



Theory of the Subject

Alain Badiou , Bruno Bosteels (Translator)

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Theory of the Subject, first published in France in 1982, is without doubt one of Alain Badiou's most important works, laying many of the foundations for his magnum opus, Being and Event. Here Badiou seeks to provide a theory of the subject for Marxism through a study of Lacanian psychoanalysis, offering a major contribution to Marxism, as well as to the larger debate regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and philosophy. The book also provides a history and theory of structuralism and poststructuralism, a unique evaluation of the achievements of French Maoism during the 1970s and the significance of the events of May 1968, and breathtaking analyses of art and literature. As a theoretical synthesis, the book is extraordinary in terms of its originality, breadth and clarity. **This is arguably Badiou's most creative and passionate book, encompassing the entire battlefield of contemporary theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis. Available for the first time in English and now in paperback, this is a must-read for anyone interested in this lively and highly original thinker.**

Theory of the Subject Details

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Benjamin says

The main difference between this and the other two parts of his core works (Being & Event, Logics of Worlds) is that this reads in a much more "traditional" continental style of neologisms, weaving poetic sentences, short stabbing aphorisms and references to literature and poetry. In this respect, it reflects the other writers of the day and the influence they had on those around them. This is Badiou before mathematical rigour and his desire for as much clarity as is possible in his increasingly complex Lacano-Marxist set theory.

This isn't a good or bad thing. While many aspects pop and fizz with aggressive polemical violence, others become obscure and impenetrable. However, stick at it. During each of these tricky sections where was often a quick detour that suddenly illuminated everything that was being said and gave it a freshness and clarity that was otherwise missing.

Less rigorous than his other works, but more dynamic. If anything, it is a must for those who've read the other two books and wish to see where they began. As usual with Badiou, I recommend picking up "Theoretical Texts" and "Infinite Thought" as two introductions, then do the two big buggers. Now I add to that advice that you should return to this later.

Phillip says

I decided not to finish this because it's quite difficult, I'm simply not that interested in the metaphysics of subjectivity, and I have more important things to do. That being said, I'm sure it's really brilliant stuff, but I have no wish to wrap my head around it.

Evelyn R says

Great engagements with subjectivity and Marxism. I don't have any background in Lacan, but I understood how it was working with Althusser and that tradition, so I was able to grasp it pretty well. Probably a must-read if you want to understand Badiou, but it's certainly a formidable work.

Full review here: <https://oldalexius.wordpress.com/2016...>

J. says

I write here so that neither I nor my interlocutors - intellectuals or not - ever become the one who, all told, can only meet the great dates of history by distributing herring vouchers.

A = (AAp)... [T:]he true but camouflaged contrary of A is the space of placement P: it is that which delegates the index. The givenness of A as being itself split into:

- its pure being, A*
- its being placed, Ap*

...Everything that exists is thus at the same time itself and itself-according-to-its-place.

Objections. 1) I think I want to maintain that this thesis, which Badiou distills effectively from Hegel, is thought more radically, and without the Aristotelian detour of the "thing", by Plato, under the heading of the relation of eidos to khora. 2) Following from this, I think I want to name A opposed to the space of placement P, as "norm" (in the double sense, mathematical and ethical norm), rather than as either "thing" or "force". 3) *How* does the place dominate? Only through a postulation (false) of a general synthesis of place and term, characteristic of ideological closure. So the dialectical algorithms are perhaps not yet located quite at the right (metalogical) level.

oddities to check against the French:

xlii: "exposed to"

13: "manor" (pun in SM?)

15: "drain"

Chris says

A tour-de-force of Marxism-Leninism. Badiou captures some really significant thoughts and offers some outstanding work in formalizing them into mathemes. I especially appreciated his reworking of materialist dialects without the use of negation: scission/determination/limit.

Badiou also accomplishes a rather novel feat in working Marxism and Psychoanalysis into a theoretical overture of the subject. In thinking through the subject-effects of anxiety, superego, courage and justice, Badiou comes up with a magnificent space to operate in wherein in one can elucidate different forms in which the subject will take (his distinction is subjectivation and subjective-process).

This work was really challenging, but once I got going on it, it was hard to turn away from. Anyone familiar with Marxism-Leninism (Mao Zedong thought) or Lacanian psychoanalysis has their foot in the door and will no doubt find this to be a rather enjoyable read. There's also a significant section of the book devoted to the use of Mallarme that I found quite entertaining.

Steve says

Still working on it.

This book starts by laying out a mathematical delineation of the ontic and ontological. Badiou is attempting to address those things which are conditional upon situations and those things which transcend situational specificity. He uses a mathematical system that reminds me much of general linear algebra. I hear that this book does much to address Marx, Lacan, and a synthesis of the two in a way very different than, say, someone like Zizek does. I hope I get more about Lacan from this than I have in the past.

By the way, Zizek's comment on the back cover states:

"you hold in your hands proof that philosophers of the status of Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger are still walking around today!"

Ariadna73 says

I didn't understand a lot of it, but I am glad that there are still philosophers out there. I am a firm believer that philosophy will save our world.

Billy Dean says

I'll admit this book has its occasional mire (getting stuck in which is often enough to deter readers from going any further), but I'd agree with Bruno Bosteels in calling this a masterpiece--perhaps THE most important work in Badiou's corpus. If you get off on set theory and Lacan, I can't recommend this highly enough.

