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Christopher Norris, *Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012. viii + 197 pp. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1441128324; \$36.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1472525925.

Review by Antonio Calcagno, King's University College, London, Canada.

Senior scholar and philosopher Christopher Norris is known for his work in recent French thought, his various contributions focusing on the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas as well as his own interventions in logic, philosophy of science, and analytic philosophy. His latest volume, *Derrida, Badiou and the Formative Imperative*, is a welcome scholarly monograph that offers readers both a careful and cogent analysis of two of France's leading, if not controversial, philosophers. The aims of the book include, first, to bring both Alain Badiou and Jacques Derrida into dialogue with the analytical tradition of philosophy by arguing that both thinkers ground their arguments in rigorous and consistent logics accessible to analytical philosophers; second, to demonstrate that Derrida and Badiou challenge the limits of traditional bivalent logics by offering us philosophical justifications of "deviant" logics that focus on questions of consistency and paradox, specifically those having to do with infinity as introduced by Cantor; third, a discussion of the ontological implications of both thinkers' ideas for our understanding of reality; and fourth, a critique of the way we understand the history of ethical thinking and a new formal way to conceive of ethics in light of the thinking of Derrida and Badiou.

Norris's introduction serves a two-fold function. First, he demonstrates why Badiou and Derrida can be read together, even though Derrida seems to have had the more distinct and enduring impact. Second, he establishes how both thinkers form a unique movement in recent French thinking, which Norris views as deeply critical of postmodern philosophy and which, unfortunately, Badiou and Derrida are seen to represent when, in fact, they are to be read, according to Norris, as opposing central relativist claims, especially about truth, like those one finds in postmodern philosophy.

Concerning the former, while it is true that Badiou and Derrida would have circulated in some of the same circles within the French academy and university system, especially in the 1960s, they never referred to one another. There is no mention of Badiou's work in Derrida's corpus, nor does Badiou mention Derrida until after the latter's death. To be sure, there is an appropriation of Derrida on the part of Badiou, as his notion of inexistence is described as functioning in the same way as Derrida's *différance*.

Given their scant interaction and given Badiou's brief homage in his later work, it would seem odd to bring these two thinkers together. But Norris makes the point, and rightly so, that both share a very deep concern for truth while at the same time recognising that it is often situated in fluctuating and precarious human states of affairs. Norris shows in later chapters how their shared commitment to a rigorous logic is the means by which one can establish an account of truth within the framework of social construction while adamantly rejecting relativism. As Norris remarks, "Badiou's posthumous tribute to Derrida...is a miniature tour de force which achieves...three extraordinary feats. First, it succeeds in shifting the emphasis from Derrida as textual close-reader of incomparable subtlety and power to Derrida as a political thinker, a shift seen not only in his later (post 1980) writings where politics very often came to the fore but also throughout its entire, massively imposing *oeuvre*. Second,

and yet more notably, it manages to present Derrida's thinking about politics in terms that derive—quite openly so—from Badiou's own treatise *Logics of Worlds*, the sequel to *Being and Event*. In brief, he takes it that deconstruction has to do with multiplicities, worlds, appearances in worlds, degrees of existence or inexistence and the forcible inscription of presence or absence. Moreover—alluding directly to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*—it points the way towards a differential ontology which allows us to explain that which undeniably has *being* in a given world (as does the proletariat in the world of twenty-first-century global capitalism) can all the same be lacking in existence, here defined as the capacity to assert its interests or make its material presence felt." (p. 4)

Concerning the latter function, Norris makes a distinction: Badiou and Derrida are not to be considered simply constructivist relativists or what are commonly referred to as postmodern thinkers, who Norris claims are relativists who reduce truth to a context-situated framework. There certainly exists a popular conception of postmodern culture and philosophy as being relativist, but when one refers to thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, for example, one notes that he thinks of truth as a language game with specific rules. But even Lyotard, the great thinker of the postmodern, believes that our understanding of how language games work and how they function reveals a logical structure that can be verified and tested. In fact, he lays out rules to govern our language games in texts like *The Postmodern Condition*. Whether de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Bourdieu, Foucault, each of these thinkers, like Derrida and Badiou, believe that there is some accessible and, therefore, true, "structure" at work in reality that allows us to understand multiplicities of contexts as well as more general principles at play. In this sense, then, Badiou and Derrida can be seen to follow in a long line of post-World War II French thinkers who try to account for truth while also accounting for it across cultures and contexts.

