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## **The Multiplicity of (Un-)Thought: Badiou, Deleuze, Event**

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### **Abstract**

This essay investigates thought as an event of “multiplicity.” French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou pose this as a concept of change (political and otherwise). Both philosophers propose that multiplicity means thinking happens as an event by engaging a theoretical impasse, or “un-thought.” Un-thought opens up and changes ideas into complex varieties or multiplicities. This dynamic is examined through the example of May ’68, an actual event that gives context to how multiplicity expresses “radical change.” The aim of this article is to see how both thinkers’ theories overlap. For Badiou, multiplicities are “truths” that happen whilst making a decision, engaging a notion of “point.” For Deleuze, multiplicities are concepts that happen materially in life as metaphysical forces, or “lines.” Multiplicity is critically approached as a complex variety of ideas that change in the forms of art, politics, and science.

**Keywords:** multiplicity, event, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, line, point

For there is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity. (Deleuze, 2006c, 22)

In this essay I will investigate how thinking is said to be a “multiplicity” that happens through an “event.” To understand how thinking is an event I will look at two philosophers: Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze. They are among the few philosophers today to develop multiplicity as a concept. My aim is to examine their claims around multiplicity, particularly one fundamental claim that this concept is about “change.” What changes and becomes a multiplicity are ways of living and being in complex wholes (situations, environments, worlds). And what also changes are the very limits or conditions that make new ideas possible. This view challenges how ideas are produced mentally and privately. According to Badiou and Deleuze, thoughts are “events” precisely because they disrupt introspection and happen “outside” the mind. To understand this key feature, I will open with a description of the event that took place in the May 1968 uprisings in France and beyond, from Italy to Mexico. I will use this example to show that multiplicity can be used to reorient thinking as something that takes place out in the so-called real world. There are two objectives that shape this investigation. The first is to see what thinking is in relation to life and notions of being. There is a *multiplicity of thought*, as I wish to call it, that make ideas possible, but from a theoretically interruptive standpoint: “un-thought.” This leads to the second objective: to investigate what “un-thought” means in terms of a theoretical impasse, that is, the interruption of the capacity to think, to live, to exist.

For both Badiou and Deleuze, the capacity to think is experienced through certain cognitive interruptions, resonant with blockage or impasse. The capacity to think any thought is possible only by working through, what I further wish to call, the *multiplicity of un-thought*. “Un-thought” means that thinking can only become an event, really take place, if it opens up into strands that go beyond pure philosophy. In the plainest sense of the word, multiplicity is how thoughts multiply into infinitely different complex strands. As I will show, such strands include science, politics, and art.

Let us start by asking some basic questions. How might thought take place as a multiplicity? And how would this be more than philosophical thought, the bastion concerned with only thinking itself? These can be understood as basic questions which can guide this inquiry into multiplicity as an event that, so to say, “takes place.” The “place” is theoretically

complex. It is the limit where thinking any particular thought (for example, a rose, loved one, artwork) confronts a certain theoretical impasse, or un-thought. This impasse might be interpreted crudely through common situations, as when someone experiences writer's block; or when recalling a name seems too difficult. But un-thought is not just some mental blockage that eventually passes. The question of multiplicity deals with a theoretical place of obstruction, or "impasse." For the moment let us say that un-thought is the theoretical place where any particular thought can become an event. It is where multiplicities can generate experiences *and*, at once, engage quite abstract theoretical spaces. These spaces are "structural." To really understand how multiplicities take place as events, we need to inquire further into such structural spaces. Here we should keep in mind modern French philosophical discourse: what is often called "post-structuralism." Badiou and Deleuze are very much integral to this discourse. Post-structuralism addresses thinking as a question of spaces and elements, signs and symbols, which can range from lines, to planes, and points as well. Just as one might view a city or territory from above, so it might be said that multiplicities take place *topologically*. As post-structuralists would say, thinking happens topologically, "inside" and "outside," taking place in the mind and out in the world.

