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The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Zizek

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The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek

by

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the post-Marxist and materialist positions of two leading

contemporary European thinkers: Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. These thinkers, I argue,

collectively offer a way between the traditional Hegelian Marxist's overarching meta-

narrative of a necessary evolution from worse to better, and the post-modern pessimism

of a lack of possibility for such a social evolution. It is this middle path, offered by these

two thinkers, that this dissertation seeks to explore and further explain. The focal point of

this dissertation is the type of philosophical materialism that is collectively offered by

Badiou and Žižek, what I call the "New Materialism." I first explain the origins of this

materialist position as it emerges in the thought of Louis Althusser, then I discuss how

Badiou and Žižek, each in their own way, seek to correct the remaining problems that

exist for the Althusserian position, while refusing to reject its core materialist insights.

Finally, I assess the ways in which both Badiou and Žižek attempt to overcome the

Althusserian problems, arguing that ultimately Žižek's corrective succeeds in remaining

within the materialist paradigm laid out by Althusser, whereas Badiou's method brings

him dangerously close to a kind of philosophical idealism that he wishes to avoid.

Introduction

> The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.[1]

These are, perhaps, some of the most famous words in all of Marx's writings.

They are often invoked when one talks of Marxist materialism, and said to represent a concise encapsulation of what this doctrine is all about. The standard understanding of this is, of course, that Marx is setting himself in direct opposition to the Hegelian (idealist) understanding of history. History is, according to Hegel, a working out (and working through) of concepts—or ideas—and the process by which we as humans, collectively or as 'Spirit' come to consciousness of their meaning. The term Spirit is Hegel's term of art for the shapes of social existence that exhibit themselves at a particular time. These shapes are constantly renewing and transforming themselves as history moves forward. Each particular shape of existing spirit gives birth to new shapes as things proceed and each new shape is a further working out of the concept(s) embodied in the prior shape. We are, on Hegel's account, always embodied, and what we embody is precisely that particular shape of spirit that exists for us—alternatively we could say that spirit is embodied in us—there is nothing mystical in this, it just means that we (and spirit) are situated within a world that has particular ways of being that

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[1] Karl Marx, "Preface to a Critique of Political Economy" in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings 2nd Edition*. David McLellen (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 425.

exhibit the particular (and limited) perspective on, and understanding of, a set of concepts that make up our communal understanding of ourselves and our world. The movement of history, on Hegel's account, is precisely this progressive working out of the concepts through which we grasp our existence towards their full transparency. Thus the 'matter' of history, i.e. human institutions, communities, events, and the like are the material embodiment of this conceptual awareness at any given time and are part of the ongoing work of a concept's coming-to-be in its full richness and actuality. On this reading of Hegel, it is the opposite of Marx's claims above: it is the consciousness of humans that 'determines their mode of existence.' For example, a given historical society's economic practices, codes of law and property, as well as cultural practices might exhibit and be determined by that society's understanding of the concepts of 'freedom.'[2] So according to this understanding of Hegel, 'Spirit' is always in the driver's seat, its 'ideas' are what determine the material conditions of social life for humans.

Marx on the other hand attempts to argue for the reverse (on the standard reading of the quote above anyway), it is rather the material conditions of existence that give rise to our 'ideas,' our self-conception and the world that we live in. Thus it is the very existence of a particular, given, historical and material way of producing and organizing the human world that leads us to our conceptual organization of the world and ourselves. From this perspective, one can argue that my concept of 'freedom' in general, and myself as a free being in particular, is determined by the very ways in which the world is organized by the existing material (and for Marx, economic) modes and forces of

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[2] To be sure, Hegel does not think that every individual in a given community will have the same understanding of such concepts or even that any individual in said community will have a transparent understanding of their own understanding of such concepts. In fact, part of the Hegelian enterprise is to read back into particular times and places the underlying—unconscious—understanding of such concepts.

production. As the standard story goes, it is the very material, technologies, tools, and modes of labor that drive human history from below and determine a given community's self-conception. So first there is matter, and then there are ideas that arise out this matter. Hence Materialism. For most that have followed Marx, this reading of history places him on one side of a traditional, and long standing philosophical opposition: that between Materialism and Idealism, where Idealists (represented by Hegel in the reading of his work given above) take it to be the case that what is primary, fundamental, and determinative of the social space are ideas or the mental (and their historical development), Materialists argue that what is primary, fundamental and determinative of the social space is rather matter (and the mental is a product of its material base).

It is, furthermore, the case that, for many of his readers (and followers), Marx's Materialist position commits him (and them) to many of the other commonly held tenets of the more general position of philosophical materialism, namely that, as with any good materialism, there is little or no room for contingency: matter is primary and is dominated by the law of cause and effect, thus whatever materially exists, exists as the result of a prior cause, and itself will then serve as a cause for whatever follows it. The immaterial (mind, ideas, or Spirit) is itself, like the effects that necessarily follow from their causes, determined by the matter which supports it. This way of understanding Marx's materialism—as a kind of determinism in the last instance—is, and has been, in effect in varying degrees in most all of those that have read and been influenced by Marx. As Eduard Bernstein has quite nicely put the point:

> The question of the correctness of the materialist interpretation of history is a question of the determining causes of historic necessity. To be a materialist means first of all, to trace back all phenomena to the necessary movements of matter. These movements of matter are accomplished according to the materialist

doctrine from beginning to end as a mechanical process, each individual process being the necessary result of preceding mechanical facts. Mechanical facts determine, in the last resort, all occurrences, even those which appear to be caused by ideas. It is, finally, always the movement of matter which determines the form of ideas and the directions of the will; and thus these also (and with them everything that happens in the world of humanity) are inevitable. The materialist is thus a Calvinist without God. If he does not believe in a predestination ordained by divinity, yet he believes and must believe that starting from any chosen point of time all further events are, through the whole of existing matter and the directions of force in its parts, determined beforehand. The application of materialism to the interpretation of history means then, first of all, belief in the inevitableness of all historical events and developments. The question is only, in what manner the inevitableness is accomplished in human history, what element of force or what factors of force speak the decisive word, what is the relation of the different factors of force to one another, what part of history falls to the share of nature, of political economy, of legal organizations, of ideas.[3]

This way of conceiving materialism is not only present in thinkers like Bernstein but is also present in the body of work produced by the Frankfurt School theorists as well as in the so-called tradition of 'Analytical Marxism,' albeit in a slightly modified form.

In the latter case, and we will have time to explain this further in Chapter One, materialistic determinism is worked out in terms of functional explanation. G. A. Cohen argues that the material base (the forces of production) is explanatory of both the existence of a given set of production relations and a given superstructure. The production relations and superstructure are, in turn, explained functionally, by asserting that they exist in the particular ways that they do (in a given time) because their particular forms are beneficial for—that is to say, sustain and advance—the forces of production (hence the functionalism: they serve a *function* in their existence). In this way then, the material determines the rest and the rest exists because of its function, which is to benefit the material.

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[3] Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/index.htm

Thus, for Cohen, much like Bernstein, there is a determined path in process in history. Here he writes, "in so far as the course of history, and more particularly, the future socialist revolution are, for Marx, inevitable, they are inevitable, not despite what men do, but because of what men, *being rational*, are bound, predictably to do."[4] The claim here is that it is because of a human faculty (rationality) and its development grounded in material production, that we can say that there is a determined goal in history, (the development of said rationality) and one that is realized materially. So here, Cohen makes of historical materialism very much a kind of Bernsteinian "Calvinism without God."

As noted above, it is also the case that something akin to this is at work in the materialist theories produced by those known as the Frankfurt School. Their version of "Calvinist" materialism, however, takes on a decidedly negative tone. According to Horkheimer, in his 1931 inaugural address as head of the Institute for Social Research, the aims of the Institute under his guidance were to be:

> …The philosophical interpretations of the vicissitudes of human fate—the fate of humans, not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a community. It [the Institute] is thus above all, concerned with phenomena that can only be understood in the context of human social life: with the state, law, economy, religion—in short, with the entire material and intellectual culture of humanity.[5]

This goal, according to Horkheimer is to be met by analyzing the:

> … Connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and

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[4] G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000). 147 Emphasis mine.
[5] Max Horkheimer "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute For Social Research" in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, translated by G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1993) 1. [Hereafter *BPSS*].

religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.).[6]

Like Cohen, Horkheimer's materialism commits him to the view that it is the very material, economic life of a society that grounds and determines the development of the individual members of a society's awareness of themselves—that is, their self-consciousnesses—and their world, as well as all of the cultural and political structures of a given society as a whole. While early in his career, Horkheimer was convinced that such analysis would, through its bringing to light the historically contingent nature of culture and its social structures, "hasten developments which will lead to a society without injustice," what he found in such analysis was the opposite.[7]

In the end, What Horkheimer finds is not a materialist doctrine that allows for the unraveling of social structures that lead to injustice and oppression, but one that instead reinforces oppression and forecloses on the possibility of change. The material structures that arise in modernity, rather, so enclose and control both culture and the individual that the belief of the early Horkheimer, that through the tools of Critical Theory, humanity could emancipate itself from oppressive forces—by coming to see them as nothing more than particular, contingent, and thus changeable—gives way to analysis of the insidious, determining, and totalizing nature of such material forces. Social theory and materialist philosophy can no longer lead to emancipation. Rather, Horkheimer argues, "philosophy is neither a tool nor a blueprint. It can only foreshadow the path of progress as it is marked out by logical and factual necessities; in doing so it can anticipate the reaction of

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[6] Ibid., 11
[7] Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, translated by Matthew J O'Connell (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 221.

horror and resistance that that will be evoked by the triumphal march of modern man."[8] It cannot, however, liberate. What we must do instead is wait, resign ourselves to the fact that social change is not yet. So here the Calvinist materialism of Horkheimer is one in which modern humans are utterly determined by the material relations of late capitalism and so much so that change itself no longer seems possible as it is "an inner necessity that has led to the self-surrender by reason" of its capacity for radical social change.[9] This 'self-surrender' is the determined outcome of the historical development of reason out of the material forces that condition it.

Read in both Cohen's way and Horkheimer's way, the doctrine of materialism is nothing more that the proverbial other side of the coin of Idealism. It finds its foundation in the emphasis on determining factors and simply offers the same position that Idealism offers but as reversed (it is not ideas that determine existence, but matter, or existence that determine ideas). Over the course of the last twenty years or so, however, there has been a growing body of work that seeks to challenge this long held view but remain firmly in a materialist position. This literature finds its roots in the work of the French Marxist Louis Althusser and its main contemporary representatives include (not surprisingly) one of Althusser's students Alain Badiou, as well as Slavoj Žižek. Each of these theorists identify themselves as materialist but do not take this in the way that we have been describing above. Rather their version of materialism, what I will henceforth call the New Materialism, seeks a position outside the standard materialism/idealism debate and, at least in part, seeks to undermine it by emphasizing not the determining

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[8] Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1947) 112.
[9] Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 1974) vii.

nature of the material but rather its foundationally indeterminate (and non-teleological) nature. The New Materialism, in this way, sees itself in opposition to *both* idealism and the standard brand of materialism described above.

The Athusserian move (that informs the new materialists) is the one that is made in opposition to the Stalinist interpretation of Marx's materialism in which it is simply and only the Capitalist economic processes that determine the both historical change and social progress. Althusser, rather, undermines this by arguing that the material conditions themselves are never monolithic in their existence and that though it is the case that these conditions form the basis for all stable social structures, it is precisely their diverse and contradictory nature that determines the social 'whole' itself to contain diverse, contradictory, and indeterminate social formations which can (and do) take on different and ultimately unpredictable paths though it is the case, according to Althusser, that we can understand the paths that have been taken in the past by retrospectively reconstructing the collection of elements of the material base that gain prominence at a given time.

It is in this argument that the standard version of materialism is called into question.[10] If it is the case that the material conditions which structure our existence are themselves multiple, diverse, and contradictory, then it is not the case that we can ever say with any real certainty that materialism is a doctrine that presents us with a vision of human history as teleological (as in Cohen's case) or as completely and totally foreclosed (as in Horkheimer's). Rather, how it is that we come to understand ourselves (our 'self-consciousness') and how it is that our world comes to be organized (both conceptually

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[10] This argument will, of course, be further explained in the chapters on Althusser.

and social-structurally) is, in a sense, overdetermined by a contingent collection of

material forces and hence, non-teleological. Here Althusser writes, "instead of thinking

contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as

the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies."[11] What is primary is not

material determination, stability, and necessity—though these are the *results* of the

material process—but rather material contingency and chance. This contingency and

chance is what 'the necessary' is built upon and thus, it is always unstable and subject to

reversal and change. As we will see, however, Althusser's own theoretical attempts at

overcoming the teleological view of materialism leave him with the problem of an

inability to account—in a Marxist way—for humanity's role in social change insofar as

any change itself is relegated to the overdetermined material structures in social

existence. It is both the Althusserian insights, and the remaining problems of Althusserian

Marxism, that are critical and foundational for the new materialism of Badiou and Žižek

in that, each of them seeks to save certain elements of the Althusserian edifice while at

the same time offering a corrective to the problems inherent in it.

It is this 'New Materialism' that this dissertation is interested in. It is intended in

part, as a contribution to the growing secondary literature on these thinkers and the

debate around them, in part as introduction to their individual theoretical projects with an

emphasis on explaining their materialist standpoints, but most importantly as an argument

for the claim that the individual standpoints of Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek also

collectively, make up a distinct philosophical tradition, one with a historical foundation in

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[11] Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978-1987*, Translated by G. M. Goshgarian (New York and London: Verso, 2006) 193-194. [Hereafter *PE*]

Althusser's work and one that offers a way out of the standard philosophical deadlock of the old materialism/idealism debate.

In the process of making this argument, however, I also confront some of the remaining problems for this particular theoretical orientation. This latter portion of the project is accomplished through the drawing of a distinction between Badiou's and Žižek's respective attempts at overcoming the remaining problems of Althusserianism. Here I argue that Badiou's orientation leads him, unwittingly, to come dangerously close to a kind of structuralism that Althusser himself decries as idealist whereas Žižek's view avoids this through a novel reading of Hegel's project *vis-à-vis* Lacanian psychoanalysis in which Hegel becomes the paradigmatic materialist thinker.

Chapter 1: *En Media Res*: Althusser's Aleatory Materialism and a

Challenge to the Teleological

To talk about 'materialism' is to broach one of the most sensitive subjects in philosophy.[12]

…One can only know what exists; the principle of all existence is *materiality*; and that all existence is *objective*, that is "prior" to the "subjectivity" which knows it, and independent of that subjectivity… One can only know what exists.[13]

The world may be called an *accomplished fact* [*fait accompli*] in which, once the fact has been accomplished, is established the reign of Reason, Meaning, Necessity, and [*Fin*]. But the *accomplishment of the fact* is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter of the atoms due to the swerve of the clinamen.[14]

According to Althusser, we always begin *En Media Res*, in the midst of things, in

a world that has a material (and objective) reality, that is an 'accomplished fact,' that

exhibits itself in such a way that it looks to have structures (and meanings and concepts)

that are necessary and in some ways eternal and that, viewed from this perspective, seems

to have a determined path of development. The aleatory materialist, however, knows that

this world is not necessary, nor is it eternal, nor is the arrangement of accomplished facts

and meanings that exist at a given time the result of some process, which at bottom, is

itself necessary. It is rather, as Althusser argues, that any existing necessity is built on the

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[12] Louis Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism" in *PE*. 272
[13] Ibid., *Essays in Self Criticism*, (London, NLB: 1976), 54. [Hereafter *ESC*]
[14] Ibid., "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" in *PE*. 169-170

back of a contingent process, a chance occurrence that can be likened to the swerve of the atoms that fall in the void as described by Epicurus. The reference to the swerve (called the 'clinamen' by Lucretius) is a direct attack on any philosophical system that purports to discover a rational and teleological process underlying the movement of history, for there is no such thing, whatever is, is the result of contingency and chance.

The materialist philosopher knows this, and thus he does not concern himself with an attempt to discover some ultimate 'Truth' that underlies what is, but rather begins with what he does know (and the only thing that he can know): the 'what is' itself, what exists here and now, at this moment, in this conjuncture. He begins with the 'objective' material reality that exists for him and through the science founded by Marx—the science of historical materialism—and elaborated on by Althusser—that of the aleatory nature of the material itself—is able to uncover the contingent nature of the conjuncture. It is this that allows the aleatory materialist to see that any seemingly fixed necessity, or determined fact, or meaning, or concept is itself nothing more than a *relation*, a chance occurrence, that results from, and emerges in, the relation that is produced by the contingent coming together of multiple and diverse elements which in themselves, are nothing (this is to say, that these elements themselves become what they are in relation to the contingent 'whole' that is formed as a result, they do not pre-exist it).

It is this form of materialism that Althusser thinks offers a new (and proper) philosophical position and one that steps outside of the traditional philosophical opposition between idealism and (traditional) materialism, which is already a trap as it is, he argues, always already defined in idealist terms. In these first two chapters, I will outline Althusser's arguments for aleatory materialism while attempting to further define

this position. I will also show how his aleatory materialist position is linked to, and emerges out of, his earlier work.

Section One

In service of the first goal of this chapter, we should begin the process of making sense of aleatory materialism by way of Althusser's contrasting of it to what he calls 'Traditional Philosophy' which, he argues,

> …Assigns itself the irreplaceable historical task of speaking the Truth about everything, about the first causes and the principles of everything in existence, hence about everything that is knowable; about the ultimate purpose or destiny of man and the world. Hence it sets itself up as a 'Science' of the totality, capable not only of providing the highest and most indubitable knowledge, but also of possessing Truth itself. This Truth is *logos*, origin, meaning…[15]

There are three characteristics of traditional philosophy that Althusser points out above, first that it attempts to "speak the Truth" about the totality that is everything that is, this is to say that traditional philosophy's goal is to accurately describe the nature of all that is as a totality. In order to do this, it attempts to speak of the 'origins' or *logos* (here the reasons) for the existence of what is (this is the second characteristic of traditional philosophy) and finally, in speaking of the Truth of what is in terms of origins or reasons, traditional philosophy also posits purposes or the *telos* of what is.[16]

Althusser certainly has in mind here those systematic philosophies posited by the likes of Kant or Hegel which (on the standard readings of them anyway) do in fact attempt such explanations of the totality of what is, and also the philosophies produced

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[15] Ibid., "Philosophy and Marxism," *PE*. 267.
[16] To be sure, there are many philosophies and philosophers that Althusser points to as not fitting in to this conception of philosophy. These are the ones he points to as the philosophical fathers of his brand of materialism and they include, not only Lucretius and Epicurus (whom we have already referenced), but also Spinoza, Machiavelli, Heidegger, and Marx. We will have time to discuss this further below.

by earlier thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle who, though divergent in many of their beliefs are also engaged in the traditional philosophical practice. In these few examples, we can also see that Althusser's characterization holds for philosophies that offer divergent responses to the questions of origin and end and the Truths that are produced based on these. This is what traditional philosophy in general attempts to do—regardless of the ways that that a particular philosophy works these questions out—the goals are the same for all. Now, as regarding these differing ways of answering the question of the Truth, Althusser points out that that there are two general 'tendencies' in the history of traditional philosophy, two general strategies that are employed in offering such answers: there is the idealist tendency and the materialist tendency.[17]

At the most general level, we could say that the idealist tendency in traditional philosophy holds—in one form or another—that what is, is as it is because it is a representation in cognition. This is to say, that the world is as it is because we cognize it as such, it is our ability as cognizers to place that which we perceive under a set of concepts and thus organize our perceptions in particular ways that allows us to perceive that which exists in the ways that we do. To be sure, there is much disputation as to just what this cognizing power amounts to in the philosophies which have a tendency toward idealism—for instance, in Plato's view, the concepts, or ideas that organize the world and its objects are not simply the result of human reason but rather much more eternal and of a higher order, whereas for Kant, though these concepts are fixed and eternal, they are nothing more than the result of the ways in which human reason is structured. It is,

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[17] To be sure, Althusser is not saying that all positions in 'traditional philosophy' are only idealist or materialist, he is aware of the fact that most philosophies contain elements of both within them. This is why Althusser points out that they exhibit certain tendencies, that is most traditional philosophies, while asserting both materialist and idealist principles, tend to favor one or the other in their final outcome.

however, nonetheless the case that both of these philosophies can be characterized as having this idealist tendency. They offer a Truth about the totality of what is based on this view and in doing so also posit an origin of the totality of what is (that origin is the concepts or the ideal itself). This also then, leads directly to a positing of an end, purpose, or goal based on this Truth.

If the idealist tendency in traditional philosophy links Truth, origin and end to the ideal in this way, then the materialist tendency in traditional philosophy is guilty of making the same mistake according to Althusser, it simply does this in a slightly different manner: rather than claiming that it is the ideal that offers the truth of what is, traditional philosophical materialism makes the claim that it is 'matter' or the material that is the Truth of what is, and as such forms both the origin and end of all that is. We can see this problem by looking to the way in which some have interpreted Marx's own version of the materialist philosophical position, namely those of the analytical Marxist school. We will use G. A. Cohen as our example here and show how it is that Cohen's form of materialism is nothing more than a veiled form of idealism (and thus, not truly a materialism).

According to Cohen, the 'Truth' of what is, is worked out in terms of functional explanation. In his *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Cohen argues that according to Marx, the material base (the forces of production) is explanatory—is, in other words, the origin—of both the existence of a given set of production relations and a given superstructure. The production relations and superstructure are, in turn, explained functionally, by asserting that they exist in the particular ways that they do (in a given time) because their particular forms are beneficial for—that is to say, sustain and

advance—the forces of production (hence the functionalism: they serve a *function* in their existence).

The problem with this reading is that it turns the relations of production into the primary mover of the process of history. The relations of production become the origin of what is, and these are, on Cohen's own account, ideal structures. Here Cohen tells us that what is truly material are only those things which fill the category of the productive forces. These are things like, the "instruments of production" (tools, machines, etc.), "raw materials" used in the labor process, and "labor power" itself, which he defines as "the productive faculties of producing agents: strength, skill, knowledge, inventiveness, etc."[18] These forces are, according to Cohen, developed/used in the ways that they are as a result of the relations of production, which he defines quite generally as "EITHER relations of ownership by persons of productive forces or persons OR relations presupposing such relations."[19] These are on Cohen's account non-material relations, they are the social/ideal 'forms' which *determine* the material content to be (and be used) the ways that it is at a given time in history. Cohen argues that we should recognize:

> …a distinction between the content and the form of a society. People and productive forces comprise its *material content*, a content endowed by production relations with *social form*. On entering production relations, persons and productive forces receive the imprint of the form those relations constitute: a Negro becomes a slave, a machine becomes a portion of constant capital…[20]

We should take careful stock of what is being asserted here. The claim is that whatever is material (persons, raw materials, tools) is *determined* by what is not material, the 'form' that the matter is given by the relations of production. According to Cohen's

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[18] G. A. Cohen *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*. 34
[19] Ibid., 34-35
[20] Ibid., 96

argument, the forces of production do not simply *cause* the relations of production and the superstructure to be organized in a particular way, but rather the relations of production, in their development, cause the development—and detemination—of the forces of production. The relations of production serve the *function* of determining the material of the forces of production to be what they are. It is this functional analysis that yields the teleological determinism inherent in Cohen's account.[21] This is best explained in relation to what Cohen calls the "Development Thesis" and the "Primacy Thesis Proper." It is these two propositions, he argues, that make up the foundation of Marx's historical materialism; they are:

1. The productive forces tend to develop throughout history (the Development Thesis).

And,

2. The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces (the Primacy Thesis Proper).[22]

As we have seen, beginning with (2), Cohen explains that the productive forces are nothing other than the material means (labor power, raw materials, tools) that are "used by producing agents to make products."[23] The relations of production then make up the determining and explanatory factors of both the superstructure of a given society (which are clearly ideal: Legal codes, political organizations, religious institutions, forms of consciousness and so forth), *and* the form that the material forces of production exhibit. We can, I think, now clearly see why this way of understanding Marx's materialism

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[21] John Elster makes a similar point to the one being made here. For an extended treatment of the teleology inherent in Cohen's functionalist account see John Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) especially pp. 26-38
[22] Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.134
[23] Ibid., 32

attributes to it a kind of idealism via offering a teleological account of history. This is best viewed by thinking through the implications of Cohen's Development Thesis.

Regarding this, as asserted by (1) above, the claim is that the forces of production are in a process of development throughout history and it is this development that is sustained and furthered by the relations of production that produce the form that the forces take. Here Cohen links the productive forces to "human faculties" and argues that there is an "extensive coincidence…between the development of the productive forces and the growth of human faculties" or as he later calls it "human power."[24] The 'human faculties', in their development, *cause the continued development of the forces of production* in a particular way—that is, they 'form' them—and do so in foreseeable direction, namely the one that furthers the development of said faculties. Thus, according to Cohen it is the progress and development of 'human faculties,' which (in the end) drives human history and the progressive development of human societies. This progress first takes place in the material forces, which in turn coincide with the 'progress' of human power. He writes:

> To say that forms of society rise and fall according as they advance and retard the development of the productive forces is to *predict* massive transformations of social structure as the productive forces progress. The master thesis of historical materialism [the Primacy Thesis] puts the growth of human powers at the centre of the historical process, and it is to this extra-social development that society is constrained to develop.[25]

The Development Thesis, coupled with the Primacy Thesis is, in this way, a teleological thesis; it asserts that there is a definite goal that humanity is in process of achieving (i.e. the broadening of human power) and that the means by which this goal is

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[24] Ibid., 147
[25] Ibid, 285 emphasis mine.

achieved is first in the development of the material forces of production by the relations of production (which themselves can be explained by their function in furthering the development of the productive forces). Elster puts this point nicely when he asserts that for Cohen, "the relations of production obtain because and so long as they are optimal for the development of the productive forces."[26]

Thus, for Cohen, Marxist materialism uncovers a determined path in process in history. It both shows us an origin for what is (the productive forces as they are conditioned by the relations of production) and based on this, an end (the growth of human powers). Here he writes, "in so far as the course of history, and more particularly, the future socialist revolution are, for Marx, inevitable, they are inevitable, not despite what men do, but because of what men, *being rational*, are bound, predictably to do."[27] Here again—much like the Kantian claim—the argument is that it is because of a human faculty (rationality) and its development grounded in material production, which is itself determined by certain production relations, that we can say that there is a determined goal in history, (the development of said rationality) and one that is realized materially.

As noted above, Althusser develops his version of materialism as a counter to that proffered by those who practice Traditional Philosophy. This is in part because as also noted above—and to be further discussed later—his view is that Traditional Philosophy is not sufficiently aware of the fact that its own 'Truths' are not in fact eternal nor are they necessary, but are rather the product of a historically situated, and contingently constructed world. In setting itself up as offering the Truth about what is, and hence offering an origin and end, Cohen's version of (Marxist) materialism remains an *idealist*

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[26] John Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 30
[27] Cohen 147. Emphasis mine.

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materialism, it posits an end and it is the positing of an end that keeps this version of

materialism one that is internal to, and hence does not escape, idealism as such.

Furthermore, this problem is exhibited in *very way* Traditional Philosophy's materialist

representatives make their arguments. Here Althusser argues that the traditional

materialist philosopher (like Cohen) offers his theory as a response to the idealist and in

doing so, his arguments are intimately tied to, and informed by idealism. Althusser's

point is then, both that (as we have seen) traditional materialism makes its arguments in

the same way that idealism does *and* that this is because it is merely asserted as a

response to the idealist understanding. Here he argues that:

> …In the philosophical tradition, the evocation of materialism is the index of an
> exigency, a sign that idealism has to be rejected—yet without breaking free,
> *without being able to break free*, of the speculary pair idealism/materialism; hence
> it is an index, but at the same time a trap, because one does not break free of
> idealism by simply negating it, stating the opposite of idealism, or 'standing it on
> its head'…On closer inspection, most materialisms turn out to be inverted
> idealism.[28]

In order to 'break free' of idealism, then we must not only offer a philosophy that rejects

all idealist premises (including those still hidden in the traditional versions of

materialism), but we must also reject the very form of argumentation that is required by

traditional philosophy. This is to say that a properly conceived materialism is one which

argues that the very claim to 'Truth' that is offered by traditional philosophy (in any of its

forms) is to be rejected, and along with it, any talk of ultimate origins or ends. Such

"Truth" is according to Althusser, merely ideological. If we are to be proper Marxist

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[28] Althusser, *PE*. 272

materialists, then we must rid ourselves of the Idealist temptation, as idealism itself is ideological.[29]

Althusser's aleatory materialism is just such a materialism. It attempts to show the traditional philosopher that she cannot have her conclusions, that they simply do not follow, that she too is trapped in ideology when she sees her conclusions as the reveling of some ultimate truth of the way things are. Althusser attempts to break free of the idealism/materialism pair by rejecting any notion of an end or goal. Now that we have begun to see the distinction Althusser seeks to draw between his brand of materialism and that offered by Traditional Philosophy, we can turn to a further explanation of exactly what the view consists of. In order to fully see this, I propose that we begin by looking at how this idea emerges out of Athusser's earlier work, as it is in relation to this that that his late materialist position is best explained as well as argued for.[30] We can begin here with a brief discussion of Althusser's overall philosophical project in his early years, namely a complete reinvention of Marxist theory through a re-reading of Marx's own project.