Chapter one argues that there is rigorous commitment on the part of Badiou and Derrida to logical formalism, which plays a specific role in our understanding of truth and contexts. Norris observes, "What gives Badiou's reading of Derrida a special interest is its clear demonstration of the fact—to adapt Barthes' aphorism once more—that while a 'little formalism' may lead thought away from a sense of its larger historical and social responsibilities, the effect of adopting a more consistent and rigorously formalized approach may well be to restore that missing dimension" (p. 38). What evidence does Norris give of both thinkers' logical formalism? For Badiou, it can be found in his discussion of events, whereas for Derrida it is in his logic of *différance*. The use (and modification) of set theory allows Badiou to formalise mathematically events within the fields of science, poetry, love (what Norris calls the "other") and politics. Adopting concepts like belonging, adhering, force and diagonalisation as well as Cantor's notion of denumerable and non-denumerable infinities, all stemming from particular interventions in twentieth-century mathematics, Badiou develops a mathematical ontology that can explain specific material and historical contexts as sets that are ordered according to certain truth procedures.

For Derrida, the discussion of *différance*, especially as it develops in the debate with John Searle in "Signature Event Context," is particularly revealing. Searle accuses Derrida of rejecting the validity of key logical concepts, including contradiction. But Derrida's reply to Searle shows how contradiction is at work in Searle's own thinking and misrepresentation of Derrida. It is precisely where one encounters contradictions and logical limits, Norris contends, following Derrida, that texts can reveal deeper realities. He cites Derrida, "[from] the moment that Searle entrusts himself to an oppositional logic, to the 'distinction' of concepts by 'contrast' or 'opposition' (a legitimate demand that I share with him even if I do not at all elicit the same consequences from it), I have difficulty seeing how he is nevertheless able to write [that] phrase...in which he credits me with the 'assumption', 'oddly enough derived from logical positivism', 'that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise, it is not really a distinction at all.'" Norris then immediately notes, "Derrida's point is not so much to cock a snook at logical positivism but rather to bring home the unwitting irony of Searle's setting up as the appointed guardian of 'analytic' values and priorities while blithely recommending that they be relaxed, suspended or held in abeyance whenever (as in the context of speech-act theory) they encounter problems or anomalous

instances. Here again he agrees with Badiou that thought can make progress—whether in mathematics, the physical sciences, politics, art, ethics—only so long as it persists in the effort to work its way through and beyond those dilemmas that periodically emerge in the course of enquiry and can later be seen to have supplied the stimulus to some otherwise (quite literally) unthinkable stage of advance.” (p. 34)

