The Desire Called Mao: Badiou and the Legacy of Libidinal Economy

Eleanor Kaufman
University of California, Los Angeles

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Human soul, let us see whether present time can be long. To you the power is granted to be aware of intervals of time, and to measure them. What answer will you give me? Are a hundred years in the present a long time? Consider first whether a hundred years can be present. For if the first year of the series is current, it is present, but ninety-nine are future, and so do not yet exist. If the second year is current, one is already past . . . . And so between the extremes, whatever year of this century we assume to be present, there will be some years before it which lie in the past, some in the future to come after it. It follows that a century could never be present.

--Augustine, Confessions 11 xv (19)

1. This essay addresses the legacy of the synthesis of psychoanalysis and Marxism that reached its apogee in France shortly after the events of May 1968. It attempts to delineate how this synthesis, largely abandoned by the mid-1970s, at least in its libidinal economic dimension (though certainly taken into entirely new registers by later thinkers such as Jameson and Žižek), might be said to be resurrected and reconfigured in the work of Alain Badiou. It is a reconfiguration that is in some sense unrecognizable as such, though Badiou's 1982 Théorie du sujet explicitly addresses the conjunction of Lacan and Mao, and his most recent work returns more forcefully to some of the earlier thematics--especially that of destruction--that to a large extent fell by the wayside in his 1988 opus Being and Event. If the "libidinal economy" theory of the early 1970s might be defined by a certain defiant, even delirious energy--defiant of interpretation, localization, or even of a specific mapping onto Marxism or psychoanalysis per se--then Badiou's reconfiguration of the conjuncture of psychoanalysis and Marxism is spoken in a tone of order and restraint that might be more characteristic of the period Badiou labels the "Restoration," namely the last two decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps such a shift in tonality is above all symptomatic of a shift from the conjuncture of Marx and Freud to that of Mao and Lacan, but the claim will be that what has shifted concerns the unconscious itself, that the early 1970s moment of libidinal economy allowed the unconscious full reign, whereas the later moment of the early 1980s and beyond demanded that the unconscious and other wayward desires be brought to full and absolute clarity. If unconscious desires served as a
driving motor for libidinal economy theory, they are left aside in Badiou's engagement with psychoanalysis, only to surface in different form around questions of number, counting, and periodization.

2. In the French tradition, the synthesis of Marx and Freud reached a heightened pace between the years of 1968 and 1974, above all in the work of Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Lacan, and Pierre Klossowski, the two most significant texts ostensibly being Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1974).[1] Of course, there are myriad other syntheses of Marxism and psychoanalysis, including some of Marcuse's works and above all Althusser's,[2] but it seems that something spectacular was at issue in the years following May 1968, a frenzy of writing that is now seen as delusional, incomprehensible, or nothing but unchecked free association—even Lyotard himself would later express great reservations about the libidinal economy project. Žižek criticizes the "flux of Life" Deleuzians for seeing in Deleuze and Guattari only a model of pervasive and libratory revolutionary energy (*Organs* 10). It is not surprising that the 1980s marks a renunciation of this failed free form model, and Badiou's sobriety might be seen as a hallmark of this. Badiou himself expresses criticism of libidinal economy theory just at the moment—1975—when it starts to wane. In *Théorie de la contradiction*, a short book devoted to Mao's theories of contradiction and antagonism and very much affirming the dialectic, Badiou refers to Marx's critique of "saint Max" (Stirner) in *The German Ideology* and links it to Deleuze and Guattari and to Lyotard:

Stirner's doctrine opposes "revolt" to the revolution in terms exactly identical to those spread all over the pestilential gibberish of the decomposition of the petit-bourgeois revolutionary movement that resulted from May 1968. The only difference lies in the small lexical variation that everywhere substituted the word "desire" for the word "egotism" used by saint Max (Stirner), and even more directly. Beyond that, saint Gilles (Deleuze), saint Félix (Guattari), saint Jean-François (Lyotard) occupy the same niche in the maniacal Cathedral of chimeras. That the "movement" is a desiring urge, a flux that spins out; that every institution is paranoid, and by principle heterogeneous to the "movement"; that nothing can be done against the existing order, but according to an affirmative *schize* that remains apart from this order; that it is thus necessary to substitute all organization, all hideous militancy, for the self-consumption... of the pure movement: all these audacious revisions, supposedly confronting the "totalitarian" Marxist-Leninism with the brilliant novelty of the dissident marginal masses--this is word for word what Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology*, had to shatter—and this around 1845!—in order to clear the landscape with a finally coherent systematization of the revolutionary practices of their time. (72)[3]

Like Lacan before him, Badiou is critical of free movement and flux, in so far as they are linked to the idea of revolt simply for its own sake.[4] Badiou reads the libidinal economists as espousing an anarchist model of pure desire and reaction in lieu of any more goal-oriented organization. Though Badiou and others may denounce the post-1968 thought of libidinal economy as maniacal, self-serving and incoherent, there is in fact a startlingly lucid nexus of arguments in these writings, and any legacy of psychoanalysis that traces its connection to Marxism must contend with it.
3. This nexus of arguments can be summarized according to three broad categories. The first is the rethinking of the hierarchy of exchange value over use value. Whereas exchange value would be something more abstract and more imbued with the complexity of money, use value would refer to a presumably immutable quality of the object or thing in itself. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard writes of the "fetishism of use value" and opines that "we have to be more logical than Marx himself--and more radical, in the true sense of the word. For use value--indeed utility itself--is a fetishized social relation, just like the abstract equivalence of commodities. Use value is an abstraction" (135, 131). Lyotard, following Pierre Klossowski, seeks to overturn in chiasmic fashion the hierarchy in which lofty exchange value towers above the debased level of needs underpinning use value. Lyotard cites Klossowski's *La Monnaie vivante* [*Living Currency*], which I cite in turn from Lyotard:

