

## The “Deflationary” Criticism of the Event: Ambiguities of the Theory of Change in Badiou’s *Being and Event*

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**Abstract:** This paper revisits the “deflationary” line of criticism that had been raised against the theory of event presented in Alain Badiou’s *Being and Event*. This line of criticism questions the Badiouian claim to have provided a theorization of radical novelty and change, suggesting that events and their consequences may be more banal than is assumed by the account of change based on truths, elaborated in Badiou’s great ontological treatise. Advancing a version of deflationary criticism, this paper proposes that there are important matters left unclear in the set-theoretical ontology of Badiou’s *magnum opus* that become particularly relevant when the categories such as *void*, *event*, and *truth* are deployed in analyses of specific and concrete extra-ontological situations. Exploiting some of those ambiguities, it will be argued that the theorization of change due to post-evental truths in *Being and Event* does not adequately establish the universality of the truths that, for Badiou, must commence with events. This is problematic for the Badiouian account of change because universality, or what Badiou’s ontological discourse terms “genericity,” is the property of truths that is supposed to ensure their transformative potential.

**Keywords:** Badiou, social ontology, social change, event

This paper revisits what could be termed the “deflationary” line of criticism, which had been raised against Alain Badiou’s theory of event and post-evental change elaborated in *Being and Event*. The deflationary line of criticism points to the problematic aspects of Badiou’s theorization on change unresolvable in the anti-relational set theoretical ontology of *Being and Event*. This paper develops a version of the deflationary criticism in the context of theorizing social change, which is categorizable as a political “truth procedure” within Badiou’s system. In particular, this paper

argues that the theorization of change due to post-evental truths in *Being and Event* does not adequately establish the universality of the truths that, for Badiou, must commence with events.

This poses a challenge for thinking social change with Badiouian categories because universality, or what Badiou's ontological discourse would term "genericity," is the property of truths that is supposed to ensure their transformative potential. What is consequently left ambiguous is the extent of the transformative effects of truths and the possibility of far-reaching social change. This ambiguity, it might be argued, stems from Badiou's deployment of set-theoretical ontology, which neither elaborates how a concrete situation come to be in its particularity nor provides an account of how situations sustain themselves and interact with each other. The section that immediately follows provides an outline of the set-theoretical ontology of *Being and Event*. This will then be followed by the discussion of a version of deflationary criticism that pursues the intuitions of earlier critics who have advanced that line of criticism and develops them further.

### Situations, Truths, and the Deflationary Criticism of Events

Based on an innovative reading of post-Cantorian axiomatic set theory as the discourse of being qua being (ontology) Badiou theorizes a *situation* as an outcome of the negation of the chaotic inconsistent multiplicity that precedes it. The structuring principle Badiou posits as having intervened in between chaos and order is termed "count-as-one," and the latter's emergence is conceivable as the structuration of inconsistent multiplicity into some particular infinite multiple (set). However, importantly, there is nothing in inconsistency itself that necessitates whatever particular count-as-one that has actually prevailed to be *its* structuring principle. The trace of the ultimate contingency of any situation is, in Badiou's theorization, the constitution of the inconsistency that must have been negated in the coming to be of a situation as a potentially destabilizing spectral real. Although uncounted or unrepresented in the structuring operation and thus not an *element* of a resultant situation, inconsistency haunts the situation as a "phantom remainder" whose "presentational occurrence" must be deferred in order for the situation to persist as it is.<sup>1</sup>

That which attests to the situation's deferral of inconsistency is the infinite proliferation of differences. This implies a second-order operation, a "count-of-the-count," that establishes a "proximity" between *presentation*—what exists as elements of the situation—and *representation*, which pertains to the symbolic-imaginary regime of what can be known, thinkable, and

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 93.

imaginable in and of the situation. Effectively a self-confirmatory process Althusser would have associated with ideological structure, this re-counting operation that Badiou also calls the “state of the situation” could be seen as sustaining a kind of social imaginary that governs the range of what appears as possible in the situation,<sup>2</sup> or as Badiou puts it in the final volume of the *Being and Event* trilogy, *The Immanence of Truths*, “covers over” anything that happens “within already-known parameters, in a language that registers this occurrence as already thinkable based on prevailing practices.”<sup>3</sup>

It becomes clear here why Badiou holds that “infinite alterity” is not, *pace* Levinas, “the predicate of a transcendence” but rather “the banal reality of every situation.”<sup>4</sup> For if the maintenance of the situation depends on the establishment of a relation of proximity between presentation and representation, representation in an infinite situation can only involve an infinite proliferation of classifications and predications working to ensure that every possible element that exists and can exist in the situation has been counted—*accounted for*, that is—in advance. This idea, that the infinitude of the situation’s representational regime is a product of its immunological operation that forecloses something truly new, cautions against ascribing transgressivity to “fluid” plural identities as such. For Badiou, thinking transcendence—that is, real change—hence demands thinking the beyond of infinite differences whose proliferation aligns with processes sustaining the *status quo*, as encapsulated in his provocative universalist imperative: “Philosophically, if the other doesn’t matter, it is because the difficulty lies on the side of the Same.”<sup>5</sup>

