will* would be redundant: the thing would be done automatically’<sup>63</sup>). Additionally, if the recognition of love appealed to existing knowledge about what ‘love’ means, then how one ‘ought’ to behave as a lover would be a matter of knowing the rules—the ‘rituals’ of love—as well. In this case, the ‘meaning’ of an event, in some sense, would be delivered over to knowledge before any of its consequences actually unfolded, and there would be no need ‘to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation’,<sup>64</sup> which a response faithful to the exceptional singularity of an event would require. These considerations are reflected in Badiou’s account of the interventional nomination of an event. Peter Hallward writes that nomination consists in the

creation of terms that, without referents in the situation as it stands, express elements that will have been presented in a new situation to come [...]. The names “Proletariat,” “Christian,” and “Revolutionary” are terms that incant their eventual referents, insofar as Proletariat is not the working class, Christian is not a particular kind of Jew or Roman, and Revolutionary is not merely an advocate for the Third Estate.<sup>65</sup>

An event has been declared to have occurred and have been ‘inscribed by a singular naming’ that introduces to the situation ‘an *additional signifier*’.<sup>66</sup> But ‘the consequences of an event [still] cannot be discerned as such’,<sup>67</sup> for the event belongs to the situation only as a name that does not possess an extensional referent in the situation, thus as a signifier that is semantically empty. If the name of an event is to be more than an empty name, nomination must be followed by ‘subjectivation’. Subjectivation, which makes it possible for an event to be consequential

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<sup>63</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason II*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>64</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 41–42.

<sup>65</sup> Hallward, p. 124.

<sup>66</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. by Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 211.

in the situation, is described as the emergence of ‘a *special count*, distinct from the count-as-one which orders presentation, just as it is from the state’s reduplication’.<sup>68</sup> What subjectivation counts is the elements that are ‘connected’ to an event, whose name has been introduced to the situation by intervention. The operator of this count is called ‘fidelity’, which can be described, at this point of exposition, as a prolonged re-examination of the situation in the aftermath of an event, which investigates, from the perspective that has decided positively on the event’s belonging to the situation, what will have been presented in the situation as the consequence of the event having occurred. A truth comes to be through a fidelity to an event—with its etymological connections to *troth* and the German *treu*, the English word ‘truth’ proves to be an apt translation. A declaration of love, as a singular instance, is nothing but what it *will have been*, and *what it meant* can only be known if the persons involved were to continue to draw out the implications of their declaration. Neither an event itself, which is but a momentary interruption that reveals the situation’s void, nor its name, which has been introduced to signify the interruption as having taken place, predetermines the consequences of an event—this is also to say that there is nothing in the event itself that guarantees that its consequences will have been a truth, and everything hereafter depends tracing ‘the effects *on the situation* of this bringing into play of an “additional-name [i.e. name of the event]”’ to ‘weave a generic procedure’.<sup>69</sup> The ‘entire effort’, Badiou maintains, consists ‘in following the event’s consequences, not in glorifying its occurrence’.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 393.

<sup>69</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>70</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 211.

## 1.4 Processes of post-evental transformation

### 1.4.1 Faithful re-examination of the situation

Sartre sought in the irreducibility of human freedom the possibility of the dissolution of seriality. The *Critique* falters, when, partly due to the ambiguous outcome of its notion of totalization of history, it makes it difficult to elaborate the specificity of a process that must be presupposed for the praxis of a fused-group to lead to a kind of transformation that is in some sense distinct from whatever transformations achieved in more banal types of praxes. The theoretical task Badiou undertakes to support his political vision is demonstrating how a process carried by an egalitarian maxim is a process that is conceptually distinguishable as a process of transformation rather than of modification. Given that the regulatory regime of representation has been disqualified as even a potential source of novelty in the situation, the potential for transformation must lie elsewhere. This is the point at which the dimension of something that exceeds the determinations of the representational regime that governs the situation enters the Badiouian discourse. This excessive dimension—what Badiou calls a ‘truth’—is not something comes from outside the situation. Rather, it is ‘an indiscernible part of a situation’,<sup>71</sup> a part of the situation that is ‘unnameable by the resources of the language of the situation alone’, a part that is ‘subtracted’ from the space of representation by having ‘not been already-counted’ by the regulatory regime that shapes it, ‘nor will be, if as long as it remains in the same state’.<sup>72</sup> Earlier, it has been mentioned that a multiple can be qualified as ‘generic’ if that multiple cannot be circumscribed by the language of the situation, thus absent in the situation’s state, the space of representation. In other words, a truth, in its being (as a multiple), is thinkable within the ontological discourse as a generic subset, which is indiscernible in as much as it is non-constructible, hence does not belong to the state of the

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<sup>71</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 410.

<sup>72</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 338.



situation schematized as a power-set  $\wp(S)$  of the situation  $S$ . The generic subset, as it is non-constructible, is an exception to all possible identities in the situation, for identities, as suggested previously, are to be thought as constructible multiples. Badiou speaks of the ‘subtractive excess of the generic’<sup>73</sup>—excessive because it is absent from the horizon of possibilities the state of the situation delimits, and exceeds whatever that can be anticipated from within the situation. In a truth, existing classifications are annulled (as in Saint Paul’s proclamation: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Gal 3:28)). It must be emphasized that to say that a truth is an indiscernible part of the situation does imply that it pre-exists its production. Badiou maintains that ‘[e]very truth is post-eventful. In particular, there is no “structural” or objective truth’.<sup>74</sup> Neither an event nor the void that it revealed thereby is itself a truth, though, as it will be seen, a truth will be constructed by re-examining the situation from the standpoint of its void. Though a truth, in its being, is thinkable as an indiscernible generic part, how a truth realizes itself, or what ‘will have been presented’ in the course of its active production in the situation depends the protracted labour of those who have decided positively on belonging to the situation of an event and have begun to draw out its implications. ‘Truth’, Badiou writes, ‘is a process, and not an illumination’.<sup>75</sup>

Badiou theorizes the process of producing a truth in a situation in terms operations of fidelity and forcing. Fidelity concerns the construction of the generic multiple, which Badiou understands to be the being of a truth in whose production the subject that has affirmed an event engages. Forcing—to which Badiou refers as the ‘law of the subject’—provides the formal scheme of the process by which a truth is incrementally introduced to a situation. The operations of fidelity and forcing are analytically separable but united in concrete practice, for

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<sup>73</sup> Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 126.

<sup>74</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 107.

<sup>75</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 15.

they denote aspects of the singular process of the production of something new in a situation. This process can be termed a ‘truth procedure [*procédure de vérité*]’, a ‘truth process [*processus de vérité*]’, or a ‘generic procedure’. A ‘truth’ is the result of this process.

Badiou defines fidelity as a set of procedures that ‘discern, in a situation, multiples whose existence depends upon the introduction into circulation (under the supernumerary name conferred by an intervention) of an evental multiple’.<sup>76</sup> What fidelity attempts to discern from the situation is the possible referents that a name of the event (‘Proletariat’, ‘Christian’, ‘Revolutionary’, and so on) may come to have in the future, which is tantamount to investigating the consequences of an event. In practice, fidelity requires ‘the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation’,<sup>77</sup> a way of being and acting that is sustained by a ‘belief’ or ‘confidence’ that fidelity to an event will not have been in vain, or that ‘there is *something lying beneath*, or *something at work* in the situation, something that remains to be discovered through a constructive practice. In short, there is unknown consistency, there is a way of doing things [...] that *works*, but that remains foreign to our imagination’.<sup>78</sup> Fidelity thus attempts to examine the consistency of a situation in relation to those elements that could not have been discerned or counted-as-one as belonging to the situation under the presentational and representational regime prior to an event. Although the way in which fidelity is concretely practiced is a matter of creative invention following a particular event from whose recognition it emerges, the general account of fidelity can be offered. Each step of a fidelity procedure is termed—Badiou adopts a Maoist vocabulary here—an ‘enquiry’. An enquiry determines whether there is a ‘positive connection’ or ‘negative connection’ between the event and an element that it ‘encounters’—meaning that an enquiry is driven by chance

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<sup>76</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 232.

<sup>77</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>78</sup> Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 108. See also: Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 397.

and cannot anticipate its result—in the situation (Hallward explains that ‘negative connection means that the element investigated remains indifferent to the event, unaffected by or hostile to its consequences’, where as a positive connection ‘might amount to a conversion, a commitment, a renewal, a successful experiment’<sup>79</sup>).<sup>80</sup> Fidelity, like the operations of the state (language and knowledge), consists of discernment and classification: each enquiry is an encounter with some element of the situation, which is analogous to discernment; and each element encountered is classified according to its relation to the event, dividing the situation into elements that are affected by an event, hence positively connected, and the elements that are not, which are negatively connected to the event.

The path from an event to the emergence of a fidelity procedure in a more concrete setting shall be illustrated with reference to Rancière’s fascinating rendition of the heterodox pedagogical practice of Joseph Jacotot. In 1815, Jacotot was faced with the predicament of having to teach Flemish students who did not speak French, without himself possessing any knowledge of Flemish: ‘There was thus no language in which he could teach them what they sought from him. Yet he wanted to respond to their wishes. To do so, the minimal link of a *thing in common* had to be established between himself and them.’<sup>81</sup> Having to find a common ground, Jacotot hands his students a bilingual copy of *Telemachus*, and assigns the students to write a paper on the text in French—a task the students were able to accomplish. This unexpected success might be construed as an event in the situation of education, in so far as the individual students, beyond their particular differences, reveal that which had been foreclosed by the ‘stultifying’ presupposition of dominant pedagogical practices that students are of lesser intelligence than the teacher: that ‘all people are virtually capable of

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<sup>79</sup> Hallward, p. 127.

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 330.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 1.

understanding what others had done and understood'.<sup>82</sup> It may be noted that these 'students'—taken collectively—is not a representation and not an identity. It is a multiple whose presentation could not have been anticipated within the educational situation, for is not constructible according to the regime of representation that governs the educational situation, and therefore is absent in the space of representation. Making a decision on the belonging of the event to the educational situation (hence deciding that what had occurred in the classroom is not an anomaly or some effect unrelated to education: mere coincidence, cheating, and so on), Jacotot becomes a faithful subject attempting to draw the consequences of this event. To be faithful to this event, Jacotot comes to conclude, the educational situation has to be approached with a presupposition that radically differs from the one that on which dominant pedagogical practices is based: the egalitarian supposition of the equality of intelligence. The assignment that students produced for him was now to be seen as the medium through which this egalitarian presupposition was 'verified' in one instance. For Jacotot, this meant that equality of intelligence could be verified elsewhere. There is the emergence of a fidelity as a process that delineates what could come to be in the situation of education through a series of enquiries whereby the egalitarian maxim is put into practice—in so doing, Jacotot examines the situation of education 'from the bias of its void'.<sup>83</sup> Whatever work that follows from an event must begin from a local point in the situation, 'the environs' of the evental site<sup>84</sup>—in the case of Jacotot, a Belgian classroom perhaps. But what had emerged in due course was something like a 'community of equals', those who are, collectively, the subject faithful to what might be called the 'Jacotot-event', that continued to investigate the possibilities of the egalitarian maxim—it is as if the evental site expands from a classroom into other corners of the educational situation. Each instance wherein equality of intelligence is verified with

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<sup>82</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 73.

<sup>84</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 330.

someone would indicate that he or she is positively connected to the event, and fidelity is the continual enquiry into the multiples of the situation that can be connected to the Jacotot-event. Rancière maintains that there is no objective evidence based on which equality of intelligence could be asserted as a ‘fact’. Though Badiou concurs that equality is never the goal to be obtained but something that is declared (or axiomatically presupposed, as Rancière would put it), if Rancièrian and Badiouan thought part ways regarding the consequences of the declaration (or presupposition) of equality, it is because the latter nevertheless seeks to theorize the lasting transformative effects of the egalitarian declaration in the situation. Though the void as such may never become a presentation in the situation, a truth—of which the subject is a part—can be built or woven from the void as something that comes to be in the situation to generate lasting transformative effects of a vanished event.

#### 1.4.2 Truth and the conceptual determination of a process of change

It is time to examine the contribution that Badiou’s theory of post-evental change makes with respect to conceptually securing what has been termed in the introduction to this thesis the ‘vertical’ axis of socially transformative process by establishing the distance between a situation and a situation that will have been transformed. The most important task here is to connect fidelity and truth. It is in this connection that fidelity—which could appear as practical voluntarism—becomes a conceptual determination of a process whose continuation is a condition for a situation to *definitely* transform.

A fidelity procedure, Zachary Fraser writes, is ‘a *truth procedure* if the projected infinite subset of the situation consisting of all the elements positively connected to the event will have been *generic*’.<sup>85</sup> The generic subset, which Badiou designates with the symbol ‘♀’,

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<sup>85</sup> Zachary Fraser, ‘The Law of the Subject: Alain Badiou, Luitzen Brouwer and the Kripkean Analyses of Forcing and the Heyting Calculus’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2.1–2

is the being of a truth.<sup>86</sup> To dwell on the story of Jacotot a little longer. Each instance of applying the maxim of equality of intelligence would have yielded a result. Suppose that there is a set of results that verify the equality of intelligence: it has been verified with a twelve-year old kid, a worker, and so on. Equality of intelligence is not how individuals are identified—discerned and classified—in the pre-evental educational situation, wherein individuals are identified in terms of certain properties and qualifications (being ignorant and being knowledgeable) that support a hierarchical relationship between the knowing master and the ignorant pupil, which fidelity to the Jacotot-event defies. Because the practice of fidelity to the Jacotot-event is strange or alien to the educational situation, the results collected through fidelity to the Jacotot-event would appear to be irrelevant or transgressive from the perspective of the educational situation as it currently stands. But to establish, conceptually, that a fidelity is a truth procedure, it is not enough to just rely on the fact that it is transgressive. As stated earlier, each step of a fidelity procedure, enquiry, involves discernment and classification. For this reason, fidelity ‘resembles’ the production knowledge.<sup>87</sup> And because discernment and classification are the paradigmatic operations of the state, fidelity ‘can appear [...] like a counter-state, or a sub-state.’<sup>88</sup> But this resemblance is the beginning of a problem. The danger is that the operation of fidelity may not only resemble operations of the state, but render it conceptually identical to the state or regime of representation, even if it might still be suggested that fidelity is a ‘counter-state’ based on a different mode of discernment. However, if fidelity were to be *just* another state, it would result in the conceptual equivocation of truth and knowledge, which implies, in Badiou’s architecture, the equivocation between the new and the old. The fulfilment of the following requirement is critical for the separation of the

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(2006), 94–133 (p. 122).

<sup>86</sup> The symbol is probably an allusion to a homology between truth and Lacan’s definition, in the twentieth seminar, of ‘women’ as an ‘open set’ without an organizing principle.

<sup>87</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 330–31.

<sup>88</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 233.

operation of fidelity and the operations of the state, in establishing the irreducibility of truth to knowledge, and specifying a distinctive process by which something new is necessarily introduced to the situation: the set of elements that are positively connected to an event must not be discernible and representable under the prevailing regime of representation; it must avoid circumscription by the situation's language and its predicative resources.

For a fidelity to be a truth procedure, the multiple that it constructs must be extensionally non-identical to any multiple that could be circumscribed by the situation's language, with its resources of discernment and classification, which is to say that the multiple it produces must be a part of the situation that is indiscernible, and indeed, generic. The method of constructing a generic multiple is a variant of Cantor's technique of diagonalization. From each property discerned in the situation, one element of that property is added to the generic multiple. Once an element from all discernible properties—a process that would continue *ad infinitum* since the situation itself and the predicates that are inscribed in the situation's language are infinite in number—are collected in this way, the generic multiple would contain 'a little bit of everything', and no discernible property would discern generic multiple itself. For instance, if the set takes as its elements twelve-year old kids and those who are not a twelve-year old kid, elderly women and those who are not elderly women, and repeats this procedure for every classification, the set will not coincide with any possible classification. The subset of the situation generated in this way is, as Badiou puts it, an 'anonymous representative' of the situation. As for the being of this generic multiple, one of the crucial passages of *Being and Event* should be quoted in length:

What could this 'one' be which—subtracted from language and constituted from the point of the evental ultra-one—is indiscernible? Since this part has no particular expressible property, its entire being resides in this: it is a part, which is to say it is composed of multiples effectively presented in the situation, an indiscernible *inclusion*—and such, in short, is a truth—has no

other ‘property’ than that of referring to *belonging*. This part is anonymously that which has no other mark apart from arising from presentation, apart from being composed of terms which have nothing in common that could be remarked, save belonging to *this* situation; which, strictly speaking, is its being, qua being. But as for this ‘property’—*being*; quite simply—it is clear that it is shared by *all* the terms of the situation, and that it is coexistent with every part which groups together terms. Consequently, the indiscernible part, by definition, solely possesses the ‘properties’ of any part whatsoever. It is rightfully declared *generic*, because, if one wishes to qualify it, all one can say is that its elements *are*.<sup>89</sup>

The infinitude of this subset that must not be circumscribed by any regime of representation is securable by its intrinsic openness to every term of the situation—so must a fidelity also be if it is to ‘fill’ the set such that it remains generic. A truth cannot *be* except as a certain ‘indifference to differences’, as something that could be ‘offered to all, or addressed to everyone’.<sup>90</sup> And it is because the being of a truth is generic that a truth is said to be universal and egalitarian, and the process of its production is a ‘process of universality’.<sup>91</sup> However, because each step of fidelity, each enquiry (such as the verification of equality of intelligence in one instance), is finite, a truth, as such, will forever remain incomplete. It follows that although the determination of a truth in the ontological discourse as generic multiple resolves the theoretical problem of conceptually distinguishing truth from knowledge and operations of fidelity from statist operations, because fidelity will never have actually completed a generic multiple at any given moment in its course, the distinction between these couples cannot be established beyond that conceptual distinction—in principle, it is possible to circumscribe whichever set a fidelity procedure has constructed at any point in its actual temporal unfolding with a long, complex predicate. This implies—as Zachary Fraser had put it—that the

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<sup>89</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 338–39.

<sup>90</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Badiou, ‘Eight Theses on the Universal’, p. 144.



‘truthfulness of a procedure does not disclose itself in extensionally determinate evidence’, and that it is impossible ‘to decide, based on empirical evidence, whether any procedure is or is not generic’.<sup>92</sup> The confirmation of truthfulness of a procedure would be possible only from a position from which a situation could be assessed *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the unreachable point when a truth has reached completion—this is a position that neither the inhabitants of the situation nor the faithful subject occupies. As a result, Fraser writes that the truthfulness of a procedure

can be testified to only in the interiority of the sequence, with respect to its projected intension. [...] Any declaration concerning the existence of a truth must [...] always remain hypothetical and anticipatory, without the hope of sufficient evidence ever arriving. For as long as a procedure is conceived as a stepwise concatenation of discrete elements of a situation, it is clear that never will this procedure achieve historical completion.<sup>93</sup>

It will remain unknown to the subject as well as any inhabitant of the situation whether a fidelity has so far composed or will have composed a truth. Thus, if the category of truth remains relevant for the theorization of change, its relevance lies not so much in its capacity to ‘inform’ practice by providing those faithful to an event some epistemic confirmation that they are ‘in the right’. Badiou writes that there is ‘no question of confirming or applying’ truths because they are ‘reality itself’. A truth is ‘*something that exists in its active process*’—such as in the ‘production of political novelties, political sequences, political revolutions, and so forth’.<sup>94</sup> The significance of the concept of truth in thinking change is that it is the concept by which processes of modification and processes of real transformation can be distinguished. The ontological discourse can only hope to articulate the *de jure* conditions necessary to think the transformation of the situation as the supplementation of a truth whose being is an

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<sup>92</sup> Fraser, p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> Fraser, p. 125.

<sup>94</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 87.

indiscernible generic subset of the situation. In *Being and Event*, the demonstration that a transformation of the situation via a truth is thinkable is achieved through an expropriation of a mathematical technique called ‘forcing [*forçage*]’, recast as the ‘fundamental law of the subject’, or the ‘law of the future anterior’. The reasons for such designations shall come to light in the exposition of the notion, which begins by reflecting on the being of a truth as a completed generic subset.

Considered in its hypothetical completion, a truth, in its ontological being, is identical to that which has been said to be the space of representation prior to the intervention of a regime of representation or ‘law’, namely, the unrestricted power-set whose cardinality is immeasurable. But if a truth is a representation, of which situation (or presentation) it is a representation, it can only be said that it is a representation of a situation that is to come. A question arises at this point: it is not immediately obvious what a truth should actually ‘contain’ as a representation of a situation that is to come, and indeed, how a situation that is supplemented or extended by a truth would differ from the situation prior to its supplementation. Although it is established that the generic subset, in its infinite totality, cannot be circumscribed by the predicates of the language of the situation, in so far as it is a multiple that is not empty, parts of it must, hypothetically, be nameable and predicable in some language, which may be other than that of the current language of the situation. It can also be supposed, if a transformed situation came to be, that its parts will have been made to belong to that situation. It should, therefore, be asked which predicates would be semantically fulfilled by virtue of having presented multiples as their extension after the supplementation of the initial situation by a truth. In his reading, Paul Livingston hints that a truth, an unrestricted power-set liberated from the constructivist restriction of the language of the situation, would be something like an ‘infinite reservoir of sense’, that is, ‘the whole totality of the *possible*

extension of *any predicates* (ranging over the members of the initial set) at all'.<sup>95</sup> If what is meant by the language of the situation, at least in social situations, is the regulatory regime for the construction of multiples qua social identities within a situation, it may be possible to offer a somewhat different description of what is included in the generic subset as its parts, one that diverges from Badiou's, but nonetheless is consistent with the reading that has been offered so far. It shall be said that the generic subset of a given situation is the possible extension of all social identities that could not have been constructed in the situation under its prevailing representational regime. On this interpretation, the eventual outcome of supplementing a situation with a truth will be a situation in which multiples that hitherto could not have been constructed can be constructed. Social identities, by definition, are representations, hence discernible or nameable parts of a situation. But under the interpretation proposed here, genuinely new identities can only be conceived as transpiring from a break from the prevailing regime of representation, a break that is pursued through the fidelity that discerns and groups together elements of the situation in previously unimaginable ways, without reference to the regime of representation that currently governs it. In the next section, it will be seen how 'forcing' a truth introduces multiples that could not have been constructed in the initial situation, such that they will have a chance to be representations when the situation and its corresponding state are transformed.

#### 1.4.3 The subject and the inscription of change

'Just as it cannot support the concept of truth (for the lack of the event)', ontology, Badiou claims, cannot 'formalize the concept of the subject. What it can do, however, is help think the type of being to which the fundamental law of the subject corresponds, which is to

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<sup>95</sup> Livingston, pp. 276–77.

say forcing'.<sup>96</sup> This claim is tied to the fact that what Badiou seeks to offer in *Being and Event* is a *de jure* determination of a process of transformation. If human animals support a truth procedure as a material practice, ontology can think what these human animals must *be* and the effects that their activity has on the situation, on the order of being, in as much as they support a truth procedure. Forcing is set-theoretical ontology's account of what might be described as the 'inscription' of a truth in a situation, *S*, such that what will have come to be is *S*( $\oplus$ ), that is, a situation extended (or supplemented) by a truth. Or to put it differently: the transformation of a situation into a new situation for which parts of the generic subset are representation of multiples that will be presentable and representable in that new situation.

It is instructive to begin with the kind of concrete effect to which the idea of forcing alludes. Badiou describes one of the prominent observable effects of a truth as that of transforming 'the codes of communication and [...] the regime of opinions' such that 'they become *other*'. This means that 'formerly obvious judgements are no longer defensible, that others become necessary'.<sup>97</sup> A journalist reporting in 1865 on the exhibition of Manet's *Olympia* writes that many viewers regarded the painting as an elaborate joke, the meaning of which they would understand if they looked closely enough. Others maintained that *Olympia* is a serious work of art. The journalist is led to conclude: 'Very probably everyone is right to some extent, and such diverse opinions are authorized by the incredible irregularities of Monsieur Manet's work. He has shown mere sketches. [...] And what is his aim? His canvases are too unfinished for us possibly to tell.'<sup>98</sup> The reactions to *Olympia*—of whether it is art or a joke, which are two incommensurable genres—has an undecidable status in the artistic situation. But if the bewildered reaction of Manet's contemporaries comes across as rather

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<sup>96</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 410–11.

<sup>97</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 80.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted from: T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 83–84.

amusing today, it is because *Olympia* inspired a generation of artists and a body of artworks and came to occupy an indelible place in the history of art. In other words, the status of the appearance of *Olympia* as an artistic event was secured retroactively after its consequences had unfolded through the artistic practice of the subject—associated with figures such as Cézanne, Monet, and Renoir, and also the works of art they produced—that, in Badiouian terms, ‘forced’, in the situation of art, the veracity of the statement ‘impressionism is art’, thus inscribing in the situation’s knowledge a new piece of knowledge. Anton Webern remarks in his lectures on the innovation of atonalism that ‘in [Schoenberg’s] musical material new laws have come into force that have made it impossible to describe a piece as in one key or another. [...] Things have asserted themselves that made this “key” simply impossible’.<sup>99</sup> In this case, it can be said that the atonal compositions force the veracity of the statement ‘music does not have to be written in one key or another’.

Stated simply, forcing proceeds by selecting and adding a set of non-constructible multiples to the situation. The end result of the extension of the situation with non-constructible multiples will be the expansion of the space of representation beyond the restrictions of the prevailing regime of representation. As a consequence of this expansion, previously indiscernible and non-constructible multiples will come to be discernible and constructible. As Brian Anthony Smith explains, the extension of the situation

based on the newly chosen and affirmed addition to the situation does not occur all at once, nor is it ever fully completed. Mathematically it does happen all at once, based simply on it being possible, but within Badiou’s philosophy the procedure of extending a situation occurs slowly. The subject is both what produces this slow extension, and the extension itself; the subject is a finite portion of a truth procedure.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Anton Webern, *The Path To The New Music*, ed. by Willi Reich, trans. by Leo Black (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 1963), p. 51.

<sup>100</sup> Brian Anthony Smith, ‘The Limits of the Subject in Badiou’s Being and Event’, *Cosmos and History: The*

For the subject placed in a concrete situation, the result of enquiries—that is, the faithful work of approaching the situation according to the event—provide some information based on which ‘hypotheses’ about the composition of the generic subset if it were to be complete could be formulated. If equality of intelligence has been verified with a child in one case of enquiry, then it can be hypothesized that the generic set will contain children; conversely, statement that it does not contain children is negated, since at least one child belongs. With these hypotheses, the subject composes a ‘fiction’ or ‘partial descriptions’ of a situation-to-come, wherein a truth will have supplemented the initial situation.<sup>101</sup> The hypothetical statements that compose what Badiou calls a ‘subject-language’ employs names and predicates to define multiples that, in S, are not semantically fulfilled, but would be fulfilled in the situation-to-come, in virtue of having their referents in the generic subset. From the ‘interiority’ of the faithful procedure, it

sounds like this: ‘If I suppose that the indiscernible truth contains or presents such or such a term submitted to the enquiry by chance, *then* such a statement in the subject-language will have had such a meaning and will (or won’t) have been veridical.’ I say ‘will have been’ because the veracity in question is relative to that other situation, the situation to-come in which a truth of the first situation (an indiscernible part) will have been presented.<sup>102</sup>

If, in the course of enquiry, it turns out that certain multiples are positively connected to the event, then it is legitimate to hypothesize that certain names and predicates are likely to have a referent in the generic subset. The content of the ‘fiction’ that the subject composes concerns that ‘configuration or partial property’ of the generic subset.<sup>103</sup> As it retains the form of the predicative language of set theory as much as the language of the situation, subject-language

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*Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2.1–2 (2006), 134–58 (p. 150).

<sup>101</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘The Ethics of Truths: Construction and Potency’, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 12 (2001), 247–55 (p. 252). Also: Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 406.

<sup>102</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 400.

<sup>103</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’, in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 24–32 (p. 32).

is not categorically distinct from language of the situation, except that the predicates composing the former would be without extension if the situation remains the same. As it had been proposed that what is contained in the generic subset are identities that are non-constructible according to the representational regime of the situation as it stands, it can be said that in making hypothesis about the situation-to-come, the subject is defining certain identities that are extensionally ‘empty’, but only so that it ‘will have been filled if the truth comes to be as a new situation’.<sup>104</sup> A situation is supplemented by a truth, by definition, if the extensional fulfilment of statements of subject-language is accomplished by the actual presentation in the situation of a part of the generic subset.

The account of forcing leads to the definition of what ‘subject’ is, in its being (a multiple), in the Badiouian account of social transformation. Suppose that, in a situation, there is really a truth that is coming to be in a situation through the work of a faithful subject. One cannot call any multiple that is actually presented a ‘truth’, since a truth is by definition uncompleteable and never presented as such in its generic being, always retaining, in the situation for which it is its truth, the status of something that ‘will have been presented’. It is in fact none other than ‘subject’ that is Badiou’s term for the actually produced part of a truth, the part of it that has attained the chance to transform the situation. ‘Grasped in its being’, Badiou writes, ‘the subject is solely the finitude of the generic procedure, the local effects of an eventual fidelity’—what the subject “‘produces” is the truth itself’.<sup>105</sup> To return for the last time to the story of Joseph Jacotot, the following can be said: the collective of ignorant masters emerging from the fidelity to an egalitarian maxim in the educational situation is the subject of the truth that transpires from the Jacotot-event. To the extent that the collective is the result of a truth procedure at a given moment somewhere in the situation, the subject is the ‘*local*

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<sup>104</sup> Badiou, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’, p. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 406.

status of a procedure'. And in so far as what it is—a 'community of equals', as Rancière might put it—could neither have been anticipated nor constructed by the previous representational regimes or the language of the situation, it is 'a configuration in excess of the situation'.<sup>106</sup> The following passage in Badiou's exposition of his account of forcing and subject-language is relevant:

A subject uses names to make hypotheses about the truth. But, given that it is *itself* a finite configuration of the generic procedure from which a truth results, one can also maintain that a subject uses names in order to make hypotheses about itself [...]. Here, language (*la langue*) is the fixed order within which a finitude, subject to the condition of the infinity that it is realizing, practices the supposition of reference to-come. Language is the very being of truth via the combination of current finite enquiries and the future anterior of a generic infinity.<sup>107</sup>

Metaphorically, the subject faithful to the event of Jacotot expands his classroom—the site of the event—to all corners of the educational situation. But this expansion is tantamount to the expansion of the subject itself: the more the subject re-examines the situation from the presupposition of equality of intelligence, the more it will have come to know about itself, in the most general sense that its very presence as a growing collective in the situation attests to what human animals, over and above their particularistic differences, are capable of when carried by an egalitarian maxim. If the situation and the state of that situation that governs the presentational and representational regime of the situation—and the suggestion that the state is the schema of social imaginary should be reiterated—were to finally accommodate the subject as belonging by the transformation of its structure, namely, its regime of count-as-one, a number of previously non-constructible, unrepresentable, multiples will have turned into constructible, hence representable, multiples, and previously unverifiable statements will have

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<sup>106</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 392.

<sup>107</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.



become verifiable via knowledge. The trajectory that begins from an event to a transformed situation may be described as that of normalization of a truth. A truth is in the beginning a pure representation, an ‘anonymous excrescence’. It will ‘end up being normalized’ when the faithful subject ‘forces the situation to accommodate it’, such that a truth, partly realized in the situation as the subject, will ‘finally be recognized’ as a term that belongs to the situation.<sup>108</sup> However, although a truth is thinkable in its hypothetical completion as a generic subset, and parts of it will come to be in the situation through the presentation of new multiples and their subsequent representation, in principle, a truth is infinite and its transformative potential is inexhaustible. Normalization of a truth would only be complete if a truth procedure itself came to an end.

Berating Sartre’s denigration of ordinary reality as a situation in which nothing of significance occurs, Raymond Aron had argued that the primary purpose such ‘monstrous transfiguration of our everyday world’ serves is to depict the ‘banality of hell or hell of banality’ that stands in contrast with the ‘moment of perfection’, that is, to highlight the exceptionality of the ‘apocalyptic’ dissolution of seriality into a group-in-fusion.<sup>109</sup> It would be easy to accuse Badiou of having replicated the Sartrean dichotomy that Aron had found implausible in sharply distinguishing the post-evental subject of truth from the human animal inhabiting a normalized, pre-evental situation. Such an accusation may not be without a dose of truth, but it should nonetheless be noted that Badiou’s point is not that the human animal is something that needs to be superseded by some ‘authentic’ subject. Badiou is not an aesthete and is thoroughly materialist on this point. As hinted in *Ethics*, Badiou holds that the animal capacities, interests, and desire for self-preservation must be mobilized in the pursuit of

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<sup>108</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 342.

<sup>109</sup> Raymond Aron, *History and the Dialectic of Violence: An Analysis of Sartre’s Critique de La Raison Dialectique*, trans. by Barry Cooper (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 53.

truths.<sup>110</sup> The thesis that is affirmed by the impossibility of a truth to be completed is none other than that once subjected to an event of a truth, what human animals are capable of bringing into being exceeds what they have hitherto brought into being. This is not surprising: one must concede that such things as generic humanity or equality of intelligence can never be made into a ‘state of affairs’. But that such things will always be the void of social situations is also what enables truth procedures that realize their effects to continue, in principle, without end. There is an optimism largely absent in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in Badiou’s conceptualization of a truth procedure: there is nothing intrinsic to it that suggests that the practico-inert is its inevitable destination. Thus, having departed from the derogatory designation of ‘human animal’ that had been accorded to the inhabitants of the pre-evental situation, Badiou at last arrives at a kind of defence of the human—not as animals, but as beings capable of supporting truths. ‘Truths—but of what?’ Badiou responds: ‘the truth of the fact that over and above their vital interests, human animals are capable of bringing into being justice, equality, and universality’.<sup>111</sup> But if the production of truths—as the creation of equality and universality—is tantamount to social change, then one might ask how far the transformative effects of a truth can extend and whether the concept of truth procedure developed under set-theoretical ontology is able to support the thought of an extensive, far-reaching, social change. These are the matters the next chapter hopes to investigate.

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<sup>110</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 40.

<sup>111</sup> Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, p. 87.

