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Alain Badiou, *The One: Descartes, Plato, Kant*. Translated by Jacques Lezra with Susan Spitzer. Introduction by Kenneth Reinhard. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. xxxvii + 246 pp. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780231194129; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780231218801; \$24.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780231550666.

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Among the figures of the now almost mythical era of postwar French philosophy, Alain Badiou hasn't achieved the star status of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Gilles Deleuze in the Anglophone world. Though there have been many publications in English about Badiou, his work hasn't been filtered into dogma or specialized vocabulary, at least not on the scale of those three. One factor in this difference is that he's somewhat younger and still living. He had also written considerably less than they had at the time their work began its importation into the Anglophone world in the 1970s. Nonetheless, he has been extremely prolific since then. His work participates in the radical reassessment of the Western philosophical canon that especially Derrida and Deleuze are known for. Along with Foucault, Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Serres, François Châtelet, and Jacques Rancière, he was part of the philosophy faculty at the University of Paris VIII: founded at Vincennes in 1968, this campus was relocated to Saint-Denis in 1981, twice as far from the center of Paris, by a spiteful conservative government on its way out after election results.

Badiou also shares with this rough group of philosophers, for whom Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser are forerunners, an understanding of the history of Western philosophy as relevant to politics in the present day. To varying degrees and in quite different ways, often at odds with each other, these intellectuals place questions of democracy, class, race, and social inclusion in intimate connection with their writing. This essential component of their work has often been misunderstood or even lost in its Anglophone adaptation and along with it the deep involvement with the history of Western philosophy. The latter is in part because their reception has been far more extensive in literature departments than philosophy departments. A prime example is in the early institutionalization of what was dubiously named "New French Theory (NFT)," when a slew of Anglo-American scholars weighed in on whether Derrida's or Foucault's work was more valuable to literary criticism.[1] The focus was on their back-and-forth between 1963 and 1972 on the role Descartes had played with regard to banishing madness from reasoned discourse—"two exemplary positions" on textuality, as Edward Said put it in a 1978 essay.[2]

Many Anglo-American literary critics were in search of new methods of generating textual commentary; none of these contributions thematized the fact that the exchange was over Descartes, commonly regarded as the founder of modern philosophy and certainly of modern French philosophy, with respect to the history of which these two young French philosophers were positioning themselves.[3]

Fortunately, this misunderstanding of much of postwar French thought has eroded over the years, giving way to an interest in how these writers interpret philosophy and its history. This interest includes Badiou, many of whose translated works would be difficult to mistake for anything but studies in the history of philosophy. The volume here under review is on three of the most-discussed figures in Western philosophy; it begins with Descartes, an affirmation of his status as founder and Badiou's relationship to the founding. The book represents the first of the series of twenty seminars that Badiou gave from 1983 to 2012, whose titles also name Aristotle, Spinoza, Hegel, Parmenides, Malebranche, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. *The One* is preceded in English translation by two other volumes, a third having more recently been published.[4] The editors' introduction to the series (*One*, vii–ix) outlines the plan to publish them all in English, following their preparation and publication in French, a task still in progress. As the editors explain, “Isabelle Vodoz and Véronique Pineau are establishing the French text of the seminar on the basis of audio recordings and notes, with the intention of remaining as close as possible to Badiou's delivery while eliminating unnecessary repetitions and other minor artifacts” (viii–ix).

In his own general preface to the seminars in English, Badiou relates the conditions in which he delivered them. For several years they were on the Saint-Denis campus, which still hosted many vocal left-wing students. In 1987 he changed their location to the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, which had recently been created by “the determined efforts of everyone in ‘living [i.e. non-traditional] philosophy’ who felt put down and badmouthed by the University,” Derrida and Lyotard most prominent among them (xiv). Starting then and for many years, Badiou's seminar was public, not tied to a diploma or even final exams. “I'd always wanted the seminar to be for people who worked,” he writes (xvi). His conception of philosophy as a public activity, along with his project of presenting the seminar in writing, is intimately tied to what, he says, philosophy has been since antiquity: “Clearly, philosophy has always combined oral activity and writing and has often privileged the oral over the written, as did its legendary founder, namely, Socrates” (xviii).

As public activity pitched especially to nonstudents and many working-class people, largely because of the official politics of education controlling the university, for Badiou philosophy is a political pursuit, directly relevant to the present day. In the preface he names politics as one of the “conditions” of philosophy that permeate his thinking, along with poetry, the history of philosophy, and love (xvi). But the urgency of politics often makes it foremost for Badiou: he shows this with the offhand comments that are part of a mostly improvised oral presentation. He notes, for example, that even in dehierarchizing the cosmos, Descartes retains the ontological theory of difference, “what is at the basis of every identity-based hierarchy (such as racism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, etc.)” (71). He also refers to his prior critique of the “militant nihilist” (77). And he offers the slogan of striking workers at the Talbot car factory in the early 1980s, “We want our rights!,” an affirmation of an otherwise unrecognized unity, as an example of a central concept of the seminar, the “count-as-one” (134), the operation by which the One of the book's title takes place.

