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**Some Notes (with Badiou and Žižek) on Event/Truth/Subject/Militant
Community in Jean-Paul Sartre's Political Thought**

Abstract

The main object of this paper is to examine the new philosophical frame proposed by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek and to show that it implies some traces of Sartre's philosophical and political heritage. According to the project of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek one should no longer accept today's constellation of freedom, particularistic truth and democracy, but to (re)inscribe the issues of freedom and universal truth into a political project that attempts to re-activate a thinking of revolution. Their thinking consists in the wager that it is still possible to provide a philosophical frame for this leftist emancipatory position that claims the dimension of the universal against the vicious circle of capitalist globalization-cum-particularization and, by following Marx's claim that there are formal affinities between the ambitions of emancipatory politics and the working mode of capitalism, takes up the struggle of universalism against globalization (capital). It is only through this struggle for the universal that the intertwined processes of a constant expansion of the automatism of capital and "a process of fragmentation into closed identities," accompanied by "the culturalist and relativist ideology" (Badiou) can be suspended. It is precisely this constellation of revolutionary act, universal truth, subject, and militant community, that reveal some similarities with Sartre's concepts of the subject, the revolutionary action, the militant community a.o.

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, political philosophy, subject, revolutionary action, militant community

In his "L'aveu du philosophe," Alain Badiou remarks upon the "moral mania" of modern biographies:

I know of only three goals that they pursue (...)

The political goal: it has to be proven that the portrayed unfortunate man got involved with the totalitarian, that he was a bad democrat. This is, by the way, the reason why he got big, although one is supposed to remain little.

The financial goal: it has to be proven that he had a suspicious relationship towards money: Either he loved it too much, which is bad, or he loved it too little, which is even worse. Thus he has created fictions not for sale either through the sublimation of his greed or through the mirroring of his miserliness.

The supreme goal: the sexual goal the whole world is waiting for. It has to be demonstrated that he had disgusting manners. The relationship to his sexual victims – men, women, or even rabbits – was not rectified through politics. Or there is nothing to report, which is worse: he had no freedom, he was in a fix, and that is why he pursued abstraction."

Badiou then gives the following advice:

(...) attempt to escape biography while still alive, and throw as many sticks as possible between the wheels for the time after your death. Before you have become senile, burn the photographs of naked women in garters, the bank statements and your stock of pamphlets and manifestoes. (Badiou 2003a, 121 – 123; my translation)

As we know, Sartre did not heed this advice; he could not or did not want to heed it. For this reason it is not surprising that one finds in one of the most recent biography on him – Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Sartre. The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century* – sections with titles such as "Sartre and women" or "Sartre and money." However, what carries more weight is the fact that this biography describes Sartre's political actions at best as violations of human rights – of human rights for whose articulation, preservation, and dissemination this "New Philosopher" credits himself –, and at worst as totalitarian crime. Under recurring denunciations of Sartre's political actions and thought as "obsession," "pure madness" (Bernard-Henri Lévy 2003, 342), "self-hatred" (ibid.), "Stalinism," (ibid., 330) and "totalitarianism" – after all, "Marxism, for us, the cause is an open and shut case. For us, the children of the century now ended, the witnesses or clerks of its bloody balance-sheet, for us who now have at their disposal all the pieces of that macabre account, the time of illusion is, fortunately, over. Stalin was already in Lenin. Lenin was already in Marx" (ibid., 360) – the political legacy of Sartre is rendered illegible between an allegedly non-political Sartrean literature and literary theory, and a fashionable ethicization of Sartre – "Sartre with Levinas" – by means of a "Thermidorean" process, that is, a disarticulation separating Sartrean political activism from "every principle and every situation," while pretending "that this activism was ever only connected with the Chinese or Soviet States." "Once severed from its real content, 'leftist' activism (...) is filed alongside subjective pathology and

fascination with totalitarian statism, a classification that does render it absolutely unintelligible." (Badiou 2005, 135-136) In short, this denial of political thought, its abdication under the sign of liberal democracy, of human rights and a humanitarian individualist morality, intends to dump the political sequences that Sartre had attempted to elaborate (French Revolution, Commune, Bolshevik Revolution) into some permanent unthinkable.

One would have to remark at length on this alleged "end of illusion"; what hides behind it is "the end of political utopias"; for today, one lives in the post-utopian time of pragmatic administration, of human rights with its apriori identified evil, and of liberal democracy, since one (particularly the "New Philosophers") has learned the hard lesson as to how noble utopias end up in totalitarian terror. What Lévy conveniently fails to mention is that his affirmation of post-politics is articulated precisely on the basis of the last great utopia: the utopia of capitalist liberal democracy as "end of history." However, in the face of current political conflicts one could ask whether the claim, that we live after the end of all utopias at the end of history, does not itself present the ultimate utopia. (Žižek 2004, 122-124)

What is more, the postmodern sophists have told us for some time now that the "grand narratives" have come to an end and that one finally finds oneself in the space of post-ideology. For can one not hold universal truth-claims articulated and actualized in the field of politics accountable for all catastrophes of recent history? Do they not explain sufficiently (and bury) the sequence revolution-totalitarianism? Today, truth as well as ideology critique must no longer figure in the horizon of politics and political theory. And philosophy must no longer think politics; rather, it has to defend the allegedly undamaged figure of liberal democracy. In other words, philosophy today is supposed to restrict itself to appeals to and apologies of liberal democracy. But precisely these appeals and apologies announcing the "good news" of the end of all ideology and ideology critique are nothing but ideology *par excellence*: they conceal their philosophical-political moment *as* ideologies precisely in their defense of liberal democracy.