Section Two

In the opening pages of "The Humanist Controversy" Althusser relates an anecdote about his 1963 encounter with one of the then members of the Frankfurt School,

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[29] To be sure, As we will see below, ridding ourselves of ideology is also not something that can be done in the way that traditional Marxists conceive of it, that is, it is not simply a matter of proper intellectual ideology critique (though this remains a part of it).

[30] To be sure, I am not the only one who makes use of such a strategy. Max Henniger in a recent article also employs Althusser's early work in an attempt to make sense of his late position, though my reading of this is different, I am indebted to this article for some of my thought here. See Max Henniger, "Facticity and Contingency in Louis Althusser's Aleatory Materialism" in *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 18 (2007) 34-59

Erich Fromm.[31] As the story goes, Dr. Adam Schaff, a friend of Althusser's, had met

Fromm at a conference in the United States and in the course of their meeting, Fromm

had mentioned to Schaff that he was in the process of putting together an edited

collection of Marxist writings (which would eventually become the collection entitled

Socialist Humanism).[32] At Schaff's insistence, Fromm wrote Althusser asking him to

submit something for this collection. When Althusser expressed apprehension to Schaff

about the possibility of Fromm accepting his work—saying that the title of the work led

him to believe that it would be a "*Missa Solemnis in Humanism Major*"—his friend

replied with this syllogism: "Every humanist is a Liberal, Fromm is a humanist;

therefore, Fromm is a Liberal."[33] Meaning, of course, that as a liberal, Fromm would not

reject the paper simply because it went against his views, that he would allow the

readership to determine for itself what to think. This is because, of course, as a 'liberal,'

Fromm should have enough of a belief in the individual's autonomy and ability to use

their own rationality to determine what to think. Fromm, however, rejected the article.

Althusser writes of this, that it confirmed his suspicion that, "between Humanism

and Liberalism on the one hand, and the conjuncture on the other, there existed

something like…a non-accidental relation."[34] The point of this remark, to put it briefly is

that Fromm and other humanist Marxists fail to see that their humanism is itself an

ideological interpretation of Marx's thought, one that is stuck in a particular, and idealist,

ideology that Marx himself—according to Althusser—worked his way out of in his later

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[31] Louis Althusser, "The Humanist Controversy" reprinted in *Louis Althusser: The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*. Francois Matheron ed., G.M. Goshgarian trans. (New York and London: Verso, 2003). [Hereafter *HC*]
[32] See Erich Fromm ed. *Socialist Humanism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).
[33] Althusser, *HC*. 223
[34] Ibid., 224

work. The core of Althusser's thought here is that there is ideology, and then there is Ideology. The first sense of the word is the standard one, there are particular ideological forms that exist in particular times and particular places throughout history. These operate in much of the standard ways that Marxists have analyzed (as a kind of rationalizing, and propping up of the current existent modes of production such that those that exist within them come to see them as the Truth, as necessary, and as absolute). It is the second sense of the word, however, that is particularly Althusserian: his point here is that ideology itself is inescapable that it is ever-present as he points out in the essay that he had submitted to Fromm:

> …Ideology is as such an organic part of every social totality. It is as if human societies could not survive without these specific formations, these systems of representations (at various levels), their ideologies. Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensible to their historical respiration and life.[35]

It is the belief that one can escape ideology all together that is challenged by Althusser and it is this that is the mistake of the idealist materialism of traditional philosophers like Cohen. By challenging this, Althusser also challenges the belief that the human will is autonomous in the sense that the humanist Marxists think it is (or could be if we could release ourselves from the grips of ideology). Here Althusser claims that "... only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies *without ideology* and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear without a trace."[36] Althusser thinks that overcoming this particular ideology—the humanist ideology—means overcoming the young Marx's idealist belief in the end of history as a reconciliation of man with himself through the

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[35] Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Penguin, 1969) 232. [Hereafter *FM*]
[36] Ibid.

revolutionary activity of overcoming the false consciousness given to those that are oppressed by ideology. In order to see this, we should first say more about the standard, or 'humanist' understanding of ideology so as to see the contrast between it and Althusser's understanding of it. We can view this 'standard' reading in the Frankfurt School theorists.

One of the many definitions given of the concept of ideology by those of the Frankfurt School is the one given by Adorno when he states that ideology is "objectively necessary and yet false consciousness."[37] For Adorno and others in the Frankfurt School all ideology is productive of a kind of consciousness that is 'false;' a distorted view of one's existence in which one finds themselves confronted with a reality that necessarily exists as divorced from them, autonomous, and with certain rigid structures and "facts" that have a kind of absolute status. These rigid structures help maintain or prop up a certain economic system (and all that goes with it). Further, this rigidity extends to one's thoughts about the kind of being that they themselves are (one's view of human nature) and thereby makes one complicit in one's own oppression. For instance, the view that we have some 'natural' and set drive to compete with one another helps prop up and support the competitive nature of the capitalist system, or the view that under capitalism, you can 'become' anything that you want and if you are not successful it is simply because you are not trying hard enough.

According to the Frankfurt School critics, these and other forms of 'false consciousness' manifest themselves in an especially insidious form in today's capitalist

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[37] Theodore Adorno, "Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre," in *Soziologische Shriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 465. Quoted in Maeve Cooke, "Resurrecting the Rationality of Ideology Critique: Reflections on Laclau on Ideology" in *Constellations* Vol 13 No. 1 (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2006) 4-20

societies. We are, argues Horkheimer, "continually being prodded by the techniques of mass culture that hammer the industrialistic behavior patterns into [our] eyes and ears and muscles" in such a way as to make even our bodily habits conform to this particular social organization.[38] As noted above, one is in the grips of false consciousness (and hence ideology) when one fails to see their subordination to the current power structures and instead comes to view the capitalist economic system—and themselves as a part of it—as the necessary, 'natural' or 'factual' order of things. Horkheimer continues, claiming that even "a concept such as that of 'fact' can itself be understood only as a consequence of the alienation of human consciousness from extra human and human nature, which is in turn a consequence of civilization."[39] We are alienated from the truth of our subordination when we find ourselves in this predicament, and we—as members of the modern capitalist society—find ourselves in this predicament all the time, thus we are always alienated. To say, however, that our consciousness of ourselves and our world is 'false' and that it is an 'alienation' of ourselves from our 'nature' both human and inhuman, is to also imply that there is a remedy, that we can come to be rid of the 'falseness' of our consciousness, that we can become un-alienated and that we can come to see through the ideology that subordinates us.

Though the theorists of the Frankfurt School take this to be an increasingly difficult prospect, it is nonetheless a driving impetus behind their work. Through just the right theorization, and just the right critique of our culture and its ideologies, they think it possible to at least keep reminding us of the ideologies to which we succumb, and within which our false consciousness is created, thereby keeping a pathway open that might in

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[38] Max Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason.* 101
[39] Ibid., 114.

some way lead to some form of enlightenment that exists beyond them in which we can come to see our subordination and ultimately, throw it off. To this Horkheimer writes:

> If philosophy succeeds in helping people recognize these factors, it will have rendered a great service to humanity. The method of negation, the denunciation of everything that mutilates mankind and impedes free development, *rests on the confidence in man…* If by enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate—in short, the emancipation from fear—then the denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service that reason can render.[40]

It is this 'confidence in man' and the ability of humanity to overcome its enslavement to false consciousness by overcoming the ideology that puts it in place, that betrays the humanistic tendency of Horkheimer and others of the Frankfurt School. The belief that one can, ultimately, under the right conditions and in the right historical moment throw off their chains and through this create a better world depends on the belief that humans are (or at least can be) rational and autonomous agents and that, given the right tools, they can come to see the arguments of the cultural critic as rational and hence emancipatory. It is precisely this point that Althusser's reading of Marx, and the theory of ideology that he builds out of this, denies.

Althusser argues that the belief that we can free ourselves from false consciousness and ideology comes in part from a particular reading of Marx that emphasizes a kind of continuity between his early work and his late work. The problem is, according to Althusser, that those that hold this view fail to see that Marx himself was caught in a particular ideology in his early work—that of a kind of Feuerbachianism— and subsequently frees himself of this in his later work. It is, claims Althusser, under the influence of Feuerbach that Marx makes his pronouncements about the end of alienation

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[40] Ibid., 126 (my emphasis).

and the reconciliation of humanity with its 'essence' in the coming communism and so

on.[41] Marx's conception of humanity's having such an 'essence' and the subsequent

belief that this implies, namely that there is a 'truth' about us that we have been alienated

from in the capitalist modes of production comes from Feuerbach. In these early writings,

there is no discussion of 'ideology' as such because, according to Althusser, Marx did not

yet have a theory of such a thing, nor did he need one, the Feuerbachian concepts of

'man' and his 'alienation' from himself gave him all of the explanatory power that was

necessary for the critique of capitalism as it was given in the early writings. Althusser

points out here that according to Marx's early view:

> History is the alienation and production of reason in unreason, of the true man in
> the alienated man. Without knowing it, man realizes the essence of man in the
> alienated products of his labor (commodities, State, religion). The loss of man
> produces history and man must presuppose a definite pre-existing essence. At the
> end of history, this man, having become inhuman objectivity, has merely to re-
> grasp as a subject his own essence alienated in property, religion, and the State to
> become total man, true man.[42]

According to Althusser, it is this view that Marx abandons when, in his later

work, he begins to use the conceptual apparatus of the base/superstructure model (and the

all important concept of ideology).[43] The argument here is that Marx came to see that

while his Feuerbachianism had initially helped propel his work, it too would have to be

overcome as the belief in an 'essence' of humans (and thus a kind of humanism) was

nothing more than a particular ideological form itself and one that was limiting his

ability to make sense of social phenomena in a fully materialist fashion. Althusser claims

that Marx began to realize this as early as the *Theses on Feuerbach* and he offers a

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[41] See Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Marx Engels Reader* 2nd
edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: Norton, 1978) especially pp 84-85. [Hereafter *MER*]
[42] Althusser, *FM* 226
[43] Ibid., 227

reading of a portion of the Sixth Thesis to back this claim up. The crucial moment

according to Althusser is the moment when Marx states at the beginning of the thesis

that: "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. *But the human*

essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the

ensemble of the social relations."[44] Here is what Althusser has to say about this:

> To give this theoretically contorted sentence a meaning, one has to retrace, in
> reverse, the detour it had to make simply in order to be pronounceable. This is the
> detour I mean. It is necessary to have done with Feuerbach, and therefore with
> what he included in the human essence. It is not enough to say, as in 1843: Man is
> the world of Man, society, the State. The world of Man is not the objectification
> of his essence; it is not mere objects, it consists of altogether astounding realities:
> *relations*, taken in their 'ensemble.'[45]

Althusser argues here that in order for Marx to even make such a claim he has to already

have let go of the influence of Feuerbach. This is because as Marx claims here, it is not in

the objects (commodities, society, the State) of the human world that we find an alienated

(and thus reclaimable) 'essence' of humanity but rather it is the 'social relations' that

become grouped together into a particular 'ensemble' at a given time that offers us

something like a 'human essence.' But this means that there is no 'abstract' essence in

humanity to be objectified—rather, it is social relations and the ensemble of them that

exists at any given time that calls something like an essence into being. This 'essence'

however, is not really an essence but is rather an ideological mis-recognition. It is not

something 'recoverable' or eternal, but is rather contingent and determined by the 'social

relations' as they are at any given moment. Furthermore, this 'essence' *has no existence*

of its own outside of the contingently grouped social relations. It is a 'whole' that is

dependent on the elements (the social relations) upon which it is premised.

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[44] Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in *MER*. 145 (my emphasis)
[45] Althusser, *HC*. 255

So, the shift that begins here, according to Althusser, is a move away from a kind of humanism in Marx where we begin with an alienated human essence and become unalienated through a process of objectification and reconciliation, the origin and end of a rational historical process, to a kind of anti-humanism in which our understanding of both ourselves and our world is nothing more that the product of a particular, contingent set of social relations that congeal into a particular ensemble at a given point in history.[46] This explains, claims Althusser, the increasingly shifting emphasis in Marx's texts to the analysis of these social relations (economic relations, forces of production, etc…) and the move away from the more utopian concerns of the early Marx. As is well known, in making this argument, Althusser draws upon the Bachelardian concept of an 'epistemological break.' Althusser's debt to Bachelard is important not just for his re-reading of Marx but has important implications for his later work as well. I will offer a brief sketch of this concept (and Althusser's use of it) and we will then return to this later.

Section Three

Bachelard's own use of the concept of an epistemological break refers both to his conception of the changes that the sciences themselves undergo throughout history, and the changes that they affect in epistemology more generally. Like Comte, Bachelard argues, that the human pursuit of knowledge is characterized by a history of radical shifts, discontinuities, and ruptures with earlier conceptions of reality; in order to come to know anything new, according to Bachelard, the scientist must 'break' with her previously held beliefs about the nature of the world. Unlike Comte, however, Bachelard does not

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[46] We will return to a discussion of the material nature of these social relations (and the their status as contingent in the next chapter).

conceive of these ruptures as only serving the function of revising and correcting one's epistemological standpoint.

They do in fact act as revisions but these revisions do not, for Bachelard, reveal a truth about the nature of reality that pre-exists scientific practice (though the scientist herself does think of her practice this way), the practices that a scientist engages in are involved in the construction of the objects a given science studies. The scientist usually does not recognize this, and is in this way trapped in a kind of ideology (in Althusser's sense, namely an imaginary relationship to their world). Furthermore, the practices that the scientist engages in are themselves (in an Althusserian sense) fully material and act on the scientist's knowledge in a dialectical manner such that these practices themselves (through their partial construction of their object) influence the scientist's conceptual awareness. In order to see this further, we should back up a moment a take a look at how Bachelard describes this process, beginning with his concept of the rupture or epistemological break that takes place in scientific practice and leads to a rejection of previously held beliefs.

The rejection that is conditioned by the break is not a mere rejection of some of the scientists conceptions about the nature of the world and revision of others, but it requires a kind of rooting out—in a Cartesian fashion—of those beliefs that hinder one's ability to incorporate the 'new' into their understanding (and a continued vigilance in making sure that earlier conceptions of reality are not creeping in to the scientific process), it is precisely the 'new' experience that the scientist has that allows for this, though the scientist herself may not recognize this process for what it is as Bachelard points out:

> For the scientist, knowledge emerges from ignorance as light emerges from darkness. The scientist fails to see that ignorance is a web of positive, tenacious, interdependent errors. He does not recognize that intellectual darkness has a structure and that, this being so, every correct objective experience, must always entail the correction of a subjective error. But errors are not easily destroyed one by one. They are coordinated. The scientific mind can only establish itself by destroying the non-scientific mind…[47]

The point here is, again a Comtean one, that the 'ignorance' itself is not actually a lack of knowledge, it is a particular kind of knowledge, a fully positive web of beliefs that make up the scientist's pre-scientific worldview (and self-understanding). This comes from many sources according to Bachelard, all of which are socio-historical in origin. This is to say that the web of positive belief is the result of the influence of the social, the knowledge that is imparted to one by one's schooling in the currently (and dogmatically) held beliefs about the nature of the world. This schooling can take on explicit forms such as in the case of actual schooling and it can take on less obvious forms such as that commonly held beliefs about the nature of the world that one finds in one's everyday experience that are found in religious traditions and the like. It is precisely this everyday experience that needs to be rejected in order for the scientific outlook to take hold, as it is this positive web of beliefs that acts as a barrier to the experiencing of the 'new'. It is the ability to recognize a 'new' experience for what it is, rather than something which confirms one's pre-existing belief system, that constitutes and allows for scientific 'advancement,' but in order to recognize such a new experience one must refrain from seeing it from the perspective of those previously held beliefs.[48]

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[47] Gaston Bachelard, *The Philosophy of No*. Translated by G. C. Waterston (New York: Orion Press, 1968). 8

[48] The Kuhnian concept of 'normal science' can help us here- from a normal scientific perspective—which is that which is characterized by its practice being structured by the current body of scientific knowledge which function in the same way that the web of common beliefs function for Bachelard, as an obstacle to true science—anything that looks 'new' is automatically seen as anomalous and treated not as something

It is the rejection of this web of beliefs—which for Bachelard form what he calls 'epistemological obstacles'—that is the result of the epistemological break that is made possible for the scientist as a result of the experience of the 'new' in her investigations. What the experience of the 'new' does is open up a space from which to view one's web of beliefs as that which prevented the acquisition of this new knowledge in the past, and hence allows the scientist to reject this web as error. To be sure, for Bachelard, this process does not in the end really uncover a 'truer' objective reality, rather it is simply a changed conception of it and one that makes the previous ways of understanding look as if they are errors (thus it retroactively confers the title of 'error' on one's previous beliefs). As noted above, Bachelard seeks to show how it is the 'new' experience found in science is itself in part generated by scientific practice and its modes of knowing. Here Bachelard writes:

> Scientific observation is always polemical; it either confirms of denies a prior thesis, a preexisting model, an observational protocol. It shows as it demonstrates; it establishes a hierarchy of appearances; it transcends the immediate; it reconstructs first its own models and then reality. And once the step is taken from observation to experimentation, the polemical character of knowledge stands out even more sharply.[49]

Not only does scientific practice construct its objects in this way, but it does so with the help of scientific instruments which are the material component of scientific practice. The laboratory, the microscope, the spectrometer; these are all material representations of a given scientific practice. Bachelard continues:

> Now Phenomena must be selected, filtered, purified, shaped by instruments; indeed, *it may well be the instruments that produce the phenomenon in the first*

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new but rather as a mistake in the scientific process. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[49] Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. (Boston: Beacon press, 1984) 12-13

place. And instruments are nothing but theories materialized. The phenomena they produce bear the stamp of theory throughout.[50]

Furthermore, the instruments themselves then, not only 'produce; their objects, but they also influence the conceptual apparatus that the scientist employs. In this way then, the scientific mind is the dialectally produced product of the material practices it employs (and the experiences it has as a result of this practice) and through which it constructs its world. Here Bachelard in making this point, tells us to "consider how 'realism' changes, losing its naïve immediacy, in its enounter with scientific skepticism. Similarily 'rationalism' need not be a closed system *a priori* assumptions are subject to change (witness the weakening of Euclid's postulates in non-Eucidean geometry for example)."[51]

The further Bachelardian point here is that it is this (not necessarily the knowledge itself) that is the upshot of the scientific perspective. It conditions the scientist (if done properly anyway) to view the world (and any given knowledge about it) with a kind of openness that recognizes that any 'facts' that exist are non-permanent and can be overcome by the discovery of new evidence. In this way, Bachelard defines "the philosophy of scientific knowledge as an open philosophy, as the consciousness of a mind which constitutes itself by working upon the known, by seeking within reality *that which contradicts anterior knowledge*.[52] The scientist becomes the kind of thinker (through her practice) that rejects the givenness with which reality seems to exist. Further, the experience of the 'new' itself is conditioned by the practices (and the instruments) that the scientist both engages in and engages with. It is this characterization

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 3
[52] Bachelard, *The Philosophy of No*. 9

of scientific practice and the epistemological break with given reality that appeals to Althusser and that Althusser reads into Marx's project.

The claim is then, that it is the scientific discovery of the method of historical materialism that allowed Marx to see the Bachelardian 'web of beliefs' that conditioned his previous philosophical understanding of things—the result of the left-wing Hegelian thinking of Feuerbach's humanism—as an error and thus made it possible for him to reject it as ideological. Further, it is out of this the Marx himself experiences the 'new'— it is the scientific practice that Marx engages in that partially produces—or reproduces, Marx's world. So, for Althusser's Marx, it is a break with a given ideology that Marx's science itself conditions, thus Marx becomes a true scientist (in the Bachelardian sense) in his rejection of humanism and this comes about through the scientific practice he engages in by developing the method of historical materialism.

To be sure, this does not mean, according to Althusser, that in the epistemological break Marx himself leaves all ideology behind. For Althusser, this is simply not a possibility, for as Bachelard has taught us, ideology itself (in the form of the web of positive beliefs) is ever present even if particular ideologies are overcome. All knowledge that exists at any given time is only provisional at best, if one were to take it as absolute fact, then they would lose the scientific perspective and return to the ideological.[53] What Marx does accomplish however, is both the ability to reject the web of belief that conditioned his previous thought, and the beginnings of a new theory of the social. Now that we can see the relationship between Bachelard's philosophy of science and

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[53] We should be careful here to distinguish the term web of beliefs as it is used here to refer to the Bachelardian conception of error from the term as Quine uses it. This is not meant to signal the Quinean use of the term.

Althusser's re-reading of Marx, we should turn our eyes back to the concept of ideology and the materialist position that emerges in relation to this reading. As we will see in the next chapter, if it is in part the result of Althusser's application of Bachelard's concepts of the epistemological obstacle and the epistemological break, it is also in part due to his reading of Spinoza as a thinker who can offer an antidote to a kind of (bad) Hegelianism that infects other (humanist) readings of this concept. The next chapter will also explain the connection to contingency that Althusser's materialism forges and that we have not yet discussed in detail.

Chapter 2: Ideology, Material Practice, and the Imagination: Spinoza as

Antidote to Humanist Marxism

If we never were structuralists, we can now explain why: Why we seemed to be, even though we were not, why there came about this strange misunderstanding on the basis of which books were written. We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: *we were Spinozists*.[54]

      As noted at the end of the previous chapter, this chapter concerns itself with Althusser's conception of ideology and its reliance on a certain reading of Spinoza. The above quotation, taken from a text written during what is commonly known as Athusser's 'middle period' should serve as a guide for us here, for in it, Althusser himself claims to be a 'Spinozist,' a claim that he will reiterate much later.[55] In what follows, I propose to take him at his word, and to attempt to discern what it is in Spinoza that Althusser deems so helpful in articulating his own position. In order to better explain this; however, I wish begin by saying a bit more about Althusser's conception of ideology.

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[54] Althusser, *ESC*. 132
[55] See Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza" in *The New Spinoza (Theory out of Bounds)*, edited by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). 3-18.

Section One

Ideology is, says Althusser, "a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society."[56] The term 'representation' should be taken in a Kantian sense, as something that exists prior to belief— a representation is simply an intuition, an objective experience. Ideology then, as a 'system of representations,' is the experience of an objective world that is the background against which an individual comes to have beliefs about themselves and the nature of that world. A given 'system of representations' is, for Althusser, born of the particular arrangement of material social practices that exist at a given time in history. In other words, the 'system of representations' is nothing more than what makes up a given society itself. It is, as note above, the background against which individuals become conscious of their existence and that which informs their understanding of themselves in relation to the world in which they find themselves. Furthermore, this 'system of representations' that is a given society is more than anything a structure (in the literal sense of the word—as that which 'structures' or holds together) that depicts one's social world as a totality with a particular set of seemingly natural meanings, necessities, possibilities, institutions, and traditions. As Althusser goes on to point out, this seeming unity is "constituted by a certain specific type of complexity" and is "imposed on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness'" but rather, "via a process that escapes them."[57] Althusser continues:

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[56] Althusser, *FM*. 231
[57] Ibid., 231, 233

> Men 'live' their ideologies…*not as a form of consciousness, but as an object of their 'world'*—as their *'world'* itself…so ideology is a matter of the *lived* relation between men and their world. This relation only appears as *'conscious'* on condition that it is *unconscious*, [and] in the same way only seems to be simple on condition that it is complex, that it is not a simple relation but a relation *between* relations, a second degree relation.[58]

There are, according to Althusser, first and foremost social relations. These are made up by any of the multitude of *materially* existing practices found in a given society: the exchange of goods (economic relations), familial relations (relations between adult and child, and sibling to sibling, as well as particular familial traditions that contribute to the individual's understanding of themselves *vis-à-vis* other members of the family), governmental relations (forms of governing, judicial relations, and such), and there are other institutional relations such as schools and religious organizations. All of these social relations are very real, very existent and multifarious relations of which we are all a part at any given time (though they are contingent in that they differ at different historical places and times).

Each of these is constructed and sustained by a particular set of material practices. For example, physically going to church on Sunday is a material practice that helps sustain the Christian social relation as does bowing one's head to pray, the practice of physically exchanging money for goods sustains the current mode of economic relationships, the common practice of treating male children differently than female children sustains the existing gender differences, and so on. Consciousness, as Althusser points out in the quotation above, is the "relation between" these relations and it functions as a kind of "second degree relation." His point here is that this 'second degree' relation is the (paradoxically unconscious) *product* of all of these disparate relations and

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[58] Ibid.

the practices that make them up. It holds them together and makes them appear to those that are subject to them as if they are natural, non-contingent, and necessary. Here Althusser writes:

> All ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion…above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them. What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.[59]

The social relations (and their material practices) in this sense 'produce' the consciousness of the subject in such a way that she, in her 'imaginary' relationship to them, *consciously lives these relations as her world*, but this happens at a level that is below the level of her consciousness. It is, instead, the altogether unconscious production—through the material social relations that she participates in—of her consciousness as her lived relation to the world. The claim that Althusser is making here is that consciousness itself—one's subjective awareness of oneself and one's world—is always already ideological. Ideology is then, produced by the real social relations, the material practices in which we are always enmeshed, but at the same time ideology misrepresents these relations, that is, makes them appear as static, natural and necessary.

Traditionally, the concept of ideology is of a set of (mistaken) beliefs that one has about her world which can be overcome and somehow 'set right.' We have seen (both in the last chapter and so far in this chapter) that for Althusser, this is an impoverished understanding of ideology as it neglects its fundamental role in our subjective awareness. For Althusser, ideology is not simply something that we believe or are trapped in. It is

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[59] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" reprinted in *Mapping Ideology* edited by Slavoj Zizek (New York and London: Verso, 1994). 125 [Hereafter "Ideology"]

rather something that we as subjects actively produce (and reproduce) in our engagement (our lived relation) with our world and material practices that form this engagement. The distortion that exists in ideology is not, for Althusser, simple false belief about the world (as there is no real falsity of the beliefs themselves- they are simply that which emerges out of material practice), the distortion found in ideology is that which arises from its inability to recognize its historical nature, that it is not eternal, nor necessary but rather the result of a set of historically contingent activities/practices which are themselves subject to change. Ideology merely *reproduces* its conditions and in doing so, denies access to both its status as historical and its nature as contingent. This is the 'imaginary' relation that is produced by ideology. It is here, à propos the 'imaginary relation' that ideological consciousness constitutes between the individual and her conditions, that Althusser's reading of Spinoza becomes relevant as it is—Althusser's reading of— Spinoza's understanding of the imagination that serves as the reference point.[60]

Section Two

Althusser most often appeals to the Appendix of Book one of *The Ethics* when referring to the Influence of Spinoza on his own theory of the imaginary.[61] We should recall that here Spinoza argues (as he does throughout Book One) that the idea that there

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[60] It should be pointed out here that it is not simply in relation to Spinoza that Althusser cultivates a theory of the imagination, it is also the case that his understanding of this is influenced by his many correspondences with, and reading of Jacques Lacan's concept of the imagination, It is however the case that Althusser himself cites Spinoza as his inspiration for this (rather than Lacan) and that in the end it does seem that Spinoza's understanding of this is closer to Althusser's. For a good discussion of this difference, see Caroline Wiliams, *Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001). Especially Chapters 2 and 3.

