

Alain Badiou

Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II.

Trans. Alberto Toscano.

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Alain Badiou is a remarkable thinker and polemicist for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that he seems to be widely referenced and rarely read. While he has written on diverse subjects, from playwright Samuel Beckett to President Nicholas Sarkozy, it was with *Being and Event* (and through the groundwork laid in *Theory of the Subject*) that his philosophical reputation was cemented. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* is a challenging and impressive extension, and in some ways, re-visioning, of that monumental project. Like its predecessor, the new work is characterized by a careful mathematical formalism which underpins erudite, poetic discussions of ethics, politics and aesthetics, making it difficult to situate the text within any traditional philosophical category. It may represent a pivotal moment in philosophical discourse as thinking re-emerges from the wake of fragmentary, “democratic materialism”: “today, natural belief can be summarized in a single statement: *There are only bodies and languages*. This statement is the axiom of our contemporary conviction”(1). Through this critique, Badiou begins a movement toward a unifying resurrection of the materialist dialectic, which would once again give body and voice to the One.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou sets himself up as a strategic iconoclast. While he carefully separates himself both from his peers and from the bulk of contemporary philosophical work—whether continental or Anglo-American—he is clear about his philosophical lineage, and about his indebtedness to Marxism and Sartre in particular. What *Being and Event II* offers the reader is a dense, clearly articulated dialectical movement from the singularity of Event and the appearance of the subject to the advent of World and worlds, all under the currently ‘outmoded’ leitmotif of Truth. Extending the mathematico-ontological argument presented in *Being and Event* to new territory, Badiou confronts, in a very direct and aggressive manner, the questions of intersubjectivity and of Truth shared among subjects.

Unsurprisingly, the book itself has a formalist structure, resembling as much a work by the Bourbaki group as anything else. In the first chapter, Badiou gives a precise axiomatic redaction of *The Theory of the Subject*, in essence recapitulating his entire philosophical project, and providing a refresher on the Event, Truth and other critical terms of engagement. Once this metaphysics is established, he is able to turn to his tripartite Greater Logic, the first two parts of which move eloquently and elegantly from the positing of worlds and their conditions to the manifestation of objects within worlds: ‘Given a world, we call object of the world the couple formed by a multiple and a

transcendental indexing of this multiple, under the condition that all the atoms whose referent is the multiple in question are its real atoms' (220). The third dialectical gesture of the Greater Logic reveals the nature of relations of objects within worlds: 'A relation is a connection between objective multiplicities—a function—that creates nothing in the register of intensities of existence, or in that of atomic localization, which is not already prescribed by the regime of the appearance of these multiplicities (by the objects whose ontological support they are' (301).

Badiou then returns to the evental site, to Truth and the subject, in Book V, which considers the possibility of emergence and change, and repeats his earlier discussions of the inter(e)ference between the phenomenological and the ontological, between Appearing and Being. Most important here is the formal characterization and clarification of 'site' within the nomenclature of the event itself. Ephemeral and transient, a site is 'an ontological figure of the instant: it appears only to disappear' (369). The evental site becomes a sort of asymptotic truth situation—the possibility of world not yet realized. This consideration of singularity segues seamlessly into Badiou's theory of points, which looks at irreversible, bifurcated decision paths. From the intersections of these decisions, the body of Truth emerges: 'Point by point, a body reorganizes itself, making appear in the world ever more singular consequences, which subjectively weave a truth about which it can be said that it will render eternal the present of the present' (503).

The sweep of Badiou's argument, particularly in the Greater Logic, is difficult to overstate. However, neither its grandeur nor its scale is a guarantor of its apodicticity. Several notable issues present themselves in the course of the book. Despite the sophistication of the set theoretic/category theoretic approach, there is a level of self-referentiality here that makes the transition from world-describing to world-generating problematic. The crux of this problem lies in the fact that Badiou has set the rules for his own truth game: within the terms and contexts he defines, the world-building processes he elucidates always-already unfold according to his own predeterminations. Moreover, the text presents a type of ontic structural realism that fails to overcome either the imaginative or the argumentative power of democratic materialism and the multiple in terms of pure generative potential. A secondary concern emerges from the style of Badiou's argument itself. Badiou often leaves the reader with a disconcerting sense of being committed to more than one thought when reading a particular section. If one agrees with Badiou at the outset, and remains convinced as the dialectic unfolds, must one agree with the outcome? There are numerous cases in which one follows the trajectory of Badiou's thought only to be faced with a forceful *quod erat demonstrandum* that seems to emerge from nowhere. Examples include his critique of 'minoritarianism', his breezy dismissal of contemporaries like Tony Negri, and some of his discussions of modern music and contemporary politics. Here, Badiou's rigorous formalism seems to descend into unsubstantiated *doxa* or rhetoric without signposts to mark the devolution. Habitually found in the scholia, these minor *caveat lector* instances nevertheless warrant mention.

Logics of Worlds is a brilliant, fascinating and, at times, excruciatingly gnomic text. Is it, as Joan Copjec suggests, ‘the book we have been waiting for’? The answer is an equivocal yes: it is a book of major importance whose ambition at times outstrips its apparatus. While it is highly technical in its language, and demanding in its conceptual approach, there is little doubt that this is a true work of philosophy in a serious, inventive sense. This is no mere exercise in reflection or criticism: Badiou has undertaken an innovative and largely successful rebuilding of philosophical thought along his own refiguring of the materialist dialectic.

A final, closing note on the translation - I have read significant portions of Badiou in both the original and in English over the years; the felicity and fidelity of Professor Toscano's translation is exceptional. He has done a major service in rendering this complex but important text accessible to non-French readers.

Conor O’Dea