This ubiquitous, shameless celebration of liberal democracy reveals, moreover, a fundamental alliance with a culture of complaint, with discourses of victimization, and a critique of "ethical violence" marking a variety of contemporary philosophies. They all seem to agree that the "fundamental evil" of traditional, metaphysical thought consists in its reduction of otherness to sameness. Consequently, philosophical thought today has to engage in exercises of humility so as to open up a space for evocations of some radical ethical Other.

Consequently, "true evil" has been displaced from capitalist exploitation to "ethnic fundamentalism" (the obscene underside of an ethics of difference), to "totalitarian vio-

lence" (the obscene underside of the doctrine of human rights and of humanitarianism), or, generally, to each collective political project that does not simply toe the line with liberal democracy. The enthusiastic denunciation of these "versions of criminal or barbarian evil," its alleged protection of liberal rights under the aegis of a claim regarding the fundamental "vulnerability" of the human being, obscures the fact that this denunciation functions as a prohibition to – at least think - true emancipation.

These ideologies form the pillars for the hegemonic liberal democratic system that provides comfort to postmodern "leftist" politicians (and political theorists) and the apostles of cultural studies. If one even still finds gestures of anti-capitalism, they are always already rendered harmless by the omnipresent horizon of liberal parliamentary democracy. That is, their challenge to a logic of exclusion or excommunication in the realm of politics for the sake of an agonistic plenitude of "others" is owed to a foreclosure of some antagonism that becomes visible, only if one identifies and renders problematic liberal parliamentary democracy as the political form of capitalism (as well as of its mirror-image: anti-capitalism of pure politics). This means, however, that one should no longer accept today's constellation of freedom, particularistic truth and democracy, but that one has to (re)inscribe the issues of freedom and universal truth into a political project that attempts to re-activate a thinking of revolution. This is the project of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Their thinking consists in the wager that it is still possible to provide a philosophical frame for this leftist emancipatory position that claims the dimension of the universal against the vicious circle of capitalist globalization-cum-particularization and, by following Marx's claim that there are formal affinities between the ambitions of emancipatory politics and the working mode of capitalism, takes up the struggle of universalism against globalization (capital). It is only through this struggle for the universal that the intertwined processes of a constant expansion of the automatism of capital and "a process of fragmentation into closed identities," accompanied by "the culturalist and relativist ideology" (Badiou 2003, 10) can be suspended.

Now, what is this new philosophical frame? To simplify matters: it consists of a constellation of revolutionary event or act, universal truth, subject, and militant community. And precisely in this constellation one can find – this is the wager of my essay – traces of Sartre's philosophical and political heritage.

In a first step, let us employ Žižek's schematizing of six different forms of political organization – a schematizing that constitutes an expansion of Jacques Rancière's distinction between three figures of political philosophy: arche-politics, para-politics, and meta-politics (Rancière 1998) – in order to mark negatively certain affinities between Sartre's political thought and that of Žižek and Badiou. Briefly put, the proper antagonistic logic of

the political is denied in the first five figures of political philosophy – they are incompatible with Žižek's, Badiou's, and Sartre's revolutionary politics -, whereas only the sixth one will acknowledge it. While arche-politics operates with a communitarian approach whose basis is the model of closed, organic communities that want to find their voice and claim their particular identity (think of Sartre's critique of hyper-organism that imputes the ontological status of totality or of a collective subject to a group or community), para-politics reformulates political antagonism in terms of a de-politicized compliance with rules, an agonistic litigious process (recall that in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre makes clear that neither liberalism nor communitarian thought can think the radical political decision; and he is opposed as well to procedural or consensual conceptions of justice and morality since they presuppose what is untenable for Sartre: "(...) that different individuals or groups, with different horizons, and with characters and habits of totally different kinds, realise a contractual agreement in reciprocity *on a minimum basis*." (Sartre 2004, 531)¹ A political theory whose central term is "consensus" has to amount to a denial of the real antagonism because it has already anticipated this denial in a theoretical manner by positing, in form of a repetition, as its premise the metaphor of society as mere agonism. And precisely here one finds the very fissures revealing each transformation of antagonism into agonism as mere myth). Ultra-politics – one could think of Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* – presents a false radicalization of the political conflict since it reduces it to a warfare between a homogeneous national community and its "external" enemy: it displaces antagonism into the outside (see Sartre's trenchant critique – in *The Childhood of a Leader* and in *Anti-Semite and Jew* – of the visions of an organicist, closed, homogeneous (and, for this very reason, anti-Semitic) French society). Socialist meta-politics, on the other hand, reduces political antagonism to an economism, renders the political as mere semblance (think of Sartre's near ubiquitous critique of economic determinism). However, one has to point out with Žižek that the Marxist term "political economy" is more ambiguous since it "also opens up the space for the opposite gesture of introducing politics into the very heart of the economy, that is it denounces the very 'apolitical' character of the economic processes as the supreme ideological illusion" (Žižek 2001, 241) – a position that is close to Sartre's insistence that the political and the economic are intertwined and that one has to politicize the economic because neither the political nor the economic are completely autonomous.²

¹ See also my book *Sartres Wider-holung* (Vogt 1995, 210-212).