## Chapter 2. Ambiguities in the theory of evental change

### 2.1 Two lines of criticism

This chapter will investigate the ambiguities in the account of social change developed in the previous chapter on the basis of *Being and Event*. The central ambiguity arises because there are matters left untouched by set-theoretical ontology, which become relevant when the categories such as void, event, and truth are deployed in analyses of specific and concrete situations. That is, the issues that are raised in this chapter pertain to the problematic distance between set-theoretical ontology and social ontology, which persists because set-theoretical ontology—a perfectly general discourse of being, inasmuch as it is nothing in particular—does not elaborate how a concrete situation come to be in its particularity, nor provide an account of how situations sustain themselves and interact with each other. One of the outcomes of this distance that is of particular interest for thinking social change is the ambiguity of the extent of transformative effects of truths, which, it will be suggested, may be limited in a way that renders the conceivability of far-reaching social change difficult. Before proceeding, two lines of criticism that have frequently been advanced against Badiou's theorization of event (and fidelity) shall be discussed. The investigation in this chapter adopts the basic intuition of one of the lines.

The Badiouian text frequently cites the Paris Commune and the October Revolution as political events. Although the relationship between philosophy and 'real' politics—which Badiou considers as one of the 'conditions' of philosophical thought, meaning that philosophy 'comes second' and cannot, by itself, determine or dictate specific political action or imperatives—is more complex than that of philosophy passing judgments on historical sequences, simply accepting abovementioned historical events as exemplifying the Badiouian

concept of event is prone to covering over whatever theoretical ambiguities there may be present in the Badiouian theory of change with blinding spectacles in which any account of radical social change is likely to recognize itself. That events may be more common than Badiou recognizes is the point of departure for what might be called a ‘deflationary’ line of criticism. The observation from Peter Dews in his review of *Being and Event* succinctly expresses the general point of the deflationary line. Dews draws from the later Wittgenstein’s remarks on mental processes to illustrate the possibility that events may be mundane and trivial. One of the two instances of a mundane ‘event’ that Dews devises is that of expecting someone’s arrival:

[T]here is no *determinate* set of thoughts and activities that can be said to be necessary and sufficient conditions of such expectation (and furthermore, activities which, in one context, are correctly taken as indicating expectation, may no longer have this meaning when transposed into a different context). It seems, then, that we could say, applying Badiou’s terminology, that the ‘event’ of expecting someone’s arrival consists of the ‘evental site’ (an indeterminate range of thought and activity)—plus the event itself ( $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ ).<sup>1</sup>

The other theorist whose work will feature in this thesis and whose criticism of Badiou shall be examined in the next chapter, Ernesto Laclau, has questioned the exceptionality of events. Even while acknowledging that Badiou’s ontology is ‘complex’ and ‘in many ways fascinating’, Laclau alludes, like Dews, to Wittgenstein, but this time to the latter’s reflections on rule-following, to suggest that ‘it is wrong to think that we have purely situational periods interrupted by purely evental interventions’, proposing instead that ‘the contamination between the evental and the situational is the very fabric of social life’.<sup>2</sup> Dews, similarly, is

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dews, review of *Being and Event*, by Alain Badiou, 2008 <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/being-and-event/>> [accessed 27 May 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 134.

led to wonder whether, given the way they are defined, events may be ‘far more pervasive than Badiou allows: indeed, that they are the very texture of the socio-historical world, of the domain which Hegel—for example—terms “*Geist*”’.<sup>3</sup>

There is another line of thought that can be brought to a similar deflationary conclusion. For Donald Davidson, the problem with theoreticians who emphasize incommensurable ‘conceptual schemes’ and ‘paradigms’ was that they tend to prioritize ‘issues of semantics—the fact that various languages differ in their range of lexical or descriptive resources—over issues concerning the elements of logical structure that all languages must have in common in order to qualify as such’.<sup>4</sup> And although the issue of ‘language as such’—*langage*, as distinct from *langue*, to put it succinctly—is not a significant factor in the present examination of Badiou’s system, in restricting the sense of ‘language’ to that of ‘language of situation’, the theoretical approach of *Being and Event* may have made itself vulnerable to another deflationary conclusion that events may not be exceptional. Again, it is a work in which Wittgenstein features heavily that provides the cue. In *The Politics of Logic*, Paul Livingston notes that restricting membership to the state of the situation to only constructible subsets of the situation, for Badiou, is supposed to ‘capture a restriction of discernibility to the predicative powers of the specific, existing “language of the situation” which cannot describe or even reference anything beyond this situation’. However, Livingston contends:

whereas the sets of the constructible universe are limited to *predicative* definitions and predicatively definable terms (and it is in precisely this sense that they are supposed to ‘restrict existence’ by means of language), *there is no reason to suppose that the representative powers of any actual, historical language are in fact limited in this way*. In fact, every actual language is, very plausibly, strongly and essentially *impredicative*. This impredicativity is marked not only in the capacity all such languages have to ‘totalize’, to

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<sup>3</sup> Dews, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 131.

talk of the ‘all’ and the ‘universe’, but also in their inherent capacity for self-reference [...].<sup>5</sup>

Badiou distinguishes ‘subject-language’ and ‘language of the situation’, but this is irrelevant given that what is being asserted is the essential impredicativity of language as such. For there is no reason to suppose that subject-language would be categorically different from the language of the situation—subject-language is a predicative language just as much as the language of the situation, except that its referents are in a situation-to-come that will have been extended by a generic subset indiscernible given the situation’s regime of representation. However, if it is the case that the nominative and descriptive resources of language as such—the one available to human beings, but not to the inhabitants of the set-theoretical universe—exceed those of the predicative languages that Badiou employs in *Being and Event*, then the self-referential, reflexive form captured by the matheme of an event would neither be exceptional in human linguistic acts nor would could such acts in any plausible sense be deemed illegitimate or prohibited simply due to their form.

Another common line of criticism advanced against Badiou’s theorization of events and truths might called the ‘practico-ethical’ line of criticism. This line of criticism is typified by arguments of the following sort: Badiou relies on an ethics wherein the ‘good’ is conceived as ‘nothing more than the subject’s consistent fidelity to the event’, thereby opening itself to an absolutism that is blind to consequences, as well as the voluntarism, no less reckless, of an existentialist ethics that exalts the ‘authenticity’ of commitment in the face of the unknown.<sup>6</sup> Even though the occasions for an interventional decision, namely, the event itself, cannot be *induced* at will, given the indeterminacy of the ‘meaning’ of an event, which depends almost entirely on an consequences of the event that only begin to surface after an essentially

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<sup>5</sup> Livingston, p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Guilherme Vasconcelos Vilaça, ‘Badiou’s Ethics: A Return to Ideal Theory’, *Badiou Studies*, 3.1 (2014), 271–321 (pp. 277, 304, 309).

ungrounded decision on its eventuality, the apparent ‘heteronomy’ of an event that calls the subject to resolutely decide, is, in the end, no more than a façade behind which lurks a deeply ‘subjective’ determination of what fidelity to that event demands in terms of practical engagement in the situation. The following passage from the overview of *Being and Event* by Jean-Jacques Lecercle is the customary endpoint of the practico-ethical line of criticism:

Since the event is, where I am situated, essentially unintelligible, how can I recognize an event, if not by an illumination, on the road to Damascus? Answering that an inquest is required for such recognition will not do: for the inquest will be held in the only terms I know, those of the encyclopaedia [i.e. knowledge] of the situation. This does not mean that Badiou’s system renders political action impossible; it does mean that it makes rational politics impossible. I sympathize with most of Badiou’s political choices [...]; but I can find hardly anything within his system to protect me from Heidegger’s mistake, when he took the National Socialist “revolution” for an event, and thought that a new process of truth had started. The risk is that the eventuality of the event will eventually be left to individual decision.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, however plausible the assessments made from the practico-ethical line of criticism may be with respect to some of Badiou’s claims in *Ethics*, or elements of decisionism and voluntarism in Badiou’s thought, there is a danger in *commencing* a critique of Badiou’s theorization of change from the practico-ethical line as characterized above. For, it is not obvious whether the indeterminacies of a truth procedure (as a subjective practice), such as the inability to ground the principles guiding its construction in anything other than itself and the difficulty of predicting and evaluating its consequences constitute a real problem. As the opacity and indeterminacy of practice appear to be least objectionable in creative artistic practices, art shall serve to illustrate the point. Badiou’s own interventions in the domain of art need not be elaborated here, as the Kantian story exhibits enough similarities with the

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, ‘Cantor, Lacan, Mao, *même combat*: The philosophy of Alain Badiou’, *Radical Philosophy*, 1999, 6–13 (p. 12).

general contours of Badiou's account of truth procedure to serve as a reference. For Kant, a work of artistic genius is a work for which no set of rules for its creation can be articulated, not even by its creator, who, Kant claims, 'does not himself know how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things [...] and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products'.<sup>8</sup> It is through the production of a succession of artworks that 'imitate' or succeed the *exemplar* that the work of genius is that it is retrospectively recognized by others that the initial work was a creation of an 'original sense', and not—to allude to one type of responses provoked by Manet's *Olympia*—an original non-sense. Similar characteristics are found in a truth procedure. Spurred by an unexplainable aleatory occurrence, the faithful subject seeks out to investigate the situation to establish that, as Oliver Feltham had put it, that 'there is unknown consistency, there is a way of doing things [...] that *works*, but that remains foreign to our imagination'.<sup>9</sup> What that occurrence, an event, will have meant depends on the active fidelity of a subject, the trajectory of which the event itself does not determine. If the constitutive opacity and incommunicability of a creative artistic procedure are not problematic as such, then neither should they be problematic, as such, in any other procedure that operates under the same logic. Problematizing those characteristics of the subjective practice of a truth procedure, then, requires at least one additional premise. Two premises that, when either one is granted, would problematize the aforementioned indeterminacies of a truth procedure are readily conceivable: (1) practices that cannot express their precepts with lucidity or seek discursive justification are inherently problematic; (2) as a truth procedure could potentially lead to consequences of great magnitude (including disastrous ones), the demand to justify the practices involved in its actual construction would be reasonable. To a critic whose practico-ethical concerns pertaining to

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §46.

<sup>9</sup> Feltham, p. 108.



event and fidelity presuppose the first premise, it must be asked in return how he conceives essentially creative practices such as that of artistic production, which, very plausibly, is a testament to an aspect of the socio-historical world whose expulsion is likely to leave human experience impoverished: that something that cannot be communicated can nonetheless be shown. On the other hand, a critic whose objection presupposes the second premise would not have taken enough critical distance from Badiou's theorization of events and truths. For unless it is possible to preclude the possibility that events could be utterly mundane, as suggested by those advancing the deflationary line of criticism, a critic who has chosen to articulate his criticism primarily in terms of practico-ethical concerns, including those related to catastrophic consequences of fidelity or the subjective determination of principles and the condition of their application, would have conceded too much. Few would seriously entertain scenarios of catastrophes brought forth by expecting someone's arrival (as in Dews's example), nor would judge the various activities and thoughts involved in awaiting someone to be causes for serious concern. In so far as they are raised with seriousness, then, ethical concerns concerning Badiou's theorization of events and their consequences cannot but tacitly grant that the events and truths about which they are so concerned are exceptional, consequential, or subversive in some indefinite sense, despite the contention of the deflationary critics that one of the ambiguities of *Being and Event* is whether it succeeds in establishing that events are as exceptional as they are advertised to be and, by extension, that post-evental truth procedures are in reality processes of effecting changes substantial and subversive enough to even merit a reflection on their consequences, let alone catastrophic consequences. Since the present thesis is concerned with the implications for social change that could be drawn from set-theoretical ontology, it is the deflationary criticism, which suggests that there are not so many implications to be drawn, that should be of primary concern.

## 2.2 The void-ness, evental-ness, and the situatedness of truths

One reader of Badiou contends that ‘there is no *a priori* reason to privilege universality over any other value as the necessary substance of event’.<sup>10</sup> Within the architecture of Badiou’s theory of change, however, there is a reason why a truth procedure initiated by an event that reveals the void of the situation is conceived as the production of a generic, egalitarian universality. In a truth, particular differences—subject-positions or social identities—that are constructible in accordance with the situation’s representational regime are annulled. In its ‘indifference to differences’, the generic, egalitarian universality of a truth violates the regime that tames the situation by partitioning it into manageable and discernible parts, and makes the production of a truth the production of multiples indiscernible from the perspective of the situation that will have transformative effects by forcing the situation to accommodate them, such that they will be presentations for the situation, multiples that belong to it. The reason for the ‘privilege’ of universality is that the ‘process of universality’—which Badiou says is ‘one and the same’ with a truth procedure<sup>11</sup>—is the process that can be conceptually determined, at least within Badiou’s theoretical framework, as a process that transforms the situation.

If what has been said concerning the ‘privilege’ accorded to universality is right, the following would be a plausible hypothesis: if the universality of a truth could somehow be questioned, what would emerge as a question is whether the conceptualization of post-evental process of change as a truth procedure is able to support the thought of social change as the introduction of something radically new. It should be made clear that it would be unfair to protest that set-theoretical ontology does not immediately yield a satisfying theory of social situations (as a specific class of situations) and social change, for it is simply not its objective

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<sup>10</sup> Vilaça, p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, ‘Eight Theses on the Universal’, p. 144.

to yield one. Badiou himself has been careful to point out that it is not the remit of a philosopher to position himself as a guide to those actively engaged in politics. Ontology is but one situation for Badiou, and he is content to accept that each concrete situation will have complexities that the language of set-theoretical ontology cannot express—‘ontology is not Hegel’s absolute knowledge’, Badiou says.<sup>12</sup> Yet, it would be not unfair to attempt to trace just how much implications for a process of social change could be drawn from the framework *Being and Event* has developed, and consider, if it is the case that ontology does not capture everything of concrete situations, what of the latter eludes the former’s grasp. In the course of engaging with the question of extent of the transformative potential of a truth procedure, this chapter will attempt to show that the generic universality of a truth risks turning into a particularity, thereby placing in doubt the potential for a truth to effect extensive social change.

To return to the deflationary line of criticism: a challenge against the exceptionality of events through the kind of deflationary criticism mentioned previously, which turns to the *form* of the evental multiple, is likely to invite a swift rejoinder. Such a challenge may be accused of neglecting a qualification that is central to Badiou’s concept of event and the theorization of post-evental transformation: that an event be the revelation of a situation’s void, of the latent inconsistency a situation has to un-present in order for it to constitute itself as a consistent multiplicity, and whose occurrence it is the remit of its state to foreclose. ‘[W]hat the State strives to foreclose through its power of counting is the void of the situation, while the event always reveals it’<sup>13</sup>—it would not be an exaggeration to say that the significance of the event for thinking social change is almost entirely expressed in this statement (and it is certainly difficult to see how the aspect of an event as the bringing forth of the void of a situation would be captured by Dews’s example of expecting someone’s arrival). Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 119.

the pervasiveness of events—or more accurately, the many instances of the form of an event—may not be so devastating for theorizing social transformation within Badiouian framework, if it is conceded that an event is only what it will have been once its consequences have unfolded. Todd May explains that Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat was an event even though there ‘were others before her who also refused. What makes her refusal an event is the fidelity to her act by other committed activists. And it is only in retrospect that we realize that hers was an event while the previous refusals were not’.<sup>14</sup> An event can only be consequential if and only if there is a subject that has decided that there is something to be pursued subsequent to that event. But subjectivation—and the concomitant initiation of a fidelity procedure—may not be necessitated by an event. With this additional specification, it can be asserted that although instantiations of events that has the form captured by the matheme of the event may pervade the socio-historical world, only very few of these instances qualify as events proper, in so far as events that reveal the void of situations are rare and even those rare instances may not have been followed by a subjectivation on which their consequentiality in the situation entirely depends. And yet, it is uncertain that even these additional qualifications are sufficient to secure the exceptionality of events and the potential for social transformation originating from them, as rest of this chapter will attempt to show.

Badiou writes that ‘[e]very structured presentation [thus, every situation] unrepresents “its” void’.<sup>15</sup> It is also claimed that ‘what allows a genuine event to be at the origin of a truth [...] is precisely the fact that it relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void’.<sup>16</sup> The ‘its’ in these statements serves as a reminder of the fact, that in extraontological situations, the void is not the ontological void, the negativity of non-being as such, but is the

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<sup>14</sup> Todd May, review of *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Re-thinking Emancipation*, by Nick Hewlett, 2008 <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/badiou-balibar-ranci-232-re-re-thinking-emancipation/>> [accessed 16 December 2017].

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 73.

nothing that is particular to a situation. It is also the case that the concept of a totally singular multiple, the evental site that borders the situation's void, 'is neither intrinsic nor absolute'<sup>17</sup>—the determination of a multiple as a site depends on the particular structure of the situation in which it is positioned as a site. Badiou accepts that '[a] multiple could easily be singular in one situation (its elements are not presented therein, although it is) yet normal in another situation (its elements happen to be presented in this new situation)'.<sup>18</sup> He could not have stated the contrary, since if the unrepresentable were to remain unrepresentable in every possible situation, change qua the production of novelty, thus of new presentations and representations, would not be possible. But it is not the case that the situation in which an evental site would be normal could come about solely through an event and a truth procedure, as Badiou goes on to say that '[o]ne of the profound characteristics of singularities is that they can always be normalized: as is shown, moreover, by socio-political History: any evental site, can in the end, undergo a state normalization'.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the point that is confirmed by these remarks is that the 'very same multiples that are evental qua abnormally singular/void in one situation or world easily could be non-evental in another setting', that the elements that are not presentable—count for nothing—in one situation might, in a different situation, 'very well possess the non-void status of being integrated into the networks of a state-regulated situation or world through re/presentation'.<sup>20</sup> Because the void, in non-ontological situations, is a structural position retroactively delineated by the operation of count-as-one that is specific to a situation, *what* is unrepresented, in non-ontological situations, is determined in relation to the situation for which it is *its* void. Thus, as Adrian Johnston explains, the 'event-ness of the site and/or event is a relative property', and the void, too, is 'a real whose realness is indexed with

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<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 176.

<sup>18</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup> Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, pp. 27–29.

respect to a given particular reality’<sup>21</sup>—it is because a situation unpresents the void that is particular to it that an event that reveals it can be described as the return of the repressed. It can be said that the *situatedness* of an evental site and particularity of the void that circulates within it indexes events and truths to particular historical circumstances, rather than turning them into irruptions from a point that is radically external to the situation.

To draw implications for an account of social change of the indexing of the void to a situation, one might begin by considering the void that is the void any social situation, and provides the support for the generic egalitarian universality of a truth, namely, ‘generic humanity’, which Hallward had defined as the ‘pure be-ing human considered without reference to any criterion of hierarchy, privilege, competence, or difference’.<sup>22</sup> It is undeniable that in any social situation, generic humanity will be its void, since the situation’s statist regime stratifies the situation into parts, which, for a social situation, has been suggested to be social identities. It seems that in so far as it is possible to speak of different situations, such as educational situation, the situation of Indonesia, or the situation of the factory, and so on, it has to be admitted that there is a plurality—an infinite plurality, as one could legitimately posit according to set-theoretical ontology—of social situations. Granted that there is a plurality of situations that qualify as social, the following proposition deserves a consideration: given that, ontologically, the fundamental individuating feature that differentiates situations are their differing regimes of count-as-one, and given that the void of a concrete situation is the void particular to a situation, in the singular, it may be the case that different events need not be revelations of the one and the same void, and, by extension, different fidelity procedures in different social situations, in so far as they are different, need not be relating to their respective

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<sup>21</sup> Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Hallward, p. 117.

social situation from the bias of the void construed solely and invariantly as generic humanity in order to qualify as truth procedures.

For Badiou, ‘there is a *multiplicity* of singular events in singular situations which also enable a *multiplicity* of truths unfolded by “faithful” subjects’—this, Frank Ruda suggests, is one of the features by which Badiou’s theorization of event and change can be distinguished from that offered by a thinker like Giorgio Agamben, for whom ‘there are *multiplicity* of singular event as ruptures of the given which always expose *one and the same* truth (of being)’.<sup>23</sup> It is a strength (in that it better captures the sense of interventions in specific situations) of the Badiouian approach that it locates the origin of a process of transformation immanently within a particular situation as the revelation of a specific void and allows that fidelity to different events requires the invention of different ways of being and acting. The situatedness of events and truths implied by the fact that evental-ness and void-ness are relative properties, however, introduces an ambiguity concerning the extent of support that the ontological discourse may offer for thinking far-reaching social change. In investigating this ambiguity, it is instructive to begin with a caricature, which is based on a historical incident in the situation of Italian football.

In the early twentieth century, Italian football clubs allowed only Italian and English players to join. Footballers not of those two nationalities, if they were to sign with a club, would have had to conceal their nationality—these footballers would have been unrepresented in the situation of Italian football. On 9 March 1908, several members of the Milan Football and Cricket Club dissent to the club’s exclusionary policy and break away to found a new football club under a declaration that one could plausibly argue is egalitarian and universal for *this* situation, the situation of Italian football: ‘*Si chiamerà Internazionale, perchè noi siamo*

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<sup>23</sup> Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 208.

*fratelli del mondo*’—or: ‘it [the new club] will be called *Internazionale*, because we are brothers of the world’. The construction of a generic multiple to extend the situation of Italian football in fidelity to this declaration would not be required to approach the situation from the standpoint of generic humanity, the void of every social situation as such, but from the capacity to play football, in so far as it is voided of markers of nationality and ethnicity that had previously served to restrict the multiples—footballers, that is—that could be presented and represented in the situation. Such would be enough for a fidelity procedure to qualify as a truth procedure in *this* situation, and the being of the truth—the truth of the fact that beyond ethnic and national differences, football is an activity that offers itself to everyone—it incrementally produces to be a generic multiple, assembled by a mode of discernment that considers elements in as much as they are in the situation, without reference to qualifications that the situation’s representational regime imposes to restrict membership.

What surfaces is the possibility that the situatedness of events and truths may work to restrict their socially transformative potential. Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos note one consequence that seems to be implied by the thought of the non-ontological void as the retroactive determination of the constitution of a particular situation, namely, that an event is the irruption of void that disturbs the determinants of the situation, but conversely, the situation conditions the possibilities that are opened thereby. The authors note that ‘the principle or law of the situation ultimately determines the site’. And ‘[b]ecause of this historical restriction and the situatedness of the political event in an evental site, the event [...] can only challenge what is determinate in the situation such as the state, the authoritarian party, the legal institution and so on’.<sup>24</sup> The real issue, however, is not the ‘conditioning’ of an event’s consequences—the truth of that event—by the configuration of

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<sup>24</sup> Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, ‘Philosophy and Revolution: Badiou’s Infidelity to the Event’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2.1–2 (2006), 210–25 (p. 222).



the situation ('what is determinate in the situation', as above authors write) in which it had occurred. No less problematic would be if it were said that the consequences of an event had nothing to do with the configuration of the situation in which it had been recognized as having occurred. Rather, the situatedness of events and truths poses an ambiguity concerning universality and their potential to transform a social order, due to one of the implications of set-theoretical ontology's disdain for Ockham's razor, and due to the fact that ontology itself, being indifferent to whether any particular concrete situation exists, abstains from responding to the question—raised by Terry Eagleton—of '[w]hat is to count as a situation, and who decides',<sup>25</sup> or, to put it differently, where *a* situation begins and ends: namely, that there are *other* situations.

The subtraction from predication by which the genericity of a truth is defined is not an absolute subtraction, but subtraction with respect to the regimes of counting specific to a situation and its representational regime, its state. If indiscernibility or genericity of a multiple in an extraontological situation is a relative property, it must be said the elements belonging to a generic multiple possess a further qualification in addition to the property of belonging to that situation pure and simple—which, in the preceding example, would be that of having the capacity to play football. The being of a truth, Badiou asserts, 'is anonymously that which has no other mark apart from arising from presentation, apart from being composed of terms which have nothing in common that could be remarked, save belonging to *this* situation'.<sup>26</sup> The emphasis on 'this' is crucial: in the formulation Badiou has offered, it is precisely the qualification '*this* situation' that is the marker of *deixis*, that which makes a truth the truth of a particular situation. What this implies is that in so far as the generic subset is generic by its non-relation to the determinations of the representational regime that prevails in a particular

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<sup>25</sup> Eagleton, p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 338–39.

situation, a mark of particularity is retained in the being of a truth, a particularity that is none other than its being generic by its subtraction from the statist determinations, classifications and predications, that stratify a particular situation. Even if it were asserted as a matter of principle that a political event invokes generic humanity, or that political truth procedure proceeds to investigate the implications of some maxim of a radically egalitarian universalism, it seems difficult to deny, in so far as a truth procedure is always the process of production of a truth in a particular situation, that the generic multiple that a truth is in its being will be marked in this way. But granted that a potentially infinite number of social situations can be thought (such as the situation of football, the situation of education, the situation of a racially segregated society, and so on), there is no *a priori* limitation on postulating the proliferation, also infinite, of indiscernible multiplicities and evental sites. What emerges consequently is a matter of concern for the political implications of *Being and Event*. Badiou maintains that ‘the place of truth should remain empty and precisely because of this feature it is equally valid “for all”’, and that a truth that originates from an event is universally addressed because it ‘neither excludes nor constrains anyone’.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the extension of ‘for all’ and ‘anyone’ in such statements is limited to those that belong or will come to have belong to some particular situation, and it appears that the transformative effects of each of the multiple truth procedures are confined, in the end, to the particular situation within which they unfold. But if this is right, the meaning of the universality that these procedures, as truth procedures, are meant to produce is ambiguous. One could imagine that a truth procedure would, in its course, come to render representable, by transforming a situation’s regime of count-as-one, those that previously were not even properly counted-as-one within a situation. However, the group newly made representable as a result of that truth procedure is nevertheless particular, since it would be merely one group among the multiplicity of groups that populate other social situations, with

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<sup>27</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 73.

the chance that some groups may as well form evental sites in their respective situations due to the regimes of representation specific to those situations.

There is neither anything inherently objectionable in the thought that the transformative potentials of truths are restricted to situations that might appear, at first sight, to be of little significance when seen from above its narrow locale, nor is it inconsistent with the Badiouian account of change to suppose that the extent of a truth's transformative potential remains unknown and can be pursued indefinitely. Nonetheless, the fact that the handful of events Badiou cites as revolutionary are widely recognized as such in science, art, and politics is enough to elicit a question of whether the conceptualization of a truth procedure should incorporate a distinction between the transformation of what might be regarded as relatively 'local' situations (such as the situation of the Milanese football scene) and the transformation of relatively 'global' situations (for instance, the state of Italy), or instead reject a distinction of such kind, thereby indexing any one process of transformation to a particular situation, without consideration of whether the situation is relatively 'global' or 'local'. Regardless of whether such a distinction is ultimately desirable, it is, in any case, unclear how this distinction could be conceived with the resources of set-theoretical ontology.<sup>28</sup> It might be suggested that the concept of transcendentals introduced in *Logics of Worlds* that is designed to account for the 'sense of "more" or "less"' in identities of objects and differences between them—hence for relationality, in a way far more nuanced than the binary logic of belonging and not belonging in *Being and Event*—is able to provide the basis on which such a distinction could

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<sup>28</sup> The reason for this can be stated roughly as follows. Within a situation, the predicates of its language (including relational predicates, which are simply higher-order predicates), quantify over that situation. This means that a statement such as 'something that happens in *this* situation matters for social change more than something that happens in *this other* situation because the former situation is relatively global with respect to the latter situation', for example, would be, in principle, verifiable if both situations featured in the statement are represented multiples of *another* situation. But since that *another* situation is itself a particular situation, there is no point from which the referents of 'global' or 'local' could be fixed from the interiority of any situation. The determination has to be made from a perspective outside *any* situation—and it is unclear both what that perspective would be and by what authority anyone can claim to possess that perspective.

be made. But as the concept of transcendentals pertains to appearance but not to being for Badiou, if that concept, hence the thought of relationality, is *needed* to think social situations and social change in their specificity, it would remain the case that general ontology *alone* is not enough to think social situations and social change. Furthermore, as noted in section 1.2.3 of the first chapter, it is doubtful whether the concept of transcendentals could respond to the question of what accounts for the force that sustains particular presentational and representational structures. Finally, as will be seen in section 2.3.1, there is an ambiguity with respect to the extent of a truth's transformative effect that is intrinsic to the account of forcing, which must still refer to the being of a truth. As examinations the follow will further suggest, the ambiguity of the transformative effects of a truth attests to the distance between general ontology and specifically social ontology, a distance that exists due to the indifference of the former to questions such as where a particular concrete situation begins and ends, how certain concrete situations come to be, and to what they owe their force of inertia.

## 2.3 The specificity of social situations and the extent of transformative effects

### 2.3.1 Forcing a truth beyond a situation

As the ambiguity raised in the previous section concerning the universality and transformative potential of a truth was premised on there being a plurality of situations in a social order, one possibility that should be considered is whether a truth procedure may dissolve the boundaries of the situation from which it had originally initiated such that it could extend beyond its situatedness in a situation and generate transformative effects across situations, in the plural. If this were possible, it would be a step toward securing a stronger sense of the universality of a truth, in so far as it could offer itself to more than those of one situation. Oliver Feltham comes close to proposing something like this.

Feltham writes that '[f]orcing [...] consists in amassing those multiples that are connected to the event'.<sup>29</sup> He suggests that 'forcing can be understood as the slow expansion of the evental site; it extends and exacerbates the original point of opacity at which the event occurred', such that, in the course of 'its continual assertion that this opaque enlarged multiple belongs to the situation', it 'breaks with the established distribution of the situation's parts'. Enquiries, meanwhile, 'create new parts or neighbourhoods with yet unknown boundaries', which can '[affect] not only the original boundaries of the evental site and the established partition of the situation, but finally the very boundaries of the situation itself'.<sup>30</sup> It might appear that Feltham has reversed the role of fidelity (or enquiry) and forcing, but that is not the case, as his premise is that there is no separation between the being of a subject as a multiples and forcing. The point that is of interest here is the possibility that is raised by Feltham, namely, that the consequences of an event may somehow spill over into other situations and transform the boundaries between situations. While acknowledging that Badiou does not draw this extreme conclusion, Feltham proposes that the 'activity of generic truth procedures within domains of art, politics, science, and love [i.e. four domains in which truths are produced according to Badiou] could lead, through infinite expansion of evental sites, to *either* the complete indetermination of those domains *or* their renaming'.<sup>31</sup> There is no reason to contest the first part of Feltham's suggestion, namely, that forcing is an expansion of the evental site. With reference to Joseph Jacotot, it can be said that the continual application of his heterodox pedagogical method gives rise to a 'community' of ignorant masters as the subject of the Jacotot-event. This is tantamount to an expansion of the evental site itself, since the subject is a multiple that is non-constructible, hence unrepresentable under the statist regime of the educational situation. The question is how strongly the account of truth

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<sup>29</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

procedure implemented in *Being and Event* is able to support the second part of Feltham's proposal, namely, that the boundaries between situations could become indeterminate. One immediate difficulty with conceiving the possibility that Feltham describes can be imagined. A truth procedure a process immanent to a situation, and subject-language cannot refer to situations that are external to the initial situation, since, as Burhanuddin Baki explains, forcing 'is always locally implemented with reference to the elements that range over the situation S'.<sup>32</sup> The being of a truth is a generic subset of the situation, which is to say that the 'ingredients' needed for its production is dispersed in the initial situation, as unrepresentable or indiscernible elements. Thus, in so far as the sets that play a role in a truth procedure are the initial situation, its state, and the generic subset that is constructed from the initial situation through enquiries, it must be concluded that 'forcing procedure never goes outside the domestic immanence of S itself or the various states connected to S'.<sup>33</sup> Statements that are forced in situation S anticipate their semantic fulfilment, that is, the coming-to-be of the extensional equivalents (referents) of the names and predicates used in the statements—these extensional equivalents, however, do not arrive from outside S itself, for a truth is built from the void of *a* situation. This means, conversely, that whatever truth procedures that may be taking place in other situations do not affect S. In what way the boundary between S and that other situation may become indeterminate, such that transformative effects in one situation affects or 'spills over' into the other, is unclear.

Although a truth does not generate effects outside the situation for which it is a truth, there is something that could happen in social situations. A truth (or a part of it: the subject), once forced and accommodated as belonging and as included by the situation, will have transformed the situation's regime of count-as-one, which can be seen as the situation's

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<sup>32</sup> Baki, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> Baki, p. 208.

membership criteria (or its structure, based on the reading of the first chapter). This implies the possibility whereby the boundary between what had been two or more separate situations becomes indeterminate. However, given the theorization of the being of a truth as a multiple built from a specific void, the indetermination of the boundaries between situations cannot continue *indefinitely*, unless all situations either had one and the same void or could come to have one and the same void. But both options contravene the premise that the void of a situation is a void particular to it and situations are infinitely numerous. Thus, the extent to which a truth transforms the boundaries between situations will at some point be limited—so will be its addressee, hence its universality. Given that there is an infinite plurality of situations, no real solution to the ambiguity of the universality of a truth—and the extent of its transformative effects—that can be posed by referring to the existence of other situations follows from this possibility. It must be stressed that it is not being argued here that the consequences of a truth is in any sense ‘finite’. The observations so far only suggest that developing the thought of the radicalization of a truth’s transformative effects to the extent that is suggested by Feltham may require additional conceptual resources that are not to be immediately found in set-theoretical ontology.

### 2.3.2 The issue of multiple truth procedures and the impact of any particular event

It has been suggested that the extent to which truth procedures could create transformative effects beyond the singular situation within which it is a truth is ambiguous. Feltham, who proposes, as seen previously, the possibility whereby a truth procedure acts to transform the boundaries of situations, has posed the question directly to Badiou, asking

whether truth procedure is able to ‘traverse more than one situation’.<sup>34</sup> Badiou responds as follows:

Two generic procedures are never actually in the same situation of reference because they are truths of their situations. But a concrete situation is not exactly the ontological scheme of the situation. A concrete situation is an interplay of different situations in the ontological sense of the term. Ontology is not by itself the thinking of a concrete situation. Ontology is *a* situation, the ontological situation which is the situation of thinking, and finally, the mathematical situation. We can think a part of the concrete situation from the ontological schema. We can say, there is a multiplicity, it is infinite and so on. But there is a concrete analysis which is not ontological at all.<sup>35</sup>

Badiou, again, insists that ontology is but one situation, which is distinct from concrete situations. Yet, if the disjuncture between the situation of ontology and concrete, extraontological situations is such that in the latter, one finds an ‘interplay’ of a plurality of situations, the issue of the situatedness of truths returns: if a concrete situation is ‘an interplay of different situations in the ontological sense of the term’, it is not clear what meaning words such as ‘generic’ and ‘universality’ conceived by the ontological discourse would have in the discussion of concrete situations, in which a plurality of other situations—‘in the ontological sense of the term’—co-exist. It is dubious whether the interplay between different situations in the concrete situations is something that a formal specification of a process of change could be simply set aside as irrelevant. There is at least one way in which two or more situations are implicated in a process of change is already presupposed in the theorization of change. If such things as evental-ness and void-ness are relative properties, it follows that for any evental site and void, there is a situation in which they would not be evental or void. It appears to be the

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<sup>34</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, p. 174.