It is his theorization of truth that answers to the task of thinking universality. In ontological terms, a *truth* can be defined as the power set of an initial infinite set whose cardinality immeasurably exceeds that of the latter. This is to say that a truth cannot be circumscribed, defined, or constructed using the classifications and predicates of the situation, making it an *indiscernible* part (subset) of the situation subtracted from the infinite

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<sup>2</sup> Min Seong Kim, “The Social Ontology of Alain Badiou’s *Being and Event*,” *Symposium: Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, 9 (2022), 271–272.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*, trans. by Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 211.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), 25–27. “Any experience at all,” Badiou claims, “is the infinite deployment of infinite differences.” An encounter between two Englishmen from North London is no less (nor more) an encounter with infinite alterity than one between a Javanese Muslim and an Australian atheist. How such infinite difference can nonetheless appear similar is something that *Logics of Worlds* tries to explain. It should be noted that in the final volume of the *Being and Event* trilogy, *The Immanence of Truths*, Badiou shifts his terminology, referring to the “ordinary infinity” that is bound to constructability as “finite” See: Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 377.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 27.

number of multiples that the situation's state is able to construct, or render representable, as elements of the situation. The indiscernibility of a truth implies its *genericity* for Badiou: it is the universal dimension of a situation obscured by statist differences. It can be said, therefore, that the transformative potential of a truth in any social situation—a factory, a nation state, universities, and so on—lies with the fact that its emergence in a situation forces another account of the situation based on the consideration of what is the most generic therein, namely *humanity*, in its simple being, without reference to classifications and predications on which identities and hierarchic positions organizing the situation are based. Hence, the most general sense that can be given to Badiouian "politics of truths" may be the following: processes by which situations are transformed by the *supplementation* of the situation by a truth, that is, by universalist and egalitarian practices of a collective subject that actualize previously unknown possibilities of human community. An elevated kind of humanism can be glimpsed herein. Badiou, in fact, goes as far as to declare that "Humanity, prior to the real forms of egalitarian politics, simply does not exist, either as collective, or as truth, or as thought."<sup>6</sup>

Connecting the theorization of what processes of truth *must be* to effects of truths in concrete empirical situations requires the occurrence of an exceptional *event*, for, if truths in practice are pursuit of possibilities in concrete situations in excess of what had been considered possible or imaginable therein, their inhabitants<sup>7</sup>—or as Badiou might describe them, the "human animals" prior to subjectivation<sup>8</sup>—must in some sense be awakened to those possibilities. An event testifies to radical contingency of the situation in which it takes place; hence its theorization as the presentational occurrence of inconsistency *in* the situation, or, stated differently, an irruption within the situation of its *void*—which is analytically distinguished from inconsistent multiplicity as such, about which nothing can be said except that it is that which precedes any objectivity, identity, and order, in that it names a *situated* inconsistency, or "a real whose realness is indexed with respect to a given particular reality."<sup>9</sup> As the point at which a process of radical novelty and change may begin, an event, when encountered by human animals, opens a way out of the existence to which they had hitherto been bound.

The gist of what might be termed the "deflationary" line of criticism is that events may be more common or banal than is assumed by the

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), 175.

<sup>7</sup> Ed Pluth, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Sergei Prozorov, "Badiou's Biopolitics: The Human Animal and the Body of Truth," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32 (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 29.

Badiouian account of change based on truths. This kind of criticism, which attempts to undermine the Badiouian theorization of radical novelty and change, has been voiced by a number of readers of Badiou (and *Being and Event* in particular). Ernesto Laclau, for example, has argued that “it is wrong to think that we have purely situational periods interrupted by purely evental interventions,” for “the contamination between the evental and the situational is the very fabric of social life.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Peter Dews, alluding to the late Wittgensteinian reflections on mental processes, considers how something as mundane as expecting someone’s arrival may conform to Badiou’s definition of an event:

... there is no *determinate* set of thoughts and activities that can be said to be necessary and sufficient conditions of such expectation (and furthermore, activities which, in one context, are correctly taken as indicating expectation, may no longer have this meaning when transposed into a different context). It seems, then, that we could say, applying Badiou's terminology, that the “event” of expecting someone's arrival consists of the “evental site” (an indeterminate range of thought and activity)—plus the event itself ( $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ ).<sup>11</sup>

Expecting someone’s arrival is an event given the way that Badiou defines the latter, Dews suggests. But in this case, events, rather than exceptions to everydayness, may simply be thought as “the very texture of the socio-historical world, of the domain which Hegel—for example—terms ‘Geist.’”<sup>12</sup>