Multiplicity is something that actually takes place. It is not purely abstract theory. One might say that both Badiou and Deleuze use their philosophies to fundamentally question notions of being, existence, and life. *What does it mean to live?* I would argue that this is a basic question that they pose. This question points of course to how they lived and related to one another. Their relationship is rather complicated and goes back to their teaching days at Vincennes—known today as The University of Paris VIII. Vincennes was an institution born from an example of a real event: the political uprisings in France and the world beyond, from Prague to Mexico, that happened around May 1968. For Badiou this was a real event, "beyond all calculation" and imposing "a new situation of thought" (2013b, 106). May '68 was a time of unprecedented intellectual, cultural, political, and artistic engagement. For Badiou, especially, this event was—and still is—exemplary. May '68 was a real event because it arrived with utter surprise, incalculably, suddenly, and without prediction. Historians often claim that this event was mainly caused by the war in Vietnam; however, in retrospect, May '68 can fundamentally be seen as a struggle against "a sort of global stabilization and expansion of capital" (110). In France, and particularly Paris, the uprisings involved university students and union workers railing against conditions and effects that

would evolve into the current global market form of capitalism. This ideology would become dominant, making the world seem whole, interconnected, one totality—and as Badiou would say “One,” an all-encompassing multiplicity. Changing this ideology (global market capitalism) continues to be a defining struggle for philosophers like Badiou as well as many quite “left-wing” activists and movements.

So, what is the issue here? Why multiplicity? Well, the issue is really this: that the world today remains very much filtered through a world-view that makes life seem one multiplicity, full of all sorts of stimulating things and filled with possibilities of “change.” However, real or radical change seems impossible—“it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism” (Jameson 2003). “Change” is merely about a life focused on producing a variety of commodities, careers, lifestyles, and hedonistic experiences. “Live without ideas” is an imperative that sustains this ideology (Badiou 2018, 84). I argue that multiplicity is important now because it is about creating new ideas and different ways to live. May ’68 however showed that any “authentic” event faces a very real impasse. A defining slogan that was popular in May ’68 was “Soyez realistes, demandez l’impossible!” This translates to saying that what was demanded was something impossible to think. Of course, what exactly was demanded was not “change”; instead, the event became criticized for fizzling out into “sexual liberation and a hedonistic entrepreneurship from below” (Ali 2008).

Known at Vincennes for his Maoist militancy, Badiou was often found waging “guerrilla warfare against Deleuze” (Dosse 2010, 366). He was known for crashing in on Deleuze’s seminars. Nevertheless, both men corresponded extensively. Although Deleuze disposed of his correspondences, Badiou used them to later write his book, *Deleuze, The Clamor of Being* (1997; 2000). Published two years after Deleuze’s tragic death, his book has sustained ongoing controversy. To date, the controversy largely polarizes both men through the following interpretation. Badiou fundamentally proposes multiplicity in two ways—or what he also calls a non-dualistic Two: a theoretical *pure multiplicity* in which thoughts take place theoretically (in terms of a mathematical science of being, or ontology) and a *real multiplicity*, in which thoughts are events that become “truths.” Deleuze says that a multiplicity is an act of thinking that is intensive and changes Life. For him Life (spelled with a capital “L”) is something vital, the sense that thought is alive, intense and happening. He

calls Life “virtual”—and the virtual is not illusory, like virtual reality or digital simulations. The virtual is Life in the sense of forces like gravity or energy. What the current debates therefore pose—and we should be hesitant to maintain this—is an interpretation that divides Badiou and Deleuze. That is to say that Badiou is the thinker of event *and* being, a philosophy of the Two (pure multiplicities that structure real multiplicities); and Deleuze is the thinker of the event *of* being, in which being is a kind of creative event that happens in matter and throughout a variety of environments. Here I wish to propose a less divisive interpretation. *My hypothesis is that both interpretations of multiplicity theoretically overlap. This overlap can be seen in terms of the theoretical space where un-thought is reticulated as an Outside. Outside deals with a sort of heterogeneous space that effectively opens any particular thought, truth or idea.*

That the event happens Outside might seem obscure and emphatic. But this is largely because multiplicity is couched within a complex and heterogeneous space, where being never remains the same. The Outside is where multiplicity is something theoretically obstructive *and*, nevertheless, necessary to think through (Žižek 2014, 321). Metaphorically speaking, Outside is like a shell that has no inner object. The “obstruction” is in neither being able to intellectually grasp some “hidden object” nor being able to avoid thinking whatever might be happening around this shell. To think something completely new and different someone has to *work through*<sup>1</sup> the obstructive sense of the multiplicity of un-thought.

To bring a more critical understanding to multiplicity in its thought-event, let us consider three topics: the topological elements of line and point, the individual as a kind of bodily subject, and traces that address the event. The “trace” and “body” regard a materialist approach to thinking in terms of line and point, movement and decision.