Steven Felicelli says

one star, but it's undoubtedly a great book - I quote Flann O'Brien

"It is surely the handiwork of wisdom, because not one word of it do I understand."

Arsh says

A work of exemplary courage and piercing insight, setting itself the task of nothing less than the resurrection of the philosophical evidence. A promise held on to in the echoes heard in his Manifesto for Philosophy years later, and in fidelity to the truly 'speculative' moment in Hegelian dialectics. A masterpiece.

Maxwell says

'Everything that exists in thought is the result of weak differences: differences among atomistic positions for Democritus, among written signs of the poem for Mallarmé, among signifiers for Lacan, and, in a certain sense, among political class positions within the masses for Marxism.'

'Every subject is political. That is why there are few subjects and rarely any politics'

I don't have a reading that can stand up to this book, so I'm just going to rattle off some stuff that's bumping-elbows in my head since I finished it.

It's interesting that Badiou's theory rigorously avoids determining the natural essence of the subject, but you leave with the feeling that he has anyway. It resonates variously in Lucretius' Clinamen (which is also Lacan's Real) 'a-specific, beyond necessity, absolutely out-of-place, unplaceable, unfigurable: chance' (p. 59), the Two in Lacan 'Two sexes, two classes' (p. 113) subjectivized through the movement from anxiety to courage, from the superego to justice. This is embodied finally in the Party as a stabilizing integer during the interplay of movement-riot (anxiety) and insurrection-war (courage), the Party as the subjectivization of the proletariat. An intertextual pattern begins to emerge, where moments across different systems of philosophy, mathematics, politics and literature are correlated onto Badiou's star chart of subjectivity, arranged into an analysis of the universal logic of the subject and its destruction.

I've always had a difficult time with anyone who diagrams philosophy like Badiou, the methodical system builders, those who expect you to follow their writing like they're an architect's blueprints. I don't have an intuitive knack for it, like I do with the, shall we say, arcane literary philosophers. But it was good to get out of my comfort zone. My problems with Badiou are more or less my problems with Lacan, and they're my problems not theirs--not just that I'm bad at logic (although I am), but that I'm bad at, let's call it, spatial reasoning while reading. When a concept is rendered mathematically, as an equation, graph or god forbid a syllogism, I have a very difficult time conjuring and coordinating it in my head. I cannot apportion the size and shape correctly, can't contour the edges--maybe I'm just slow, but I just can't ever visualize the thing and charts, diagrams ("mathemes"?), etc do more to muddle these representations than reveal them. The parts of Badiou I found most compelling (and helpful, to be frank) were the practical examples that followed his formulations of Lacan, Hegel and whoever else, usually polemicizing the logic of his abstractions as Marxist materialisms; $A = (AAp)$ is rendered as the exploitation of the proletariat. This explication works in inverse too--the situation of the vanishing term in Mallarme is elaborated as a structural dialectic, etc.

I wouldn't be surprised if Badiou's readers in philosophy departments found this stuff easier to follow than me, but there's plenty in here that phlegm-for-brains English Literature students like myself can sink our teeth into. This book is difficult because it's complex, not because it's obfuscated by stylistic conceits like certain theorists that were popular in my seminars. The writing in Theory of the Subject is very clear and the jargon is technical and specific, rather than a funny & vague conceptual personae of hammers, arcades and rhizomes. There's no thunderous rhetoric, but toward the end of each lecture Badiou ties together his adventurous arguments with heavily political calls-to-arms which I usually found very moving. My favorite of these was at the end of 'Lack and Destruction' where he denounces the return as inimical to courage, his motor for praxis, claiming 'we must pass or overtake our nostalgia, as one passes or overtakes a special convoy; we must exceed the pregnant form of the return by way of courage' (p. 168).

This is one of the more affecting books I've read all year. It was my first real foray into Badiou (I read a collection of ephemera called 'Infinite Thought' last year but it did not really leave an impression on me) and I'm planning to return to Badiou once I've pulled myself further from the muck of 'theory' and into the light of Philosophy proper.

Chris says

This is Badiou's first major book, and it is about as hermetic and gnomic a book as Badiou will ever write. The central question that animates Badiou's entire corpus is, of course, the problem of the New, and in this book we find Badiou approaching the problem before having worked out his mathematical ontology in detail (though all his central concepts are already here: Event, Truth, Subject...)--thus Badiou is compelled to approach his topic through an engagement with all the familiar signposts of contemporary French philosophy: Hegel and Lacan, Mallarme, Greek Tragedy, the history of Marxist politics...

This book, more than any other I've read, has taught me what it means to be a dialectician, and reveals the dialectical foundations of Badiou's philosophy--a foundation that is not as readily apparent in his later great works, 'Being and Event' and 'Logics of Worlds'. Although Badiou has revised his position on a number of key points in later works, reading 'Theory of the Subject' is indispensable for understanding his work as a whole. If Badiou is right when he claims (in 'Logics of Worlds') that the philosophy we need today is nothing other than a materialist dialectic to oppose the insipid complacency of prevailing democratic materialisms, then 'Theory of the Subject' is nothing less than the manifesto of the materialist dialectic.

Karlo Mikhail says

Difficult.