Questioning the exceptionality of events through the kind of deflationary criticism exemplified by Laclau and Dews, which turns to the *form* of an event laid out by Badiou’s set-theoretical general ontology, inscribed in Badiou’s ontological discourse as  $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ , however, invites a swift rejoinder. For such a challenge does not adequately take into consideration a qualification that is central to Badiou’s concept of event and his theorization of post-evental change: that an event be the revelation of a

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<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), 201. For an examination of the difficulties that Laclau’s own approach, which rejects an absolute demarcation between event-ness and situationality, faces when theorizing novelty and change, see: Min Seong Kim, “The Break between Old and New Orders in Laclau’s Theory of Hegemony,” in *Problemas*, 103 (2023).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Dews, Review of *Being and Event* by Alain Badiou, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2008), <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/being-and-event/>>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

situation's *void*, of the latent inconsistency a situation *has to unrepresent* in order for it to constitute itself as a consistent multiplicity, and whose occurrence it is the remit of what Badiou terms the situation's "state" to foreclose. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the significance of the event for thinking social change is almost entirely expressed by Badiou in his stipulation that "what the State strives to foreclose through its power of counting is the void of the situation, while the event always reveals it."<sup>13</sup> Given this stipulation, Dews's deflation of events falters: the example of expecting someone's arrival does not consider the aspect of an event as the bringing forth of the void of a situation.

It might further be argued in favor of Badiou that the ubiquity of instances of events may not, after all, be so devastating. It could be argued, for instance, that an occurrence that has the form of an event is an *event proper* only once its consequences have unfolded. As Todd May points out, the refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat was an event, even though there "were others before her who also refused. What makes her refusal an event is the fidelity to her act by other committed activists. And it is only in retrospect that we realize that hers was an event while the previous refusals were not."<sup>14</sup> An event can only be consequential if and only if there is a subject that has decided that there is something—such as a political project—to be pursued subsequent to that event. However, subjectivation (as well as the concomitant initiation of a truth procedure whereby an event's consequences are realized in the situation through the collective endeavor of individuals "faithful" to the original moment of inspiration that the event has become for them) does not necessarily follow from an event. Granted that events that reveal the void of situations are rare and even those rare instances may not have been followed by a subjectivation on which their consequentiality in the situation entirely depends, it is possible to assert that although instantiations of events that formally conform to the matheme of the event may pervade the socio-historical world, only very few of these instances qualify as events proper.

Clarifying the details of the Badiouian theorization of events and truths does help to dissolve the force of the deflationary criticism of the sort raised by Dews and Laclau. This paper shall seek to show, nonetheless, that what is not precluded by the intricate architecture of *Being and Event* is an augmented version of the deflationary line of criticism. In other words, the radically transformative potential that Badiou's philosophy places on what it

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2006), 119.

<sup>14</sup> Todd May, "Review of Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: *Re-thinking Emancipation* by Nick Hewlett," in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2008), <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/badiou-balibar-ranci-232-re-re-thinking-emancipation/>>.

supposes to be exceptional and disruptive events can be questioned on the basis of the presuppositions and implications of Badiou's ontological treatise itself.

### The Extent of Post-evental Effects

Every situation “unpresents ‘its’ void,”<sup>15</sup> and “a genuine event” is “at the origin of a truth” in as much as the event “relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void.”<sup>16</sup> It should be emphasized, again, that in extra-ontological situations (the “concrete” situations other than the ontological discourse), the void is not the ontological void—that is, the negativity of non-being as such—but is the nothing that is particular to a situation. The “evental site”—a totally “singular” multiple that “borders” the void and is, importantly, the *material substrate* of an event—“is neither intrinsic nor absolute,”<sup>17</sup> for the determination of a multiple as an evental site thus depends on the particular structure of the situation in which it is positioned as a site. Accordingly, as Adrian Johnston puts it, the “event-ness of the site and/or event is a relative property.”<sup>18</sup> One extensionally identical “multiple could easily be singular in one situation (its elements are not presented therein, although it is) yet normal in another situation (its elements happen to be presented in this new situation).”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, if the unrepresentable were to remain unrepresentable in every possible situation, change *qua* the production of novelty would be unthinkable. Nor is it the case that the situation in which an evental site would be “normal” could come about solely through an event and a truth procedure. On the contrary, the normalization of evental sites is a process constitutive of the metastructure, or state, of any situation: “any evental site, can in the end, undergo a state normalization.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, the “very same multiples that are evental *qua* abnormally singular/void in one situation or world easily could be non-evental in another setting,” and the elements unrepresented in one situation might, in a different situation, may “very well possess the non-void status of being integrated into the networks of a state-regulated situation or world through re/presentation.”<sup>21</sup> Because the void, in non-ontological situations, is a structural position retroactively delineated by the operation of count-as-one that is specific to a situation, *what* is

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–29.

unpresented, in non-ontological situations, is determined in relation to the situation for which it is *its* void.