<sup>35</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, pp. 174–75.



case, then, that in any given event and truth procedure at least two situations are in some way implicated: the situation in which a particular multiple is an evental site and a situation in which that multiple is not evental. This is not an ‘empirical’ observation of concrete situations, but it is implied by the theorization of a truth procedure in a situation as built from *its* void, whose void-ness is a relative property. It seems reasonable, therefore, to demand the ‘interplay’ between situations that is implicated in any concrete process of change be reflected in the theorization of situations and their transformation.

A way in which the interplay between situations could be especially relevant for thinking social change might be conceived in terms of the formation of an evental site with a specific composition in a situation. Even if an event itself is a purely haphazard occurrence, it might be argued, the impossibility of ‘inducing’ an event as such need not preclude a theorization of how evental sites, as necessary but insufficient conditions of events, form—and dissipate, as Badiou has allowed this as a possibility—in social situations. Indeed, Johnston observes that ‘[o]ddly enough, despite his sweeping ban on positing conditions or pre-cursors for events, Badiou himself occasionally appears to defy this same ban’.<sup>36</sup> Citing Badiou’s remark in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, in which it is stated that ‘every event admits of a figural preparation’,<sup>37</sup> and an interview, wherein in he remarks that ‘we are in a period of the constitution of a possible evental site’ as ‘zones of precariousness, of partial movements which one can interpret as announcing that something will happen’,<sup>38</sup> Johnston finds it

reasonable to propose [...] that although an event apparently explodes onto a situational scene in an ex nihilo fashion, there are certain (perhaps hidden and invisible) primers or triggers [...] clandestinely participating in setting of this explosion—furthermore, that such figures, as primers or triggers

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<sup>36</sup> Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Badiou makes this remark in an interview published in *Cahiers du cinema* Quoted from: Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, p. 20.

prefiguring events, perhaps can be discerned, thus allowing for a foreseeing of potential event-level happenings. Such propositions indeed must be put forward if Badiou is to adhere to his own requirement that change accounted for as an immanently emergent transformation arising from within the worldly situation itself.<sup>39</sup>

How the constitution of an evental site might occur in social situations is hinted by Feltham's discussion of what makes the *sans-papiers* the evental site of the French situation. For a 'materialist ontology', Feltham claims, what is 'in' an evental site of a situation must 'come from somewhere',<sup>40</sup> and suggests that an 'evental site [...] consists of an encounter between heterogeneous situations'. It is through an encounter between situations (Mali, Senegal, France) that heterogeneous elements come to enter one situation (France) to form its evental site (the *sans-papiers*), whose indiscernibility in the situation is to be accounted by the heterogeneity of its composition that makes it unrecognizable as a part of the (French) situation. An evental site, Feltham concludes, 'can thus be defined as a non-recognized intersection between situations; a disqualified mix which appears, at the level of the state, as a pure disjunction'.<sup>41</sup> This is a thought that is not only reasonable but one that also sheds some light on Badiou's somewhat vague remark on the 'figural preparation' of events cited by Johnston. The constitution of an evental site through the encounter or intersection between heterogeneous situations is one way to speak of the 'interplay' between situations. Such interplay in and between situations by which an evental site is constituted in a situation presumably implies some kind of pre-evental dynamics in those situations. But it is not entirely clear how such dynamics—pre-evental kinesis, so to speak—is to be reflected in the account of social situations, when set-theoretical ontology relegates individuals to the status of objects fully determined by anonymous operations of count-as-one and assigns stasis as one of the

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<sup>39</sup> Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>40</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

characteristics of pre-evental situations. Without elaborating an account of how different situations and their respective states interact, it seems that if there is an evental site with a certain material composition in a situation, what can be said is that it is *already there* in the situation, with the process in which they have *come to be* falling beneath theorization.

It remains the case that Badiou insists on the irreducible plurality of truths, truth procedures, and subjects: ‘there are only multiple procedures of truth, multiple creative sequences’,<sup>42</sup> he writes, and there no ‘single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths’.<sup>43</sup> But if truth procedures and subjects exist in the plural, the possibility of their incompatibility needs to be considered. Yet, there is little else in Badiou’s system that precludes interferences and conflicts between pluralities of truth procedures *a priori* other than the fact that their effects are, under the strictly formal definition of fidelity and forcing, restricted to the particular situations in which they unfold, situations that remain separate and whatever ‘interplay’ that may occur between them ontological discourse does not reflect. Whilst ‘any one individual belongs to a vast number of situations, and subjective participation in any one procedure need not block other sorts of commitment’, Hallward observes that ‘to any one truth, there seems to correspond only one subject’ and that there is ‘no obvious way that a situation might tolerate more than one subject’.<sup>44</sup> The question, then, is whether the non-conflicting plurality of truth procedures that is apparently implied by set-theoretical ontology—and apparently endorsed by Badiou’s remark quoted earlier, that there is not a plurality of truth procedures in one and the same situation because each truth is a truth of a particular situation—could be maintained consistently, in the case that a concrete situation is an interplay of a plurality of situations.

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<sup>42</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Hallward, p. 289.

One of the commentators to have remarked on the tension that arises at this point is John Milbank, who has advanced a reading of Badiou that he admits is ‘perverse’ but insists is ‘accurate’ nevertheless.<sup>45</sup> At one point in his reading, Milbank writes that ‘if for Badiou the many different truth-processes are compatible with one another, then it does not seem satisfactory to say, as he does, that the public measure of their legitimacy is merely the non-interference of one process with another’. It is not satisfactory, he claims, because it implies that Badiou’s theory of eventual change thereby lapses into a ‘liberalism’, in the sense that a ‘clearly demarcated distribution of boundaries of discourse [...] prevail over the unpredictability of a newly emerging Event’.<sup>46</sup> Rephrased in accordance with what has been previously suggested in this chapter: what will have been achieved is different groups, in different situations, that co-exist as differences in a ‘larger’ social situation. Milbank shares with Feltham the intuition that the transformative potential of an event ‘must surely include the capacity to revise any such boundaries’ between different situations or discourses. Milbank suggests that if the thesis that a plurality of truths do not conflict and that truths effect radical transformation were to be maintained simultaneously, what needs to be considered is the possibility of a “‘meta-truth-process” arising from an event that is “the universal of all universals””<sup>47</sup>—what is insinuated is that a ‘meta-truth-process’ could account for the compatibility of plurality of truths and their cumulative contribution to extensive social change (such that they ‘add up to a revolution’, to use Gramsci’s expression).

It might be pointed out that the kind of thought toward which Milbank’s suggestion leads has no chance of being accommodated by Badiou’s system, as set-theoretical ontology leaves no room for such things as the ‘universal of all universals’ (or by the same token, the

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<sup>45</sup> John Milbank, ‘The Return of Mediation’, in *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, by Slavoj Žižek, Creston Davis, and John Milbank (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), pp. 211–38 (p. 238).

<sup>46</sup> Milbank, p. 215.

<sup>47</sup> Milbank, p. 215.

‘truth of all truths’), in so far as they presuppose a multiple of all multiple whose existence the laws of being written in the language of axiomatic set theory has prohibited. And yet, Badiou’s own philosophical—that is, metaontological—premises do not allow for a convenient dismissal of Milbank’s proposal of a ‘meta-truth’ that evidently has a theological undertone. On the one hand, the non-conflicting plurality of truths is depoliticizing, as producing simply another particularity is indistinguishable from the effect of stabilization achieved by the situation’s regime of representation. On the other hand, if the concept of the event is in essence a defence of the possibility of something that transgresses the laws of being, then it may be asked what in Badiou’s system rules out the possibility that God, whose existence is prohibited by ontology, may come into being as an event.

Only a step away is Milbank’s position from the thought that different subjects, though they may be plural, realize a truth that is, at bottom, *one*. And if one were to attempt to think the being of this univocal truth, it can only be assumed that it would be an ‘absolute’ genericity: it is a truth that is subtracted from the representational regime of any and all situation. But this is tantamount to the denial of a truth’s *situatedness*, for the being of this ‘meta-truth’ would not be generic with respect to any *particular* situation. This truth would thus be ahistorical and beyond expression in the discourse of set-theoretical ontology, for genericity, as conceived by set-theoretical ontology, is definable only in relation to a particular situation and state, even though the relation between a truth and a state is that of non-reference, non-relation, or exceptionality of the former with respect to the latter. Whatever attempt to preserve the universality of a truth against its ‘particularization’ by being marked by the particularity of situation of which it is a truth, then, cannot resort to a complete denial of the situatedness of a truth procedure and the specific void from which it is built, for this would be tantamount to the expulsion of processes of change from any concrete historical context, thereby rendering it equivalent to an intervention of divine transcendence. What follows, if the arguments so far

are right, is that the theorization of truth procedure in *Being and Event* is doubly bound. If the situation in which a truth unfolds as a process were to be specified, then whatever truths produced therein risks slipping into a particularity, since the situation would be one of an infinite plurality of situations, seriously restricting its transformative potential as a result. But, conversely, if the situation were not specified, a truth procedure risks disconnection from the historical circumstances in which it unfolds.

Ambiguities concerning the situatedness of events and truths, and the tension between the need to specify a situation and the problematic implications of doing so, lead Badiou to resort to tenuous equivocations when he attempts to describe the specificity of a political event that one must presume occurs in extraontological, social situations. One instance of a problematic equivocation is found in the concluding essay of *Metapolitics*, titled ‘Politics as Truth Procedure’. In this text, the ontological thesis of the immeasurable excess of inclusion over belonging—that the state of the situation exceeds the situation (as the cardinality of the power-set is greater than that of the base set)—is transposed onto the realm of politics through the equation of the state of a situation with the political state (the two shall be distinguished hereafter by capitalizing the latter, which is a convention often adopted by Badiou). For example, Badiou writes that ‘[t]here are always more parts than elements; i.e. the representative multiplicity is always of a higher power than the presentative multiplicity. This question is really that of power. The power of the State is always superior to that of the situation’.<sup>48</sup> He then proceeds to suggest that ‘[e]mpirically, whenever there is a genuinely political event, the State reveals itself. It reveals its excess of power, its repressive dimension’, which has to ‘remain measureless, errant, unassignable’ for the ‘normal functioning of the State’.<sup>49</sup> If what Badiou is suggesting is that a genuine political event induces the normally

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<sup>48</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp. 144–45.

<sup>49</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 145.

hidden repressive police apparatus of the State to appear on the scene, there is little that is controversial in the suggestion. That true radical politics provokes the State is not in itself a particularly contentious view. Moreover, granted that the intervention of the repressive apparatus may be an indicator of the impotency of the State, in as much as it evinces the failure of the State in maintaining order, it may even be said that the State's violent reaction to an event is plausibly one of the first signs that announces the possibility of change in the situation. But it is difficult not to concur with Paul Livingston when he objects that the particular way in which the point is expressed by Badiou conflates the *quantitative* excess of the state of the situation (that its cardinality exceeds that of the situation of which it is the state) and the *qualitative* excess of the State's repressive power.<sup>50</sup> Whereas Livingston concludes that there is a metaphorical leap that cannot be justified by set-theoretical ontology in Badiou's description of the political event in an ontic setting, some readers have nonetheless associated the State with one type of multiple defined in *Being and Event*, namely, 'excrecent' multiples, which are multiples that belong to the state of the situation but not to the situation itself, hence 'exist' as something like an external appendage to the situation.<sup>51</sup> Excrecent multiples are a direct expression of the excess of inclusion (representation) over belonging (presentation)—they conform to the premise on which the repressive power of the State is based, namely, that 'the representative multiplicity is always of a higher power than the presentative multiplicity'. There is a way of reading this statement as a critique of representative politics: even in its most democratic form, the State represents individuals only through the means of groupings or classifications (such as electoral constituencies). The 'excess' or 'excrecence' of the State, in this case, refers to the fact that a State is fundamentally at a distance from the individual

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<sup>50</sup> Livingston, p. 272.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, 'Politics', in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 94–104 (p. 95).

members of those groups that it claims to represent—this is a point that Livingston is willing to grant.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, it is unclear whether the association of excrescent multiples with the empirical State actually succeeds in fully dispelling the suspicion that there is a hypostatization of an ontological category. This is because given the way in which the being of a truth has been defined, a truth is also excrescent in exactly the same sense: it is included in the situation in so far as it is a subset but does not belong the situation in so far as it is an infinite generic subset. Thought in its generic being, a truth, Badiou writes, is a ‘pure indistinct excess over presented multiples’, indeed, an ‘anonymous excrescence’.<sup>53</sup> Excrescence, then, is the type of multiple that by which the being of both a truth and a State is thought in the discourse of set-theoretical ontology. In fact, it is none other than the immeasurable excess of representation over presentation on which the thought essential to the theory of post-evental transformation, namely, that a truth, in its being, is generic, infinite, and irreducibly separated from knowledge, is grounded. The equation of excrescence with the State, therefore, is not implied by the ontological discourse itself. Nor can the ‘repressive dimension’ of the State be attributed to the excess of representation over presentation, in so far as a truth is essentially liberating and transformative (rather than repressive and inertial). If the ‘State’ stands for the mechanism that maintains a social situation as it is, the equivocation that has been witnessed here between quantitative and qualitative excess of ‘power’, it would not be unreasonable to suggest, may be a symptom of the lack of a clear place in the Badiouian framework—to return to a point noted previously in the first chapter (section 1.2.3)—for the qualitative force that must be posited in order to account for the inertia and persistence of a social situation.

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<sup>52</sup> See: Livingston, p. 47.

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 342.



Since the equation of state of the situation and State is tenuous, one might ask whether it could simply be disregarded in a Badiouian account of social change. Yet, it appears that the equivocation does perform a role in the account. The mere existence of the repressive apparatus of the State does not entail its intervention. If so, the *fact* that the State has intervened in response to a certain event must be seen as *showing* something about the event and the situation for which it is an event. The claim of this chapter was that the fact that there is an infinite plurality of situations in a society may render events and truth procedures rather common—and possibly mundane—in so far as they are limited to particular situations. The provocation of the State can be said to fulfil the following revelatory function in the Badiouian account of social change: the intervention of the State’s repressive apparatus, its *resistance* to an event, confirms retroactively that the void that the event has revealed is in fact something that is disruptive, something that *matters* to the State, so much so that it is forced to intervene. It confirms, in other words, the non-mundanity of the event in a particular social situation—its status as a ‘genuinely political event’—that is not determinable in terms of set-theoretical ontology alone.

#### 2.4 Toward the determination of society as a situation

In the proposition that ‘[a] truth concerns everyone inasmuch as it is a multiplicity that no particular predicate can circumscribe’, the extension of ‘everyone’ has two possible interpretations. Either a truth concerns only those in the particular situation in which it is produced, or it also concerns, or at least can come to concern, those who are beyond—or are not inhabitants of—the situation for which it is its truth. If the argument advanced in this chapter that any specific void and the event that reveals it are indexed to a particular situation and that this situatedness limits the extent of the socially transformative potential of a truth is right, then only the former interpretation is defensible within the bounds the theoretical

framework developed in *Being and Event*. What is thereby placed under doubt is whether the account of truth procedure is adequate to support the thought of an extensive transformation of society, if society is conceived ‘concretely’ as the ‘interplay’ of social situations in the plural. It can be conceded that it is not the task of general ontology to provide an account of extensive social change. But if such an account is to be developed, it does not seem satisfactory to simply concede the incommensurability of concrete situations and the ontological situation. The ambiguities raised in this chapter may be alleviated if either of the following could be incorporated into the social situations and transformative processes: (1) an account of how a political process takes place across different situations and in relation to a plurality social identities therein; (2) a specification of situations that, in some sense, ‘matter’ more than other situations for social change. With neither conceptually determinable with the resources of *Being and Event*, the elaborate formal theorization of what it means to transform a situation that it succeeds in providing is not yet a theorization of far-reaching, extensive social transformation, in as much as the social could be construed as being composed of a potentially infinite number of situations that are formed, related, and sustained in ways that are not clearly specifiable within the framework of Badiou’s general ontology. If *Being and Event* secures the ‘vertical’ axis through the conceptual determination of novelty and process of change, it does not elaborate with the same acuity the concrete, historical conditions in which processes of change take effect—something of the ‘horizontal’ axis thus remains undertheorized. This undertheorization attests to the lack of theoretical resources in *Being and Event* to address the specificity of social situations. The next chapter thus turns to the works of Laclau, which promises to provide an ontology of the social.

## Chapter 3. Hegemony and the search for fullness

### 3.1 Introduction to the theory of hegemony

Hegemony theory proposes that processes of totalization of diverse particular identities are involved in both the constitution of a social order and a project toward its transformation. This totalization occurs through a ‘hegemonic’ operation by which a particularity—a group, a social identity, a demand or a political struggle, and so on—comes to assume the function of universal representation, which, for Laclau, always alludes to an as yet unachieved self-identity of society. As long as the self-identity of society—its ‘fullness’—is unachieved, and it is never finally achieved according to Laclau, it becomes the objective to be attained. The ‘absent fullness’ of society is what generates political desire, and sustains any attempt to establish or transform a social order. Given such an emphasis on totalization, it might be hoped that the process of social change that is thinkable under hegemony theory would provide an alternative account that avoids some of the ambiguities in the theorization of social change drawn from *Being and Event* that have been found in the previous chapter, such as the situatedness of a truth procedure in a situation and the difficulty of conceiving the interaction between different situations and subjects.

There is no shortage of ambition in Laclau’s work. Its final objective is nothing short of a theoretical system that reflects the ‘basic homology at all levels of analysis of human reality’ attested by linguistics, psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and politics.<sup>1</sup> On what this homology Laclau finds is, the following is perhaps the most succinct approximation: there is no social reality beyond processes of signification or meaning, social activities are signifying (or ‘discursive’ or ‘articulatory’) processes, all social objects are produced through such processes

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<sup>1</sup> David Howarth, ‘An Interview with Ernesto Laclau’, in *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique*, ed. by David Howarth (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 257–71 (p. 261).

(hence they are discursive objects), and the contingency of their identity and the possibility of their transformation is revealed in the breakdown of the process of signification. What Laclau proposes is an ontology for which the constitution of objectivity is—instead of the anonymous count-as-one—the outcome of signifying acts. If the anonymity of the count-as-one ensures the generality of Badiou's ontology, then perhaps Laclau's premise concerning the constitution of objectivity renders the ontology that underpins his theory of hegemony a 'regional' ontology. But if his is indeed a regional ontology, it is unquestionably one that elucidates the processes by which specifically social situations are constructed, maintained, and transformed.

Although the core of Laclau's thought remains constant in his works, presenting hegemony theory as a single chain of reasoning is not an easy task, for Laclau's formulation of his theory shifts as the domain of his theorization shifts and new concepts appear and disappear in his works as the purpose and object of his analyses change. Some of his key concepts—such as dislocation, antagonism, subject, and empty signifier—have undergone significant reformulations over time. Rather than retracing the developments of Laclau's thought, this chapter will aim to reinterpret hegemony theory as to present it in a way that would maintain a sense of continuity with the interpretation of set-theoretical ontology offered in the first chapter. The result is an unconventional reading—whatever dangers such a reading entails shall simply be embraced.

In the two subsections of 3.2, the idea that the structure of social order is a systematic totality shall be elaborated. After considering of the purported differences between Badiou and Laclau and the some of the questions that Badiou's approach has elicited in section 3.3.1, this chapter will turn to Laclau's critique of Badiou, in which prominent theoretical differences between them concerning the structure of social order and the possibility of social change are shown. Sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4 are devoted to Laclau's account of subject and 'fullness',

which orients the political process of instituting an order in the place of disorder induced by the breakdown of a prevailing order. In the next chapter, a further examination of the account of social change proposed by hegemony theory will be carried out by contrasting it against positions advanced by other theorists and his critics, finally to reach a verdict on whether hegemony theory provides a satisfactory account of social change, one that will be issued, in part, from a Badiouian perspective.

### 3.2 The logic of hegemony and the actualization of alternative possibilities

#### 3.2.1 Totality and hegemonic formations

Laclau accepts as a basic ontological principle the thesis that “‘relations’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous’.<sup>2</sup> A social order, as well as all the elements that are embraced within it, are constituted through the various relations that hold between them. Although Laclau adopts insights of structural linguistics rather than axiomatic set-theory as the basis of his ‘discursive’ social ontology, the initial steps that Laclau takes toward the conceptualization of social order are not without parallel in the Badiouian approach. In the Badiouian account of a normalized situation, the state of a situation, under the limitation of the constructivist regime of representation, ‘tames’ the immeasurable excess of representation to preserve the situation as it is. A comparable thesis is asserted by Laclau: a stable social order is the outcome of an attempt by certain social forces to ‘domesticate’ the non-totalizable ‘infinity of the social’ and ‘embrace it within the finitude of an order’.<sup>3</sup> The particular social force that has succeeded in instituting a stable order is said to be ‘hegemonic’. It can said to have ‘[acted] over the ‘social’”, by fixing the relationship between social elements—signifiers, words and

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<sup>2</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 256.

<sup>3</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 91.

deeds, subject-positions—into a stable configuration,<sup>4</sup> which shall hereafter be called a ‘hegemonic formation’. When positional differences thereby instituted maintain their regularity, the order is said to be ‘sedimented’. On several occasions, Laclau has employed the vocabulary of ‘countable’ and ‘uncountable’ to describe a sedimented social order, writing, for instance, that ‘sedimentation refers to the institutionalized forms of the social (broadly speaking, to what Rancière calls “police”) and are the point at which the “countable” and the “uncountable” exclude each other’.<sup>5</sup> It might be said that elements integrated into a hegemonic formation are ‘counted’ as differential positions that belong to it, whereas the ‘uncounted’ elements are those that do not belong. But setting this terminology aside for now, it is to Laclau’s own theorization of the constitution of social orders the exposition shall turn.

To conceive a differential system, Laclau argues, is to conceive the limits of that system, the boundary between what is inside and what is outside the system. Limits, Laclau claims, ‘only exist insofar as a systematic ensemble of differences can be cut out as *totality* with regard to something *beyond* them, and it is only through this cutting out that the totality constitutes itself as formation’.<sup>6</sup> One way to conceive this limit that ‘cuts out’ a totality would be to imagine it to be a fence between the inside and the outside. But in this case, there are still only differences: the inside, the outside, and the fence itself. Under the conception of a limit as another difference, the determination of the ‘beyond’ that is needed to cut out a totality would be deferred, in which case it is impossible to determine the beginning and the end of a social order. A limit that is the ground of a system of differences—a systematizing limit—cannot be just one more element or one more difference. Laclau proposes that the limit be seen as ‘exclusionary’. The beyond is to be conceived not as another difference *vis-à-vis* the inside,

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<sup>4</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>5</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Reply’, *Cultural Studies*, 26.2–3 (2012), 391–415 (p. 412).

<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2001), p. 143.

but as ‘something that the totality expels from itself’ in order to constitute itself, such that whatever lies beyond the limit is not ‘simply one more, but an *excluded* one’.<sup>7</sup> From the thought that a totality is constituted by an exclusionary limit, Laclau infers a subversive dialectic between ‘equivalential’ and ‘differential’ relations within that totality:

A first effect of the exclusionary limit is that it introduces an essential ambivalence within the system of differences constituted by those limits. On the one hand, each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others: difference=identity. On the other hand, however, all these differences are equivalent to each other inasmuch as all of them belong to this side of the frontier of exclusion. But in that case, the identity of each element is constitutively split.<sup>8</sup>

Equivalence, which is the subversion of difference, is as much a condition of possibility of a system of differences as difference. Totality is the locus of tension between relations of equivalence and difference. This tension is one that cannot be eliminated, since equivalence and difference are necessary but contradictory conditions of the constitution of a systematic totality. Laclau occasionally remarks that there is ‘no square circle that can provide the basis for the logical articulation of these two poles’.<sup>9</sup> For Laclau, what is is not the one, but it is not multiplicity either—if the paradox of self-belonging leads axiomatic set-theory to declare that there is no set of all sets, Laclau draws from the tension between the two poles constitutive of systematic totality the conclusion that totality ‘exists’ as a ‘failed unicity’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland, ‘Not a Ground but a Horizon: An Interview with Ernesto Laclau’, *World Picture*, 2 (2008) <[http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_2/Laclau.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_2/Laclau.html)> [accessed 18 September 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Glimpsing the Future’, in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 279–328 (p. 325).

Following Livingston, it might be said that axiomatic set-theory opts for consistency and incompleteness, whereas Laclau’s discursive ontology opts for inconsistency and completeness. See: Livingston, chap. 9.

‘The social only exists as the vain attempt to instate that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice’<sup>11</sup>—this statement, with which Laclau concludes a programmatic essay published alongside *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle*, prefigures the direction of Laclau’s argument from this point onward. No object corresponds to the concept of totality as a ‘sutured and self-defined’ entity,<sup>12</sup> and it is impossible for a social order to constitute itself as such. However, that a totality is never finally constituted—that it has a boundary that will remain essentially porous and renegotiable, and that, for this reason, the relationship between the elements, hence their identities, cannot be fixed once and for all—does not eliminate the need to constitute it, as there would be no social order and no social identities without it. Laclau is keen to repeat that totality persists as a ‘horizon and not a ground’, suggesting that social activities are attempts—the success of which will always be precarious and temporary—to constitute this impossible object.<sup>13</sup> For it is ultimately unachievable, totality is always an attempt at totalization. The dichotomy between pre-evental stasis of the situation and post-evental kinesis that is found in the Badiouian approach becomes difficult to uphold, since complete stasis could be ascribed to the elements of a totality if it were the case that the totality itself existed in a state of equilibrium. Despite blurring the dichotomy, however, hegemony theory proposes that relative stasis can be, and must be, achieved for there to be an order rather than chaos.

Processes by which any discursive—that is, social—object is produced are termed ‘articulation’. Social activity, in so far as it establishes, modifies, and reinforces relations between elements, are articulatory processes. Any social order or hegemonic formation is a ‘structured totality resulting from [...] articulatory practices’.<sup>14</sup> But an additional step is

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<sup>11</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Impossibility of Society’, *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 7 (1983), 21–24 (p. 24).

<sup>12</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p. 105.



needed to constitute a totality, namely, the instance of totalization. One could say that a “concrete individual” can have a number of different subject-positions—one and the same individual may belong to a plurality of such articulated totalities that allow that individual to ‘be positioned as, “black”, “working class”, “Christian” and a “woman”’ and so on’.<sup>15</sup> Because all such subject-positions with which an individual could identify that, in some sense, must ‘cohere’ to form a social order as a relatively stable self-identical configuration are initially particularistic elements within various articulated totalities, an account of how all of these differences, the plurality of elements and a variety of formations in which they are constituted as objects come to be differences within a broader systematic totality is required. Hegemony theory postulates that there is an instance at which a certain element totalizes to produce a whole. This instance is that of hegemony itself, at which ‘a certain identity is picked up from the whole field of differences, and made to embody this totalizing function’,<sup>16</sup> or, alternatively phrased, when a certain particularity—which may be anything: words, a political project, subject-positions, or ‘ways of life’—‘without ceasing to be *particular*’, come to acquire a significance beyond its own particularity as the representative of the totality as a whole.<sup>17</sup> In this instance of hegemony, some particular element in the system further splits ‘between the particularity which it still is’ and a more universal dimension of which it ‘becomes the bearer’.<sup>18</sup> Through this splitting—‘the moment of excess’ at which the particular overflows its own particularity<sup>19</sup>—the particular element ‘becomes something of the order of an *empty*

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<sup>15</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, p. 13.

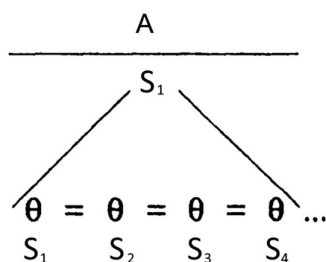
<sup>16</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32.4 (2006), pp.646-680 (p. 652).

<sup>18</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Future of Radical Democracy’, in *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*, ed. by Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 256–62 (p. 258).

signifier'.<sup>20</sup> A slightly altered version of a diagram that Laclau has employed on several occasions serves to illustrate the idea of empty signifier<sup>21</sup>:



The constitutive split in each element,  $S$ , is marked with the symbol  $\theta$ . The '=' linking the plurality of  $S$ 's indicate their equivalential relation, that they compose a 'chain of equivalence' in virtue of being elements of the same systematic totality. One of the elements,  $S_1$ , appears twice, indicating its split between its particularity and its being an empty signifier. The results of Laclau's reflections on systematic totality as something with a beyond returns to limit the universality that can be achieved, such that the only achievable universality becomes a partial—or hegemonic—universality. An empty signifier itself has to be defined in relation to something else. But since an empty signifier has to be a 'signifier of the pure cancellation of all difference' in as much as it is not just another difference, and in as much as it represents the totality as a whole,<sup>22</sup> it must be defined not against an element within the system but against what the totality excludes. The exclusionary limit is marked in the diagram above by the horizontal bar between  $S_1$  and  $A$ . The latter is the signifier that represents whatever that is beyond the limit and serves as the negative reference of  $S_1$ . An empty signifier represents 'something equally present' in the elements of a totality<sup>23</sup>—but that which is equally present

<sup>20</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> The original diagram can be found in: Ernesto Laclau, 'Constructing Universality', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 281–307 (p. 303).

<sup>22</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>23</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 42.

is not a positive feature, but the relation of exclusion that all of them share with respect to the outside, by which their belonging together on one side of the exclusionary limit is attested. A particularity that functions as an empty signifier is also called ‘hegemonic identity’ or ‘hegemonic particularity’ in the Laclauian text, in which it is maintained, *pace* Claude Lefort, that ‘emptiness is a type of identity, not a structural location’.<sup>24</sup> This is meant to suggest a reciprocity between the totalizing function of the empty signifier and that which it totalizes: a particularity functions as an empty signifier in so far as a wide range of social agents, in their condition as subjects whose identities are constituted through acts of identification, identify with it. What motivates identification, what conditions identification, and the ‘content’ of identification, are matters to be explored later in this chapter and in the next chapter.

### 3.2.2 The glimpses of change

Following the elaboration of the constitution of systematic totality, it can be said that the construction or articulation of subject-positions within a systematic totality, as much as it is the introduction of another difference, is also an expansion of the equivalential relation or the chain of equivalence that holds between differential elements in as much as they belong to one side of an exclusionary limit. Difference (that particular positions are articulated into the formation) and equivalence (that these positions belong to one side of the exclusionary limit) are two relations that are always simultaneously operative in any process of hegemonic articulation. This is why equivalence, in and of itself, implies neither a normatively substantive idea of equality nor an emancipatory dimension. Rather, what will need to be maintained instead is that the emergence of a socially transformative process involves the construction of an equivalential chain between elements that, in some sense, breaks from the internal

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<sup>24</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 166.

determinations of the previous formation. As this chapter hopes to present hegemony theory whilst maintaining a sense of continuity with the interpretation of set-theoretical ontology offered in preceding chapters, it is instructive to turn to the following passage from Roland Végso—in which both Laclauian and Badiouian vocabularies are employed—to give a redescription of hegemonic identity and anticipate how that break will be conceived:

we could say that whatever is excluded from a particular hegemonic articulation appears from the perspective of this articulation as a singular term. In case some of these elements successfully enter the chain of equivalences composing this hegemonic articulation, they will become normal terms. They are both presented and represented in the sense that their identity is always split between their particularity and the hegemonic universality that counts them as one.<sup>25</sup>

An element that has been successfully articulated into a hegemonic formation belongs to it as a differential element and is represented by the hegemonic identity that, in its function of universal representation, counts as one all elements that belong to the formation, in as much as they belong. Geoff Boucher is right when he writes that universality, for Laclau, ‘cannot exist before—or independently of—a chain of equivalences, formed through discursive articulations, that links particular identities’.<sup>26</sup> It does not seem plausible, however, to maintain that the universal dimension of a hegemonic formation is a ‘mere generalization’ of plurality of particular elements, or that any element could be integrated into an equivalential chain. Laclau had written that in a sedimented order, the “countable” and the “uncountable” exclude each other’, suggesting thereby that in so far as a hegemonic formation is stable, there are some elements that cannot be articulated as another difference within it. Thus, it would not be implausible to suggest that in a sedimented social order, in as much as it remains such, the introduction of another difference will be constrained in some way. To conceive of this

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<sup>25</sup> Végso, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Boucher, p. 115.

constraint, the interpretation may turn to a notion that has featured in some of Laclau's writings: social imaginary. As Laclau defines it, a social imaginary is a 'surface of inscription of subject positions' or a 'space of representation' that operates as a kind of framework according to which subjects constitute their identities.<sup>27</sup> '[S]ocial imaginaries organized around some empty signifiers represent', Laclau writes, 'the limit of socially attainable universalization. There is no universality [...] except through an equivalence between particularities, and such equivalences are always contingent and context-dependent'.<sup>28</sup> From the objective presence of a stable order, it is inferred that a hegemonic identity, in so far as it continues to stabilize a formation, is comparable to what has been defined in the first chapter as the regime of representation that governs what can be represented in a situation: it establishes the extent of what would be an immanent development of the structure. The introduction of further differences that expands the equivalential relation, but as a relation that is constitutive of one particular formation, will be constructed within the limit of what can be represented as elements that belong to the formation, whose universal dimension some particularity functioning as an empty signifier or a hegemonic identity represents. It remains to be investigated how hegemony theory accounts for the emergence, persistence, and displacement of a particular regime of representation, such that it will have accounted for not only the structure and development of a stable order but the possibility of a different social order in which the relationship between the countable and uncountable is renegotiated, such that previously unrepresentable positions will have become representable.

