

## *New Truths in Alain Badiou's Thought*

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### RESUMO

Neste artigo, examino a ideia de Badiou acerca do “valor infinito da verdade” como um importante imperativo da nossa era de pós-verdade. Os principais conceitos que são constitutivos para a compreensão da criação da verdade são o sistema matemático de teoria dos conjuntos, acontecimento, relações entre verdade e sujeito, verdade e política e verdade e arte. A condição da verdade parece essencial para a noção de Vida Real em Badiou. É por meio de uma melhor compreensão do que a verdade pode ser que uma visão e compreensão diferentes do futuro que está por vir podem ser exploradas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: verdade; infinito; acontecimento; vida.

### ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine Badiou's idea of “infinite value of truth” as an important imperative of our post-truth era. The main concepts that are constitutive for understanding the creation of truth are mathematical system of set theory, event, relations between truth and subject, truth and politics and truth and art. The condition of truth seems essential for Badiou's notion of Real Life. It is through a better understanding of what truth can be that a different vision and understanding of the future to come can be explored.

KEYWORDS: truth; infinite; event; life.

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What is particularly fascinating for me in Alain Badiou's oeuvre is the concept of truth. With a certain philosophical courage (if courage can be philosophical) he tries to deactivate today's popular ideologies of relativism and scepticism in favour of an "infinite value of truth". Infinity is what keeps truth away from any predictability or any structural state involvement. He goes even more persistently against the currents and claims that new truths are universal immanent production within a particular world. "...a truth is also an exception to the world in which it is created, quite simply because it has a universal value." (Badiou, 2022, p. 27)

A question frequently asked is whether Badiou really separates his proposition of universal truth from Descartes' eternal truth which belongs to the realm of theology and is the creation of God. In his own words, the intent was to bring infinite truth back to Earth: "truths are created by a human subject - personal or impersonal, individual or collective - in particular worlds, with particular materials." (Badiou, 2022, p. 26)

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was easy to announce a time of post-ideology, post-truth, post-human, post-history, postmodernity, but it seems that these ideas were not fruitful, as if the world was not ready for them or perhaps they were flawed from the onset. We, the new generation of academics, eagerly adopted postmodernity and awaited the creation of a new subject to profoundly transform our collective existence and overcome ideological barriers of state and nation politics, and free ourselves from meanings imposed on us as truths. Unfortunately we find ourselves again in the vicious circle of fascist ideology which employs myth as the "ultimate form of truth" (Finchelstein, 2022, p. 15) to unify leaders, people and nation. We are witnessing the explosion of extreme nationalism, post-fascism, racism, and this poisonous combination emanates from a Pandora's box of mythical truths. It is becoming increasingly clear that the notion of truth participates in the production of

meanings which are the main drivers that can trigger the closure or opening of our being-together. For this reason it is very important, in Badiou's words, that "one must fight against skeptical or relative stance" which claims that universal truth is impossible and that everything is relative (Badiou, 2022, p. 27). We have even reached a critical junction in the understanding of the word *truth* as "name for a metaphysical fiction." (Badiou, 2022, p. 27) The problem of the appearance of truth leads to an inability to define new possibilities of our existence. "How are we to live really?" The answer can possibly be found in the "exceptional creation of new truths." (Badiou, 2006)

Thus the question arises: what does the truth look like in a post-truth era? Today it is quite interesting to analyze the state of truth in the face of contemporary technology, machines, and new ideologies. We are witnessing new political upheavals which are the consequence of not comprehending new political directions. Therefore, it is primarily old ideologies that are driven to extremes, which is very evident within right-wing political structures all over the world. Fear of new approaches to economy, organization of society, politics, environmental issues overshadowed the future for which we should be striving. Fear of new technologies culminates precisely in reevaluating our relation to truth, and their ability to create artificial life. It is up to us and it is our responsibility to create a just relation to technological advancement to ensure that new scientific achievements can break new ground for the humanity and the entire planet. It is clear that new technologies add new dimensions to our human existence and that they can strengthen but also rethink our responsibilities towards creation of new truths. Relativity of truth unfortunately has not brought any improvement to such a state of affairs, so it seems worthwhile to further explore Badiou's proposition of new principles of truth in relation to the creation of a *Real life*, implementing a meta-ontological, mathematical approach.