It is because a situation unpresents the void particular to it that an event, which reveals that particular void, can be said to be a return of the repressed. In other words, the *situatedness* of an eventual site and particularity of the void that circulates within it indexes events and truths to particular historical circumstances, rather than turning them into irruptions at a point radically external to the situation. To draw the implications of the indexing of the void to a situation for theorizing social change, one might begin by considering what would be the void of *any* social situation. As noted earlier, that void is generic humanity, definable as the "pure be-ing human considered without reference to any criterion of hierarchy, privilege, competence, or difference,"<sup>22</sup> which provides, within Badiou's reflections on politics, the support for the egalitarian universality of a truth in social situations. In any given social situation, generic humanity will be its void, since the situation's statist regime stratifies the situation into "parts" or, in the case of social situations, social identities. In so far as it is possible to speak of different situations (the situation of Indonesia, the situation of the factory, educational situation, and so on), it has to be admitted that there is a plurality—an *infinite* plurality, as one could legitimately posit according to set-theoretical ontology—of social situations. Granted that there is an infinite plurality of situations that qualify as social, the following thought merits further examination: given that, ontologically, the fundamental individuating feature that differentiates situations are their differing regimes of count-as-one, and given that the void of a concrete situation is the void particular to a situation, in the singular, it may be the case that different events need not be revelations of the one and the same void, and, by extension, different truth procedures in different social situations, in so far as they are different, need not relate to their respective social situation from the bias of the void construed solely and invariantly as generic humanity in order to qualify as truth procedures.

For Badiou, "there is a *multiplicity* of singular events in singular situations which also enable a *multiplicity* of truths unfolded by 'faithful' subjects."<sup>23</sup> This is, Frank Ruda suggests, one of the features by which Badiou's theorization of event and change distinguishes itself from that offered by a thinker like Giorgio Agamben, for whom "there are *multiplicity* of singular event as ruptures of the given which always expose *one and the*

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 117.

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



*same* truth (of being)."<sup>24</sup> It is a strength (in that it better captures the sense of interventions in specific situations) of the Badiouian approach that it locates the origin of a process of change immanently within a particular situation as the revelation of a specific void and allows that fidelity to different events requires the invention of different ways of being and acting. The situatedness of events and truths implied by the fact that event-ness and void-ness are relative properties, however, introduces an ambiguity concerning the extent of support that the ontological discourse may offer for thinking far-reaching social change.

An illustration is useful here. In the early twentieth century, Italian football clubs allowed only Italian and English players to join. Footballers not of those two nationalities, if they were to sign with a club, would have had to conceal their nationality—these footballers would have been unrepresented in the situation of Italian football. On the 9th of March 1908, several members of the Milan Football and Cricket Club dissented against the club's exclusionary policy of admitting only Italians and Britons as members and found a new football club under a declaration that one could plausibly argue is egalitarian and universal for *this* situation, i.e., the situation of Italian football: "*Si chiamerà Internazionale, perchè noi siamo fratelli del mondo* (it [the new club] will be called *Internazionale*, because we are brothers of the world)."<sup>25</sup> The construction of a *generic multiple*—that is, a truth, considered in its universalistic being—to extend the situation of Italian football in fidelity to this declaration would not be required to approach the situation from the standpoint of generic humanity, the void of every social situation, but merely from the capacity to play football, in so far as it is voided of markers of nationality and ethnicity that had previously served to restrict the multiples (football players) that could be presented and represented in the situation. Such would be enough for a practice of realizing the founding declaration of the new club to be a truth procedure in *this* situation, and the being of the truth—the truth of the fact that beyond ethnic and national differences, football is an activity that offers itself to everyone—it incrementally produces to be a generic multiple, assembled by a criterion of belonging to the situation that considers elements without reference to qualifications that the situation's state or representational regime imposes to restrict membership.

What should be asked is whether it is possible for the situatedness of events and truths to work to *restrict* their socially transformative potential. For Badiou, there are "multiple procedures of truth, multiple creative sequences,"<sup>25</sup> and there is, accordingly, no "single Subject, but as many

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 109.

subjects as there are truths."<sup>26</sup> However, while "any one individual belongs to a vast number of situations, and subjective participation in any one procedure need not block other sorts of commitment," Peter Hallward notes that "to any one truth, there seems to correspond only one subject" and that there is "no obvious way that a situation might tolerate more than one subject."<sup>27</sup> This is one consequence implied by the thought of the non-ontological void: while an event is the irruption of void that disturbs the determinants of a given situation, the situation also conditions the possibilities that are opened thereby. As Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos have explained, because "the principle or law of the situation ultimately determines the site" of an event, an event finally "can only challenge what is determinate in the situation such as the state, the authoritarian party, the legal institution and so on."<sup>28</sup> Limits on the extent of the transformative effects of truths, together with the potential existence of an infinite number of situations (and a plurality of truth processes), raise the question of how these situations and change processes would interact. Noting the in-principle compatibility of truths in Badiou's philosophy, John Milbank writes that "if for Badiou the many different truth-processes are compatible with one another, then it does not seem satisfactory to say, as he does, that the public measure of their legitimacy is merely the non-interference of one process with another."<sup>29</sup> It is not satisfactory, Milbank claims, because the stipulated non-interference implies that Badiou's theory of eventual change lapses into a "liberalism," in the sense that a "clearly demarcated distribution of boundaries of discourse ... prevail over the unpredictability of a newly emerging Event."<sup>30</sup>