² This "symbolic" relation between the political and the economic (and the psychical) has interesting implications for the way in which Sartre's logic conceives the relation between particular and universal. Fredric Jameson remarks: "Implied in this is a whole new logic as well, in which the static model of the relationship of universal and particular would be replaced by one in which each particularity

Finally, post-politics operates with a liberal democratic model of negotiation and integration of the different strategic interests; it denies on the one hand that liberal democratic processes of decision are the form of the imperatives of capitalism, that is, that participation in the post-political process amounts ultimately to Sartre's "idiot's traps" (elections) in "capital parliamentarism" (Badiou) that Žižek illustrates again and again via the example of a button in an elevator that, if one presses it to close the door, has, however, no real effect; in post-politics, on the other hand, "the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists ...) and liberal multiculturalists." (Žižek 2000, 198) Public opinion, expert knowledge etc. are, however, incompatible with the notion of truth in Badiou and in the later Sartre because they represent forms of epistemic alterity. I have attempted to show elsewhere how Sartre's analysis of racism and multiculturalism can be linked to Žižek's (and Badiou's) claim that the liberal democratic, multicultural gaze whose humanitarian figure and extensive "good nature" wants to bestow charity, goodness, and humanity on all forms of ethnic identity – think, for instance, of the figure of the "democrat" in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* ("No doubt, he proclaims that all men have equal rights; no doubt he has founded the League for the Rights of Men," but for this very reason, one can detect in the "most liberal democrat a tinge of anti-Semitism") – represents a disavowed form of reflexive racism. (Sartre 1948, 55 and 57)³ For the plea for multicult-

symbolized realizes in itself and in its own mode the totality of the universal in question." (See Jameson 1971, 225).

³ See my book *Sartres Wieder-holung* (Vogt 1995, 210-212). For a comparison of Sartre's and Žižek's analyses of racism and multiculturalism see my *Zugänge zur politischen Ästhetik* (Vogt 2003, 101-124). Incidentally, this allows also for a different reading of Sartre's "notorious" preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. This preface is not addressed to Africans, but rather exclusively to Europeans; Sartre does not attempt, on the basis of a "transcendental Europe," to prescribe or suggest to Africans what they would have to do regarding their liberation: Sartre's position is that of a listener, of a listener whose listening far exceeds the typical (multiculturalist) narcissism that listens to others only in so far as they contribute to the European ego-ideal. Moreover, Sartre does not impose liberal democratic principles on the African discourse of liberation and decolonization: he does not make any distinctions between democratic and "non-democratic," "fundamentalist" options. I follow here closely Bruce Baugh's "Sartre, Derrida, and Commitment: The Case of Algeria," (Baugh 2003, 40, 16). Similarly, Badiou writes in *Ethics*: "Our suspicions are first aroused when we see that the self-declared apostles of ethics and of the 'right to difference' are clearly *horrified by any vigorously sustained difference*. For them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on. As a matter of fact, this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other – which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*? Respect for differences, of course! But on condition that the different be parliamentary-democratic, pro free-market economics, in favour of freedom of opinion, feminism, the environment... That is to say: I respect differences, but only, of course, in so far as that which differs also respects, just as I do, the said differences. Just as there can be, no freedom for

tural respect of differences conceals an identitarian logic of exclusion. As long as the other acts in accordance with our own values, we respect her; as long as we can identify ourselves with our differences and love to respect, the other is a "good" other; as soon as the cultural customs of the other are in conflict with our democratic pluralist values, she becomes an "evil" other.

Democratic multiculturalist pluralism can tolerate only itself; its moral consensus is an apriori fact, it relies upon a disavowed political decision; for even if post-politics acts like the management of a rational consensus respecting differences, it is and remains a political decision, in so far as its difference between "rational" and "irrational" doctrines constitutes a political decision.

However, what is the sixth form of political organization, or proper politics? It is located in the very moment when revolution is "in the air" and everything is about to change. It is only in that very moment that truth can appear: the truth of fighting for a new society that emerges from those singular elements subverting the existing order. Those singular elements cannot be regarded as belonging to a particular set, and it is for this very reason that they are universally equal. Each of these elements renders universal equality and, at the same time, all particular identities indifferent. This truth of universal equality affirmed by those singular elements lacks representation: it constitutes an empty set; and precisely this empty set can subvert the established order and render contingency as the very site at which a new truth can emerge – and "revolution" designates the actualization of the empty, abstract universal set.⁴

Event

The revolutionary experience of the event implies the discovery of a truth: the truth of a situation, of a truth that is not *of* this situation. This truth, which is one and which has to count for all, is not a factual truth, but rather one that requires the transformation of what has counted so far as "facts." It is a truth for which one has to struggle, a truth that appears only in the context of an unconditional commitment, of a decision for it. This truth can never be glimpsed from the perspective of a neutral, historicist gaze.

the enemies of freedom', so there can be no respect for those whose difference consists precisely in not respecting differences. To prove the point, just consider the obsessive resentment expressed by the partisans of ethics regarding anything that resembles an Islamic ,fundamentalist'." (Badiou 2001, 24).

⁴ I draw here heavily on Marc de Kesel's excellent summary of Badiou's "mathematical" rendition of the French Revolution (see de Kesel, 2004, 167 – 197).

In other words, the event has no objective content verifiable through "facts"; it cannot be calculated or predicted because it decides on all measures. There is no already established frame for the event; on the contrary, all already established frames are suspended by the event. Although it results from a situation, from a configuration of being, it can never be deduced from it. A radical caesura, it resembles (in certain but not all respects) Žižek's *act*, in so far as the act is also conceived as the suspension of an existing order, that is, as something without any support in that order. When seen from the standpoint of the status quo, it appears as surplus, as excess, as something impossible within the framework of the existing symbolic order. (Žižek 2000, 236)

The same applies to Sartre's (political-historical) revolutionary event, in so far as it is equally conceived as disorder, as rupture, explosion, and flash of lightning. Both in Badiou and Sartre one finds the claim regarding the fundamental link between event and contingency: "the event always is presented as having an underlying contingency because it includes chance." (Sartre 2005, 35) Moreover, it is interesting that the event receives one of its central figurations from literature. As Jameson points out, this notion of the revolutionary event is comprehended best in terms of literary categories. (Jameson 1971, 58) In order to illustrate this claim, let us briefly condense some of those traits of the literary work of art as event that Sartre develops in *What Is Literature?*