## System of set theory

When we want to explore Badiou's new form of truth we have to take into account mathematics - specifically Zermelo-Frankel's system of set theory with the axiom of choice as an ontology. This does not mean that being itself is mathematical, but that set theory is the only demonstrable and completely transferable discourse on ontology, which does not rely on some privileged place of disclosure. "Modernity is defined by the fact that the One is not... that 'God is dead'... for we moderns, the Multiple-without-One is the last word on being qua being. Now the thought of the pure multiple, is called: 'mathematical set theory.'" (Badiou, 2008a, p. 65) The end of metaphysics thinks in a logical-mathematical way. In set theory Badiou saw a possible way to overcome the monistic understanding of truth. Only from the existence of an empty set (emptiness), it is possible to derive a set that has no other predicate except that it is a set according to the other axioms of set theory. But emptiness is not the presence of the absolute One; instead, it is an unrepresented seam of multiplicity and being.

Therefore every major concept of set theory can be understood as a concept of "modern ontology." (Badiou, 2008a, p. 65) The demarcation between philosophy and its conditions of politics, science, art and love is found in the treatment of set theory where the ontological character of mathematics is not internal to *working mathematics*, but through a philosophical intervention concerning the ontological property of mathematics. In his philosophical considerations of new truths mathematical absolute or the *absolute ontological referent* is the only feature able to bridge absolute and infinities.

Our thought can accept the essence of truth only by negative as "undecidability, indiscernibility, the generic not-all (pas-tout), and the

unnamable.” (Badiou, 1998, p. 58) Truth is not part of the judgmental process but always something new. It is crucial to distinguish truth from knowledge as Kant distinguishes between *reason* and *understanding*, as Heidegger does between *truth* and *science*. However, the immanent share of the human intellect in an adequate idea can be realized in accordance with two regimes, which Spinoza calls the *second type* and the *third type* of knowledge. The second type takes a steep path of proof, which requires logic, while the third type proceeds by means of *intellectual intuition*. Spinoza calls it *virtue*, Plato would no doubt say *justice* - the state of a human subject who reaches a complete knowledge of an adequate idea, because he was able to access it by means of a third type of knowledge. Finally, happiness is an affect of the True, which would not exist without mathematics and could not be concentrated in one intuition had it not been proven first. In Badiou's words:

“...we have an intimate tie between philosophy and mathematics (a tie strongly thematized by Plato himself.) If the philosophic concepts are in the end the form of the concepts of truth, then they must support the proof of formalization. Whatever this proof be. All the great philosophers have submitted the concept to an overwhelming, speculative form of formalization. I think this is why mathematics must have remained a passion for me? I scrutinize this precisely - in mathematics: What is thought capable of when it is devoted to, pure form? As the literality of form? And the conclusion I have progressively drawn is that what it is capable of, when it is ordained as pure form, is thinking being as such, being as being. Which gives my provoking formula according to which effective ontology is nothing else than constituted mathematics.” (Badiou, 2008b)

## Rupture of the event

Truth is an event that occurs as a rupture in the established order of being and understanding as a disturbance within the given state of affairs. It is an unannounced creative interaction within generic procedures in politics, science, art or love. Unpredictable, immanent innovative crack within ordinary production of knowledge, known social norms, established methods of economic and political action, that is, life based on the doctrine of finitude. The emergence of truth is recognized by the subject (“an individual’s or a group’s becoming subject”) and by creating a completely new, real event that enables immanent production of truth which is universal (Badiou, 2022, p. 27).