Chapter two concentrates on Badiou’s philosophy, especially as it is developed in *Being and Event I and II*, in order to explain how he draws from mathematics to formalise his ontology and ethics. He unpacks the key notions of the event: subject, multiplicity, truth, belonging, inclusion, member and part. “Such is Badiou’s claim, to repeat, that ‘consistent multiplicity’ always results from restrictive operation of the count-as-one in its various modes and object domains whose effect is to repress, dragoon or dissimulate the ‘inconsistent multiplicity’ which—as a matter (at least since Cantor) of formally demonstrable truth—necessarily both precedes and exceeds it. It is by way of that claim along with its set-theoretical elaboration that Badiou is able to press his case for the pertinence of mathematics to every area of ontological enquiry, including the social political, where there exists a more or less drastic non-equivalence between members and parts” (p. 57). Norris argues that one finds in Badiou a deep commitment to conceptual formalism that aims at critically exposing a clear and cogent line of thinking necessary for us to grasp the being and non-being, that is, the inexistence, of politics, art, and ethics. He also demonstrates that Badiou’s ethical formalism is also a deep critique of traditional ethical thinking, including structuralist, Kantian and liberal approaches to ethics. Norris writes, “Thus, the main target of his criticism is the notion that mere consensus belief or agreement over a sufficient range of culturally salient issues might somehow offer a basis for ethical thinking. This is merely the complicit mirror image of a Kantian-deontological approach that places moral values outside and above all the messy contingencies of historically situated human choice and which moreover (for just that reason) very often comes down—as in the liberal ideologues such as Hannah Arendt—to a counsel of contemplative detachment from the urgencies and pressures of a fully engaged practico-political life” (p. 40). It should be remarked here that Norris is an astute interpreter of Badiou and understands his philosophy well. What would make Norris’s case stronger, however, would be a deeper probing of the coherence between Badiou’s mathematical claims and their application to the different ontological domains of art, love, and politics in order to see if Badiou’s claims hold water. Set-theorists, I am sure, would challenge how Badiou understands the relation between belonging and membership; they would also challenge the extension of the mathematics to non-mathematical domains, even if we read Badiou as a mathematical realist. If we apply Badiou’s mathematical ontology to politics, for example, one could rightly account for the rising of an event and even a subject, but the account stops there, for it is so general that it cannot account for the complexity of detail that historians see as constitutive and unique about events. This is Sylvain Lazarus’s point when he rereads the work of the French historian Marc Bloch on the French Revolution. How, then, could Badiou deal with the charge that his level of mathematical ordering of events achieved in retrospective apprehension is so general that it simply provides the bare bones of events while ignoring their historical complexity? Recall that Badiou places history and the material within the situation and the *événementiel*.

Chapter three turns to Derrida and shows with great acuity how and why Derrida is to be read as committed to the “requirements of classical (bivalent) logic” (p. 65). But Norris also demonstrates how Derrida accounts for the deviant logics of supplementarity, difference and parergonality. Norris is famous for this kind of work and he continues to argue, and thankfully so, for a dialogue between Derrida and analytic philosophers. The strength of the chapter consists in showing how philosophers like Rorty, Searle, Austin, Ayer, McDowell, Davidson, Dennett, Dummett, Quine and Stanley Fish can engage Derridean philosophy, ultimately contributing to debates around questions of logic, language, realism and antirealism. Norris observes, “Deconstruction is very often assumed to belong squarely on the side of anti-realism, constructivism, cultural-linguistic relativism, irrationalism or a composite bugbear that incorporates all these and more. That in truth it belongs very firmly elsewhere is a point that finds plentiful evidence in Derrida’s work but which again has been missed with curious tenacity by those ranged for and against it in various disciplinary corners” (p. 98).

Chapter four extends work already begun in chapter two insofar as it returns to key concepts in Badiou's thought, including the "axiom of choice" (p. 121). Here, Norris masterfully brings Badiou into dialogue with analytic philosophers, especially philosophers of mathematics. Norris is also more critical here of Badiou's mathematical and ontological claims, but he still contends that his formal logic has much to offer to analytic philosophers. In the introduction to *Being and Event*, Badiou maintains that his work can be read in three ways: from the perspectives of mathematics and formal ontology; in an expository fashion; and through the great figures and events in history and philosophy (hence, the numerous meditations on great figures like Rousseau, Hegel and Spinoza.) Norris limits his discussion to the first way, as this is his focus. As we read Badiou and his meditations, one often wonders whether what he says mathematically necessarily and perfectly maps on to what he says in his expositions and meditations on the figures of the history of philosophy. For example, does what Badiou says about the "general will" in Rousseau really match with what he lays out in his expositions? Scholars have often interpreted *la volonté générale* in light of the work of Condorcet, and the transcendental and *sensus communis* of Kant. To read *la volonté générale* as the key to forming "the people," in Badiou's understanding, ignores the array of possible counter-interpretations. It seems that what Rousseau the philosopher has to say, especially in light of his larger corpus, exceeds the formal representations given in Badiou's set theory. This tendency is also evident in Badiou's formal account of literature and poetry. He can certainly account for great interventions or events in literature and poetry that change our way of reading and thinking about literature and art, for example, the introduction of a new style or poetic device, but when Badiou begins to compare different literary figures (e.g., Beckett, Mallarmé, Pessoa) or music (*Blue Beard*), the accounts he gives of these individual works of art sound more like a list of his own favourite pieces than a formally justifiable account arising from Badiou's own interventions in mathematics and formal ontology. There is a serious paucity of engagement in Badiou's aesthetics with critics and scholars as well as art historians who may interpret artworks in different ways.

