

# The Social Ontology of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*

Min Seong Kim

**Abstract:** The innovation of Alain Badiou's theory of change, which has attracted a great amount of attention from scholars working in disciplines across humanities, social sciences, and art over the past two decades, cannot be appreciated independently of the account of situations prior to an event's irruption, namely, the order of being that is conceived using modern set theory in his treatise on general ontology. Retracing the meticulous systematicity with which pre-evental situations are conceived in *Being and Event*, this paper offers a reconstruction of Badiou's general ontology that points toward the potential therein for articulating an account of structures and situations that may be qualified as *social*.

**Keywords:** Alain Badiou, contemporary French philosophy, social ontology.

## 1. Introduction

*Being and Event* by the French philosopher Alain Badiou is the first volume of what might be called his *Summa Ontologica*, which comprises three books published in France between 1988 and 2018: *Being and Event* (2005), *Logics of Worlds* (2009), and *L'Immanence des vérités* (2018). Few works of European philosophy to have appeared in the last several decades – inclusive, arguably, of Badiou's two sequels to *Being and Event* – match its innovation and ambition, which can be succinctly stated as follows: to do philosophy again in a manner reminiscent of Hegel's *Logic*, by founding it on an account of being qua being that Patrice Maniglier has characterized as “perfectly general, nonspecific theory of what *is*, inasmuch as it *is*, and inasmuch as it is nothing in particular,” which is “as valid for nature as it is for culture.” (2010, 69)

As dictated by its own ambition, *Being and Event* unfolds systematically from the analysis of pure being. The question motivating Badiou's philosophical endeavor, however, can be stated in more concrete terms. The “fundamental question,” Badiou says of his philosophy, “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, 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.” (Badiou and Critchley 2007, 361-62) The account of being to which roughly half of *Being and Event* is dedicated is thus a propaedeutic to addressing matters that truly interests Badiou, that is, the theory of event and its transformative

consequences – conceptualized under the terminology of *truths* – developed in the second half of the book. Badiou does not pretend to be alone in engaging the question of novelty, the question of whether it is possible for there to be an experience of something genuinely new and transformative. Every thought of change, political revolutions, or even artistic creations is intricately tied to that question, such that both those who affirm the possibility of radical novelty and those who deny such a possibility must have at least implicitly engaged with the question – it is certainly “not by chance that French post-structuralist thinkers have put so much weight on the concept of ‘event,’ both from a theoretical and political perspective.” (Renault 2016, 30) But, at the same time, if so many thinkers in the philosophical tradition to which Badiou too belongs have made references to some moment of rupture, and ‘event’ has been the most common name given to that moment, the designation ‘the philosopher of the event’ attached to Badiou’s name should not occlude the simple truth that whatever that is of value in Badiou’s works is to be found in *how* Badiou thinks the event, not *that* he thinks the event.

Thus, while it is understandable that aspects of Badiou’s philosophical system that have attracted the great amount of attention from scholars working across humanities, social sciences, and art are those pertaining to novelty, event, and change, the innovation of Badiou’s theory of change cannot be appreciated independently of the account of the world before an event, namely, the pre-evental order of being that is presented in *Being and Event* with meticulous systematicity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, unless an account of structures and situations that could rightly be qualified as social could be reconstructed from Badiou’s general ontology, the value of *Being and Event* for conceptualizing novelty and change in the specific situations scrutinized by many disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and art would be significantly diminished. To show how the seemingly esoteric categories of *Being and Event* can be transposed onto categories relevant for thinking the fundamental structure of the social world, this paper offers a succinct but sufficiently detailed reconstruction of the account of the order of being in *Being and Event* that maintains an emphasis on the feature of that account that has perhaps been the most controversial, as well as constituting an obstacle for many readers whose background is in the humanities: the decision to read mathematics, particularly modern set theory, as a general ontology. It is to be acknowledged that the relation between the strictly set-theoretical ontological discourse and extraontological – including social – discourse is a problematic one in Badiou’s philosophy, regarding which some remarks shall be made in the section that