### **Vitalist Multiplicity**

We should start then by briefly looking at multiplicity in terms of its emphasis on life. This deals with a certain “vitalist” multiplicity. As Deleuze says, with his occasional co-writer Félix Guattari, multiplicity is something that happens throughout life at its most essential,

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<sup>1</sup> On *working through* as a Freudian psychoanalytic method, interpreted through Badiou’s philosophy, see Ruda 2015.

diverse, and complex. Like electrical forces that flow between neurons or blood pumping in one's veins, this vital act makes one alive and able to think. Deleuze also articulates such forces by using the element of the "line." The line is a—metaphysical—element that renders "mental objects determinable as real beings" (Deleuze and Guattari 2003, 207). The line expresses the act of thinking, language, and being. So, thinking has a radically empirical sense. The line is what Deleuze also calls "virtual." The virtual is a vital act that resonates with creative force; but also with biological, psychophysical, and indeed metaphysical phenomena. Take his example of synaptic phenomena found in the brain. Synapses are said to spark signals between neurons that can fire throughout the entire body. These neuronal signals generate activities we cannot readily see. However, such "hidden" biological operations are too mechanistic; neurons would seem to fire signals and connect within a hidden network (underneath one's skin), but this does not express the "mental chaosmos" in which the event of thinking virtually happens (208).

For Deleuze, Life is a matter of lines, forces that multiply into different multiplicities. The element of a point however remains problematic. Deleuze highlights this problem when he claims "a point traversing the line" is merely "the quasi-cause. . . the decentered point. . . the point of nonsense" (Deleuze 1990, 183).

The problem at hand is more complex. It deals with the rather emphatic notion of event as happening "Outside" in the vitalist sense. Here multiplicity structures an event that is "monomaniacal in operation," as writer Jon Roffe comments, "a disparate and disjunct ensemble of operations that cannot communicate with one another through any ideal form of the object that they all share" (2012, 36). Indeed, an individual might remain "caught up in the great drama" of an "eccentric spiraling at the heart of being" (157). However, to prevent this "eccentric spiraling" becoming meaningless or totally obscure, mystical or nihilistic, we should ask plainly: what kind of multiplicity is really thinkable?

So far we can understand multiplicity in the following way: Multiplicity refers to how, universally and not just particularly, ALL things become what they *are*. One and many. Diverse and complex. Now we might wonder, why does it matter to know this? Well, one main reason is that multiplicity also changes the inherent way, the very means or capacity, that makes these complex varieties possible to think and experience. In practice, multiplicity

refers to how any of us not only think but also rethink any worldview as the only kind. In the case of May '68, multiplicity is the act of obstructing the capitalist worldview as the only kind of complex whole.

### **Disjunctive Synthesis**

Let us look further at the vitalist form of multiplicity, where it is coming from and how it seems to work. It is French philosopher Henri Bergson who, at the turn of the twentieth century, advances this notion by proposing that multiplicity is a “vital order” grounded in matter (1998, 236). Life and matter are “two movements” folding into “an undivided flux, and undivided also the life that runs through it, cutting out in it living beings all along its track” (Bergson 1998, 249). Surprisingly, the very stuff of life (being, what is) remains “cut out” from this flux. Vitalism emphasizes instead that thought “unfolds outward and externalizes itself” as it, simultaneously, “turns back within itself” (Bergson 1992, 124). Thinking unfolds, or one might say *externalizes* itself throughout this trace-like force. Externalization is the act of tracing life outwards and through an indeterminate force. This “abstract line must confront this indeterminate, this groundlessness” (Deleuze 1990, 275). And therein resides the undivided flux of “an event, a singularity, a life. . .” (Deleuze 2005, 30).

In its vital order, multiplicity externalizes and inherently changes Being (spelled with a capital “B”). Being is Life “becoming” by unfolding itself into living matter—and this becoming is not to be conflated with some yin-yang-like harmonious flux, for instance. This complex topology presents thought as:

Not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than outside, but precisely the inside *of* the outside. . . . (Deleuze 2006a, 80)

Matter is what lives by “folding” throughout “peristaltic movements” in order to virtually *force* thought Outside. This act opens “pre-conceptual components” (May 2003, 141). Here it should be clarified that the virtual interrupts meditative approaches to thinking. Someone cannot just close their eyes, meditate, and think some kind of inner Being, spiritual object or proper substance (the real Me, proper I). Being is the event that is Outside because it happens *without returning to any proper inside or internal object*. Whatever mentally goes in *irreversibly* folds and goes out. Folds express “groundlessness”—and one could further say *tracelessness*.