One should imagine for an instant an apparently impossible regression: that is an industrial phase where the producers have the means to demand, in the name of payment, objects of sensation on the part of consumers. These objects are living beings.... What we are saying here in fact exists. For, without literally returning to barter, all of modern industry rests on an exchange mediated by the sign of inert currency, neutralizing the nature of the objects exchanged; rests, that is, on a simulacrum of exchange—a simulacrum which lies in the form of manpower resources, thus a living currency, not affirmed as such, already extant. (Klossowski 89; Lyotard, *Libidinal* 87)[5]

Following Klossowski, Lyotard proposes that both use and exchange value be seen "as signs of intensity, as libidinal values (which are neither useful nor exchangeable), as pulsations of desire, as moments of Eros and death" (*Libidinal Economy* 82). Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Klossowski all seek to demonstrate the extent to which "use" is caught up in an economy as abstract and affectively invested as exchange itself, and an economy which is inseparable from bodily drives and desires. Effectively, both exchange value and use value (and not just exchange value) are lodged from the outset in an economy of prostitution.[6]

4. The second thematic is that of a perverse, inhuman, or machinic desire that transfects the human being and transforms a relation of pure exploitation or revolt into something else. The import, staged in the form of a lesson from the examples that follow is that there is a logic of desire, often masochistic, that infuses all submission and non-submission to conditions of exploitation. In *Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard gives the marvelous example of the supermarket scenario where, when the store is suddenly taken over and an announcement is made that everything in the store is free and anything may be taken at will, the shoppers become paralyzed and do not end up looting the store. Baudrillard's point is that any attempt to liberate pure use value fails because use is always bound up in a logic of desire that is more rooted in the "desire of the code" than in the specificity of the object itself (204).[7] Or, one can turn to Lacan, who tells the students attending his 1969-70 seminar during the upheaval of that period, "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will have one" (*Other Side* 207, translation modified).[8] Or in the most extreme case of all, Lyotard uses the example of the English proletariat to claim that a *jouissance* inseparable from the death drive underlies what appears as a brutally straightforward instance of bodily exploitation:

Look at the English proletariat, at what capital, that is to say their labor, has done to their body. You will tell me, however,
that it was that or die. But it is always that or die, this is the law of libidinal economy, no, not the law; this is its provisional, very provisional, definition in the form of the cry, of intensities of desire; "that or die," i.e. that and dying from it, death always in it, as its internal bark, its thin nut's skin, not yet as its price, on the contrary as that which renders it unpayable. And perhaps you believe that "that or die" is an alternative?! And that if they choose that, if they become the slave of the machine, the machine of the machine, fucker fucked by it, eight hours, twelve hours, a day, year after year, it is because they are forced into it, constrained, because they cling to life? Death is not an alternative to it, it is a part of it, it attests to the fact that there is jouissance in it, the English unemployed did not become workers to survive, they--hang on tight and spit on me--enjoyed [ils on joui de] the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of hanging on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening. (Libidinal Economy 111)

This is the most exorbitant claim in all of Lyotard's outrageous book, and one with which it may be hard not to find fault. However, at the heart of this and other of Lyotard's rants is the basic insistence that capital conditions and thrives on the very desires that would seem to be at odds with it, and that one cannot think situations of oppression or hegemony without taking these desires into account--something that is also a lesson of Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, of Gramsci's model of hegemony, and of Fanon's analysis of colonialism. In short, all of the above examples illustrate a central point that is repeatedly underscored in the range of writings by the theorists of libidinal economy: to not consider economy through the lens of desire, disjuncture, and perversion is to not understand it.

5. A corollary to attending to the desires that undergird use value (hence capital) is that one must similarly be attuned to desires in the very form and genre of Marxian analysis itself. As Lyotard puts it in memorable fashion in Libidinal Economy: "What is the desire named Marx?" He proceeds to argue that there are at least two Marxes at issues, one who is a severe critic of capital (the Big Bearded Prosecutor Marx) yet unable to dispense with his fascination for it, and the other who is caught in a juvenile state of enrapture with capital (the Little Girl Marx) yet rejects its "prostitution under the name of alienated mediation" (136). In this extreme if not obscene fashion, Lyotard raises the important question of the desiring-relation to capital of those who critique it. We might extrapolate to ask what is the desire of those on the left today who invest great energy in critiquing the United States or globalization or colonialism? Would such a critique be possible without a concomitant desire precisely for that very thing denounced?! And how does one name that desire ("the desire called Marx") without both affirming and undermining the very real object that is also under scrutiny--capital?