Badiou proposes the One as the structure of Western philosophy's primary referent, the subject. Accepting that the world is a multiplicity of phenomena and that experience of them is also multiple, he understands the subject as achieving oneness through gathering experiences together. He begins the seminar with Descartes as the first to develop a subject that holds for all modernity; he proceeds to Plato in order to show how the problem of the subject, though the concept isn't named in the dialogues, is central to Western philosophy from its beginnings. He concludes with Kant as the philosopher who begins with the impasses in Descartes's philosophy in order to arrive at a cognizing and morally acting subject. Though several times in the book he speaks of Heidegger with reverence for having recognized the importance of being to philosophy, on the point of the subject Badiou implicitly challenges him. Heidegger holds that humanity as subject and the world as object begin with Descartes's cogito. Previously in the history of philosophy, for Heidegger, *Dasein* stood in relation to being; Descartes's inauguration of the human subject as the modern determination of *Dasein* circumscribes the world as picture and obscures being.[5] When Badiou locates the history of the subject as far back as Plato, his reading of Descartes yields a subject open to apprehending the world, to be further developed by Kant and Hegel.

Descartes remains, as Badiou explains in the opening lines of session one of the seminar, the philosopher who "proposed the first systematization" (1) of the recentering of the universe around subjective experience. Badiou devotes the first four sessions of the seminar to Descartes, focusing mainly on the *Meditations*. Badiou demonstrates (as others have) that the cogito only offers certainty for a moment; he then closely follows the maneuvers Descartes makes to arrive at a subject that apprehends the truth of the world. Turning to Plato, Badiou spends sessions five through eight carefully commenting on the *Sophist*, then sessions nine and ten on the *Parmenides*. He explains that "the main thrust of the *Sophist* will be, on the one hand, to establish that there is a being of nonbeing, and, on the other hand, to criticize as antipolitical the philosophical heritage of the theorists of pure being" (78). In the two sessions on the *Parmenides*, Badiou returns to the importance of the One, arguing that it links being and nonbeing through its dialectic with the world; he affirms that the One thus constitutes a subject in Plato, an orientation of the world. Badiou continues by devoting sessions eleven through sixteen to Kant, the longest section of the book. "If Descartes is the inaugural figure," writes Badiou, "if he represents the first period of the modern subject, this period is only substantiated through the retroaction of the second period," which Kant represents (143). While Descartes's aim is to arrive at the certainty of truth, Kant's question is on the status of being "from the now inescapable standpoint of the subject" (144). Integral to Kant's One is the transcendental unity of apperception in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; he famously posits the thing-in-itself as belonging to the supersensible and unavailable to representation, the latter strictly involving phenomena or the sensible. He follows this book with the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which treats the moral law as only bearing on the supersensible. It is in the third critique, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, that he comes to the count-as-one that accommodates both the sensible and the supersensible.[6]

Throughout, Badiou's thinking-on-the-spot, audience-conscious delivery is patent. The digressions and the responses to questions make the text all the more readable. This conversational quality comes across with full effectiveness in the elegant translation by Jacques Lezra and Susan Spitzer. Badiou's general preface to the seminars is an engaging account of a philosopher's career under challenging political and pedagogical circumstances. Kenneth Reinhard's introduction provides important background material and context, as well as a keen

summary of Badiou's aims. In the few pages that Badiou himself writes to introduce *The One*, he beautifully illuminates the problems he addresses in the book.

The One: Descartes, Plato, Kant will interest all readers of postwar French thought, not least because it contributes to the Anglo-American re-evaluation of that period as momentous in the history of philosophy and intellectual history. And as a thoroughgoing exploration of these three philosophers' work, it's a remarkable achievement.

NOTES

[1] See, among others, Robert D' Amico, "Text and Context: Derrida and Foucault on Descartes," in John Fekete, ed., *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*, 164–82; Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 35–55; John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 207–16; Dalia Judovitz, "Derrida and Descartes: Economizing Thought," in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 40–58.

[2] Edward W. Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978): 673–714.

[3] Hassan Melehy, *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 25–43; Hassan Melehy, "Critiques of Early Modern Criticism: Poetics, Historicism, and the Pitfalls of Periodization," in Jeffrey R. Di Leo ed., *Criticism After Critique: Aesthetics, Literature, and the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 127–140.

[4] The two volumes of the seminar preceding *The One* are *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020) and *Malebranche: Theological Figure, Being 2*, trans. Jason E. Smith with Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). The volume that has appeared since *The One* is *Images of the Present Time*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

[5] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 116–54; *Nietzsche*, trans. Frank Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), vol. 4, 85–138.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Critique of Practical Reason*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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