---

<sup>1</sup> Because Badiou decides that mathematics is the discourse of being, there is no such thing as *Badiou’s* ontology in the strict sense. Whenever that expression is employed hereafter, it shall denote the ‘metaontological’ attempt carried out in *Being and Event* to determine, based on what the ontological discourse – mathematics, or more specifically, set theory – speaks of being, particularly Badiou’s philosophical concepts of presentation, representation, void, truth, and subject.

immediately follows. Nevertheless, this paper will have fulfilled its purpose in so far as the connection made between the categories of *Being and Event* and social theory facilitates an understanding of the categories presented therein further than would be possible without referring to its mathematical basis at all, hinting thereby ways in which Badiou's set-theoretical ontology allows for productive theorizations of social situations and social change.

## 2. Mathematics as the Discourse of Being qua Being

The following inaugural decision of Badiou's ontological discourse is no doubt motivated at least in part by a desire to dispel every vestige of mysticism that the question of being has often tended to evoke: "What 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." (Badiou 2004a, 168) While the decision for the identity of the discourses of being and mathematics – it should be emphasized that the decision asserts the identity of those two discourses, not between mathematical objectivity and being simpliciter – is a decision for which no justification can be offered except retroactively through the demonstration of its productive consequences for thought, the decision may be seen as invoking what might be described in Heideggerian terms as an epochal disclosure of being. That is to say, the Badiouian decision is compelled by the recognition that modern mathematics has enabled the categories of being, universality, truth, and subject to be rethought, and it is the task of philosophy to register the possibility opened by mathematics – a task that has a certain historical urgency for Badiou, who sees that the Platonist categories of truth, universality, and absolute have been denigrated to the detriment of thinking, from both within and without philosophy (Badiou 1999).

Showing that mathematics is the discourse of being does not require an extensive treatment of the most interesting or novel idea in mathematics, but only a demonstration that well-established practices in mathematics can be read as answering to the very same questions with which ontology as practiced by philosophers have struggled. The mathematical components of *Being and Event* almost exclusively consist of the standard Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory with the axiom of choice (ZFC) and a limited arsenal of mathematical techniques, with Badiou readily acknowledging that set theory is neither the most 'interesting' nor "significant in the current state of mathematics." (2005, 14) But if the proposition that mathematics is ontology is "not a thesis about the world but about discourse," (Badiou 2005, 8) taking Badiou's set-theoretical theorization of being as describing the *way things are* would elide the distinction that Badiou imposes between thesis about the world and discourse of being qua being. An ambiguity thus arises concerning what to do with the concepts elaborated in *Being and Event* once they are taken outside the system of rational immanence that Badiou's theoretical discourse is, and then applied to extraontological situations, such as

social or historical situations wherein any actual political processes must take place.

For any transposition of the insights of set-theoretical ontology that is elaborated in *Being and Event* to extraontological 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 considered following Kant the *quid juris* question, proves difficult to conceive. Peter Osborne notes 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." (2007, 24) Peter Hallward similarly remarks that it is not clear whether there is a place for 'ordinary ontic reality' in the set-theoretical universe of infinite multiplicities on which Badiou founds his thinking of being (2008, 118). The problematic relationship, or lack thereof, between ontological and extraontological situations in Badiou's speculative philosophy leads Ray Brassier, a prominent interpreter of the Badiouian text, to pronounce 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." (2007, 113)

Ultimately, the question of whether Badiou's set-theoretical general ontology can be legitimately transposed to extraontological situations admits of no straightforward answer.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, studies that attempt to transpose Badiouian concepts onto domains beyond ontology have been forced to make an interpretive choice on the weight given to mathematics. In his *Badiou and Politics*, Bruno Bosteels expresses what is perhaps the most obvious choice:

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. (2011, 35)

Bosteels opts to regard set-theoretical ontology as a sort of a helpful tool or a heuristic for thinking transformative processes that must unfold in situations that are not strictly ontological, asserting that "as soon as we exit the domain of strict ontology [...] the role of mathematics becomes heuristic at best." (2011, 35) However, Badiou's own stance hints, without repudiating the passage from Bosteels, at a more intimate relation between mathematics (set theory, in particular) and extraontological situations:

---

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth examination of the relationship between ontology and extraontological situations, see Tho (2008).