6. This question of naming the desire underlying the Marxian analysis is particularly acute when brought to Badiou's work. As Fredric Jameson writes in Žižek's impressive recent collection of essays on Lenin, "Or, to put all of this in a different terminology (that of Jean-François Lyotard), if we know what 'the desire called
Marx' is all about, can we then go on to grapple with 'the desire called Lenin'?
("Lenin and Revisionism" 60). Similarly, in another recent collection on Lacan,
also edited by Žižek, Jameson writes about Lacan's passion for spatial figures and
"mathemes";

Lacan's formalizations—not merely the graphs, but the later
mathemes and topologies, including the knots and the rings—have
been thought to be motivated by a desire for a rigour, an effort
to avoid the humanism and metaphysics of so much "orthodox
Freudianism," as well as an attempt to pass on a legacy of Lacan's
own immune to the revisionisms to which Freud was subjected. That
may well be true; but I think we cannot neglect the spatial
passion involved in the pursuit of these concentrated hieroglyphs
or "characters", nor can we avoid seeing in them a specific kind
of desire, the desire called formalization, which would seem to me
to be something quite distinct from scientficity and the claims
made for that. ("Lacan" 374)

Not only does Badiou share Lacan's "desire called formalization" (something that
sets him apart from the libidinal economy theorists who, with the exception
of Lacan, are less inclined to formalization), but he famously links his entire
philosophy to the axiomatic system of set theory, going so far as to declare that
"mathematics is . . . 'onto-logical'" (Briefings 105). The very persistence of
Badiou's orientation toward mathematics—as well as his repeated invocations of
literary, philosophical, and political master-thinkers such as Mallarmé, Plato, and
Mao—quite readily provokes the question of just what is behind the drive for these
figures. Citing the reflections of Peter Hallward on Badiou's "unusual fidelity to
Plato," A. Kiarina Kordela emphasizes in her probing critique of Badiou in
Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan the importance of "address[ing] the desire underpinning
Badiou's exhortation to return to Plato" (49). If libidinal economy theory is under
the sign of the death drive, then Badiou's desire, be it for Plato or Mao or
mathematics, is more nearly under the sign of a drive for order and formalization.
Yet the intemporal aspect of this drive to order has an odd affinity with the outer
limits of the theory of libidinal economy, and it is in this third dimension of
libidinal economy that a connection to Badiou may be retrieved.

7. As outlined above, there is clearly a premium in libidinal economy theory on
unstopabble libidinal flux and energetic machines (Žižek's "flux of Life"
Deleuzians), yet this is also a thought that pushes towards its opposite, namely
inertia. This is nowhere more apparent than in some of the more difficult passages
from Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus in which the "Body without Organs"
(BwO) might be said at least partially to inhabit the form of a "desiring machine"
that is in flux and moving toward somewhere. But this somewhere that the BwO
approaches asymptotically is none other than the "plane of consistency" (or "full
BwO") that represents the total arretation of desire at the zero point, the point of
an immobile and undifferentiated field.[10] Lyotard builds on the work of Deleuze
and Guattari and describes an organic body similarly facing the limit point of its
mobility. For Lyotard, this point of the limit is also none other than theory itself,
theory in its full libidinal dimension: "Medusa immobilizes, and this is jouissance.
Theory is the jouissance of immobilization . . . . Ideally, a theoretical text is an
immobilized organic body" (Libidinal Economy 242-43). Whether it is these
evocations of immobility at the end of Libidinal Economy or Deleuze and
Guattari's BwO coming up against the plane of consistency, there is an elusve yet
radical inertia that rests at the limit point of such analyses, not unlike Freud's death
drive. At issue here is that which might have the power to stop capital in its tracks
(if such a thing were to be granted). In this reader's opinion, it is the power of this radical inertia that is the greatest insight of the strain of thought that counts as the theory of the libidinal economic, a body of thought that many now largely dismiss.[11] This staging of the encounter with inertia represents a psychological libidinal counter to capital in the place where its motor force--its infinitely expansive flexibility, its second law of thermodynamics, its signifying chain dominated by the endless energy of speculation--collapses into a black hole. It is a site where what Badiou signals as the crucial space of the void, or what Lacan terms the not-all, also takes over the function of the all. Such a space of the inert abyss, which is also Nietzsche's concept of forgetting, was soon displaced by a Marxian focus on the materiality of the object (without its concurrent energetic a-materiality) and the haunting of the psyche though trauma, memory, catastrophe, etc. What the moment of the wake of 1968 shares with Badiou is a paradoxically a-material materialism that is in no way bound up with contemporary registers such as trauma, memory, or the haunting of the past.

Yet such a tarrying with the practico-inert, to put it in Sartrean terminology,[12] is accessed by Badiou in a fashion diametrically opposed to that of the libidinal economy theorists. If for the latter there is a chiasmic reversal of the object and its abstraction (use and exchange value), a continual insistence on the perversion of desire, and a gesture to an inert plane of consistency that is not entirely distinguishable from excess or surplus, Badiou insists then on the unity of the object and its abstraction, admits no desire in excess of his acclaimed fidelity to a truth procedure, and in the strangest twist of all, which will be taken up in what follows, advocates a Marxian if not Maoist dialectic of contradiction, antagonism, and twoness, but in doing so develops in spite of himself a realm of atemporal inertia.

The question of desire is at once a common refrain in Badiou's work--especially Théorie du sujet--and something that appears as a blind spot in his oeuvre. Whereas thinkers such as Deleuze and Foucault debate about the relative importance of desire (important for Deleuze, subordinate to power for Foucault),[13] Badiou in Lacanian fashion affirms its importance yet leaves no space for the kind of libidinal economy analysis that locates a logic of desire in the very fabric of what would appear to be the most crude materiality. In Théorie du sujet, Badiou writes:

> for Lacan, the analytic theory holds this equivocation in the instruction of desire from which the subject apprehends itself. For us, Marxism holds it in the political practice of which the subjective point is the party. Lacan, involuntary theoretician of the political party? The Marxists, unenlightened practitioners of desire? False window. In truth there is only one theory of the subject. Lacan has a lead on the actual state of Marxism, one which it behooves us to employ, in order to improve our Marxist affairs. (133)[14]

What Badiou denounces as a "false window" is precisely the point of entrance that the libidinal economy theorists would take, highlighting above all Lacan's "involuntary" theory of the party and the Marxists' "unenlightened" theory of desire. For Badiou, this confrontation between Marxism and psychoanalysis entails only one theory of the subject. But the point of the libidinal economy analysis is to retain two poles of the equation, such as use value and exchange value, and to observe how the two exchange positions in chiasmic fashion--use takes on the affective currency of exchange, while exchange has its utilitarian
dimension. Indeed, Badiou adheres to and repeats the Maoist dictum of the one dividing into two, but at the level of his "theory of the subject," Badiou reverts to an upholding of the one, the one theory of the subject.