It is here that we can now see the most radical feature of multiplicity. Thinking folds virtually throughout “unthought,” that is, the “impossibility of thinking which doubles or hollows out the outside” (Deleuze 2006a, 80). Vital multiplicity is undoubtedly complex. This is mainly due to multiplicity’s “impossibility,” its inherent obstruction to any commonsense form of intellectual activity. When Deleuze writes that “every idea is a multiplicity or a variety,” he claims to reformulate the very nature of thinking, which has “neither sensible form nor conceptual signification” (1994, 183). This is not to say that thinking is completely impossible; multiplicity is “vital” because it requires intense engagement, everything in you and more. An authentic event is impossible to predict—like May ‘68. Vital multiplicity happens when thought suddenly and irreversibly interrupts itself. This entire event is described by Deleuze—and criticized by Badiou—as a “disjunctive synthesis”: the event of inventing concepts by interrupting thought so to change thinking in its very capacity, that is, its pre-conceptual sense. In other words, the “synthesis” means folding the capacity to think Outside. Thought/multiplicity becomes this inside-*as*-outside.

Disjunctive synthesis becomes clearer when looking at vital multiplicity in relation to time and aesthetic experience. The value of disjunctive synthesis is “to create novelty and difference” (May 2003, 140). Deleuze presents this, for example, using paintings by Francis Bacon or Paul Klee. The event is aesthetic in that the painterly marks, composing imagery and figures, present the thoughts of the artist. Visually the imprints are “lines,” elements that trace certain intellectual activities in matter as paint and color. Lines render visible and tangible indeterminate forces (such as gravity, pressure, concentration). The artist paints with emotional and intellectual effort. This event is “disjunctive” by creating a “crack of thought” (Crockett 2013, 176). Metaphysically, this event traces a kind of empty-time, so “to make us sense these insensible forces,” every perceivable figure in the painting turning into a bodily “zone of indiscernibility” (Deleuze 2007, 40-42).

Here I argue that the line is virtually *traceless*. *The line is nothing to think in essence; it is traceless and lived*. Though traceless, hollow, and without content, the line is “what forces us to think” (Deleuze 2008, 62). It is “multiplicity’s growth, the extension and unfolding of its lines, the production of something new” (Deleuze 1995, 146). Thinking is the event of being emotive and expressive, affective and virtual. Such a “thought event,” as Eric Alliez comments, is the experience of “thought proceeding by virtualization” (2005, 87).

Virtualization therefore marks a highly important logic in Deleuze's theory. It is a logic of difference, a logic through which thinking takes place virtually. Virtualization "erases being" (Hammar 2007, 60). It is virtual in how thoughts become perceptible and affective, like seeing colors and feeling tension. Clearly the virtual does not mean experiencing illusions or digitally fabricated environments (for example, virtual reality). In short, virtualization "makes fluid the instituted distinctions, augments the degrees of freedom, *hollows out a moving void*," as Alliez elaborates (2005, 87, emphasis added). Virtualization is traceless because it is "the real minus existence" (May 2003, 148).

By now we see how the line is the *modus operandi* of vital multiplicity. The line gives multiplicity its radical empiricism—of experiencing what hollows out, forces, bifurcates, differentiates, and so on. The vitalist ideology, however, views everything in Life under the element of the line. Theorist Peter Hallward critically observes that the line is emblematic of "a *pure* [in other words] or absolute between," a moving void that "can just as well be described as 'between' nothing at all" (2006, 154). Even though this line virtually moves, it also hollows itself out, only to disjunctively synthesize and therefore become one *indifferent* multiplicity—rather than radically change thinking into different paradigms. The contradiction, which Hallward shrewdly calls up, is that vital multiplicity never affirms the radical change it implies. Its logic of becoming remains traceless and also monotonous. Instead, vital multiplicity resonates with a kind of quasi-mystical or spiritual pseudo-event—and I will come back to this. The line therefore is the element that exposes vital multiplicity in its enigmatic sense, something abstract and open to uncritical forms of thought.

### **A Point Un-thought**

What I find questionable about vital multiplicity is the abstract line as a kind of "trace." Does the line trace a real or authentic event? The vitalist event traces only lines that express thought, becoming, Life. However, the line negates a more elemental point. Recall how Deleuze comments that the point is a "quasi-cause" and "nonsense." Here is a passage in which he elaborates this in terms of the virtual:

Lines aren't things running between two points; points are where several lines intersect. Lines never run uniformly, and points are nothing but inflections of lines. More generally, it's not beginnings and ends that count, but middles. (Deleuze

Obviously, the point is a profoundly negated element. It serves only to supplement the inflection of lines expressing thoughts that take place in matter. In itself the point is utterly superfluous. A *point un-thought*, one might say. The voided-point-of-inflection thus “marks the proliferation of the line, or its sudden deviation, its acceleration, its slowdown, its furor or agony” (Deleuze and Guattari 2002, 297).

