

can form 'distinct groups of belongings' (ibid.). The relation between set and part or subset is one of inclusion, written \subset . Thus the subsets of the set of the national population will include elements combined 'according to civil status, tax rates, criminality, levels of education or salary, or indeed according to any arbitrary criterion ("everyone with black hair," "everyone living east of the Seine," etc.)' (BA, 88). Self-evidently, the number of subsets that can be produced out of a set is always much larger than the number of elements comprised in it. For Badiou, the significant point is that there is always what he calls a 'point of excess', a massive gulf between belonging and inclusion ('une béance sans mesure', EE, 468). Inclusion is always 'irremediably' in excess of belonging (EE, 100). The resources of a given multiple are always greater than those that mere counting suggests. This is crucial for Badiou: it shows there are always other potential orders hidden within the one given. The scope of a given order is not determined by the elements that comprise it, but is a question of how they combine. Nor is it ever possible to know or calculate the exact excess of inclusion over belonging (MP, 60–1). The 'point of excess' is indeterminate or 'errant', to return to the *Timaeus* (AB, 158). It wanders lawlessly through all things, producing effects that are strictly unpredictable, incalculable, and intermittent.²

The 'point of excess' is the principle of a fundamental ontological instability. We might also think of it as Badiou's principle of freedom. We only know it as situated. A situation is a particular presentation (configuration, disposition) of the multiple. The State is a representation of that presentation. Whatever its claims to the contrary, it really has no interest in the life of people as such. It knows the citizen, not as the 'concrete infinity' he or she is, but as an element that is counted as one, 'as a subset' or singleton of him- or herself (DO, 46; EE, 124). It counts its already structured elements by imposing a 'metastructure' (EE, 126). Every structure 'calls for a metastructure' (EE, 99), and no situation is thinkable apart from this concept. Any given structure presents an infinite and inconsistent multiplicity as units ('ones'). But one is always a 'fictive' effect (EE, 105). Structure is always haunted by the void on which it is founded. Remember the laughter tinkling in von Neumann's champagne-glass tower. Structure is threatened by an eruption of the very inconsistency of the multiple that it seeks to hold at bay. There is always the possibility of 'a catastrophe in presentation' and the manifestation of inconsistency as such (EE, 109). Structure of itself cannot guarantee consistency. For the count

² See BA, 82–6.

³ On the 'point of excess', see EE, 98–100. On excess as 'errant', see MP, 60–1.

2

Badiou (ii): Politics, Ethics, Aesthetics

STATE AND DOXA

The account of Badiou's philosophy that I have given so far raises an obvious question. Being is irreducibly inconsistent. In an actually infinite universe, there is always what I have called a wobble or a play in Being. This is what makes the event possible. But why, then, is Badiou's world not more like Deleuze's? Why are events rare? Why is the world not as full of events in Badiou's later as in his early work?

The answer lies in the concept of the State. This has both an ontological and a political significance. Badiou does not define it solely in political terms: Spinoza's God is an example of it. As we have seen, nature is another. But, not surprisingly, the concept of the State becomes starkly clear in relation to the political sphere. I shan't be offering an exhaustive account of Badiou's politics. Hallward has already done so. But the pathos of intermittency cannot be separated from politics. Here, I shall follow through a particular—and particularly relevant—strand in Badiou's political thought. This will lead on to brief accounts of his ethics and aesthetics. These, too, are compressed and precisely focused. They are focused, above all, towards the discussion of Badiou's reading of Beckett, in Chapter 3. We cannot go any further, however, without first referring to what Hallward calls the 'simple foundation' of Badiou's whole ontology (BA, 85), the distinction between belonging and inclusion.

Hallward provides an admirably clear account of this.¹ On the one hand, a set is a collection of elements. The elements belong to the set, the relationship of belonging being written \in . Hallward provides the example of 'a national population' (let's say, French). This is the set defined by of all those elements that are 'counted for one in a particular census' (ibid.). On the other hand, the elements in a set can be grouped as parts or subsets of it. They

itself escapes the count; the structuring operation escapes structuring and is the point at which the void is given. This is why metastructure is so crucial: it defends structure against catastrophe. It counts what has already been counted a second time. It gives form and shape to indifferent consistency. Most of the time, this 'doubling' of structure (*EE*, 109) holds the event at bay and provides an effective defence against its consequences. This is the logic of rarity and intermittency.