The necessity of a constitutive outside implies that there are always elements that are excluded from a particular hegemonic formation, elements that are not counted. The 'ideal of

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<sup>27</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Judith Butler (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 182–212 (pp. 210–11).

a radical inclusivity' is impossible, since every social order, always configured by hegemonic processes, presupposes exclusion. This is not a reason for despair, for a world in which everything is already included is a saturated world without room for future inclusion. Judith Butler captures Laclau's position when she writes that it is the 'very impossibility [of radical inclusivity that] nevertheless governs the political field as an idealization of the future that motivates the expansion, linking, and perpetual production of political subject-positions and signifiers'.<sup>29</sup> The possibility of change, then, comes from the outside that exists due to the impossibility of any order to extend its inclusivity to embrace all positions. Thus, Butler explains that, for Laclau, politics will be transformative to the extent that

the constitutive exclusions that stabilize the discursive domain [...]—those positions that have been excluded from representability [...]—are established in relation to the existing polity as what calls to be included within its terms, i.e., a set of *future* possibilities for inclusion, [...] as part of the not-yet-assimilable *horizon* of community.<sup>30</sup>

Unassimilated positions can emerge as possibilities whose actualization would initially disrupt a formation, and then possibly lead toward its transformation if it were to be assimilated. It might be asked how someone whose identity is constituted by and located within a particular hegemonic formation could begin to identify with a position external to that formation. There are two possible responses. First, the articulation of elements as fixed 'moments' of a totality is never accomplished entirely and finally. This is due to the influence of other discourses, or the 'structural pressure' of other systematic totalities and their articulatory processes—exposure to alterity is what prevents the absolute totalization of the social space by one discourse. Even if it is the hegemonic, most dominant, discourse that has acted over the social, it is but a partial totality in the non-totalizable 'infinite of the social'. It is thereby implied

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<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 144–45.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, p. 144.

that there will be a ‘surplus’ of elements that allows for the articulation of other social objects (identities, projects, or discourses), and that the stability of all discursively articulated objects is inescapably open to the possibility of disturbance by what is other to them. This line of response has invited some criticism. Hegemony theory, especially the version presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, has been criticized for an ‘excessive voluntarism’ by critics who saw Laclau as ‘stipulating that on the basis of the availability of a particular discourse, effectively anything was possible’.<sup>31</sup> It will be seen in the next chapter that for Laclau, there is no instance at which everything becomes possible and that the availability of a discourse does not entail its acceptance. The second response—developed in the years following the publication of *Hegemony*—is that there are crises, or ‘events’ that ‘dislocate’ established discourses or social formation. Laclau cites the German economic crisis of the 1920s and its devastating effects on the middle classes, at which ‘[a]ll routine expectations and practices—even the sense of self-identity—had been entirely shattered’, leading to a ‘generalized dislocation of traditional patterns of life’.<sup>32</sup> In either case, it is there is a ‘failure’ of the structure to determine the identity of social agents. In hegemony theory, such lack of identity is ultimately the ‘experience of antagonism’, or, the experience of the ‘limit of the social’. What is theorized under the concept of ‘antagonism’ is the interruption of immanent development of the structure.

Torben Bech Dyrberg describes antagonism as revealing the ‘split between the actual and the potential in which the latter is sought hegemonized by the former as an actuality that is prevented from being what it is’.<sup>33</sup> Laclau claims that it is ‘because a peasant *cannot be* a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land’.<sup>34</sup> These

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver Harrison, *Revolutionary Subjectivity in Post-Marxist Thought: Laclau, Negri, Badiou* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Torben Bech Dyrberg, ‘The Political and Politics in Discourse Analysis’, in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 241–55 (p. 247).

<sup>34</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p. 125.

formulations of antagonism suggest, firstly, that in antagonism, there are identities social agents aspire to attain but whose attainment is denied under the prevailing hegemonic formation. Thus, where antagonism exists, what is shown is the internal limit of a social order as it is presently configured. The abovementioned formulations of antagonism suggest, secondly, that in as much as what gives rise to antagonism is not a pure externality with respect to the social order but arises from the relations that constitute the social order, antagonism is an instance at which the non-self-identity of that order is shown. Antagonism exists between hegemonic processes by which identities are constituted when one is experienced by another as the subversive presence of an ‘other’ that prevents its identity from becoming a ‘full’ self-identity. When an object is prevented from self-identity, this object is said to be *dislocated*. ‘Actualizing the potential’ that is thwarted by an antagonistic other, Dyrberg explains, ‘is an act in the sense that it cannot be read off from structure, which is why the decision is an irreducible moment in the process of rendering the potential actual’.<sup>35</sup> It is at the point at which a gap exists between the actual and potential that the distinction between subject-position and subject is introduced. In the event of dislocation, Laclau, playing on an existentialist trope, asserts that one is ‘*condemned to be free*’. But this freedom, he asserts, emerges not because one has no structural or objective identity, but because he has a ‘*failed structural identity*’. One is ‘simply thrown up in [one’s] condition as a subject’ because he has ‘not achieved constitution as an object’.<sup>36</sup> It is this feature of subjectivity—that the subject is born from the failure of structure and identity—that is disclosed in the dislocating experience of antagonism or the limit of the social, ‘when it is no longer clear how the subject is to “go on”, that is, when it is undecided as to how it is to follow the rules, for instance, or engage in its routinized practices’.<sup>37</sup> Dislocation is an identity crisis for social agents because the formation that

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<sup>35</sup> Dyrberg, p. 247.

<sup>36</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Glynos and Howarth, p. 129.



constituted the subject-positions with which they had identified no longer accommodates them. The contingency of one's identity, which implies its non-identity with a subject-position, is shown in this instance. The link between the subject and identification becomes that of possibility than of necessity, that of real alternative than that of immanent development—thus, dislocation can also be said to be the interruption of the structure's capacity to determine its outcome. The Laclauian subject, condemned to be free because it has not achieved self-identity, is confronted by an 'undecidability', which Laclau defines as the 'distance' between 'the plurality of arrangements that are possible out of [a given structural point] and the actual arrangement that has finally prevailed'.<sup>38</sup> The 'moment of the subject', Laclau writes, is the 'distance between the undecidability of the structure and the decision'.<sup>39</sup> The decision of the subject is an act of identification. The subject asserts a new identity, which, if it succeeds, amounts to the neutralization of dislocation, thus the restoration of order as a relatively self-enclosed totality. The decision is directed toward the actualization of one possibility over others, and in so far as it is, it implies the repression of alternatives that had been available. In this respect, '[t]he constitution of a social identity', as much as it is an exercise of freedom, is also 'an act of power'. But if this is the case, it must also be that 'identity as such *is* power',<sup>40</sup> for the stability of a restored identity implies the continual repression of certain possibilities from actualizing in the order reconstituted through the act, the order in which dislocation has been resolved and the moment of the subject has passed.

Dislocation, at which the immanent development of a systematic totality is interrupted, and identification, which results in its reconfiguration into a transformed totality, compose a process that has been described figuratively as a "loosening" and "tightening" of the

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<sup>38</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 49–70 (p. 54).

<sup>39</sup> Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, pp. 31–32.

structure’.<sup>41</sup> If sedimentation moves toward an order in which ‘the “countable” and the “uncountable” exclude each other’, dislocation renders the boundary between the countable and the uncountable indeterminate—it is the moment of ‘reactivation’ at which contingency of an order is revealed and alternatives become available. There is a somewhat unintuitive implication of the preceding description. If dislocation—the ‘loosening’—is the source of freedom, possibility, and of the subject, then the subsequent ‘tightening’ achieved by the subject’s act results in its eclipse of the subject, the loss of freedom, and the closing down of possibilities. This outcome—in which an unexpected similarity with the Sartrean idea of the becoming-inert of human praxis is observed—is one that Laclau is prepared to accept, as he does not hesitate to conclude that ‘social action tends towards the constitution of that impossible object [i.e. society as a closed, self-identical totality], and thus towards the elimination of the conditions of liberty itself’.<sup>42</sup> The Laclauian subject is a ‘vanishing operator’ whose effects on the structure is indicated by its disappearance and the institution of a new order and subject-positions, which are, as ‘objective’ social identities, ‘the crystallization of an act of the subject’.<sup>43</sup> Not only does this characterization of the subject differ in tone from Badiou’s description of the subject of a truth as ‘Immortal’,<sup>44</sup> it also is indicative of a substantive difference between the role that Laclau attributes to a political process toward extensive social transformation and the role that Badiou accords to politics as a truth procedure.

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<sup>41</sup> P. A. Hudson, ‘The Concept of the Subject in Laclau’, *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, 33.3 (2006), 299–312 (p. 305).

<sup>42</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Hudson, p. 307.

<sup>44</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 49.

### 3.3 The political vision of hegemony theory

#### 3.3.1 Subtractive politics or strategic rearrangement of discourses

A process toward social change ‘involves the articulation of different identities and subjectivities into a common project’,<sup>45</sup> where the structure of this ‘project’ itself is conceived as a systematic totality, or more accurately, attempts at totalization. As the equivalential articulation of different identities marks the emergence of a new hegemonic universality, it would appear that Laclau is, broadly, in agreement with the assertion, from Badiou, that the ‘difficulty lies on the side of the Same’ that transcends differences, that the task of a theory of social change is thinking the universality that ‘*must come to be*’.<sup>46</sup> When the extent to which this concern for universality in political process is shared is examined, what emerges is the sense in which the understanding that a political process unfolds in a situation that is populated by different groups—thus, an aspect of what has been termed, in the introduction, as the ‘horizontal’ axis—becomes a more prominent concern in hegemony theory. One very brief sentence that is found in an essay by Alberto Toscano shall serve as a starting point for comparing and contrasting Badiouian and Laclauian approaches.

Toscano writes that ‘despite the deceptive resonance’, the production of a universal and egalitarian truth is not to be confused with the hegemonic construction of an equivalential chain. The latter, he claims, involves ‘strategic rearrangement and occupation of discourse (what Badiou would call “the language of the situation”)', whereas the production of a truth ‘requires instead an organised subtraction or separation from its manner of structuring and stratifying our experience of the world’.<sup>47</sup> Within the bounds of parentheses, the concept of discourse is equated with the Badiouian category of the language of the situation. The equation

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<sup>45</sup> Howarth and Stavrakakis, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> Alberto Toscano, ‘Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou’s Turn’, in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. by Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 529–48 (p. 534).

appears even at first sight to be spurious, as there is no reason to believe that whatever ‘language’ that is presupposed by the concept of discourse could be identified with the wholly predicative language that the language of the situation is. But even if this matter were set aside, it is unclear to what extent the succinct distinction between ‘rearrangement and occupation of discourse’ supposedly characteristic of hegemonic processes are constituted and ‘subtraction or separation’ that characterizes a truth procedure is capable of establishing a difference between the two.

The faithful subject of a truth ‘emptily names the universe yet-to-come’ by devising a subject-language that employs names and predicates that will be semantically fulfilled in a situation extended by a truth.<sup>48</sup> Because the subject, due to its situatedness in a particular situation, ‘cannot *make a language* out of anything except combinations of the supernumerary name of the event and the language of the situation’,<sup>49</sup> subject-language anticipates the truth that ‘will have been presented’ by ‘shifting’ established meanings, to name empty places that will have been filled in a situation extended by the accommodation of previously indiscernible multiples. ‘Language’, Badiou goes as far to assert, ‘is the very being of truth via the combination of current finite inquiries and the future anterior of a generic infinity’.<sup>50</sup> When a truth procedure is characterized in these terms, it seems difficult to deny that the production of a truth in a situation does involve what can only be presumed is a discursive procedure that rearranges the language of the situation. If so, ‘rearrangement and occupation of discourse’ cannot be an entirely erroneous way to describe at least one aspect of the Badiouian post-evental process. Another distinction between Laclauian and Badiouian theorizations of political process insinuated by Toscano’s brief remark is that the rearrangement of discourses is ‘strategic’ in hegemony theory, in contrast to the politics of truth, which operates in the

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<sup>48</sup> Badiou, ‘On a Finally Objectless Subject’, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 396.

<sup>50</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.

mode of ‘subtraction’. What needs to be seen is what ‘strategy’ means, and whether the ‘subtractive’ should be maintained as categorically incompatible with the ‘strategic’.

As Oliver Marchart writes, ‘the only possible reference [of equality] is the *non-reference* to the state of the situation, to the principle of classification and order’.<sup>51</sup> Universality and equality—and a truth for Badiou is nothing if not universal and egalitarian—cannot have a positive, particularistic determination, and their production takes place as the undoing of identitarian differences that are established by the situation’s prevailing representational regime in order to regulate presentable and representable realities. Thus, although ‘every truths erupts as singular’ (as their evental nature is such that they cannot be subsumed under existing order of representation and knowledge), they are ‘immediately universalizable. Universalizable singularity necessarily breaks with identitarian singularity’.<sup>52</sup> Badiou places this idea in a historical context in *Saint Paul*, wherein Paul’s attempt to establish the universality of Christianity is presented not as a matter of religious faith as a paradigm of political action.

‘That every truth procedure collapses differences, infinitely deploying a purely generic multiplicity’, Badiou writes, ‘does not permit us to lose sight of the fact that, in the situation (call it: the world), *there are differences*’.<sup>53</sup> In order ‘for people to become gripped by truth’ such that they transcend their differences to participate in its universality, ‘it is imperative that universality not present itself under the aspect of a particularity’.<sup>54</sup> Badiou cites the following passage from Corinthians:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law—though not being

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<sup>51</sup> Marchart, p. 122.

<sup>52</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 98.

<sup>54</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 99.

myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men.<sup>55</sup>

If the idea of ‘becoming all things to all men’, which seems to involve, in practice, presenting oneself differently when interacting with different groups, does not already bear some resemblance to a ‘strategic occupation’ of different discourses, one might, with Audrone Žukauskaitė, note that it may very well be the case that ‘not every identitarian or minority group prefers to be subjected to the universal truth’.<sup>56</sup> Badiou describes a truth as a ‘subsumption of the Other by the Same’. But *that* a truth is addressed and offered to all is one thing; for the addressee to *receive* the offer is another. It would not be unreasonable to seek an explanation for the factors that may have led to successes, difficulties, or even failures, of certain attempts to ‘win over’ different groups—which, in *Being and Event*, had been theorized as the ‘enquiry’ of the faithful subject—in the process of establishing the universality of a truth. Perhaps it should be accepted that conversion, in the end, is a matter of ‘grace’, thus, as unexplainable as an event (which Badiou does occasionally say is ‘grace’, something that ‘presents itself as pure givenness’<sup>57</sup>), but also—as Kant might say—as unexplainable as freedom. And yet, the moment one attempts to offer some explanation for successes and failures of the activity of ‘winning over’, one will have moved toward an explanatory account of the efficacy of a process in producing actual transformative effects. But to have such an account is no different from the possession of the prerequisite for developing any kind of strategy, in so far as strategic actions are fundamentally goal-oriented actions that are performed because there are reasons to believe that their accomplishment would be a step

<sup>55</sup> Cor. I.9.19-22. Quoted from: Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Audrone Žukauskaitė, ‘Ethics between Particularity and Universality’, in *Deleuze and Ethics*, ed. by Nathan Jun and Daniel W. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 188–206 (p. 200).

<sup>57</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 63.

toward the intended goal, actions that are also open to course-correction depending on circumstances.<sup>58</sup> It is not being denied that the process of social transformation that is conceived within the framework of *Being and Event* must operate in the mode of subtraction in as much as it is a truth procedure—that a truth must transcend differences in order to introduce novelty into the situation is a fundamental thesis of Badiou’s *de jure* account of change. Nevertheless, whether forcing a choice between the ‘strategic’ pursuit of practical efficacy and the practice of disciplined ‘subtraction’ that a truth procedure is characterized to be is conducive to thinking social change is rather dubious.

In the next section, the sole essay in which Laclau discusses Badiou’s work at length will be discussed at length.<sup>59</sup> Laclau’s criticism of Badiou reveal the differences between their conceptualization of particularity and universality, and the centrality of the question of universalization for Laclau. The discussion also will point to the role that hegemony theory assigns to a process of extensive social change, which Laclau believes is absent in Badiou’s theorization. In sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4, Laclau’s account of the emergence of a universal dimension through a ‘radical investment’ in a political project will be outlined.

### 3.3.2 The disruption of social order and its reconstitution

What Laclau finds unconvincing about Badiou’s account of fidelity is that the ‘winning over’ is regarded as a ‘total conversion’ in which ‘there is either a “connection” or “disconnection”’ with an event, without the possibility of any ‘middle’.<sup>60</sup> What Laclau means

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<sup>58</sup> For example, when attempts to reach the goal repeatedly fail—this is an aspect that may especially be unamenable to Badiouian thought. The reluctance to accommodate such an aspect narrows down the scope of what counts as ‘science’ in Badiou’s philosophy to the strictly formal science of mathematics, in which scientific practice is a matter of following the rational consequences of a set of axioms chosen.

<sup>59</sup> This is excepting the 1977 book in which Laclau discusses an ‘excellent analysis’ of Engels’s *The Peasant War in Germany* by Badiou and François Balmès. See: Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 168–76.

<sup>60</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 132.

by this ‘middle’, one can only presume that it will broadly correspond to what he theorizes as a ‘floating’ signifier. Such an element, which neither entirely belongs nor is entirely excluded from a given totality—hence an element classifiable neither as entirely connected nor entirely disconnected to an event—cannot be thought under Badiou’s approach as long as the categorical and absolutely dichotomous distinction between the generic multiple that a truth is and the constructible multiples authorized by the situation’s state is maintained. Although Laclau’s demand for such a middle is a sign of his poststructuralist leanings that tend to exalt contamination and porous boundaries over purification and dichotomization, his point, in the end, is that Badiou’s theorization of post-evental process of change leaves untreated the issue of what is it about a particular truth procedure that wins certain individuals and groups over, and what motivates inhabitants of a situation to participate in the universality of a truth. Thus, one line of criticism that Laclau advances against Badiou in his essay turns to the issue of how universality emerges from particularities—or, to put it differently, how there can be a universalization of something particular. Laclau’s criticism on this matter is followed by another one, which seeks to introduce another role that a process of extensive social change will need to fulfil.

In Badiou’s account, an event reveals the void of the situation, which is an exception to any particularistic determination and possibly begets the subject of a truth that approaches the situation from the bias of its void. Laclau glosses this as follows: ‘as far as human situations are concerned, the subjects of a truth that affirms the event address universality pure and simple. This means, indistinct humanity—in the sense that Marx for instance asserted that the proletariat has only his chains’.<sup>61</sup> Badiou’s effort to secure the generic universality of a truth with the category of the void faces an ‘insurmountable’ difficulty that results, Laclau argues, from the fact that the ‘category of the void—of the empty set—is only empty when it operates

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<sup>61</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 126.



within mathematics'. When transposed to social analysis, the void is not without a particular differential content. Instead, it is 'filled with certain contents—thinking, freedom/consciousness, "only chains" etc.—which are far from being empty'.<sup>62</sup> This is Laclau's iteration of the point that has been confirmed, that the void-ness of the void in extraontological situations is a relative property. The challenge that is posed by Laclau's reading is the following: in the case that the point that the void is not empty were conceded, then to insist that a truth produced by faithfully drawing out the implications of an event is a universality in as much as this process approaches the situation from the bias of its void would be tantamount to bypassing the difficult issue of the universalization of a particular project toward social change. Laclau maintains that if the issue of universalization is to be given proper theoretical treatment, it must be accepted as a starting point that no group, however excluded, enjoys a special relation to universality by virtue of their excluded position. As for the *sans-papiers*, one of the recurrent figures of the edge-of-the-void multiple—an evental site—in Badiou's political interventions, Laclau quickly points out that the 'demands of the *sans-papiers* are clearly, in the first instance, particular and not universal demands'.<sup>63</sup> Ascribing a special significance to excluded groups and their demands with reference to their status of being void elements of a situation, for Laclau, would rely on an 'illegitimate' and 'hopelessly metaphorical exercise' by which 'emptiness' of the void, strictly thinkable within the ontological discourse only, is equated with universality.<sup>64</sup>

In Laclau's eyes, then, the Badiouian proposition that a truth is 'immediately universalizable' in virtue of its property of being generic is one that makes sense solely within the intrinsic rationality of the ontological discourse. The Badiouian approach does not elaborate an account of universalization needed to think politics in the ontic realm. This is a

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<sup>62</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 126.

<sup>63</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 126.

decisive omission for Laclau, as he holds—and on this point he is concurring with Badiou—that it is the universality of a political process that ensures that it be capable of social change. As he believes that any proposal for an alternative arrangement that could emerge following an event—an event of dislocation, possibly manifest as an unfulfilled demand—is initially a particularity, hegemony theory posits no single event of dislocation as the origin of extensive social change. Nor is it the case for Laclau that an instance of dislocation, although it is conceptually a disruption of a social order, can be seen as *necessarily* posing, in a concrete context, a serious challenge against established order. For, in practice, it is possible for a dislocation to be ‘differentially absorbed’ by the institutionalized social order, such that the disruptive effect of dislocation will not reverberate beyond the narrow confines of one of its ‘local’ sectors—a demand for clean water, for example, even if the government agency responsible for supplying water is unable to fulfil it, may be fulfilled by a non-governmental organization. The demand absorbable in this way receives no opportunity to be anything other than a particular demand—such as a demand for clean water. Thus, when Laclau writes that a social change begins from a ‘breakdown of something in the social order’,<sup>65</sup> the breakdown denotes not a single event of dislocation but a proliferation of dislocations, which may appear as an emergence of a plurality of unfulfilled demands across different sectors of society, that the prevailing order has failed to absorb. A process of extensive social change emerges through the widening of an antagonistic relation through the equivalential articulation of a plurality of unfulfilled demands, so that it becomes not one between, for example, a peasant and a landowner, but between, for example, the ‘people’ and an ‘un-responsive power’. Laclau contends against Badiou that the universal dimension of a political cause emerges, not from an ‘immediately universalizable’ truth, but only when ‘people excluded from many other sites within a situation (who are unnameable within the latter) perceive their common nature as

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<sup>65</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 113.

excluded and live their struggles—in their particularity—as part of a larger emancipatory struggle’.<sup>66</sup>

The thought that an extensive social change presupposes the proliferation of dislocated points leads to one of the features that sets politics of hegemony apart from approaches in emancipatory political thought that regard politics as primarily a form of resistance. Although Laclau emphasizes the need for the construction of a common front of excluded groups—a collective subject—against an institutionalized order, this is but one aspect of a socially transformative political process that also involves a second movement: the reconstitution of the order itself. A very brief digression shall be made to note the potential practical implication of this aspect that Laclau builds into his vision of politics as hegemony. The implication can be hinted with reference to one of Žižek’s comments made against the kind of political practice advocated by Badiou and Simon Critchley. In practice, Badiou recommends abstention from most, if not all, ‘conventional’ political processes, such as electoral politics. If the *modus operandi* of whatever that counts as ‘true’ politics for these theorists is to work at a ‘distance’ from state—the empirical State, in this context—and ‘bombarding [the State] with prescriptive proclamations and demands’, Žižek wonders whether the kind of political practice they advocate ‘rely on the fact that someone else will assume the task of running the state machinery, enabling us to engage in taking critical distance towards it’.<sup>67</sup> One could argue that the practical implications of the introduction of the second movement is that politics, including emancipatory politics, does not preclude as a matter of principle an involvement in the State and the chance that it may need to appropriate the State apparatus.

The line of thought that underpins Laclau’s introduction of the second movement, however, is not based on the above practical considerations. Conceiving politics as involving

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<sup>66</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 402.

solely a ‘subtraction or separation’ from the statist regime that ‘structures and stratifies’ a social order presupposes the consistency of that regime, or at least restricts the extent to which it could be deprived of its power to structure and stratify. And this is the point where another one of Žižek’s assessments of Badiou seems to be relevant. ‘Badiou goes wrong’, Žižek claims, ‘when he insists on a strict frontier between the Political and the Social (the domain of State, of history)—he concedes too much: namely, that *society exists*’. What should be endorsed instead, Žižek continues, is ‘the thesis, articulated by Laclau and Mouffe, that “society doesn’t exist”’.<sup>68</sup> What would be entailed by the endorsement of the thesis—one that Žižek continues to support even after the acrimonious denouement of his intellectual partnership with Laclau—is the abandonment of the assumption of stability of the statist regime of representation, which Laclau argues, is a ‘simplifying assumption’ for which there is ‘neither logical nor historical’ justification to accept. It is an assumption that is carried onto Badiou’s political reflections from set-theoretical ontology, but one that precludes the possibility of what Gramsci had called an ‘organic crisis’. If a situation is such that the possibility of its far-reaching transformation has been opened, this opening logically presupposes that whatever mechanism that sustains the situations as it is—the situation’s regulatory regime of representation—has failed to perform its role. In the context of engaging with Badiou’s work, Laclau describes an organic crisis as a historical circumstance in which that which has become ‘uncountable in the situation is the principle of countability as such’.<sup>69</sup> Rephrased in Laclau’s own theoretical vocabulary, it would be the widespread proliferation of dislocations. Since a dislocation is an identity crisis, organic crisis is the ‘generalized crisis of social identities’—the example of the German economic crisis has been mentioned earlier.<sup>70</sup> Laclau contends that under such a condition, the determination of the eventual site as a delimited point of unrepresentability within a situation

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<sup>68</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ‘Lenin’s Choice’, in *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, by V. I. Lenin, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), p. 182.

<sup>69</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 125.

<sup>70</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p. 135.

that is required for Badiou's conception of event would be undermined. For 'what confronts us, in that case [i.e. of organic crisis, when the 'principle of countability as such' has ceased to be operative], are not particular sites defining (delimiting) what is unrepresentable within a general field of representation, but rather the fact that the very logic of representation has lost its structural abilities'.<sup>71</sup> Whilst it can be contested that Laclau's adoption of the terms of set-theoretical ontology in his critique does not accurately reflect their meaning in the Badiouian text, Laclau may well retort that if this idea of organic crisis—whose nature his expropriation of set-theoretical terms has the virtue of intuitively conveying—cannot be expressed in terms of set-theoretical ontology, then it is an evidence of its shortcoming in theorizing a certain dimension of social reality, and by extension, social change.

If the emergence of a socially transformative political process is contemporaneous with a widespread structural failure (as in an organic crisis), then a political process that begins from an event—whose unpredictability in the situation asserted by Badiou is fully endorsed by Laclau—has from 'its very inception' two roles. The two roles are elaborated by Laclau through a distinction between 'situation' and 'situationness', with the 'former being the actually ontic existing *order* and the second the ontological principle of *ordering* as such'.<sup>72</sup> Here, 'ordering' denotes systematicity, the condition of any hegemonic formation, thus, of social order, whereas 'order' denotes its *specificity*. If attaining the former requires *that* something be excluded as per Laclau's reflections on the grounds of a systematic totality, then the latter is defined by *what* it includes and excludes. In the case that what is pervasively disrupted is the situationness of the situation, Laclau proposes that a political project—that is, a rival or counter-hegemonic project—cannot solely consist of a fidelity to an event qua 'an exception vis-à-vis a highly structured situation' that '[subverts] the existing state of the

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<sup>71</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 131.

<sup>72</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 131.

situation’, but will need to also consist, ‘in one of its basic dimensions, in reconstructing the situation’ and ‘[restructuring] a new state around a new core’.<sup>73</sup> What such reconstructions must involve is readily inferable: the reconstruction of a social order, or the construction of a new hegemonic identity, such that a different regime of representation will have emerged.

### 3.3.3 The source of political desire

What needs to be examined is how Laclau understands the transition from a multiplicity of dislocated subjects (or partial identities) to a collective one, such that they comes to ‘live’ a common struggle and work toward the neutralization of dislocations, which is tantamount to the constitution of a new order in which it had been absent. The examination of this aspect of Laclau’s thought requires turning to his attempt to complement the formal dimension of systematicity and dislocation with an account of the affective ‘force’ with which a particular hegemonic formation and projects toward extensive social change grip subjects.<sup>74</sup> In elaborating this affective dimension, Laclau relies on a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations of *objet petit a* and sublimation (that he claims is based on the interpretation of the Lacanian text offered by Joan Copjec), declaring that the ‘logic of *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical’.<sup>75</sup> Laclau has not been wholly transparent in stating the extent to which he is willing to integrate aspects of Lacanian theory into his own, and warns against assuming that his theoretical categories correspond to seemingly analogous categories in Lacanian theory (for instance, it is simply not the case that what Laclau calls ‘discourse’ corresponds to what Lacan calls ‘symbolic’—that a mechanical translation would be unwarranted is already evidenced by the fact that the Lacanian

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<sup>73</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, pp. 125, 131.

<sup>74</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 116.

‘distinction between the symbolic and imaginary is not present in [Laclau’s] theoretical approach’<sup>76</sup>). But even if Laclau is ‘neither Derridean nor Lacanian, but mostly Laclauian’, as one commentator observes, the conspicuous absence of any reference to the Lacanian notion of fantasy in Laclau’s text is somewhat perplexing, especially since one of the most oft-cited definitions of *objet petit a*—whose ‘logic’ Laclau claims is identical to that of hegemony—is that it is the object of fantasy, and as such, requires the notion of the imaginary.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, the account of political desire that Laclau develops implies a necessary dimension of ideological distortion that accounts for the ‘cohesive power’ that sustains a hegemonic formation, and in that distortion, one aspect of fantasy seems to be involved.

In Badiou’s account of post-evental transformation, a truth is that which the activity of a subject incrementally produces—or realizes, as the subject itself—in the situation. Thought in its ontological being as a multiple, a truth is an excrescence, pure representation of what would remain unrepresented and unrepresentable if the situation and its state were to remain the same. The faithful subject of a truth is oriented by the hypothesis, or ‘fiction’, of a completed truth articulated with subject-language whose referent, as Žižek has aptly described, is “‘empty’ precisely in so far as it refers to the fullness yet to come’.<sup>78</sup> The function of fullness, or specifically, the fullness of society, in the Laclauian theoretical architecture is an analogue to that of truth in the Badiouian framework, to the extent that it is that toward whose attainment a process of social change which, under the present interpretation, should be seen as composed by acts of identification taken by a plurality of those who have been thrown up in their condition as subjects, is oriented. Like a truth that is incompleteable, fullness is constitutively

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<sup>76</sup> Laclau, ‘Reply’, pp. 401–2.

<sup>77</sup> In spite of the concept’s absence in Laclau’s own text, several theorists influenced by Laclau have emphasized the relevance of fantasy for hegemony theory. See, for example: Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Encounters of the Real Kind: Sussing out the Limits of Laclau’s Embrace of Lacan’, in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 201–16.

<sup>78</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 136.

unreachable, for it denotes for Laclau an ‘*entirely* reconciled society’<sup>79</sup>: a totality without an outside (an impossible, ‘mythical totality’), the incorporation or transcendence of all particularities, hence undifferentiated and unexposed to temporality and change, whilst hegemony is premised on the thought that every institution of an order is based on a constitutive exclusion whereby it is exposed to the subversive presence of the other it has excluded. There is no such thing as an actually achieved fullness of society. A systematic totality that embraces every difference is an impossible object, and there is no social order that could extinguish once and for all the possibility of dislocation and their subsequent equivalential articulation into a hegemonic project toward an alternative order. Despite this, it is the claim of hegemony theory that it is the desire for fullness that mobilizes a plurality of subjects, setting in motion the process toward the institution of a different social order.

The Laclauian subject is a subject in so far as it has a failed identity, which evinces the fact that the structure cannot constitute itself as a closed totality in which identities will be entirely determined by the structure. This construal is the basis on which an affinity between hegemony theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis can be asserted, and allows for the appropriation by the former the idea of the desire for self-completion—a ‘full’ identity—to recast it as the essence of political desire. In terms closer to Lacanian theory: to have social existence—to have an identity—is to be symbolically represented. However, despite the reservoir of signifiers available for symbolic representation, there is something ‘radically unassimilable to the signifier’, namely, the ‘subject’s singular existence’, its unique being.<sup>80</sup> The resemblance that the Lacanian description bears to Hegel’s analysis of sense-certainty in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is worth noting: the resources of symbolic representation are general terms, which are constitutively inadequate for representing a singularity. Something of the

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<sup>79</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 116.

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 179.



subject's singular being will fall beneath symbolization, and any signifier—socio-symbolic identity—by which the subject represents itself is experienced as inadequate. This inadequacy of the signifier sets in motion the subject's desperate, but in the end, futile, search for a signifier that fully expresses its being, hence for the reconciliation of its singular being and socio-symbolic identity, that is, for a state of harmony, and it is this state of harmony that Laclau's term 'fullness'—an entirely reconciled society—denotes at a larger scale. Notwithstanding the shifts observable in the Lacanian text on this matter in different phases of Lacan's thought, this state of harmony that the subject seeks can be said to be full *jouissance*—what the subject experiences as lacking in its socio-symbolic existence 'the lack of a pre-symbolic, real enjoyment'.<sup>81</sup> When transposed onto Laclau's system, the reference to a state of harmony that is pre-symbolic, hence pre-social, should not carry the implication of a linear evolutionary conception of the emergence of the subject of lack (this would be akin to a narrative of a theft perpetrated by the process of socialization on a child basking in its union with the mother). The conception of politics as oriented toward the recovering of an original loss would endow the lost object with a transhistorical determination, paving way to the equation of the recovery of the lost object with the end of history—the transhistorical concept of labour that underpins certain branches of Marxist thought can effortlessly be re-described in terms of an originary loss. Rather than conceiving fullness as something that pre-exists its loss, it must be conceived—to adopt a Lacanian expression—as the 'lack of lack'. Fullness is a 'retrospective illusion',<sup>82</sup> and it is always experienced as absent because it is the effect of 'the potential yet-to-be-realized that is prompted by the blockage of this potential',<sup>83</sup> namely, the limit of society experienced in the dislocation of identities. Accordingly, *that which the subject of lack perceives as something that must be attained* is the general description of the role of fullness

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<sup>81</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Laclau, 'Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics', p. 651.