Why is the point always already negated, unthinkable? According to Jacques Derrida, a contemporary of Badiou and Deleuze, “the point, as a limit, does not exist *in act*, is not (present)” because the line “removes the limit of the point only by developing its potentiality” (1982, 52). The point *is* voided. The point does not exist because it does not affect, does not force anything to happen. The point is a far more passive element. The point deconstructs the line’s event.

One main consequence of Deleuze’s philosophy is its resonance with capitalism. That Deleuze is “the philosopher of Capitalism” (Žižek 2004, 180) comes down to the virtual event he dresses multiplicity in, where flows and movements express the New Spirit of Capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). This event is not merely economic but metaphysical. It is metaphysical and totalizing by “thinking thought (its act, its movement) on the basis of an ontological precomprehension of Being as One” (Badiou 2000, 19). The line expresses the “totalization of beings in a unified principle,” which invokes “the paradigm of metaphysical thought par excellence” (James 2012, 138). Socially and politically, the Deleuzian event is “monotonous,” meaning “everything happens, in as much as everything happens” (Badiou in Boundas and Olkowski 1993, 56).<sup>2</sup> This *monotony of the virtual*, as I wish to call it, strikes directly at the Deleuzian event: “[it] is always what has just happened, what will happen, but never what is happening” (Badiou 2009a, 382). This monotony makes Deleuze a “romantic of the infinite,” wherein the virtual is an “all-encompassing, gigantic vortex” (Tarby in Badiou and Tarby 2015, 138). For all its sensation and intensity, the event of vital multiplicity “amounts to little more than utopian distraction” and is “essentially indifferent to the politics of this world” (Hallward 2006, 162). What is worse is that Deleuze’s concepts could also

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<sup>2</sup> See also Badiou’s four criticisms of Deleuze in Badiou (2009a, 381-387).

inspire military strategies—as they already have with the Israeli Defence Force! “Inverse geometry” is a strategy inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s “war machine” theory. IDF soldiers blast lines into urban buildings, thus “hollowing out” architectural passages to more effectively attack and “creatively” traumatize enemies (and civilians, too).

A more critical interpretation of multiplicity is therefore imperative. Here multiplicity must be unpacked in its metaphysical context and language, too. This involves looking at a philosophical theory stretching back to around 500 BCE. For Badiou, vital multiplicity happens under one key maxim that is originally posed by the Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides: “[Being] is the same thing which occurs and is said” (Deleuze 1990, 180). Both Deleuze and Badiou seem polarized in their positions towards Parmenides’s maxim “thinking and being are the same” (in McKirahan Jr. 1994, 152). For Deleuze, being is what is perpetually said and expressed throughout an event that “never stops happening and never ceases to await us: a pure virtuality” (2006b, 120). Of course, what never stops happening are metaphysical forces, lines that affect and change life, but without really engaging the element of “point.”

Let us look then at how the notion of a point takes place. This requires looking closer at Badiou’s view of multiplicity as “truth,” which means returning to Parmenides’s maxim. It states that Being as such “must either fully be or not” (Parmenides in McKirahan Jr. 1994, 153). Rather strikingly, Badiou argues that Being is *not*. Whatever exists or has being is “never the concentration of vital continuity or the immanent intensification of a becoming” (Badiou 2009a, 384). He tries to say that there is no multiplicity of virtual forces; nor is Life expressed through non-representational colors and emotions. Instead his ultimate proposition is this: multiplicity means thinking “the void, which is neither presented nor represented” (Badiou 2005a, 108). No doubt this proposition poses difficulties. But this is precisely how Being is a *pure* multiplicity. It is pure in theoretically structuring the thinking of Being at a mathematical level, specifically through set theory. Pure multiplicity is the notion of impasse or un-thought. The gist of Badiou’s event is that multiplicity happens from the standpoint of the thinker as subject—rather than vital forces multiplying in matter and Life; and it is up to the subject to engage, or as Ruda would say, “work through” not-being (pure multiplicity). Moreover, it is the subject that poses new ideas as “truths,” which take place through four conditions: politics, art, science, and love. These conditions are where true ideas can be made

thinkable and translated further as: egalitarian freedom, poetic declaration, mathematical singularity, and amorous relation.