By definition, the State never merely reflects or contains the whole of a given situation. It rather always masters or dominates it, imposing on it the 'fictional being' of a metastructure (*EE*, 115). This is a system of inclusion, a structure of separate but interlinked parts or parties (a 'connexion du séparé et du lié', *ibid.*). But inclusion will always exceed belonging. The combinations that can be derived from a given multiple are always more numerous than any specific or situated count suggests. No count will exhaust them. Multiples of multiples cannot be reduced to a unity: 'no multiple is capable of making-one [faire-un] of all that it includes' (*EE*, 99). Translated into practical, concrete, political reality, this is part of the logic of Badiou's commitment to the cause of the 'sans-papiers', French immigrant workers without papers. They have precisely been left out of the count.³ The system of the prevailing count means that, in a sense, they cannot even be noticed. They are therefore both philosophically and politically significant. The Organisation Politique has worked to get them counted, thereby also changing the principle of the count itself (French nationality). This abruptly returns us to the 'most radical statement' in the first Epistle to the Corinthians: "'God has chosen the things that are not [*ta mē ontia*] in order to bring to nought those that are [*ta ontia*]"' (1 Corinthians 1: 28; *SP*, 50; *SA*, 47). The work of the Organisation Politique is an exact demonstration of why Badiou gives such emphasis to the passage. For it is a succinct and altogether unsentimental expression of the ontological basis for social transformation.

The dominance of the State may be effected through a 'paradigmatic' subset, as in the case of the Party under Eastern-bloc communism (*CS*, 242). In the modern State whether socialist or democratic, State power is above all a question of management ('gestion'). This is above all the case in the current

phase of what Badiou rather awkwardly calls capitalo-parliamentarianism. No metastructure, however, can exhaust the 'immanent resources' of 'a presented multiple' (*EE*, 100). For this reason, as Hobbes knew, the State is ultimately founded less on consistencies than 'on the peril [and the fear] of inconsistency' (*EE*, 126).⁴ Furthermore, the systems of structure and metastructure are incommensurable. The 'point of excess' means, not only that inclusion exceeds belonging, but that it does so to an 'errant' or indeterminate degree. The excess of the State over the situation can never be precisely judged. The protection afforded by the State against the void (its 'fonctions "anti-void"', *EE*, 117) is never assured. It is unstable at its foundation. It is precisely because of this founding instability that politics in Badiou's sense is possible. Those who belong to but are not included in the State, whom it disregards, who are literally nothing to it, may transform its terms of reference. Badiou is fond of quoting the *Internationale*: 'Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout' ('We are nothing, let us be everything', *AB*, 130).

To recapitulate: every multiple presentation is threatened by the void, which is 'its being as such' (*EE*, 109). There is even a situational 'anguish of the void' (*EE*, 110). Metastructure protects us from it, offering 'closure and assurance' (*EE*, 114), a bulwark 'to keep the void from pouring in', to quote from Beckett's *That Time* (*CDW*, 390). But there is a price to pay: metastructure will always mean that a part functions or appears as the whole. This in turn means that we necessarily live in a world of representations that have only a 'fictional being' (*EE*, 115). This is the world of *doxa*. *The Republic* associates *doxa* with the habit of 'taking things for granted'.⁵ Badiou usually refers to it as opinion. 'What corresponds to the State in people's consciousness', writes Badiou, is 'the apparatus of opinion' (*SA*, 15; *SP*, 16). Opinions 'are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge' (*ES*, 50). They are context-derived, immediately known, and indifferently communicated. 'What arises from a truth-process, by contrast, cannot be communicated' (*ES*, 51). Truths are not information. They are not contained in messages or conveyed in broadcasts or emissions. They are produced subjectively, in encounters. Subjectification involves breaking with the world of opinion, or, in Badiou's

⁴ For a relevant account of Hobbes, see Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, tr. Hassan Melchby, foreword Hayden White (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 19–23.

⁵ See for instance *Republic*: 509d–513c. Plato, *The Republic*, tr. with an introd. and notes Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 237–40.

³ Cf. Badiou's argument with reference to Israeli nationality and the proper incorporation of Israeli Palestinians, and his identification of his position with Jewish 'creative universalism' (St. Paul, Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Trotsky, *CO*, 93–4). Cf. also the Chinese workers and peasants before 1949. *La Révolution culturelle: La Dernière révolution?* (Paris: Conférences du Rouge-Georges, 2002), 27.

meaningful phrase, with 'business as usual'.⁶ In making this break, subjects also break with themselves insofar as they are tied to that world, as for Badiou, they must be.