The literary work of art constitutes "a new event" that cannot be reduced to something given prior to it. (Sartre 1988, 54) It also cannot be explained by or reduced to the intentionalities or projects of its subjects (author, reader); rather, the literary work of art is a self-abandonment and self-sacrifice of both author and reader generating a metamorphosis: a self-sacrifice via "commitment, oath, (...), fidelity (...), constantly renewed choice." (Sartre 1988, 60)

The event of literature thus receives its status through a kind of self-abandonment that requires a certain violent work on one's self; it constitutes a challenge to projects, to utility, instrumentality; it is a performative speech-act, that is, an appeal to freedom: "it is a break, a refusal (...) of narcissism (...), an affirmation of negativity (...). Therefore, it is, if it springs up within the universe of desire, deliverance from the universe of desire. It is (...) an affirmation of interhuman relations." (Sartre 1992, 369) This "affirmation of interhuman relations," this mutual recognition of freedoms (of author and audience) introduces an excessive economy without limit, except that of freedom. What becomes manifest in the literary event is an experience of freedom; it marks a space of free invention.

With regard to the acts of writing and reading, the event of literature seems then to imply a kind of symbolic death of the subjects (author/reader) that produces an excess in which, so to speak, more is given than can be given. The event of literature opens up a

community, a common discourse, emerging in the midst of the self-destruction of symbolic identities. What is given in this excessive event? A new communal relationship of exposed subjects.

Thus the structure of the literary event carries, perhaps, within itself the model for a new political community: Sartre writes: "(...) literature will be a synthesis of negativity, as a power of uprooting from the given, ... it will be the festival, the flaming mirror which burns everything reflected in it, and generosity, that is, a free invention, a gift. (...) In short, literature is, in essence, the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution. In such a society it would go beyond the antinomy of word and action." (Sartre 1988, 139) Consequently, one could claim that Sartre's artistic practice has its own revolutionary politics, and it is now the task of revolutionary politics to appropriate for its own use the very modes of presentation that have been produced through this artistic practice.

Sartre's identification of literary and political event, the identity of word and action – do these not call to mind another confluence of the essence of literature with the properly revolutionary moment, namely Maurice Blanchot's account of the literary act and of revolutionary action in his "Literature and the Right to Death"? Consider the following passage from this text which maintains about revolutionary moments that they are

in fact, fabulous moments: in them, fable speaks; in them, speech of fable becomes action. (...) Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature; the passage from nothing to everything, the affirmation of the absolute as event and of every event as absolute. (...) The writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history. It is his truth. Any writer who is not induced by the very fact of writing to think 'I am the revolution, only freedom allows me to write', is not really writing. (...) Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. (Blanchot 1995, 318-322)

The event of literature accomplishes in its free, excessive relationship between author and readers a break with the restricted economy of the project, with rational calculation and with the spirit of seriousness. It is "a break with the spirit of seriousness, expenditure, nihilation (...) liberation from the spirit of seriousness, the end of economies the overthrowing of hierarchies, and the absorption of the Other by the Same, of the objective by the subjective, of order by disorder." (Sartre 1992, 374) It opens up a common discourse

through a certain apocalypse liberating author and reader (from themselves) by putting them on terrain "where they have to destroy themselves." (ibid., 375)

Is it then really surprising that the apocalypse of the literary event with its foundation of a new community re-emerges precisely in the revolutionary center of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, that is, in those sections in which Sartre elaborates his presentation of the revolutionary collective: the fused group?⁵

Let us highlight briefly the evental character of the revolutionary fused group: The fused group, which is *not* and is an excess, emerges from a revolt against serial alienation, against the proliferation of alterity; as dissolution of capitalist bourgeois society, it is a resurrection of human freedom. Individual praxes are fused with other individual praxes in a kind of apocalypse of human revolt in order to burst open a new episode of true humanity in terms of freedom and reciprocity. Like the apocalypse of the literary work of art, the apocalypse of the revolutionary group praxis engenders humanity as a performative event, as the miracle of a *creatio ex nihilo*, that, in a sense, does not occur in time, but rather interrupts teleologies and causal chains – it is pure invention; it marks the possibility to transform impossibility into possibility. And the revolutionary group praxis implies the symbolic death of isolated subjects; it transforms them, in so far as they are no longer the same after the event of revolution; finally, the fused group also carries its justification in itself since it rejects normative criteria or the assignment of external apriori principles.

Truth

Badiou's truth is innovation *en acte*, always an intervention, always singular with respect to its site and its occasion, but universal and egalitarian regarding its address and its effect. Truth is always the truth of a situation; however, it does not concern those elements most identified, but rather the imperceptible groupings of elements. In short, the truth of a situation concerns always the generic; it is a generic grouping that occurs as break with the status quo. It makes claims to universality precisely as supplement to a concrete social situation that do not rely upon interest or privilege, but rather affirm the strictly generic universality of all members of a situation. In other words, Badiou's epistemological as well as practical-political notion of truth never re-affirms or stabilizes the privileged part of the situation, but its site is determined through the proximity to that which is the most anonymous in a situation: that is, what is, according to the logic of situation, "impossible."

⁵ See the excellent passages on Sartre in Suzanne Guerlac's *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Guerlac 1997); I draw here on her illuminating remarks regarding the relationship of politics and aesthetics in Sartre.