[61] See, for instance, Althusser, *ESC*, 135-141, and the late essay, "The Only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza" in *The New Spinoza (Theory out of Bounds),* edited by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). 3-18

is a final cause (a *Telos*) in Nature is a strictly human invention, that we perceive things in Nature from our human perspective and attribute things to it that simply do not inhere in the natural world. The *telos* that we see in nature is our own application, for as Spinoza argues:

> This doctrine of Final Causes turns Nature completely upside-down, for it regards as an effect that which is fact a cause and vice versa. Again, it makes that which is by nature first to be last; and finally that which is highest and most perfect is held to be most imperfect.[62]

Spinoza's point here is that when we look to the world and 'see' order, and purpose we commonly regard it as an *effect* of a hidden cause that exists in the natural world that grants that purposiveness to nature (like a creator God, who is both the origin and end of all that is, or simply the well ordered purposiveness of nature itself) however, this 'effect' is itself a cause of humanity's mistaken belief in final causes. What we see as an effect of some final, well-ordered cause, is not the effect of such a thing but rather that which causes in us the belief that there are such causes. Hence it is not human reason that is in control and truly comprehends its world when it recognizes purposiveness, but instead humanity's belief in such a *telos* is caused by its (necessarily) mistaken relationship to its existence. For Althusser's Spinoza, the necessarily mistaken relationship (and the teleological perspective that attends it) is the result, as Althusser argues, of the 'illusion of the subject' that Spinoza discerns.[63]

As Spinoza argues, part of what it is to be human—in one's *lived* relationship to one's world—is to take oneself to be the center of action and to "act always with an end

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[62] Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics* in *The Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*. Translated by Sam Shirley, Edited by Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1992) 59 [Hereafter *The Ethics*]
[63] Althusser, *ESC*. 135

in view, to wit, the advantage that [we] seek."[64] Since this is part of what it is to be

human (as we *live* our humanity anyway) we come to think that other things in the world

follow this same process (and like us, have themselves, goals and purposes for which

they exist and act). When we encounter things that seem not have such purposes, we

attribute them to a 'divine' intelligence that in fact does have a purpose in mind (one that

we simply cannot comprehend). Because we (as humans) tend to look to things in nature

as means to fulfilling our own purposes, we come to think that this divine intelligence has

created nature to fulfill our needs that the natural world and its events have such a

purpose. Here Spinoza writes:

> When men became convinced that everything that is created is created on their
> behalf, they were bound to consider the most important quality in every individual
> thing that which was most useful to them, and to regard as of the highest
> excellence all those things by which they were most benefitted. Hence they came
> from these abstract notions to explain the natures of things: Good, Bad, Order,
> Confusion, Hot, Cold, Beauty, Ugliness; and since they believe that they are free,
> the following abstract notions came into being: Praise, Blame, Right, Wrong.[65]

It is in the space of these and other abstract notions that we form and place on the

world, based on our own notions about what benefits us, that we come to consciousness

both of ourselves, and the world in which we live. We (mistakenly) think that these

notions are in fact *in* the world itself—as a natural part of it, stemming from its inherent

purposiveness—rather than the result of a process of mystification that is inherent to our

subjective awareness (and one who's particular content is ultimately determined not by

us, but is the effect of the world on us). Thus Spinoza argues that humans do not

understand that this is a subjective mystification. We do not see that this is an effect of

our 'lived'—our conscious subjective—relationship to a world in which we find

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[64] Spinoza, *The Ethics.* 57
[65] Spinoza, *The Ethics.* 60

ourselves (an effect that is conditioned by causes that escape us- because we take them to

be effects themselves of the 'purposiveness' of nature). It is in this way that humans

come to "Mistake their imagination for their intellect, they are firmly convinced that there

is order in things, ignorant as they are of things and their own nature."[66] In other words,

our lived/conscious/subjective relationship to our world is a mystification of the real

relations that underlie and determine our subjective awareness. Spinoza continues:

> It will suffice at this point if I take as my basis what must be universally admitted, that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, that they have a desire to seek their own advantage, a desire of which they are conscious. From this it follows that men believe they are free, precisely because they are conscious of their volitions and desires; yet concerning the causes that have determined them to desire and will, they have not the faintest idea, because they are ignorant of them.[67]

As we should be in a position to see now, what Spinoza gives us in this theory of

the imaginary, according to Althusser, is a nascent theory of ideology; one that excavates

the connection between a subjectivity that is ideologically constructed and a subjective

belief in freedom, purposes, and teleology. As Althussser puts it, "Spinoza showed us the

secret alliance between Subject and Goal."[68] Furthermore, on Althusser's account of

Spinoza, we also get a theory of ideology that shows us how ideology is not simply a

mistaken relation between the individual and the individual's world (one that can be

righted by a proper re-orientation of one's awareness), but rather a theory of ideology that

shows us how it is that one's ideological consciousness is materially produced and

materially invested through the practices in which one engages. Here Althusser writes:

> Spinoza's "theory" rejected every illusion about ideology…but at the same time it refused to treat ideology as a simple error, or as a naked ignorance, because it

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 57 my emphasis
[68] Althusser, *ESC*. 136-137

> based the system of this imaginary phenomenon on the relation of men to the world "expressed" by the state of their bodies. This *materialism of the imaginary* opened a way to a surprising conception of the First Level of Knowledge: not at all, in fact, as a "piece of knowledge", but as the material world of men as they live it, that of their concrete and historical existence.[69]

For Althusser, Spinoza's thought on subjectivity's imaginary relationship to its world (and the purposes that it constructs in this relation) does not simply make an anthropological claim, that is, Spinoza (according to Althusser) is not simply saying that it is human nature to add purposes where there are none, but that *the ways* in which our subjective imaginary relation to our world are produced (and hence the kinds of purposes we come to see in the world) are themselves historically and materially produced. Althusser realizes that this is an unorthodox reading of Spinoza, but as he points out, "to be a heretical Spinozist is almost orthodox Spinozism, if Spinoza can be one of the greatest lessons in heresy the world has ever seen!"[70] In other words, Althusser readily admits to using Spinoza for his purposes—he rejects, or at least ignores, the portions of Spinoza's corpus in which Spinoza's views about our imaginary relation to our world become anthropological, for instance—but it is still this heretical Spinoza whom inspires and grounds this portion of Althusser's revision of ideology and the materialist doctrine that he constructs. For our purposes, it matters little whether or not Althusser gets Spinoza right, what we are interested in is making sense of Althusser's claims to be a Spinozist and what that ultimately entails. Now that we have some sense for how Althusser uses Spinoza in making sense of his revision of the concept of ideology, we should turn back to Spinoza, to see what it is in Spinoza's thought that leads Althusser to see this type of materialism emerging from it.

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[69] Ibid., 136
[70] Ibid., 132

Our own nature is, according to Spinoza, one that is determined to be as it is by forces that exist outside of us, forces that impinge not only on our bodily existence but our mental life as well. We as natural beings are a part of a larger whole that is Nature, and Nature (or God in Spinoza's parlance) is a giant mechanistic system of causes and effects. Furthermore, according to Spinoza's strict Anti-Cartesianism, there is no real separation between mind and body, rather, "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, a body actually existing."[71] As pointed out above, the body is, as a part of nature, subject to the forces exerted on it by other existing bodies and the events of which they are a part. The mind is, like the body, determined to be what it is, not by acting as its own cause. Its nature is, rather, the result (the effect) of causes that exist outside of it:

> The human body is affected by other external bodies in a great many ways and is so structured that it can affect external bodies in a great many ways. *But the human mind must perceive all that happens in the human body…* The idea which constitutes the formal being of the human mind is the idea of the body.[72]

Our mental life takes on the character that it does, according to Spinoza, not of its own freewill, but rather as a result of that which happens to our bodies, of those things which we physically experience and are a part of (those external things which 'affect' the body). Further, since the individual human body is the kind of thing that it is, namely a physical entity that is itself acted on by other bodies, it too is not truly a singular entity, separate from all other bodies. We are, as Spinoza argues, "passive insofar as we are a part of nature which cannot be conceived independently of other parts."[73] The 'part' that is my individual body, is not separate from other parts of Nature and is thereby tied to these

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[71] Spinoza, *The Ethics*. 71
[72] Ibid., 76 my emphasis
[73] Ibid., 156

other parts insofar as they act on me as causes and are effects which flow from my causal efficacy.

What we are as individuals, is again, the result of the world in which we find ourselves and that which exists in it (materially) at the time that we come into the world. Our minds—that is our consciousness—are determined by our bodily existence, and our bodily existence is determined by the particular set of (material) causes that impinge on it at a given point in history. These causes are both physical and social, there are historically existing social 'bodies,' or material 'institutions' in Althusser's parlance, that act on us as individuals and help construct our understanding of ourselves. Recall again the claims about the material and social practices in which we find ourselves in our world—it is through these practices and the beliefs that are constructed out of them that I come to understand both myself and my world (that I *live* my world). These practices both pre-exist my individual existence and are the material out of which I build my own knowledge of myself and the world in which I find myself. This 'social body' is that to which I am connected in a Spinozist fashion (both bodily and mentally- it forms the background against which I come to conscious awareness, and out of which I derive epistemic and conceptual material).

The imaginary relation that we have to the material substrate in which we are defined, is for Spinoza a reversal of the proper order of things, as it is for Althusser—I imagine that I am both free in relation to this substrate (that I choose it), and that this material is simply the natural order of things, the way things fundamentally (and epistemologically) are. In my ideological imaginary, I miss the historical nature of both the material relations that exist and the conceptual (mental) knowledge that attends it, as

well as my entrapment in, and construction by, that particular material constellation in which I find myself.

It is here again that we can see the importance of Spinoza's thought for Althusser's materialism. Not only do we get "an abstract theory of ideology" from Spinoza but further, Spinoza's thought represents a materialist anti-humanism *par excellence*. Consciousness on this reading, is nothing more than a 'second-degree' imaginary relation that has no existence of its own—it is not free from that which determines its awareness (at least not in its everyday existence)—, it is an 'idea' of the body (which is itself determined by Nature, or the constellation of bodies in causal relations that exist at a given time), formed as it is as a result of those material causes that act on the body, and those causes can be (and are) seen in an Althusserian light as including the historically constructed material practices and the material social institutions in which these practices are encased, which engage us and contribute to our conception of our world, and our conception of ourselves as a part of it. Again, we should be sure to note that this is Althusser's reading of Spinoza, it in no way claims to be the definitive reading of Spinoza. It is, as I have noted above (and as Althusser himself notes), a 'heretical' reading of Spinoza.

We now can turn back to some of the discussion of Althusser's claims about a split in Marx's thinking from the first chapter in order to further see how it is that Althusser conceives of the (Spinozist, or heretical Spinozist) connections between (material) body and mind, individual bodies and social bodies, and ultimately how this plays into his view of consciousness' ideological construction. Recall that, as we saw in

the last chapter, the Althusserian claim is that Marx's thought began in a particular

ideology (that of a kind of Feuerbachiansim). Althusser points out here that:

> Marx did not choose to be born to the thought German history had concentrated in
> its university education, nor to think its ideological world. He grew up in this
> world, in it he learned to live and move…the young Marx emerged into the
> *thought world* of his own time, to think in it in his turn, and to enter into the
> exchange and debate with the thoughts of his time which was to be his whole life
> as an ideologue.[74]

The key point to note in the passage above is the claim about the university education as

a concentration of a particular way of thinking. This education is what made the young

Marx what he was according to Althusser. This is to say that it is the education, which

produced the consciousness of the Young Marx. This educational apparatus is the

'material' out of which the Young Marx as thinker 'emerged.'[75] The German university is

then, a material representative (a Spinozist social body) in which this knowledge had its

life, and it is by being engaged by the practices involved in attending the German

university (both physically and mentally) at the time, that Marx came to think the ways

the he did in his youth. In this reading of Marx's development, we can see again

Althusser's conception of the material-ideological construction of consciousness itself.

Consciousness is, as we have seen, the secondary relation, between the material

relation, between the individual's body and causes that act on it. Consciousness as this

'secondary relation' is in fact a kind of ideological distortion but not as something that

can be thrown off through a proper mode of critical awareness. It is rather a distortion—

or a constitutive imaginary—that is necessary and constitutive of any consciousness

whatsoever and one that is lived (and produced) in and by the very material practices that

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[74] Althusser *FM*. 64 emphasis in the original
[75] Of course, it is not the only material, it is part of a larger social structure that was made up of many
material apparatuses and practices in which the educational apparatus in its given state was enmeshed.

it embodies. This is the point that is being made when Althusser claims that: "*the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology only insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*."[76] As ideological, consciousness is distorted because consciousness' knowledge (and its world) appears to it as natural, static, and non-historical. This ideological mode of awareness is only ever partially overcome in that ideology is never something that we can be rid of and new modes of ideology arise as old modes are overcome.[77] There is then, a kind of symbiotic relationship between one's subjectivity and ideology: it is in ideology that the subject is constituted but at the same time it is the constituted subject that sustains (or reproduces) ideology. Althusser's theory of interpellation is meant to further explain this point.

One is 'interpellated' or 'hailed' by ideology when one recognizes himself as the 'subject' of its call or the one that is being hailed. Althusser's classic example here is of the policeman who hails a passerby on the street by saying "hey you there!" It is in the physical act of turning around and responding to the hail that one becomes a 'subject" and is thus interpellated by the hail because as Althusser points out, "he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). We are, argues Althusser, always in a state of being interpellated in this way. By engaging in any material social practice we admit (unconsciously) that we are the 'subject' of such a practice and in doing this, we *become* the kind of subject that engages in that practice and thus are constituted by it. For instance, by engaging in the

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[76] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Mapping Ideology*. 129 (emphasis in the original text).

[77] Again- this is what we learn from Bachelard- we can, as scientists, overcome portions of the 'web' of positive beliefs through scientific practice, but in doing so, we replace portions of that web with other beliefs that can come to function in an ideological fashion.

practice of taking my comprehensive exam in order to move on to the next level in my progress towards gaining my doctorate, I recognize myself as the kind of being who takes such an exam, this is to say I respond to the hail of that particular practice with a 'yes, that is me!" In doing this, I become interpellated as a particular kind of subject and at the same time, I sustain not just the practice of comprehensive exams, but also the entire network of practices that surround the institution of the university. Thus, I am both interpellated as a subject by the ideological 'apparatus' of the university and in the recognition of myself as the kind of being that responds to such a hail with a "yes, that is me" I prop up the apparatus itself (and consequently many other social apparatuses that are linked to such an institution).

This, as we should be able to see now, is a process that is always happening, I am always being interpellated by the social practices that I engage in thus I am always already the subject of ideology. When I go to the grocery store, I am interpellated by the ideological practices that I engage in while I am there—politeness, using a shopping cart or basket, paying for my food, etc.—and I generally (unconsciously) respond to this interpellative process with the recognition of myself in such practices. When I am driving and I accidentally blow a stop sign, I find myself interpellated as a subject who is guilty (even when there is no one around to catch me—it is enough that I feel that moment of fear as I look to see if there is a policeman lurking anywhere) and I recognize myself as such. We should keep in mind that in all of this, my recognition of myself as the subject of ideology is not just the recognition of myself as such a subject at that moment. Rather, in my constitutive imaginary I recognize—or misrecognize—myself as always having been such a subject. This is an important point not to be missed, when I am interpellated

and I recognize myself as the one being hailed, part and parcel of the recognition is the misrecognition that I have *always-already* been that subject that is subjected to such practices and is beholden to them.

In this way, as Althusser points out, "Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always already subjects*."[78] Not only is it the case that since we are constantly in a process of being interpellated we are always already subjects, Althusser also argues that though ideological practices may differ at different historical times and places, *the structure of interpellation is ever present*. This is what is meant by his claim that "Ideology has no history."[79] Our preceding discussion of Althusser's reading of Spinoza should help make sense of this claim, we always find ourselves in an ideological/imaginary relation to our world (in our conscious lived existence) in which we take ourselves to be free beings, but that conscious existence is in reality, the result of the material/external causes that act on and interpellate us as the beings that we come to take ourselves to be. We always find ourselves interpellated as subjects by some grouping of social relations and the practices which make them up (apparatuses in Althusser's terminology) and while these change as history changes, the process of our constitution by them—and the constitutive imaginary itself as the lived relationship to the world— remains stable.

We should, however, be careful in using the word 'structure' here, as it smacks of the accusations that continue to be leveled at the Althusserian project that it is nothing

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[78] Ibid., 132
[79] Ibid. 120

more than a kind of Structuralist Marxism, accusations that Althusser himself thinks are false and miss the importance of Spinoza in his thought. I want to now briefly turn back to the claim in the quotation that began this chapter. Recall that in it, Althusser defends himself against the charge of structuralism by citing his 'Spinozism,' we are now in a position to see what he means in making this claim and how he thinks what he is doing is not structuralist, or at least not simply structuralism as applied to Marxism. Furthermore, a discussion of this will illuminate, for us, the question which has remained in the background until now: what role the claim to contingency plays in Althusser's materialism and why it is so important.

Section Three

The standard way of understanding the Althusserian position of anti-humanism, is by reading it in relation to the structuralist movement then underway in much of the intellectual scene in both France and on the continent more generally.[80] We might, however, challenge this view by thinking through the implications of the foregoing. If it is the case that Althusser draws the inspiration for his particular brand of Marxist anti-humanism from the likes of Bachelardian philosophy of science, backed up by a novel reading of Spinoza's materialism, then it seems that, as he himself has repeatedly tried to point out, his own brand of anti-humanism cannot simply be reduced to a kind of structuralism. As Warren Montag points out, Althusser began a serious study of structuralism as early as the academic year 1962-63 in which he gave a year-long seminar

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[80] See For Example, Ted Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism: Althusser and his Influence*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

on the subject.[81] Among the students that participated in this seminar were Pierre Macherey, Etienne Balibar, and Jacques Ranciere. Each of these students produced works out of this seminar that were critical of structuralism in a variety of ways.[82] It is also during this year that the foundations for Althusser's own criticisms of, and attempts to distance himself from, the structuralist movement were laid.

To begin to make sense of this criticism (and its foundations), we should recall our discussion of Bachelard in Chapter One. According to Bachelard, the proper scientific attitude is the one that remains open, that rejects the seemingly settled nature of scientific 'fact,' that seeks to "disrupt the habits of objective knowledge and make reason uneasy."[83] This, again as we saw in chapter one, is because, as Bachelard points out, 'objective' knowledge is always in a certain sense ideological, and forms an 'epistemological obstacle' to scientific practice. Therefore, since our very subjective awareness is first conditioned by a knowing that is taken to be objective (and hence is itself, conditioned by these epistemological obstacles), Bachelard argues that "we must constantly strive towards a desubjectification" in order to gain access to the 'new' in science.[84] That is, we must continually interrogate this subjective awareness (and its attendant conceptual schemes) as it always harbors ideological potential.

Though structuralism itself gives one the philosophical tools to effect such a desubjectification and hence to think the outside of the human 'subject' as that which determines (rather than is determined by), it has its own problems. First, structuralism

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[81] See Warren Montag's introduction his edited collection of Macherey's work, entitled *In a Materialist Way*, Translated by Ted Stolze (New York and London: Verso, 1998) especially 4-7.
[82] I will look at specifically at some of Macherey's work in this regard below.
[83] Bachelard, *The Formation of Scientific Mind*, Translated by Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002). 245
[84] Ibid., 246

itself merely displaces the category of 'subject' from the individual human to the structure, leaving intact both an origin (the origin of things is to be found in the structure) and an end. And second, in doing so, the concept of 'structure' becomes ideological insofar as it becomes a part of 'objective' science and thus, objective knowledge, and thereby remains uninterrogated by those who make use of it. As we are now in a position to begin to see, structuralism itself—when treated as a philosophical movement—is nothing more than a traditional philosophical theory, which as any traditional philosophy, is both idealist and ideological in its purported claims to be the 'right' or 'correct' (non-historical) way to understand social existence. To put it in Bachelardian parlance, Althusser's main charge against 'structuralism' is that it had (in his time) become an ideological 'epistemological obstacle' in the theoretical pursuits of his contemporaries (and in his own early work as well).[85]

Here Althusser writes that we must remember that, "Structuralism [is] born of theoretical problems encountered by scientists in their practical work (in linguistics from the time of Saussure, in social anthropology from the time of Boas and Levi-Strauss, in psychoanalysis, etc.)."[86] Thus it is (like any scientific practice) a historically situated theoretical phenomenon, born of a particular conjunctural set of problems and questions. Furthermore, Structuralism is not a unified body of theory, with a unified conceptual apparatus, but rather "a jumble of vague themes that only realizes its ultimate tendency under certain definite conditions."[87] This is to say again, that there is no 'Structuralism' but rather certain structuralisms that are responses to *particular* problems and questions

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[85] He thus, uses his own philosophical method to interrogate and critique his earlier philosophical positions. This is the General project of the book that we have been citing here as *ESC*.
[86] Althusser, *ESC*., 128-129. Montag notes that this critique was founded in the seminar referred to above (much earlier than it was published here). See Montag, "Introduction" in Macherey, *In a Materialist Way*. 4
[87] Ibid.

that arise in a given conjuncture or historical moment. To treat these Structuralisms in any other way, for instance, as *the* way to understand social phenomena, (which as we have already noted, Althusser thinks many of its own practitioners do) is to turn structuralism into a traditional philosophy, to neglect its historical nature as an epistemological phenomena, to neglect the specificity of its existence and arrival on the scene. This is to make it ideological and non-scientific.

Althusser makes this point in his criticism of Levi-Strauss' structuralist account of social phenomena such as kinship, which he claims vacillates between two mistaken postions: The first is that of a bad (read- ideological) formalism in which kinship structures are the material 'incarnation' of a 'logical principle' found in the 'human spirit' or the structure of the brain as such—he calls this Levi-Strauss' "materialist side, which combines a binary linguistic approach with a cybernetic conception of the human brain." [88] The problem here, is that this brand of materialism assumes a static human nature (or 'Spirit') *vis-à-vis* logical/mental structures that are expressed in various ways in differing groups. Althusser is thinking here of passages in Levi-Strauss such as the one in which he, in the midst of attempting to account for the existence, and common roots of, differing social practices appeals to the (non-historical) notion of a structure of the human mind. Here is one example of such a passage, in it Levi-Strauss is attempting to make sense of the existence of "dual organization" structures of social phenomena:[89]

> Dual organization is not in the first place an institution… It is above all a principle of organization, capable of widely varying, and in particular, of more or less elaborated applications. In some cases the principle applies only to sporting competition. In others it extends to political life…in others again, to religious and

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[88] Althusser, "On Levi-Strauss" in *HC*. 25-26
[89] A Dual Organization is when a society has a practice, or multiple practices in which the society is divided in half and each member of that society is a part of one group or the other.

ceremonial life. Finally, it may extend to the marriage system. In all of these forms, there is a difference in degree, not of kind; of generality and not of type. *To understand their common basis, inquiry must be directed to certain fundamental structures of the human mind, rather than to some privileged region of the world or to a certain period in the history of civilization.*[90]

The second mistaken position according to Althusser is that of a kind of functionalism.

To this he writes:

> If [according to Levi-Strauss] certain rules governing marriage and so forth exist in primitive societies, it is so *that* these societies can live, survive, and so on. (a functionalist biologist subjectivism: there is a 'social unconscious' which ensures exactly as an acute intelligence would, that primitive society possesses the means it needs to live and survive. Just as one must criticize this functionalism, which on the theoretical plane, invariably takes the form of a subjectivism which confers upon 'society' a form of existence of a subject endowed with intentions and goals, one must criticize and reject the concept of the *unconscious*, its indispensible correlative, of which Levi-Strauss is compelled to make liberal use. I would go so far as to say that the concept of the unconscious is no more a scientific concept in psychoanalysis than in sociology, or anthropology or history…)[91]

To be sure, Althusser does not mean that we should reject the concept of the unconscious altogether, he cannot mean this, as he makes extensive use of this concept himself (as we have seen in the foregoing). The concept of a 'social unconscious' that Althusser accuses Levi-Strauss of making use of (and thus falling into functionalism) is, of course, a Durkheimian one (though for Durkheim, this is called a 'collective consciousness,' not a 'social unconscious'). It is certainly something that Levi-Strauss is aware of and builds his theory out of, but it is also something which Althusser himself is both aware of and, at times, is also indebted to. I wish to look primarily at this second criticism of Levi-Strauss and Structuralism (though we will have brief reasons to return to the first problem posed for Levi-Strauss by Althusser), as it is here that we can best see how Althusser seeks to

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[90] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Translated by James Bell, Jon Von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). 75 emphasis mine
[91] Ibid.

distance himself from it and ultimately gain further insight into how Althusser's own

project—that of aleatory materialism—attempts to avoid such a problem.

We should begin by looking a bit further at both Levi-Strauss' and Althusser's

debt to Durkheim. The Durkheimian concept of a 'collective consciousness' is drawn in

distinction from that of individual consciousness and it is this collective consciousness

(or the social consciousness) that is to be studied when seeking an account of social

existence. As Stephen Turner has pointed out, according to Durkheim, "the form of

consciousness is determined by its content, and the content of collective consciousness

differs from the that of individual consciousness."[92] This is to say, that the Durkheimian

model of social analysis rejects the subjective viewpoints of individuals in a given society

as offering a valid account of social life. A proper understanding of social life comes

from the rules and laws that act as unconscious determinants of the forms of

consciousness that individuals in a given society come to have. This conception of social

existence is very influential for both Althusser's account of the conscious life of

individuals—think here of the theory of interpellation described above, it is the 'social

consciousness' and its rules that form the background against which individuals come to

awareness and through which they become recognizable to both themselves and others as

members of a society—and Levi-Strauss' studies of kinship relations and mythologies, in

which, as Turner shows us, Levi-Strauss "present(s) the view that these collectively

shared practices…must be seen as complex systems of signification, with sets of rules, or

"logics," of their own, which it is the task of the sociologist and anthropologist to

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[92] Stephen Turner, "Structuralist and Participant's View Sociologies" in *The American Sociologist* Vol. 9 (August, 1974) 143-146.

decipher."[93] Unlike both Levi-Strauss and Althusser however, Durkheim thought that deciphering these social 'logics' meant coming to understand the underlying causal laws that formed the relations between individuals, their practices, and the 'social consciousness.' Neither Levi-Strauss, nor Althusser hold this view of the proper mode of explaining social phenomena. As Turner points out elsewhere:

> For Levi-Strauss, the 'causal law' explanatory conception is replaced by a very different view… [For Levi-Strauss] to explain is to discover an order of relations that turns a set of bits, which have limited significance on their own, into an intelligible whole. This order may be termed 'the structure'. It is only when considered as a whole that the structure is intelligible…[94]

In other words, looking for causal connections á la Durkheimian approach, misses the complexity that is truly explanatory of social phenomena (the structure) because it limits itself to the conceptual apparatus of causality. Rather, one must come to understand the relations that exist between social phenomena, such as social practices, that form the structural whole and can explain their existence and role in a given society—So here causality matters little in scientific explanation- one must first understand relationality. Something similar could be said about the Althusserian project- Recall our earlier characterization of consciousness as a 'relation between relations.'[95] For Althusser, like Levi-Strauss, what matters for proper social explanation is a proper understanding of the (structural) relations between various practices that make up a social structure. The Althusserian critique of Levi-Strauss is, as noted above, that Levi-Strauss (and hence structuralism as a movement) goes wrong when he/it becomes insufficiently aware of the fact that the 'structured whole' that structuralism seeks to describe is not a unified whole

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Turner "Complex Organizations as Savage Tribes" in *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 14 Number 3 (July 1977) 99-125.
[95] See Chapter One.

'endowed with a conscious existence' for which the relations that make up a given structure exist, and which is perpetuated (read- benefits) by these relations (hence the worry about a kind of functionalism creeping into the account). For this we can return to Althusser's Spinoza.

Thinking of the Spinozist conception of consciousness itself as conditioned by the imaginary relation between itself and that of which it is conscious (and the materialism which is called into existence by this view, that is the materialism of the conditioning of mind by the body and the individual body, by that of other bodies which are themselves connected to all other causes that exist in nature) we can begin to see just how it is that Althusser's aleatory materialism is both an anti-humanism and attempts to avoid the more problematic aspects of structuralism: Though, as we have seen, it posits the conscious world of the human as a world that results from the coming together of a select grouping of elements, the elements of the materially existing bodily practices in which we engage (or rather by which we are engaged and so constituted), it categorically refuses to attribute a telos—even an immanent one—to the existence of what is. There is no 'social subject' doing the determining or being benefitted by the existence and grouping of a set of practices for Althusser, the concept of a social subject itself is a historico-ideological one. We can see this point, and how it relates to his Spinozism by making a detour through Althusser's conception of the discipline of history (and his critique of a certain type of history).