We have a concrete 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. (Badiou 2004b, 178-79)

The reconstruction offered in this paper shall take its cue from the preceding statement from Badiou, namely, that to *think* the ontological structure of a concrete situation is to assume a certain perspective from which the situation is analyzed. On what that extraontological situation concretely is, set-theoretical ontology is utterly indifferent. For, 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 (Laclau 2007), the formalism of set theory, its non-reference to a particular object, is what allows it to be the basis of a general ontology such that, while it may not grasp all the specific aspects of every region of being, no region of being – including that of the social – essentially resists its grasp.

### 3. The Structuration of Being in Badiou's Set-Theoretical Ontology

That *the one is not* is a fundamental metaontological decision of *Being and Event* (Badiou 2005, 23). Badiou stipulates that whatever oneness – determinacy or objectivity – there is, it is a result of what he calls an 'operation' of 'count-as-one.' The primary significance within Badiou's system of the initial positing of oneness as a result of some mechanism of unification is that it implies the necessity of positing not-one as anterior to the one-effect of the count-as-one. That which is posited as preceding oneness is called "inconsistency," described by Badiou as the "ungraspable horizon" of sheer being, which is qualified as multiplicity in as much as it is *not one* (2005, 34). While several prominent readers of Badiou have rightly noted a deep ambiguity in the notion of operation, whose operator, in fact, remains utterly anonymous within his strictly ontological considerations (something that shall be discussed in more detail later), its basic function is clear. The operation of count-as-one is an ordering into a minimal order of sheer being, and like the Levinasian category of the *il y a* to which it is thematically close, nothing can be said about it except that it must precede any determinate objectivity, identity, 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*, then, is defined as "any presented multiplicity," and Badiou proclaims there is "nothing apart from situations." (2005, 25) Thus, no intrinsic distinction between a presentation and a situation is stipulated by the ontological discourse. Nevertheless, a semantic distinction between the two can be proposed, as the distinction is useful especially

when the ontological discourse is transposed onto discourses on extraontological situations. Badiou remarks:

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. (2005, 24)

"To exist," for Badiou, is "to be an element *of*. There is no other possible predicate of existence as such." (Badiou and Hallward 1998, 130) And being an 'element,' he 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." (Badiou 2005, 45) 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, hence 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 multiple must have arisen. To phrase this in a Heideggerian manner: the occlusion of *Sein* – pure inconsistent multiplicity – in its disclosure as *Seiendes* – consistent multiples, presentations, situations – does not annihilate the former. 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." (2005, 53) Inconsistency subsists in the situation as unpresentable. Every situation, in so far as it admits into itself the inconsistency that it 'unpresents,' is simultaneously, as Roland Végso (2013) had put it, a "failed presentation." This failure is not a failure to present something that could have otherwise been presented. Rather, it 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, so to speak, 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 marks the *suture* of a situation to its own 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 incorporation in set-theoretical ontology the thought that although inconsistency is unrepresented and excluded (or *subtracted*, in Badiou's terminology) from presentation (or from a situation), it is nonetheless simultaneously *included* as the underlying pure being of every presentation (or a situation). Although it is never locatable in a situation because it is unrepresented, the void of that situation is nevertheless dispersed everywhere in that situation. In short: "insistence of the void in-consists as de-localization." (Badiou 2005, 77) 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 to illustrate the point. 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 rests every social order and makes whatever hierarchical relations imposed within an order operative. 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. Badiou puts it thus: "The law of the void is in-difference." (2005, 77) The void of any social situation can thus 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 regard the second count as an operation that makes the aforementioned failure of presentation to continue to remain undisclosed, such that the 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

---

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Rancière himself rejects any 'transcendentalization' or 'ontologization' of equality. His proposition of equality, Rancière insists, is but an "opinion." (2009) Whether Rancière can maintain his ontological non-commitment consistently, of course, is an altogether different question.