10. For Badiou, the political itself is grounded in the category of the impossible, which is in many regards the foundational category of his 1985 *Peut-on penser la politique?* [15] Yet, in a particularly notable example, the thing that serves as the driving force of the impossible, that which will transform a pre-political state into a properly political one, is none other than the body of the worker and the treatment of the worker as a thing, as merchandise, as use value. Badiou writes:

> Interpretation produces this event that, in a pre-political situation, was the statement that it was impossible to treat workers as used merchandise. Under the circumstances, this impossible is precisely the reality, hence the possibility. The possibility of the impossible is the basis of politics. (78)

Here, the impossible takes on the status of something that is at the level of the obvious from a basic Marxian perspective, namely, that the workers cannot be treated as objects to be used and discarded. The impossible thus exists at the level of the imperative, that one must not allow this to happen. What is by far more radical if not transgressive--and Badiou will have none of this transgression--is the integration of a desiring apparatus into a thought of the situation of the workers. As with the example from Lyotard above, the question is not so much to deny the situation of exploitation, but rather to recognize that there are other contradictory processes taking place at the same time: that the body of the worker may experience a *jouissance* exactly at the site where it is made into an object or into a pure use value, and that the experience of the body as thing may not be perceived entirely as exploitation, but also as a reveling in the superhuman capacity of the laboring body. [16] Indeed, to see only exploitation and not the contradiction inherent in the very notion of use value--that use will always prove elusive, will always turn out to be bound up with questions of desire and economy--is still to perceive from the perspective of the bourgeois. This is the lesson of libidinal economy, and this is what Badiou resoundingly forecloses, while nonetheless continually emphasizing the import of contradiction, antagonism, and doubleness or twoness over singularity or the one.

11. The question of the desiring structure of the worker leads to a tangential yet important series of reflections, which will not be treated in detail here. At issue is the concept of the human and its relation to the categories of "masses," "people," "workers," and "inexistence." In this domain, Badiou is maddeningly difficult to pin down. On the one hand, he evinces a sort of Sartrean humanism of engagement and people-based action. In *Théorie du sujet* he writes that "a politics 'without people,' without the foundation of the structured masses, does not exist" (32). This statement is clearly at odds with the more inhuman emphasis of Lyotard and the libidinal economy theorists (emphasizing the desires, drives, and *pulsions* that push the human to the limit space beyond the human) and is in this formulation closer to but still some distance from Althusser's emphasis on desubjectification in his analyses of masses and class. Yet Badiou will conclude his *Peut-on penser la politique?* not only with a return to the question of the impossible, but also with a call for the time of the future anterior, and this is
remarkably close to both Deleuze and Derrida and their evocations of a future anterior and a people to come (107). Similarly, the emphasis on the "inexistent"--proximate to the impossible in Badiou's early work--returns in the recent Logiques des mondes and even in Badiou's posthumous tribute to Derrida in which he links their two otherwise disparate philosophical modes under the banner of this term.[17] In sum, Badiou's oeuvre presents a strong paradox. While being resoundingly consistent within its own terms and within the variation of its terms over time, it nonetheless seems to offer very different positions on certain concepts depending on the text and context in which these concepts appear. Thus while Badiou concludes Peut-on penser la politique? with an appeal to the future anterior, elsewhere his work seems to eschew the register of the temporal altogether, something all the more striking given the affinity that is occasionally expressed for Marxian periodizing frameworks.[18] It is via a consideration of Badiou's relation to temporality that I will return to the desire named Mao and the place of the psychoanalytic within Badiou's thought.

12. Despite the concern with appearance and consequences in Logiques des mondes and increasing gestures to the question of the future in recent lectures, it is Badiou's notion of temporality that is most incongruous with a general Marxian framework that would emphasize some form of causal relation, cyclical pattern, or mode of historical periodization. This fraught relation to Marxian temporality comes out around the notion of how to count a century and appears in the form of a logic of temporal condensation rather than periodizing expansion, in the notion of a short twentieth century rather than a long twentieth century. This is certainly in keeping with Badiou's longstanding insistence on subtraction, or on the political import of what is subtracted from a count (in France one might think of the sans papiers, those who are subtracted or not counted with respect to the citizen but who nonetheless might have a political force).[19]

13. There are many works and declarations that pose the problem of the being and the lineage and the number of the century, including Foucault's famous pronouncement that "perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian" ("Theatrum Philosophicum" 165). Giovanni Arrighi's The Long Twentieth Century locates the origins of twentieth-century American dominated capitalism at least as far back as 1873, and moreover as a fourth and not a unique historical instance of capital accumulation. Arrighi isolates

> four systemic cycles of accumulation . . . . a Genoese cycle, from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries; a Dutch cycle, from the late sixteenth century through most of the eighteenth century; a British cycle, from the latter half of the eighteenth century through the early twentieth century; and a US cycle, which began in the late nineteenth century and has continued into the current phase of financial expansion. (7)

Each of these cycles is considerably longer than one hundred years, "hence the notion of the 'long century,' which will be taken as the basic temporal unit in the analysis of world-scale processes of capital accumulation" (7).