Althusser argues that there are two types (or 'modes' in his parlance) of historical investigation. The first is what he calls "the History of the traditional historians" and it is

in this category that he places Levi-Strauss' ethnological research. Those who practice this type of history:

> …Talk about 'laws' of history because they consider only the accomplished fact of past history. History in this case, presents itself as a wholly static object all of whose determinations can be studied like those of a physical object; it is an object that is dead because it is past.[96]

This form of history is one that Althusser terms ideological. It is ideological because it is unaware that those 'laws' that the historian (or ethnologist) discerns in her investigations and to which she subjects that historical analysis are themselves imposed on her object (her historical research)—and on her subjective awareness itself—as identifiable laws by the given conjuncture of which *she* is a part—they are not the 'laws' that the particular historical object that she studies existed under. They are her 'laws,' only discernable in her time, and resulting from the material substrate that contributes to her conscious awareness. These 'laws' are retroactively read into the history which the historian investigates and attempts to account for.

To recognize this, is to do a second kind of history according to Althusser, the kind of history that Althusser terms *Geschichte,* which as he describes it, "designates not an accomplished history, but a history in the present [*au présent*]."[97] Those who practice history *au présent* recognize that their historical research and its insights is determined by their own conjuncture—by the historical time and place in which they live and out of whose material the historian is created (that is, she do not think that she is uncovering origins or eternal truths—to think this is to remain trapped in Ideology). Further defining the conditions of a given moment or conjuncture Althusser continues:

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[96] Althusser, "Philosophy and Marxism" in *PE*. 263
[97] Ibid.

It is necessary to bear in mind that 'conjuncture' means 'conjunction', that is, an aleatory encounter of elements—in part, existing elements, but also unforeseeable elements. Every conjuncture is a singular case, as are all historical individualities, as is everything that exists.[98]

One way of making sense of the claims made here about the aleatory nature of a given conjuncture (and hence the contingent nature of a given 'historical law' that is allegedly discerned by practitioners of the first kind of history, Levi-Strauss included) is to look to Althusser's critique of Hegel's system as in it we see the foundations of the point that is being made here.[99]

As Althusser understands it, Hegel's version of a dialectical history relies on a conception of historical creation and change as explained by the existence of one 'simple' contradiction. For Hegel (according to Althusser) the dialectical motor of history is contradiction—the contradiction between consciousness' "sensuous existence and its knowledge."[100] What drives both the given existence of particular social formations and their mutation and change is the contradiction that arises between a given individual's (and a given culture's) understanding or self concept and the way that that self concept plays itself out in that individual's/culture's lived expression of that awareness. To put the point briefly (and perhaps a bit roughly), on Hegel's conception of history, particular historical individuals come into the world as members of particular societies that have particular sets of ideals through which they understand themselves and their world and in accord with which they seek to define themselves. In the actual putting into practice of such ideals, these individuals and societies come to understand the real meaning of them

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[98] Ibid., 264
[99] To be sure, this critique is one that is launched against Althusser's understanding of Hegel- which will be problematized in later chapters of this dissertation. Specifically when we get to Žižek's reading of Hegel in chapter 5.
[100] Althusser, *FM*. 101

and it is often the case that there is a contradiction that emerges between the social ideal

that individuals seek to embody and the ideals themselves as they become materialized,

or get lived in that social world.

As noted above, on this reading of Hegel's account of things, it is usually one

fundamental contradiction that defines and gives body to a given social formation.

Coming to consciousness of that given contradiction is to come to consciousness of the

real meaning of that ideal in its fully objective existence—which is ultimately to change

one's conscious awareness. This change, then, in turn affects the whole of society as it

attempts to come to terms with the contradiction that it experiences. Althusser cites

Hegel's understanding of the emergence (and downfall) of Roman society as an example

of this theory:

> Rome: its mighty history, its institutions, its crises and ventures, are nothing but
> the temporal manifestation of the internal principle of the *abstract legal
> personality*, and then its destruction. Of course, this internal principle contains *as
> echoes* the principle of each of the historical formations it has superseded, but as
> echoes of itself—that is why it too has only one centre, the centre of all the past
> worlds conserved in its memory; that is why it is *simple*.[101]

Hegel reduces a complex history to the existence of one principle, one 'law' that

determines and defines all of the complexity. We should recall the claims made in the

first chapter against Cohen's version of Marxism. The same problem exists for Hegel (on

Althusser's account)—the analysis yields a simple teleological principle, which defines

the origin and the end and presents itself as a necessary development. Again we

encounter an idealism (an ideology). This idealism, however, is one that is conditioned by

a misrecognition of historical analysis, it is a doing of history that thinks it is identifying

objective explanatory historical tendencies and structures but is in fact, only identifying

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[101] Ibid. 102

history as it is in the present, or was, in Hegel's present, at his conjuncture, from within his given historical moment. A moment in which the identification of the 'simple' principle of development and change (the abstract legal persona) was identified (and identifiable) and retro-actively posited as the guiding principle of historical creation and change. In other words, the mistake that Hegel makes here is the same mistake that the Humanist Marxists make in reading the early Marx and the late Marx as offering the same theoretical position: they (both Hegel and the humanist Marxists) stand at the end of a particular historical development and read the end back into the beginning, retroactively conferring a unified development from origin to end on a subject that does not in itself have such a teleological principle.

On an Althusserian account of things, Hegel's given conjuncture (or the given conjuncture of the humanist Marxists), as is the case with any given conjuncture, and the 'law' that becomes identifiable within it, however, was/is itself overdetermined by a number of factors that are not reducible to a simple principle or a simple contradiction, rather as Althusser argues, a given conjuncture is made up of a, "vast accumulation of contradictions…some of which are radically heterogeneous—of different origins, different sense, different levels and points of application—but nevertheless merge into a ruptural unity" and form the background conceptual/material apparatus that the historian uses to make sense of the past. [102] Furthermore, to read the problematic of a given conjuncture back into a past conjuncture is to mis-recognize the heterogeneity of contradictions that exist at any given time, the radical contingency of the particular combination of elements that come together to make up a given conjuncture, and the

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[102] Ibid., 100.

discontinuous and ruptural nature of historical development itself. This is also the

problem that exits for a Levi-Straussian, and more generally, a structuralist, account of

social phenomena—in making such claims, Levi-Strauss runs the risk of retroactively

positing an objective and a-historical 'law' of social organization, one that becomes

identifiable as a 'law' in his own conjuncture, namely the 'law' of 'structure' to exist and

determine the social space, and one that comes to have the status of a kind of non-

historical scientific 'truth.'

       As noted earlier, Althusser gave a year long seminar on structuralism in 1961-62.

Out of it came Pierre Macherey's first publication, a piece on Canguilhem's philosophy of

Science called "Georges Canguilhem's Philosophy of Science: Epistemology and the

History of Science."[103] Althusser wrote a short forward to it for its publication. Why this

is important is that in the piece, Macherey makes the same argument (via Canguilhem)

about contemporary views of the history of science that Althusser makes above in

relation to history more generally: that they always see a *telos* retrospectively in the

'progress' of the sciences, that this ultimately comes from a present view implanting the

progressive story in the history- Macherey here cites Canguilhem's study of the concept

of 'reflex' wherein Canguilhem debunks the claims by historians of science that Descartes

had a theory of the reflex that was later worked out by the progress of the sciences (the

progress of reason). Rather the basic claim is that this (and other scientific concepts) are

invested with ideological components (think again here of Bachelard's web of beliefs)

and through (proper) scientific practice they become disburdened of their (conjunctural)

ideological components- but this process radically changes the content of the concepts

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[103] Reprinted in, *In a Materialist Way*. 161-187.

themselves such that they come to have radically different content (so- the concept of

'reflex' in Descartes is not the same as the concept of 'reflex' in the biological sciences of

the late 1950s early 1960s in Canguilhem's example, but we fail to see this from our

perspective). Once generated, these 'new' concepts become ideologically (and materially)

invested with contemporary-conjunctural ideological components (hence the problems

with the histories that are written of the sciences- we tend to apply our ideologically

invested concepts to those that existed in the past and see continuity wherein there is

none if we look carefully). How do these arguments help us in making sense of the

grounds upon which Althusser attempts to distance himself from structuralism? In his

introduction to the original publication of Macherey's paper Althusser writes that

Canguilhem's work (as interpreted by Macherey) show us:

> … A new [conception] of history, which above all, abandons the old *idealist* schema of a continuous mechanistic or dialectical progress, without breaks, paradoxes, set backs, or leaps forward. [Here] a new history appears: that of the becoming of reason which is scientific but is stripped of this reassuring idealistic simplicity, which just as kindness is never forgotten but always finds its reward, ensured that a scientific question never remains without a response, but always finds its response. Reality has a little more imagination: there are imaginary responses which leave the real problems they evade without a true response, there are sciences which are called sciences and are only the scientific imposture of a social ideology.[104]

Both Macherey's paper and Althusser's comments in his introduction to the paper

coupled with his view of the discipline of history more generally show the "method" that

Althusser and his students were attempting to employ at this time, and it is in the method

that we can see the critique. If we think back to the Spinozist/Bachelardian (and now

Canguilhemian/Machereyan) claims that science (properly practiced) gets us to realize

that all knowledge is provisional at best, never complete or completely static/accurate,

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[104] Ibid., 164

that is always harbors some ideological components and is always tied to its times (its conjuncture) and the material available to it- to believe otherwise is to fall into ideology, then those that practice structuralism without this critical/scientific awareness remain trapped in structuralist ideology- the concept of structure now serves as the ideological concept that explains the existence of social phenomena. When Althusser critiques Levi-Strauss, he accuses him of misunderstanding the concept of ideology at same time that he makes the arguments cited above.[105] It is this that he is worried about when Althusser makes this accusation, that 'structure' is supposed to explain the existence of ideology (conceived of as kinship relations and the like) for Levi-Strauss but the concept of structure is itself ideologically invested in the current conjuncture and remains (at least in Althusser's time) immune to proper scientific awareness.

For Althusser, as we can now begin to see, in any given conjuncture, there is simply what is, the particular conjectural set of social relations that come together at a particular time and out of which a particular *lebenswelt* is born. Here he returns to Spinoza and writes:

> Now I thought that Spinoza could consider every singularity, including that which took place in the *lebenswelt* of the imagination, as universal singular individuality, As a *case*, almost in the sense in which the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* writes, "*Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist,*" an untranslatable sentence, but one that more or less means "the world is everything that is the case." What is the case if not that which comes to pass, if not purely and simply that which "befalls," as if by accident, that is, without origin or end? That which befalls in existence and in being, in the world constituted by similar "falls," by similar "cases," to infinity.[106]

Recall again the claims that we made above in relation to Spinoza, (in relation to Althusser's 'heretical' reading of Spinoza): For Spinoza, what is, is as it is as a result of

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[105] See Althusser, "On Levi-Strauss" in *HC*. Especially 19-21.
[106] Althusser, "The only Materialist Tradition: Spinoza" in *The New Spinoza*, 7.

the causes that bring that which is into existence. These causes are not teleological, that is, they are not the result of an intentionality which attempts to achieve goals—they are mechanistic/naturalistic causes. Our minds (our imaginary relationship to our world) are caused to be as they are by our material bodily relations, which are themselves connected to other bodies which are themselves connected to this larger mechanistic causality with all of its aleatory contributions to our existence both as individuals and as societies. We might say here—sketchily—that Althusser's aleatory materialism is then an attempt, as he says, to think the radical contingency of necessity in that what it strives to do is remain open to the non-necessity of facts and particular theoretical enterprises in the sciences for understanding social phenomena (in a Bachelardian/Spinozist sense)- that is not get stuck in traditional philosophy (by rejecting both origins and ends) while at the same time admitting that there are certain 'necessary' features of a given particular social formation that make up its quasi-universal nature. These necessary features are made up of the multitude of material practices that condition the ideological awareness of those living in that social formation.

This universality, however, is singular in the sense that it arrives on the scene as a singular result of the contingent and aleatory nature of the particular combination of elements (practices) that combine at that time (thus it is a 'case' in the sense alluded to above). This 'universality' moreover, is not one 'concrete universal' in the Hegelian sense of the term, that makes up a part of a larger process unfolding in history, it is completely and utterly singular in its contingent nature and further, this universality is itself only existent in the elements that make it up (and the elements themselves are what they are as a result of the same contingency). That is, it has no existence of its own, it

emerges, as we do, *en medias res*. It is here, however, that Althusser backs himself into a corner. The distinction that he wants to maintain between science and ideology collapses under the weight of his theorization of the nature of science itself- if all science or scientific 'truth' is conjunctural and historical, then it seems that we have a simple relativism, we have no way of pulling the non-ideological true from the ideological and holding it apart in such a way as to overcome the ideological. As Althusser himself argues:

> …We know that there is no *pure* theoretical practice, no perfectly transparent science which throughout history as a science will always be preserved, by I know not what Grace, from the taints of idealism, that is, of the ideologies which besiege it; we know that 'pure' science only exists on condition that it continually frees itself from the ideology which occupies it, haunts it, or lies in wait for it. The inevitable price of this purification and liberation is a continuous struggle with ideology itself, that is, against idealism…[107]

Now that we see the problem that arises for Althusser, we can in the next Chapter, turn to the thought of Alain Badiou and begin to look at the ways in which Badiou's theory emerges out of Althusser's and attempts to offer a solution to the problem we are left with in relation to it.

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[107] Althusser, *FM*.170

Chapter 3: Badiou's Materialist Project: Stasis and Change

As noted in the introduction to this project, what I hope to do here is to show how it is that both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek share a theoretical debt to Althusser while at the same time attempt to overcome the impasse left in the Althusser's theoretics. This chapter begins that project in relation to the thought of Alain Badiou. It is certainly well known that Badiou's thought is indebted to Althusser.[108] This chapter gives a brief overview of Badiou's materialist thought, and its relation to Althusser, echoing some of what has already been pointed out by others but also taking issue with what some have said. The chapter that follows this one will then move to a discussion of the details of Badiou's attempt at a solution to the problems of Althusser's theory as identified in chapter two and it will, most importantly, assess the success of Badiou's method of correcting Althusser's theory in the construction of his own.

Badiou, like Althusser, remains steadfastly committed to a certain type of Marxism, one that asserts that radical change is not only possible, but is in at least in one sense, inevitable. This inevitability is not, however, akin to the vulgar Marxist notion of a necessary evolution through capitalism ending in communism, rather, for Badiou, radical

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[108] See for example, Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) and Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Trabscendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008). Each of these books devotes some discussion to connections between Althusser and these thinkers. We will have ample time to engage with each of these books on this topic in what follows.

change is inevitable because it is simply something that happens, the idea that a given

historical moment, or conjuncture, could give way to a kind of eternal stasis, or put an

end to history is flatly false according to Badiou. Large-scale change has happened in the

past, and will happen again.

Furthermore, for Badiou, modification is not true change; it is instead a way for a

given social order to stave off real change and perpetuate itself in its attempts to assert a

false (ideologically driven) eternal stasis. For Badiou, change is not something that

happens slowly and gradually, it happens as a result of a quick and revolutionary shift in

which the existing order is destabilized and ultimately toppled. Thus, as Adrian Johnston

has nicely put the point, for Badiou, our worlds have two temporalities, one which can be

characterized as relatively static, in which nothing really changes and one in which there

is a rapid fire change that results from what Badiou characterizes as an 'event.'[109]

The event, for Badiou, is something which emerges out of a given 'situation'—

Badiou's term for a state of affairs or a given historical moment that is relatively static—

and has the effect of making the static temporal mode which always appears as stable,

natural, and necessary to those living in it, exhibit its normally hidden fragile instability.

By shining a light on the unstable nature of the static temporality; the event paves the

way for a change that inserts a break (we can think here of a break in the Bachelardian

sense) or a rupture with a given temporal moment. The event itself, however, is not

enough. Events require the recognition of their eventual status by individuals who

experience them in such a way as to be affected by their appearance and become the

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[109] Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

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event's 'subjects.' These evental subjects work to sustain the 'truth' that the event brings to light.

One of Badiou's examples of such an event and the subject who arises in its wake, helping to usher in the change that is announced by the event, is the conversion of Saint Paul. Briefly, Badiou argues that Saint Paul becomes a Christian in becoming a 'subject' of the event that befell him on the road to Damascus. It is only as a result of this that Paul becomes Saint Paul. As Badiou describes it, Paul becomes the 'subject' of this event and declares his fidelity to its truth (the resurrection and the Christian belief in the equality of all before God); a truth which he passively receives and which occurs within the 'situation' that existed at the time (a situation in which this particular truth was not existent). The event exceeds the situation in which it arises because for Paul (and subsequently, his followers) it effectively emptied—or 'voided—that historical moment of its prior organization and all of the existing different identities and social organizations based on them. For Paul and his followers, no longer were there Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians, and other identitarian categories; there were simply, only, and universally God's subjects.[110]

As a result of this event, and the work of those that became its subjects, the social world was irrevocably changed, and was so in a radical (and quick way). For Badiou (who is a committed atheist) it matters little that this was a theological transformation. What matters is this example's exhibition of the power of the event. As Badiou theorizes it, Paul's conversion shows us the difference in the two temporalities, the unchanging relatively static world that Paul found himself in prior to the event, in which there existed

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[110] Alain Badiou *Saint Paul,* translated by Ray Brassier (Standford: Stanford UP, 2003). 57

many differences that were conditioned by the existing historical situation and the quick, revolutionary change that follows on the heels of that event, in which those differences no longer make sense (at least for those who became the event's subjects).

As noted above, the affirmation of such an evental 'truth' will depend on those who are subjected to it by experiencing the 'event' that reveals it. Events and their truths cannot be guaranteed, justified, provoked, or proven based on anything about a given historical situation as it is prior to an event's happening. In other words, events are ephemera, but what they reveal is not. Before the event, our knowledge and experience of the world (and of ourselves) is the product of the historically contingent order, structures, and differences that exist at any given time within which there is really no universality. It is only in the revelation provided by the 'event' that one is able to see the historically contingent nature of one's existence and modes of knowing the world (which is part of the universal truth that such events reveal). Thus, as Badiou points out, "to enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be *something that happens to you*."[111] The recognition of universality can only, on Badiou's accounting of things, come through the passive reception of the event itself. Thus, as is the case for Althusser, Badiou conceives of change as depending not on the activity of individuals working within a given situation seeking change, but rather, on the aleatory, or the chance occurrence of an event which then can reorient individuals to become the agents of such change.[112]

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[111] Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* trans. Peter Hallward (New York and London, Verso, 2001). 51

[112] Bruno Bosteels has gone as far as to suggest that Althusser's theory of the aleatory is itself influenced by Badiou's own grappling with the question of the possibility of change. See. Bruno Bosteels and Alain Badiou, "Can Change Be Thought? A Dialogue with Alain Badiou" in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, edited by Gabriel Riera (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 237-262. While Badiou does not deny this claim, I think it is impossible to be sure of the directionality of influence in particular cases such as

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In order to properly understand this we will have to understand the status of the "event" (which convokes, or brings to light shared and universal truth), what Badiou means by 'truth,' and the status of the "subject" of the truth that is founded in the event. To make sense of these all-important components of Badiou's thought, however, more needs to be said about the 'two temporalities' (stasis and change) that are the backbone of Badiou's thought and the materialist grounding and implications of this theory.

Section One

Setting aside for a moment, any discussion about what constitutes such an 'event'—as we will return to this later—and instead concentrating on the claim that events "void" the existing differences between people (and things) we can begin to see that, according to Badiou, any particular existing organization of things in the world is not eternal, stable, or ultimately necessary, but rather something which is of contingent historical origin. This goes for any of the various ways objects in the world are carved up and cataloged by our systems of knowledge and is also true of human awareness and social organization (political and otherwise). Those things that count as beings, on Badiou's account of things, are as they are as a result of an operation he describes in the beginning of 1988's *Being and Event* as the count-as-one.[113]

Badiou writes, "what has to be declared is that the one, which is not, solely exists as an operation, in other words, there is no one, only the count-as-one."[114] Being in-itself (what Badiou terms 'being-*qua*-being') is not a one, or a whole, but rather an infinite—

this, especially since Althusser is not around to be asked. I would rather just point out the shared theoretical point that exists here.
[113] Badiou, *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005). [Hereafter *BE*]
[114] Ibid., 24

or incomplete—multiplicity that comes to be structured (made to appear complete) by a particular operation of counting-for-one that produces a 'situation' in which being presents itself as containing a multiplicity of structured ones. In this process, being's foundational and fundamental incompleteness is, according to Badiou, subtracted from that which is presented in the situation. That is, what is covered over—subtracted—in presentation is the fundamental lack-of-completion of being.

Badiou argues, moreover, that a given multiple itself only comes to be legible as multiple (as a 'one' that is but a single multiple in a consistent multiplicity of ones) in presentation (in being made consistent so as to become legible by the operation that counts the multiple as one). Summarizing this, Badiou claims:

> …The multiple is the regime of presentation; the one, in respect to presentation is an operational result, being is what presents (itself). On this basis, being is neither one (because only presentation itself is pertinent to the count as one) nor multiple (because the multiple is solely the regime of presentation).[115]

To understand ontology, according to Badiou, is to think the foundational inconsistent/incomplete multiplicity in-itself; outside of any counting operation that makes such a multiplicity a structured, consistent multiplicity of ones. In order to do this, that is, to think being's incompleteness, we must come to understand the counting operation and the ways in which the situation (which, as we have seen, is what results from the count) is structured so as to both present itself as a totality of structured ones and contain (a hidden) incompleteness. In *Being and Event*, Badiou turns to mathematics, and more specifically, to Cantorian set theory as a means by which to think such an ontology of being in which we are able to discern the non-existence of the whole, and the twin processes which create the one, namely the process of the count-as-one, and the

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[115] Ibid., 24

subtraction of being's incompleteness (its inconsistency). In the next section I will give a brief account of the portions of Cantor's mathematical theorization that are important for Badiou.

Section Two

According to Cantor, a well-ordered set of numbers is a set in which, for every number that is a member of that set, there is a new number that is ordinally related to that number insofar as it is the successor of the original number. This is commonly known as the theory of ordinals and can be demonstrated most basically in relation to the natural numbers, which are themselves ordinals. For every natural number (and for the set of all natural numbers), there is a number, which is ordinally related to that number such that it follows the original number in succession (the number 2 is ordinally related to 1, and 3 is ordinally related to 2, etc.). The theory of ordinals applies, according to Cantor, both to finite numbers, like the natural numbers, and to what he calls 'transfinite numbers' or ever increasing infinite sets of numbers. In this way, there is no one set or collection which can/does collect together all ordinals into a closed whole. That is, there is not one infinite set containing all possible ordinals, but rather, there are multiple 'transfinite' sets of ordinals (which are themselves ordered in relation to one another).

Cantor argues for the existence of transfinite sets of numbers, in part by referring back to the point we have already seen, that sets of numbers can be ordinals in the same way that a single numbers can be ordinally related to one another. Given this, we can see how one can have a set of all the natural numbers (an infinite set) which can itself be an ordinal in relation to the set of all the natural numbers plus one, and that set can be

ordinally related to a greater set and so on. Hence one can suppose the existence of

multiple infinite sets, or transfinite ordinals as Cantor himself argues:

> …The smallest transfinite ordinal number, which I denote ω, belongs [to the
> transfinite], for it can be increased, enlarged to the next greater ordinal number
> $\omega+1$, this again to $\omega+2$, and so on. But the smallest actually infinite power or
> cardinal number is also transfinite, and the same holds of the next greater cardinal
> number and so on.[116]

The smallest of the transfinite ordinals (Cantor's ω) is the set that contains all of the finite

numbers (the natural numbers and their fractions), commonly denoted as $\aleph_0$. Cantor

proved that this set is smaller than the set of the so-called 'Real numbers' (the set

containing both the finite numbers and the 'irrational' and 'transcendental' numbers) so

here we have two distinct infinite sets of differing sizes. Further, Cantor famously goes

on to prove that the infinite set containing the real numbers is equivalent to $2^{\aleph_0}$ (That is, it

is the power set of $\aleph_0$).

Once proving this, Cantor asks whether the $2^{\aleph_0}$ is equivalent to the transfinite

number that is denoted by $\aleph_1$ (or $\omega+1$ in Cantor's own notation), which would then make

it the transfinite ordinal that is the immediate successor to $\aleph_0$. This is the content of the

Continuum Hypothesis, and if the Continuum Hypothesis were to be proved true, then

$\aleph_1$—the transfinite ordinal that follows $\aleph_0$—would be equivalent to $2^{\aleph_0}$, which would then

in turn mean that $\aleph_2$ would be equivalent to $2^{2^{\aleph_1}}$, and so forth. The proof (or disproof) of

the truth of Continuum Hypothesis has major implications beyond the realm of

mathematics and set theory as Peter Hallward points out:

> [The Continuum Hypothesis]… Asserts an orderly, well-defined relation between
> the conventional measuring system of mathematics (the numerical hierarchy of
> alephs) and the real numbers of physical science. If this Continuum Hypothesis

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[116] Georg Cantor quoted in Michael Hallet, *Cantorian Set Theory and the Limitation of Size: Oxford Logic Guides 10* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). 41

were true, not only would there be (*pace* Bergson) a precise, measurable link between physical continuity and number, but everything within the transfinite universe could be thought of as in its appropriate place, as occupying degrees in a clearly ordered hierarchy… On the other hand, if CH cannot be proved, there is at least one infinite number, $2^{\aleph_0}$, that cannot be assigned a definite place in the cumulative hierarchy. Looking at the equation from the other way around, if CH is not true, the smallest infinite power set ($2^{\aleph_0}$) is a kind of pure immeasurable excess over the set $\aleph_0$ itself. A universe that denies CH would thus accept a degree of ontological anarchy. It would tolerate the existence of sets that could not be assigned any clear place in an order that would include them.[117]

As is well known, though the Continuum Hypothesis has neither been proven true nor false, P.J. Cohen has shown its independence from the axioms of set theory and this, for many—including Badiou—, is tantamount to a proof of its falsehood.[118] For Badiou, the philosophical take-away from this is that being is not closed- there is no foundational consistent whole (this is the meaning of the Badiouan claim that 'the one is not'). Further, because being as it presents itself to us, is such that it appears well-ordered (and complete), presentation itself must also contain that which is inconsistent (not well-ordered). Without the formalism of the set theoretical matheme outlined above, Badiou argues that:

> …The inconsistent multiple is unthinkable as such… the inconsistent multiple is solely—before the one-effect in which it is structured—an ungraspable horizon of being…the pure multiple scarcely occurs in presentation before it has already dissipated; its non-occurance is like a flight of scenes from a dream.[119]

In appearance, the inconsistent multiple is barred from showing itself. Being, as presented to us—as in-situation—, is always-already structured by the count-as-one operation. This is why being as such (being-*qua*-being) is unthinkable without the aid of set theory. The mathematical formalism of set theory allows us to think the ontological

[117] Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 69.
[118] For Badiou's own discussion of Cohen's proof see, Alain Badiou *Number and Numbers* translated by Robin Mackay (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2008).
[119] Badiou, *BE*. 34

position of inconsistent multiplicity, and thus to think the incompleteness of being from within a situation in which such inconsistency (and its attendant incompleteness) in-exists. Badiou continues:

> …Since everything [in a given situation] is counted, yet given that the one of the count, obliged to be the result, leaves a phantom remainder—of the multiple not being in the form of the one—one has to allow that inside the situation the pure or inconsistent multiple is both excluded from everything, and thus from presentation itself, and included, in the name of what 'would be' the presentation itself, the presentation 'in itself', if what the law does not authorize to think was thinkable: that the one is not, that the being of consistency is inconsistency[120]

That which is presented as consistent—and hence becomes a multiplicity of ones that are legible in a given situation—is made possible only by the law of the count, which in covering over the remaining inconsistency, makes it into something, namely that which is nothing (or no-thing) in a given situation:

> Once the entirety of a situation is subject to the law of the one and consistency, it is necessary from the standpoint of immanence to the situation, that the pure multiple, absolutely unpresentable according to the count, be *nothing*. But being-nothing is as distinct from not being as the 'there is' is distinct from being.[121]

Badiou's name for this particular nothingness that exists, that has a place in a given situation (after the act of the counting operation), but does so as subtracted from view in presentation, is the 'Void.' In discussing the place of the void in Badiou's work, we should be careful to point out here, along with Sam Gillespie, that the void is not be seen as "a physically existing vacuum, or a lack, or a wound at the center of experience. It is simply Badiou's name for what is subtracted from presentation. And since nothing

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[120] Ibid., 53
[121] Ibid., 55

preexists presentation…the inconsistent un-presented of any situation is named the void."[122]

Gillespie is correct in drawing a distinction between the pure multiple, who's status we can think mathematically as a result of Cantorian set theory (and developments in relation to this), and the 'Void,' which for Badiou is the name for that which comes-to-be as a result of the counting operation and the resultant situation, but who's being is that of the nothing (or the subtracted), which, though distinct from the pure multiple, we also are able to think with the help of the matheme.[123] The theory of the void is central for Badiou's conception of change. In order to properly see this, we must first say more about the nature and status of Badiou's conception of the 'situation' as the (seemingly) static mode of temporality in which the void inheres.