<sup>83</sup> Dyrberg, p. 247.

in Laclau's theorization of social change, but *what* must be restored, redeemed, liberated, attained, or realized is not determinable prior to the particular social order that has been articulated under a concrete historical circumstance and the unfulfilled demands that might have arisen within it. This way, Laclau is able to reject the discourse of the end of history but simultaneously maintain that '[e]mancipation is not [...] an *act of creation* but instead of liberation of something which precedes the liberating act'.<sup>84</sup>

Drawing from Freud, Lacan introduces the term 'the Thing' in the seventh seminar to designate the object of primordial *jouissance* that the subject experiences as lost. Desire is the search for this lost object, but, as one of Lacan's memorable expressions goes, "'that's not it'" is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from *jouissance* expected'.<sup>85</sup> No actually obtainable thing delivers full *jouissance*. The rationale behind Laclau's declaration that the 'logic of *objet petit a*' is identical to the 'logic of hegemony' surfaces at this point. As Alenka Zupančič explains, 'the *objet petit a* designates nothing but the absence, the lack of the object, the void around which desire turns. [...] [T]he moment the subject attains the object she demands, *objet petit a* appears as a marker of that which the subject "has not got", or *does not have*—and this itself constitutes the "*echte*" object of desire'.<sup>86</sup> This should be connected to Laclau's claim that '[a]lthough the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence'.<sup>87</sup> Fullness *as such* cannot show itself—it is an impossible object, has no consistency of its own, and is strictly unknowable and indescribable. Thus, it has to show itself as 'incarnated' or 'embodied' in some particular object, the only kind of objects that exist. What Laclau understands by the 'logic of *objet petit a*' is the possibility for a partial object to

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<sup>84</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: Encore*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 111.

<sup>86</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 52.

be constituted as an object of desire by incarnating an impossible fullness, the Thing, to which no partial object is actually commensurate; and hegemony presupposes that a particularity, without ceasing to be particular, can come to represent the dimension of universality that exceeds its particularity. As these two ‘logics’, Laclau claims, are identical, it is to be concluded that an ‘empty signifier can only function as an *objet petit a*’.<sup>88</sup> This means that a political project or a cause, if it is to acquire a universal dimension as a hegemonic identity and thus the power to act on the social, must present itself—which is always something particular—as the promise of fullness, as the negative reverse of a dislocated social order. During the German economic crisis mentioned as an example of organic crisis, Laclau claims that National Socialism emerged as a ‘real hegemonic alternative’ by ‘[addressing] the problems experienced by the middle class as a whole and [offering] a principle for their interpretation’.<sup>89</sup> The same can be said of the Long March, which, Laclau claims, ‘succeeded because it was not only the destruction of an old order but also the reconstruction of the nation around a new core’.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.3.4 The moment of radical investment and the necessity of ideological distortion

The account of political desire as the search for absent fullness outlined so far is vulnerable to an objection, one to which hegemony theory itself had been vulnerable ever since Laclau’s declaration—made long before his dallies with Lacanian theory—that attempts to realize a reconciled society are ultimately in vain. If subjects that desire full identity identify with a particular political project because the latter offers a promise of fullness, then this is a desire that inevitably will fail to be satisfied, for a particular project cannot institute anything

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<sup>88</sup> Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, p. 81.

<sup>89</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>90</sup> Laclau, ‘An Ethics of Militant Engagement’, p. 131.

other than a finite and limited social order. An objection of the following sort seems unavoidable: Laclau has turned every actual political project and hegemonic formation into surrogate for that which is ontologically impossible—utopia, the ‘real thing’—and has explained the inevitability of political disappointment, and the lure of resignation and cynicism. It might be noted first that hegemony cannot simply preclude the possibility of such outcomes, if only because they are real political experiences that hegemony theory would be obliged to take into account if it is to be a descriptive theory of ‘how politics actually works’. Moreover, given Laclau’s reliance on Lacanian theory to formulate his account of political desire, it may be no less of a problem if full satisfaction were achievable. The negative undertones of ‘impossible satisfaction’ should not mislead, as it is meant to indicate the following point, articulated by Adrian Johnston:

One of the reasons why people don’t remain passively riveted to an indefinitely enduring configuration of collective life is that a certain libidinal ‘restlessness’ (perhaps capable of being described, in Lacanian parlance, as an insatiable thirst for a socio-politically defined ‘surplus *jouissance*’) always promises to agitate at least some people into striving toward the achievement of various alterations of their present circumstances’.<sup>91</sup>

Acts of identification are repeated because complete satisfaction is impossible. Since they are the condition of possibility of social change, if ‘total and complete satisfaction (qua full, absolute *jouissance*) were indeed capable of being achieved’—in which case both the need and motivation for further acts would be eliminated—there ‘really would be an “end of history” in a vulgar Hegelian sense’.<sup>92</sup> However, even if it were granted that full satisfaction remains unachievable, Laclau would still need to respond to the objection that the *awareness* by social agents that the object being desired is a surrogate for something that cannot in principle be

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<sup>91</sup> Johnston, Badiou, Žižek, and *Political Transformations*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>92</sup> Johnston, Badiou, Žižek, and *Political Transformations*, pp. 100–101.

attained, and in this respect is merely the ‘second best’, is likely to thwart a sustained attachment to a political cause. Psychoanalysis proposes that desire is metonymy—but whether political desire, especially with respect to projects toward profound social transformation, should be theorized in exactly the same manner by which desire is conceived under psychoanalysis is not obvious. For it appears that political subjects have the option—unlike the neurotic subjects of psychoanalysis—of withdrawing from the search for fullness through protracted, and oftentimes arduous, processes of extensive social transformation.<sup>93</sup>

Laclau’s attempt to circumvent this difficulty relies on a theory of what he calls ‘radical investment’ (or, alternatively, ‘ethical investment’) that proposes an account of the operation by which the attachment to a particular project or hegemonic formation occurs. The theory of radical investment presupposes that an identification with a particular object can be a moment of transubstantiation whereby a partial object—an object incommensurate to the Thing—becomes, not a part *of* a whole that is in principle unobtainable, but instead, a part that *is* the whole. In this account, Laclau appeals to the distinction between desire, which is unsatisfiable because its objects are surrogates for an impossible Thing, and drive, which does bring about satisfaction. As Copjec explains, drive is ‘no longer a means of attaining satisfaction, it is an end in itself; it is directly satisfying. It is not a means to something other than itself, but is itself other than itself’.<sup>94</sup> Adopting Lacan’s formula of sublimation, Laclau describes the moment of becoming ‘other than itself’, the moment at which a partial object becomes the whole, as the moment when the former is ‘elevated to the dignity of the Thing’.<sup>95</sup> A particular

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<sup>93</sup> This point is related to Žižek’s criticism of the so-called ‘radical democracy’, especially as elaborated by Yannis Stavrakakis through a conjunction of hegemony theory and Lacanian theory in the following work: Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*. In summary, Žižek’s criticism is that radical democracy advises one to renege of the ‘excessive’ desire for impossible fullness and find satisfaction in small things. Žižek sees this as denying revolutionary change. See: Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, pp. 324–33.

<sup>94</sup> Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>95</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 161. The formula of sublimation is found in: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 112.

object, in other words, transubstantiates into ‘the embodiment of a fullness totally transcending it’. Laclau argues that the ‘embodying object is [...] the ultimate horizon of what is achievable—not because there is an unachievable “beyond”, but because that “beyond”, having no entity of its own, can be present only as the phantasmatic excess of an object through which satisfaction is achievable’.<sup>96</sup> The proposition that a particular hegemonic formation articulated around an empty signifier is ‘simply the name that fullness receives within a certain historical horizon’ is a corollary of the claim that ‘[t]he only possible totalizing horizon is given by a partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythical totality’.<sup>97</sup> Radical investment, as such, is an act of identification with a particular hegemonic formation or a political project—a partial object—through which it is made into the embodiment of the fullness that is incommensurable with it. On one of its dimensions, radical investment will appear to be a ‘*pure* decision’,<sup>98</sup> for which no justification can be offered—the incommensurability between the partiality of the object and the fullness it is made to incarnate—which is also to say: the incommensurability between particularity and universality—precludes a relation between the investment and the object that receives the investment that can be established on a rational basis. The other dimension, which consists of hedges and qualifications that Laclau introduces to evade the accusation of pure decisionism, shall be examined in the next chapter.

Since fullness has no presence (or meaning) beyond the ‘ontic content’ of a particular hegemonic process, the process, for the subject—the ‘investor’, so to speak—that has identified with it, it becomes ‘the horizon of *all there is*’, and is no longer ‘an empirically achievable second best *vis-à-vis* an unattainable ultimate fullness’ for which the subject can

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<sup>96</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 117.

<sup>97</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 116.

<sup>98</sup> Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, p. 82.

only wait in vain.<sup>99</sup> According to the theory of radical investment, then, the attempts to reconstitute a social order through the pursuit of that project has become identical to the attempt to realize the promise of fullness as such—for a particular object to have become the object-incarnate of fullness for a subject is to have become the only means by which the subject believes fullness can be accessed. This is what turns the object into ‘the rallying point of passionate attachment’ rather than an *ersatz* second-best.<sup>100</sup> These descriptions can be understood in terms of the emergence of what has been called a ‘social imaginary’. What the notion of fullness *as absent* suggests is that a social imaginary acquires a dimension of being a *project* toward the actualization of certain possibilities or construction of subject-positions; the affective dimension of fullness introduced via psychoanalysis accounts for the *grip* of a social imaginary.

One suspicion that the theory of radical investment might not have entirely succeeded in dispelling is that it tends toward a kind of *ex post facto* explanation designed to accommodate into his theory that which Laclau has already accepted as a fact, namely, that there really is passionate attachment to a cause in political movements, the archetype of which in his thought is Latin American populism. This is not necessarily a shortcoming, as Laclau only needs to provide an account of the possibility of sustained attachment to a cause that does not contradict the premise of the impossibility of fullness. As hegemony theory is not a system of rational immanence, the assessment its theoretical components, including radical investment, will partly depend on its explanatory power and usefulness for analysing concrete political movements. Although this thesis does not engage with the more empirically-oriented analyses that is reflected in Laclau’s thought, it shall be noted that Laclau believes that his account explains a phenomenon that he claims to have ‘seen several times’, namely, how,

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<sup>99</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 226.

<sup>100</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 116.

‘after the fall of an oppressive regime, the most disparate social and political movements entering a process of mobilization, living for a short period in the illusion that, because an oppressive regime had fallen, what had actually fallen was oppression as such’.<sup>101</sup> A repressive regime, if it had been ‘seen as incarnating evil or oppression in general’, then its fall ‘always liberates forces larger than what the fall, as a concrete event, can master: as the regime was seen as a symbol of oppression in general, all oppressed groups in society live for the moment in the illusion that all unfulfilled demands—in any domain—are going to be met’.<sup>102</sup> These remarks lead to one final point concerning the notion of fullness.

The discussion of the Laclauian subject, fullness, and radical investment in this chapter has refrained from contesting Laclau’s appropriation of Lacanian theory. But there is one point that merits attention. Although, as noted at the beginning of this section, the concept of fantasy does not feature in Laclau’s exposition of his theory, there is a term in Laclau’s own theoretical vocabulary that comes close to reflecting an aspect of fantasy, namely, ‘ideology’. Laclau writes that ideology ‘[consists] of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, the impossibility of any ultimate suture’.<sup>103</sup> But given this definition, every investment in a particularity as the incarnation of fullness must be seen as ideological, since, as Maeve Cooke has noted, the ‘cohesive power’ of a hegemonic identity over a chain of equivalence between a plurality of groups ‘[depend] on the illusion that a particular representation of the universal is adequate to it; without this illusion the chain of equivalence would disintegrate’.<sup>104</sup> For hegemonic politics to be possible, something particular has to be made to be universal and something that is impossible to attain has to be made to appear as attainable. With this, Laclau has effectively incorporated one aspect of fantasy in his account

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<sup>101</sup> Laclau, ‘Glimpsing the Future’, pp. 317–18.

<sup>102</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘Power and Social Communication’, *Ethical Perspectives*, 7.2–3 (2000), 139–45 (p. 92).

<sup>103</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 92.

<sup>104</sup> Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 102.



of radical investment, an aspect that has been succinctly expressed by Žižek. In fantasy, the ontologically impossible fullness is transmuted from ‘the *impossible* into the *prohibited*. [...] [T]he real-impossible changes into something *possible*, i.e., into something that cannot be reached, not because of its inherent impossibility but simply because access to it is hindered by the external barrier of a prohibition’.<sup>105</sup> The corollary of the Laclauian thesis that a particular hegemonic body becomes an object of passionate attachment because it is believed to incarnate fullness is that the *impossibility* of fullness has to be ‘positivized’ into an obstacle whose overcoming would appear to be possible for the ‘investors’. If the instance of radical investment elevates a certain particularity, some particular cause, into the promise of fullness, it simultaneously makes a particular ontic object the incarnation of the obstacle whose overcoming will deliver the promise, even though fullness is ontologically impossible. This latter particularity too, therefore, becomes something in the order of an empty signifier.

Neither a political objective to be achieved nor the motivation to achieve it could be conceived without incorporating the aspect of fantasy outlined above: the project toward fullness, such as the struggle against oppression, will always be directed at a particular enemy that is believed to be an incarnation of ‘pure anti-community’ or ‘pure evil’. And because radical investment presupposes that a particular struggle to eradicate a particular enemy is turned into a universal struggle under a historical circumstance, by Laclau’s own terms, ideological misrecognition of a particularity as universal becomes the necessary condition of a project of extensive social change. Laclau maintains, in one of his most post-Marxist propositions, that an investment in a particularity that renders it universal is a necessary illusion, ‘a dimension of society which cannot be suppressed’.<sup>106</sup> For Laclau, what classical Marxism regards as false consciousness and fetishism not only harmless, but are necessary

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<sup>105</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 116.

<sup>106</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology’, *MLN*, 112.3 (1997), 297–321 (p. 303).

conditions of any social order and social change. The question of whether it is in fact harmless to allow an ideological distortion to orient and sustain political processes toward the institution of a new order has elicited responses from several commentators, both positive (such as Maeve Cooke) and negative (such as Martin Hägglund). Although some of the critical responses shall be outlined in the next chapter, the key issue, in the end, is that of novelty. Antonio Gramsci once described a crisis as a historical interregnum during which ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’.<sup>107</sup> Rephrased in terms of hegemony theory, the proliferation of dislocations in the existing order would be the characteristic of the ‘old’ that is dying. The institution of a different hegemonic formation should, then, correspond to the birth of the ‘new’. However, it will be seen that it is unclear whether hegemony theory leaves room for a conceptual distinction between processes of modification and processes of transformation that has been central to the Badiouian account of change, a distinction without which the novelty of the social order that will have been achieved through hegemonic processes may be underdetermined.

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<sup>107</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 556.

## Chapter 4. Repression and novelty in the institution of a different order

### 4.1 Repression and order

#### 4.1.1 The totalitarian dimension of hegemony

In his critical study of post-Marxist theories, Geoff Boucher claims that because hegemony theory supposes that every social order is ‘fundamentally constructed upon exclusion and marginalization, the real question [in hegemonic politics] becomes one of how to swap the leading personnel, rather than whether to transform the social order’.<sup>1</sup> A judgement broadly in line with Boucher’s is made by Molly Rothenberg, when she claims that the ‘failure’ of any hegemony to ‘deliver on its promise [...] establishes the conditions of “bad infinity”, as one group after another occupies the site of power’.<sup>2</sup> It is plausible that the way in which the structure of a hegemonic formation is conceived, as always limited and exclusionary, should have repercussions on the kind of social change that is thinkable under hegemony theory—and whatever change is, it cannot be that of just swapping the ‘leading personnel’. This chapter will begin by considering the implications of the thesis that every social order is based on exclusion. Subsequent sections will turn to the issue of novelty. Investigations of the reasons behind the disagreement between Laclau and Žižek—Badiou shall receive a mention as well—apropos the nature and extent of the break between the old and new orders will pave the way to the two key claims of this chapter. First, it is a strength of hegemony theory that it incorporates into the theorization of social change the fact that a process of change will always be partly limited by its situatedness in a particular historical circumstance. Second, having broken with the idea that a process of change proceeds from a total break with the existing

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<sup>1</sup> Boucher, pp. 231–32.

<sup>2</sup> Molly Anne Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), p. 150.

order, hegemony theory is led to propose that a socially transformative process is always conditioned by a kernel of particularity that is ineliminable and whose displacement is limited, and that this qualification generates ambiguities concerning the novelty that is achieved in the transition between hegemonic formations.

In his *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund defends, from a broadly Derridean perspective, the thesis of the inescapable corruptibility to which every finite existence is exposed. Hägglund commends Laclau for having reflected the political implication of this thesis in his ‘hyperpolitical thinking’, which affirms that ‘nothing (no set of values, no principles, no demands or political struggle) can be posited as good in itself’.<sup>3</sup> However, Hägglund proceeds to argue that the desire for fullness is incompatible with the desire of democracy as Laclau himself had defined it, and that it renders every investment in a political cause totalitarian. It is not the tension between democracy and totalitarianism *per se* that is of interest in this chapter—and neither is it for Hägglund, in the end—but the significance of the repressive dimension that Hägglund believes that any hegemonic process based on radical investment is bound to imply. That, with *On Populist Reason*, Laclau may have ‘changed his position from “radical democracy” to populism’, reducing democracy ‘to the moment of democratic demand *within* the system’ rather than construing it as the process of extensive social transformative *per se*,<sup>4</sup> is irrelevant, in so far as the theory of radical investment that underpins both remains constant. Hägglund summarizes the rationale behind radical investment as follows:

Given that a particular finite object cannot answer to what we really desire [...], it must be regarded as the incarnation of fullness in order to become an object of libidinal investment. Accordingly, there can be no political struggle without a radical investment in a particular content or a particular body,

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> It is Slavoj Žižek who has suggested that Laclau shifts away, in *On Populist Reason*, from radical democracy he had defended in his earlier works. See: Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 325. Laclau himself, however, has denied a shift in his position.

which allows it to take on a hegemonic function. As Laclau maintains, 'hegemony is nothing more than the investment, in a partial object, of a fullness which will always evade us'.<sup>5</sup>

A tension emerges because of the definitions of democracy and totalitarianism that Laclau offers. As Laclau sees it, democracy 'involves the institutionalization of its own openness and, in that sense, the injunction to identify with its ultimate impossibility'. In contrast to democracy, which repudiates 'the illusion of taking us beyond' the impossibility of a fully reconciled order, totalitarianism is characterized by Laclau as founded on the equation of a 'particular content with the fullness of absolute justice'.<sup>6</sup> The tension is apparent: the kind of equation between particularity and universality that characterizes totalitarianism appears to be exactly what occurs in radical investment, which, Hägglund notes, is made because some particular project is 'believed' by the subjects to 'restore an infinite fullness to society'.<sup>7</sup> In so far as radical investment is 'predicated on the illusion that the political cause is fully universal', Hägglund writes that the 'radical investor'—the Laclauian subject—must necessarily remain oblivious to the fact that the object that has received its investment is particular, 'finite', and 'contingent', since, for the investor, the hegemonic body has to become '*all there is*',<sup>8</sup> or, as Laclau himself had put it, 'the ultimate historical horizon, which cannot be split into its two dimensions, universal and particular'.<sup>9</sup> The outcome that Hägglund regards as unavoidable is that someone who is passionately attached to a hegemonic body 'cannot listen to any arguments saying that it exercises illegitimate exclusions or is in need of revision'.<sup>10</sup> What hegemony theory proposes as the desire that underpins every process of hegemonic totalizations is indistinguishable from the totalitarian desire for the closure of the social.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Hägglund, 'Time, Desire, Politics: A Reply to Ernesto Laclau', *Diacritics*, 38.1–2 (2008), 190–99 (p. 195). The quote from Laclau appears in: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 198.

<sup>9</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 226.

<sup>10</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 198.

Hägglund emphasizes that the solution is not to oppose ‘good’ democratic desire from ‘bad’ totalitarian desire, which is premised on an essential difference between good and bad—Hägglund concurs with Laclau that any political struggle, regardless of its normative content, is underpinned by a homologous libidinal economy.<sup>11</sup> What Hägglund proposes, rather, is that political desire *as such* is not a desire for fullness—a desire for completion and closure—but a desire for ‘something temporal’, a desire for a finite body that ‘remain[s] open to its own alteration’.<sup>12</sup> Only then could a desire for democracy *as democratic* be conceived.

A broadly similar point apropos the totalitarian dimension of hegemony is made by Rothenberg, who observes, in the course of a broader Lacanian critique of Laclau’s concept of the empty signifier, that it is ‘nothing more than a fantasy that the aggregate of the points of identification seized upon by each subject cohere as the same object’ that sustains an equivalential relation between a plurality of identities in a formation.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Laclauian account of hegemonic totalization harbours the possibility that the ineliminable ‘fact of the differences between individuals’ would ‘[give] the repressive authority ammunition for discipline and punishment for deviations from the fantasized sameness of the group members’.<sup>14</sup> An example of the kind of totalitarian implication that Rothenberg brings to attention can be drawn from the description of the artistic regime of socialist realism provided by Žižek. According to Žižek, the task of art as the officially sanctioned artistic regime of the Soviet Union was to ‘depict “typical” heroes in “typical situations’’. Writers who presented a ‘predominantly bleak picture of the Soviet reality were not accused simply of lying—the accusation was that they provided a distorted reflection of social reality by focusing on phenomena which were not “typical”, which were sad remainders of the past’.<sup>15</sup> In this

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<sup>11</sup> Hägglund, ‘Time, Desire, Politics’, p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Rothenberg, p. 143.

<sup>14</sup> Rothenberg, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 174–75.

example, the meaning of ‘typical’, instead of reflecting plural experiences, is fixed to a particular content, and effectively turns into a grounds for repression.

As the above passages have merely stated only partial elements of the broader criticisms and alternative proposals advanced by Hägglund and Rothenberg, the discussion below is offered not so much as a direct response to their criticisms than as a clarification of the implications of the thesis that every order is founded on exclusion, with the aim of shifting the issue from that of repression to that of novelty. Laclau, unlike either Badiou or Rancière, does not identify politics *per se* with emancipatory politics, and it is indeed an internal possibility of hegemonic politics for it to be repressive or totalitarian. However, to claim that Laclau’s positing of fullness as the objective of any hegemonic politics precludes democracy as a real political possibility because hegemony necessarily presupposes a repressive dimension would be an overstatement. Laclau’s reflections on the conditions of systematic totality have suggested that the closure that is implied in his account of fullness as an ideological distortion that is necessary for a project toward social change to emerge. A hegemonic process, emancipatory or not, is the actualization of certain possibilities and the repression of others, in so far as its task is to institute a new order. That there are possibilities that threaten an order cannot be denied without conferring upon that order an immutable being. But since the being of a social order is not immutable, that an order needs to repress certain possibilities has nothing whatsoever to do with whether that order is democratic or totalitarian, but rather with the mere fact that the being of a particular order is contingent, thus inescapably exposed to the possibility of its negation. Repression, on those terms, is an ontological category, and it would be a mistake to directly infer from the ontological necessity of repression in the constitution of any particular order the varying ways repression could be manifest concretely. Drawing from repression in the ontological sense the conclusion that a given normative order is totalitarian would be possible only if the ‘ontic’ differences between

normative orders were neglected. It is possible to discern in the circularity that is involved at the moment of institution of a normative order such as deliberative democracy repression in the ontological sense. The right to participate as equals in deliberation is a precondition of deliberative democracy. Yet, in so far as it is the precondition of deliberation, the right to participate as equals cannot itself be the outcome of democratic deliberative procedure. At the moment of its institution, a decision to bestow that right on the participations of deliberation has to be made. This implies that any attempt to institute deliberative democracy is an attempt to institute a particular order that necessarily excludes—‘illegitimately’, by its own normative standards—some possibilities. Allowing the actualization of what it ‘illegitimately’ excludes as a legitimate option—the *denial* of the equal right to deliberation, for example—would render the order to become other than itself: undemocratic. It can be said that the ‘subject’ of deliberative democracy has made a radical investment in elevating deliberative democracy, which is a particularity, as universal, when it is in fact both contingent as it can be negated, and only partially universal, as it is based on exclusion.

Laclau states that ‘there is no permanent attachment between the signifier of fullness and the various objects incarnating it’.<sup>16</sup> Hegemony always establishes an order with a limit, for any order maintains itself as such through an exclusion of possibilities that those invested in it cannot entertain as an acceptable alternative—at least not until they come to experience profound dislocations that place in doubt the demarcation between credible and incredible, acceptable and unacceptable, options. But since actual fullness is impossible, every order is exposed to the possibility of an encounter with its inherent limit, the real of antagonism, irrespective of whether those invested in the order had been willing to ‘listen’—the other arrives irrespective of the ethical stance toward alterity that one has taken and the experience of undecidability is the inescapable condition of finitude. As seen previously, Laclau suggests

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<sup>16</sup> Laclau, ‘Glimpsing the Future’, p. 300.



that following the success of a hegemonic project against oppression, ‘all oppressed groups in society live for the moment in the illusion that all unfulfilled demands—in any domain—are going to be met’.<sup>17</sup> The illusion ends when some demands fail to be fulfilled even under the newly instituted order following the fall of oppression, which then could be articulated into an equivalential chain, propelling a renewed political cause—what the ‘content’ of these demands will be and how it will be processed is a matter that cannot be determined *a priori*. If full satisfaction—which would be what a permanent attachment of the investor to a particular order presupposes—implies an end to any further social change, then disappointment, like dislocation that is in the first instance a traumatic experience, is to be seen not solely as a cause for cynicism and resignation, but also as the condition of an open-ended future. And it is how open the future is that is of question.

#### 4.1.2 Moving toward the question of novelty

The distinction between democratic and totalitarian orders requires analyses of particular orders and their constitution, and the ways in which dislocations are handled and the limits are treated, which will always be specific to each order. These, the Laclauian approach leaves as matters befitting empirical analysis. This does not mean that the aforementioned observations from Hägglund and Rothenberg are entirely misguided. There is a kind repression operative in hegemonic processes that is problematic, namely, the *continual* repression of *certain* possibilities in the transition between hegemonic formations, for this concerns the novelty that is achieved in the institution of a new order. The question of novelty shall begin to be developed by relating Laclau’s theory to the Badiouian approach.

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<sup>17</sup> Laclau, ‘Power and Social Communication’, p. 142.

Ed Pluth writes that ‘the name of an event [...] is an empty signifier for the inhabitants of the situation’ that ‘has no referent as far as the situation is concerned. A subjectivation occurs when an inhabitant of a situation starts to bring this name into relation to other multiples in the situation, forcing its presence in the situation’.<sup>18</sup> Although the term ‘empty signifier’ employed by Pluth in this statement does not warrant an immediate equation with the term as it features in hegemony theory, it is not the case that there is no relation between the two at all. Laclau duly acknowledges that his notion of the empty signifier is based on the Lacanian notion of *point de capiton*, which has in fact been compared to the name of the event by Žižek in his reading of the Badiouian text, wherein it is suggested that intervention and eventual nomination as conceived by Badiou is tantamount to the intervention of the ‘Master’, who, ‘by producing a new *point de capiton*, Master-Signifier, reconfigures the symbolic field via the reference to the new Event’.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Jelica Šumič goes one step further by offering a straightforward Badiouian redescription of the Laclauian empty signifier as something that is ‘offered to all’—as ‘a signifier of the pure cancellation of all difference’—and whose referents ‘will have been filled’ in a new situation:

Empty signifier is the name that has no referent in the situation. Such names are terms which ‘will have been presented’ in a new situation, in the situation considered, hypothetically, as transformed by the hegemonic intervention.

<sup>18</sup> Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 164.

Laclau’s acknowledgement of Lacan’s influence is found, among other places, in the introduction to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle*: Laclau and Mouffe, p. xi.

Lacan’s analysis of language shows that what is required for a cohesive experience or effect of meaning to emerge from a chain of signifiers—words and deeds—is an intervention of a signifier that totalizes other signifiers in the signifying chain by referring them to a common point of reference: itself. This signifier, the *point de capiton*, could be said to be a signifier without a particular signified of its own—in this respect it is a ‘pure signifier’, which is how Badiou describes the name of an event—because it exhausts its role in its function, which is to ‘to stop the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification [*arrête le glissement autrement indéfini de la signification*]’. The *point de capiton* consists the signification a chain of signifier can provide and gives rise—to borrow Žižek’s description apropos Badiou’s account of interventional nomination—to a ‘new readability of the situation’. The Laclauian notion of an empty signifier draws from Lacanian theory the idea that the fixing of the relations between elements into a formation—allowing thereby the stabilization of meaning—is achieved by a particularity that is detached from of its particularity, or ‘emptied’ of its particular signified.

The formulation from Lacan cited above is found in: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 681/805.

The empty signifier is a term which creates its referent. Empty signifiers upset established significations, so as to leave the referent empty, in a place that will have been filled in a new situation. The production of an empty signifier is an absolutely creative moment, a moment with no links to what is already established: the transformation of an anonymous, perfectly insignificant proper name (say, Perón, to use Laclau's example) into a representative of the Whole.<sup>20</sup>

In Badiou's theory, this new situation is the outcome of forcing a truth, by which a situation is extended by multiples that are unrepresentable under its prevailing representative regime. If a truth, in its being, is initially an anonymous excrescence none of whose elements are presented in the situation but is a representation of situation that is yet to-come, hence something akin to a promise, then fullness—the dimension of 'mythical totality' that is always perceived by the subject as absent—is, as suggested in the previous chapter, its closest counterpart in hegemony theory. As the trajectory of the Laclauian subject runs from dislocation to the achievement of objective social identities or the production of subject-positions, it can be said that the referents that 'what will have been presented' in a social order reconfigured by hegemonic processes are plurality of new subject-positions—this is compatible with what has been proposed as an interpretation of the transformative effects of a truth as that of adding previously non-constructible multiples to a situation. The question that should be directed at hegemony theory is how it conceives the novelty of the reconfigured order and the elements that will have been presented in it. In the passage below, Laclau speaks of the novelty of a hegemonic formation:

The passage from one hegemonic formation, or popular configuration, to another will always involve a radical break, a *creatio ex nihilo*. It is not that all the elements of an emerging configuration have to be entirely new, but rather that the articulating point, the partial object around which the

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<sup>20</sup> Jelica Šumič, 'Anachronism of Emancipation or Fidelity to Politics', in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 182–98 (p. 193).

hegemonic formation is reconstituted as a new totality, does not derive its central role from any logic already operating within the preceding situation. Here we are close to Lacan's *passage à l'acte*, which has been central in recent discussions concerning the ethics of the Real. As Alenka Zupančič claims, 'the *Aktus der Freiheit*, the "act of freedom", the genuine ethical act, is always subversive; it is never simply the result of an "improvement" or a "reform".<sup>21</sup>

Expressions such as 'radical break', '*creatio ex nihilo*', and 'act of freedom' with which he describes the transition from one hegemonic formation to another, taken together, may be suitable as a characterization of radical investment in one of its dimensions, namely, that it is a 'pure decision' by which a particular project is affirmed as a universal project that, Laclau asserts, is grounded, in the 'final instance', on the singularity of the decision alone. That no principle according to which a new order would be ordered is necessitated by the previous order, hence that the previous order does not determine the elements that will have been articulated in a new order, ensures that the transition from the previous order to another will be the establishment of an order that is new. And yet, whilst asserting that a decision is in the 'final instance' grounded solely on its singularity, Laclau adds the qualification that 'social agents never act in that final instance'.<sup>22</sup> The same kind of qualifications repeatedly surface in Laclau's theorization of the transition between hegemonic formations. Perhaps this is indicative of the sober realism of the theorist who has chastised other thinkers—Slavoj Žižek, in particular—for their 'r-r-revolutionary' pretensions.<sup>23</sup> But such qualifications are also the source of difficulty for specifying exactly what makes the transition between hegemonic formations the emergence of a new order.

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<sup>21</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Laclau, 'Constructing Universality', p. 289.

## 4.2 The conceptual determination of a process of transformation

### 4.2.1 Break and continuity in the transition between different formations

As seen in the passage quoted above, Laclau maintains that not all elements of a newly emerging formation have to be ‘new’ for its emergence to be deemed as a ‘radical break’ from the previous formation, as long as the core of the new formation—the hegemonic identity, empty signifier, which Šumič has likened to the name of an event—is the recipient of radical investment, a decision by which a particular object is elevated into an incarnation of fullness with which it is incommensurable. However, when one begins to examine the conditions under which a particularity is able to become the core of a hegemonic formation and the ways in which ‘new’ elements could be distinguished from ‘old’ elements, matters become complicated, and what ‘radical break’ actually means for social change under hegemony theory becomes unclear. Despite Laclau’s acknowledgement that he bases his theory of radical investment on the reading of the Lacanian theory of sublimation by Joan Copjec, there is a point at which Laclau must diverge from her reading. The interpretation at which Copjec, who tends to emphasize the drive’s *indifference* to its object, arrives in the end is that the satisfaction the subject derives from the object of drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the particular quality of the object itself, but depends entirely on the relation between the subject and the object.<sup>24</sup> Even though satisfaction is sought in the object of drive because fullness is absent, the indifference of drive to its object means that an object is able to deliver satisfaction irrespective of its particularistic qualities. But this is an interpretation that goes in a direction that Laclau cannot follow, for he must attribute some weight on the side of the object and allow radical investment to be conditioned by some particular qualities of the object. This is because unless the particular qualities of an object had some bearing on its being the object with which subjects in fact identify, the strategic activity of presenting particular discourses

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<sup>24</sup> See: Copjec, chap. 1.

and political causes as the promise of fullness would be superfluous, and render the place of intentional agency, which Laclau prefers to preserve and some regard as an advantage of his approach, highly ambiguous. Not every particularity is a live candidate for radical investment. And this point, Laclau will indeed confirm. The supposition that any particularity could be a hegemonic identity would be tantamount, for all practical purposes, to the supposition that the social is a ‘flat’ terrain in which any project toward an alternative order would be as appealing to social agents as any other—a view that Laclau rightly rejects, insisting instead that the social is an ‘uneven’ terrain shaped by normative frameworks, practices, and power relations, that would have achieved varying degrees of sedimentation.