14. Arrighi's fundamental and explicit thesis is to expand, if not displace, the notion of the century: as a construct, the century is not equivalent to its name in years. Moreover, the twentieth century, along with its mode of capitalism, is in fact but a shortened repetition of previous long centuries that wax and wane according to a cyclical logic. Beyond the claim that capital, which seems to reach so distinctive an apogee in the twentieth century, is not exclusively of the century, Arrighi also--and
this less explicitly--proposes a somewhat novel ontology and temporality of the century, according to which the century definitionally exceeds itself and extends beyond its temporal limitations and its number of one hundred, creating the paradox of an entity defined by its number that is nonetheless and also by definition not equivalent to its number. It is ultimately in this domain of the numerical, of the number that exceeds its number, that I would locate a certain proximity to Badiou. Still, if Arrighi's long twentieth century exceeds the number of the century, it does not dispense with the century's periodizing gesture. Insofar as the century marks a period in time, Arrighi's model is entirely in keeping with this temporal structure--just the dates or number of years may not correspond.

15. In this regard, *The Long Twentieth Century* is of a piece with a Marxian model that would insist on breaks and ruptures, where dates become significant as points of crisis and rupture, such as the famous nodal points in France of 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871, and 1962. The title of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* perfectly illustrates this disjunctive yet essentially temporal logic. The Eighteenth Brumaire refers to the day of the month in the French revolutionary calendar--time having recommenced with the revolution--when Napoleon Bonaparte became emperor (1799). The Eighteenth Brumaire of the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte (Charles Louis) is here the tragedy replayed as farce of the second declaration of empire, this time a half century later.

16. Unlike Arrighi, Badiou condenses rather than expands the twentieth century such that it starts in 1917 and ends in 1980 with what he calls the Restoration. At the same time, Badiou's notion of Restoration operates very much at face value and without an eye to the contradictory forces of the political unconscious of the moment of restoration. If for Badiou Balzac counts as the "great artist of the first Restoration, the one that followed the French Revolution of 1792-94" (*The Century* 26) (and thus foreshadows the second Restoration, or the twentieth century's last two decades), for such Marxist literary critics as Lukács and Jameson, Balzac marks a last outpost of a multifaceted system of social relations that is eclipsed by the more monochrome literary world that comes into being with the advent of monopoly capitalism--in short, the break between Balzac and Flaubert. Balzac may be politically conservative (and for Badiou the analysis simply stops there), but it is precisely this that, for a critic like Jameson, is the condition of possibility for capturing in literary form a heterogeneity of life worlds that are no longer thinkable in more advanced stages of capitalism. Thus, for Lukács and Jameson, the thought of periodization is of a piece with a dialectical notion of temporality, whereas for Badiou to think in the unit of the century is precisely to condense rather than expand, thereby flying in the face of a dialectical materialist notion of periodization.[20]

17. This is not to say that Badiou is without his own mode of periodization. Although his book *The Century* speaks of the short twentieth century, Badiou's own century (never acknowledged as such) might run from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the crucial sequences of the Cultural Revolution between 1966-67, hence an interval of one hundred years, but one not synchronized with the specific period of the twentieth century.[21] Badiou's idea of the alternative and unacknowledged century is entangled with his longstanding interest in the question of number--though he will write in *Peut-on penser la politique?* that "politics will not be thinkable except when freed from the tyranny of number" (68).[22] Also relevant to Badiou's periodization is what constitutes an "event" for Badiou in the realm of politics--an event being something that is accessed through the four domains of politics, art, science, and love and that furthermore marks the success of a universalizable process of bringing to fruition what was imperceptible or
inexistent in a situation in order for it to have new affirmative and revolutionary potential. (For Badiou, a model is the Apostle Paul's radical fidelity and proclamation of the event of Christ's resurrection and the early Christian movement that ensued.[23]) In the passage that follows from Théorie du sujet, Badiou discusses the trajectory from the Paris Commune to the October Revolution and up through the Cultural Revolution, placing his discussion under the sign of the undecidability between three and four that concludes Hegel's Logic. Here Badiou espouses a Marxian mode of periodization, above and beyond the "idealistic" Hegel, who sees only the cyclical and the three-part movement of position, negation, and negation of the negation.[24] What is crucial about this periodization is the retrospective insight it affords (the owl of Minerva, as it were), though it is hard to establish if it is the Commune that is new in and of itself or if its newness is only perceptible retrospectively, from the vantage point of the events of October 1917. As Badiou writes,

any periodization must embrace its dialectical double time, for example including October 17 as the second, and provisionally final, scan of the count. Hence the historians’ conundrum: according to the relation force/place, the Commune is new (Marx). According to the relation subjective/objective, it is October that is new, and the Commune is this boundary of the old whose practical perception, which purifies force, contributes to engendering its novelty. It is highly likely that the Chinese Cultural Revolution has the same profile, and that the question of the second time of its periodizing function is thus broached . . . If Hegel makes a circle, it is that he always wants but a single time. In principle he is unaware of differing retroactions, although he tolerates them to an insidious degree in the detail. (Théorie 64-65)