Section Three

We have already seen how it is that, according to Badiou, beings are counted-as-one (or have the kind of existence that they have) in the particular ways that they are as a result of their being a part of a 'situation.' Badiou defines a 'situation' as a "presented multiplicity" and he goes on to explain that a situation is "the place of taking place" of being as presented at a given time.[124] There are, according to Badiou, many different situations and each one "admits of its own particular operator of the count-as-one."[125] The "operator" is termed by Badiou the 'structure' of the situation. It is the structure of

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[122] Sam Gillespie "Placing the Void: Badiou on Spinoza" in *Angelaki* Volume 6, No.3, 63-77.
[123] Ibid., see especially Gillespie's discussion of this point on page 64.
[124] Badiou, *BE*. 24
[125] Ibid.

the situation that determines *how* things are counted-as-one and thus, how things show up as presented multiples:

> When anything is counted-as-one in a situation all this means is that it belongs to the situation in the mode particular to the effects of the situation's structure… One must not forget that every situation is structured. The multiple is *retroactively* legible therein as *anterior* to the one, insofar as the count-as-one is always a result.[126]

In 2006's *Logics of Worlds* Badiou further elaborates the concept of a 'situation,' which he now terms 'world.'[127] Just as there are multiple situations, there are multiple worlds defined by their particular structures which count-as-one various objects that belong to those worlds. The key innovation in *Logics of Worlds* for our purposes is Badiou's elaboration of the 'transcendental' nature of a (given or local) world's structure. Understanding this can both help us further make sense of Badiou's (remaining) debt to Althusser and his own brand of materialism.

"Every world" argues Badiou, "contains a transcendental organization"—or a structure in the parlance of *Being and Event*—but this organization is not to be confused with the Kantian version of transcendence, which relies on a subjective constitution of the existence of what is.[128] Rather, for Badiou:

> The transcendental…is altogether anterior to every subjective constitution for it is an eminent given of any situation whatsoever…it is what imposes on every situated multiplicity the constraint of a logic, which is also the law of its appearing, or a rule in accordance with which the 'there' of the being-there allows the multiple to come forth as essentially bound.[129]

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* translated by Alberto Toscano (New York and London: Continuum, 2009). Here he explicitly states that he is replacing the term 'situation' with the term 'world' see p. 99. Hencforth I will use the terms interchangeably.
[128] Ibid.,
[129] Ibid., 101

It is the transcendental organization that imposes a structure, or a 'logic,' on Being and beings such that they come to have the status that they do. As we will see, this transcendental is for Badiou, the non-ideal material structure within which, even we as beings, come to awareness of ourselves and our world. It is material insofar as it is not imposed on the world by consciousness but rather, one's conscious awareness is the product of the ways that the transcendental organizes and categorizes the world in which individuals find themselves.

Returning to the concept of a world (a situation) then, Badiou argues that we should understand this in terms of a "metaphor for the localization of multiples."[130] A world is the non-empty place within which multiples come to be legible insofar as they are counted-as-one by the particular logic that structures the count (the transcendental). The way in which the transcendental counts-as-one various multiples, and thus brings them to consistency allowing for their appearance is through a process (an operation) of defining the identity of a given multiple in relation to other multiples that appear in-world. The transcendental is then, the operation, which identifies the ways in which particular multiples are identical to, and differ from other multiples that come to consist (and hence to appear) in a given world. Here Badiou writes:

> …We will call 'appearing' that which, of a mathematical multiple, is caught in a situated relational network (a world), such that this multiple comes to being-there, or to the status of being in a world [*étant-dans-un-monde*]. It is then possible to say that this being is more or less different from another being belonging to the same world. We will call 'transcendental' the operational set which allows us to make sense of the 'more or less' of identities and differences in a determinate world.[131]

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[130] Ibid., 102
[131] Ibid., 118

The transcendental of a given world is then, the operational set which, as Badiou says, "pronounces upon" or fixes the "degrees of identity and difference" that exist between multiples, and in doing so, makes them come to consist with one another in appearance.[132]

We might think of how the world of the university defines the ways that people and things show up as members of its world. It does so through the defining of the 'degrees of identity and difference' between them. The various roles that individuals fulfill in the structure of the university, *i.e.,* from the most general categories of student, faculty, staff, classroom, lab, library, dormitory, etc., to more fine-grained categories of identity and difference. The differences that exist in a student population between undergraduate and graduate, for instance, or between various ranks amongst faculty (assistant professor, professor, adjunct faculty and so forth) define the world of the university and these differences do so by way of constructing categories that identify and define the various positions that individuals and things can inhabit within the world of the university (through an operational process of defining the ways in which things are 'more or less' identical) such that they come to appear—to be consistent members of its world.

What matters in appearing, in the 'fixing' of the multiple such that it can appear consistently, is the operation—or the set of operations—which defines the ways that it is possible for the multiple to appear. The multiple itself does not enter into the process of its being defined in its being-there; its appearance is the result of this process. Thus, it is the operation that does this work and the operation is the a-subjective structure that emerges in the relations that come to be defined between objects, which then in turn

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[132] Ibid.

defines the existence of those multiples that are presented in a given world. This is important as it returns us to the materialist theme.

As we have seen, a 'local' world and those objects (or multiples) which come to inhabit it is defined by its transcendental, or the structure of the count which marks out the set of identities and differences that exist within it and which constructs the being-there of the beings that exist within it. It is in this way that the world makes consistent the multiples that come to be legible as such. Here Badiou argues:

> It is therefore clear in what sense we call transcendental that which authorizes the local (or intra-worldly) evaluation of identities and differences. To grasp the singularity of this usage of the word 'transcendental', we should note that as in Kant, it concerns a question of possibility; but also that we are only dealing with local dispositions, and not with a theory of universal difference. To put it very simply: there are many transcendentals; the intra-worldly regulation of difference is itself differentiated. This is one of the main reasons why it is impossible to argue from a unified 'centre' of transcendental organization, such as the Subject is for Kant.[133]

In the example of the university-world given above, those individuals who appear as members of this world, do so only insofar as they are subjected to the operations which define the categories that they may come to inhabit and so appear within the situation. This is true for the objects that exist in this world and for the humans that exist in the world. It is the structure or the logic, that is defined by the set of operations, which as we have seen, construct the categories that people may come to inhabit (through a process of relational differentiation) that allows for a person's appearance in that world. The individual human plays no role in the construction of this world except insofar as she, if she comes to appear in the world of the university, is defined by it; by the set of transcendental ordering operations that define the places that the individual can inhabit.

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[133] Ibid., 120

The world of the university pre-exists my coming to inhabit it, and if I do come to inhabit it, I do so in the ways prescribed by the logic of the structure. Of course, if I am a being that inhabits the world of the university, it is never only this that sets the terms of my identity. I can, and do, inhabit multiple worlds as do many other 'objects' as Badiou points out:

> It goes without saying after all, that a being… can appear in different worlds. It would be absurd to think that there is an intrinsic link between a given multiple and a given world. The 'worlding' of a formal being, which is its being-there or appearing, is ultimately a logical operation: the access to a local guarantee of its identity. This operation may be produced in numerous different ways, and it may imply entirely distinct worlds as the grounds for the further operations it elicits. In particular, man is the animal that appears in a great number of worlds. Empirically, we could even say that it is nothing but this: the being which, among all those whose being we acknowledge, appears most multiply. [134]

Badiou takes this as further evidence for his claims about the human's lack of ability to be the 'centre' from which the transcendental organization of a world emanates. Pace Althusser's theory of interpellation, I do not construct the categories that I come to inhabit, I am inhabited by them such that I come to understand myself in the particular ways that are defined by their particular logics. Further, since I am a being who can be 'worlded' (or interpellated) multiply, I simply cannot be the agent of this process, I am that which is acted on by it in different ways, at different times, in different situations (to shift back to the language of *Being and Event*). Hence, in my being 'worlded' by a particular materially existent logic, I am not a subject. My 'selfhood' has the character and status of that which comes from the logic of the world (and its process of relational differentiation). This is one place in which Badiou breaks with Althusser. Recall that for

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[134] Ibid., 114

Althusser, I become a subject by being subjected to the interpellative process. Badiou is unwilling to call the human as worlded (or interpellated) a 'subject.'[135]

It is in this way that, according to Badiou, my "worlded" self is materially, an 'other-self' or an object-self. It is an 'other-self insofar as the selfhood that I find myself with is defined not by me or my choices, but by those things which present themselves to me as possible choices to make (where there are such choices), ways to be, or identities to inhabit which have their existence in something other than me, namely the material of the world and the transcendental logic that structures it. This self is an object self insofar as I am presented in this world (both to myself and others) in the same way as all other objects are, again as determined by the law of the count and the transcendental structure that defines the worldhood of the particular world in which I find myself. In other words, who I am as a being in-situation (or a being that is 'worlded'), is a being whose 'identity'—whose own being—is defined in its being by its being differentiated from and related to other multiples—by 'being-other' than those multiples to varying degrees—by the structural logic of the count. As Badiou puts the point: "…a 'real' being is the one which, appearing locally (in a world), is at the same time its own multiple-identity—as thought by rational ontology—and the various degrees of its difference from other beings in the same world."[136]

We are firmly in the realm of Althusserian anti-humanism here, but this account of the structure of social existence is also akin to the one given by Levi-Strauss and structuralism. What is important, for Badiou, in making sense of how things appear in a given world, is not the things themselves (or the conscious awareness of those humans

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[135] I will discuss this at length in the next chapter.
[136] Ibid., 145

that show up in particular ways in a given world) but the relations between those things

and people that are presented in a world, and said relations are defined, as we have seen,

by the logic or the law of the count, which is itself non-ideal. In this way, Badiou fully

endorses a structuralist account of the worldhood of a given world (or situation). We will

return this in detail in the next chapter but I bring it up here in order to return to the

question that began this section of the chapter, namely the question of the defining of the

static mode of temporality.

Worlds are that which ground this mode of temporality. Everything that appears,

or is presented in a world is in its 'proper' place and is determined to be the way it is by

the place that it inhabits. In this way, beings in a given world are fixed and relatively

static. Again we can return to my example of the world of the university in order to make

sense of this. The categories marked out by the world of the university are themselves

relatively static. It is true that over long periods of time, the world of the university

changes shape slightly, but it never does so in a radical and quick way.[137] The basic

categories that are available to be inhabited by various beings are fixed not by the beings

that inhabit them, but by their relations to other categories and only shift and change

insofar as the other categories shift and change (which is itself a long slow process, and

hence, on Badiou's account, not really change at all). I now would like to turn to a brief

discussion of the other mode of temporality that Badiou defines- the mode of change, in

which a given world (and its attendant static temporality) gives way to a new existence.

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[137] We need not spend time on this point here, but Badiou discusses the change that does take place in a given world in depth in *Logics of Worlds*. See especially pp. 358-360 in which he points out the certain 'changes' are themselves set out by the transcendental of a given world such that the beings which inhabit it do in fact appear to 'change' in their temporal existence but as Badiou points out, "As long as the transcendental regulation remains identical, it is certainly possible to witness considerable variations affecting the same element…but these variations are nothing but the immanent movements of appearing, whose possible intensities and amplitude are prescribed by the transcendental" (359).

Section Four

We know, from the foregoing, that Badiou's understanding of ontology is such that change is made possible by the foundational lack of closure in existence. The failure to prove the truth of the Continuum Hypothesis (or, its having been proved independent from the axioms of set theory at least), for Badiou, guarantees this claim. There is, in existence, as Hallward puts the point in the quote cited earlier "a degree of ontological anarchy."[138] It is, on Badiou's account, this that is the foundation for the possibility of the overcoming of the static and unchanging temporality that attends the existence of a given world. Badiou argues, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, that it is in the moment of an 'event' that this bit of anarchy appears in a given world and disrupts its stasis. The event, does not, however reveal the inconsistent multiple as such (or being-qua-being) as this is never revealed, we only access it through the formalism of mathematical ontology. Rather what appears in the moment of the event is the 'void' of a given world, that particular bit of being that exists as 'the' nothing as determined by a given logic or structure, and as such is subtracted from the everyday quotidian experience of that given world. The appearance of this void then acts to destabilize the logic or the structure of the world insofar as it disrupts the relations amongst the beings that are presented in that world and displays the lack of closure and hence the lack of the necessity of that particular existing relational logic.

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[138] See page 8 of this chapter.

We might, in order to make sense of this, return to thinking about the nature of being as it appears in-situation (in a world). Specifically, we should look again at the being-there of humans in a given world. As we already noted, the being-there of the human in a given world is defined by the relations that exist between that particular human and other beings that are counted-as-one by the law of the count. We described, along with Badiou, the nature of this being as 'being-other.' This means, as we saw that the worlded self is such that it gets its identity through its being marked as something 'other' than this or that being (again, it is the relations of identity and difference that matter here).

There is, however, a further (and important) lesson to be drawn from this according to Badiou. Namely, that in my being 'worlded' by a particular logic or structure, I am a being who, in appearance or in presentation (both to myself and to others), is split. Not only do I become an 'other-self' in the ways described above, but I also become something 'other' than what I am outside of the structural logic of that particular world, or what I would be outside the law of the particular world in which I find myself and to which my experience of myself is bound as Badiou notes:

> The key to thinking appearing, when it comes to a singular being, lies in being able to determine, at one and the same time, the self-difference which makes it so being-there is not being-qua-being, and the difference from others which makes it so that being there, or the law of the world which is shared by these others, does not abolish being-qua-being.[139]

Though it is the case that the law of the world is what defines my identity 'in-world,' this does not, as Badiou claims above, 'abolish' being-qua-being in my own case, and in the case of other beings found in a given world. In the case of individual humans

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[139] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. 117

we can say (or speculate) that a human as being-qua-being is something other than a human as encountered in a given world. Recall that, as we also noted above, according to Badiou, humans are beings who have the possibility of being worlded in many different ways. Again, this brings us up against the claim that, as a human, I am fundamentally split in my being worlded. I am, in a given world identified by the law of that world, but I am not coextensive with that identification (though it appears to me and to others that I am). The fact that I can be worlded in other ways by other transcendentals allows me to think (theoretically) the incompleteness of being in-world though I am unable to glimpse this incompleteness as it has been subtracted from view by the logic of the transcendental. It is only in the space of the event that this is revealed to me.

The event has the power to show me that the identity(s) that I find myself with (and those that others find themselves with) are non-necessary, derivative, and ultimately unstable. That is to say, the event reveals the incomplete nature of the transcendental and the world that it constructs not by revealing being-qua-being itself, but by revealing the void of the situation, or the split between myself as worlded and myself as a being that is not only my worlded self (the event can show me that my worlded self is not-all there is). It shows my being in excess of the world in which I find myself. In doing this, the event allows for the possibility of acting not only in the ways prescribed by the transcendental but in ways that are no longer conditioned by it. In this way then, the event allows for the creation of a true subjectivity insofar as those who experience the event become the agents of the change that it makes possible by acting in fidelity to it and working to bring about an end to the particular transcendental that first conditions their existence.

Ultimately then, the 'event' reveals to one her previously unrecognized subjective limitations—by revealing the excess of her selfhood—through giving her a new, shared and revealed truth that is *ex post facto* read back into her remembered existence prior to the event and transforms it such that she comes to see herself as always having been such a subject and subjected to such a universal truth. At the outset of this chapter, we looked briefly at one of Badiou's examples of the evental subject, namely the evental subject of Saint Paul, I now want to turn to one of Badiou's other examples of this process—that of the French Revolution—in hopes of further clarifying his thought.

As Badiou points out, there are, from the perspective of the historical situation many differing and scattered causes of (and actors in) the Revolution: "the electors of the General Estates, the peasants of the Great Fear, the *sans-coluttes* of the towns, the members of the Convention, the Jacobin Clubs," and so forth. [140] However, Badiou continues, "the halting point for this dissemination is *the mode in which the Revolution is the central term of the Revolution itself,* that is, the manner in which the conscience of the times…filters the entire site through the one of its evental qualification." [141] The point here is this: as with the case of Saint Paul, the French Revolution is an event because the differences between the individual actors that existed prior to the revolution (the General Estates, the Jacobin clubs, the members of the Convention, etc) come to be "filtered" through the "one" event, namely the revolution itself. The different classes involved in the revolution came to share the term 'revolutionary' thus the event revealed a shared truth that was not present initially. Badiou continues: "the peasants are certainly presented in the French situation of 1789-1790, but not *those* peasants of the Great Fear

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[140] Badiou, *BE.* 180.
[141] Ibid.

who seized the castles," the peasants that exist after this event are *changed* by the event.[142] They became the peasants of the Revolution. This is not only the case for the peasants but for all the prior categories of people (the Jacobins, Convention members, etc.) at the moment of the revolution, these other categories too were emptied of their previous meanings and were henceforth filtered through the one "universal" category—or truth—of the Revolution. It is this category that came to (retroactively) filter each individual's understanding of himself as always having been a member of the one universal 'revolutionary' class.

It is in this way that the political activity that came to fruition in the French Revolution is, according to Badiou, indicative of a 'rupture' with the existing situation (or world), as founded in an 'event' (here the event of the French Revolution) that acts as a site for the production of a "truth" which is that which is truly 'new' and can have a kind of 'universal' status in that it implicates—or interpellates—*equally* all of those that are involved in it regardless of their seeming differences. This, furthermore, allows individuals to become subjects of the universal truth that is founded in the event and act in fidelity to such truth—which is ultimately to come to be able to act as agents of change against the static pre-evental world. As we now have a good picture of Badiou's understanding of both stasis and change—or the 'two temporalities' of our worlds in Johnston's parlance—we can move, in the next chapter to an in depth discussion of the ways in which Badiou's theory offers a corrective to some of the problems of the Althusserian arguments and an assessment of the success of this corrective.

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[142] Ibid.

Chapter 4: Badiou as Structuralist, or the Idealism of Formalism

One way to productively understand Badiou's thought in its response to Althusser is

to do so in relation to his comments in a recent interview with Bruno Bosteels in which

he points out that much of his work has been an attempt to unite the disparate thought of

Althusserian anti-humanism/structuralism and Sartrean subjective freedom. It is, in a very

important sense, around these two poles that the entire Badiouan edifice is built. As

Badiou states in this interview:

> If I think of those who have been Althusserians, Lacanians, and Maoists—which was
> the normal itinerary for the militant intelligentsia from 1968 to 1972—they were all a
> bit younger than me. So what did this mean? It meant that they had not had the time
> to be Sartreans… I found in Sartre's theory of practical freedom, and particularly in
> the subjectivized Marxism that he was already trying to produce, something with
> which to engage myself politically, in spite of everything, in the situation. This did
> not keep me from taking my distance from Sartre, nor from participating in that
> generation of mine which indeed started to take a major interest in the question of
> structure. But in the end, I entered this debate from the point of view of Sartre…This
> meant that against all odds, I have always been concerned in a privileged way, by the
> question of how something could still be called 'subject' within the most rigorous
> conditions possible of the investigations of structure.[143]

In attempting to both retain what he thinks Althusser (and structuralism) gets right—

namely the conception of the overdetermined nature of a given conjuncture or a world in

which we find ourselves and the identities that attend it—but also overcome the problems

of such a conception, namely the inability understand and account for the possibility of

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[143] Alain Badiou and Bruno Bosteels, "Can Change be Thought?: An Interview with Alain Badiou" in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*. Edited by Gabriel Reira (New York: SUNY Press, 2005). 242

(radical or revolutionary) change, Badiou seeks to unite these two traditions. Thus Badiou theorizes the event and the two temporalities of stasis and change.

Section One

In regard to stasis, as we saw in detail in the previous chapter, we get a kind of mathematized Althusserian/structuralist theoretics of a series of "worlds" or "situations" which present themselves as de-subjectified, fully determined, objective totalities in which everything is presented as if it is in its proper place, as determined by the structure or transcendental logic that conditions that world/situation in its constructing of the relations of identity and difference amongst 'objects.' However, as Badiou takes pains to argue, such presentation conceals that which might act to disrupt it in the form of the 'nothingness' or 'void,' described as a fully positive—though subtracted, or un-presented—moment of a given world. Because, as we have seen, for Badiou 'the one is not' but only comes to be in the 'operation' which counts-as-one beings in a given world, there is always something which is unable to be brought under the law of the count except as that which is subtracted (which is a form of objectification). It is this that, as we have also seen for Badiou, allows the possibility of change via its revelation in the moment of the event.

The event shows to those humans who are able to recognize it, the normally hidden 'not-all' of a given world (the void of that world). This revelation, if properly experienced—that is, if it is to become an event—also then reveals the counting operation or transcendental logic to be just that: an operation which has conditioned apparent objects and identities, but is itself not necessary nor totalizing. In other words, the event

reveals the fact that the world's logic is merely contingent, and not all there is. This then allows for the possibility that those who experience the event shed the logic of the world out of which they emerge, losing along the way, the very set of differences and identities that first marked their awareness. It is here that agency is born for Badiou: those who become 'subjects' do so by being, in Althusserian language, 'interpellated' by the event, which they then, as we have also discussed, work to integrate into existence with the goal of changing the very fabric of that existence to match the new world that they themselves have already come to know.

What is important to see here (as has already briefly been pointed out at the beginning of chapter 3) is that it is not just the event itself that is important for the theory of change, those who are subjectified by it are also key to the process. The happening of the event is, of course, indispensible, but it is the ability of the human to be subjectified by the event, and the commitment to the 'truth' of the event that is cultivated by those who are subjectified, that is necessary for the process of change to take place. So, it must be the case that the human be the kind of being that is capable of being subjectivized by the event, that is, the human must be the kind of being that is capable of shedding the identity that she comes to have as a result of the world that she first finds herself in. Though it is true that, for Althusser (and for structuralism), we are the kinds of beings whose 'identity' shifts and changes as institutions and practices shift, change, and interpellate us in various and different ways (we are, in other words, the kinds of beings whose nature is not fixed) Althusser's theory cannot, on its own, allow for the freedom from the conjuncture and its ways of determining both individuals and objects, that Badiou seeks.

For as we saw in the first two chapters of this study, on Althusser's account of

things, humans are always trapped in, and constructed by, the ideologies in which they

participate. And these ideologies, though in some sense built out of and sustained by

human activity, are never owned by, or in the control of individuals. That is, for

Althusser, subjects find their existence within the conjuncture itself (they are not

oppositional to it). Ideology is what regulates and controls the understanding and

behavior of individuals. Even Althusser's heroic attempt at maintaining a distinction

between ideology (objectivity, necessity, determination) and science (the recognition of

ideology as historical and non-necessary) collapses under the weight of his understanding

of the insidious nature of ideology and its workings (even 'science' is, or quickly

becomes infected by ideology such that the difference between science and ideology is

shrunken to such a small point that it becomes difficult to maintain the distinction, and all

becomes tainted by the ideological) as Althusser himself argues:

> …We know that there is no *pure* theoretical practice, no perfectly transparent
> science which throughout history as a science will always be preserved, by I know
> not what Grace, from the taints of idealism, that is, of the ideologies which
> besiege it; we know that 'pure' science only exists on condition that it continually
> frees itself from the ideology which occupies it, haunts it, or lies in wait for it.
> The inevitable price of this purification and liberation is a continuous struggle
> with ideology itself, that is, against idealism…[144]

Here is where the Sartrean theory of subjective freedom becomes important for

Badiou. As Nina Power argues, we can best see this connection *vis-à-vis* Sartre's

conception of the group-in-fusion found in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*.[145] Power

explains this connection by first pointing out that Sartre's opposition between the status

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[144] Althusser, *FM*.170

[145] Nina Power, "The Truth of Humanity: The Collective Political Subject in Sartre and Badiou" in *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 20 (2009) 1-27.

of 'sociality' and the status of the 'group-in-fusion' (the autonomous collectivity-autonomous in a Kantian sense- as free from external determinants) can be mapped onto the Badiouan distinction between the counted-as-one non-subjects of the world and the subjectivized agents of change that exist in the wake of the event. She does this by explaining that for Sartre, the former is "always on the side of the order and antagonism that constitutes capitalist atomization, inertia and seriality", while the latter is, in effect, that which results from a 'disalienation' that extracts those who come to constitute the 'group' from the individuated seriality of the social that first defines the existence of the group's members.[146] In other words, for Sartre, the group-in-fusion is a break or a rupture with the determined nature of the social, and it is this that makes the group into a (political) subjectivity capable of affecting change (albeit only briefly on Sartre's accounting of things). Sartre uses the example of a collection of people waiting at a bus stop to indicate the 'serially' determined nature of the social as opposed to the unity of the 'group in fusion.' Regarding this example Sartre writes:

> To begin with, it should be noted that we are concerned here with a plurality of isolations: these people do not care about or speak to one another and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist side by side alongside a bus stop. At this level it is worth noting that their isolation is not an inert statute (or the simple reciprocal exteriority of organisms); rather, it is *actually* lived in everyone's project as its negative structure. In other words, the isolation of the organism, as the impossibility of uniting with Others in an organic totality, is revealed through the isolation which everyone lives as the provisional negation of their reciprocal relations with Others.[147]

For Sartre, our lived experience of the relations between one another, that is, our lived experience of the 'social' is filtered through the serialized isolation between individuals.

[146] Ibid., 11-12.
[147] Jean-Paul Sartre *The Critique of Dialectical Reason Volume 1*. Translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York and London: Verso, 2004). 256

It is this serialization that structures the world in which we find ourselves and militates against any unification amongst individuals in our everyday quotidian existence. Further it also militates against many forms of true subjective agency as it is the case that the serialized isolation between individuals in a given social structure is what (re)produces and gives support to the very structures in which we find ourselves, and as long as we remain serialized in this way, we are as Sartre argues, impotent in relation them.[148] However, unification does happen. It happens through *praxis* for Sartre. We can find ourselves taken out of the sphere of serialization in the moments in which we come to be 'fused' with one another in pursuit of a common goal or a common work.[149] It is in this, as we have seen, that we become autonomous in the sense that, in the collective unity produced by the 'group in fusion' we are extracted from the individuated seriality that defines the social world in which we first become aware of ourselves.

Power continues, explaining that, as with Badiou's conception of the subject, (which is itself importantly non-individuated) for Sartre, "the group-in-fusion, is not a 'return' to some previous essence, as a simple re-reading of alienation would have it" and moreoever, "the group-in-fusion as Sartre describes it, also involves a kind of immanent anti-organicism, in the sense that the project that unites the members of the group cannot be seen from the outside (nor for that matter, can the group as a whole be comprehended)."[150] Meaning that the only thing that holds the group together in a unity is the group's own activity and the experience of those who make up the group, the external

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[148] See for example, Sartre's analysis of the Marxian theme of the fetishism of commodities wherein our impotence in relation to the price of commodities is determined by the serialized nature of consumption in the capitalist social structure. Ibid., 321-323

[149] Sartre, Like Badiou, looks to the French Revolution as an example of this. Ibid., 354-363

[150] Power, "The Truth of Humanity." 12

observer cannot identify the group as such a collectivity because there is nothing external to mark if off from other collections of individuals which remain serially determined.

Sartre's attempts at making sense of the emergence of such groups out of (and in opposition to) the conjuncture is thus, on Power's reading both materialist, insofar as the group is a result of, or only comes about in, existence (it does not pre-exist its coming to be), and anti-humanist (insofar as it is not the realization of a pre-existent essence). But, Sartre's conception of this is also at the same time a kind of humanism, as Power points out, insofar as it is only the decision, or the commitment of those humans that act as a group in Sartre's sense that sustain the existence of the group itself. Thus, she dubs the Sartrean theory of the group-in-fusion (quite rightly) a kind of "anti-humanist humanism whose concern is the subject, rather than an idealist or essentializing humanism."[151]

Section Two

It is this "antihumanist humanism" of the Sartrean subject that serves as the model for Badiou's own theory of the subject as the oppositional force founded by the event. So, Badiou's use of the Sartrean conception of the process of change that is initiated by the group in fusion as over against the seriality of the social is what allows for Badiou to account for the possibility of radical change (and true subjective agency) in a way that Althusser cannot while at the same time, allowing Badiou to retain, as we have also seen, much of the Althusserian edifice.

In Badiou, however, subjective agency—though it has the force of change that results from the agent's extraction from the (ideological) world/situation in which she

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[151] Ibid.