The critical point raised by Milbank (as well as by Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos) that events and their transformative consequences do not seem to transgress boundaries of particular situations appears to be supported by the strictly formal ontological theorization of truths. Subtraction from predication, by which the genericity of a truth is defined, is not absolute but is relative to the regimes of counting specific to a situation and its representational regime (that is, its state). If genericity of a multiple in an extra-ontological situation is a relative property, it must be said the

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<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 289.

<sup>28</sup> Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, "Philosophy and Revolution: Badiou's Infidelity to the Event," in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2 (2006), 222.

<sup>29</sup> John Milbank, "The Return of Mediation," in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek, Creston Davis, and John Milbank (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 215.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

elements belonging to a generic multiple possess a further qualification in addition to the property of belonging to that situation pure and simple (in the example from the previous section, it would be that of having the capacity to play football). The being of a truth, Badiou explains, “is anonymously that which has no other mark apart from arising from presentation, apart from being composed of terms which have nothing in common that could be remarked, save belonging to *this* situation.”<sup>31</sup> The emphasis on “this” is crucial: in the formulation offered by Badiou, it is precisely the qualification “*this* situation” that is the marker of *deixis*, that which makes a truth the truth of a particular situation. What this implies is that in so far as the generic subset is generic by its non-relation to the determinations of the representational regime that prevails in a particular situation, a mark of particularity is retained in the being of a truth, a particularity that is none other than its being generic by its subtraction from the statist determinations, classifications, and predications, that stratify a particular situation. Even if it were asserted as a matter of principle that a political event invokes generic humanity, or that political truth procedure proceeds to investigate the implications of some maxim of a radically egalitarian universalism, it seems difficult to deny, in so far as a truth procedure is always the process of production of a truth in a particular situation, that the generic multiple that a truth is in its being will be marked in this way. But granted that a potentially infinite number of social situations can be thought (such as the situation of football, the situation of education, the situation of a racially segregated society, and so on), there is no *a priori* limitation on the proliferation, also infinite, of eventual sites and generic multiplicities that are indiscernible—hence unrepresentable—within *some* situation.

This outcome is relevant for thinking about the theory of social change that is supportable by the set-theoretical general ontology of *Being and Event*. Badiou writes in *Ethics* that “the place of truth should remain empty and precisely because of this feature it is equally valid ‘for all,’” and that a truth originating from an event is universal to the extent it “neither excludes nor constrains anyone.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, the extension of “for all” and “anyone” in such statements is limited to those that belong (or will come to belong) to some particular situation, and it appears that the transformative effects of each of the multiple truth procedures are confined, in the end, to the particular situation within which they unfold. Coupled with the fact that ontology abstains from responding to the question of—to borrow Terry Eagleton’s

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<sup>31</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 338–339.

<sup>32</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 73.

formulation—what is to “count as a situation, and who decides,”<sup>33</sup> or to put it differently, where a *particular concrete situation* begins and ends, what becomes ambiguous as a result is the meaning of the universality that these procedures, as truth procedures, are meant to produce. One could imagine that a truth procedure would, in its course, come to render representable, by transforming a situation’s regime of count-as-one, those that previously were not even properly counted-as-one within a situation. However, the group newly made representable as a result of that truth procedure is nevertheless particular, since it would be merely one group among the multiplicity of groups that populate other social situations, with the chance that some groups may as well form evental sites in their respective situations due to the regimes of representation specific to those situations.

There is neither anything inherently objectionable in the thought that the transformative potentials of truths are restricted (at least initially) to situations that might appear, at first sight, to be of little significance outside their boundaries, nor is it inconsistent with the Badiouian account of change to suppose that the extent of a truth’s transformative potential remains unknown and can be pursued indefinitely. Nonetheless, the fact that the handful of events Badiou cites as revolutionary are widely recognized as such in science, art, and politics is enough to elicit the question of whether the conceptualization of a truth procedure should incorporate a distinction between the transformation of what might be regarded as relatively “local” situations (such as the situation of the Milanese football scene) and the transformation of relatively “global” situations (for instance, the state of Italy), or instead reject a distinction of such kind, thereby indexing any one process of transformation to a particular situation, without consideration of whether the situation is relatively local or global.

Regardless of whether such a distinction is ultimately desirable, it is, in any case, unclear how the distinction of that sort could be conceived using the resources of set-theoretical ontology.<sup>34</sup> Absent an account of a “global” transformative potential of an event and an how a situation in which an event

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<sup>33</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), 252.