Chapter five continues the work of chapter three, except rather than focus on classical bivalent logic, Norris shows how Derrida develops and expands his "deviant logics" by giving us a close reading and outline of his reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. Norris's exposition is expertly done and he hits all the Derridean high notes. He sums up his view of Derrida in the following manner: "Quite simply, bivalence is the sine qua non for a reasoned and philosophically accountable treatment of these topics that would not rest content with an 'approximative' logic and thereby forego any claim to conceptual rigour. At the same time, *contra* theorists like Searle, Derrida insists in the absolute impossibility that philosophy of language should somehow attain a methodological perspective outside and above the kinds of problematic instance that provide its most challenging material....Yet it also very clearly the case that Derrida never goes so far as his post-structuralist disciples would wish in renouncing the distinction between object-language and metalanguage, that is, the necessity that reading should aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the author, between what he commands and what he does not command of the language that he uses" (p. 149).

The concluding chapter of the book offers a further analysis of Badiou's *Being and Event*, but it does so from a specific angle. This chapter is powerful in that Norris really fortifies his argument concerning the profound resonance between both Badiou's and Derrida's project. Both thinkers are committed to bivalent logics but they also extend the limits of what they can do by introducing other "deviant" logics. We saw how Norris says Derrida does this in chapter three. Here, we learn how Badiou brings greater complexity to logic in that he uses mathematics (e.g., Zermelo, Fraenkel, Cantor, Gödel, Cohen) to give a rigorous account of paradox, ultimately challenging standard analytic readings of paradox (p. 152). It is precisely the uniqueness of Badiou's intervention in analytical thinking that should turn the heads of analytic philosophers interested in similar questions as Badiou. "What sets it so decisively apart is the strength of his commitment to the claim for mathematics as the sole adequate basis for ontology in general and, beyond that, for those particular or regional ontologies that form the subject-matter of the

various sciences. It is also his remarkable ability to think in a way that unites the maximum degree of conceptual precision with the kind of creativity—or courage to venture into new and philosophically uncharted seas of thought—that tends to be regarded by analytic types as leading in an opposite, imprecise and (some would say) philosophically disreputable direction. That Badiou presents so powerful a challenge to this still fairly commonplace set of assumptions is yet further reason to count him among the most significant thinkers of our time” (p. 171).

Norris most certainly accomplishes what he sets out to do, and he does so with great rigour and discipline. His book fills in an important lacuna in emerging Badiou studies insofar as he provides an analysis of certain aspects of Badiou’s logic and mathematical ontology. If I were to offer critique, it would focus on the practical application of both Derrida and Badiou’s thought. Given that Norris believes that the French philosophers’ formalism is rich as it is valid, then is it robust enough to explain, understand and interpret what is actually happening on the ground, what we experience in the world, in terms of art, love, science and politics? In short, what and how does the theory relate to the practice? This challenge certainly is not confinable merely to Badiou, Derrida or even analytic philosophy, as it cuts to the core of all philosophical endeavour. Admittedly, this is not the purview of Norris’s book as he wishes to examine closely the question of formalism in both Derrida and Badiou. Despite these larger and what seem to be perennial critiques of philosophy, the value of this excellent books lies in its contribution to furthering our understanding of both Derrida’s and Badiou’s projects.

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