Therefore, it is necessary to maintain that every universal presents itself not as a regularization of the particular or of differences, but as a singularity that is subtracted from identitarian predicates; although obviously it proceeds via those predicates. The subtraction of particularities must be opposed to their supposition. But if a singularity can lay claim to the universal by subtraction, it is because the play of identitarian predicates, or the logic of those forms of knowledge that describe particularity precludes any possibility of foreseeing or conceiving it. Consequently, a universal singularity is not of the order of being, but of the order of a sudden emergence. It is a break, a cut, a discontinuity, but not the process of becoming.

In the spirit of Heidegger’s understanding of being as an event, Badiou claims that being is pure multiplicity (multi-meaning, which can be adequately formulated only by mathematics), that is expressed structured according to the law of presentation. The notion of universalism is important, comprehensible in the light of relationships to the universal structure of being and the uniqueness of the event, which represents it in

a certain situation. A situation is an ontological given, a circumstance into which we are thrown by our own existence, for example, any given set of existence that is presented in a structured way. It represents the established, *normal* as normed, while the event signifies a supplement to every situation. As a void, an event is always the *nothingness* of a situation, it is immanent to it, at the same time being its edge or the unrecognizable that, as finite, exceeds it. That is why the subject, mobilized by the event and acting in the situation, needs to achieve a new way of being in order to succeed in going beyond the default state of affairs of a situation, beyond its structuredness. Truth is a process that follows from faithfulness to an event, at the same time forming the subject that names that event.

The truth that Badiou proposes is not a relation between thought and reality, but a fundamental change within reality itself or the revolutionary potential of a promising void within the situation itself, which has the energy to establish a new order and brings into focus the unrepresented, what is present in it, but invisible and unrecognized. Truth finds its path toward thought through the “process of the real.” (Badiou, 1998, p. 61) The appearance of truth arises from the rupture of the event which is conditioned on newness and supplement that inhibit the process of repetition. The “new theory of change” (Badiou, 2006) is highly dependent on *truth procedure*, especially the notion of radical change or event and *new truth* emerges into world by *truth procedure* as an outcome of the event. The event that happened cannot be evaluated but the subject is deciding to be faithful or not to the event and stop the process of undecidability.

## **New truth and subject**

Dealing with the subject, Badiou pondered the way in which the human / animal can fully become a subject by radically creating a new truth, transforming the situation of the reality. The subject exists as something quite distinct from a mortal being, a victim, a sufferer or a sentient entity – as a right to immortality and infinity above all finitude and contingency. The fundamental characteristic on which subject's immortal being (*être immortel*) is based is her/his ability to live the truth. The subject can exist only as an eccentric, disappearing subject, as that which is not in its place. A signifier without meaning could appear in the field of the Other. It could therefore be argued that the case manipulates precisely the sufficiency of lack, as the field of the Other on which a signifier without meaning appears, that should represent a subject for another signifier, even though it is completely formalized, mathematized, because as a signifier without meaning it cannot represent anything. The deficit is formalized as an empty set. The subject is also formalized as an empty set. Or, since it is completely formalized, it is completely full because it is a pure ontological reality, of course, if mathematics is an ontology, as Badiou claims; because then it can also be in a place where it is not. In other words, the signifier without meaning is full because it is the closest to the ineffable core, the “has”, which is, in a way (so that it really is not), the signifier of the ineffable core, because the non-sense of the signifier without meaning can be replaced by any meaning. In the field of the Other, if things stand like this with a signifier without meaning, an event can also arise. The case is then the realization of the sense of the signifier without meaning, the case is the explosion of the first signifier, or the explosion of non-sense, on the one hand, as sense and, on the other hand, an explosion in sense. Various processes begin with it.