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In Badiou, however, subjective agency—though it has the force of change that results from the agent's extraction from the (ideological) world/situation in which she

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[151] Ibid.

first finds herself—remains thoroughly bounded by and to the taking place of the event. Though it is true that the Badiouan subject gains autonomy, she only does so from the existing world's logic. The Badiouan revolutionary subject is still determined in her behavior and her being- it is just that this determination comes from her recognition of the event and the fidelity to it that is provoked in her by it. So the Badiouan subject remains in a very important way, a proto-structuralist and fully materially generated subject albeit one whose identity is conditioned by a relation to a happening that disappears as quickly as it appears rather than the structure or world. I wish now to turn to a discussion of this and why it poses a problem for Badiou's own materialism. As we will see, Badiou's account of the nature of worlds, their transcendental logics, and his account of change via a structuralized Sartreanism brings his theory dangerously close to the very kind of structuralist idealism Althusser himself was wary of.

First however, for further evidence à propos the structuralist nature of the Badiouan subject, recall the last line of the long quote referenced at the beginning of this chapter, in which Badiou himself points out the structuralist nature of his enterprise. There he claims that he is interested in making sense of, as he puts it, "what can be called subject" while remaining fully within a structuralist framework.[152] Further, in *Logics of Worlds* commenting on Deleuze's simultaneous adoption—via what Deleuze terms Sartre's conception of the "impersonal transcendental field" of the group in fusion—and critique of Sartre's conception of the subject, Badiou registers his agreement with the Deleuzian claim to the effect that:

> Sartre was prevented from thinking through all the consequences of his idea
> because he continued to tie the impersonal field to a self-consciousness…He did

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[152] See note 1 of this chapter.

not expose the subject to the chance of a pure Outside. One of the names of the Outside is 'event.' That is why the event, as that to which the power of a thought devotes itself and/or that from which this power stems, has after Sartre become a term common to most contemporary philosophers.[153]

In other words, Sartre remained faithful, in Power's terminology, to a "disaleination" that

is provoked by an experience of being-with others, or finding oneself enmeshed in an

impersonal 'we' as opposed to the seriality of the 'I,' but this provocation comes, for

Sartre, from the being-with another itself and not from anything material, or external to

consciousness on Badiou's account. So for Sartre, though the true (Sartrean/Badiouan)

subject emerges in existence—and is hence, materially generated in this way—she only

emerges by recognizing herself in the other (another consciousness). Sartre is explicit

about this in his description of the group in fusion that he saw as constituted in the

storming of the Bastille:

> Everyone continued to see himself in the Other, *but saw himself there as himself*,
> that is to say, in this case, as a totalization in himself of the Parisian population,
> by the sabre blow or the rifle shot which would kill him.[154]

The Sartrean 'impersonal field,' as Deleuze puts it, is constituted in reference to a kind of

mirroring effect in which each individual steps out of his or her own 'personality' and

recognizes herself in the other and thus the unified consciousness of the group appears

through the shedding of the individuated consciousnesses of those involved. This is, as

pointed out above, for Sartre, accomplished through, and in reference to, consciousness

alone. As Badiou laments, Sartre did not think through the further foundations of the

unification experience itself and the conditions upon which such an experience rests. If he

had, on Badiou's (and Deleuze's) account, his analysis would have bottomed out in the

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[153] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds.* 381
[154] Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason Volume 1.* 354 emphasis mine

event. But for that one needs the anti-humanism afforded by both Althusser and structuralism. One needs to think beyond consciousness, to the structures that condition it for both the consciousness of the serialized multiple individual and the "impersonal" unified, agent-like, subjectivity of the group in fusion. Thus, though the Sartrean subject is material in the sense that it is generated in existence (as Power points out), it is not materialist in the sense of being itself conditioned by that which is other than consciousness, or the material 'event' that interpellates the subject, which as Badiou claims, is the mark of a true materialism. This is to say, whereas for Sartre the 'event' would be the *result* of the unification that is the group in fusion (the 'event' of the storming of the Bastille for instance) that unifies disparate consciousnesses into a force capable of effecting such an event, for Badiou, "The event cannot *result* from the passion of a body, nor can it differ in kind from these actions and passions. On the contrary, an active body adequate to the new present *is an effect of the event.*"[155] The "active body" is thus a *structural effect* of the event, not that which conditions it. Another way to put this same point, might be to say that for Badiou, the event is the material phenomenon that underlies the operation which comes to count-as-one the subject, who then works to reorient the consistent multiplicity of a given world to mirror the awareness she now has. With all of this in view, we can now turn to a discussion of the not-so-materialist outcomes of Badiou's materialist thought.

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[155] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds.* 385

Section Three

Recall the Althusserian critique, discussed in Chapter two, of Levi-Straussian style structuralism. The basic point that Althusser makes there is that Levi-Strauss and his followers become "traditional philosophers" (that is, idealists) the moment that they forget the connection to the specific historical moment in which their theories are produced. That is, when they forget the conjunctural nature of the foundations of the theory and begin to posit structuralism as an a-historical scientific 'truth' of social organization and in so doing, make the ideological (and idealist) mistake of conferring a kind of abstract subjectivity on 'structure itself. This is, of course, the result of the continually present danger of the impurity of theory as pointed out in the Althusser's statement of this problem referenced earlier in this chapter. Something of a similar order can be brought to bear on the Badiouan edifice and in so doing we can show that Badiou's account here suffers from some of the same problems (though on a different scale) that Althusser attributes to the traditional structuralist account. It is precisely this problem that pushes Badiou away from a full fledged materialism.

I am, of course, not the first to take up such a line of argument in relation to Badiou's thought and I wish to begin by looking at two other versions of this claim before turning to some additional ways that we can see the danger of idealism emerge for Badiou. We have, thus far, been talking about temporality in Badiou in relation to two modes: stasis and change, but there is another way of thinking about this theme. We can,

along with Peter Osborne, translate our terms for Badiouan temporality into structuralist terms: synchrony and diachrony.[156] Here Osborne writes that for Badiou:

> Time is reduced to two dimensions—synchrony and diachrony—and diachrony is no more than a serial ordering of synchronically defined situations. Situations are considered 'historical' in which there is 'at least one evental site'…but there is no unity to these situations, no 'evental situation' and hence no history.[157]

Badiou's ontology is ahistorical insofar as on the one hand, it is concerned with exposing the formal or synchronic properties of the ordering relations between objects found any given world/situation that make up the 'structure' of those worlds. On the other hand, Badiou's ontology is concerned with the historical (the diachronic) insofar as it attempts to theorize those worlds in which an event arises and the properties of the subjects that are created by them, but as Osborne points out above, since there is no 'evental' world because events are, as theorized by Badiou, things that appear and quickly recede in normally synchronically ordered worlds, history just is the history of ahistorically (and mathematically) structured worlds punctuated by the occasional 'event' and the subjects that arrive in its wake and thus it is the job of the philosopher to theorize the structures of these worlds insofar as they yield both stasis and the possibility of change. Osborne continues:

> …It is precisely the idea that *philosophy* is to be pursued, systematically, through a thinking of mathematics that is Badiou's primary classical, rationalist and idealist trait—its return to Plato—however modern the maths.[158]

So for Osborne, Badiou's philosophy returns to idealism because it rejects the diachronic and favors the synchronic or, in other words, because it seeks to understand and analyze

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[156] Peter Osborne "Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*" in *Radical Philosophy: a Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* Volume 142 (March/April 2007) 19-29.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid

the structures of worlds/situations synchronically and thus, independently of history. It is not interested in the connections between the structures of a given world and that world's history—it doesn't find the history of the situation to be important for the production of either the given world or the process of change—the world does not produce history, rather, the world is nothing but a static de-historicized conglomeration of subjectless objects that gain their status as objects through the structural relations between one another imposed by the (again non-subjective) transcendental. The event is what produces history though (oddly) it too is a-historical insofar as it is divorced from the de-historicized history of the world in which it appears as we have seen: though it arises within a situation/world, the event is not something that is itself conditioned by it (and so cannot be the subject of philosophical investigation, until after its happening).

I would like to push Osborne's analysis further here and point out that the formal synchronic description of worlds that Badiou gives us throughout both of his major works comes dangerously close to an idealism insofar as he, at the synchronic level, reifies the mathematical structure that he uses to analyze various worlds in both their synchronic nature and their harboring of potential diachrony. That is, the mathematical structure, for Badiou, becomes an ideological—and hence ideal—blind spot in his otherwise materialist theory. This is precisely the point that Adrian Johnston, in a pair of essays, develops further in relation to the Badiouan mathematic ontology and the concept of the count-as-one respectively.

Section Four

Johnston points out that when faced with concerns about the properly materialist

nature of Badiou's thought, given that abstract mathematical structures are considered to

be the foundations of ontology, Some of Badiou's defenders—Johnston cites Fabian

Tarby here—point to the fact that "Badiou rejects the portrayal of mathematics as a

fabrication of the human mind overlaid onto the objective world" so ultimately,

"Badiou's mathematical ontology is materialist insofar as mathematical entities and

configurations are viewed, by Badiou-the-Platonist as enjoying ontological weight, as

participating in real being."[159] Johnston's initial response to this is worth quoting at

length:

> Believing in the ontological reality of mathematics does not make one a
> materialist. Put differently, metaphysical realism is not equivalent to
> materialism—quite the contrary. Metaphysical realists tend to be, not
> coincidentally or by accident, idealists. At least in glancing back through the
> history of philosophy, one discerns a strong correlation between materialism and
> the diametric opposite of metaphysical realism, namely nominalism.[160]

If Badiou is a realist about mathematical entities, then his materialism is undercut by this

belief, as it forces him into a position of accepting the reality of abstract, formal or ideal

entities. Johnston goes on to critique Badiou's well-known rejection of the life sciences in

favor of the formalism of pure mathematics as further entrenching this problematic

idealist materialism via Badiou's recent comments on the status of physics and its

application of mathematics to empirical. Badiou argues that the life sciences (represented

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[159] Adrian Johnston, "What Matter(s) in Ontology: Alain Badiou, The Hebb-Event, and Materialism Split From Within" in *Angelaki: The Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* Volume 13, No. 1 (April 2008) 27-49

[160] Ibid.

here by physics) are stuck at the level of presentation, only a pure mathematics can get to

the ontological. First here is Badiou:

> …The more you decompose the concept of matter into its most elementary
> constituents, the more you move into a field of reality which can only be named
> or identified with increasingly complex mathematical operations. "Matter" would
> simply be, immediately after being, the most general possible name of the
> presented (of "what is presented")…Matter, in the sense in which it is at stake in
> physics, is matter as enveloping any particular presentation—and I am materialist
> in the sense that I think that any presentation is material. If we consider the word
> 'matter,' the content of the word 'matter,' matter comes immediately after
> being.[161]

It is on the basis of the distinction drawn here between the domain of pure mathematics,

the study of being-as-such (ontology), the 'applied' mathematics of physics, namely

'matter' or, the particular collection of objects and relations found in presented worlds

that Johnston is able to further call Badiou's professed materialism into question:

> What raises serious questions and difficulties in this context is the firm line of
> demarcation partitioning being and matter (instead of "thought and matter"), a
> line drawn in accordance with the full-fledged mathematization of ontology.
> Moreover, this line…indeed does end up segregating "impure" empirical
> disciplines, keeping them outside the enclosure of ontology properly speaking.
> And to Badiou's disadvantage, this is where Tarby's previously critiqued and
> utterly inadequate defense of the materialist credentials of the mathematical
> ontology of Badiou-the-platonist returns with a vengeance: the manner in which
> Badiou differentiates between *L'être* and *la matiére* that is tied up with a Platonic
> ontology that, if deemed to be materialist, renders the very opposition between
> materialism and idealism entirely null and void. How is this not metaphysical
> realism, an otherworldly doctrine inextricably intertwined with idealist
> spiritualism?[162]

Once the specter of such an 'idealist spiritualism' haunting Badiouan Materialism *vis-à-*

vis Platonist metaphysical realism is raised we can, along with Johnston, identify the

ways in which Badiou's twin concepts of the count-as-one and the de-subjectified

transcendental are also complicit in idealism's continued grip on Badiou's philosophy.

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[161] Badiou, quoted in Johnston, Ibid.
[162] Ibid.

As Johnston points out in the second essay with which we are dealing here, some of Badiou's critics (himself included) have raised questions about the status of the 'operation' that is the count-as-one.[163] Recall that, the count-as-one is the always already present 'law' that structures given situations, identifying what is 'presented' in a situation (and in what ways presentation takes place). That is, the count-as-one, at least in *Being and Event* is the operation that makes the inconsistency of being-*qua*-being into objects or consistent multiples, thus it defines the status of objects that are presented. However, as these critics argue, since Badiou himself denies that the count-as-one is a 'being' and gives it rather, the strange—and unexplained—status of an 'operation' (one that is, again, always already in effect in presentation), this all important concept seems to be, in Johnston's words, "an ethereal, spectral, operation of unification" that is real-yet-abstract and hence problematically idealist in line with the realist idealism outlined above.[164]

In *Logics of Worlds,* as we saw in the previous chapter, Badiou uses the concept of the count-as-one much less, replacing it with the idea of the a-subjective 'transcendental' (or the transcendental logic) as that which stands in for and serves the same function as the count-as-one of *Being and Event*. The transcendental is that around which a given world and its objects are structured much like the law that is defined by the counting operation. But here, the transcendental, rather than being described as an 'operation', is itself included in that world that it structures (rather than being an operator that in some sense pre-exists the world that is structured by it). As Johnston notes, this has been seen as a sign of a move away from the problematic idealism inherent to the

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[163] Johnston, "Phantom of Consistency: Alain Badiou and Kantian Transcendental Idealism" in *Continental Philosophy Review*, Number 41 (2008) 345-366.
[164] Ibid.

concept of the count-as-one by some of Badiou's readers. Johnston cited Alberto Toscano here:

> Toscano believes that [the] anxieties about Badiou's less-than-fully materialist status *circa* 1988 subsequently are assuaged in two ways after 1988: First, the 2006 conceptualization of the transcendental is purportedly less, as it were, mysteriously faceless than the anonymous count-for-one; second, the immanence of each transcendental regime to its respective world supposedly (re)-secures Badiouan thought as a form of strict materialism.[165]

However, Johnston also rightly points out that Badiou doesn't give up the count-as-one in 2006, the concept remains in use in *Logics of Worlds* and further when it is used, it is so at a crucial moment in the description of the status of objects presented in a given world. Speaking of the nature of objects in *Logics of Worlds* recall that, as we saw in the previous chapter, Badiou claims that:

> It goes without saying after all, that a being… can appear in different worlds. It would be absurd to think that there is an intrinsic link between a given multiple and a given world. The 'worlding' of a formal being, which is its being-there or appearing, is ultimately a logical operation: the access to a local guarantee of its identity. This operation may be produced in numerous different ways, and it may imply entirely distinct worlds as the grounds for the further operations it elicits.[166]

The point—as we also discussed in the last chapter—is that the appearance, or the being-there of a given object in a given world does not, for the Badiou of *Logics of Worlds*, exhaust the object. A given object can be worlded in multiple ways, by multiple transcendentals, and insofar as the particular appearance of a given object in a given world is defined by the relations that develop between it and other objects, the appearance of that object is (as we pointed out in the previous chapter in relation to the identity of humans in given worlds) defined in its being-there by other beings, or other

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[165] Ibid.
[166] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. 114

objects. This defining however, does not fully define and circumscribe the object, it is also defined in this by being other than what it is outside of a given world.

The object is thus split in its being worlded. It both is what it appears to be insofar as its appearance is defined by the relational structure, and it is importantly, not-all that it is in appearance or as Johnston puts the point, "The Badiouan object is never entirely situated in and structured by its respective world without reserve (or in Lacanese, "not all" of the object is in its world).[167] Though the object's nature exceeds the appearance, the object is made consistent through the subtraction of all that is not relationally consistent with other objects in that world, but as Badiou notes (and as we also made clear in the last chapter) this subtraction does not destroy the excess of the object or its nature outside of the relational structuring of the transcendental:

> The key to thinking appearing, when it comes to a singular being, lies in being able to determine, at one and the same time, the self-difference which makes it so being-there is not being-qua-being, and the difference from others which makes it so that being there, or the law of the world which is shared by these others, does not abolish being-qua-being.[168]

Thus, the object straddles the line between the inconsistent multiplicity of being-qua-being and the consistent appearing of the being-there of the world. As Johnston puts it, "the object as an onto-logical conjunction of *l'être en tant qu' être* and *être-lá*, is the condensed crossroads at which this interaction between being and appearing takes place, an interaction in which appearing comes to leave its mark on being itself."[169] It is here that the concept of the count-as-one operation reappears in *Logics of Worlds* the appearance of the object in-world, as a 'one' or a consistent multiplicity, is described by

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[167] Johnston "Phantom of Consistency," 364.
[168] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. 117
[169] Johnston, "Phantom of Consistency," 363.

Badiou as an "atom of appearing" which is, as Johnston points out, defined (in part) in the 'Dictionary of Concepts' at the end of *Logics of Worlds* with reference to the count-as-one: the "atom (of appearing)" is "the instance of the One in appearing, and therefore, the instance of what *counts as one in the object*."[170]

Leaving aside a discussion of the first part of this definition, we can see that the count-as-one thus, remains an important concept for Badiou as it continues to play a crucial role in the definition of objects in-world. This is also in part why in outlining the Badiouan edifice in the previous chapter I thought it unproblematic to use this term and the Badiouan transcendental interchangeably (more on this in a moment). Further, though Badiou continues to use the concept of the count-as-one in this way in *Logics of Worlds* it remains a mysterious abstract-yet-real concept as Johnston claims, "It remains troublingly unexplained who or what performs this enigmatic, mysterious operation as well as from where it comes."[171]

Returning now to the theme of the connections between the criticisms of Badiou's account of the social and the processes of stasis and change registered by both Osborne and Johnston, and the criticisms that Althusser launches against the structuralists of his day, these can be aligned if we consider how it is that what is identified as problematic by both of Badiou's critics is the portions of Badiou's theory that remain idealist "abstractions" which Badiou relies on to serve critical functions in his system. Nothing more needs to be said about the idealism inherent to the metaphysical realist position in mathematics (even though, according to this view mathematical entities are 'real' they remain formal immaterial entities, and are thus ideal). In addition to the problems

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[170] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds.* 579 my emphasis
[171] Johnston, "Phantom of Consistency," 364.

identified by Johnston in relation to count-as-one operation, we can add here in an

Althusserian vein, that because Badiou is insufficiently aware on the uncritical reification

of this concept, it comes to have the same kind of a-subjective subjective agency that the

concept of structure had for those whose structuralism became, as Althusser argues,

infected with ideology (and hence idealism) insofar as the count-as-one is endowed with

a quasi-intelligence as that which ensures the ordering of multiples across

situations/worlds. Further, à propos the attempted overcoming of the problems inherent to

the concept of the count-as-one by replacing it with the concept of a de-subjectified

transcendental, as Johnston has convincingly shown, the transcendental itself is still tied

to the count-as-one operation and as such is undergirded by the remaining idealist

abstraction.

Chapter 5: Žižek and the Materialism of the Immaterial, or Why Hegel is not an Idealist

> Žižek, in a recent interview, regarding his materialism, claims:

> …There is a fundamental difference between the assertion that 'everything is matter'…and the assertion 'there is nothing which is not matter' (which with its other side, 'not all is matter,' opens up the space for the account of immaterial phenomena). What this means is that a truly radical materialism is by definition non-reductionist: far from claiming that 'everything is matter', it confers upon the 'immaterial' phenomena a specific positive non-being.[172]

This chapter will begin our discussion of Žižek's relation to (and revision of) Althusser by attempting to clarify Žižek's 'non-reductionist' materialism as described in the quotation above. It will do so by locating it via Žižek's de-progressified, Lacanian reading of Hegel's thought in which Hegel becomes the primary representative of a properly—non-reductive—materialist paradigm. The Chapter that follows this one will then assess the similarities and differences between Žižek's view and Badiou's arguing that Žižek's materialism overcomes the remaining idealism that continues to infect Badiou's thought. We can begin this project by first discussing the basics of Hegel's philosophy that are important for Žižek's position, with an emphasis on Hegel's understanding of the importance of the 'negative moment' as this concept is crucial to

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[172] Slavoj Žižek, "Interview" in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Sirnicek, and Graham Harman. (Victoria: Re.press, 2011). 407. A similar formulation of this can be found in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006). 168 [Hereafter *PV*]

Žižek's own materialist view insofar as it maps on to Žižek's understanding of the 'not-All'.

Section One

As is well known, for Hegel, the negative moment in the dialectical process of Consciousness's coming to awareness of itself and its world is critical. It is the point where mediation occurs, where what is properly "true" about the previous moment comes into view. It is in the space of such negativity that we begin to discern that which before was not mediated (immediate, and not fully understood), in its fully expressed actuality, as the moment that is what it is *through the exclusion* of that which it negates. In the mode of the immediate (at any given step in the process), one is under the illusion of having a kind of complete understanding, believing that knowledge of one's self and one's world is complete, closed, and whole. In the space of the negative moment, this understanding and the perceived whole—and its explanations—becomes inadequate and fall apart. What appeared to be complete, whole, and universal turns out not to apply, there is a lack—an inherent 'not-All' in one's knowledge—that has been covered over by the perceived totality which then becomes, in the space of the negative moment, laid bare in its incompleteness. This calls into question, for the knower, the previously experienced universality of knowledge. In order to better grasp this point we can look briefly at how this process unfolds in the opening sections of "Sense Certainty" in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

On Hegel's account, consciousness's first attempts to understand its world are founded in taking that which comes to it through the senses for what is true. According to

Hegel, what consciousness finds is that "the thing," namely, the object (or set of objects) that it receives through its senses, "is."[173] This is to say that the thing has a kind of abstract existence and that "it is merely because it is."[174] The multiplicity of things that are found in the world, appear to consciousness as necessarily fixed, determined, and differentiated in certain ways. Thus, what is true for consciousness at this stage is "this" thing, in its abstract existence, that is "here," displayed in front of consciousness "now." What is further revealed to consciousness in this moment is that the structure of the thing (the "This") is both "Now" and "Here" which then become the new determinations (or concepts) that need to be understood.[175]

Thus we could ask—as Hegel did—about the "Now" (the question is: what is the "Now?") and say, for instance that the "Now is night" (this thing, that is here now, is night) but as we will quickly notice, that definition is only a fleeting one for it is the case that at some point the 'Now' will not be night but it will be day.[176] What this realization brings with it is a further determination and differentiation of the "now." This is also—as is well known—Hegel's description of how consciousness comes to discover universal concepts like 'This,' 'Now,' and 'Here' out of the particulars to which they are initially applied in consciousness' everyday dealings with the world. These universal concepts arise *in* and come to be known as a result of the experience of them as non-universal, fleeting, and contingent. The concept is brought to light in the *negation* of its particular (and contingent) determinations. In the negation of particular 'nows' we come to understand the concept of "Now" itself, but this concept is not strictly identical with any

[173] G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977). 58 [Hereafter *Phenomenology*]
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., 60
[176] Ibid.

of its particular instantiations, it is rather 'not' any one of them. Thus what is also revealed in this is the primacy of the negative moment as Hegel shows us:

> The Now that is night is preserved, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that is; but it proves itself to be on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is not night; equally it preserves itself in the face of the day that it now is, as something that is also not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general.[177]

What was first posited by the moment of sense certainty as the 'Now' has become distinguished from its particulars, as it is not properly any one of them but rather a universal, which is at the same time all of its particular moments *and* none of them. This is, as we have seen, discovered through the negation of attempting to identify the universal "Now" with one of its particular instantiations, but this knowledge only comes *after* or as a *result* of a distancing of the starting point in which the universal is not universal but rather particular and determined, but that which is particular and determined is perceived to be universal.

Hegel conceives of knowledge as always being mediated by the negative moment. As we have seen in the example of consciousness's coming to understand the concept of "Now" it first took what was immediately given as the truth of the "Now" (now is night) but then found that the negation of that idea (that the "Now" was not only to be identified with 'night' but with 'day' as well) exhibited the real "truth" of the first understanding of the term, namely that that this understanding was inadequate, that is did not offer a completed definition—because now the "Now" is day, but this also becomes mediated in the recognition that the universal "Now" cannot be strictly identified with either of these

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[177] Ibid.

particular instantiations of it, and is in fact radically different then, and not determined by, the particularity with which these instantiations appear.

It is only in the negative moment, as that moment in which we come to see what is left out by our current knowledge of things, that we come to see what is universal and hence "True" about the nature of our current mode of knowing (that it is always inadequate, that it always leaves something out, that it is what it is based on this exclusion). Furthermore, consciousness itself is what it is at any given moment as a product of such inadequacies—its own determinations are only what they are as a *result* of a kind of foundational exclusion that only shows itself *in existence* in the moment of negation.

We should briefly recall that for Hegel, like Kant before him, the "objective" world in which we live is the product of the interaction between consciousness (as that which organizes, imposes meaning, and "knows") and what is affected by it. Recall the Kantian idea of consciousness as a 'receptive spontaneity;' consciousness receives information and then spontaneously organizes it (according to the structures it imposes on this information) so that it can be understood, or 'known.' It is not, on Kant's accounting of things, the objects of experience that modify our consciousness but rather our consciousness that modifies the objects of experience so that they can be comprehended.[178] Hegel wishes to accept a portion of the Kantian claim. He does think, along with Kant, that the subjective conditions of experience and knowledge cannot be changed by objects and that objects are in fact determined by consciousness and are grounded in such determinations. In commenting on this in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel

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[178] See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

points out, à propos the common sense idea that when one cognizes the world she

somehow "has" notions, concepts, or ideas of her objects, that though this way of

describing cognition is "true" with regard to "determinant notions" (particulars), "the *I* is

the pure Notion itself, which as Notion, has come into existence."[179] That is, the 'I' is that

from which concepts, or notions *as such* issue and to which particular 'determinant

notions' are subordinated. Thus notions are not merely 'had' by thought but are rather, in

part, produced by and through consciousness's activity, and so are deeply connected to,

and unified with it. Hegel continues approvingly:

> This constitutes the nature of the *I* as well as the Notion; neither the one nor the
> other can be truly comprehended unless the two indicated moments are grasped at
> the same time both in their abstraction and their perfect unity. When one speaks in
> the ordinary way of the *understanding possessed by the I*, one understands
> thereby a *faculty* or *property* which stands in the same relation to the *I* as the
> property of a thing does to the thing itself, that is, to an indeterminate substrate
> that is not the genuine ground and the determinant of its property. According to
> this conception I *possess* notions and *the* Notion in the same way as I also possess
> a coat, complexion, and other external properties. Now Kant went beyond this
> external relation of the understanding, as the faculty of notions and of *the* Notion
> itself, to the *I*. It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the
> *Critique of Pure Reason* that the unity which constitutes the nature of the Notion
> is recognized as the original *Synthetic* unity of *apperception*, as the unity of the 'I
> think,' or of self-consciousness.[180]

Though it is the case that Hegel agrees, in part, with the Kantian arguments here, He

wants to argue that the *subjective conditions of experience do in fact change, even though*

they are not affected by the object. They change historically, as people and cultures

change and so, individual cognition is related to communal cognition which itself shifts

and changes throughout history.

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[179] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999). 583 [Hereafter *SL*]
[180] Ibid., 583-584

Thus, there is, as Hegel says in the *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, 'Reason in history' in two senses: First, insofar as he takes the Kantian claims to be true—since reason is involved in the creation of objects as they are cognized by humans, and insofar as humans themselves are temporal beings, human history is infused with reason's participation in the construction of objects. As he points out, "Reason is the *substance* [of our historic world] in the sense that it is that whereby and wherein all reality has its being and subsistence."[181] And second, at the same time that Hegel takes the Kantian points described above to be true, he also wants—as already noted—to say that Reason and History are connected insofar as Reason bears the mark of the history in which it comes to be what it is. So the claim that there is "Reason in history" is also meant to signal Hegel's innovation over and above Kant: the claim to the historically developmental nature Reason, and also, the historical construction, transformation, and indexing of the Kantian transcendental conditions themselves.