Badiou repeatedly insists that twentieth-century thought was almost universally anti-Platonic. This anti-Platonism was undiscriminating. He himself calls for what is, in effect, a discriminating return to Plato, and particularly to the Platonic insistence on the break with *doxa*. This is an unfashionable insistence, but it is hard to overestimate its importance to Badiou. 'Since Plato', Badiou writes, 'philosophy has been a break with opinion' (AB, 89).⁷ Thought is thought only insofar as it repudiates or holds at a distance that which is immediately given us to think. If philosophy is unremittingly affirmative, it is constituted as affirmation precisely in its break with *doxa*, which must itself be recognized as a form of negativity. To put the point differently: all thought refuses immersion in the 'massiveness' ('massivité', CS, 83) of the social order. It seeks to have done with the excess of the State over Being, of representation over presentation. It seeks to make the two coincide, to get the measure of the mirage of representation, or have done with it. In its overpowering fear of a historical relapse into terror, our culture has grown stubbornly hostile to thought. One might add that the fate of 'theory' shows this precisely. In its inception, theory was an extraordinary break with opinion, the sheer force of which is still evident, for example, in the structuralist and post-structuralist work of Roland Barthes. But this is a momentum that is subsequently lost and which has now disappeared. Badiou effectively tells us to renew it.

The break with opinion should not be loosely defined. For Badiou as for Plato, it is exemplified above all in mathematics. Mathematics is 'irremediably discontinuous' with 'the immediacy of *doxa*' (CS, 167). There are no mathematical opinions. The difficulty of mathematics exactly reflects the severe demand inherent in the break. Indeed, mathematics is the very paradigm of the possibility of the break. Everything else remains in some degree 'capitive to opinion' (ibid.). It is mathematics above all—though Badiou does not say exactly this—that resists the deconstructive double-bind. 'On peut toujours recourir aux mathématiques' (ibid.): other forms of the struggle to break with *doxa* can always look to the example of mathematics, as Beckett

⁶ Quoted in Daniel Bensaid, 'Alain Badiou et le miracle de l'événement', in *Résistance: Essai de topologie générale* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 143–70, 163.

⁷ Cf. the remarks on Plato's 'long détour', *CI*, 10.

does. Whilst Badiou actually makes comparatively little of Beckett's interest in mathematics, he rightly reads the Beckettian affirmation as founded on an almost uniquely astringing repudiation of contemporary *doxa*. This move is comparable to mathematics both in its difficulty and in its radical abstraction from the world. As we'll see later, however, for Beckett, the break with *doxa* has considerably more problematic consequences than Badiou ever quite seems to recognize.

POLITICS

In an interview with Jacques Henric, Badiou grouped Beckett along with Genet and Natacha Michel as an instance of what, in *Abrégé de métapolitique*, he calls 'resistant subjectivity' (AB, 9).⁸ He was thinking of Beckett's membership of the French Resistance. For Badiou, whose own father was also a member, understanding Beckett's courage is important to understanding his work. In Badiou's terms, however, that courage was neither heroic nor sentimental. Beckett made a clear-eyed declaration of allegiance and then submitted to 'his jurisdiction'.⁹ Like Cavailles and Canguilhem, who were also members of the Resistance, Beckett was "'resistant through logic"'.¹⁰ In a phrase of Rimbaud's that Badiou is fond of quoting,¹¹ Beckett's wartime politics was a form of 'logical revolt'. For Beckett as for Cavailles and Canguilhem, the choice of resistance is a choice made against the grain of 'subjugated opinion' (AB, 13). It is not a humanistic but an intellectual necessity. The first thing to recognize about what Badiou calls politics is that politics is always thought.

Modern politics is by definition emancipatory. It involves a subtraction of thought and action from the dominant (state-sponsored) forms of what passes for subjectivity. It breaks with the existent ('avec ce qu'il y a', AB, 34). It declares the intrinsic possibility of what seems to be impossible. It must therefore stop its ears to 'the voice of the time' (PP, 96). Politics begins with an event and consists of truth-procedures. It is also always singular, which means that, strictly speaking, there is 'no definition of politics' (AB, 56). Political events are by definition collective. But collective action does not imply the need for a Party. Parties spell the death of politics. Politics involves discipline,

⁸ Natacha Michel is a friend of Badiou's and a fellow founder of the Organisation Politique.

⁹ 'Les Lieux de la vérité', interview with Jacques Henric, *Art Press spécial*: '20 ans: L'Histoire continue', hors série 13 (1992), 113–18.

¹⁰ AB, 12. Badiou is quoting Canguilhem (unsourced).

¹¹ See for instance *IT*, 39.