Expressions such as ‘*creatio ex nihilo*’, ‘genuine ethical act’, or ‘absolutely creative’ describe the transubstantiation of a particularity into an incarnation of fullness that occurs in the transition between hegemonic formations. What these expressions do not imply is that ‘what will have been presented’ or become actualized as a consequence presupposes a total break in which nothing in the old constrains the new—and it is precisely the latter point that is affirmed by Laclau when he asserts that dislocation does not lead to a ‘psychotic universe’ wherein ‘*everything* becomes possible or that *all* symbolic frameworks disappear’,<sup>25</sup> thereby placing a constraint on the extent by which the old is dissolved. Predictably, the result of this constraint is a limitation on what a political project can hope to achieve under a given historical circumstance. Even though a process of change has to begin with a breakdown in the existing order, the extent of this breakdown is always partial, and the possibilities for change that are opened up are proportional to the extent of the breakdown. Thus, Laclau writes that the ‘more points of dislocation a structure has, the greater the expansion of the field of politics will be’, such that the outcome of hegemonic processes will become less determined by the present

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<sup>25</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, pp. 42–43.

state of affairs.<sup>26</sup> But in so far as the indeterminacy of outcome is insufficient as a conceptual determination of the novelty of the ‘elements of an emerging configuration’ that will have come to replace the old, it remains to be examined whether hegemony theory provides that further determination. In subsequent paragraphs, Laclau’s position will be contrasted with that of Slavoj Žižek, who has appealed to the notion of *passage á l’acte*—to which Laclau had alluded in a previously quoted passage—in formulating his account of revolutionary change. Žižek’s idea of the revolutionary ‘act’ has been much maligned by his critics. The brief discussion of the Žižekian act below is not intended to clarify or defend Žižek’s position, but will only serve as a point of contrast between Laclau and Žižek (and, briefly, Badiou), which, by highlighting the reasons for Laclau’s rejection of what he perceives to be Žižek’s position, lead toward a discussion of the strengths and the difficulties of Laclau’s own position apropos his theorization of the novelty of a new hegemonic formation in the next section.<sup>27</sup>

In his critique of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Žižek insists that a distinction has to be maintained between ‘a mere “performative reconfiguration”, a subversive displacement which remains *within* the hegemonic field’—Žižek likens such displacements to ‘an internal guerrilla war’—and ‘the much more radical *act* of a thorough reconfiguration of the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity’.<sup>28</sup> If hegemonic politics that is inspired by the Gramscian image of ‘war of positions’ falls under the former, what Žižek proposes to maintain is the idea of a revolutionary, radical ‘act’ of ‘wiping the slate clean’ for the advent of a new order. Žižek’s notion of the act alludes to a distinction made by Lacan between *passage á l’acte* and ‘acting out’. Although both are impulsive and violent actions of the subject, Lacan explains that acting out is still ‘an appeal

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<sup>26</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> For a reasoned defence of Žižek’s position, see: Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Žižek has responded to criticisms of the idea of the radical act in: Slavoj Žižek, ‘With Defenders like These, Who Needs Attackers?’, in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 197–225.

<sup>28</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 264.

to the Other', an attempt to be recognized by the Other (as in a child's tantrum), whereas *passage à l'acte* amounts to an 'exit' from 'the *stage* of the Other where man as subject has to be constituted'.<sup>29</sup> The outcome of *passage à l'acte*, then, is the dissolution of the subject whose social existence is conditional on representation by a signifier in the discourse of the Other. The dissolution of the subject, as Župančič writes, is temporary, as it has an 'after': 'After an act, I am "not the same as before". In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn [...]; the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse of the subject'.<sup>30</sup> About this 'after', Lorenzo Chiesa explains further:

[W]hat [...] Lacan deems possible on the individual level, and which accounts for the extraordinary importance he attaches to the mythical examples of symbolic death, is a *temporary* separation from the Symbolic—a momentary desubjectivizing permanence in the Real/void-of-the-Symbolic, an undoing of fantasy—which is logically followed by a new symbolic reinscription.<sup>31</sup>

Žižek takes these ideas and recasts them in his notion of the radical act. The moment of the act is the moment of 'the self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of its links with "reality"'.<sup>32</sup> Only by subtracting itself from symbolically mediated reality and whatever that passes as objective historical tendencies can the subject be reborn as the bearer of a revolutionary project. For Lacan, an act is not the outcome of deliberation or self-conscious reflection—it is experienced by the 'enacting' individual as though it were something miraculous that had befallen him. There is some uncertainty regarding the extent to which the radical act as proposed by Žižek could be unintentional, but Žižek, in the end, seems to incline toward the Lacanian position. What an act definitely is not, in any case, is an

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X: Anxiety*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by A. R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), pp. 116–25.

<sup>30</sup> Župančič, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), pp. 148–49.

<sup>32</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 153–54.



outcome of analysis, prediction, or strategy, as evinced by Žižek recommendation that '[w]e simply *have to accept the risk* that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization—there is no short cut here, and no guarantee of a successful outcome either'.<sup>33</sup> As Žižek acknowledges, the radical act shares several affinities with the Badiouian event. Both are unpredictable and almost miraculous occurrences that suspend every mechanism that regulates the situation, and are unforeseeable in their consequences. Both radically transform those that are subjected to it: the human animal has the chance of becoming a subject of a truth through its exposure to an event, whilst the subject is reborn in the aftermath of an act. And finally, an act is 'not simply an act of outrage, a word of defiance launched at the Other' but 'also an act of the creation of the Other (a different Other)'. The sense in which the different symbolic order that emerges subsequent to an act is new, Zupančič explains, is in fact captured by Badiou in his description of the consequences of a truth as that of transforming 'codes of communication' and 'rules of opinions' such that 'they become other', rendering previously evident judgements no longer sustainable.<sup>34</sup> Despite these significant affinities that have led some commentators to categorize Badiou and Žižek together as proponents of a 'politics of the real', in the postscript to *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou offers a brief remark that hints that there is an aspect of the Badiouian account of eventual change against which the idea of the radical act stands in tension. On Žižek's thought of the radical act, Badiou remarks that it is 'so ephemeral, so brutally punctual, that it is impossible to uphold its consequences'. According to Badiou, the 'effects of this kind of frenzied upsurge are ultimately indiscernible from those of scepticism'.<sup>35</sup> The aspect in Žižek's idea of the act that would elicit a response such as this from Badiou should be considered, as it both highlights the contribution of Badiou's thought and foreshadows Laclau's own position apropos the thought of a total break.

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<sup>33</sup> Žižek, 'Lenin's Choice', p. 225.

<sup>34</sup> Zupančič, p. 204.

<sup>35</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 563.

As Bruno Bosteels has emphasized, Badiou's concern is 'not only the ontological delimitation of the event in terms of a fulgurating cut, or a punctual encounter of the real, but also its logical and topological inscription at the heart of a given situation'.<sup>36</sup> In *Saint Paul*, Badiou writes that 'an event always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a "no...but"', with 'no' referring to 'the potential dissolution of closed particularities (whose name is the "law")', and the 'but' indicating 'the task, the faithful labour, of which the subjects of the process opened by the event [...] are co-workers'.<sup>37</sup> An event is a beginning of a process, not the instant of the wholesale negation of the present, and fidelity is a protracted process that takes place in a situation that Badiou affirms is something to be transformed through the supplementation of a truth rather than destroyed. In the case of the radical act, it seems that it can only be hoped that some gesture that severs the subject from the way that it has hitherto been attached to reality will have made it into a revolutionary subject and that it will be subsequently followed 'the emergence of the "New Harmony" sustained by a newly emerged Master-Signifier', that is, by a radically transformed symbolic order.<sup>38</sup> But if the new order that will have come to be in so far as the act 'succeeds' presupposes a total break from the preceding order, it is difficult to conceive the connection between an act and the particular order that it will have subsequently brought about as anything other than as accidental. Thus, from a Badiouian perspective, what is absent in Žižek's thought is a distinction between a new order whose transformation has been effected by a truth, as a process, and new order whose emergence is accidental. It may be the case that Žižek is prepared to fully embrace the paradox in the idea of radical transformation, that a transformation that is truly radical, by transforming the very criteria by which transformation is identified, makes itself unrecognizable. But one of the most significant contributions of Badiou's theorization of truth through the resources of

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<sup>36</sup> Bosteels, p. 176.

<sup>37</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, pp. 67–68.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 154.

set-theoretical ontology is that it makes radical change intelligible as a process. Even if a truth, as such, is, by definition, beyond knowledge, its transformative effects on the situation—such as the production of novelty, the reconfiguration of the coordinates of what is deemed possible and impossible, sensible and insensible, and so on—are not beyond rigorous conceptualization. The rest of this chapter will turn to Laclau's theorization of the extent of the break between the old and the new and the process by which novelty is actually introduced.

#### 4.2.2 The particularity of a hegemonic project

An act of identification taken by a subject is a creative act, which, Laclau claims, is a decision that is ultimately groundlessness. Alluding Kierkegaard, Laclau writes a moment of decision is a 'moment of madness' that is analogous to 'impersonating God', where God is understood as that being who does not have to give an 'account of his actions before any tribunal of reason because He is the source of rationality'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is affirmed that a 'true decision escapes always what any rule can hope to subsume under itself', that it 'cannot be *ultimately* grounded in anything external to itself' and 'has to be grounded in itself, in its own singularity'.<sup>40</sup> Statements such as these seem to suggest that Laclau's position is not far from those of Badiou and Žižek in defending the singularity of a decision in radical break. Laclau, however, immediately hedges the description of decision with the qualification that the madness of *human* decision always falls short of that of an omnipotent God, thereby distancing himself from pure decisionism. Human beings, it is asserted, are 'mortal gods' for whom 'the madness of decision is [...] a regulated one'.<sup>41</sup> In what sense a decision is regulated, firstly, is that the range of what is decidable is limited. Because the Laclauian subject is neither an agent

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<sup>39</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', p. 55.

<sup>41</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 57.

of absolute creation nor an omnipotent chooser, ‘the range of what is thinkable and decidable’ is always limited in any concrete situation.<sup>42</sup> What limits the range of the thinkable and the decidable is the background of sedimented values, ideas, and beliefs, from which social agents, even in their condition as subjects thrown up by events of dislocation, cannot entirely be freed. Without such a background, one would have no reason to choose a particular course of action over others. That a decision be able to be presented as reasonable, or as ‘preferable to other decisions’,<sup>43</sup> is a thesis that Laclau will need to retain if political activity involves, as he believes is the case, engagements in a concrete setting, whose means include argumentation and persuasion. From this theoretical perspective, it will appear that Žižek has posited the possibility of an absolute separation from historical circumstances, the *Sittlichkeit* of the community, that comprise a certain stratum of ‘facticity’ that, though not immutable, is never completely subverted. Laclau chastises Žižek for using politics as merely a means to elaborate psychoanalytic concepts, and thus failing to offer a ‘truly *political* reflection’. When Žižek does attempt to identify the ‘protagonists of what he sees as true revolutionary action’, it is based on ‘grotesquely misinformed’ analyses of social reality that verge on ‘pure delirium’.<sup>44</sup> For he holds that the assertion that ‘everything is contingent’ is one that would ‘only make sense for an inhabitant of Mars’, it comes as no surprise when Laclau reprimands Žižek for ‘waiting for Martians’.<sup>45</sup> But if Laclau believes his position is more down to earth, it is exposed to its own set of difficulties—one that concerns the conceptual determination of the ‘vertical’ dimension.

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<sup>42</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 133–34.

<sup>43</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 31. Also: Laclau, ‘Constructing Universality’, p. 289.

<sup>44</sup> Laclau, ‘Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics’, p. 680. Also: Laclau, ‘Constructing Universality’, p. 289.

<sup>45</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 27. Also: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 232. For Žižek’s response, see: Slavoj Žižek, ‘Schlagend, Aber Nicht Treffend!’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.1 (2006), 185–211.

Corollary to the suggestion that a stratum of facticity—deeply sedimented beliefs and practices—regulates radical investment is the idea that the emergence and effectivity of a new hegemonic formation is conditional on the *availability* of particular projects as candidates of radical investment, as well as their *credibility*, which ‘will not be granted if [their] proposals clash with the basic principles informing the organization of a group’.<sup>46</sup> Such conditions for the elevation of a particularity into a hegemonic one is described in terms of power: ‘The ability of a group to assume a function of universal representation presupposes that it is in a better position than other groups to assume this role, so that power is unevenly distributed between various organisms and social sectors’.<sup>47</sup> In conjunction with the interpretation of hegemony theory in the previous chapter, especially of the statement that the ‘constitution of a social identity is an act of power’ and that ‘identity as such *is* power’, it must be concluded that the power of a particularity—a particular group, project, or cause—to become hegemonic, hence its power to repress certain possibilities whilst actualizing others, derives from the sedimented normative frameworks and practices of a social order. If this is the case, it seems to follow that, whilst processes by which a social order is reconfigured may result in changes in the identity of all of the elements involved, including the element that embodies the hegemonic function of universal representation (this much is simply entailed by Laclau’s structuralist premise that ‘relations’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous), whatever change a hegemonic identity may undergo cannot be as extensive as to divest it of what Maeve Cooke has described as its ‘cohesive power’ that it acquires from the sedimented background, for this would amount to the negation of its ability to continue to remain as the object of political desire. Laclau maintains that ‘[t]here is not, on the one hand, a purely empty signifier and, on the other, an incorporated one. The two of them are exactly the same’.<sup>48</sup> There is ‘no

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<sup>46</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>47</sup> Laclau, ‘Structure, History and the Political’, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Laclau, ‘Glimpsing the Future’, p. 318.

universality that operates as pure universality', he asserts, for there is only 'the relative universalization created by expanding the chain of equivalences around a central particularistic core'.<sup>49</sup> It would be inaccurate, therefore, to say that an empty signifier can be 'emptied' completely even in principle. Accordingly, it is the implications of the 'particularistic core' that is retained in a processes of social change that must be examined.

Referring to the Polish *Solidarność* (which, incidentally, is mentioned by Badiou as possibly having been an event), Laclau explains that although its particular set of demands was the locus of 'equivalential associations vaster than themselves', those demands were 'still linked to a certain programmatic content—it was precisely that contact which made it possible to maintain a certain coherence between the particularities integrating the chain'.<sup>50</sup> In the hypothetical case where the 'empty signifier becomes entirely empty', hegemonic identity would not determine in any way what is articulated into the chain of equivalence that expands around itself, and 'the most contradictory contents' could be articulated into the chain. Such a chain would be 'extremely fragile', Laclau claims, as 'potential antagonism between contradictory contents can break out at any moment'.<sup>51</sup> It must be inferred that the articulation into the chain of heterogeneous positions—as that which is 'counted' in a hegemonic formation—does not induce an extensive transformation of the chain as a whole, such that these positions would have retroactively been made to override their contradictory contents in order to maintain the consistency of the hegemonic formation. It only follows, then, in a *sustainable* hegemonic formation (which is the only kind that really matters, after all), 'once a set of core links has been established', the expansion of the equivalential chain becomes limited, as there are some 'links that would simply be incompatible with the remainders of particularity which are already part of the chain'. An empty signifier in this sense becomes

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<sup>49</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', p. 208.

<sup>50</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 217.

<sup>51</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 217.

‘imprisoned’ by the particularities that it articulates around itself, and ‘is not able to circulate freely’, as those ‘remainders of particularity (of the links of the chain) limit its possible displacements’.<sup>52</sup> It may be conjectured that the trace of particularity that cannot be divested from a hegemonic identity in its function as an empty signifier in fact fulfils a crucial theoretical requirement that issues from the following premise: if, as Laclau claims, no amount of dislocation entails that everything becomes possible, *some* limit with respect to what can be achieved has to be reflected in the transition between hegemonic formations. This is the theoretical requirement that is fulfilled by the stipulation that a hegemonic formation that is sustainable is not open-ended, in as much as the extent of its universality or inclusivity is restrained by some particular content that is the condition of the possibility of its sustainability. The account of social change conceived under hegemony theory therefore reflects the particularity which is preserved in a newly achieved universality as the necessary marker of its having emerged under a certain historical circumstance. This means, conversely, that the concept of an empty signifier that completely divests it of its particularity is tantamount to detaching it from its condition of emergence, thus from any determinate context. Hegemony theory resolves the point of ambiguity that led to questions concerning the transformative potential of a truth procedure by embracing the thesis that what is decidable and achievable is limited: hegemonic universality is always a ‘socially attainable universality’, and the institution of a social order through a hegemonic project, even if it were in some sense ‘more inclusive’ than the superseded order, is conditioned by the particularities of the circumstances from which it had emerged.

A hegemonic process is universalizing but—unlike the generic universality that Badiou ascribes to a truth procedure—does not break entirely from the particularity that it is. Its universality is an always partial universality, hence, it is never, even in principle, ‘offered

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<sup>52</sup> Laclau, ‘The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology’, p. 321.

to all', as Badiou says of a truth, and Šumič, adopting the Badiouian view, had said of the Laclauian empty signifier. What is thereby abandoned in hegemony theory is the aspiration that drives the Badiouian theorization of change, namely, the determination of a process of change that is situated but whose trajectory is unconstrained by the regulatory mechanisms of a situation. There is no reason to regard the attempt in hegemony theory to reflect the limitation that processes of social change, which is stipulated to exist in so far as they occur—as they always do—in concrete historical situations, as something that weakens its theorization of social change. Yet, even if it is conceded that a process of social change can neither begin from a point of total exteriority nor realize the ideal of radical inclusivity in so far as it has as one of its roles the institution of an order and the order that can actually be instituted is conditioned by its situatedness in history, what remains unresolved is the question of the novelty of a transformed order that can be achieved under that given historical circumstance.

#### 4.2.3 The novelty of a new order

The institution of a different order is a process that presupposes investment in some project that is already in possession of what might be regarded as its 'symbolic' power, which it commands due to the sedimented norms and practices at a given time that has made it available and convincing for diverse range of social agents. Because the Laclauian subject makes a radical investment in a particular project in so far as the latter promises to deliver a fullness that is experienced by the subject as lacking, the direction that it will be able to take while preserving itself from the possibility of disintegration is constrained by its own particularity and the desires, beliefs, or normative framework from which the 'investors' it has mobilized cannot completely detach themselves. This seems to imply that a hegemonic project toward the institution of a new order promotes the exclusion of certain positions or possibilities, ones whose repression is the condition, arising from sedimented normative frameworks of the



community, of its becoming hegemonic. This exclusion of certain terms is what ‘particularizes’ a hegemonic project, and imposes a restriction on ‘what will have been presented’ in the order that it succeeds in instituting. It cannot be denied that a hegemonic project restricted in this way would nevertheless result in social change that will ‘solve a variety of partial problems’ as Laclau had written,<sup>53</sup> and lead to an alternative arrangement that overcomes dislocation and lack of identity. What this arrangement will be, and which terms will be included and excluded in that arrangement, is not *determined* by the previous order—and there is no element that is such that it will *necessarily* remain excluded. But what is not precluded even if this point were granted is the possibility that *certain* positions and possibilities will *continue* to be excluded in the new order. It is at this the point that social change as conceived by hegemony theory stands at the greatest distance away from the possibility of incorporating the idea that the Badiouian theorization of politics as a truth procedure is an attempt to realize. As Sam Gillespie has noted, one of the central theoretical objectives of Badiou’s thought is the determination of a process through which ‘situations *necessarily* transform themselves’<sup>54</sup>—it is toward the specification of a transformative process that introduces into the situation elements that would have continued to remain excluded if it were not transformed that the Badiouian account of change based on the supplementation or extension of a situation by a truth built from its void makes its contribution. This theoretical objective is also why, from a Badiouian perspective, it is not satisfactory to just say that the outcome of a hegemonic process is contingent and not necessitated, not determined, by the existing order. Whilst previously excluded elements may come to be included in a new hegemonic formation, this ‘new’ formation, given the way in which the transition between formations is theorized by hegemony

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<sup>53</sup> Ernesto Laclau, ‘The Politics of Rhetoric’, in *Material Events: Paul De Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 229–53 (p. 244).

<sup>54</sup> Gillespie, p. 79.

theory, is not the outcome of a process that necessarily effects the transformation of the preceding formation.

It has been suggested so far that it is unclear how actual outcomes that may be merely reflections of the *status quo* in so far it continues to exclude certain positions and repress certain possibilities are to be distinguished from outcomes that introduce something definitely new into the situation under the framework of hegemony theory. The more one turns to the practical implications of Laclau's position, the more familiar the problem becomes. One of the explanations Laclau offers regarding the possibility of making reasonable arguments for a course of action is the following:

[...] sedimentation of social practices is an *existential* in the Heideggerian sense: it is constitutive of all possible experience. So, to the questions, Why prefer a certain normative order to others? Why invest ethically in certain practices rather than in different ones? The answer can only be a contextual one: Because I live in a world in which people believe in A, B and C, I can argue that the course of action D is better than E; but in a totally presuppositionless situation in which no system of beliefs exists, the question is obviously unanswerable.<sup>55</sup>

It is not the case that this sort of contextual argument for a course of action is limited to deliberation within an established normative framework. The above passage already indicates that the condition of acceptance applies to radical investment (radical investment is synonymous with ethical investment). Indeed, Laclau writes that although radical investment

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<sup>55</sup> Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, p. 134.

Laclau confirms in the sentences that immediately follow the quoted passage that the 'content' of the particularity that comes to incarnate fullness is also conditioned by sedimentation:

In the case of the mystic, as we have seen, the contact with divinity as an absolute beyond all positive determination is followed by a normative investment that is the source of a militant engagement; but it is clear that the particular normative order that is the object of such an investment is not dictated by the content of the mystical experience—which has no content—but by the positive system of religious beliefs—the sedimented practice—within which the mystic lives.

‘looks, on the one side, like a *pure* decision, on the other, it has to be collectively accepted’.<sup>56</sup> Laclau had claimed that the call for a particular course of action, hence the call to actualize certain possibilities, will not be answered if it clashes with the ‘basic principles’ that social agents hold. It is not just the range of what is thinkable and decidable that is limited—the range of what will be actually decided is also limited. With the idea of a collective acceptance of a decision having been made into an influential factor in orienting the actual trajectory of political processes, it is difficult to dispel the suspicion that Laclau’s position has become susceptible to the kind of objection that has often been raised against proceduralist theories, namely, that a procedure of deliberation does not rule out that the possibility that whatever conclusion that is finally validated may merely be a reflection of the *status quo*. The commonly raised problem with proceduralism is—and this is one about which Laclau himself had written—that the acceptance of the validity of a procedure by someone will also depend on the substantive values that he has already accepted. The theory of radical investment implies that there is nothing beyond the particular substantive values in which the subject has invested. Oliver Harrison correctly observes that for Laclau, there is no particular normative order or discourse that is ‘ethically preferable in-itself, and the only basis for deciding as much is through the degree of attachment or “investment” that a people decide to place in it. [...] It is the subject that decides as to what is both ethical and normative, not the discourse theorist’, for whom the ‘the nature of the order chosen’—and this is from Laclau himself—is ‘not relevant’.<sup>57</sup> How actual political consequences that are thinkable under hegemony theory would differ from the consequences foreseeable in proceduralist terms is difficult to see. Indeed, Cooke observes that ‘[i]n appealing to the *Sittlichkeit* of particular communities Laclau avoids the accusation of decisionism, but at the price of opening himself to the charge of

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<sup>56</sup> Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, p. 82.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison, pp. 67–68. See: Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, p. 85.

conventionalism’—she is not alone in proposing that to avoid such a damning outcome Laclauian thought should be complemented by an account of context-transcending validity, which she finds in the works of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>58</sup> It is true that Laclau allows that sedimented normative frameworks, despite ‘never [disappearing] to the point of requiring an act of total refoundation’, may nonetheless undergo ‘deep dislocations requiring drastic recompositions’.<sup>59</sup> That no sedimentation is irreversible—to deny this would be to deny history for Laclau—suggests that a series of dislocations, in time, may eventually reshape the exclusionary limit of a social order, even if that limit might appear to have been reproduced in the short term. It is also difficult to deny that a proposal that goes against a collectively acceptable normative framework is likely to face resistance, marginalization, and incredulous stares. But conceding these points does not undermine the claim that the process of social change as conceived by hegemony theory is a process in which two processes are intertwined: a socially transformative process that makes actual certain possibilities that had been hitherto repressed and a socially reproductive process that accounts for the project’s efficacy, which it attains by offering a promise of fullness—whose always partial achievement necessarily implies repression and exclusion of certain possibilities and positions—that is convincing and acceptable for a wide range of social agents whose evaluative criteria are always, at least in part, products of the preceding social order.

The series of qualifications that Laclau has introduced concerning decisions, conditions of radical investment, and the extent to which a political process could be

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<sup>58</sup> Cooke, p. 93. Another attempt to synthesize Laclau and Habermas has been made by Mark Devenney. Despite affirming Laclau’s thesis that language and meaning is always marked by relations of power, Devenney argues that the Laclauian thought should be supplemented by the account of the symmetrical relations of communication and the possibility of normative validity found in the works of Habermas. See: Mark Devenney, *Ethics and Politics in Contemporary Theory: Between Critical Theory and Post-Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

However, as Lasse Thomassen notes apropos Devenney’s work, it is unclear whether whatever important *theoretical* differences there may be between Habermas and Laclau translate into salient *political* differences. See: Lasse Thomassen, ‘Habermas and His Others’, *Polity*, 37.4 (2005), 548–60.

<sup>59</sup> Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, p. 82.

universalized, raises a doubt about whether anything of real significance for social change is indicated by expressions such as '*creatio ex nihilo*', 'radical break', and '*Aktus der Freiheit*' that supposedly characterize the transition between hegemonic formations or the emergence of new formations. It appears that, in reality, the instance of *creatio ex nihilo*, radical break, or act of freedom never actually arrive. There is a reciprocity between the extent to which an order will have been transformed and the *status quo*, such that any process of social change that is conceived under hegemony theory implies aspects of both social reproduction and social transformation. What hegemony theory leaves unclear, however, is how a process of transformation could be distinguished conceptually from a process of reproduction.

Although Badiou himself has never commented at any length on Laclau's work, a Badiouian assessment of hegemony theory is extractable from his 1982 publication *Theory of the Subject*. One of the claims that Badiou advances in that text is that the consistency of the Lacanian subject is dependent upon keeping the 'raw' real at a distance—the Lacanian subject is as 'a consistent repetition in which the real ex-ists'.<sup>60</sup> It suffices to mention the analogy that Badiou draws between the Lacanian theory of subject and a political theory, for which a disruption in the social order (the 'real of the cut that can be found in the impulse of the masses') is something to be avoided, and that advises, if such a disruption occurs, that what is of utmost importance is the restoration of order.<sup>61</sup> Žižek summarizes the key difference between Badiou and Lacan—as elaborated by Bruno Bosteels—as follows:

The ultimate difference between Badiou and Lacan, therefore, concerns the relationship between the shattering encounter with the Real and the ensuing arduous work of transforming this explosion of negativity into a new order: for Badiou, this new order 'sublates' the exploding negativity into a new

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<sup>60</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 239.

<sup>61</sup> See: Ed Pluth, *Signifiers and Acts: Freedom in Lacan's Theory of the Subject* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 126–27.

consistent truth; while for Lacan, every Truth displays the structure of a (symbolic) fiction, that is, it is unable to touch the Real.<sup>62</sup>

It is not difficult to infer what Badiou would find objectionable about Laclau's 'realist' account, expressed in the most succinct manner below, which starts from the state of profound crisis that Laclau has suggested in his critical essay on Badiou is presupposed by radical, extensive social change:

Let us consider the extreme situation of a radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions—which are not far away from Hobbes's state of nature—people need an order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. 'Order' as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder 'order' is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function.<sup>63</sup>

This Hobbesian passage may not be entirely implausible as an empirical description—there are several historical cases where, in elections that are held after a longstanding authoritarian leader has been deposed, people have voted for the political party associated with the ousted leader. But from a Badiouian perspective, what Laclau does not adequately reflect in his approach is the thought that social transformation consists not in the establishment of *an* order, but in establishing a new consistency of the situation through the introduction of something that could have been neither produced nor embraced under the previous order. In other words, although hegemony theory registers the disruptive effects of dislocation and antagonism—two

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<sup>62</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Enjoyment within the Limits of Reason Alone', in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2008), pp. xi–cvii (p. lxxxviii).

For a Lacanian response to the Badiouian criticism, see: Pluth, *Signifiers and Acts: Freedom in Lacan's Theory of the Subject*, pp. 115–56.

<sup>63</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 44.

of the figures in hegemony theory that have been likened to the Lacanian real by both Laclau and his readers—in the social, its account of the process through which order is thereafter reconfigured provides no conceptual determination of a process that would lead, not just to an order, but to a *different* order. It is this difference, a difference in the ‘content’ of orders, that, as Laclau sees it, becomes a ‘secondary consideration’ in the very circumstance where far-reaching social change is deemed to be possible. But for the discourse theorist who holds as a matter of fact that *some* content will be chosen by historical actors, what that content will be—or ought to be—is beyond the remit of theory. One surmises that the Badiouian theorization of a truth procedure goes in the direction of speculative thinking that Laclau may be unwilling to follow. But this unwillingness is maintained at a price: what cannot be determined within the theoretical framework of hegemony theory is the conceptual distinction between modification or reproduction and transformation. If hegemony theory regards social change and political processes to be far more commonplace than Badiou allows, this may only be because that distinction, from its perspective, is an imperceptible one. The following judgment by Badiou regarding Lacanian psychoanalysis could be cited as a Badiouian assessment of what is missing in hegemony theory: ‘the thought of an effective destruction of the old law and the observation that what recomposes itself can no longer in any way be *the same*.’<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, p. 246.

## Chapter 5. The potentials and limitations of synthesizing the two approaches

### 5.1 Toward an alternative account of social situations

The examination of hegemony theory has suggested that whilst it reflects the historical limitations of socially transformative processes in its theorization of social change, the transition between different hegemonic formations is a transition wherein the to-come is conditioned by the present to such an extent that the distinction between processes of social reproduction or modification and processes of social transformation is blurred. Hegemony theory accepts that there is no absolute conceptual distinction between reform and revolution or between gradual change and abrupt change. Yet, it is not obvious how the distinction, which becomes even more crucial for thinking change once the dichotomy is discarded, between socially reproductive aspects and socially transformative aspects of a given process of hegemonic articulation could be conceived, for the two processes are effectively conflated in his approach into an indeterminate third: not necessarily either. Although the Badiouian approach does provide a conceptual determination of a process of transformation, the situatedness of that process has been seen to generate a tension. If the situation in which a truth unfolds as a process were to be specified, then the generic universality of the truth produced therein risks becoming indistinguishable from yet another particularity, since the situation would be one of the infinite plurality of situations that may compose a broader social situation. But if, conversely, the situation were not specified, then the truth that emerges therefrom would be disconnected from a historical context, from a situatedness.

This chapter will explore whether there is a way in which the theoretical resources collected from the works of Badiou and Laclau could be deployed, such that it becomes possible to determine what their systems in isolation have left ambiguous: the *specificity* of a



process of transformation toward *extensive* social change—one that, even while retaining the features of the Badiouian truth procedure, cannot be subjected to the deflationary criticism—advanced in the second chapter. It must be emphasized that the aim of these discussions is neither the reduction of one approach to the other, nor the incorporation of the two approaches into one ‘system’—there are irreconcilable differences between the two approaches that limit the extent of their coherent co-articulation, and it is not the ambition of this chapter to attempt to produce a system. The aim here is a modest one: this chapter seeks to explore possibility of an alternative account of social situation in which the insights of both Badiouian and Laclauian approaches are reflected, and consider what can be gained therefrom. Amongst the possibilities this chapter will explore is that of introducing, by drawing from aspects of hegemony theory, in the account of social situations a ‘pre-evental’ subjectivity to which the construction of particular identities and the force of situation’s inertia could be traced. If this could be achieved, it would make further analysis of the internal composition of a social situation possible, which in turn allows the thought of a historically imposed limit of inclusivity or representability to be reflected in the account of social situation.

In section 5.2, several points that have been raised in the course of this thesis will be retraced, with the aim of showing how incorporating insights of hegemony theory could alleviate several ambiguities in the set-theoretical understanding of social situations. Any suggestion that an account of social situations and processes of change could draw insights simultaneously from two theoretical approaches would immediately invite the objection that such an attempt cannot avoid recourse to the unjustifiable assumption that the theoretical objects of two different theoretical systems are identical. In the three subsections of 5.3, the suppositions that are needed for the two approaches to be co-articulated shall be explored. Incorporating the insights of hegemony theory in the construal of the composition of social situations, it will be seen how a process of transformation, based on the Badiouian account the

extension of a situation with a generic multiple, may be construed. Although hypothetical and tentative, the exploration undertaken in this chapter will not have been in vain if it succeeds in pointing toward the possible of specifying a socially transformative process that, due to the way the situation in which it unfolds is constituted, can result in extensive social transformation.

## 5.2 The contributions of hegemony theory toward an account of social situations

The thesis of *Being and Event* that ontology is itself a situation, and that what distinguishes it from other situations is that it is a situation in which *presentation as such* is presented, announces the de-relation of the ontological discourse from any material ‘substrate’ of the ontological structure it elaborates. Badiou’s rational ontology, in other words, affirms that a structure is indifferent to of what it is a structure. It is on the basis of this indifference that set-theoretical ontology can claim to be a perfectly general ontology, a discourse of being-qua-being. There is a number of seemingly intractable questions that have been directed at set-theoretical ontology—the problematic relationship between ontological and extraontological situations in Badiou’s system has been mentioned. But leaving this matter aside, an interpretation of set-theoretical ontology had been developed in the first chapter, applying to situations that can be qualified as ‘social’ the Badiouian proposition that it is possible to ‘think the ontological structure’ of concrete situations, that there is an ‘ontological schema of the situation’ with which extraontological situations can be ‘understood’.<sup>1</sup> Distancing himself from what he believes to be one of the key premises of linguistic idealism, that ‘language constitutes differences’, Badiou asserts that ‘true differences are the differences of the sets themselves, of the multiplicities’.<sup>2</sup> It seems, then, that one of the things involved in thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, pp. 178–79.