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 unrepresented, hence what accounts for the sustenance of a certain regime of count-as-one, is the second count, the operation of what is called the “state of a situation.” (Badiou 2005, 97) What comes to fore with the state (*état*) 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 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 said to be ‘normal.’ Given Badiou’s set-theoretical premises, it must 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 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,’ (2006, 143) 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 allusion 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 that ensures both that the void remain unrepresented and the excess of representation over presentation be tamed. It may thus be concluded 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.

#### **4. A Depiction of a Normalized Social Situation**

While this paper must suppose that the ontological categories outlined in the preceding section can be productively mobilized to illustrate and understand social situations, it is the case that there is no intrinsic definition of 'social' that is derivable from the Badiouian general ontology founded on post-Cantorian extensional set theory. To proceed, then, a concrete situation that can reasonably be qualified as social must simply be selected. For the purpose of exposition, let it be supposed that 'Indonesia' names 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 situation chosen, such that it will be possible to say that those that belongs to the situation, in as much as they belong, are Indonesian citizens. 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 presented elements encountered therein 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 is a presented multiple that is also represented, and the same can be said of all its individual members. In the Badiouian typology, the baseball team would be a 'normal' multiple.

The arrangement of the parts of a situation is regulated by the state of the situation, in accordance with a particular regime of representation. In his mathematically oriented reading, Burhanuddin Baki suggests that the state should be seen as "Badiou's version of the Lacanian symbolic." (2015, 105) The comparison is not unjustified: the particular arrangements of parts proceed through the deployment of an apparatus that Badiou calls the 'language of the situation' – to be explained in detail shortly – that mediates presentation and representation. Moreover, the goal of the state is to govern the relationship between presentation and representation in a particular way to produce an illusion of completeness or wholeness of the situation, so as to foreclose the situation's "encounter with its own void, the presentational occurrence of inconsistency." (Badiou 2005, 93) In this respect, the state of the situation is comparable also to the Lacanian imaginary, with the void, unnameable by the situation's language and foreclosed from presentation, analogous 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 could be termed a 'social imaginary,' conceivable as the set of representations of what the inhabitants of the situation can become, but whose actualization would not disrupt the situation's self-identical unity in so far as they can be anticipated from how the situation already is. The conceptual determination of novelty and change – the prime achievement of *Being and Event* – cannot be completed without thinking their very opposite, namely, the way in which a situation is maintained in its self-identical unity. Critical for understanding the situation's self-identical unity, in fact, is the language of the situation.

Along the lines of interpretation offered in this paper, language of the situation can be understood as the mechanism by which a regime of representation works to constrain the space of representation through two types of operation: discernment and classification. Discernment, Badiou explains, "concerns connection between language and presented or presentable realities," whereas classification concerns "the connection between the language and the parts of a situation, the multiples of multiples." (2005, 328) 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 "being is anterior to language" (2005, 501) – 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." (Badiou 2005, 44-47) 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, hence classified. 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. 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 language of the situation, through operations of discernment and classification, are *constructible*. These multiples constructed through the workings of the situation's language provide the ontological schema of subject-positions or objective social identities.

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. By means of the language of the situation, the state ensures a ‘proximity’ between presentation and representation such that “the state does not exceed the situation by *too much*, or that it remains commensurable.” (Badiou 2005, 288) The imaginary of a normalized 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 is to 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.

