

On “the Idea” in Badiou*

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Despite Badiou’s constant reference to “the Idea,” there seems to be no systematic presentation of “the Idea” in his opus, which is quite surprising for one of the most systematic philosophers. What *is* the Idea for Badiou? What does he *refer to* when he talks about the Idea? What does the Idea *stand for* in his system; what *is it the name of*? Departing from Badiou, of course, what I want to do is simply summarize his views, while being fully aware that Badiou himself (perhaps) would not subscribe to my account as presented here. Let me start with Badiou’s recapitulation of the “state of the art” from nearly a decade ago:

The theme of the Idea appears gradually in my work. It was no doubt already present in the late ‘80s from the moment when, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, I designated my undertaking as a “Platonism of the multiple,” which would require a renewed investigation into the nature of the Idea. In *Logics of Worlds*, this investigation was expressed as an imperative: “true life” was conceived of as life lived in accordance with the Idea, as opposed to the maxim of contemporary democratic materialism, which commands us to live without any Idea. I examined the logic of the Idea in greater detail in *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, in which the notion of ideation, and thus of the operative, or working, value of the Idea is introduced. This was backed up by a multifaceted commitment to something like a renaissance of the use of Plato. (Badiou 2010a, pp. 229–30, n. 1)

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This passage contains many themes to which I will return later on. It is obvious from it—firstly—that Badiou himself is quite serious about the Idea. Though Badiou is notorious for his self-declared Platonism and communism, all the talk about the Idea is not intended merely to complete his image and is not a provocation for its own sake. It has its role in Badiou’s philosophical project—the laicization and secularization of infinity—while securing new grounds for a renaissance of philosophy, as well as for the withering away of the State and the radical transformation of society in the direction of Communism.

Here, the Idea is charged with some important tasks. It is an operator that directs and orients us in these disoriented¹ times, without being (completely) synonymous with Kant’s regulative Idea: “For almost thirty years, the present, our historical present, has been a disoriented time: a time that does not offer its youth, especially the youth of the popular classes, any principle to orient their existence. The continuation of globalized capitalism provides no sense at all of collective and individual existence” (Badiou 2016, p. 1).² The Idea addresses two interrelated questions. In theoretical terms, it addresses the question of *thinking*: “What is thinking in our times?” is a key question for Badiou (see Badiou 2011, p.

¹ It is no coincidence that one of Badiou’s seminars (taught in Paris from 1983 to 2016) has “orientation” in its title. Furthermore, the seminars held in the last fifteen years, at least, are somehow “internally oriented”: one passes from an analysis of the images of our present times to the question of how to orient ourselves in them via Plato and the question of how to change the world. All this culminates in the question of how this change in the form of “immanent truths” can be thought and enacted: *Images du temps présent* (2001–2004); *S’orienter dans la pensée, s’orienter dans l’existence* (2004–2007); *Pour aujourd’hui: Platon!* (2007–2010); *Que signifie “changer le monde”?* (2010–2012); *L’immanence des vérités* (2013–2017).

² It is worth noting that on the “philosophical front” the main “enemy” remains the same: while in *Manifesto for Philosophy* the “enemy” was called “poetic disorientation” (Badiou 1999, pp. 73–74), today, in *Immanence of Truths*, it is called “finitude.”

38); in practical terms, it tackles the question of *acting*: in order to act politically, one has to have an Idea, but lacking it, the popular masses’ confusion is inescapable. Or, better put, without the Idea, the popular masses’ disorientation is impossible to avoid or escape (see Badiou 2010a, p. 258). Precisely on account of such a stance, Badiou has been accused of many things,³ while remaining firm on this point: we need the Idea, “a compass” (Badiou 2017a, p. 85), whose tasks are the following: to orient ourselves in the present; to orient the life of an individual in accordance with the True; to view the situation one is in as one entailing a choice; to become a subject who “makes a pure choice, a choice without concept, a choice between two indiscernible terms” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 219). The choice Badiou talks about is not to be understood in the sense of the “free choice” of the dominant ideology, but rather as The Choice that, precisely, stands against it: by way of making the choice, an individual becomes a subject; subjectivity results from the encounter with and a fidelity to an event. Here, we get a glimpse into the inner tension and the crucial point of Badiou’s system at which the Idea, at least in my view, is situated. Accused by his critics of overemphasizing the emergence of an event (or “miracle”⁴) which might or might not emerge at all, in recent years Badiou has increasingly emphasized that “truths are eternal.” It seems, however, that “truths” are still deployed conditionally here (the infamous *sinon* in the phrase “except that there are truths”), while “the Idea” is deployed unconditionally and invariantly; it somehow has to be here as a kind of didactic means. Didactics, “as we know, is the crux of Plato’s first dialogues, and subsequently