<sup>2</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, pp. 177–78.

the ontological structure of a situation is the understanding of differences between situations and between parts of a situation in terms of extension of multiples, beyond (or beneath) the ‘predicative diversity’ of language or differences between different discourses or language games. Although what this means when applied to an analysis of extraontological situations is not immediately obvious, the following illustration perhaps could serve to capture the basic idea. Étienne Balibar has proposed a distinction between racism and meta-racism. If the former legitimates exclusion of groups of people by asserting the superiority of one race or culture over other races and cultures, the latter, as Balibar writes, ‘presents itself as having drawn the lessons from the conflict between racism and anti-racism, as a politically operational theory of the causes of social aggression’. The ‘insight’ of meta-racism is that what must be discarded if one wishes to truly avoid racism is the ““abstract” anti-racism which fails to grasp the psychological and sociological laws of human population movements’. In lieu of ‘naïve’ anti-racism, meta-racism advises that ‘tolerance thresholds’ be respected and ‘cultural distances’ be maintained.<sup>3</sup> The reasons by which exclusion is legitimated differ under each discourse—racism and meta-racism are different discourses. Each discourse would also describe or refer to the disenfranchised groups differently. Arguing that meta-racism is all the more pernicious because it poses as non-racist and anti-racist, ‘advocating racist measures as the very means of fighting racism’, Renata Salecl concludes that ‘distance between racism and meta-racism is void’.<sup>4</sup> This non-distance may be construed, under the ontological schema, as indicating that the groups and individuals that in fact becomes disenfranchised under the meta-racist discourse is the same as those whose disenfranchisement was legitimated by the discourse of classical racism. Between all the linguistic difference that may exist between the two discourses, those who count-as-one and those who do not remain unchanged—in this respect,

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<sup>3</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘Is There a “Neo-Racism”?’ in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, by Immanuel Wallerstein and Étienne Balibar (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 17–28 (pp. 22–23).

<sup>4</sup> Renata Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.

the regime of count-as-one remains the same. This section outlines what is missed when social situations are understood with the categories of set-theoretical ontology, and the ways in which hegemony theory may open alternatives that account for aspects of the social that are missed.

One of the claims made in the second chapter was that what is inadequately reflected in the account of social situations based on set-theoretical ontology is the ‘interplay’ between situations. And this is especially problematic if it is possible to think of a social order as composed of an infinite number of situations that can be qualified as social because the consequences of a truth seems to be confined solely to one situation. What results is an ambiguity of the sense in which a truth could be asserted to be universal, addressed to everyone, and open to all, which is also to say that the extent of a truth’s transformative effects becomes ambiguous. Set-theoretical ontology stipulates that a situation is ‘any presented multiplicity’ and that ‘[t]here is nothing apart from situations’,<sup>5</sup> while at the same time remaining indifferent to the actual existence or non-existence of particular concrete situations. It may simply be asserted that relatively ‘global’ situations—for example, the situation of global capital, as distinct from the relatively ‘local’ situation of one household—do happen to exist, and that transformative processes (such as a truth procedure) acting on those situations will have far-reaching social consequences. But as these qualifications are not determined by the ontological discourse, the series of questions with which Terry Eagleton concludes his review of Badiou’s work is unavoidable: ‘What is to count as a situation, and who decides? Are there really any “singular situations”, as Badiou seems to imagine? And is there any way of analysing, or even identifying one, which does not implicate general categories?’<sup>6</sup> That the existence of a situation—*any* situation—can be acknowledged is a part of the problem when attempting to transpose the insights of Badiouian theory of change in social situations. In as much as

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<sup>5</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton, pp. 252–53.

something can be thought under the ontological schema, it is a situation, and since the ontological schema does not recognize an intrinsic difference between extraontological situations except the difference between their regimes of count-as-one, there is no situation that is intrinsically more ‘global’, or conversely, more ‘local’, than any other. But if one could speak of some situations as more ‘global’ even in the vague sense that they somehow ‘matter’ more than other situations for social change, then it is perhaps not a worthless endeavour to seek a way in which that feature that makes them matter for far-reaching social change could be reflected in the structure of situations themselves without appealing to preconceived ideas about situations that matter for extensive social change, even if this may require taking a further distance from the Badiouian theoretical framework.

Hegemony theory stipulates that the limit of a systematic totality is an exclusionary limit, thus positing an outside that is constitutive of the inside as a formation. The obverse of any constitution of an order, thus of social identities or the actualization of certain possibilities, is the exclusion of other identities or the repression of other possibilities. In the interpretation of hegemony theory in the third chapter and the examination in the fourth chapter of the ambiguities pertaining to the break between the old and the new that is achieved in the transition between hegemonic formations, two points have been affirmed. Firstly, there is a particular ‘ontic content’ that must persist in the core of the hegemonic formation—a hegemonic identity—as long as it effectively performs its ontological function as a totalizer, that is, for it to have a ‘cohesive power’ to sustain a chain of equivalence. Secondly, the conditions by which a particularity comes to be the representation of fullness, that is, the conditions by which a particularity becomes ‘the horizon of all there is’ and establishes a social imaginary, suggests that it is possible to trace *what* that content is to the sedimented layer of values, ideas, and beliefs, that makes certain projects more credible and acceptable for social agents in a particular historical circumstance. In this respect, hegemony theory inherits the

thesis that Balibar had proposed to be the logical outcome of Althusser's theory of ideology, that '[i]n the last instance, there is nothing like a dominant ideology of the rulers', for the 'dominant ideology of a given society is a specific universalization of the imaginary of the dominated'.<sup>7</sup> This thesis contributes toward the understanding of the specificity of different social situations.

It is difficult to deny that a transformative political process is bound to face resistance. On the conceptualization of the source of this resistance, Badiouian and Laclauian approaches diverge. Badiou pushes the source of resistance to a 'genuine political event' onto the empirical State—an event provokes the State to reveal its 'excess of power' that, in *Metapolitics*, is associated with its repressive police apparatus. It had been proposed in the second chapter that Badiou's claims concerning the State in *Metapolitics* relies on a leap by which the state *qua* a properly ontological category is overtaken by a referent that should have remained a metaphor, the risk of which had been latent from the instant Badiou had nominated the 'state of the situation' as the name of the representational operation in the situation. The State in writings such as *Metapolitics* (and often in Badiou's explicitly political interventions, of which are legion) is construed as something of an omnipresent enemy against which stands a true socially transformative process. But even Badiou does not seem to construe the State always negatively—apropos the Palestinian situation, for example, he remarks that the 'axiomatic principle' that applies in the situation, 'in the end, is "a country and a state for the Palestinians"'.<sup>8</sup> But with no more specification of the State apart from that it is the force of inertia that is resistant to novelty and change, Badiou's thought may have precluded an

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<sup>7</sup> Étienne Balibar, 'The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser', in *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1–16 (p. 13).

Laclau's hegemony theory decisively separates the concept of hegemony from that of domination. For hegemony theory, the fact that every struggle cannot avoid beginning from a position in an existing order does not entail that a counter-hegemonic struggle can never, as a principle, 'set the terms' of its struggle. The terms of struggle are not wholly determined by the hegemon.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Beyond Formalization: An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels', in *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 318–50 (pp. 330–31).

articulation of a philosophically salient difference between different types of States. It seems that the ontological category of the state of the situation must remain categorically distinct from the empirical State to even raise the question of different types of the latter (such as totalitarian states and liberal democracies). Moreover—and more relevantly for this thesis—Badiou's position makes it difficult to incorporate the role of other social forces that may account for that resistance, which, plausibly, are operative internally *within* a situation rather than beyond it, as the State, qua an 'excrement' multiple, is posited to be.

Hegemony theory is able to construe the resistance that socially transformative processes may confront in a different manner, such that if its insights could be assimilated with that of set-theoretical ontology in an alternative account of social situations, both the conflation of the state *qua* an ontological category with the empirical State, on the one hand, and the elevation of the State into force of inertia *per se*, on the other, may be avoided. Because what sustains a hegemonic formation is the investment of those in the situation but one which is limited and conditioned by the *Sittlichkeit* of the community and ideological distortions, the existence of antagonism at certain points, between certain identities or between certain attempts to actualize a possibility and the attempts to repress it, is a reflection of the particular constitution of that order. To put it analogically: to say that there is a point at which a person's body resists further ingestion of food is to make a trivial point; but when a person experiences the limit of his digestive capacity after consuming a certain amount of food, this experience is indicative of the physical composition of that particular person. A hegemonic formation is constituted through the relations that come to hold between identities. The Indonesian national identity is constituted through relations, some of which may be antagonistic, with various other identities, such as the ethnic Chinese-Indonesian identity, the LGBT communities, the Christian minority, and so on. The ensemble of these relations constitute 'Indonesia' as a particular situation and 'Indonesian' as a particular identity, as distinct from other national

identities for which their relations to identities that constitute the former in a given historical circumstance play little to no constitutive role in determining their respective identities. Later, in section 5.3.2, the possibility of defining a (relatively) ‘global’ situation will be explored by departing from the set-theoretical account of social situations to incorporate into the account the thought that situations are constituted via relations, and that their constitution always is accompanied by an exclusion that attests to the limit of the situation’s inclusivity, or a restriction on what is representable in a situation.

None of what has been said so far denies that there is an empirical State and that its repressive apparatus may be deployed to thwart transformative political processes. On the contrary, Laclau’s discussion of an equivalential chain that may be constructed between disparate working-class struggles, not because of an objective unity of their interests but because they stand against a common repressive regime, or his characterization of populism as an antagonism between an ‘unresponsive power’ and the ‘people’ that emerges from an articulation of unfulfilled demands into an equivalential chain, are suggestive of the role that governmental institutions may perform as a force of inertia and repression.<sup>9</sup> What hegemony theory proposes in distinction with Badiouian thought is that the State’s *power* to repress and the *specific* instances at which it intervenes can be seen as reflections of the constitution of the situation and those individuals who inhabit and sustain it under a particular historical circumstance. By placing the source of resistance to change back into the situation, hegemony theory allows the particularity of the situation as well as its inertia to be reflected in an account of social situations, without recourse to the metaphorical leap that makes Badiou’s association of the category of the state of the situation with the empirical State problematic. There is no need for a hypostatized concept of the State.

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<sup>9</sup> Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 41–42. And: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 86.



### 5.3 Components of the alternative account of social situations

#### 5.3.1 Minimizing the distance

As important a question of what could be gained in terms of theorizing social change by incorporating aspects of both Badiouian and Laclauian theories is the question of the viability of this attempt. It is undeniable that there is no way to reconcile the fundamental differences between set-theoretical ontology and discursive ontology. Set-theoretical ontology is, as Geoff Pfeifer has characterized, ‘quasi-structuralist’, to the extent that, for it, ‘it is not the relations that do the defining’, but rather, ‘the relations exist insofar as those things which count become linked as a result of the count or the law’.<sup>10</sup> Set-theoretical ontology holds that belonging to a multiple—‘to be an element of’—is the ‘sole possible predicate of existence as such’. For set theory, relations *between* elements of a set have no bearing on the constitution of these elements—their objectivity—or their identity, nor on the identity of the set itself (as extension is the sole criterion of the identity of a set). This is different from the discursive ontology underpinning hegemony theory, which adheres to the premise that an identity of any element is determined by its position in a relational system. Since hegemony theory regards a social order as constituted through processes that establish and modify relations between elements, realizing its possible contributions to the understanding of social situations requires a negotiation between two incompatible ontologies. Furthermore, to preserve the possibility of incorporating the theorization of an event and truth procedure in the alternative account of social situations that incorporates insights of hegemony theory, the critical point raised by Laclau concerning the preclusion of something like an organic crisis in the set-theoretical approach needs to be circumvented. What occurs in organic crisis, Laclau has contended, is the loss of ‘structural abilities’ of counting operations, hence the impossibility of delimiting

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<sup>10</sup> Geoff Pfeifer, *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 67.

what is unrepresentable in the situation—a determination that Laclau believes is required by the Badiouian concept of event. Although Laclau may not have based his criticism on a faithful rendition of Badiou's system, defining a place that is akin to an evental site will be necessary if the Badiouian account of post-evental transformation is to be incorporated into the alternative account.

Despite the irreducible difference between the two theoretical systems, it is still possible to investigate whether there is a condition under which the difference could be minimized. Specifically for the purpose of developing an alternative account of social situations and socially transformative processes, what needs to be identified is a point of greatest isomorphy between social orders as understood by set-theoretical ontology in extensional terms and in relational terms by hegemony theory, an isomorphy that also leaves open the possibility of locating something like an evental site. Laclau's remark at the very end of his essay on Badiou (the same essay that has been discussed in the third chapter) seems to offer a glimpse of hope:

The huge question that remains is the following: could the ensemble of relations that I have described as rhetorical be absorbed and described as a special case within the wider categories of set theory, so that the latter would retain their ontological priority; or, rather, could set theory itself be described as an internal possibility—admittedly an extreme one—within the field of a generalized rhetoric [i.e. hegemony]? I am convinced that the right answer implies the second alternative, but this demonstration will have to wait for another occasion.<sup>11</sup>

The occasion for the demonstration in favour of the second alternative has never transpired. Nor is there any hint in the essay itself what that 'extreme' case, at which the set-theoretical approach becomes an internal possibility of Laclau's theoretical framework, could be. Here is

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<sup>11</sup> Laclau, 'An Ethics of Militant Engagement', p. 137.

an opportunity for a conjecture. If the extreme case is where a formation of the social conceivable under hegemony theory is structurally isomorphic to the social situation conceived in terms of set-theoretical ontology, there is one case thinkable under the framework of hegemony theory that would almost satisfy this condition: it is a social order that has a clearly defined limit, a clearly defined frontier between inclusion and exclusion (for whether an element belongs or does not belong to a set is an all-or-nothing matter, without any middle). For Laclau, such an instance is purely hypothetical and cannot be found in reality, as ‘nothing is ever fully internal or external’.<sup>12</sup> The assertion of absolute separation of the unpresented from the presented or the evental from the situational that characterize the Badiouian approach cannot, in the end, be made compatible with the approach of Laclau, in which strict dichotomies of such kind is rejected. In the present exploration, the complexities will be left aside—if this implies that an ‘ontological priority’ is accorded to set-theoretical ontology over discursive ontology, it is an implication that shall be admitted.

The expansion of an equivalential chain is described by Laclau as a process of the ‘simplification of social space’.<sup>13</sup> It is described as simplification, because if the chain of equivalence expands toward a limit that must be postulated it will reach at some point, that ‘something’ that is ‘equally present’ in the elements articulated into the chain will need to be defined not in terms of positive qualities but by their exclusionary relation vis-à-vis the outside that becomes the negative referent by which their common belonging to the inside is established. At the limit of its expansion of an equivalential chain, hence at the point of the ‘maximal’ simplification of the social space, the social space would be dichotomized into two formations or identities that exclude each other. The difference between each formation in this dichotomized social space is the closest that hegemony theory can think of differences between

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<sup>12</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 152–53.

<sup>13</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, p. 130.

formations as purely extensional differences, in the sense that the identity of a formation is less determined by the relations within that formation than by its ‘counting’ certain elements as belonging whilst excluding others. It remains to be explored how this maximally simplified social space may be expressed in terms of the categories of Badiouian ontology such as situation and state of a situation. Granted this can be done, the subsequent task would be to draw some implications apropos the internal structure of this dichotomized situation and determine whether it would be possible to specify a process that would transform the situation, which, in this thesis, will be conceived in line with the theory of post-evental truth procedure.

Neither the contributions that hegemony theory could make toward understanding social situations outlined in earlier nor the thought of the dichotomization of a situation as a process could be reflected in the alternative account of social situations unless a pre-evental subject in the construction and maintenance of social situations were posited. The pertinent question is whether the thought of the pre-evental subject is downright disallowed by the Badiouian theoretical framework. Christopher Norris explains that the Badiouian subject

‘inhabits’ a situation just to the extent that she registers what Badiou defines as the discrepancy between it and the ‘state of the situation’, or belonging and inclusion, or—again—between the dominant count-as-one and those multiples which [...] exceed, surpass or intrinsically elude its grasp. From which it follows that the ‘subject of a truth’, as distinct from the subject in the commonplace acceptance of the term, should be thought of always according to its role in the furtherance of just those projects or enquiries that most strongly define its ‘militant’ vocation.<sup>14</sup>

Subjectivation—the creation of a faithful subject of a truth—is said to be ‘a *special count*, distinct from the count-as-one which orders presentation, just as it is from the state’s reduplication’.<sup>15</sup> Subjectivation is the emergence of the operator of fidelity following the

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Norris, *Badiou’s ‘Being and Event’: A Reader’s Guide* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 41–42.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 393–94.

interventional nomination of an event, which attempts to construct a generic multiple by establishing another mode of discernment, or by counting elements without reference to the prevailing regimes of counting or already defined identities and predicates, such as to construct a multiple that would be indiscernible and unrepresentable according to the situation's prevailing representational regime. Although truth is impossible without the subject, the subject, too, only persists only as long as it incrementally constructs and forces a truth in the situation. On this view, there is no subject in a situation unaffected by an event because such a situation would be one in which there is no operator of counting that is otherwise than those whose remit is to maintain the situation's consistency, its presentational and representational regime, hence no chance for a multiple that is not already represented or representable in the situation's space of representation to come to be discerned and be made representable. It is, nonetheless, stipulated that there are operations of counting—prior to the emergence of the subject proper through a 'special count'—that accounts for there being order rather than chaos, for there being situations and states. But if the operations of counting prior to an event cannot be tied to the subject whose advent is subsequent to an event (and the only subject posited in *Being and Event* is a post-evental subject), then one might ask what these operations—which maintain or modify the situation rather than transforming it—are, concretely, in social situations. Given some of the examples that Badiou employs to illustrate presentation and representation (such as the example of the French registry office), it appears that—as Paul Livingston has suggested—it is only natural to assume, at least when the situation under consideration is a social situation, that they refer to social or discursive practices that are sustained by 'the behavioural regularities of a specific cultural or language community'.<sup>16</sup> While some rationale has been offered in the first chapter concerning why the project of conceptually determining a process that *necessarily* transforms the situation need not overly

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<sup>16</sup> Livingston, p. 245.

be concerned with the ‘agency’ of those who inhabit social situations, it is one of the purposes of the alternative account of social situations to open a way toward conceiving how particular social situations and corresponding states come to be shaped and sustained under a historical circumstance. Adding slightly more detail to the pre-evental counting operations is therefore highly desirable. Perhaps, in the scrupulously neutral stance that *Being and Event* takes with respect to the ‘counter’ of counting operations, there is room for theoretical liberty, in as much as what the neutral stance does not outright preclude the thought of a ‘subject’ other than that of the subject of social transformation (that is, the subject faithful to a truth) to whose activity social reproduction, the regularity of structures as well as their modifications, could be traced.

In the fourth chapter, the Žižekian radical act has been described as the moment at which the subject is reborn as new by breaking from the established order. It is not the case, however, that the only kind of subject present in Žižek’s works is the subject of the radical act. For, in Žižek’s thought, the momentary self-withdrawal or contraction of subjectivity is required precisely because there is a subject prior to the act, the subject that is capable solely of reproducing an existing social order. Thus, for Žižek, it is the ‘subject’s own activity that serves both as the foundation of stasis *and* of the possibility of change’.<sup>17</sup> As Pfeifer explains:

Whereas Badiou rejects any notion of a pre-evental subjectivity and instead relegates pre-subjective individuals to the status of objects, determined simply by the externally imposed counting operation—arguing instead that events ‘subjectivize’ individuals—Žižek’s theory requires the pre-act existence of the self-limiting subjects for there to be any acts whatsoever (and hence any change). This point tracks the Lacanian distinction [...] between ‘action’ and the ‘act’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Pfeifer, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Pfeifer, p. 123.

Pfeifer proceeds to contrast the Žižekian position against the Badiouian one, suggesting that the subject of ‘action’—as distinct from the radically transformative ‘act’—is that which performs the ‘counting’ that structures the pre-evental situation:

The subject is that point through which, in every quotidian ‘action’, a given social structure or conjuncture is ordered and sustained [...] insofar as it is such a subject that, through the action of self-limiting and limiting the world to presuppositions handed over to it, posits—in an ideological form—a given conjuncture as Whole. In answer to the question of ‘what does the structuring?’, Žižek need not, as Badiou does, posit the existence of a reified, abstract, and formal process such as the ‘count-as-one’. It is subjectivity itself that does the ‘counting’ here in its reduplication and redeployment of the material structures of the community.<sup>19</sup>

Taking the cue from Pfeifer, it shall be suggested that the ‘reduplication and redeployment of the material structures of the community’ is what the Laclauian subject performs in one of its dimensions, in as much as a process of social reproduction (or modification) is implicated in the role of the subject as the ‘vanishing operator’, whose acts of identification does reconfigure a hegemonic formation but only in a limited manner. During the discussion of hegemony theory, it had been stated that a subject-position is a crystallization of the act of the subject—it is what will have been articulated as an element of a reconfigured hegemonic formation after the moment of the subject has passed. A subject-position is different vis-à-vis other positions in a hegemonic formation, but equivalent with them, in so far as they belong to the same formation. The Laclauian subject is implicated in the operations of ‘counting’ because it, through acts of identification, both produces subject-positions as elements to be counted as belonging to a formation and modifies the relations between these elements. The counting effective in a hegemonic formation is, therefore, not an anonymous operation to which individuals are passively subjected. If, as Pfeifer observes, the Badiouian approach ‘relegates

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<sup>19</sup> Pfeifer, pp. 123–24.

pre-subjective [hence pre-evental] individuals to the status of objects' whose identities are entirely determined by an anonymous count, in the Laclauian approach, one is 'subjectivized' because he has 'not achieved constitution as an object',<sup>20</sup> and, in his conditions as a subject, both produces and sustains the object that will have come to be counted as belonging to a reconfigured formation—objective social identities, or subject-positions—through an act of identification. That a dimension of social reproduction is implicated in the operation of the Laclauian subject can be supported by referring to the fact that what is decidable and thinkable by the subject, hence the ways in which identities are constructed, is limited by a particular content or body that becomes 'the horizon of all there is',<sup>21</sup> which is, in the end, conditioned by the *Sittlichkeit* of the community in a given historical circumstance. Due to the constitutive exclusion—the repression of certain positions and possibilities—that 'accompanies' every act of identification,<sup>22</sup> limitless inclusivity is impossible. Accordingly, not all positions can be counted as elements of a hegemonic formation. But as hegemonic universality cannot exist except through the equivalential chain between particularities, this means, conversely, that the equivalential relation between positions that can actually be attained by a hegemonic formation is a reflection of 'the limit of socially attainable universalization',<sup>23</sup> that is, the extent of inclusivity that is achievable under a historical circumstance. In other words, the positions that are actually produced and counted in a formation are the reflection of the extent of a hegemonic universality that, because it is always partial, must exclude certain terms from the formation.

The investigations in the fourth chapter regarding the conditions by which a particular hegemonic project becomes effective have tried to show that it is difficult to distinguish

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<sup>20</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> Laclau, 'Structure, History and the Political', pp. 210–11.



processes of transformation and that of reproduction in hegemony theory. In so far as the production of subject-positions does not expand this limit to the inclusivity of the hegemonic universality that exists because every act of identification is accompanied by constitutive exclusion, the changes that are induced thereby are to be seen as modifications. Examining whether it is possible to specify a process of transformation is the task of the next two sections. It needs to be acknowledged that the set-theoretical account of social situations—on which that upcoming endeavour will be based—does not register the distance between dislocation and decision that underpins the distinction between the Laclauian subject and the subject-position. Pre-evental, normalized situations are regarded as atemporal, in the sense that its diachronic development is in fact a synchrony in the sense that whatever that is presentable has already been represented. The processes that have led to a certain configuration of the situation fall beneath what the ontological schema allows to be understood of a concrete situation, for it requires, given that it will always posit operations of counting as having been performed, that a concrete situation to be *already* constituted. What the social situation conceived in accordance with set-theoretical ontology is nevertheless able to register is the outcome of the act of the Laclauian subject by which a formation is reconfigured, in which there is no subject but only objective social identities or subject-positions. In so far as the outcomes that configure a situation are not operational results of an anonymous operation of counting but of acts of identification, however, it becomes possible to further analyse the internal composition of the situation.

### 5.3.2 The composition of a social situation and the limit of inclusivity

This section outlines how the insights of hegemony theory, when incorporated into the account of social situations based on set-theoretical ontology, might allow a historically imposed limit on the space of representation to be understood. For the limit is assumed to

emerge from the relations between elements of the situation, to explore this possibility is also to analyse the internal composition of a social situation, which, owing to its being the point of greatest compatibility between set-theoretical ontology and hegemony theory, has been stipulated to be a situation that is ‘simplified’ through the expansion of the chain of equivalence to the point where a situation is dichotomized into two formations or identities.

Characterizing Spinozian ontology in his own terms in the tenth meditation of *Being and Event*, Badiou contends that Spinoza denies the ‘errant’ unpresented void that haunts a situation from within. This denial makes the coincidence of the operations of count-as-one (presentation) and count-of-the-count (representation)—or a situation and its state—possible in Spinozian ontology. One implication of this coincidence noted by Badiou is ‘that a human being, even when he or she belongs to two separable situations, can count as one insofar as the state of the two situations is the same’.<sup>24</sup> As will be seen below, what is hinted by Badiou’s statement—which states that in Spinozian ontology, identity at the level of representation establishes identity at the level of presentation—is a way to express the construction of hegemonic formation as the construction of one situation from a plurality of situations and their elements in terms of set-theoretical terms. That this hint comes by way of Spinozian ontology (or Badiou’s characterization of it) in which the gap between presentation and representation is denied is unsurprising, for the articulation of a hegemonic formation or identity is sustained by the elevation—via the operation of radical investment by subjects in search of fullness—of a particular formation or identity as the realization of universal representation. Though this elevation may be ‘nothing more than a fantasy that the aggregate of the points of identification seized upon by each subject cohere as the same object’,<sup>25</sup> it is

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<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Rothenberg, p. 143.

the operation that underpins the process by which a plurality of social situations and identities are related to form a larger whole.

As Burhanuddin Baki explains, in set-theoretical ontology, the strategy by which the wholeness of a situation is secured involves ‘[stepping] outside the situation into some larger situation’ wherein the elements presented in the initial situation are ‘fully named, predicated, and related together’.<sup>26</sup> This larger situation is the power-set, refashioned in the Badiouian text as the state of the situation, which has been suggested in this thesis to be the schema for the space of representation. If the state of two situations are the same, there must be some kind of relationship between those two situations. Under the schema of set-theoretical ontology that conceives relations in terms of inclusion and belonging, if the two situations are to share one and the same state, they must each be a part of some other situation whose state is precisely that one and the same state—the same space of representation—shared by the two situations.

It can be said that if two situations are different, what differs is their regimes of counting—authorized and maintained by their respective states—that can be understood here as their criteria of membership. Suppose that the restriction of membership to a school does not allow all individuals but only students and teachers to belong to the school. As per the illustration of a social situation developed in the first chapter, it may be assumed that, under its regime of representation, ‘student’ and ‘teacher’ are two subsets into which every individual that belongs to the school situation can be classified. Those individuals that belong to the school situation belong to either of the two subsets both presented, as individuals belonging to the situation, and represented in the situation, in so far the two subsets of the situation are elements of the situation’s state, conceived as a set. A multiple (named ‘student’, ‘teacher’, and so on) is an identity in a given social situation, in so far as any individual that

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<sup>26</sup> Baki, p. 115.

belongs to that multiple is both presented and represented. A different situation, a baseball team, for example, is a situation that would have as its subsets ‘pitchers’, ‘hitters’, and ‘catchers’. If the baseball team and the school situations were totally unrelated, it must be assumed that there is no instance in which one and the same individual could be both a baseball player and a student. However, if one and the same individual could simultaneously be a baseball player and a student, a common space of representation—a state—shared by the baseball team and the school must be posited. But if a state is posited, then it is implied that there is *another* situation for which that state is its state. At this point, it would not be unjustifiable to employ the language of set-theoretical ontology and speak of the situations of baseball and school as ‘included’ in that other situation. And any individual who belongs to the two initial situations that are included in the other situation is both presented and represented in the other situation. The state of the other situation will have as its elements all the multiples, that is, social identities, which belonged to the states of the two initial situations. All the identities in the two initial situations, which are, by definition, representations in those situations, will also be representations in the ‘larger’ situation.

One and the same individual belongs to multiple situations and therefore is able to possess a plurality of identities. But—drawing here on the implications of the statement that ‘a human being, even when he or she belongs to two separable situations, can count as one insofar as the state of the two situations is the same’ in terms of a hegemonic construction of a situation—if that individual is to be one and the same individual, another situation in which the multiple situations are included must exist. This another situation is a situation that shall be qualified as relatively ‘global’ with respect to the multiple situations that are included therein. It is not possible to determine *a priori* how different situations and identities will actually be related, as this is a matter of the outcomes of certain identificatory acts—decisions—of the subject that, though limited, is not determined by the existing social order.

However, based on the thought that elements articulated into a hegemonic formation are both presented and represented, ‘in the sense that their identity is always split between their particularity and the hegemonic universality that counts them as one’,<sup>27</sup> it shall be said that the identity of each individual is split between a particularistic identity (being a batter or a student or a catcher, for example) and another one, which is acquired by virtue of there being a relation between situations, ensured by the common space of representation whose existence implies the inclusion of a plurality of situations in another situation, one to which that individual also belongs. The other identity that results from the relations that have been established between situations and identities—in whose construction the states of those situations are implicated—points toward a way to conceive of something akin to a hegemonic identity, as distinct from other, particularistic identities.

What needs to be considered in further analysing the composition of a relatively global situation is not so much the ‘content’ of identities or which empirical individuals are represented by certain identities—rather, what needs to be brought into the account is the idea that the articulation of identities will be constrained in some way, that a hegemonic universality cannot count every social element as belonging to a situation and that a hegemonic identity is not representative of every identity that could be constructed in the situation. To assimilate this point in the composition of a relatively global situation is to assimilate the thesis that ‘the affirmation of all identity’ is ‘accompanied’ by a constitutive exclusion of an outside.<sup>28</sup> For a situation  $S$  whose elements are human individuals, the construction of any identity,  $X$ ,  $Y$ ,  $Z$ , in that situation implies the constitutive exclusion of certain identities,  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$ . Suppose, then, that  $X$ ,  $Y$ ,  $Z$  are collected in the set  $\alpha$  and  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$ , in the set  $\beta$ . About the identity of  $\alpha$ , it can be said that it is constituted by the exclusion of  $\beta$ . It is not merely the case

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<sup>27</sup> Végső, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 183.

that  $\alpha$  has not yet extended itself to count amongst its elements of  $\beta$  but has to exclude  $\beta$  in order to constitute its identity. A maximally simplified situation can now be understood as denoting a situation  $S$ , all of whose elements and parts could be classified as either  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ .

As an example, let it be supposed that  $\alpha$  is the extensional equivalent of an identity named 'Indonesian'. The extension of  $\alpha$  is not individuals living in the Indonesian archipelago. Nor should it simply be supposed that it is coextensive with the set of individuals holding an Indonesian passport. The example needs to be one in which the Indonesian situation is riven by antagonism, but the illustration of antagonistic relation—which presupposes a constitutive exclusion rather than merely an externality—would be somewhat difficult if elements of  $\alpha$  were to be identified as all those who live in the Indonesian archipelago or hold an Indonesian passport. Those individuals, for the sake of exposition, may be supposed to be elements of  $S$ , but only after noting an underlying layer of complexity implied by the fact that  $S$  is a social situation. In so far as 'Indonesian' is not—and can never be—a fully self-identical object, its determination cannot be left to objective facts such as that of living in a certain geographic location or of possessing a certain passport. Laclauian social ontology insists on the ontological impossibility of  $\alpha$  being identical to  $S$ . What the supposition in the present example that the extension of  $S$  is those who live in the Indonesian archipelago or hold an Indonesian passport actually implies, then, is that geography and formal nationality are not subjected to processes of hegemonic articulation, hence that they are part of the sedimented background on which the articulation of Indonesian identity takes place. Nevertheless,  $S$  should be regarded as a social situation, for, though they may be mundane facts in most cases, living in a certain geographic location and holding a certain passport are part of one's identity, and as such, they cannot be deprived of the *possibility* of becoming elements that, in a process of radical rearticulation of social identity, are invested with meanings that are irreducible to merely objective facts. In an alternative example, such as the articulation of Indonesian national

identity in relation to separatist movements in Aceh, West Papua, and East Timor, geography and formal nationality would have an entirely different status. The layer of complexity, therefore, is needed for the alternative account being developed here to remain faithful to the idea that the beginning and end of a social situation—including the one denoted by  $S$  in the present example—are contingent but are not arbitrary resultants of an entirely anonymous counting operation, to the extent that what is to count as a situation is ultimately determined by processes of articulation or acts of identification, even if the contingency of a particular determination had been forgotten and the boundaries of the situation have become sedimented.

With these considerations in the background, it shall be said that the property shared by all individuals that belong to  $\alpha$  is *being Indonesian* in that emphatic sense—and this is one thing that is implied by  $\alpha \neq S$ , the non-identity of  $\alpha$  and  $S$ —irreducible to objective facts, a sense that is evoked by that nebulous expression, ‘Indonesian culture’. *Being Indonesian* is a property that is shared not because these individuals possessed this property prior to the construction of  $\alpha$ , but by their ‘factually being together’—or their having identified with a signifier without a proper meaning—as a result of articulatory or identificatory processes, attributable to pre-evental subjectivity, that have led to a particular constitution of this multiple under a given historical circumstance. As is the case with any social identity, the relation to an outside is constitutive to the determination of ‘Indonesian’. That set of elements that the constitution and maintenance of Indonesian identity excludes shall be designated  $\beta$ . If  $\alpha$  were seen as the extension of a hegemonic universality, then,  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$  would not be representations in  $\alpha$ , since the elements that belong to  $\beta$  do not belong to  $\alpha$ —they are not counted-as-one by  $\alpha$ . But despite being excluded from the Indonesian national identity, it cannot be said that  $\beta$  is in any sense an evental site. For one,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  could be seen as competing constructions of hegemonic identities or rival hegemonic formations, in which case the attribution of a categorial difference between the two would be unjustified. Alternatively, since  $\alpha$  has been

supposed to be the extension of Indonesian national identity, it might be possible that what is included in  $\beta$  are identities that the Indonesian national identity constitutively excludes—the ethnic Chinese-Indonesians and the LGBT people, for example.<sup>29</sup> This would be the case in which a project to impose a particular Indonesian national identity over the social space would have placed ethnic Chinese individuals and sexual minorities in a marginalized position—in other words,  $\beta$  would represent the underdogs in the situation  $S$ . And yet, although the marginalization of certain groups by others is indicative of uneven power relations, the alternative does not present a case that is conceptually different from the case where  $\beta$  is a rival hegemonic formation. The most straightforward way in which a distinction between pure outside and constitutive outside that is crucial for determining the limit of a particular social order according to hegemony theory can be reflected in set-theoretical terms is to regard  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  as subsets of the situation  $S$  (which, as noted earlier, is the sedimented background is not being redrawn), with which neither  $\alpha$  nor  $\beta$  is extensionally equivalent. To express things simply, presented elements of  $S$  are individuals that are also members of either  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$  but cannot belong to both simultaneously. However, if this approach is adopted, both  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , as subsets of  $S$ , would be representations and therefore be elements of  $\wp(S)$ , the state of the situation  $S$ . This implies that elements of  $\alpha$  will share a common space of representation with elements that belong to  $\beta$ , hence that elements of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are both presented and represented in  $S$ . But this means that in the situation  $S$ , neither  $\alpha$  nor  $\beta$  conform to the definition of eventual site as a presented multiple none of whose elements are represented. To elaborate on this point and explore the possibility of incorporating the notion of eventual site and event, it is instructive to return to one of the discussions in the second chapter. Oliver Feltham had suggested that

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<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of the perception of Chinese-Indonesian minority in Indonesia—that differed along class and ethnic lines—underpinning the violence directed against Chinese-Indonesian petit-bourgeoisie in the 1998 Jakarta riots, see: James Siegel, ‘Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta’, in *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia*, ed. by Benedict Anderson (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2001), pp. 90–123.



the evental site ‘consists of an encounter between heterogeneous situations’.<sup>30</sup> The resources of hegemony theory has provided a way of thinking the internal composition of a situation that reflects the limitation to the positions that can be represented under a historical circumstance, as well as a way of thinking the coming to be of such a situation through the interaction between situations and their respective states. It is an appropriate time to return to this suggestion and consider how an evental site may be located in the social situation, reconceived via the incorporation of aspects of hegemony theory.