Badiou's politics of truth is thus subjective and egalitarian-universal: subjectivity and universality do not mutually exclude each other, but are the two sides of the same coin. This committed truth-position is therefore an equation of the claim of universality with a militant, divisive position on the part of those subjects who participate in this struggle. Žižek reads Badiou's truth-process in terms of an identification of the universal with the point of exclusion, with the displaced element, and it is precisely here that he recognizes a correspondence with his own position. According to Žižek, proper politics always involves the gesture of universalization on the basis of a political agenda that cannot be realized within the existing system, and that puts it in question. "Politics proper thus always involves a kind of short circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a *singulier universel*, a singular which appears as the stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body." (Žižek 2000, 188)

Even here one can discern several affinities to Sartre. According to Sartre, the event is a singular case that is located in the tensional field between singular and universal. If the event is singular, "it may not use explanations in terms of what is general except to demonstrate the presence of the general within the singular and as a singular form of the general." (Sartre 1992, 74-75) The singular universality of the event lapses neither into relativism nor into transcendent absolutism. Sartre writes that the event "never presents an absolute meaning that would be transcendent to the relative;" on the contrary, the event "is relative and the absolute is immanent within the relative." (ibid., 421) Moreover, Sartre emphasizes again and again that philosophy has to articulate the truth about man, but this philosophy can disclose itself only to revolutionaries, that is, to human beings who find themselves in the situation of being oppressed, and it needs them in order to manifest itself in the world. Sartre demonstrates that a split inhabits the true universal; his political gesture consists never simply in a protestation against the very injustice suffered by the oppressed or excluded in order to secure a public space in which their voices can be heard and recognized; rather, it represents them as stand-in for a claim to egalitarian universality disrupting the smooth circulation of negotiable particular interests, and it appears as a metaphorical condensation for the re-structuring of the social body: for the new invention of an egalitarian political space. Sartre's politics identifies the point of internal exclusion with the universal, thereby producing a kind of short circuit between the singular and the universal that, precisely as truth, stakes on the liquidation of alterity: "The truth in its original sense, therefore, as sociality and within an integrated group, is the elimination of all alterity." (Sartre 2004, 535) This short circuit between the singular and the universal that can be found in all three philosophers proves to be a politics that attempts to render possible the impossible. Sartre remarks: "The transformation therefore occurs when impossibility itself becomes

possible, or when the synthetic event reveals that the impossibility of change is an impossibility of life." (ibid., 350) This also explains why this short circuit is not a mere subjective act of arbitrariness. That is, neither Sartre nor Žižek nor Badiou subscribe to a simple decisionism: the notion of a fully existential commitment is not reducible to a voluntarist leap, for it refers to a situation in which one no longer has alternatives or the possibility to take a step back in order to judge the situation from a distance; rather, full existential commitment recognizes that we are not free to decide or not to decide since the renunciation of decision would already constitute a (bad) decision.

As has been demonstrated convincingly by Thomas Flynn, one cannot think truth as universal in Sartre without a free, reciprocal, and egalitarian praxis; (Flynn 1996, 448-465)⁶ ultimately, it is possible only in the egalitarian group that – another correspondence with Badiou – has generic equality as its epistemological and political axiom. This correspondence will be addressed in more detail in a moment.

Sartre then poses the question of a fidelity to the truth-process when he remarks that evidential truth has to be seen in a context with a pledge that keeps simulacra and epistemic alterity at a distance: "It is at this still practical level that the group has a silent knowledge of itself through each common individual: but this understanding (*évidence*) is not available to those who do not share its objectives." (Sartre 2004, 501) Fidelity to the truth-process will thus be the form of a fidelity to some pledge.

According to Badiou, the only true experience of fidelity is the result of an event. This fidelity to the truth-event is not something that could be described, but it rather amounts to something like a performative speech-act; this means that the effect of fidelity is, in a way, already operative on us before we even have arrived at fidelity. This is the reason why Badiou begins to distinguish between two moments of fidelity: the initial, primary fidelity to respond to the event as event; and the secondary fidelity whose task it is to remain faithful to the primary fidelity. Badiou writes: "But since the truth-process is fidelity, then if 'Do not give up' is the maxim of consistency – and thus of the ethic of truth – we might well say that it is a matter, for the 'some-one', of *being faithful to a fidelity*. (Badiou 2001, 47) While primary fidelity is experienced as disorder of our previous mode of being that suspends our certainties and dissolves our simulacra, one has to ask the question as to how one can remain faithful to this disorder. This constitutes the issue of secondary fidelity.

⁶ Flynn's excellent essay shows in detail that truth and politics are conceptualized by the later Sartre as dissolution of alterity and as production of reciprocity and strict equality. What is more, truth in the egalitarian sense is possible solely in the free group; Sartre's politics is, as Flynn remarks, "vertically, the levelling of hierarchies and, horizontally, the realization of positive reciprocity." (Flynn 1996, 457-458)

If primary fidelity is identified as disorder or rupture, then secondary fidelity has to be grasped as the paradoxical attempt to organize something like consistency. The fidelity to fidelity implies the following question: "how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being?" (Badiou 2001, 50) If we consider the revolutionary event in the light of Sartre's fused group, then primary fidelity marks that moment which leads to the apocalyptic formation of a group that can no longer be grasped in terms of a mere collection, gathering, or accumulation of individuals. This apocalyptic formation of a group via primary fidelity does, however, not suffice since the group must be maintained consistently precisely in its movement of permanent surpassing. That is, the group has to find a way to continue the very disorder that characterizes it. Fidelity is thus split between disorder and organization, break and preservation. And this reduplication of fidelity is rendered by Sartre in terms of the fused group and of the pledge as socialized praxis. Again, the fused group represents a break with seriality, it is the elimination of alterity, the suspension of opinions that, for Sartre as well as for Badiou, are nothing but "the cement of sociality (...) the primary material of all *communication*." (ibid., 50-51) This break – with an ethics of communication via an ethic of the Real (ibid., 52) – is presented as disorder, as "upheaval which destroys the collective by the flash of a common *praxis*" (Sartre 2004, 349) and, finally, as apocalypse, as abrupt resurrection of freedom that has as its primary moment of fidelity the "watchword," a unification without appeal to alienating orders. But it is exactly here that the issue of preserving the fused group becomes virulent: a "practical device" is needed in order to bind the group in unity and permanence – and this "practical device" is the pledge. This act of pledging can only be a common one: "the order is 'Let us swear'. This means that I also make myself, both in and for him (the Third), a guarantee that alterity cannot come to him through me." (ibid., 421) We will return below to this group characterized by "pledged fidelity."