<sup>34</sup> Within a situation, the predicates of its language (including relational predicates, which are simply higher-order predicates) quantify over that situation. This means that a statement such as “something that happens in *this* situation matters for social change more than something that happens in *this other* situation because the former situation is relatively global with respect to the latter situation,” for example, would be, in principle, verifiable if both situations featured in the statement are represented multiples of *another* situation. But since that *another* situation is itself a particular situation, there is no point from which the referents of “global” or “local” could be fixed from the interiority of any situation. The determination has to be made from a perspective outside *any* situation—and it is unclear both what that perspective would be and by what authority anyone would be able to claim to possess that perspective.

could have such far-reaching transformative potential might come about, or perhaps an account of how events, as Milbank suggests, could redraw the “boundaries” between a plurality of situations or discourses,<sup>35</sup> it would be difficult to avoid a conclusion of the following sort, drawn by Paul Livingston: Badiou’s system faces difficulty in “thinking the possibility of varieties of change and transformation that ... affect, or even disrupt, the unity and hegemony of global and total systems of organization, order, and control,”<sup>36</sup> precisely in so far as he “[relativizes] the void to situations” and restricts “the action of what he will go on to theorize as the event and its specific effects, as well, to situations, and to the specific possibilities of change that they structurally determine.”<sup>37</sup>

### **The Gap between the Ontological Discourse and Extra-ontological Situations**

Given the problematization of the transformative potential of events and truths discussed in the previous section, it might be asked whether the set-theoretical ontology of *Being and Event*, though it may not itself contain a full elaboration of the interaction between situations or the transformative effects of a truth beyond a particular situation, nevertheless contains the conceptual basis to theorize the latter. Badiou himself, after all, emphasizes the distance between ontological (that is, set-theoretical) and extra-ontological situations is one that Badiou registers, noting the latter are not to be reduced to the former. Responding to the question of whether a truth procedure is able to “traverse more than one situation,”<sup>38</sup> Badiou replies that while it is true that two truth processes do not unfold in one and the same situation, “concrete” situations are complicated by the fact that they are not the formal, ontological situation:

Two generic procedures are never actually in the same situation of reference because they are truths of their situations. But a concrete situation is not exactly the ontological scheme of the situation. A concrete situation is an interplay of different situations in the ontological sense of the term. Ontology is not by itself the thinking

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>38</sup> Alain Badiou, “Ontology and Politics: An Interview with Alain Badiou,” in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*, ed. by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2004), 174.

of a concrete situation. Ontology is *a* situation, the ontological situation which is the situation of thinking, and finally, the mathematical situation. We can think a part of the concrete situation from the ontological schema. We can say, there is a multiplicity, it is infinite and so on. But there is a concrete analysis which is not ontological at all.<sup>39</sup>

It should be accepted, as Badiou implies, that analyses of concrete situations require more than just ontology. Still, granted the gap between the ontological discourse and extra-ontological situations, the inevitable question persists: if concrete analysis is "not ontological," *to what extent* can set-theoretical ontology advance an understanding of extra-ontological situations, which are in fact the only kind of situations in which events actually happen? Oliver Feltham's attempt to consider ways in which the consequences of an event may somehow spill over into other situations and transform the boundaries between situations attests to the difficulty of responding to such a question. Feltham argues that what is "in" an evental site of a situation must "come from somewhere," and suggests that an evental site "consists of an encounter between heterogeneous situations."<sup>40</sup> It is through an encounter between situations (Mali, Senegal, France) that heterogeneous elements come to enter one situation (France) to form its evental site (the *sans-papiers*), whose indiscernibility in that situation is to be accounted by the heterogeneity of its composition that makes it unrecognizable as a part of the (French) situation. An evental site, Feltham proposes, "can thus be defined as a non-recognized intersection between situations; a disqualified mix which appears, at the level of the state, as a pure disjunction."<sup>41</sup> The constitution of an evental site through the encounter or intersection between heterogeneous situations is one way to speak of the "interplay" between situations mentioned by Badiou in the passage quoted above. Such interplay in and between situations through which an evental site is constituted presumably implies some kind of pre-evental dynamics in situations. What Badiou terms *forcing*, namely the post-evental process by which a truth transforms a situation, then, can be understood as "[consisting] in amassing those multiples that are connected to the event."<sup>42</sup> Feltham explains forcing "as the slow expansion of the evental site; it extends and exacerbates the original point of opacity at which the event occurred," such

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–75.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2008), 122.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

that, in the course of “its continual assertion that this opaque enlarged multiple belongs to the situation,” it “breaks with the established distribution of the situation’s parts.” Enquiries (the practical component of a truth procedure), meanwhile, “create new parts or neighbourhoods with yet unknown boundaries,” which can affect “not only the original boundaries of the evental site and the established partition of the situation, but finally the very boundaries of the situation itself.”<sup>43</sup>