Having defined the fundamental limitation of a normalized situation within the terms of set-theoretical ontology, it is possible to anticipate how change must be conceptualized: 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  $S$ , hence no predicate or combination of predicates of the language of that situation would circumscribe it. 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 an *indiscernible* part of the situation. This part can, under certain conditions, be qualified as ‘generic,’ a term which Badiou also characterizes the being of what he rather controversially calls a ‘truth’ – it is the key objective of the second half of *Being and Event* to advance the idea that radical change in the situation is induced by its supplementation by a truth. Something beyond imagination can only appear as an unpredictable, aleatory occurrence from the perspective of the situation. Hence the centrality for Badiou’s theorization of change the concept of event, to which the second half of the title of his treatise refers. But the final section of this paper must leave aside the theory of change proper and return to consider an important feature of pre-evental social situations whose fundamental structures have been described using the resources of Badiou’s set-theoretical ontology.

## 5. Social Situations without Subjects

As hinted earlier, the ambiguous status of the anonymous ‘operation’ by which presentations and representations result, the count-as-one, has been noted by

several commentators. In one of the earliest substantive reviews of *Being and Event*, Jean-Toussaint Desanti turns to Badiou's following declaration: "What 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." (Badiou 2005, 24) Desanti proceeds to write: "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?" (2004, 60) Edoardo Acotto, similarly, asks: "Badiou defines [the count-as-one] as an *operation*. But who, concretely, is the *operator*? This is one of the mysteries of Badiou's philosophy, and of its exclusion of perceptual and cognitive mechanisms from the ontological discourse." (2007, 86; translated from French)

The question of the 'counter' in the operation of count-as-one (to which a sort of Kantian transcendental subjectivity cannot be an acceptable answer 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 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. As Paul Livingston has argued, irrespective of what Badiou intends to achieve philosophically (such as avoiding recourse to subjective or linguistic idealism), at least apropos social situations, it is "very difficult to avoid the natural assumption" 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." (2014, 245) To be sure, it may be that for set-theoretical ontology to be a general ontology, its account of structuration cannot be inextricably tied to any particular counter, or 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, as soon as the specificity of particular situations or types of situations is considered, it seems to become critically pertinent to ask "[w]hat is to count as a situation, and who decides." (Eagleton 2003, 252) 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, as attested by several of Badiou's own examples. 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 of any sort of agent or some form of subjectivity that such practices likely need to presuppose appears as a problematic omission.

The depiction of social situations as asubjective, which remains as the only depiction that is directly supported by the Badiouian ontological discourse, can be contrasted with accounts offered by theorists that give greater prominence to the

role of discursivity in the constitution of the social, such as Ernesto Laclau, whose final publication is tellingly titled *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (2014). In the entirely asubjective action of structure postulated by the discourse of set-theoretical ontology and an understanding 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 its elements, as well as the structure itself, as self-identical objects. He contends that it is precisely this failure of 'structural objectivity' that opens the 'space of the subject.' (Laclau 1990, 67) In other words, 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. From this perspective, subjectivity is always implicated in how a social situation is structured and restructured. In the set-theoretical account, however, neither such creative acts of identification nor whatever that compels such acts – for instance, the subject's desire that Lacan-influenced theorists propose to understand with reference to the idea of the ever-elusive object of desire, the *objet petit a* – has a place.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it would still be too hasty to conclude its exclusion of such subjective acts makes it impossible for Badiouian ontology to support a robust social ontology, without considering a rationale that can be offered from the Badiouian perspective for the absence of consideration of human agency in normalized, 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." (Gillespie 2008, 79) Badiou's system imposes a strict distinction between modifications that occur as an immanent development of the situation, which is regulated by the state, and a real change that begins from the interruption of that development. The former kind of change is one that Badiou associates with the constructivist orientation. It is indeed this orientation that has been adapted in this paper to depict normalized situation. 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." (Badiou 2005, 290) The type of change that occurs in a normalized situation is – to repeat Cornelius

---

<sup>4</sup> On the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Laclau's political theory, see Stavrakakis (1999) and Stavrakakis (2007).