Subject

If the subject (in Badiou and, perhaps, in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*) is generated solely via the fidelity to truth, if it is an effect of the event and of the fidelity to the event, would one not have to call in question this account of subjectivity? In Žižek's words: "So (...) is not Badiou's notion of the Truth-Event uncannily close to Althusser's notion of (ideological) interpellation?" (Žižek 2000, 145) That is to say, is there, for Badiou, no subject outside of the truth-event, as there is for Althusser no subject outside of interpellation? Do subject and subjectivization coincide for Badiou (and Sartre)? For it seems that the commitment to the event induces retroactively a singular subject. This

means, however, that the subject relies entirely and unconditionally on this commitment; that it is fully absorbed into this commitment, existing solely in the externality of an affirmation of truth. Moreover, Badiou seems to think that his conception of an empty, non-substantial, anti-psychological subject without a vis-à-vis is in agreement with Sartre's and Lacan's conceptions of the subject,⁷ in so far as both think the subject via the question of decision: "The subject constitutes itself only where there is the place of decision, and each decision is, as true decision, ultimately a unique decision." (Badiou et al. 1997, 26, my transl.) But this claim of an alleged correspondence obscures, perhaps, fundamental differences. It is in the name of Lacan that Žižek insists that subject and the gesture of subjectivization have to be kept separate in a strict manner: subjectivization is the interpellation of the subject (or fidelity to the event), whereas the subject "is the negative gesture of breaking out of the constraints of Being that opens up the space of possible subjectivization." (Žižek 2000, 160)

Where is one, however, to really place Sartre's conception of the subject in this debate? Bosteels seems to suggest that Sartre's conception of the (committed) subject finds itself in a full correspondence with Badiou's engaged fidelity, with the embrace of the Cause versus a cause. (Bosteels 2005, 221-244, 237) But how could one reconcile this account of the Sartrean committed subject with Sartre's recourse to the Cartesian cogito and

⁷ These claims are made by Peter Hallward in his excellent *Badiou: A Subject of Truth* (Hallward 2003, xviii). Hallward quotes also Badiou's statement that, due to the concept of the subject – a subject without a vis-a-vis – shared by Lacan, Sartre, and himself, a "re-grouping of Lacan, Sartre, and myself" would be possible. On page xxxi, Hallward returns to Badiou's appropriation of the Sartrean subject: he claims that this appropriation concerns mainly the subject of *Being and Nothingness*; he also mentions that Badiou subtracts from Sartre's freedom its ontological justification. This, however, leads precisely to the question whether Badiou does not reduce the subject to mere subjectivization (the subject as "secretion of Nothingness" remains underdetermined) – a question Hallward returns to toward the end of his study. His critical remarks revolve around the relation between true subject and "objective individual" (ibid., 279); however, he does not take recourse to Sartre. And even his question whether one finds in Badiou one subject or multiple subjects could be related to Sartre's incessant attempt to keep separate the subject as individual praxis and the group (as constituted dialectic). Anyway, Hallward presents a very fine summary of Badiou's reading of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (see ibid., 41-43).

From a different perspective, Bruno Bosteel's instructive essay "Badiou without Žižek," (Bosteel 2005, 221-244) takes issue with what he considers to be Žižek's highly appropriative and transcoding strategy of reading Badiou. Bosteel's essay is primarily an attempt to liberate Badiou's texts from the framework of Žižek's interpretation which, he claims, follows the (Lacanian) matrix of "x with y" whereby "y" reveals the truth of "x": an interpretation that, so Bosteels, has been able to exercise a hegemonic force on Anglo-American discussions of Badiou's work. Bosteels attempts to subtract Žižek from Badiou, primarily by bringing into play several central texts by Badiou that, according to Bosteels, have in many ways already anticipated and refuted Žižek's main critical points. For a critical rejoinder to Bosteels by Žižek see Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Žižek 2006, 64).

to its capacity of abstracting itself from everything, of negating everything, of tearing itself away from the world? Would this, perhaps, suggest an even worse alternative: that of the Sartrean subject standing fully under the sign of an irreducible and constitutive lack, forever barred from the Cause or Thing? In other words, would Sartre's conception of the subject not find itself in a secret complicity with merely "idealist" problems of desire, its constitutive lack, and so on? Or is it not, rather, the case that Sartre's being-for-itself is not sufficiently accounted for by this idealist framework? Recall that the being-for-itself is characterized not only in terms of its capacity to negate beings in the world, but, more fundamentally, in terms of its *original nihilation*: that is, Sartre's subject, similar to that of Žižek, is marked by a radical negativity that can bring about a transformation of the very coordinates conditioning its being-in-the-world – again, not only conditions *within* its being-in-the-world, but also the *very* conditions *of* its being-in-the-world. That is, Sartre insists that our "being-in-the-world" is already the result of an original choice. Both Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian subject and Sartre's "existentialist" subject are to be grasped in terms of self-relating negativity, withdrawal-into-self, "night of the world," death drive (Žižek), or as original nihilation, violent upsurge (Sartre), and they emerge as fissures in the texture of being that cannot be filled up by any subjectivization, thus testifying to the destitution that, ultimately, *is* the subject. Finally, both conceptions of the subject seem to share constant (simultaneous) associations of subject with the abject, with the excremental on the one hand, and (revolutionary) liberating violence on the other hand: a violence by means of which the subject seems to liberate itself from all empirical features, reduces itself to a Nothingness, thereby putting to risk (and annihilating) its symbolic identity. This radical subject in the act, the act of annihilation, is revolutionary precisely through its violence. Sartre writes: "this irrepressible violence (...) is man recreating himself." (Sartre 1963, 21) Revolutionary emancipatory freedom is, for Žižek, directly identifiable with violence: "it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs the balance." (Žižek 2003, 33) And Sartre seconds with his account of the upsurge of the revolutionary group: "The fact that the origin of the grouping was Terror is not actually very significant; every *praxis* constitutes itself as an opening made in the future, and sovereignly affirms its own possibility (...) As the freedom of revolt reconstitutes itself as common violence (...), its future objectification becomes, for it, the free violence of men against misery and impossibility of living." (Sartre