Introducing pre-evental kinesis and post-evental transformative effects that “spill over” the boundaries of a particular situation would indeed constitute an important step toward clarifying the ambiguities of Badiouian theory for thinking social change by opening up, to refer to one of the issues raised previously, the possibility of conceptualizing a “global” situation (and far-reaching transformative consequences) made possible through the interaction of a plurality of “local” situations. However, the gap between the ontological discourse and extra-ontological situations poses a difficulty once again when one begins to consider how Feltham’s sensible picture of pre-evental and post-evental dynamics would actually fit into the ontological discourse. The difficulty for thinking the former (pre-evental kinesis) arises because set-theoretical ontology relegates individuals to the status of objects fully determined by anonymous operations of count-as-one and assigns stasis as one of the characteristics of pre-evental situations. The difficulty for thinking the latter (post-evental dynamics) in terms of forcing emerges because a truth procedure is a process immanent to a situation, and “subject-language”—the medium of the articulation of truths—cannot refer to situations that are external to the initial situation.

As Burhanuddin Baki explains, forcing “is always locally implemented with reference to the elements that range over the situation  $S$ .”<sup>44</sup> The being of a truth is a generic subset of the situation, which is to say that the “ingredients” needed for its production is dispersed in the initial situation, as unrepresentable or indiscernible elements. Thus, in so far as the sets that play a role in a truth procedure are the initial situation, its state, and the generic subset that is constructed from the initial situation through enquiries, it must be concluded that “forcing procedure never goes outside the domestic immanence of  $S$  itself or the various states connected to  $S$ .”<sup>45</sup> Statements that are forced in situation  $S$  anticipate their semantic fulfilment, that is, the coming-to-be of the extensional equivalent (referents) of the names and predicates used in the statements—these extensional equivalents,

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Burhanuddin Baki, *Badiou’s Being and Event and the Mathematics of Set Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 208.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

however, do not arrive from outside S itself, for a truth is built from the void of *a* situation. This means, conversely, that whatever truth procedures that may be taking place in other situations do not affect S. In what way the boundary between S and that other situation may become indeterminate, such that transformative effects in one situation affects, or spills over into the other, is therefore unclear. If there is an eventual site with a certain material composition in a situation, what can be said is that it is *already there* in the situation, with the process in which they have *come to be* falling beneath theorization.

The preceding discussion suggests that ambiguities pertaining to the situatedness of events and truths—that is, questions concerning the extent of the transformative effects of truths on the social—that are not readily resolvable, and that this poses difficulties for any “application” of the theoretical categories of *Being and Event* to describe and analyze the specificity of a political event, which must occur social situations that are extra-ontological. There are, in fact, instances of Badiou’s own deployment of ontological categories that could be seen as symptomatic of this difficulty. In *Metapolitics*, the ontological thesis of the immeasurable excess of inclusion over belonging—that the state of the situation exceeds the situation (based on the result of set theory that the cardinality of the power-set is greater than that of the base set, and immeasurably greater when the base set is an infinite set)—is transposed onto the realm of politics through the equation of the state of a situation with the political state (the two shall be distinguished hereafter by capitalizing the latter). Badiou writes that there are “always more parts than elements, i.e. the representative multiplicity is always of a higher power than the presentative multiplicity. This question is really that of power. The power of the State is always superior to that of the situation.”<sup>46</sup> He then proceeds to suggest that “empirically, whenever there is a genuinely political event, the State reveals itself. It reveals its excess of power, its repressive dimension,” which has to “remain measureless, errant, unassignable” for the “normal functioning of the State.”<sup>47</sup> If what Badiou is suggesting is that a genuine political event induces the normally hidden repressive police apparatus of the State to appear on the scene, there is little that is controversial in the suggestion. That true radical politics provokes the State is not in itself a particularly contentious view. Indeed, the State’s violent reaction to an event may plausibly be argued to be one of the first signs that announces the possibility of change in the situation. But it is difficult not to concur with Livingston, who objects that the particular way in which the point is

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<sup>46</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 144–145.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



expressed by Badiou conflates the *quantitative* excess of the state of the situation and the *qualitative* excess of the State's repressive power.<sup>48</sup>