The major task for Badiou is therefore in distinguishing a purely void multiple from an infinite multiplicity, that is, Being from Event. This distinction makes his philosophy radical in every sense of the word. For Badiou, we truly see ideas. We focus on truths that appear through the world and change how we exist and appear in it. This distinction is clear in how certain persons as “subjects”—rather than individuals—present or force certain truths to appear. For instance, when someone falls in love, the person loved appears to the beholder to stand out from everything around them. This event opens up a kind of new world. Multiplicities as truths are engaged through an event of “primitive affirmation,” which is “something that is really an opening” (Badiou 2013a, 3). Hence the distinction: there is a void multiple that is in itself open or “generic,” a purely mathematical form that opens up the event; and yet it is theoretically thinkable in the science of being (ontology, transfinite set theories). Truths are *thinkable* by means of a subject faithfully upholding the event. And this event is the “opening” of truly different and multiple ways of thinking and existing.

Truths mean *tracing* the opening of multiplicity. Multiplicity opens, however, in the “impasse of thought that is *internal* to thinking the totality of being, rather than a name for some failure of thought,” explains Sam Gillespie; in other words, the “internal” impasse means tracing how “the void is not a physically existing vacuum, of a lack, of an existential wound at the centre of experience” (2001, 65). Pure multiplicity is a theoretical impasse because “its limit must be void from the beginning” (Hallward 2003, 82). As I am saying, the impasse echoes the point. To engage this elemental point somebody—with unwavering conviction, or (objectless) faith—needs however to “be there.” To *appear* means to decide as to how someone exists. The subject really appears in the world by, furthermore, working through the point (of un-thought) as an element within decision-making.

Now, without any preceding knowledge—other than theoretical knowledge of how Being is mathematically presented (void-multiple, impasse, opening)—the subject must decide what will be true or not. The subject decides—and then traces out—this or that direction, distinguishing true from false. The subject makes the proverbial *leap of faith* but, to reiterate, without having some deeper object or metaphysical Being to access. Decision

therefore “must be thought as pure *point*”; but since “the void is the unrepresentable *point of being* of any presentation,” the task is to engage a completely uncertain situation: “if the void is not, it is because *one cannot think* an empty place” (Badiou 2005a, 77, emphasis added). A decision is made where “a subject is nowhere given (to knowledge)” (Badiou 2009a, 278). Multiplicities therefore “can’t be thought by means of the forms of knowledge available to us” (Badiou in Tarby and Badiou 2015, 115). Regardless of not knowing what to decide—and this we might find astonishing—the subject “can *force* new bits of knowledge, without even *verifying* this knowledge” (Badiou 2005c, 49). This event means working through what seems “radically unknowable,” thereby engaging in a decision that confronts where “thought butts against its own limit” (Ling in Bartlett and Clemens 2010, 50-51).

### **Point and Void-Multiple**

Up until now we have investigated multiplicity as a concept of change at the level of Being. Deleuze’s multiplicity is the sense that Being is the event of the virtual, where we not only think but, metaphysically speaking, live. However, we have found that there are problems with this theory of becoming. Life/Being does not change beyond one order of thought; instead, what we live through now is, to keep using the case of capitalism, the same event of multiplicity, for example, expansion, growth, production, consumption, and so on. The Deleuzian concept of change (vital multiplicity) then has to be reconsidered in light of this monotony of the virtual. The following section will give us the chance to see whether Badiou’s multiplicity fares any better.

First, we should unpack how Badiou theorizes pure multiplicity. Recall Badiou’s rebuttal to Parmenides’s maxim. The stuff making thought possible (metaphysics) is about “not being.” Badiou proposes that Being as such is *split*. He dubs this split the Two—“a disconnected connection, an irrational couple” (2005a, 208). Being is a “void-multiple,” a set-theoretical matheme that, as impasse or un-thought, obstructs metaphysical activities but really opens up and enables infinite possibilities of thought. Being and event, pure multiplicity and infinite multiplicities (truths), form an “irrational couple.” Truths happen through “disconnected connections.” And a subject bears this split as somebody that works through the radically unknowable, and, in doing whatever it takes, makes truths appear concretely.