It appears from this that for Badiou the heart of the struggle of periodization lies in establishing what counts as new. If according to one sequence (presumably the one to which Badiou would adhere) it is the Commune that is new, then the events of October mark a second and final moment in the sequence. If, however, it is not until October that we have the true novelty of the subjective dimension (rather than simply the new possibility of the party), then the Commune would be more nearly a pre-political moment.[25] If, however, we introduce the third moment of the Cultural Revolution, then in any case it rewrites both sequences, so there are at least four possibilities, the two sequences described above, and the Cultural Revolution added to each of them: the Cultural Revolution as the third and final term in the sequence inaugurated by the Commune, or the Cultural Revolution as the second and final term in the sequence inaugurated by October 1917, thus forming two additional permutations of the two initial sequences. But by another count, the Cultural Revolution could be the first moment when the subjective dimension of politics is truly articulated, allowing for a new thought of the party, and serving as the inaugural moment of its own properly political sequence. At different points, Badiou seems to gesture toward all these possibilities. Here Hegel's conclusion to the Logic is significant, for it signals the difficulty of counting between the third and the four, something that is a larger refrain in all of Badiou's work:

In this turning point of the method, the course of cognition at the same time returns into itself. As self-sublating contradiction this negativity is the restoration of the first immediacy, of simple universality; for the other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the positive, the identical, the
universal. If one insists on counting, this second immediate is, in the course of the method as a whole, the third term to the first immediate and the mediated. It is also, however, the third term to the first or formal negative and to absolute negativity or the second negative; now as the first negative is already the second term, the term reckoned as third can also be reckoned as fourth, and instead of a triality, the abstract form may be taken as a quadruplicity; in this way, the negative or the difference is counted as a duality. (836)

Not only is there a dizzying vacillation between the three and the four, but the very possibility of counting and knowing the count is itself brought into question. In this ability to sustain a thought of the difficulty of counting, Badiou comes closest to Lacan and by extension—at least to readers of Lacan such as Jameson and Žižek—to Hegel and the dialectic.[26]

18. Yet this overture to the complexity of the count, to something that cannot be fully accounted for due to the temporal disjuncture it represents, is, as I have been at pains to indicate here and elsewhere, at odds with the very formalism of Badiou’s work. To be sure, the problems of counting a sequence—in short, the question of the cardinal and the ordinal—can be mapped onto the framework of the set theory that underlies many of Badiou’s philosophical formulations. But what the problem of periodization reveals is the difficulty of mapping itself, the problem of the translation entailed not only in working between mathematics and philosophy but in positing any moment of newness and its appearance. Badiou provides more of a rubric for such appearance in his latest work Logiques des mondes, giving a number of possible outcomes for the taking place or failing to take place of an event.[27] But again, at issue here—and this is where psychoanalysis becomes most prominent and necessary—is not so much the concurrent mapping of Marx and Lacan, or of Mao and Lacan, or the correlation between Lacan’s notion of desire and Marx’s notion of the party,[28] but the very desire for such procedures of mapping, as noted above in Jameson’s reading of Lacan. In this fashion, there is a Badiouian desire that I would designate as numerical, a desire for the uncountable proliferation of number itself (and this despite the claim that number is not properly political).

19. While it might be debated to what extent Badiou’s interest in Mao (and that of the remainder of the French Maoists, past and present) relates to the specificity of Chinese history[29]—though it is not the goal here to reject Badiou’s usefulness for thinking this history—it is nonetheless important to distinguish the desire structure behind such a focus on Mao and the Cultural Revolution from the writings and the person of Mao as such. One can, for example, compare Badiou’s Théorie du sujet from 1982 with Samir Amin’s more economically oriented study of Maoism from the year before, in which Amin highlights the influence of the Cultural Revolution on four problematics: “equality between the city and the countryside, a compressed hierarchy of salaries, the development of national autonomy, and the option of workers’ management of economy as well as society” (129). Questions such as that of the relation between the rural and the proletarian are hardly at the forefront of Badiou’s more philosophical analyses, which center instead on dialectic, contradiction, and the question of the party itself.

20. The driving force behind Badiou’s meditations on Mao and the Cultural Revolution might be grouped into two sets of terms. One set is that of the party and the periodization of the party, which becomes visible in the difficulty of narrating what happened between Lenin and Mao. Was Lenin the one who
inaugurated the very category of the party--according to Sylvain Lazarus this was done before November, 1917--and Mao the one who pushed the party structure to its limit and ultimate failure? Or did Mao himself bring a new dimension to the form of the party, which then dissolved? Badiou's writings seem to make a variety of claims on these counts, and even his own political involvement in France moved from membership in the Marxist-Leninist UCFML (L’union de communistes de France marxiste-léniniste) to the Organisation Politique, from membership in an essentially party-oriented group to one that espouses politics without the party. What the desire named Mao bears witness to is the intractable difficulty of locating the form of the party, indeed of making this a philosophical question per se. Even in abandoning the party, it seems that there is a desire not to give up on the question of the party. If for Lacan ethics is to not give way on one's desire, then Badiou's ethics vis-à-vis the Marxian and Maoist moments is to not give up on a thought of the party structure, even to a point beyond its dissolution.

21. In a similar and even more pointed fashion, Badiou's Mao is a preeminent thinker of contradiction, and specifically of the two terms that refuse to be collapsed into one. If all of Badiou's work might be fashioned, at least in its explicit formulation, as an attack on the question of the one, then for Badiou Mao represents a thinker--as opposed to someone like Deleuze, whom Badiou reads as falsely linking a theory of the multiple to that of the one--who will insist that the politically progressive model is that of the one dividing into two, whereas the reactionary one is that of the two uniting into one (and this is where Badiou also criticizes a Hegelian trinitarian urge to synthesize the three into one). Evoking a temporality and a problematic outside that of a recognizably Marxian periodization, Badiou goes so far as to claim in The Century that "the century is a figure of the non-dialectical juxtaposition of the Two and the One" (59). Badiou's short century now eschews the dialectic but retains the division between the one and the two and in this fashion continues to resonate with the basic themes of Badiou's earlier writings on Maoist contradiction. If these two periodizations, or rather non-periodizations or failed periodizations (that of the twentieth century and that of the century dating from the Commune to the Cultural Revolution), can be linked, then it is under the banner of the unconscious desire for the century itself, a thought of the century. This might be said to be the Real of Badiou's Marxism, which in many respects does not resemble anything typically Marxian (though this claim could be made about certain aspects of Marx's work itself).