2004, 405) We find thus in both Žižek and Sartre an ontology of the subject as essentially revolutionary subject: a revolutionary subject that is inherently marked by pure violence.⁸

Militant Community

According to Sartre, the revolutionary group posits itself as the free medium of free human realizations. On the basis of the pledge it produces man as free common individual, rendering possible for the other his/her re-birth; the revolutionary group is the absolute end as pure freedom liberating men from alterity. As Sartre states more precisely: the pledge "is the origin of humanity." (Sartre 2004, 436) Furthermore: "This beginning therefore directs recognition to the reciprocal affirmation of these two *common* characteristics: we are *the same* because we emerged from the clay at the same date, through each other and through all others. (...) In other words, *our common being* is not *an identical nature* in everyone." (ibid., 437) It is through the pledge that the group becomes a mediated reciprocity (of conditionings); each praxis becomes the same as every other. The group enters the milieu of the same. It is here that one finds the birth of fraternity, the universal equality of everybody in relation to everybody else: the singular praxes conquer universal sameness by transforming their alterity. "in approaching a third party, I do not recognise my inert essence as mani-

⁸ The issue of violence and terror is complex in both Sartre and Žižek. While Badiou addresses the problem of terror (in *On Metapolitics*) in the context of the "Thermidorean operation" – he points out that "the attempt to 'think terror' is impractical as such, because the isolation of the category of terror is precisely a Thermidorean operation (...). It is an operation designed to produce something unintelligible and unthinkable. Considered in isolation, terror becomes an infra-political datum, one that is politically unthinkable, thereby leaving the terrain wide open for moralistic preaching against acts of violence" (Badiou 2005, 138) – and insists on the revolutionary work as a homogeneous multitude from which terror cannot be separated (that is why terror is a political problem and not simply a barbaric evil or crime), Sartre and Žižek emphasize the certainty of violence and even terror much stronger in terms of ontological implications of the subject of revolution. I have already indicated that the conception of pure expenditure and excess plays a prominent role in the Sartrean event of literature and of politics. It is before this background that one would have to re-examine Hannah Arendt's claim (in *On Violence*) that violence in Sartre is to be grasped in instrumental terms, for both Žižek as well as Sartre attempt to discern different registers of violence. And in both cases, "pure violence" – a violence that exhibits a certain affinity to Walter Benjamin's "actual state of exception" in opposition to the state of exception that aims merely at maintaining existing law and order – is taken to be as a signpost of "authentic revolutionary explosion." For Sartre, see, above all, his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and his writings on colonialism (as well as the passages on the revolutionary group in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*); for Žižek, see his *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (Žižek 2004, 158-159), and see also his *The Parallax View* (Žižek, 2006, 380-381). See above all Neil Roberts' "Sartre, Fanon, Violence, and Freedom" (Roberts, 2004, 139-160). This essay is instrumental to my claim that Sartre's notion of violence must not be reduced to an instrumentalist understanding

fested in some other instance; instead I recognise my necessary accomplice in the act which removes *us* from the soil: my brother, whose existence *is not other than mine* approaches me as my existence and yet depends on mine as mine depends on his..."(ibid., 405) On account of the "creative act of the pledge" we "have become brothers," and our particular identities have become insignificant. Sartre continues: "(...) we *are our own sons*, our common creation." (ibid., 405) And: "The constituted group is produced in and by everyone as *his birth as a common individual* and, at the same time, everyone can grasp, in fraternity, his own birth as a common individual as having been produced in and by the group." (ibid., 438) Consequently the group is the product of the work of a community of common individuals (of Badiou's *some-ones*). The relation of individual praxis and group mirrors dialectically the relationship of cause and effect. On the one hand, the cause (of the group) is without doubt the product of the activity of individual praxes; it is alive only, in so far as it is continuously renewed by the passion of individual praxes. On the other hand, these individual praxes experience the cause (of the group) as the absolute that sets them in motion: that is, as cause of their activity. Individual praxes posit the cause (of the group), but they do not posit it as something that is subordinate, but rather as their absolute cause.

