

Specifying Badiou

Badiou: A Subject to Truth

By Peter Hallward

Minneapolis & London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003. pp. 469.

ISBN: 0816634610. \$25.95 Paperback.

Review by Stuart Elden

In May 2002 Alain Badiou gave a lecture at the Institut Français in London. Shortly before he was due to take the stage, the organisers realised that he had prepared a text in French, yet the audience was expecting one in English. Fortunately Peter Hallward was in the audience, and, at short notice, was imposed upon to provide a running translated summary. It was an impressive performance, not least because Badiou's English is of a level that he was able to offer correctives to Hallward's rendering, something he did only on rare occasions.

The ability to condense complicated ideas into succinct summaries, the linguistic skills, and the understanding of how particular issues are situated within the wider body of his thought are similarly evident in this lengthy and comprehensive study of Badiou's work. Hallward has done a marvellous job here: clearly written yet challenging; sympathetic yet probing; an overview with attention to detail. In the Anglophone world, Badiou's star has risen quickly in recent years. Introduced to these audiences from the late 1990s by articles by Žižek, Hallward and Critchley, and by translations beginning with 1999's *Manifesto for Philosophy* and *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, there are now almost ten books translated, with more in publishers' catalogues. In addition there are Jason Barker's introductory volume for Pluto, a collection of critical essays edited by Hallward, and this text.

For those new to Badiou's thought this book is the ideal place to start. For those with more knowledge of his work, Hallward's comprehensive study still has much to offer. He is able to situate the better known and more recent works in a detailed intellectual heritage that takes into account the earliest writings, changing positions and some of the minutiae of the French left. His readings of works unavailable in English, manuscripts and forthcoming works, as well as letters exchanged provide a privileged point of view. It really is the model of how to write a book about a thinker whose

work is still in progress: generously critical and critically generous. Its scope precludes more detailed analysis here, but let me offer some notes on three issues: politics, mathematics and philosophy.

Given the helpful summary of Badiou's formative years in Maoist politics, something more on his relation to Althusser and his students would have been useful. Equally, in the last couple of years Badiou has offered some commentary on contemporary events, collected in the two volumes of *Circonstances*. While these have appeared only recently, undoubtedly since Badiou went to press, the book as a whole is perhaps at times a little too detached from Badiou's own political interventions. Though the importance of *L'Organisation Politique* which Badiou co-founded is stressed throughout, it does seem that the politics is generally analysed in order to shed light on the thought, rather than perhaps the other way round.

One of the great strengths of Hallward's book is the treatment of mathematics. Ontology is mathematics for Badiou, and this is crucial for his thought. This has been most apparent for Anglophone readers only really since the publication of *Theoretical Writings*, but is found throughout his thought, including the untranslated *Le concept de modèle* and *Le nombre et les nombres*, as well as his most important work *L'être et l'événement*, forthcoming as *Being and Event* from Continuum.¹ Hallward treads a careful path through the relation of Badiou's work to set theory and while the book is readable alone, provides an extremely helpful summary of some key issues in an appendix "On the Development of Transfinite Set Theory." Those readers who have not realised the importance of mathematics to Badiou's thought, or indeed struggled with that realisation, would do well to start here.

In this discussion Hallward offers some useful orientations around Badiou's relationship to Heidegger and Deleuze. According to some commentators, *Being and Event* may well be the most important work of continental philosophy since Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and Badiou certainly considered Deleuze one of his most important contemporary opponents, indeed the most important philosopher of our time. Hallward's orientations, in a book of this scope, are necessarily limited, but they do provide some beginnings toward work that needs to be done. We can expect more in his forthcoming book on Deleuze, and should note that some of this has already been attempted in the collection Hallward edited, *Think Again: Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*.

It is clear from the contributors to that volume, and Žižek's foreword to this one, that Hallward is well regarded both in the Anglophone world

and beyond, as a first-rate commentator on Badiou and as an important and emergent thinker in his own right.² The final part of this book, where he offers some questions and criticisms to Badiou, allows this exemplary introduction to go beyond merely a leading into a thinkers work, and to provoke and open up future discussion.

Notes

¹ It is also discussed in the interview between Hallward and Badiou, found as an appendix to Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated and introduced by Peter Hallward, London: Verso, 2001, especially pp. 127-31.

² See, in particular, Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.