22. Badiou's theory is most incomplete at those points where it does not acknowledge its own unconscious, something in some sense endemic to any good theory--what de Man terms the dialectic of blindness and insight. For Badiou, this is all the more marked given his extensive indebtedness to, if not engagement with, the work of Lacan. It might be claimed that Badiou's notion of the void or what is inexistent in a situation has affinities with the Lacanian Real. Yet for Badiou the void or inexistent is the space from which a potential event would issue, one that would recognize and deploy that aspect of a situation that lies outside the count, making that uncountable entity the conduit to a universal accessibility. In contrast, the Lacanian Real is that which is inaccessible to the subject (and for Lacan's subject, there is no Other of the Other). For Badiou, there may be something uncountable, but it is not precisely inaccessible: it is simply in a potential process of transformation. In this respect, it is number itself that in its process of division or failure of division somehow resists the specificity of the count. If the century resists demarcation and coincidence with its number, if the one divides into two, and sometimes the two divides into four, and from the four it is possible to subtract and arrive at three, then we are left with something that might approximate
an economy, if not a libidinal economy, of number.

23. In the process of seeming to move or go somewhere, the count is also what stops you in your tracks (as Lacan describes Antigone's beauty in his seminar seven, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). On the one hand, movement and change are at the heart of what for Badiou constitutes the political. The early *Théorie de la contradiction* presents Marx, Lenin, and Mao as each advocating a notion of politics as movement, but the difficulty of locating what is new in each of these thinkers proves a vertiginous exercise that may have the opposite effect of inducing more of a stupor.[34] In *Théorie du sujet*, Badiou also links politics to waiting, and it seems that there is a profound and unending waiting involved in the process of the recognition of the event after the fact. While there is excitement at the moment, the more significant step involves the assessment of the evental status after the fact, in what must necessarily be an interval of some more pronounced stasis. The question of immobility may seem to be of minor significance when grappling with Badiou's oeuvre, yet it is on this count that a concluding return to the thought of libidinal economy may be proffered, in a move that would, as it were, come full circle.

24. The preceding analysis has served to underscore that Badiou's work from the 1980s and his more recent meditations on Marxism and psychoanalysis represent an extreme departure from the work of the libidinal economy theorists. When all is said and done, Badiou is much more of a literalist. Though he may dwell on numbers and the count and the dialectic (arguably some version of Sartre's *practico-inert*), he maintains the significance of such terms as the party, the workers, the masses, and the subject. By contrast, thinkers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard and Klossowski are more decisively bent on an overt undermining of these terms--hence, on showing that precisely where you think there is practice, there is theory; where you think there is the material, there is the ideal; and above all, where you think there is a body, there is also language in a chiasmic and dialectical relation to that body. Whereas Deleuze concludes his *Logic of Sense* with an appendix on "Klossowski, or Bodies-Language" in which he signals the importance and interchangeability of those two terms, Badiou opens his recent *Logiques des mondes* with a denunciation of the conjunction of bodies and languages, which for him is symptomatic of the "democratic materialism" of our current moment, something he rejects in favor of a "materialist dialectic" (which is more resonant with his work from the early 1980s at issue here than with the more mathematical-philosophical *Being and Event*). Similarly, if the libidinal economists seek to foreground the desiring mechanisms that underlie not only capital but their very attempt to write it, Badiou eschews such self-reflexivity. Badiou's work is squarely at odds with the project of libidinal economy on multiple counts, yet in different ways both bump up against something that might be described as an intemporal force of inertia. Lyotard speaks on several occasions of the immobilized body outside of time. Sylvain Lazarus, Badiou's longstanding partner in philosophical Maoism, also writes against time and speaks of the inexistence of time.[35] As outlined above, the realm of the immobile appears as the elusive yet necessary limit point of this thought. Much of Badiou's work has an intemporal aspect to it, and this is nowhere more central than in the waiting to decide what will have constituted the event, that is, the stasis built into the time of the future anterior. It is a strange meeting point indeed, but it seems that Marxian thought and psychoanalysis are poised to discern in the problem of the new and mobile the simultaneous presence of the old and the stuck. It will take innovative disciplinary conjunctions to broach this terrain effectively, but it is my claim that thinking the joint relation of inertia and stasis beyond simple mobility is a central concern for our time. This is the limit that fascinates both Badiou and the libidinal
economy theorists; it is also the limit that stops both in their tracks, and in this fashion marks a point where they are not at odds.

Department of Comparative Literature and Department of French and Francophone Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

Talk Back

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Notes


2. For a more recent engagement with this topic, see Wolfenstein. See also more recent work in psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, including Nandy and Khanna.

3. All translations from the French of works not translated are my own. It is interesting that Badiou, in his criticism of the libidinal economists, uses a language of long, urgent sentences that leave one gasping for breath, very much in the exuberant style of those theorists he is at pains to criticize and quite unlike his generally restrained prose. It is as if in evoking them he cannot help but take on their style.

4. See Feltham's discussion of Lacan's rejection of the proposition that "all is flux"
5. The 1970 version of Klossowski's bizarre economic treatise is accompanied by a series of staged, tableau vivant-style photographs featuring Klossowski and his wife Denise Morin-Sinclair. A subsequent edition of the text appeared a quarter-century later without the photographs: see La Monnaie vivante 66-67. For a more extensive analysis of this example, see the chapter "Objects, Reserve, and the General Economy: Klossowski, Bataille, and Sade" in my Delirium of Praise. For a somewhat different questioning of the hierarchy of use and exchange value, see Spivak 154-75.