It is here that we need to grapple with some of Badiou’s mathematical terminology,

which he derives from the set theories posed by Georg Cantor and Paul Cohen. According to Badiou, the world is a “place” which designates all things within this world as whole. He calls this place the “count-for-one.” What counts are things someone might be able to identify (for example, that tree, this house), so long as it is possible that “there is” One, a totality of things (whole, world). So the world is more of a complex situation, in the sense that this whole makes everything, which is countable, *structurally* void. This void is *less than nothing* (Žižek 2012, 59; Ruda 2015, 93). Clearly the “void” is without any mystical or metaphysical connotations. And Badiou makes this clear by calling it the “void-multiple.” Only in Cantor’s notion of the “void-set” can there be a way to demonstrate that this less-than-nothing void is a unique set. Put plainly, this is the *only* set that belongs to itself as a subset of its totality. We could say that no-thing belongs with no-thing. And the void-multiple is the multiple of multiples if, and only if, the subset of its elements is greater than the set as a whole. This is the most crucial part of Badiou’s theory. It clarifies why un-thought is a theoretical impasse. In laymen’s terms, the part that is in the whole/world is the person as subject. The subject is fundamentally split, thinking and trying to live as the “no-count” within the count-for-one. The subject is therefore split because the inner and essential stuff (Being), making him what he essentially is, is “no-thing” (Hallward 2003, 100). In practice, this “no-thing” is precisely where someone becomes a “subject.” If someone is a subject, with a real sense of truth to live for, he/she must be open enough to think by deciding *more than* or in excess of what is thought wholly as “world.” The subject makes the event of opening a new multiplicity, idea or truth, which happens through a moment of decision, or as Badiou says, “point of excess.”<sup>3</sup>

From Aristotle onward, much of Western philosophy has trivialized the point, relegated to having “no conceivable type of being, neither separable nor inseparable” (Badiou 2005a, 70). Badiou turns the Aristotelian relegation around completely. Instead, the point is *the* element that enables a kind of non-metaphysical shift from void (Being) to event (truth). The point’s excess is how multiplicity, as the capacity to think, is a “zero affected by the barring of sense” (Badiou 2005a, 69). No wonder the point has no emotionally charged or affective qualities, and is therefore anathema to Deleuze’s intensive, vital multiplicity. The point bars Being, vitiates sense, obstructs and leaves open thought from becoming anything

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<sup>3</sup> See “Meditation Seven: The Point of Excess,” in Badiou 2005a, 81-92.

metaphysically deeper. In this way Badiou proposes how “the void is the unrepresentable *point of being*” (2005a, 77).

### **Bodily Subject and Traceless Trace**

To slowly bring this investigation to a close, let us analyze the two criteria that answer the question first raised at the outset of this essay—How is multiplicity really thinkable in its unthought? The first criterion is about how someone, as a subject, might “appear” when making a decision. The second criterion is about what “point” this subject engages to decide and trace new ideas or truths. I argue that in itself the point takes place through a *traceless trace*. Here we need to deal with thought as a multiplicity that is political in meaning. There is a political kind of thinking that is imperative to what is a “dialectical materialism” posed by Badiou. This “materialism” is the way in which someone exists as a subject. The subject exists dialectically, namely to decide and “think the structural law of the empty place as the punctual anchoring of the excess over the place” (Badiou 2009b, 261). The dialectical materialist approach to the event resonates with egalitarian and collective modes of militant intervention. Recall that an authentic event is a “break,” an intervention into a dominant order (like capitalism), so to open up and impose change. One example Badiou will use to describe this intervention is the Marxist proletariat. For Badiou, the proletariat is a subject who is exemplified by the infamous Roman gladiator/slave, Spartacus. In the eyes of the State, here being the Roman Republic, all individuals (citizens, residents) are identified under a single order (One multiplicity). The State accords with Badiou’s post-structural notion of One, the order that counts everyone under count-as-one. However, Spartacus and other enslaved gladiators are publicly visible but legally degraded to silenced nobodies, counted under no-count. So, to interrupt this punitive relegation, Spartacus must “think” by decisively forcing, or “punctually anchoring,” the event by means of a declaration. In this case Spartacus declares “We slaves, we want to return home!” From this declaration other enslaved gladiators assemble. According to the State, their event qualifies as a revolt. Unrecognized by the State, “home” names nowhere. The prospect of radical change is ignored by the State. But for Badiou, the declaration is exemplary of a trace. Tracing thought in the unthinkable or incalculable decision that opens an event means naming, and declaring this name again and again. The trace is event-like, enabling such men—via the structural law (void-multiple, empty place)—to override the State’s dismissal. The trace is the declaration opening new truths that enact radical changes. As theorist Ian James explains, this event means that



“radical changes or decisive breaks in historical situations can and do happen but they cannot be prescribed or known in advance nor fully apprehended in an immediate present” (James 2012, 144).