Castoriadis's critique of classical structuralism that captures precisely the gist of the constructivist orientation – “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.” (1997, 173) Within normalized situations, identifications harbor no transformative potential regardless of the ‘agent’ behind them, in so far as they merely unfold in accordance with the representational regime of respective situations. Attempts to produce ‘new’ identities or subject-positions are applications of the discursive resources of a situation – its language – to produce additional constructible multiples, where such productions do not necessarily compose a process that 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 and productions of identities in themselves irrelevant for the theorization of change as the emergence of new, unanticipated possibilities in a situation, as such a theorization requires a strict conceptual distinction between that which is actually new and that which is only possibly new.

The spatial metaphor of ‘spreading out’ in the line from Castoriadis is appropriate to describe the kind of change possible under a normalized social situation, which is not exposed to something other than what it already is or what is anticipatable from within it – normalization in this respect is the spatialization of temporality, and a normalized situation is one in which the synchronic prevails over the diachronic. Constructivist in orientation, the regime of representation and its discursive apparatus cannot be the source of novelty or induce radical change. There is – to repeat Rancière’s apt remark on the policed distribution of social roles – a sense in which that “everyone is included in advance” in a normalized situation (1998, 116). Whatever ‘new’ identity definable using the situation’s language will never fail to be represented. Because the subject for Badiou is “the real presence of change in a situation, or the actual existence of the new,” (Pluth 2010, 118) there is no subject prior to an event. Subjectivation, the emergence of a subject in the situation, is subsequent to the interruption of a normalized situation in an event, whose conceptualization, Badiou contends, is beyond the remit of ontology. For, in as much as an event is not of the order of being but signifies its radical interruption, it is – as Emmanuel Levinas, with whose ethical philosophy Badiou shares more in common than he would be willing to admit, might put it – *otherwise than being*.

## 6. Conclusion

If the pre-evental social situation reconstructed from Badiou’s set-theoretical ontology appears to be a monotonous world in which nothing genuinely new takes place, this is in no small part due to the fact that, within the architecture of Badiou’s system, the depiction of the pre-evental situation is the propaedeutic to a dichotomic determination of what change and socially transformative political processes are. From the perspective of this system, events and processes of real

change are far rarer than would be supposed by a worldview that legitimates the extension of the referent of 'activism' from the factories to the streets to social media hashtags. While the ascription of rarity to change could be seen as indicative of a problematic yearning for a 'great politics,' it may simultaneously be a sobering reminder that – as Badiou had remarked apropos the *gilets jaunes* movement in France – “not everything that moves ahead is red [*tout ce qui bouge n'est pas rouge*].” (2019)

Despite its purported aim of theorizing novelty and change, whether Badiou's intricate system actually is able to support the thought of a far-reaching social change, particularly in the direction endorsed by Badiou himself, is an open question. Difficulties that arise when conceptualizing social change within the coordinates of Badiou's system have been documented by a thought number of readers. Livingston's elaboration of those difficulties stands out for its attentiveness to the implications of set-theoretical ontology (2014). Laclau, for his part, has challenged the strict dichotomy Badiou imposes between the pre-evental situation and post-evental processes of genuine change (2004). Commentators have also argued that there is no reason to believe that any particular event and post-evental change should command anyone's approval and commitment – a normative deficit, as it were, haunts Badiou's “ethics of truths.” (Dews 2004; Lecercle 1999; Vilaça 2014) Perhaps, even Badiou's appropriation of the word 'truth' to name a crucial category in his philosophy may be challenged, in as much as Badiou fails to tie truth sufficiently to a notion of the good (Critchley 2000; 2007).

Difficulties such as those aforementioned have not, however, prevented the application of Badiou's account of situations and change to social theory. The most extended of such attempts to bring Badiou's thought to bear on social theory to date is Colin Wright's *Badiou in Jamaica* (2013). Wright demonstrates in his study that the Badiouian system presented in *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* can be further elaborated into a sophisticated conflict theory, while also entering into a productive dialogue with experientially and historically grounded thinkers from cultural studies and postcolonial studies. The potential of Badiou's system to contribute to social theory cannot be measured in advance. Applying the same criterion by which, according to Badiou, events are to be ultimately evaluated, it might be said that a great portion of the evaluation of Badiou's thought will depend on the consequences it produces, both in theory and in practice. The reconstruction of the social ontology contained within *Being and Event* in this paper has been offered with the hope of continuing their production.