In addition, Badiou's dualist ontology, which is the conjunction of body and language, of being and event, opens the possibility for a new body to emerge through the eventual procedure. This new body contains elements of the biological but is not limited to only natural and vitalist functions. "The new concept of body [...] potentially include[s] whatever can be ground for truth procedure, whether it is organic or inorganic." (Badiou, 2024, p. xxxii) The new body emerges through the process of being reborn from the pre-existing bodies, thus always perpetuating the subject of truth through the process of a logical mathematical set of creative practices.

The event is excessive in relation to the situation and its condition; it is drawn from the knowledge that circulates within the state of the situation. An event can only be named and singled out retroactively within a situation and that is the subject's task. The subject, for Badiou, is not an everyday occurrence, but rather the subject of an event (events are rare), a subject that guarantees that the event took place. The subject must vouch for the event, since there is no objective truth about it. Then, in deciding that the event happened, the subject has to follow the consequences of the introduced novelty: it is the process of truth and assigning a supernumerary name to the event.

## **Political truth**

"After my experience of mine workers strike in Belgium, I have given a philosophical order to myself: 'transform the notion of truth'" – announced Badiou (Badiou, 2008b).

Like mathematics, philosophy is from everywhere and for everyone: it has no special language, but there is a strict rule for drawing conclusions. The philosophical act is a repetition – but a creative one.

Creative repetition is based on variation of classical form bringing new order in the theoretical and practical domains while at the time same offering possibilities for new truths to appear. When, therefore, philosophy investigates politics, it cannot do so according to the criteria of pure freedom, or to the criteria of freedom of opinion. Philosophy is much more interested in the question: What can be a political truth?

The return of the political in Badiou's work is always centered around truth and subjectivity, and justice is always there as a political principle. Does the subject of truth escape the logocentric trap where the soul – spirit – is based on a structure of asymmetry and privilege, where spiritual self-realization does not lead to justice and equality for all? Equality and universality are the characteristics of a valid policy in the field of philosophy. Its classic name is: justice. For justice, equality is more important than freedom. And universality is more important than particularity, identity or individuality. For this reason, the general definition of democracy as the freedom of individuals is problematic.

The best paradigm of justice is probably, as Plato already explained, mathematics. In mathematics we find primordial freedom, the freedom to choose axioms. Then there is complete determinism, which follows logical rules. We must accept the consequences of our first choice and to accept that it is not freedom, but coercion, necessity and difficult intellectual work of finding concrete evidence. In mathematics we find a strong universal equality in the precise sense: a proof is a proof, and without exception for all who accept the initial choice and logical rules. Choice - consequences - equality - universality. Those four concepts describe, in this order, the paradigm of the political concept of justice.

In other words, the first political infinity refers to the infinite amount of possibilities that exist in a given historical context. This infinity requires a “selective analysis” (Badiou, 2022, p. 449) in order to choose and activate the real and new possibilities in the concrete situation. The

second one is “the infinity of state power” (Badiou, 2022, p. 449) where infinity of possibilities are based on state decisions which type of power is going to be used in the particular situation and what tasks are going to be determined.

Badiou insists on the particularity, both of the animalistic human and of the truth that conditions and induces the subject, making it impossible to build some general ethics. Politics has an advantage over ethics because it creates a new concrete reality. It is also superior in relation to philosophy, being one of the conditions of thinking that fulfills the prerequisites for the possibility of thinking the truth. Truth is understood universally as binding for everyone, but the place of its origin is always situationally determined and starts from some particularity. Truth is therefore the universal-singular of an event. In his ethics, Badiou thinks about truth in the categories of fidelity and trust in the event. The subject, that is constituted by the event, makes itself possible only through faithfulness to the truth of the event, which is decided as its own reality irreducible to a situationally determined state of affairs. Loyalty to that truth, which makes us subjects, represents the fundamental imperative of Badiou's ethics. What provides consistency and permanence to one's share within the subject initiated by the process of truth is called the ethics of truth. Everything that promotes persistence in the endless process of affirming the truth of an event can be called good.