When radical change happens, the subject appears and in a bodily way. He physically appears as a “real, concrete creation,” which incorporates the trace in yielding “access” toward one’s “thinking of the infinite itself” (Badiou 2009c, 4). At the same time, there is a “problem of the body” which becomes a “matter of bringing the status of appearing to thought” (Badiou 2009a, 35-36). The “problem,” however, threatens to become aesthetic in a rather perplexing way. For it is curious as to how real multiplicities, or truths, are traced through bodily form. Badiou seems to suggest that the body is not the privileged site of the putative thinker—the cogito grounded through consciousness of, for example, metaphysical Nature, Divine Being or God. For “the subject is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness of the true” (Badiou 2005a, 397). Because the subject cannot “access” un-thought (other than already understand that any “ground” of Being or ontology is mathematically void, less than nothing) he must appear concretely and Outside. Real multiplicities, so to speak, mean thinking truths Outside. That is to say, without any special consciousness, without any mystical thinking or spiritually metaphysical foundation, decisions are made through an (objectless) act of faith.

The problem of the body extends further into aesthetics. Here I consider a criticism made by French theorist Jacques Rancière. The trace is a primary example of what he generally says about Badiou’s notion of truth: “it always lies within the difference between what comes to pass and that through which it passes,” wherein “the immanence of thought in the sensible immediately splits into two” (Rancière 2009, 66). The reader might notice the parallel this “split” has with vital multiplicity. Here it is helpful to unpack this parallel by going into another artistic example of the event. Take Badiou’s study of dance. For him, a dancer moves by tracing “a circle that is not drawn from outside, but rather draws itself” (Badiou 2005b, 58). Thinking happens in the “disjunctive energy” drawn throughout “the creative force of disappearance” (Badiou 2005b, 65). Badiou is quite ambiguous in this language. He employs forms of the virtual and the line, too. He attempts to articulate the line as the tracing of a “thought-body.” “Not as a thought caught in a body,” he says, “but as a body that thinks”; however, what I find expedient to this example—and here I agree with

Rancière—is the peculiar way the body seems to trace the “vertigo of the infinite” (Badiou 2005b, 70). That is, the artistic event happens through a quasi-virtual multiplicity. What this means is that the virtual is a kind of itinerant staging of the event: thinking multiplicity as both passing away (traceless, disappearance) and passing onward (appearing, bodily). Here “a much more unsettling possibility of an event disavowing itself, erasing its traces,” can result in “a self-erasure of the event” (Žižek 2007, 6). The dancer appears Outside in the sense that he cannot stop and think in advance of how to dance and trace this event. The dance would instead be done by “tracing” effects from decisions that have already happened, but where this subject cannot and does not need to think at all. Instead, the event is enacted faithfully again and again, the dancer appearing in bodily form by tracing movements that express perpetual disappearance. In this way it should be concluded that the event means engaging a trace that constantly risks total self-erasure. This trace is complicated by Badiou’s bodily subject, who moves virtually, as if disappearing and appearing at once by working through decisions and a point of un-thought. To this effect, an overlap becomes apparent in the impasse of un-thought that relates Badiou’s and Deleuze’s multiplicity.

### **Real Events**

It is in light of this subject-oriented event that conclusions can be made. Essentially, I have tried to show that multiplicity is distinct from mystical, metaphysical or purely philosophical foundations. The theories posed by Deleuze and Badiou show that the capacity to think deals with a multiplicity that opens and changes the ontology of thought. In the purest sense, multiplicity is ontologically devoid of content. Un-thought is metaphysically de-ontological. Un-thought is, though intellectually obstructive (nothing to think or embody), *necessary* for opening the precondition for the possibility of creating infinitely more multiplicities, ideas, and truths. Indeed, such multiplicities are real events.

The multiplicity of (un-)thought addresses an “objectless philosophy” (Ruda 2015, 8). With Badiou particularly, what is certainly thinkable is the radical change insisted upon by the subject himself, who is constituted by the ontological split. That “split” is the incalculable space of the point as an Outside that someone makes a decision within. This act invokes a trace that symbolically renders the line representing any decision and way of existing *traceless*. And it is the subject that asserts new ideas by engaging this traceless trace into concrete forms; ideas are what appear through each of us driven enough to make them

happen. Ideas are exceptional multiplicities, new truths that are forced from “something inexistent” (Ruda 2015, 103). In which case Deleuze’s lines of thought have crossovers with Badiou’s event-like trace. Both theories overlap in the engagement with un-thought. What this means is that multiplicities trace new narratives and paradigms. Multiplicities do happen point-by-point, one step at a time—and, in difficult circumstances, such as May ’68, happen with two-steps back for every step taken.

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