It has already been mentioned that the subjects undergo at this point a symbolic death, that is, they lose their symbolic identity: their predicative particularisms are suspended, and they re-emerge as common individuals. That is, what is lost in this transubstantiation is precisely the (particular) substance, that which the (bourgeois) subject considers the most precious kernel of his individuality. And Sartre does not hide that fact that this transubstantiation, by means of which the particular selfhood of the individual dies, is a horrifying, violent, and traumatic process, perhaps similar to the ubiquitous motif in science fiction of changed identity (for example, one could refer here the numerous passages in which Sartre renders in graphic details the very violence and trauma necessarily involved in the attempt of the colonized to bring about their own re-birth outside of the matrix of colonialism; incidentally, Sartre implies on more than one occasion that a successful and total liberation would also have to address the very link that keeps the oppressed bound to the system of oppression; that is, Sartre suggests, not unlike Žižek, that the colonized has to strike not only against the colonizer, but also, in a way, against herself or himself: against her or his attachment to the colonial system. Therein lies, for Sartre, the great significance of the work of Frantz Fanon; and as Žižek has remarked ironically, it is therefore no wonder that current multiculturalist, "radical" post-colonial theory has been characterized by the remarkable and convenient absence (and exclusion) of Fanon's thought and its refusal to subsume the struggle against colonialism, exploitation, and oppression simply under some discourse of victimization, of identity politics, and of the right to recognition).

Annihilation – conversion – re-birth: does this sequence of the Sartrean group whose thinking produces sameness out of alterity by remaining indifferent to differences, not anticipate the very militant community that, for Badiou as well, is organized around "the Real of a radical fraternity?" After all, Badiou states with regard to the possibility of a strictly egalitarian community: "Only that which will present itself *as a discourse of the Son* has the potential to be universal, detached from every particularism." (Badiou 2003, 43) And: "It is quite true that all postevental universality equalizes sons through the dissipation of the particularity of the fathers." (ibid., 59) This dissipation is, however, not simply an abolition of particularity; the task is rather, as Badiou elaborates with regard to Paul and the question of Jewish particularity, to animate Jewish particularity "internally by everything of which it is capable relative to the new discourse, and hence the new subject." (ibid., 103) And it is precisely this strategy of "subsequent symmetrization" (ibid., 104) – identified by Badiou in Saint Paul – that one finds repeatedly in Sartre. Just one example: In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre conceives the "authentic French Jew" as the very place of the singular universal, as singular universality and power of negativity subverting the fixations or "reifications" of particularism in French society. (See Vogt 2003, 123) And precisely this Sartrean politics of authenticity with its sole maxim of not giving up on one's own split (as singular universal) is evoked by Badiou in the following passage:

With regard to what has happened to us (...) differences are indifferent, and the universality of the true collapses them. With regard to the world in which truth proceeds, universality must expose itself to all differences and show, through the ordeal of their division, that they are capable of welcoming the truth that traverses them. What matters, man or woman, Jew or Greek, slave or free man, is that differences *carry the universal that happens to them like a grace*. Inversely, only by recognizing in differences their capacity for carrying the universal that comes upon them can the universal itself verify its own reality. (Badiou 2003, 106)⁹

⁹ In *Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida comments on "the gravest problem" of fraternity or fraternization: "Of course, no one will contest the fact that all movements (Christian or revolutionary ones, for example) celebrating fraternity or fraternal friendships have universal range and theoretically challenge the limits of natural, literal, genetic, sexually determined (etc.) fraternity." (Derrida 1997, 237) But why then Derrida's reticence about the discourse of fraternity? "In keeping this word to designate a fraternity beyond fraternity, a fraternity without fraternity (literal, strict, masculine, etc.), one never renounces that which one claims to renounce – and which returns in myriad ways, through symptoms and disavowals whose rhetoric we must learn to decipher and whose strategy to outwit." (ibid.) It is, perhaps, Badiou's and Sartre's "subsequent symmetrization" that accomplishes the very outwitting that, to a certain extent, Derrida wants to preserve in Blanchot when he remarks: "What can the name 'brother' or the call to fraternity still mean when one or the other arises in the speech of friendship which, like that of Blanchot [...] has so radically delivered itself from the hold of all de-

Badiou's egalitarian, universal, and revolutionary collective of sons is thus elaborated in the context of a reading of Saint Paul. Fully subscribing to Badiou's appropriation of Pauline universalism, Žižek comments:

The Christian community (...) designates a new collective held together not by a Master-Signifier, but by a fidelity to a Cause, by the effort to draw a new line of separation that runs 'beyond Good and Evil', that is to say, that runs across and suspends the distinctions of the existing social body. The key dimension of Paul's gesture is thus his break with any form of communitarianism: his universe is no longer that of the multitude of groups that want to 'find their voice,' and assert their particular identity, their 'way of life,' but that of a fighting collective grounded in the reference to an unconditional universalism. (Žižek 2003, 130)

Could this, finally, mean that, in addition to "the revolutionary party and the psychoanalytic society" as "further examples of this same collective," (ibid.)¹⁰ one would have to include as well the Sartrean group as a another version of Pauline-Christian universalism?

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terminated communities, all filiation or affiliation – families or peoples – or even all given generality...?" (ibid., 304)

¹⁰ Here, one would have to examine, above all, the simultaneity of revolutionary (redemptive) violence and love. Badiou and Žižek repeatedly describe the Pauline community in terms of the work of love, and this work is the figure of revolutionary politics. One finds this simultaneity also in Sartre: in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he remarks that this violence (of the revolutionary group) "is the very power of this lateral reciprocity of love." (Žižek 2003, 439) Why this recourse to revolutionary collectives clearly inspired by Christian universalism? Perhaps because other conceptions of community – above all those in the context of neo-Heideggerianism – are characterized by a certain political impotence. Derrida's "New International" remains, beyond its affirmation of a democracy to come, politically empty. True, it is important to demonstrate the traditional identificatory notions of community in terms of collective identity in order to render possible a different perspective on community and on the processes of socialization. But is this endeavor really exhausted by the claim of an essential community "of those who have nothing in common," or by hypostatizing philosophically certain writers' organizations (such as PEN)? The suspicion remains that a certain asceticism regarding praxis and a certain dictate of pure politics (that without "dirty hands"; that of "beautiful souls") attempt to obscure current attempts (however imperfect and problematic) at collective action.

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