6. See Lyotard's discussion of prostitution in Libidinal Economy 111-16, 135-43, 165-88. This is dramatized in fictional form in Klossowski's trilogy Les Lois de l'hospitalité (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). I discuss the gender implications of this model of hospitality as prostitution in "Bodies, Sickness, and Disjunction" in my Delirium of Praise.

7. Analysis follows on 209-11.

8. See Žižek's analysis of this statement as marking the "passage from the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the University as the hegemonic discourse in contemporary society" in Iraq 131.


10. See Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, esp. 1-22.

11. This is underscored in Žižek's critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's somewhat disparaging remarks in Empire (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) on the radical inertia dramatized by a literary character such as Melville's Bartleby. See Žižek, Parallax 342, 381-85.

12. See Sartre, Critique.

13. See Deleuze and Foucault, "Le Désir et le pouvoir."

14. See also 189, where he writes: "The Marxist analysis in terms of the point of view of class is isomorphic to the Lacanian analysis according to truth. Torsion is necessary in both cases, for the truth cannot say all (Lacan) and there is no truth above classes (Marxism), thus it effectively cannot say all. Which signifies that it should say not-all. Thus we have the subject, hysteric for one, revolutionary for the other." It seems that these are not entirely parallel terms, however, for in the Marxian framework Badiou references truth does exist at the level of class, and it certainly does exist in Badiou's own Platonic truth-oriented framework. It is not clear that the Marxian revolutionary or Badouian militant subject has the same conception of the not-all as Lacan. Moreover, Badiou automatically positions this subject in relation to the not-all as the hysteric, which, according to Lacan's schema of the four discourses in The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, is the subject position in relation to knowledge. It seems that it is the position of the analyst that is most aligned with the "not all," to be strictly Lacanian about this.

15. Badiou singles out the impossible as a "category of the subject, not of place (lieu), of the event, not of structure" (95). Indeed he writes of the impossible that "it is being for politics." Despite their differences with regard to the legacy of
French Maoism, this might serve as a point of proximity between Badiou and Rancière.


17. See Badiou, "Homage" 34-46 and also *Logiques* 570-71, where Badiou writes: "In homage to Derrida, I write here 'inexistence,' just as he created, long ago, the word 'différance.' Will we say that . . . inexistence=différance? Why not?"

18. See especially *Théorie du sujet* 38, 62-65, 72, 246-47. This will be taken up in what follows.

19. For a helpful explanation of Badiou's logic of the evental site and its emergence from that which is subtracted from the count, using the example of the *sans papiers*, see Hallward 14, 116-18, 233-34.

20. See Jameson, *Political Unconscious* and Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* and "Narrate or Describe?" Such works might be said to think the historical in the intricacy of its relation to the temporal, whereas for Badiou the historical is not an operative category per se.

21. See Badiou, *Polemics*, especially "The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration of Politics" (257-90), "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?" (291-321), and "A Brief Chronology of the Cultural Revolution" (322-28). See also the issue of *positions* devoted to "Alain Badiou and Cultural Revolution" (13.3, Winter 2005). This issue contains Bosteels's definitive overview of Badiou's relation to the Cultural Revolution: "Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics." See also Bosteels's "The Speculative Left," both part of his forthcoming *Badiou and Politics* (Duke UP). This essay has also benefited from the work of Alberto Toscano on Badiou's relation to communism, especially "Communism as Separation" and "From the State to the World?" The latter especially suggests that Badiou's oeuvre may be more caught up in a logic of capital than he explicitly admits. See additional elaborations of this argument by Brassier and Brown. Brown puts it in perhaps strongest form: "Badiou cannot think Capital because Capital has already thought Badiou" (309).

22. In contrast, see his entire book *Le Nombre et les nombres*, which would seem to go against such an easy claim.

23. See Badiou, *Saint Paul*.

24. He accuses the idealist dialectic of misrecognizing "the double scission that founds all historical periodization," (*Théorie du sujet* 65).

25. Badiou explicitly notes that Lenin's *What is to be Done?* is not so much a theory of the party as it is a "breviary of Marxist politics" (64). This is very much in keeping with Sylvain Lazarus's periodization of Lenin's writings, which locates the earlier *What is to be Done?* (1902) as the inaugural moment of Lenin's most significant political sequence, culminating in October 1917. See "Lenin and the Party." 258.

26. Indeed, though Badiou generally considers Hegel as a thinker who is merely cyclical, he also gestures to the dialectical and material dimension of Hegel, especially in *Théorie du sujet* and *Being and Event*, something very much in
keeping with the work of Žižek.

27. Though certainly in no way Heideggerian, it would be interesting to link Badiou's work on appearance in *Logiques* to something like Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, esp. "Being and Appearance," 98-114.

28. See *Théorie du sujet* 180.

29. See again the issue of *positions* devoted to this question (note 21).

30. On the question of whether or not the party is a philosophical concept, see Jameson, "Lenin and Revisionism" 61-62. For an extended discussion of the waning of the notion of the party in Badiou's thought, see Bosteels, "Post-Maoism," esp. 587-94.


32. See Badiou, *Deleuze*.

33. Though Žižek helpfully points out that the synthetic moment in Hegel is just one lens, and not necessarily the most significant one, of interpretation.

34. See Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction* 37, 41, 54, 60-61, 78-82.


**Works Cited**