Hegel goes on then, to re-conceive of the ground of both the objective world and the individual self as being found in the struggle for recognition and the movement from individual desire to a communally agreed upon set of "truths" that form and shape our experiences of our world and our understanding of ourselves. Knowledge—and the knower—is determined by our pragmatic concerns and our active dealings with one another in the community. What is true is, in fact, determined by self-consciousness but is so in reference to what self-consciousness is concerned with, and this is primarily determined by the concerns of the historically located community. Thus, *self-consciousness is conditioned by the social*. Objects in the world are conditioned by self-

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[181] Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, translated by Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988). 12

consciousness's desire, or lack of desire, for them. However, this also is not merely the

desire of a single self-consciousness, but that of a historical community. It is Hegel's

description of self-consciousness as founded in the struggle for recognition that gives us a

conception of identity in which identities are *determined* and understood in relation to a

historically contingent and changing communal consciousness—"Spirit" in Hegel's

terminology—of what is to be desired.

To be sure, individual consciousness still exists, but it is grounded in a pre-

existent communal consciousness that is already meaning-laden and unfolds according to

a certain historical-communal understanding what is valued and meaningful. It is out of

the already meaning-laden world that the individual consciousness arises and thus that

world reflects back to the individual those things which make up her self-understanding.

In this way, self-consciousness always begins as, or finds itself, determined and

differentiated by its particular historical moment. The crucial aspect of this to see is that

this determinism is historical, the identity of individual self-consciousness is the product

of the communal modes of knowing (in the same way that knowledge itself is). Žižek, in

commenting on this, notes that:

> Hegel of course learned the lesson of Kant's transcendental idealism (there is no
> reality prior to a subject's positing activity); however, he refused to elevate the
> subject into a neutral-universal agent who directly constitutes reality. To put it in
> Kantian terms: while he admitted there is no reality without the subject, Hegel
> insisted that *subjectivity is inherently pathological* (biased, limited to a distorting,
> unbalanced perspective of the whole).[182]

Žižek's point, as we have already begun to see, is that the Hegelian subject both

organizes its world—in a Kantian sense—and is also organized by its world insofar as its

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[182] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absenst Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000) 78. [Hereafter *TS*]

own organizing capacities are constructed and constrained by the existing community as it is at a given historical moment. That is, in order for *any* world to show up, it must be organized by a conscious subject, the reality that such a subject posits, however, is always limited (biased, distorted) by the context within which she is found. There is then (at least initially) no non-pathological subject.

If all subjects are pathological in this sense, then all are contingently constructed in their subjecthood. Echoing the Althusserian conception, For Žižek's Hegel, subjectivity (first) is a product of the various differences, institutions, practices, traditions, modes of knowledge, and ideologies that exist at a given time. So subjectivity itself (and all of its differences) begins as the contingent, and ideologically limited, product of history. As such, it serves to ground, (re)produce, and sustain those differences. This ground, however, is so only on the condition that it excludes that which it negates (i.e. universality itself in the form of the negative moment, or knowledge of the 'not-All' of knowledge).

In some versions of the Hegelian story, the dialectic—and thus history itself—comes to an end in "Absolute Knowing" where the subject and its object coincide completely in higher level which takes both out of the realm of the historical (finite) existence and into the ahistorical (infinite), at this moment, there truly is no longer anything left out in knowledge and existence and, in turn, there is no longer any negativity but rather an infinite "whole."[183] This, however, is *not* Žižek's version of the story. Žižek explains the moment of "Absolute Knowing" not as a grasping of the

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[183] See for example, Alexandre Kojeve, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Trans. James H Nichols, Ed. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980) or Robert Pippin's excellent *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) in which he reads the historical nature of the Hegelian project as a developmental story of Consciousness's coming to awareness of the already fixed and determined Kantian categories.

Absolute in which we gain a way out of the historical process through an understanding that becomes infinite and thus ends negation, but rather "…we fail to grasp the Absolute precisely insofar as we continue to presuppose that, above and beyond the domain of our finite reflected reasoning, there is an Absolute to be grasped."[184] It is precisely *within* the confines of our finite reasoning that we come to know the Absolute Truth, which is simply that "there is no Absolute *beyond* or *above* the reflexive oppositions and contradictions of the Finite—the Absolute is *nothing but* the movement of self-sublation of these finite determinations."[185]

This is the source of Žižek's materialist reading of Hegel. For Žižek's Hegel there is no outside, we are always already included—even as subjects—in the world that we construct in our modes of coming to know it. Furthermore, this world is as it is *on the condition of* the modes of understanding that are employed by us, which are not constructed *ex nihilo* but rather are themselves founded by individuals and communities in history—that is, the results of the historical, embodied activity of humans. These modes themselves become what they are by being embodied, in both individuals and communities, and the material practices in which they engage. Thus, what is "Absolute" is precisely the historicity of systems of knowing (founded on the dialectic of negation and mediation), the contingent and historical world that these create (and, reflexively, that is created by these modes of knowing), and the contingent, differentiated subjects that are born out of this. The Hegelian Absolute is nothing other than this process itself and "Absolute Knowing" is nothing more than the awareness of this fact.

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[184] Žižek, *TS.* 84
[185] Ibid.

Commenting on the place of contingency in Hegel recently, Žižek argues, that what the standard views of Hegel's system—in which there is no room for contingency and all is determined by a necessary logical, historical, and processional development of a pre-existent whole in the process of moving from implicit to explicit—miss is that:

> The Hegelian dialectical process is not such a 'saturated' self-contained necessary Whole, but the open-contingent process through which the *Whole forms itself*. In other words [the standard view] confuses being with becoming: it perceives as a fixed order of being (the network of categories) what is for Hegel the process of becoming which *retroactively*, engenders its necessity.[186]

The necessity—if there is any—only comes *after the fact* in a retrospective reconstruction of the path that consciousness has taken. This does not mean that such a necessity was present from the beginning, nor does it mean that what we perceive as necessary is anything more than a necessity that forms out of a contingent historical process. We will return to this in a moment. At this point, it will be useful to take a detour through Žižek's understanding, and use, of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in his appropriation of Hegel.

Section Two

What I wish, initially anyway, to focus on are two key ingredients of Lacan's thought, namely the 'Symbolic' as that which structures and organizes, and the 'Real' to be read here, following Žižek's reading of Lacan, as that which is the symptom of the Symbolic in that it is both inherent to, and generated by, the symbolic but also that which acts to disrupt its continuity and universality. Seen in this way, the "real" can be viewed as the properly negative moment of the symbolic (further explanation below).

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[186] Žižek, "Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?" in *The Speculative Turn*. 215 my emphasis

For Lacan, like Hegel, we come to understand the world and ourselves through a kind of interaction in which both—ourselves and the world—become organized, ordered and meaning-laden. One of the ways that we can understand this is through Lacan's analysis of the foundational nature of language. Language functions as the primary mode through which this ordering happens. Here Lacan writes, "through the word…there is born the world of meaning of a particular language in which the world of things will come to be arranged."[187]

The arranging of the world through language immediately takes on a foundational tone as Lacan goes on to claim that it is not merely through language that the world gets organized but that in fact it is "the world of words that *create* the world of things" and this means that the world *is* what it is in large part, as the product of language.[188] As Lacan sees it, the structures of language and the meanings that these structures create *impose* organization not only on the world, but on humans as well and this process happens in an altogether unconscious fashion. We do not recognize this imposition of structure as such because it is inscribed in, and the foundation of, our very conscious awareness of both ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. We only come to consciousness *within* the world of meanings that exists as the result of language; and language and meaning is the result of an ongoing material and historical process. Thus, it is language and its historically located structures and meanings that are constitutive of our very experience (and our very world).

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[187] Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated and edited by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). 65
[188] Ibid.

This process is, according to Lacan, the process that Freud is metaphorically describing when he discusses the foundational nature of the Taboo against incest in his *Totem and Taboo*. Here Lacan writes, "the primordial Law [prohibition of incest] is therefore that which, in regulating marriage ties, superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating…This law then, is revealed clearly enough as identical with an order of language."[189] It is with language, in its unconscious imposition of order on both the world and individuals, through its creation of the world of things, that humans are, to speak metaphorically, raised out of an animal-like existence in which the world exhibits itself as unorganized and capricious and we merely act on instincts (as in the case of killing the father out the desire for the mother in Freud's story). This is because the order of language imposes an order on this instinct and caprice such that it becomes regulated.

To be sure, this story, for Lacan is not an attempt at any sort of empirically valid explanation of the pre-history of humanity. It is an explanatory myth. One that, while offering a plausible understanding of what humanity might be like outside of the ordering imposition of language, is nonetheless a myth as Rosalind Coward and John Ellis point out: "this myth can only ever be mythical precisely because any knowledge one has of the processes pre-existing language and the unconscious are known only through language with its symbolic relations."[190] This should not, however, lessen the force of the point of myth itself, the goal here is demonstrate the power of language and meaning in its ordering capacities. Speaking non mythically, it is, according to Lacan, language

[189] Ibid., 67
[190] Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Laguage and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (New York and London: Routledge, 1977). 101

which first orders and constitutes both consciousness itself (as consciousness)—and the

multiple and different identities that particular consciousness's take on—and allows for

the differentiation and categorization of consciousness's objects. Lacan continues:

> Symbols [words, languages, grammars] in fact envelop the life of man in a
> network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who
> are going to engender him by "flesh and blood;" so total that they bring to his
> birth, along with the gift of the stars, if not the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his
> destiny.[191]

This can—and should—be read in connection with the point that Hegel makes

about the nature of knowledge being determined by the community. It is within the order

and the meanings that are present in a socio-historical situation that any given subject

comes to self-awareness and awareness of her world as ordered, categorized, and

differentiated in a particular way. These meanings are imposed on the subject before she

has the ability to question or resist them and as such they present themselves as necessary

categories within which she comes to think both herself and her world. Thus, this

awareness, while productive of both the subject and the object, is always conditioned by

this pre-existing social and historical situation. Nevertheless, all of this is only possible in

the mode of the symbolic, through the positing of a subject who, in the use of linguistic

utterances to refer, is herself established as a particular kind of subject within a

communal context in which those linguistic utterances refer to something that is

recognizable by others in that community.

À propos Lacan's example referred to in the quote above, of the ways in which

language and meaning come to structure one's existence even prior to one's birth, we can

think of the particular type of meaning-ladenness that exists in our times of the concept of

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[191] Lacan, *Ecrits*. 68

'baby' and the network of meanings and significations that are built up around, and connected to such a term. None of these meanings are a-historical- they shift and change as cultures shift and change, but no matter their particular content, they are the network of meanings and values that are imposed on one even prior to one's birth. Regarding 'our' conception of this, as any contemporary—one should, I guess qualify this 'any' with other historico-social markers such as 'Western'—parent who has such thoughts knows, it is virtually impossible, for instance, to find much in the way of non-gendered infant products. From clothing to diapers, to cribs and room decorations, almost everything is marked by the cultural meanings that surround our current (again, local) conjuncture's understanding of what it is to be male or what it is to be female. Further, parents themselves often now find out the sex of their babies very early on in a pregnancy and this knowledge also marks the way that parents come to think of—and talk to, and treat—their baby even as it exists in the womb; so that when and if it does arrive, there is always-already a set of expectations for characteristics waiting for the child's arrival into which he or she will be fit. Further still, the entire set of meanings, values, and beliefs that surround the advent of a pregnancy is cultural and historical (and also in many ways economic) and this complex network of significations determines both the experience of the pregnancy/birth/child-parent relation for *both* the parent-to-be, and the child from the time that it is conceived.

Thus, as Lacan argues, I become a subject when I enter into the network of the symbolic, when I begin to learn the language of my community and come to understand myself in relation to it. It calls me into existence in a particular way through its structures, which are imposed on me whenever I respond to the linguistic call—again, we return to

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the Althusserian theme of interpellation—of others in my community who use these structures to refer to me.

The call is what in Lacanian terms structures and is structured by the symbolic. To again weave this together with the Althusserian account of subject formation, I become a unified being in my relation to the 'Other' of the symbolic, which calls on me to perform certain actions that interpellate (or draw me together) as its subject.[192] When my students address me as a teacher it is to their call that I am subordinated. Here I am 'subjectivized' as a teacher and along with that, come all of the trappings of the position of authority. The power that I seem to hold in such a position is not something which I do in fact hold, rather I am held by it, that is to say I only 'have' such power in virtue of the social recognition that I am accorded and it is this recognition that constructs my very subjectivity as one who has such power. In the same way, when I am called out to by someone else who holds a position of power, my advisor for example, not only does my subjective position become cemented, but so does his (and all of the power that comes along with it for him, and for me, all the lack of power that comes along with my recognition of his call). It is this interpellative mechanism that, writ large, structures one's world and the meanings that are possible for one by designating the symbolic coordinates of her understanding of both herself and her world.

However, as we should be able to see, even though language (and the symbolic order) and its processes of differentiation and meaning giving, appear as totalizing (in the same way that the coordinated desires of a community attempt to totally determine what

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[192] This is, as noted, a self-consciously Althusserian inflected reading of the Lacanian trope of the mirror stage as the foundation of both subjectivity and the symbolic order in which the subject finds herself. For Lacan's own famous discussion of this see, Jacques Lacan, "the Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function as Revealed in Psychoanalysis" and "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Ecrits* Translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006)

is meaningful for Hegel), the ordering/structuring move itself generates its own obstruction, its symptom, as that which signifies its failure to totalize. Here Lacan describes an opposition between speech and language and reminds us of some conditions under which language (as the imposed order/ordering act) fails in its attempted totalizing structuring. One of these is found in what are taken by the symbolic structures of a given language to be incomprehensible utterances (speech) of the insane, where "speech has given up trying to make itself recognized."[193]

Speech, then, is not exhaustively structured by language. Speech can be unstructured and point to something that is excluded by the structures of any given linguistic system. It is precisely these incomprehensible utterances, which form the inherent borders of that system itself, which exhibit its inability to totalize. Nevertheless this 'exclusion' is also the condition upon which a given language comes to signify, so it is also a part of it. In Žižek's terms, it is "the part which, although inherent to the existing universal order, has no 'proper place' within it."[194] This is how Žižek understands the Lacanian notion of the Real: as that which is both generated by the symbolic, and that which forms its immanent limitation or, as Žižek puts it, "The Real is not the transcendent substantial reality which from outside disturbs the Symbolic balance, but the immanent obstacle, stumbling block, of the order itself."[195]

This is the further foundation of Žižek's understanding of the negative moment in the Hegelian dialectic. That which forms the negative moment of any given historical mode of understanding is identified by Žižek with the Lacanian "real," and this is, as

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[193] Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*. 70
[194] Žižek, *TS*. 224
[195] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York and London: Verso, 2008). 319

described above, nothing other than the symptom of that given moment's perceived universality, which when revealed, shows the lack of closure of the symbolic and hence its nature as 'not-All' there is.

Returning now to the crux of the Hegelian/Lacanian brand of materialism Žižek endorses, we should comment on the possibility of a lingering worry. Given all the talk of the determination of the subject and the world by the symbolic, or language and meaning (Lacan), or subjective consciousness and its modes of knowing/concepts (Hegel) one might be tempted to argue that there is nothing of a materialism here, or if there is, it is one this still infected with what can only be described as a kind of linguistic/conceptual idealism in which the matter is determined by a meaning that floats above matter itself and exists only in the minds of those who cognize it. The answer to this is to be found in part in Lacan himself and also (by extension) in Žižek's claims that his materialism is 'non-reductive.'

Section Three

First, recall the structure of the Hegelian-Lacanian claims laid out above: the awareness of the individual (both in regard to herself and her world) is determined by the network of linguistic meanings within which the individual first finds herself such that said individual is not really in control of the network of meanings and symbols that constructs her own awareness. Further, this network itself is not static (or synchronically structured) it is rather historical and the result of the contingent development of communal practices and language usage. This latter point—the contingent nature of linguistic structure—is demonstrated by the existence of the Lacanian 'Real'—or the

Hegelian negative moment—that is defined as the symptomatic exception/excess that remains in the face of the seeming totality of meaning/knowledge, and which, when it becomes visible, shows us this 'not-All.'

The materialism inherent to this is thus born out, first, by the claim that, as individuals we are not (initially) in control of the meaning-giving function of the linguistic utterances that we use (in fact we are controlled by them) and, second, the meanings themselves are embedded in the existence of the historico-social community as it is at a given time. There is then, for Lacan (as for Žižek's Lacanian Hegel), not a strict division between the material (history/community) and ideal (linguistic meaning) and it is the negative moment found in the 'real,' with its rendering visible the incomplete nature of the symbolic, that shows us this. As Tom Eyers has recently pointed out, Lacan thinks that:

> By rooting our understanding of the Real within the logic of the signifier we may begin to recognize the materiality of the immaterial, and the stubborn opacity of the material itself. Lacan's claim that it is through the signifier that this materiality is revealed to us should not be taken as a concession to any standard brand of anti-realism or hyper-textualism; to the contrary, Lacan's aim is to render superfluous any neat separation of the ideal from the material, from the representative to that to which it ostensibly refers.[196]

Žižek's Hegelian materialism—contra Eyers' comments elsewhere in the same essay that his is somehow different than Lacan's position—is precisely an extension of this project of making problematic any simple separation of the ideal from the material.[197] We can see this most fully if we now—with Lacan in view—turn back to Žižek's reading of Hegel and the connection between the Lacanian conception of the symbolic as defined by

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[196] Tom Eyers, "Lacanian Materialism and the Question of the Real" in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Volume 7, No.1 (2011) 155-166.
[197] Ibid.

language and meaning, and the Hegelian communal subject. We are now, I think, in a

position to understand the point that Žižek makes—and its connection to the description

of it that we saw at the beginning of this chapter—when he renders his materialist

position in this way in the opening pages of *The Parallax View*:

> Materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather, it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I am included in the picture constituted by me—it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both outside and inside my picture that bears witness to my 'material existence.' Materialism means that the reality I see is never "whole"—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.[198]

The 'redoubling of myself' that Žižek refers to here is the redoubling that occurs in my

awareness of myself (and my world) as built for me out of the material of the historico-

communally grounded symbolic order that exists for me (that is, my *inclusion* as a being

that is itself constructed by those symbols I use to refer) *and at the same time* my

awareness of (in a properly materialist awareness anyway) the fact that my awareness of

this is itself partial and limited. Adrian Johnston puts this point in this way:

> …What appears as external reflection (i.e. the gaze of the subject on substance) is not confined to an epistemological field separated off from the reflected-upon reality of being. Rather than being external, this reflection is inscribed in the reality of being upon which it reflects as an internal inflection, an immanent folding-back of substance on itself; the gaze of the subject upon substance is substance-as-not-all gazing upon itself.[199]

In this way, Žižek's non-reductive materialism is not a rejection of the ideal, or a

relegating of it to another realm, but rather an embracing of the existence—and

determining power—of the ideal *qua* subjectivity in a quasi-Kantian sense, but with a

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[198] Žižek, *PV*. 17
[199] Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*. 166.

Lacanian-Hegelian twist in which the ideal itself is located as emerging *in*, and out of, the

historico-communal material. As such, subjectivity is itself (even in its ideality),

materially generated, universally always-already partial, limited, and not-All there is.

If this is correct, if the finite, pathological, and limited ideal—even though it is

that through which reality is constituted for us—emerges itself out of the material,

defined here as the symbolic-communal order, if the subject is, in Hegelian fashion,

simultaneously substance, the question is then *how* does such a split, such a redoubling

emerge? As Žižek himself asks the question in *The Parallax View*, "how, from within the

flat order of positive being, [does] the very gap between thought and being, the negativity

of being, emerge?"[200]

In a book co-written with Markus Gabriel, Žižek looks to Hegel's conception of

'habit' as our naturally extant 'second nature' for the foundation of how this materially

generated emergent gap is produced:

> …It is not that the human animal breaks with nature through a creative explosion
> of Spirit, which then gets habituated, alienated, turned into mindless habit: the
> reduplication of nature in 'second nature' is primordial, that is, it is only this
> reduplication that opens up the space for spiritual creativity.[201]

The argument here goes as follows (echoing much of what we have said already): The

distinction between first nature and second nature is, for the human, *not really a*

distinction- we are beings whose first nature is to be beings who have a second nature.

This second nature—signified here as a collection of historically contingent and changing

'habits' which are built out of what is, at a given time, communally acceptable and

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[200] Žižek, *PV*. 6
[201] Zizek, "Discipline between two freedoms: Madness and Habit in German Idealism" In Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009). 100

founded—is what organizes and constructs subjectivity's appearance, that is, subjectivity

is the internalization of that which is originally external and communal.

These subjective habits are truly habits insofar as they are experienced by the

individual subject not as contingent chosen activities, but rather as the necessary features

of existence. One such set of habits is (here is the importance of the Lacanian reflections

on language given above) linguistic habits, in which we become habituated to hear

meaning (which, as we have already noted, is itself historically indexed) rather than the

brute natural sounds of the utterances themselves as Žižek notes:

> When I hear a word, not only do I immediately abstract from its sound and 'see through it' to its meaning (recall the weird experience of becoming aware of the non-transparent vocal stuff of a word- it appears as intrusive and obscene…), but I have to do it if I am to experience meaning.[202]

My very experience of hearing is conditioned (most of the time anyway) by the second

natural habit of hearing meaning rather than brute sound. This is true of many other

habits that I pick up in existence. For instance the habitual way one greets someone in a

particular culture—say in the United States—the handshake is experienced by one who is

properly habituated, not as the brute experience of the flexing of the muscles in the arm

as it is extended and the clasping of the hand around the other hand, but as a symbolic

gesture, detached from the material action that embodies it. In this way, both in the

linguistic example and the example of the greeting, through habituation to and in

historico-cultural practices (linguistic and otherwise), the actions themselves are 'freed'

from their material foundations and this reduplicated at a second level (which becomes

the most important level). Again referencing Hegel, Žižek argues:

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[202] Ibid., 106

> Hegel emphasizes again and again that…habit provides the background and foundation for every exercise of freedom…through habits, a human being transforms his body into a mobile and fluid means, the soul's instrument, which serves as such without us having to focus consciously on it. In short, through habits, *the subject appropriates the body*…[203]

The 'freedom' Žižek speaks of here is the emergent freedom of thought out of being, the transcendent out of the material, the 'inner' out of the 'outer' in which the outer (the body) comes to be regulated and controlled by this inner (the subject) which itself is first found externally to the individual (in the material of the social). Žižek continues:

> The conclusion to be drawn is thus that the only way to account for the emergence of the distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' constitutive of a living organism is to posit a kind of self-reflexive reversal by means of which—to put it in Hegelese—the One of an organism as a whole retroactively 'posits' as its result, as that which dominates and regulates, the set of its own causes (i.e. the very multiple processes out of which it emerged).[204]

So for Žižek, the gap between the ideal and the material is internal to, and emerges out of the material. It is this that marks and defines the non-reductive nature of his materialism. It is also this that Žižek relies on in his account of change. In the next chapter we will look at both how Žižek's account responds to the problems inherent to Althusser's account and how this account differs from (and overcomes the problems of) the Badiouan account of materialism.

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[203] Ibid. 101
[204] Ibid., 106

Chapter 6: Žižek Contra Badiou

As we saw in the last chapter, Žižek's appropriation of Hegel via Lacan opens up the possibility of what he has termed a 'non-reductive' materialism in which the 'inner' emerges out of the material or 'outer' of social existence and in this process becomes detached from the outer in such a way as to be irreducible to it. As we also saw, in the first part of this argument Žižek endorses the Althusserian conception of the material foundations of both a given conjuncture and the individuals that find themselves in it. Subjectivity is first founded on (and in) the particular nexus of (external) social practices and materio-linguistic structures and meanings that come together at a given moment in history and interpellate individuals. It is the second part of the Žižekain claim that innovates on the Althusserian theory insofar as Žižek is unwilling to agree with Althusser's view that subjectivity is nothing but this. Subjectivity has for Žižek, a status of its own and is, once interpellated, not simply reducible to these material structures (more on this below).

As we also saw in the last chapter, by turning back to Hegel, Žižek is able to account for the immaterial-within-material reduplication of the subject's simultaneous inclusion in the material reality that constructs and constricts it, and at the same time, subjectivity's (quasi-Kantian) role in the positing of that reality within which subjectivity itself is included—through the emergent immaterial conceptual apparatus that is first

handed over to it by the external communal linguistic meanings and practices. Add to this Žižek's Hegelian claims about the fundamental lack of closure in material being via the conception of the primacy of the Hegelian negative moment in the dialectical process (read here in connection with the Lacanian conception of the real) as the inherent excessive element of the symbolic. The negative-real is, as we have seen, that which stands for the failure of closure in any given symbolic order, the absolute and universal 'not-All' that underlies all perceived totality. We can, by putting all of this together, begin to see Žižek's overall conception of the processes underlying the two categories of stasis and change that we have spent so much time analyzing in relation to both Althusser and Badiou.

Like Badiou, as we will see, for Žižek, subjectivity is the foundation of the possibility of change, though as we will also see, Žižek's theory—despite his own adoption of Badiouan terminology at times—does not necessitate the positing of the intrusion of an external 'event' as the catalyst for such change nor does it rely on a problematic split between 'being' as formal ontological multiplicity and 'presentation' as structured by the counted-as-one material partial representation of being. It is the subject's own activity that serves both as the foundation of stasis *and* of the possibility of change for Žižek. We will return to the Badiou/Žižek relation in a moment, but first we should say more about Žižek's reply to Althusser as this will lay the groundwork for our discussion of the latter relation.

Section One

As noted above, Žižek agrees in part with Althusser as to the nature of subjective

constitution out of the communal social material, but Žižek counters, in a

Hegelian/Lacanian vein, the conjunctural material out of which the subject is first

interpellated is not the structured whole/totality that Althusser makes it out to be. This is

because, on Žižek's Hegelian understanding, given conjunctures are never whole nor

completely totalizing in the way that Althusser thinks of them. Further, the subject—

because it is, once interpellated, irreducible to the material of the social order—is not

constrained to merely sustain and reproduce the institutions and practices out of which it

emerges.

To be sure, subjectivity does act in this way, in the reduplication that we have

described subjectivity does in fact serve as the point from which and through which the

material that first constructs it is redeployed and sustained, but subjectivity isn't

necessarily subordinated to this function as Althusser would have it. Rather, it only

appears (to subjects themselves even) that subjectivity is so constrained. Contra

Althusser and invoking the Lacanian concept of the 'big Other' (the view of the symbolic

order as a fully structured totality), Žižek summarizes this point in this way:

> With Lacan's "big Other" the perspective is completely the opposite: the very
> 'positing' of the big Other is a subjective gesture, that is, the "big Other" is a
> virtual entity that exists only through the subject's presupposition (this moment is
> missing in Althusser's notion of the "Ideological State Apparatuses," with its
> emphasis on the "materiality" of the big Other, its material existence in
> ideological institutions and ritualized practices—Lacan's big Other is, on the
> contrary, ultimately virtual and as such, in its most basic dimension,
> "immaterial").[205]

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[205] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*.113-114

The idea that there is a fully structured, social whole is a subjective 'presupposition' insofar as the conception of the closure of the social as a totalizing big Other, is placed on the world by consciousness-as-interpellated: this totalization has no existence outside of the subjective presupposition. Althusser misses this point, according to Žižek because of his singular focus on the material external nature of interpellation—and ideology—and thus he does not sufficiently recognize the dialectical reduplication that is involved in this process.[206]

The Hegelian background to this should not be missed. Think again of Žižek's discussion of the role of habituation in Hegel as the means whereby what is external (ritualized communal practices, linguistic structures as the like) becomes internalized in such a way as to create the individual's awareness and then is redeployed by those individuals as that through which the world is comprehended, structured, and organized. The world appears to us in the way that it does as a result of our activity which is, itself a reduplication of that which first constructs this activity. Here is Žižek—in a quote already cited in Chapter 5, but that should be recalled in this context—discussing this point:

> The conclusion to be drawn is thus that the only way to account for the distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' constitutive of a living organism is to posit a kind of self-reflexive reversal by means of which—to put it in Hegelese—the One of an organism as a Whole retroactively posits as its result, as that which dominates and regulates, the set of its own causes (i.e. the very multiple process out of which it emerged).[207]

In interpellation, I am, pace Althusser, subjected to the materially existing practices and structures of my socio-historical community which are then reduplicated in me as the

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[206] It should be noted here that Žižek also takes ideology to be grounded in the material practices subjects engage in (it is not just a matter of mistaken knowledge) he just, as we will see later in this chapter, takes the positing of presuppositions to be as material as any other practice.
[207] Žižek, "Discipline Between Two Freedoms: Madness and Habit in German Idealism" in Gabriel and Žižek *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*. 106

inner structure of my subjectivity (that is, in habituation, I internalize these practices—

what I am is the internalization of them) and at the same time the 'inner' is then thrust

back onto the world and is what acts as the 'virtual' or 'immaterial' limit of the world

itself. In other words, I experience this limit—set by me in my subjective conceptual

presuppostions, which posit the existence big Other—as an externally imposed limit. In

this way my own positing activity becomes that which limits me (and my conception of

my world) *without my knowing it*. Žižek continues:

> In this way—and only in this way—an organism is no longer limited by external
> conditions, but is fundamentally self-limited- again, as Hegel would have
> articulated it, life emerges when the external limitation (of an entity by its
> environs) turns into self limitation.[208]

Put concisely, the Lacanian 'big Other' is not that which is external to me and limits my

subjectivity (as Althusser would have it), but is rather, that internalized-externality which

becomes a virtualized subjective posit or presupposition through which I limit myself and

thereby also limit my world. In this reduplication, I limit myself but experience this

limitation as coming from the world, that is, I do not comprehend it as emanating from

me. I remain, in my everyday existence, unaware of my role in this process of limitation.