## References

- Acotto, Edoardo. 2007. “Alain Badiou et l'ontologie du monde perdu.” In *Écrits autour de la pensée d'Alain Badiou*, edited by Bruno Besana and Oliver Feltham, 83-100. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan.

Min Seong Kim

- Badiou, Alain. 1999. *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Translated by Norman Madarasz. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2004a. "Being and Appearance." In *Theoretical Writings*, translated by Alberto Toscano and Ray Brassier, 163-76. London: Continuum.
- . 2004b. "Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou." In *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, edited by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, 169-93. London: Continuum.
- . 2005. *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum.
- . 2006. *Metapolitics*. Translated by Jason Barker. London: Verso.
- . 2009. *Logics of Worlds*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum.
- . 2018. *L'Immanence des vérités*. Paris: Fayard.
- . 2019. "Lessons of the 'Yellow Vests' Movement." Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso. Accessed March 20, 2021. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4327-alain-badiou-lessons-of-the-yellow-vests-movement>.
- Badiou, Alain, and Simon Critchley. 2007. "Ours Is Not a Terrible Situation." *Philosophy Today* 51 (3): 357-65.
- Badiou, Alain, and Peter Hallward. 1998. "Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou." *Angelaki* 3 (3): 113-33.
- Baki, Burhanuddin. 2015. *Badiou's Being and Event and the Mathematics of Set Theory*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bosteels, Bruno. 2011. *Badiou and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brassier, Ray. 2007. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Critchley, Simon. 2000. "Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou." *Radical Philosophy* 100: 16-27.
- . 2007. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso.
- Desanti, Jean-Toussaint. 2004. "Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou." In *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, 59-66. London: Continuum.
- Dews, Peter. 2004. "States of Grace: The Excess of the Demand in Badiou's Ethics of Truths." In *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, 106-19. London: Continuum.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2003. *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*. London: Verso.
- Gillespie, Sam. 2008. *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou's Minimalist Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re.press.



- Hallward, Peter. 2008. "Order and Event." *New Left Review* 53: 97-122.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 1990. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso.
- . 2004. "An Ethics of Militant Engagement." In *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, 120-37. London: Continuum.
- . 2007. "Discourse." In *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, edited by Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge, 2nd ed., 1: 541-47. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2014. *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London: Verso.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. 1999. "Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*: The philosophy of Alain Badiou." *Radical Philosophy* 93: 6-13.
- Livingston, Paul M. 2014. *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Maniglier, Patrice. 2010. "The Structuralist Legacy." In *After Poststructuralism: Transitions and Transformations*, edited by Rosi Braidotti, 7: 55-81. The History of Continental Philosophy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Osborne, Peter. 2007. "Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*." *Radical Philosophy* 142 (April): 19-29.
- Pluth, Ed. 2010. *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Rancière, Jacques. 1998. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2009. "A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière." *Parallax* 15 (3): 114-23.
- Renault, Emmanuel. 2016. "Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology." *Journal of Social Ontology* 2 (1): 17-32. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2015-0013>.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. 1999. *Lacan and the Political*. London: Routledge.
- . 2007. *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tho, Tzuchien. 2008. "The Consistency of Inconsistency: Alain Badiou and the Limits of Mathematical Ontology." *Symposium* 12 (2): 70-92.
- Végső, Roland. 2013. *The Naked Communist: Cold War Modernism and the Politics of Popular Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Vilaça, Guilherme Vasconcelos. 2014. "Badiou's Ethics: A Return to Ideal Theory." *Badiou Studies* 3 (1): 271-321.
- Wright, Colin. 2013. *Badiou in Jamaica: The Politics of Conflict*. Melbourne: re.press.