An evental site is defined as a presented multiple that belongs to the situation, but none of whose elements belong to the situation. In the interpretation of Badiou’s system, the elements of an evental site have been suggested to be radically unrepresentable—although this is not how Badiou describes the evental site, it is nevertheless compatible with the claim that nothing of what is in the evental site can be known, since knowable implies representable. Feltham argues, however, that it is implausible to claim that the *sans-papiers* constitute a ‘point of total ignorance’ if the *sans-papiers* form an evental site in the situation of French society: the French State will need to claim to know something about them in order to legitimate their marginalization. The relevant passage in which Feltham diverges from Badiou’s claim shall be quoted in full:

In the eyes of the French state, illegal immigrants are excessive in their number, criminal tendencies, their weight upon French society; in turn, they are deficient according to every measure of French social integration [...]. However, if the *sans-papiers* form an evental-site in French politics, it is inaccurate to say that they constitute a point of ignorance for the state: how could they, being its favourite scapegoat? The question is how much knowledge, and of what kind, is necessary to construct a fantasy. It is the phantasmatic figure of the illegal immigrant as parasite that justifies the proud exercise of the state’s repressive capacities. The real ignorance of the

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<sup>30</sup> Feltham, p. 122.

state concerns rather the social and political capacities of these particular people. These capacities, however, are no mystery; in fact, they form a part of other situations and their states, whether it be the situation of Mali expatriates, or the situation of civil associations that help illegal immigrants. Every evental site is on the edge of the void, as Badiou says, from the perspective of the state of the initial situation. However, from within the evental site itself, its multiple is made up of an intersection between situations, an intersection between post-colonial Mali and the situation of the French economy [...]. In a materialist ontology, heterogeneous elements have to come from somewhere: the evental-site can thus be defined as a non-recognized intersection between situations; a disqualified mix which appears, at the level of the state, as a pure disjunction—the French state is *not responsible for citizens* of Mali [...]. For so long the left have been dismissed as idealists but here activists along with the *sans-papiers* are calling for a dose of realism: the state needs to exit its fantasy and enter the real world; in other words, the level of presentation and its expansion via intersecting populations.<sup>31</sup>

Because Feltham considers Badiou's claim that the composition of the evental site is strictly unknowable difficult to uphold in concrete social situations, in the alternative he proposes, there is something of the *sans-papiers* that is known to the inhabitant of the French situation—it is only that they do not know well enough, and do not know that they do not know well enough. In Feltham's claim that the actual 'capacities [of the *sans-papiers*] are no mystery' because 'in fact, they form a part of other situations and their states', what is again affirmed is that void-ness is a relative property in extraontological situations, and that a multiple that is an evental site for one situation may not be in others. Although this is perfectly reasonable as an account of the French situation and the marginalization of the *sans-papiers*, the premises of the alternative account of social situations being developed in this chapter makes it difficult to directly incorporate Feltham's account and conclude that the *sans-papiers* form an evental

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<sup>31</sup> Feltham, p. 99.

site. Difficulty arises because, firstly, the alternative account of social situations fixes the sense of the term ‘state’ strictly to mean a space of representation and, secondly, accepts the interpretation proposed in the first chapter that every social identity is, in the end, an underrepresentation.

On the first point: if the *sans-papiers* appear ‘deficient according to every measure of French social integration’, it can only be the case that the situation of French society is one in which the *sans-papiers* is discerned as deficient people—the *sans-papiers* form a multiple that is not only presented, but also represented, represented as deficient people. This is not to deny the thought that is implied in the long passage quoted previously, namely, that the representation of *sans-papiers* as deficient or incompetent is one that is unfairly imposed, and what the inhabitants of the situation does ‘know’ of the *sans-papiers* is nothing but a testament to their ignorance of the actual capacities of the *sans-papiers* as *individuals*, or their failure to see the *sans-papiers* as more than an indistinct group of people who are ‘not French’. Still, in so far as ‘deficiency’ indicates the alterity of the *sans-papiers* vis-à-vis ‘French’ identity, there is a relation between the two terms, ‘*sans-papiers*’ and ‘French’. But two terms that are related need a space wherein they can be related as different, and this space can only be a common space of representation. Thus, if the identity of ‘French’ requires it to be differentiated from what it is not, then that against which it is differentiated necessarily has an access to the space of representation of the French situation as a whole (this is a point to which the discussion of the Laclauian category of the ‘socially heterogeneous’ later will return). On the second point: adapting Badiou’s definition of a historical situation as a situation wherein there is an omnipresence of singular multiples, it had been suggested that every social identity is a singular multiple that can be described alternatively as an underrepresentation, in the sense that in concrete social situations governed by a particular regime of counting, individuals are presented and represented under the aspect of their particular qualities. Under this

interpretation, a strict distinction between *sans-papiers* and other social identities that may be represented in the French situation becomes difficult to maintain.

The possibility of a slippage from radically unrepresentable to underrepresented or misrepresented—which, on the alternative account, is the characteristic of all social identities—is one that had been latent in the premise that in extraontological situations, voidness, and by extension, the event-ness of an event, are relative properties. It is this slippage that needs to be avoided if the thought of an event as the singular point of origin for a process of extensive social transformation, which shall be defined as a process whose transformative effects do not range over just any one social situation, but over a situation that reflects the limit of inclusivity and representability that is achievable under a historical circumstance. The risk of slippage between underrepresented and unrepresentable persists because set-theoretical ontology does not prohibit the *thought* of there being a situation that would have as its subsets the situation of France and the situation of Mali expatriates. In that ‘larger’ situation, with its more expansive representational regime, the *sans-papiers* and the French citizens, strictly under the definitions of the ontological discourse, may well be presented and represented. This ‘upward’ delineation of situations, hence the *a priori* indefinite expansion of a space of representation, is not intrinsically prohibited in the discourse of set-theoretical ontology—the examination that followed from the caricature of Italian football in the second chapter has explored the ambiguities that ensue from this. Indeed, for set-theoretical ontology, it must be the case that such a ‘larger’, more ‘inclusive’, situation is *thinkable*. It is the thinkability of such a situation that allows a situation-to-come supplemented by a truth as well as the forcing of a truth to be thinkable, since what happens in forcing is that the subject of a truth approaches the situation via the hypothesis of a situation-to-come, what will have been presented therein if those who are not even counted-as-one will have come to belong in the same way as those who are already counted as belonging. However, it is implausible to suppose that the regime

of representation that regulates a concrete social situation could be transformed or expanded by thinking alone. The contribution of hegemony theory at this point is that it is able to propose the following: although the limit to what can be represented cannot be posited *a priori*, that limit is nonetheless necessary if the beginning and end of a particular social order is to be determined, and that such a limit is constituted and reinforced by relations of equivalence, difference, and constitutive exclusion between social identities that are established in the order. It proposes, in other words, that the limit is one that is imposed historically. On this view, the exclusionary relation between ‘French’ and ‘*sans-papiers*’ is irreconcilable because the actual realization of a more inclusive, larger situation is thwarted by the particular ways in which the identity of ‘French’ is constituted and sustained. It can also be surmised what a socially transformative process must be in one of its dimensions (in its ‘vertical’ dimension): the realization of that inclusive situation, which abolishes the established relation—one that is exclusionary—between identities that blocks the expansion of the space of representation, so as to allow a plurality of previously unrepresentable, hence non-constructible, multiples to have a chance of becoming representable in a new situation. The remaining task is to see how the dichotomized situation as construed so far could incorporate the idea of a momentary interruption of presentational and representational structure at which the possibility of a situation beyond the restrictions of the regimes of counting that currently regulate the situation is glimpsed.

### 5.3.3 An outline of a process of transformation

In line with his refusal to valorise the position of ‘total exteriority vis-à-vis the present situation’ as the only position from which a socially transformative process can initiate, Laclau states that ‘absolute subtraction from all particularities of the situation’ is ‘a notion thinkable

in a Badiouian perspective but not in mine'.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, with the introduction of the category of 'heterogeneity' or the 'socially heterogeneous' in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau defines a class of elements that are located at the point of greatest exteriority conceivable in his approach. The role of heterogeneity in the construction of hegemonic formations and antagonistic divisions is complex, and will not be treated in full detail, as the complexity is not relevant in so far as the alternative account presupposes the 'extreme' case in which there are clearly defined relations between identities, as either antagonistic or non-antagonistic. It shall be suggested that the category of heterogeneity can be connected to the evental site in Badiou's theory, in that it denotes elements in a social order that are not merely underrepresented, but radically unrepresentable, and whose 'emergence'—presentation—would dislocate the regime of representation.

The basic motivation for the introduction of the category of heterogeneity in the theory of hegemony is not difficult to summarize. Without an exclusion that is radically unrepresentable in the representational space as such, the maximal simplification of the social space—that is, the division of society into two irreconcilable formations or identities—would result in

a saturated space within which all social entities can be located. We have, it is true, an antagonistic frontier, but one which cannot include, within its own logic, its own displacement in any direction. The reason for this is clear: if the excluded other is the condition of my own identity, persisting in my identity also requires the positing of the antagonistic other.<sup>33</sup>

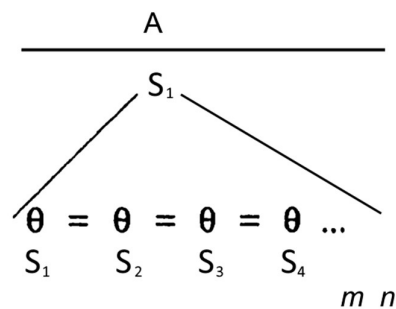
Such a 'saturated space' would be a social order wherein all identities are locatable within either of the two hegemonic formations that dichotomize a social order—or, to refer to the account of the simplification of the social space developed earlier, a situation S in which every

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<sup>32</sup> Laclau, 'Glimpsing the Future', p. 318. And: Laclau, 'Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics', p. 679.

<sup>33</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 140.

element can be classified as belonging to either  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ . In Laclau's view, the sole effect of antagonism in this case is the stabilization of identities. The shifting or displacement of the boundary between formations cannot be deduced from their difference in so far as the boundary is what constitutes them as different—hence, a 'pure inside/outside opposition would presuppose an immobile frontier'.<sup>34</sup> To uphold the possibility of breaking this immobility, Laclau postulates that there will be an 'irreducible remainder' or a 'residue' that is unassimilable to any existing formation, in which the possibility of dislocating any particular construction of identity and of social space is retained. Laclau describes heterogeneity at one point by employing a Lacanian vocabulary, as the 'Real' that 'resists symbolic integration'—this captures the thought that heterogeneity is the 'kind of outside' that is 'not only an exteriority to something within a space of representation, but to the space of representation as such'.<sup>35</sup> As has been suggesting earlier, 'two entities, in order to be different, need a space within which that difference is representable'. Heterogeneity, then, cannot mean difference, as it 'presupposes the absence of that common space'.<sup>36</sup> By introducing a slight alteration to the diagram employed in the third chapter, heterogeneity can be indicated as follows<sup>37</sup>:



<sup>34</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 152. See also: Lasse Thomassen, 'Antagonism, Hegemony and Ideology after Heterogeneity', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 10.3 (2005), 289–309 (p. 300).

<sup>36</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 140.

<sup>37</sup> The diagram is a modified version of the one that Laclau provides in: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 148.

$S_1$  and A represent two hegemonic identities in an antagonistic, exclusionary, relation that have dichotomized the social space. In an antagonistic relation, the outside is constitutive of the inside, the identities of the inside define themselves in relation to the other. Thus, the ‘other’, A in the diagram above, is represented in a common space of representation as  $S_1$ , as its negative reference. The elements  $m$  and  $n$ , however, are heterogeneous in the sense that they are unrepresentable in any of the formations—they are not counted-as-one by any of the hegemonic universalities that dichotomize the social situation. The formulation of heterogeneity as the ‘residue’ or ‘irreducible remainder’ of the constitution of an order that cannot be integrated into any formation and has no access to the space of representation, it might be suggested, makes heterogeneity the closest Laclauian equivalent of the elements that compose an evental site, located at the edge of a situation’s void. From the perspective of the situation, there is nothing in the evental site to be discerned to make its elements enter into the composition of multiples in the situation. In the first chapter, this has been explained by saying that the only ‘property’ that the elements that compose an evental site possesses is a non-property according to the situation’s prevailing regime of representation, and that, as a result, this ‘property’ cannot be the basis on which a social identity is constructed, as a representable multiple, in the situation. Laclau writes: ‘in the case of an outside which is opposed to the inside just because it does not have access to the space of representation “opposition” means simply “leaving aside” and, as such, it does not in any sense shape the identity of what is inside’.<sup>38</sup> As heterogeneity is not a difference and thus excised from the relationality that constitute identities, it could be likened to elements composing an evental site, which cannot be related to elements that belong to that situation under the situation’s prevailing presentational and representational regime. Heterogeneity is comparable to the evental site in this respect. But it can now be added that its ‘evental’ quality is constituted—has *come to be*—

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<sup>38</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 140.



in the process of equivalential articulation of a plurality of identities to establish a social order. The question, then, is how heterogeneity can come to have actual transformative effects. On the ‘emergence’ of heterogeneity, Harrison summarizes Laclau’s position as follows and raises pertinent questions:

All we can really know [about the socially heterogeneous] is: (a) that their emergence cannot be explained dialectically; (b) strictly speaking they do not have a name (or identity); and (c) that they are the ‘residue’ of the construction of a previous ‘people’ [or a hegemonic identity, in the present context]. Hence whilst crucial for Laclau’s theory on a whole a number of unanswered questions remain: do the socially heterogeneous have to be a collective subjectivity? What is the logic of their emergence?<sup>39</sup>

In a similar vein, Balibar has remarked that in Laclau’s theory, heterogeneity is ‘[pushed] back beneath the properly political construction or formalization [...]’. About this heterogeneity, and thus about this demand for equality and freedom, without which there would be no initial “shock” for politics, [...] we can say nothing except that it must exist’.<sup>40</sup> These readers are right to note that Laclau does not proceed much further beyond the postulation of heterogeneity as the necessary condition for preventing the permanency of established identities and antagonistic divisions—that heterogeneity will emerge as ‘the outsiders of the system, the underdogs’ is one of the few things that can be said about its emergence.<sup>41</sup> However, with the affinities between heterogeneity and evental site that have been listed so far, and given the suggestion in the first chapter that an event in Badiou’s theoretical architecture is the moment of impossible passage from the unrepresentable to the representable, it would not be unjustified to propose that the emergence of heterogeneity is comparable to an event, whose occurrence is not an effect of structure—its occurrence is unexplainable from

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<sup>39</sup> Harrison, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> Étienne Balibar, ‘Populism and Politics: The Return of the Contract’, in *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, trans. by James Ingram (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 187–95 (p. 194).

<sup>41</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 150.

the perspective of the situation—but is a presentation that occurs in violation of the regimes of counting that governs the situation.

One last observation apropos the category of heterogeneity shall be made. Laclau regards the socially heterogeneous to be in possession of a lumpenproletariat-like status, that is, the status that the lumpenproletariat has within the classic Marxist discourse of the relations of production and of class struggle between two camps that emerges therefrom. In the orthodox Marxist discourse, the expulsion of the lumpenproletariat from ‘the field of historicity’ is ‘the very condition of possibility for a pure interiority, of a history with a coherent structure’, based on the ascription of an ‘*a priori* central role’ to the proletariat as the ‘necessary agent of historical development’.<sup>42</sup> Belonging neither to the proletariat, nor to what is antagonistically opposed to it, namely, the bourgeoisie, Laclau believes that the lumpenproletariat is reduced to a ‘peoples without history’ in this discourse. Laclau is led to postulate the lumpenproletariat-like status of the socially heterogeneous as that which subverts a final determination of an antagonistic relation (it should be noted that the attribution of transformative potential to the lumpenproletariat is not without precedence—Laclau himself mentions Frantz Fanon). This is partly motivated by his view that an antagonistic relation cannot be *a priori* deduced—it is likely that, to Laclau, the characterization found in Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of the superficial revolutionary activities of the lumpenproletariat as ‘masquerades’ of true revolutionary activity would appear as nothing but an attempt to salvage the idea that ‘true’ antagonism can be deduced from something that is beyond political construction—the economic substructure, for example. Yet, the distinction between the lumpenproletariat and the proletariat has been drawn by some authors as two modalities of political subjectivity, without reference to economic determinism. Vladimir Safatle—to name just one author—

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<sup>42</sup> Laclau, ‘Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics’, p. 667. Also: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 144.

explains that whereas the activities of the lumpenproletariat are oriented toward self-preservation and motivated by a desire to return to order, the proletariat, devoid of property and detached from ‘traditional modes of living’ or ‘established social normativities’, is capable of turning ‘its destitution into a political force to radically transform existing forms of life’.<sup>43</sup> A theory that posits the neutralization of dislocation and thus the recuperation of an order as the sufficient condition of social change requires neither an account of social change other than as conceived as the overcoming of the lack of order, nor a concept of subject other than as lacking, whose attempt to remedy that lack through investing in a particular project that it believes would restore an order wherein it will have attained self-identity. However, if the processes of instituting an order does not necessarily imply social transformation, the conceptual determination of social transformation requires, at least, an additional distinction between processes that are sustained by the *continual* marginalization or exclusion of certain positions or possibilities and processes that do not—a distinction that is corollary to that between a subject for whom the objective is the attainment of fullness (a reconciled society) as such and a kind of subject whose trajectory could be specified differently. The explorations of this chapter have so far suggested that the incorporation of aspects of hegemony theory in the account of social situation should allow the thought of pre-evental subjectivity, the articulation of equivalential relations, or the construction of hegemonic formations and identities under certain historical conditions. To think the ‘vertical’ dimension of transcending the situation shaped by those ‘horizontal’ processes, however, what is needed is precisely the abovementioned distinction. If the emergence of the socially heterogeneous could be seen as ‘evental’, it should be followed by a process that could definitely be regarded as one that is akin to the process of extending the situation with a truth.

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<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Safatle, *Grand Hotel Abyss: Desire, Recognition and the Restoration of the Subject* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2016), p. 281.

Not all the details of the Badiouian categories of event, intervention, subject, and truth procedure will be reiterated here and the co-articulation of hegemony theory and Badiouian theory shall not be pushed beyond the point of showing that in the account of social situations developed in this chapter, the supplementation of the situation with previously non-constructible multiples constitutes a process of extensive social transformation. For the sake of exposition, Rosa Parks shall serve as an example, granting that her refusal to give up her seat was an event and that the American situation in which this event occurred has the structure of a maximally simplified situation, that, in this case, is a situation dichotomized by two irreconcilable identities, namely, ‘black’ and ‘white’. Bypassing the details and judgements pertaining to actual history, what is outlined below is how a socially transformative process that unfolds the consequences of the ‘event’ of Rosa Parks might be understood.

The particular situation in which the incident involving Rosa Parks occurred was that of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. As there had never been a shortage of buses in mid-twentieth century United States, it must be said that it was a perfectly ordinary situation. It is not the case that there were no other resistances against segregation, including refusals to give up seats, prior to a day in 1955. But, as Todd May explains, ‘[w]hat makes the refusal of Rosa Parks an event is ‘the fidelity to her act by other committed activists’—it is ‘only in retrospect that we realize that hers was an event while the previous refusals were not’, which were ‘interventions [that failed] to catalyse an event’ for the situation.<sup>44</sup> On illustrating what makes a situation as ordinary as that of a bus an evental site of the American situation and that the affirmation of an event that had occurred therein initiates a transformative process on that situation, the alternative account shall rely on a thought that is broadly related to Rancière’s formulation of subjectivation as the emergence of a ‘figure’ that is constituted through ‘a

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<sup>44</sup> May, review of *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Re-thinking Emancipation*.

crossing of identities’ as an exception—in Rancière’s own term, ‘supernumerary’—to the ‘calculated number of groups, places, and functions in a society’.<sup>45</sup> In the alternative account, it will be said that an evental site is composed of ‘figures’ that are not representable in the situation—they are not identities, strictly speaking—because they do not constitute themselves with reference to the exclusionary relation that is constitutive of any identity in that situation. This is to say that if the refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat is an event, it is because the figure of Rosa Parks that it presents belongs nowhere in the set of all social identities constructible in accordance with the representational regime that governs the American situation as a whole. In Rancière’s account, subjectivation, by definition, involves an egalitarian declaration, which Badiou suggests is, ‘for Rancière, the event itself’.<sup>46</sup> The alternative account accepts that the presentation of an unrepresentable figure is an event and that what makes the figure unrepresentable is that it is a kind of ‘crossing’ of identities. However, it stays closer to Badiou in holding that whilst it is an event that makes the production of a truth (or egalitarian) consequences possible, an event is not in itself their realization, which depends entirely on the continuation of a process that comes after the event.

One of the conditions for unfolding the consequences of an event is that any attempt to dissimulate it, to reduce an event to a non-event, has to be resisted. It will always be easier for the inhabitants of the situation to explain away an anomalous figure by conferring an already-representable identity on it. The inhabitants of the situation possess the resources to do so, for it is, in fact, part of the situation’s knowledge that Rosa Parks is a passenger, a black woman, and so on. An illustration from Jodi Dean outlines how the event of Rosa Parks may be dissimulated:

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<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization’, *October*, 61 (1992), 58–64 (p. p.61). Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. p.51.

<sup>46</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘The Lessons of Jacques Rancière: Knowledge and Power after the Storm’, in *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, ed. & trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 101–30 (p. 118).

One can imagine what could have occurred should the therapeutic and particularized practices of institutionalized identity politics have been in place: Rosa Parks would have discussed her feelings about being discriminated against; the bus driver would have dealt with his racism, explaining that he had been brought up that way; and perhaps there would have been a settlement enabling Parks to ride at a discounted fare on weekends and holidays. Maybe the two would have appeared together on a television talk show, the host urging each to understand and respect the opinion of the other. Ultimately, the entire situation would have been seen as about Parks' specific experience rather than about legalized segregation more generally. It would not have been political; it would have been policed (to use terminology from Jacques Rancière).<sup>47</sup>

The passage above indicates negatively what drawing the transformative consequences of the event of Rosa Parks would require: to recognize that there had been a crossing of the division between 'black' and 'white' and to affirm that figures like Rosa Parks, which currently would compose a multiple unrepresentable under the prevailing regime of representation, belong to the American situation and will have become representable if the situation's representational regime were transformed. Those who have decided positively on these propositions can be said to be the subject of the event of Rosa Parks.

The process of transformation itself can be conceived in terms of a truth procedure, or, more specifically, the forcing of a truth, described in the first chapter as the process of extending the situation with non-constructible, hitherto unrepresentable, multiples. Paul declared that '[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female'.<sup>48</sup> If it were supposed that the regime of representation were such that 'Jew' and 'Greek' excluded each other, the radicalism of Paul's declaration—his subject-language—might lie in its occultation of a situation in which the exclusionary relation no longer restricts

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<sup>47</sup> Dean, p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> Gal 3.28, quoted in: Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 9.

the construction of multiples. Following from the account of the dichotomization of social situation, the composition of the American situation is assumed to be such that every represented, hence constructible, identities in the situation are defined by their exclusion of either 'white' or 'black'. A socially transformative process, far from reinforcing what 'black' identity had hitherto been, must consist in the radical transformation of that identity. But as 'white' identity is constituted by its exclusionary relation to 'black' identity, the transformation of the latter also implies the transformation of the former. In fact, the extent of their transformation should be such that the distinction is finally abolished: in the American situation in which 'black' and 'white' marks every identity that is represented therein, what the transformation of the situation will need to produce is a multiple that is not marked as such. This multiple will have supplemented the American situation and transformed its regime of representation when a whole variety of previously non-constructible, unrepresentable multiples would have come to belong to the situation as representable multiples. For example, one could imagine that in a transformed situation, a social role that had previously been reserved for one race will have become a multiple whose membership criterion is no longer restricted in that manner. The way in which the dichotomization of a social situation and the restrictions on social identities that are constructed therein have been conceived also allows the following description of fidelity to the event of Rosa Parks: since any identity representable according to the representational regime of the American situation is simultaneously a part of some other 'local' situation in the American situation, the unfolding of the consequences of the event will consist in interventions in those local situations, discerning the traces of racial divide therein and abolishing them. By abolishing the restrictions on the identities that can be represented in the situation, the historically imposed limitation on the expansion of the space of representation is overcome. The process of transformations renders the situation more

inclusive because, as a result of that process, the construction of identities of its inhabitants will no longer be constrained in the way that it had been previously.

#### 5.4 Recapitulation and remaining issues

The alternative account of social situations outlined in this chapter have sought to specify, by incorporating the idea of the simplification of social space and the construction of social identities from hegemony theory, a situation that would reflect the extent of the universality or inclusivity that is achievable in a historical circumstance. The composition of that situation, it has been suggested, is such that the realization of a more inclusive situation is blocked by the ways in which identities are constructed therein. Subsequently, a process of transformation tasked with the abolition of the restrictions on the construction of identities have been outlined by drawing from the Badiouian account of post-evental transformation. The transformative effect of this process is the expansion of the space of representation, which renders representable multiples—social identities—that had previously been unrepresentable. This process can be said to be a process of extensive social change, because its transformative effects do not range over just any one social situation, but over a situation whose internal composition reflects the limit of inclusivity that is achievable in a historical circumstance. From this result, then, the following statement might be drawn regarding the relationship between the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ axes: the vertical process by which something radically new is introduced is most easily determinable conceptually when it involves breaking through the limit of inclusivity attained via horizontal processes. However, it must be admitted—as Rancière and Laclau have, but against, perhaps, Badiou—that in practice, the two processes will be intertwined in a way that an indistinction between the two is retained, partly because it is questionable whether concrete social situations could ever be so radically simplified or dichotomized in the way that the alternative account presupposes in order to delineate what is



new in the situation. Although rooted in the post-Marxist theory of Laclau, the paradigmatic instance of a socially transformative process the alternative account depicts seems to be closer to that which is depicted by classical Marxism.

To conclude this study, a limitation of the construal of the two axes that has been reached here shall be considered by returning to the ‘practico-ethical’ question. In the second chapter, the practico-ethical line of criticism raised against the Badiouian approach had been set aside, on the grounds that the issues that it raises concerning event and fidelity are practically relevant in so far as a truth procedure is really a process of substantial change. If it is granted that this chapter has pointed toward the possibility of specifying a process of extensive social transformation by drawing from the theoretical resources of Badiou and Laclau, the practico-ethical issue gains relevance. Yet, on this matter, there are, unfortunately, more questions to be raised than answers to be provided.

It might be questioned whether, in the alternative account, social transformation *as such* becomes an objective, without a clear answer to the question of why any particular process of social transformation should be affirmed. One could argue that both Badiouian and Laclauian approaches contain the seeds of this outcome. Christopher Watkin’s observation points to the issue in the Badiouian approach. The universality and egalitarian dimensions attributed to a truth, Watkin writes, ‘can only be justified in terms of the inconsistent multiplicity that is retrojected from the counting-as-one of any situation, counting-as-one that introduces hierarchies, relations and divisions foreign to the void’.<sup>49</sup> By undoing hierarchies, relations, and divisions that governs a situation, a truth ‘brings into being a new universal category [...] that counts as one in a way more faithful to the retroactively apprehended non-hierarchized inconsistent multiplicity’.<sup>50</sup> Although *Being and Event* may have succeeded in

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> Watkin, p. 233.

demonstrating that a truth procedure is a process that necessarily effects transformation and produces novelty in any given situation, since every historical situation has a specific void, it seems perfectly reasonable to ask whether there is any other justification for challenging prevailing regimes of counting in any *particular* situation. Not unexpectedly, a justification for supporting any particular change cannot be derived from ontology—Watkin is led to conclude that ‘[t]here can only be one reason for preferring truth and subjecthood over animality and the “get rich!” maxim: inconsistent multiplicity is *eo ipso* Good’.<sup>51</sup> Although this may be a slightly hasty conclusion to draw when dealing with extraontological situations, it seems true nonetheless that whether Badiou’s philosophy has offered the sought justification remains unclear. As for Laclau, Harrison’s remark shall be quoted again:

According to [Laclau] no particular normative order is ethically preferable in-itself, and the only basis for deciding as much is through the degree of attachment or ‘investment’ that a people decide to place in it. Hence, for Laclau the varying degrees of ‘unevenness’ between differential discourses cannot be explained by the relative merits of a particular order [...]. It is the subject that decides as to what is both ethical and normative, not the discourse theorist.<sup>52</sup>

While the impossibility of instituting a self-identical society necessitates hegemonic processes and an investment in a particular normative order by historical actors, the evaluation of the ‘content’ of the normative order chosen is beyond the remit of hegemony theory. What is important for hegemony theory is for subjects to invest in *some* order.

One can only respond to someone who asks why social change is desirable in the first place by congratulating him for finding satisfaction in the world as it is. But even if one were committed to the desirability of social change, this entails neither the affirmation of change in

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<sup>51</sup> Watkin, p. 233.

<sup>52</sup> Harrison, pp. 67–68. See also: Laclau, ‘Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics’, p. 85.

*any* direction nor that it is desirable to change *any particular* social situation. Thus, in practice, some means of justifying a particular course of action appears to be in need. And here, the difficulty of integrating the vertical and horizontal axes resurfaces at a very practical level. Badiou observes that any scientific revolution worthy of its name is first received with scepticism, ‘lovers’ babble is dismissed as infantile foolishness’, and that revolutionary politics is deemed to ‘maintain a utopian (or non-realistic) discourse’ by ‘external witnesses’, for whom the statements a faithful subject makes about a situation-to-come appear to ‘make up an arbitrary and content-free language’.<sup>53</sup> The statements that are initially meaningless for the inhabitants of the situation will have become meaningful once the initial situation is extended by a truth—as it has been stated in the first chapter, it is an effect of a truth that ‘the codes of communication’ and ‘the regime of opinions’ in the situation changes, such that ‘formerly obvious judgements are no longer defensible, that others become necessary’.<sup>54</sup> But this points toward a practical problem concerning the efficacy of a socially transformative process. The problem is not so much that of solipsism, or the exclusion of other perspectives from fidelity that, from the outside, may appear to proceed with the Pelagian ‘certainty that perfection lies wherever it leads’.<sup>55</sup> Rather, the worry is that in denying the meaningfulness of subject-language in a situation that has *not yet* been transformed by a truth and to those who are *not yet* a faithful subject, there is a danger of making the actual accommodation of a truth by the situation (and its inhabitants) as something that results from *purely* contingent reasons (this is a worry that has been expressed by Peter Dews<sup>56</sup>).

Émile Benveniste—whose work has been influential for Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the concept of symbolic power—had written: ‘Anybody can shout in the public square, “I decree

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<sup>53</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 398.

<sup>54</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 80.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>56</sup> See: Peter Dews, ‘States of Grace: The Excess of the Demand in Badiou’s Ethics of Truths’, in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. by Peter Hallward (London ; New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 106–19.

a general mobilization,” and as it cannot be an *act* because the requisite authority is lacking, such an utterance is no more than *words*; it reduces itself to futile clamour, childishness, or lunacy.’<sup>57</sup> If such utterances that are perceived by bystanders as ‘noise’ resemble the characteristic that Badiou attributes to subject-language, Laclau, in spite of everything that he says about the incommensurability of the particular and the universal, partial object and fullness, and the irreducibility of decision, nonetheless affirms that the actual efficacy of a political project depends on its availability, credibility, and acceptability to a diverse range of social agents. It can be said that these conditions correspond to the ‘authority’ that makes a certain project (or discourse) to be more than noise. If Badiou embraces the impossibility of evaluating—or even comprehending—the statements made by faithful subjects from the outside, Laclau goes in the opposite direction. But in appealing to the *Sittlichkeit* of the community, his position risks diluting the specificity of a transformative process that, from a Badiouan perspective, must be a process that introduces something new and unexpected in the situation. The difficulty of integrating the vertical and the horizontal axes returns at this point: the more one tries to provide justification or good reasons for a particular course of action, the more likely it becomes that the extent of transformation achieved will be limited by the normative framework of the prevailing order—and yet, without being able to offer reasons and justifications that elicit broad acceptance, political practice risks becoming the work of the few that is easily dismissed by society at large.

From the theoretical resources of Badiou and Laclau, it is possible to elaborate the formal ontological conditions that makes radical transformation of a social order thinkable, and conceptually determine what a process of social transformation *is*—it is hoped that this study has at least shown this much. But the persistence of the difficulty of integrating the two

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<sup>57</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1973), p. 236.

axes at a practical level suggests that actually moving toward social transformation of that sort in practice is another matter, the elaboration of which, plausibly, will need to draw from theoretical resources that neither Badiou nor Laclau may have provided.

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