Here again, is Žižek:

> There is a link to Kant here, to the old enigma of what, exactly Kant had in mind
> with his notion of 'transcendental apperception,' of self-consciousness
> accompanying every act of my consciousness (when I am conscious of something,
> I am thereby always also conscious of the fact that I am conscious of this)? Is it
> not an obvious fact that this is empirically not true, that I am not always
> reflexively aware of my awareness itself?[209]

I am, in a very precise way, *not* aware of the presuppositions that I extend to my world in

my everyday quotidian dealings with it, but it is these presuppositions, which act as the

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[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid., 109

very frame and filter of my cognition. This frame, however—and this is the important

point—though it is virtual in the sense of being the immaterial imposition of the subject-

as-constructed out of the material, has a concrete effect on the reality that I experience (in

a Hegelian fashion). It is here that the Althusserian conception of ideology—and the

distinction between it and 'science' that Althusser attempts to draw—returns with a

vengeance (though in a modified form): My world is a virtual, ideological construction

insofar as it is retroactively posited (by me, in the already described subjective

reduplication, without my awareness) as a closed whole, but this positing activity is not

merely imaginary: it has real consequences for the world as it exists. In further

delineating this point Žižek invokes Deleuze:

> The solution to this dilemma is precisely the notion of virtuality in a strict
> Deleuzian sense, as the actuality of the possible, as a paradoxical entity, the very
> possibility of which already produces/has actual effects. One should oppose
> Deleuze's notion of the virtual to the all-pervasive topic of virtual reality: what
> matters to Deleuze is not virtual reality, but the *reality of the virtual* (which in
> Lacanian terms, is the Real). *Virtual reality* in itself is a rather miserable idea: that
> of imitating reality, of reproducing its experience in an artificial medium. *The
> reality of the virtual*, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the virtual as
> such, for its real effects and consequences.[210]

The 'virtual' here is, of course, the term signifying the 'inner' immaterial product—the

subjective posits/presuppositions—of the 'outer' material structures—historically bound

social/communal/linguistic practices—that in turn, come to have a decisive effect on the

material world. Recall here the Althusserian arguments traced at the end of Chapter Two

regarding the ideological nature of structuralism. There as we saw, Althusser claims that

structuralism becomes ideological insofar as it doesn't recognize its own status as a

theory that is, in the present, constructed out of the particularity of the material as it exists

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[210] Ibid. Emphasis in the original

in its given singular moment and instead, retroactively posits the 'truth' that it discovers as the origin, or eternal/explanatory truth of social existence. This is analogous to the claim that Žižek makes here about the nature of the subjective posit insofar as the posit is ideological in the same sense as the structuralist theory when it remains unaware of its historical nature, but as we will see, the problems that arise for Althusser, namely that he is unable to account for proper extraction from the ideological, are mitigated in Žižek's rehabilitation of the Hegelian concept of change.

Section Two

If the story, as we have told it thus far, accounts for stasis, as it offers an explanation of the ways in which subjectivity supports and reproduces the set of social/communal traditions, practices, and habits that first interpellate it—via a retroactively posited virtualized totalization—it also offers us insight into the ways in which the possibility of change appears on the scene according to Žižek. Rejecting the Althusserian notion that subjectivity is simply reducible to the practices and institutions that interpellate it (and thereby fully constructed and determined by them) and instead claiming that once interpelllated, subjectivity is not so reducible, gives us an indication of a first form of change that exists (even when such an irreducible subject merely serves as the ideological support of a given social order) on Žižek's accounting of things. That there are 'subjects' at all is a change (as the subject is the immaterial shift that arises out of the material), further, Žižek's account of subjectivity's nature as self-limiting makes its own action the foundation for change. We can now turn to an explanation of this point and its relation to the Badiouan account of change.

Where there are, for Badiou, 'events' that are the catalyst for change, there are for Žižek, 'acts'—yet another term taken over from Lacan—that serve a similar function. Johnston provides us with a succinct description of the Lacanian background of this concept.[211] As Johnston explains, in the fifteenth seminar, Lacan draws a distinction between what he calls 'action' and what he calls the 'act.' Here is Johnston on this distinction:

> The former is simply some sort of natural and/or automatic process (for instance the body's motor activities). The latter by contrast, involves a dimension over and above that of something like the mundane material occurrence. A proper act has symbolic repercussions; it transgresses the rules of the symbolic order, thereby destabilizing the big Other in revealing its flaws, inconsistencies and vulnerabilities. Whereas action is part of the normal run of things, an act disrupts the predictable cycles governing particular realities, forcing transformations of regulated systems in response to its intrusive irruption.[212]

For Zizek then, the Lacanian 'act' has an effect similar to that of the Badiouan 'event' insofar as it has the power of disrupting the normal flow of static time in such a way as to radically reorganize it. Furthermore, the transformative effects of such an act are not limited to the externally existing order. The act also necessarily brings about a change in those individuals who experience it. This is the further similarity between the Badiouan event and the Žižekian/Lacanian act: the act has the effect of reorienting the subject as well as the world in which the subject finds herself, and because it has this effect—of both disrupting the symbolic and the subject—it is experienced by the subject in the same way that the event is for Badiou- as something which *happens to* the subject, not as something that the subject does. Here again is Johnston:

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[211] Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).
[212] Ibid., 110

One remarkable feature of the act that Lacan does indeed go out of his way to underscore is that this disruptive gesture is not the outcome of prior deliberations on the part of self-conscious reflection… Hence it seems as though the act is an impossible miraculous occurrence that emerges and befalls individuals who are, at least at first, subjected to the act's subjective reverberations.[213]

Before commenting on this, we must first note a crucial difference here between the Badiouan conception of the subject and the Žižekian conception, which has a decisive effect in differentiating the two accounts in this context.

As should already be apparent by what has been said so far, whereas Badiou rejects any notion of a pre-evental subjectivity and instead relegates pre-subjective individuals to the status of objects, determined simply by the externally imposed counting operation—arguing instead that events 'subjectivize' individuals—Žižek's theory requires the pre-act existence of self-limiting subjects for there to be any acts whatsoever (and hence any change). This point tracks the Lacanian distinction, elaborated on by Johnston, between 'action' and the 'act.'

The subject is the point through which, in everyday quotidian 'action', a given social structure or conjuncture is ordered and sustained (as we have seen) insofar as it is such a subject that, through the action of self-limiting and limiting the world to presuppositions handed over to it, (ideologically) posits a given conjuncture as Whole. In answer to the question of 'what does the structuring?", Žižek need not, as Badiou does, posit the existence of a reified, abstract, and formal process such as the 'count-as-one.' It is subjectivity itself that does the 'counting' here in its reduplication and redeployment of the material structures of the community.

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[213] Ibid., 110-111

Further, since the external material communal structures that undergird the inner life of the subject are themselves always and universally historical and partial, subjectivity is also at its very core a 'not-All' insofar as it is itself never fully structured and totalized (though it does not recognize this in its quotidian 'action'). This latter point is what gets revealed to the subject in the space of the 'act' and is what leads to the possibility of change. When the (subject's own) act reveals to her the inherent lack of totalization it also reveals the fact that her world is 'not-All' there is, that it is not totalized. This then has the effect of extracting her from her previously conditioned existence, thereby changing both herself and the world that she inhabits insofar as her own ordering activity—the subjective presuppositons through which the world is ordered—is shifted by the act.

Section Three

Žižek struggles throughout his works to articulate the conditions of existence for such a transformational subject. Many of his most decisive examples are drawn from literature and movies. These fictive examples function for Žižek, much like the 'thought experiment' functions in other philosophical contexts, they provide a nice demonstration of the phenomena under consideration. Such examples move beyond the classical philosophical thought experiment, however, insofar as they tend to mimic the actual behavior of people and so are more forceful (in my mind anyway) than many of the quite far fetched philosophical 'thought experiments' that academic philosophers are willing to accept. Though this is a bit of an aside, I offer this commentary here in anticipation of the objection that using a fictive example is problematic.

That said, I wish to focus on Žižek's analysis of the figure of Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener in the short story that bears his name. As the story goes, Bartleby, when asked to do just about anything responds with the phrase "I prefer not to."[214] Through its repetition, this act can come to negating the order that gives rise to it, as it literally becomes an unconditional refusal that stops making sense from within the symbolic/ideological space of reasons. Such a refusal, as Žižek puts it, "…is a signifier turned object, a signifier reduced to an inert stain that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order."[215] What Bartleby's move does—without his conscious awareness initially—according to Žižek, much more than simply refuse an order, is that it calls the perceived universality of the given conjuncture into question by saying no to the structure itself through a refusal to participate in the forms of action that are sanctioned by it.[216] The motivation for this action is first found within the existing symbolic order; one is called upon to act in a certain manner that is fitting of a certain kind of subject but the response (the 'I would prefer not to) comes to act as a rejection of both that call *and* the subjectivity that it addresses by opening up a space in which both are seen as non-totalizing and not-All there is and thereby, revealing the universality-as-lack of closure that underlies all subjective presupposition.

Making the Hegelian background in Žižek's reading of this explicit will help to clarify the ways in which the 'act,' though a product of subjective activity, can be experienced by the subject analogously to the way that the 'event' is in the Badiouan account of change but without all of the problems that attend the Badiouan edifice. As my

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[214] See Herman Melville "Bartleby the Scrivener" in *Herman Melville: Moby Dick, Billy Bud and Other Writings*, edited by Thomas Transelle (New York: Penguin, 2000) 639-678.
[215] Žižek, *PV* 383
[216] Ibid.

reading of this through the eyes of Žižek's (Lacanian) Hegel makes clear, Bartleby's is

itself an act that supplies its own content or to put this a different way, the negativity

inherent in the refusal, is also *at the same moment* the creation of a new possibility and is

in this way, simultaneously positive in its negation.

Recall (again) that according to Lacan, we become the kinds of beings that we are

in relation to the Symbolic, which both calls us into existence (interpellates us) and

makes up the background of meaning for the world that we experience. In Bartleby's case

this interpellative process begins when he is called upon by his boss to perform a certain

task that fits his position, namely to look over, and transcribe some documents to which

he responds for the first time with the famous phrase. It is thus within the world of

structured and ordered meanings that appear to Bartleby as being fixed and external to

him, that Bartleby first commits himself to his cause: to respond to the interpellative call

with a refusal. In the commitment to (repetitious) refusal, however, the destitution of the

particular content (and meanings) of the order/ordering mechanism is secured. The key

point to see here is that through its repetition, the refusal itself, *has the same*

interpellative effect as the initial call, but this time it is Bartleby's own commitment to the

cause that acts as the thing which constitutes him as a subject and not the call (perceived

as) issuing from the symbolic. Thus it is *his own act* that interpellates him as freed from

the order that he initially posited as totalizing. Here we find ourselves not only in Lacan's

territory but also in Hegelian waters. The act that Bartleby brings about is akin to the

action effected by consciousness's move to skepticism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Recall skepticism as:

> …a moment of self-consciousness, to which it does not *happen* that its truth and
> reality vanish without its knowing how, but which in the certainty of its freedom,

makes this 'other' which claims to be real, vanish. What skepticism causes to vanish is not only objective reality as such, but its own relationship to it.[217]

Self-consciousness recognizes the contingent nature of what it once took to be necessary—the necessity that is destroyed is nothing other than self-consciousness's relationship to the external Other, in the form of the Lord, who has—it believes—determined its existence up to this point. The same holds true for Bartleby's refusal to do what he is asked. Žižek writes:

> His "I would prefer not to" is to be taken literally: it says "I would prefer not to," *not* "I don't prefer (or care) to"…In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate, rather he affirms the non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it, he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of "resistance" or "protestation," which parasites on what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation.[218]

Returning to Hegel, we can see the relationship between what Žižek is pointing out and the moment of skepticism. In the active negation of the Master's world (the world in which the skeptic was once immersed and presented itself as a necessary and transcendent world) the skeptic finds himself to have a minimal freedom: necessity disappears for self-consciousness—not as it did in past moments, without its knowledge of how or why—but rather self-consciousness recognizes that *it is the one* who has made this necessity disappear, that this change issues from it. It accomplishes this by negating all positive content that comes to it from without. As with Bartleby, who says "I would prefer not to" in response to any attempt to get him to act, in his own negative activity, the skeptic frees himself from the earlier relationship he had to the master.

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[217] Hegel, *Phenomenology*. 124
[218] Žižek, *Parallax View*. 381-382

Freedom is thus tied directly to this act as Hegel notes, "through this self-conscious negation it [self-consciousness] procures for its own self the certainty of its freedom, *generates the experience of that freedom,* and thereby raises it to truth."[219] It is only in the practice of active negation of all seemingly external positive content that freedom from the enslavement to the other is realized. It is critical that we recognize that this freedom is not something that existed prior to this action (and just needs to be realized). For Hegel, freedom can only appear on the scene *in* this activity, self-consciousness was not free at all until its own action gave it that possibility. This freedom is immanently generated in the act of negation.

To be sure, initially, the negative action of the skeptic, is tied to the positive order as Hegel notes:

> It [self-consciousness] pronounces an absolute vanishing, but the pronouncement *is*, and this consciousness is the vanishing that is pronounced. It affirms the nullity of seeing, hearing etc., yet it itself is seeing, hearing etc., It affirms the nullity of ethical principles and lets its conduct be governed by these principles…it has itself the doubly contradictory consciousness of changeableness and sameness, and of utter contingency and non-identity with itself.[220]

The upshot of this, however, is that here consciousness experiences this split (the split between its activity of negation and the positive content which the negation is tied to) not as a split external to itself but rather one that cuts across the very center of its being: both the positive order and its negation are found to be (through this action) *within* self-consciousness, within it as a subject. Hegel continues:

> Skepticism's lack of thought about itself must vanish, because it is in fact *one* consciousness which contains within itself these two modes. This new form is, therefore, one which *knows* that it is the dual consciousness of itself, as self-

[219] Hegel, *Phenomenology*. 124.
[220] Ibid.

liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical, and as self-bewildering and self-perverting, and it is the awareness of this self-contradictory nature of itself.[221]

What propels the forward movement of the dialectic here (for Hegel) is the new found awareness of the split as not one of external imposition/internal negation but rather that both of these sides are inherent in the subject. That is, the subject recognizes, pace Žižek, that the 'big Other' is a subjective posit and that not only is the communal world not fully determined, but that the subject herself is not either, that such determination is itself nothing more than an ideological posit.

Furthermore, in the space of the 'act' the subject is both that which acts to negate the order *and* that which, through this negation becomes (for itself) unchangeable and stable—it enacts its own stability in its continued negative activity. The subject recognizes her own inherent potential in this. The same is true for Bartleby: he becomes the thing that he is through the continued habit of the negation of commands that come from without. In doing this, he founds himself—in an enacted freedom from the externality of the interpellative call—as a new stable being in the process of that negation (the stability offered in the activity of negation):

The importance of this is not to be missed. As Hegel points out, what we find here is the *production* of the positive freedom of the subject *in and out of* the moment of negation. It is through this activity that the subject comes to the awareness of her being as split, who is both free from external constraint in her ability to actively negate external reality—as that which was immediately seen as this "external constraint," now comes to be viewed as internally posited—and at the same time founds herself as the source of stability. So what we are faced with is precisely the traumatic product of the rejection of

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[221] Ibid., 126

the symbolic produced by the refusal: the internally contradictory nature of subjectivity itself. The subject is nothing other than the "gap" between the positive content of the symbolic order and its negation (both of which are internal to its activity). It is both the foundation and source of all stability and determination and *at the same* time the recognition of the (universal) lack of absolute determination. Žižek writes:

> This brings us back to the central theme… Bartleby's attitude is not merely the first, preparatory, stage for the second, more "constructive" work of forming a new alternative order; it is the very source and background of this order, its permanent foundation…The very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying "I would prefer not to" which forever reverberates in it—or as Hegel might have put it, the new post-revolutionary order does not negate its founding gesture, the explosion of the destructive fury that wipes away the Old; it merely *gives body* to this negativity.[222]

That is, Bartleby's act of negation which is the "source" of the "new" remains its "foundation" because it is this act that, as we have seen, first makes us aware of the illusory nature of the externality and externally necessity of the authority of the old order. Recall here the Hegelian claim that the skeptic's action makes external reality "vanish." This is nothing other than the realization that what one once took to be externally (and necessarily) imposed is rather only so as long as one acts based on this belief, which points to the fact that what was thought to be externally imposed was rather imposed on the subject *by himself* all along (in the subject's self-limiting activity). This action then is the recognition that it is the subject herself who acts to sustain the order and thus it is also the subject herself who can challenge its assertion of authority as neither the order, nor her (ideologically) interpellated subjectivity is fully determined. In other words, in the 'act' the subject comes to recognize the 'virtual' nature of the Whole.

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[222] Žižek, *PV.* 382

It is in this negative activity itself that one becomes able—in a Hegelian fashion—to *enact* one's freedom from the constraints of this imposed external reality, To be sure, the freedom that is founded here is nothing more than the freedom from the imposed/imposing demand of the old order as viewed as external to the subject, it is not an absolute freedom. There is still subjection, it is simply that subjection is now recognized for what it is: again, as something that is internally imposed on the subject by herself. What is then built out of this is, in this way, founded on the stability that is produced in the continued habitualized negation (the gap that is internal to the subject— the experience of the subject as both that which negates and is free and that which founds itself as a stable being in this negation). We should, moreover, take literally the Hegelian claim that Žižek makes at the end of this remark, namely that "body" is given this negativity.

It is literally materially the case that in acting in fidelity to the recognition that arises as the result of the act, we give (material) body to a new possibility. Recall again the structure of the non-reductive materialist dialectical reduplication that Žižek describes in which what is external, is the material foundation for the production of the internal which then is what, through the conceptual apparatus provided by the action of the internal 'posits,' through the set of virtual presuppositions, the external as standing over-against the internal.

This process is not changed in the 'act,' what is changed is both the content of the virtual set of presuppositions and the subject's relation to them (here the subject is aware of the process in a way that it was not before). Thus, subjectivity gains a new disposition and along with it, a new relation to the world, which, as such, brings with it a new world

in actuality. The rest of the Žižekian story of change is similar to the Badiouan account in that, such a 'new' subjectivity must work to change the world, insofar as it must work to sustain the 'new' world that is already a part of its subjective presuppositions insofar as it is ushered in by its act.

We should now be able to clearly see a further important distinction between the Badiouan account and the Žižekian one. Žižek's Hegelian/Lacanian materialist conception of both stasis and change never leaves the materialist history in which it emerges. That is, there is no split between synchrony and diachrony in which the synchronic stands outside of the diachronic and does the determining of the particular nature of the diachronic, as it does in Badiou's account. What is synchronic in Žižek's account emerges from the materialist diachronic (not the other way around). What is universal, and universally 'true' is the lack of closure that underlies the nature of the materio-symbolic order, but this universal 'not-All' *comes to be* in the partial, pathological, and contingent nature of history insofar as the subject's own awareness of this comes to be in history and this awareness (if properly habituated) becomes the foundation of the universal truth itself.

Conclusion: New Materialism or Neo-Durkheimianism?

The title of this study makes a claim about the nature of the materialism that is espoused by those whose thought it occupies. It claims that there is a 'new' materialism here. That there is something different in this materialism than materialisms that came before or that it does not simply re-hash longstanding materialist claims. As noted in the introduction, the newness claim is mostly limited to the thought of Badiou and Žižek, as Althusser serves as a common reference point for both, and a background against which these two are reacting.

It seems that, having worked our way through the various claims these three thinkers make *vis-à-vis* materialism, and having demonstrated their shared theoretical focal points as well as the problems that they encounter along the way, we are now in a position to assess this 'newness.' I wish to begin this assessment in the reverse, that is, I want to begin by discussing the ways in which we might be able to say that these positions are *not* new. We have, I think, already been given one reason to think that at least Badiou's materialism is not all that new given its problematic closeness to a certain kind of (idealist) structuralism. I want, in light of this, to look at the relation between this brand of materialism as it appears in both Badiou and Žižek and a certain reading of Durkheim.

We have had occasion to bring Durkheim up before in this study via Althusser's attempt to distance himself from the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and his followers

insofar as he attributes the imposition of the Durkheimian conception of a "collective consciousness" to certain elements of the structuralist enterprise.[223] Further, this same criticism was used, in Chapter four, as a backdrop for extending the complaints leveled at Badiou's theory by Johnston and Osborn.[224] It is not a coincidence that Althusser raises the Durkheimian claims in relation to Levi-Strauss—as was also noted in chapter two— both Althusser and Levi-Strauss were well versed in Durkheim; so well, in fact, that the latter was a member of the famous *Collège de sociologie* along with many others including—importantly for us—Sartre and Lacan.[225]

The *Collège* was not itself affiliated with 'official' university life but was, rather a collection of intellectuals and artists that met in Parisian cafés between 1937 and 1939. Its primary aim was to undertake an analysis of society which looked critically at the roles and relations between power, the religious, the social order, mythology, and the like. These investigations were founded on Durkheim's own analysis of these topics in his analysis of the relations between society and the religious as found mostly in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.[226] Before we say more about the influence of the *Collège*, we should say a bit more about Durkheim's own social analysis.

As we saw in chapter two, Durkheim argues that to understand social existence one could not simply look to the subjective viewpoint of individuals but had to understand the conceptual rules and laws that govern what he calls the "collective consciousness" as it is these that are determining factors (in part anyway, as combined

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[223] See Chapter 2
[224] see Chapter 4
[225] Other important members included, Bataille, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Kojeve just to name a few.
[226] See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Translated by Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1968). [hereafter *Elementary Forms*].

with individual consciousness) for the forms of consciousness that individuals in a given society have. These rules and laws are not themselves coextensive with collective consciousness, but they inform and undergird its particular historical manifestations insofar as they are the categories through which individual societies understand themselves and organize their worlds.

As Durkheim understands it, the change in manifestations of collective consciousness—that is, the existence of historically shifting and differing social structures and organizations—can be at least partially accounted for by making sense of the different ways in which these rules and laws get combined in different societies in history. However, as Stephen Turner notes, "there is a limit to such explanations. They do not allow for genuine moral and religious novelty" as merely recombining pre-existing formal categories leaves out the possibility of the 'new.' This is a problem that Durkheim was aware of and he offers, as Turner points out, the category of "Collective effervescence [in order to] fill this gap."[227]

The concept of collective effervescence is described by Durkheim as a moment, found in collective ritualized religious practice, in which the normally experienced 'profane' world of egoistic individuation is shed and a new collective consciousness and set of collective representations is forged. Here is Durkheim explaining the experience of the individual in the moment of such an effervescence, as a moment in which:

> …A man does not recognize himself any longer. Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of an external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer…[228]

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[227] Stephen Turner, "Introduction" in *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Moralist* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). 7
[228] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*. 249.

As Frank Pearce points out, in the hands of the members of the *Collège*,

Durkheim's thought in this regard was radicalized in a variety of ways.[229] Not the least of

which was the interpretation given to Durkheim's conception of social (and individual)

transformation via the concept of a 'collective effervescence' and the distinction between

the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' the latter of which, for Durkheim himself, signified the

distinction between "phenomena or categorizations that are homogeneous internally but

heterogeneous to each other."[230] That is to say, within Durkheim's theory these two

categories, while heterogeneous in relation to one another remain part of one

homogeneous social order. In the hands of the *Collège*, however,— and Pearce cites

Bataille's and Caillois' reading of this—this became, for Bataille, "a distinction between

the heterogeneous and the homogeneous" as such, and for Caillios a distinction couched

in temporal terms.[231] Here is Pearce's description of Caillios' musings:

> For Caillois… The Sacred is a key element both in ordinary life and in the
> festivals found in primitive societies (and to a much attenuated degree in
> contemporary societies)…Ordinary life tends to be regular, busy, safe, and
> sclerotic. 'Time is wearing and exhausting' and there is a need for social
> regeneration. This is made possible by the popular frenzy of the festival. It
> releases an active sacred energy, reverses the normal course of time and forms the
> social order…[232]

Thinking about the linkage between Durkheim and the members of the *Collège*

especially in relation to comments made here about the transformations and

radicalizations of the Durkheimian edifice it is hard not see this in the background,

regardless of intention, of both Badiou's and Žižek's theoretical projects. There is here

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[229] Frank Pearce, "Introduction: The *Collège de Sociologie* and French Social Thought" in *Economy and Society* Volume 45, number 3 (2002). 1-6 [hereafter, *Introduction*]
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.

(in Durkheim as reconstructed by the *Collège*) two 'temporalities' defined by stasis—the profane—and change—the sacred, as emerging in collective effervescence in which the individuation of profane existence is shed in favor of a collectively grounded event/act. Looking at the overall structure of the Durkheimian claims in relation to Badiou we can see that the conception of the profane maps on quite nicely to Badiou's conception of the intra-worldly structure of the counted-as-one logic of objects and individuals.

We can see this point if we think of the profane (a bit outside of the role Durkheim himself gives it, but not, I don't think in opposition to his usage of the term) as the normal experience of existence that humans have in which they are individuated, things run along as usual, in a kind of mundane fashion in which as Durkheim puts it, "daily life drags wearily along."[233] This is certainly analogous to the Badiouan pre-evental world, in which all things are in their place, any inconsistencies are subtracted, and things run along in a mundane fashion. It is the individuation inherent to both accounts that is key for seeing the similarities—Remember here that Badiou builds his view of this out of and in relation to both Althusser and Sartre. Thinking again about our discussion of the Sartrean conception of the group-in-fusion that Badiou appropriates in theorizing the event, and knowing of Sartre's participation in the *Collège* it is hard not to speculate as to the influence of the Durkheimian theory (as interpreted by the *Collège*) on Sartre's work in this regard, and its being filtered through Sartre and into Badiou.

Furthermore, the formal structures of collective consciousness in Durkheim, as noted in chapter four, stand outside the world of subjective consciousness, but are the formal backdrop through which individuals come to consciousness of themselves and the

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[233] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*. 250

world. In this way, Durkheim's formal structures of collective consciousness can be seen as analogous to Badiou's conception of the count-as-one. It is hard not to see, in light of this, Badiou's theory as precisely not new, and rather, simply a materialist neo-Durkheimianism (even if it is unaware of this and is the unconscious inheritor of this via the *Collège*).

Durkheim's own comments regarding the experience of collective effervescence also certainly echo the Žižekian theory of the act wherein the quotidian self is shed in favor of a new possibility that stands outside the individuation that is imposed on it by the conjuncture—and the subject's own active positing of the roles and conditions conjuncture in its reflexive redeployment of them (as described in Chapter six)—allowing the subject to view itself as a part of the universal (negative/real) rather than the particular (determined/quotidian). To be sure, in bringing this up, I am not necessarily interested in making wildly speculative claims about intellectual influence, but rather, simply want to point out, not only the historical lineage but also the translation and transposition of some theoretical components from one theory into the next (as we have been doing throughout much of this study) and further, that the questions and methods that ground the respective projects of both Badiou and Žižek (and their relation to Althusser) should not and cannot be taken to be entirely new.

We can, however, qualify this rejection of the title of 'new' by pointing out that, what is 'new' in these theories is the ways in which they recombine and rethink the categories and concepts that they inherit. Furthermore, we might argue that, for both Badiou and Žižek, what is new in their materialism is the newness found in the rebirth of the old claim to universalism, but here encountered in a new form—as appearing within

existence (and not as external to it). Here again the Durkheimian conception of the 'sacred' is relevant, as whatever is 'sacred' and hence collective, *appears* materially in effervescent moments. As Badiou puts it at the end of *Logics of Worlds*, "But I need neither God, nor the divine. I believe that it is here and now that we arouse or resurrect ourselves as Immortals."[234]

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[234] Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. 513

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