“Within the subjective dimension of the declaration of equality, nothing else is of interest save the universality of this declaration, and the active consequences to which it gives rise.” (Badiou, 1998, p. 77) Justice is a political principle; it is not an ideal state but rather a “subjective figure that is affective, axiomatic, immediate.” Justice necessarily refers back to an “entirely disinterested subjectivity.” (Badiou, 2013, p. 393) Badiou advocates political antagonism as the only way towards the post-utopianism and towards the change of the existing political system, where

eventual rupture and truth procedure create conditions for *Real world* to happen.

### **Art as a producer of truth**

At this point, it might seem that there is very little place for art in Badiou's work: "mathematical ontology" - expressly opposed to "poetic ontology" (Badiou, 2013, p. 9) - brought the crucial concepts of his philosophy. From the aspect of art, the visible ontological task allows us to evaluate the artistic truths immanent in the artistic processes themselves.

Badiou defines *inaesthetics* as a relationship between philosophy and art, which implies that art is a producer of truth and is not an object of philosophical consideration. Inaesthetics follows the *intra-philosophical effects* of art as thought and does not take works of art as examples for philosophical speculations, but as subjects of truth. So, for instance, when he claims that Mallarmé is a thinker of events, this does not mean that the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé is an example of an event, but that poems such as *The Throw of Dice* (*Un coup de dés*) are rigorously considered contributions to the theory of events. The task of inaesthetics is to establish art as a condition of thought, and of truth. The truths that the arts produce are considered singular and immanent. If truth is immanent in art, it is produced by a sequence of works of art. Truth is singular if it belongs to the domain of art and cannot be reduced to other conditions, whether political, scientific or romantic, although it should be noted that in his work Badiou often connects artistic truths with politics, despite the thesis that they should not be reduced to politics. The truth of art cannot be reduced to philosophy either, because for Badiou philosophy itself does not produce truth but rather acts as a *messenger* between truths. Hence,

inaesthetics sees the artistic production of truth as singular and immanent and as *sui generis*.

Badiou gave an example of a poem by Alberto Caiero where truth, for him, can only be known by way of the physical connection to its material composition.

“That is why on a hot day  
When I enjoy it so much I feel sad,  
And I lie down in the grass,  
And close my warm eyes,  
Then I feel my whole body lying down in reality,  
I know the truth, and I am happy.” (Badiou, 2022, p. 170)

Caiero's poem brings ontological intensity to the concept of the real, alienated poetic operations that interrupt the known freedom and gives us a notion of great liberation, a possibility of new truth.

*Real life is absent*, to remember Rimbaud's expression, Rimbaud as a true poet of youth, someone whose poetry is based on his entire life experience. Badiou's notion of *The Real life* is supposed to reject the radical desire of the *One*, to overcome internal contradiction and to envision synthesis. Dialectal thought demands a unity of opposites and gives a chance for the existence of a new human to emerge from the destruction of historical antagonisms, a new human of the *Real world* without fatherland or material possession or any predefined social bond, a subject able to produce truth and be faithful to it. “Faith, salvation, communism, transfinite, serialism are names used in declaration of love. These names are evidently capable of supporting the future anterior of a truth. They *displace* established signification and leave the referent void: this void will have been filled if truth comes to pass as a new situation.” (Badiou, 2013, p. 399)

Our entire existence eventually can be explained not as a search for ourselves, not as a process of becoming, not as an understanding of

another, not as a realization of a new philosophical thought, but as a process of truth creation where the realization of such a process will in fact simultaneously work on all these other fields of our realization as subjects. Badiou leaves room for further reflection on the realization of truths, but no room to abandon it and start to strive for some form of nihilism, a life devoid of meaning, and therefore unable to last as true life. Such view of life arises when the drive for death secretly dwells in the urge to live. That death drive unconsciously takes over life and breaks it down. It is clear that Badiou's truth procedure can create new ontological conditions as suggestions for our future existence.

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