In *Being and Event*, "excrecent" multiples are defined as multiples that belong to the state of the situation but not to the situation itself, hence multiples that exist as something like an external appendage to the situation. Excrecent multiples are a direct expression of the excess of inclusion (representation) over belonging (presentation)—they conform to the premise on which the repressive power of the State is based, namely, that "the representative multiplicity is always of a higher power than the presentative multiplicity." There is a way of reading this statement as a critique of representative politics: even in its most democratic form, the State represents individuals only through the means of groupings or classifications (such as electoral constituencies). The "excess" or "excrecence" of the State, some readers have argued,<sup>49</sup> refers to the fact that the State fundamentally stands at a distance from the individual members of those groups that it claims to represent. While that may be acceptable as a description of some ontic situations, the association of excrecent multiples with the empirical State is a metaphorical leap unsupported by set-theoretical ontology. For, given the way in which the being of a truth has been defined, a truth is also excrecent in exactly the same sense: it is included in the situation in so far as it is a subset but does not belong the situation in so far as it is an infinite generic subset. Thought in its generic being, a truth, Badiou writes, is a "pure indistinct excess over presented multiples," indeed, an "anonymous excrecence."<sup>50</sup> Excrecence, then, is the type of multiple that by which the being of *both* a truth and the State is thought in set-theoretical ontology. In fact, it is none other than the immeasurable excess of representation over presentation on which the thought essential to Badiou's theory of post-evental change, namely, that a truth, in its being, is generic, infinite, and irreducibly separated from knowledge, is grounded. The equation of excrecence with the State, therefore, is not implied by the ontological discourse itself. Nor can the "repressive dimension" of the State be attributed to the excess of representation over presentation, in so far as a truth is essentially liberating and transformative (rather than repressive and inertial).

The equivocation between quantitative and qualitative excess of "power" works to compensate for the lack of a clear place in the Badiouian framework for the qualitative force that must be posited in order to account for the inertia and persistence of a social situation. While the mere existence

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<sup>48</sup> Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, 272.

<sup>49</sup> See for example: Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, "Politics," in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, ed. by A.J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London: Routledge, 2014), 95.

<sup>50</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 342.

of the repressive apparatus of the State does not entail its intervention, the *fact* that the State has intervened in response to a certain event is seen as *showing* something about the event and the situation for which it is an event. The claim of this paper was that the fact that there is an infinite plurality of situations in a society may render events and truth procedures rather common in so far as they are limited to particular situations. The provocation of the State can be said to fulfill the following revelatory function in the Badiouian account of social change: the intervention of the State's repressive apparatus, its *resistance* to an event, confirms retroactively that the void that the event has revealed is in fact something that is disruptive, something that *matters* to the State, so much so that it is forced to intervene. It confirms, in other words, the non-mundanity of the event in a particular social situation—its status as a genuinely political event—that is not determinable in terms of set-theoretical ontology alone.

## Conclusion

The deflationary line of criticism questions the radically transformative potential that Badiou's philosophy places on what it theorizes as exceptional and disruptive events. If the deflationary argument advanced in this paper—that any specific void and the event that reveals it are indexed to a particular situation and that this situatedness limits the extent of the socially transformative potential of a truth—is right, then it must be asked whether the account of truth procedure is adequate to support the thought of an extensive transformation of society, if society is conceived (to use the same words that Badiou employs) "concretely" as the "interplay" of social situations, in the plural. While, on the one hand, it is not the task of general ontology to provide an account of extensive social change, it would, on the other hand, be hardly satisfactory to simply concede the incommensurability of concrete situations and the ontological situation. What the deflationary line of criticism highlights is the difficulty of co-articulating the two dimensions.

As the challenges that are highlighted by the deflationary criticism pertain to the *political* implications commonly associated with Badiou's philosophy, it is unsurprising that Badiou's works subsequent to *Being and Event* can be read, at least in one of their dimensions, as attempts to respond to the challenges of that line of criticism. One of the central claims of *Logics of Worlds*, the first of the two sequels to *Being and Event*, is that the realm of appearances is inherently relational and dynamic. The notion of "transcendentals" elaborated therein is designed to account for the sense of "more" or "less" in identities of objects and differences between them, hence for relationality in a way far more subtle than the binary logic of belonging (counted) and not belonging (uncounted) in *Being and Event*. It is undeniable

that developments in Badiou's philosophy since *Being and Event* has allowed him to introduce (or, better integrate into his system) nuances that undermine the absolute dichotomy between the static situationality and events questioned by critics such as Laclau. Indeed, Badiou has come to allow that there are "traces of the event prior to the event" based on which a pre-evental praxis could presumably be organized.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the evolution of Badiou's thought, however, the challenge of the deflationary line of criticism does not entirely dissipate. Noting that the realms of appearances and being qua being are held together by what Badiou calls the "postulate of materialism" (which *postulates* that "every atom of appearing is real"<sup>52</sup>), Livingston asks whether Badiou's "elaborate theory" of transcendentals offers an explanation of how they "actually come to structure worlds to which they apply, or to what they owe their force in governing these relations of appearing and 'intensities' of existence."<sup>53</sup> The very concept of the "world"—the category central to *Logics of Worlds* that serve as the phenomenological counterpart to the ontological category of situations—remains, for Livingston, "quite ill-defined."<sup>54</sup> If the deflationary line of criticism exploits the ambiguities in how situations come about and are delimited and sustained (where situations begin and end or, as Eagleton has put it, what "count as a situation, and who decides"<sup>55</sup>), it is a line of criticism that pertains to a difficulty that arguably has not entirely been resolved within Badiou's philosophical system.

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<sup>51</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 62.

<sup>52</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 218.

<sup>53</sup> Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, 245.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent*, 252.

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