³ For instance: “Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to accuse him of anthropocentrism, since he does not privilege human existence so much as a capacity for thinking which he only sees exemplified by the human animal. The problem lies in Badiou’s ‘noocentrism’ rather than in any alleged anthropocentrism.” (Brassier 2007, p. 114) For an ingenious defense of “idealism without idealism” see Ruda 2015.

⁴ See Bensaïd 2004, pp. 94–105.

of the whole of non-critical philosophy. Starting from any situation whatever, one indicates, under the progressively clear name of Idea, that there is indeed something other than bodies and languages” (Badiou 2010b, p. 140). In this context, the Idea is a lighthouse, a light,⁵ similar to Plato’s sun, the light “making the invisible visible,” which would be consistent with Badiou’s claim that another name for the Idea is purity: “*pure* is an invariant, *purity* is an invariant, because it is ultimately the name of the Idea” (Badiou 2010c, p. 140).

Not only the Idea, but Badiou’s personal philosophical style as such is devoted to clarity and distinctiveness, inspired by the Cartesian project. What is instantaneously clear and evident to anyone who has ever listened to one of Badiou’s talks, seminars, interviews, or debates, to anyone who has ever read his texts, is that his *style of presentation* is always committed to clarity and being as understandable as possible. His writing style and procedure are reminiscent of Beckett’s effort to write as simply and minimally as possible by cutting out all redundant, superfluous elements. One can even say that Badiou’s “philosophical writing—regardless of its effects of style or literary qualities—is always *didactic* writing: its rationale consists in conveying the Idea and, consequently, in convincing and changing intellectual subjectivities” (Burchill 2013, p. vii). In this context (of light, clarity, guiding principles), it is clear that Badiou is committed to the Enlightenment—perhaps even more than he is willing to admit. It is nonetheless no coincidence that—I will save the analysis of further implications of this for some other occasion—Badiou recently tackled the question of orientation in Descartes (*morale provisoire*) and in Kant (“What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”).

⁵ See, for instance, the following passages: “For me, an event is something that *brings to light* a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable” (Badiou 2013a, p. 9); “This means that—as in the Platonic myth, but in reverse—to paint an animal on the wall of a cave is to flee the cave so as to *ascend towards the light of the Idea*” (Badiou 2010b, p. 19; my emphasis).

The first task of the Idea is therefore to present a choice (“to live with/without the Idea”) and an orientation. For Badiou, this orientation is not something neutral. Even common sense somehow associates “the idea” with Plato and a political cause. This is indeed the case for Badiou, for whom the Idea evokes and struggles for the legacy of Plato’s philosophy, while—within the field of praxis—evoking the struggle for the cause of radical politics, the politics of equality, or, simply, for communism. While I will omit here the problematics of the *communist* Idea⁶ and of *communism*, it is nonetheless clear that today the mere mentioning, let alone fidelity to (the Idea of) communism, causes troubles. And while Badiou does not miss an opportunity to declare himself a Platonist, he also admits: “‘Platonism’ is intended as a provocation or a banner by which to proclaim the closure of the Romantic gesture.”⁷

Having a banner and being provocative (as the Idea is) is essential for at least two main reasons. For Badiou, *polemos*, polemics, and controversy constitute a vital, if not the most important, part of any thought or practice. He himself has been a militant and activist his whole life. His influences range from Sartre and Mao to Althusser (who defines philosophy as “class struggle in theory”) and Kant (Badiou frequently refers to Kant’s definition of metaphysics/philosophy, from the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a “battlefield”). In short, philosophy is never “just a theory.” But first and foremost—and this is the second reason—today philosophy is neither dead nor over. “The Idea” and the name of Plato are upheld here not only to fight the topics of Romanticism, i.e. finitude and death, but also because, for Badiou, Plato is *the* philosopher, if there ever

⁶ It is interesting to note in passing that the predicate “communist” is used by Badiou as an almost exclusive predicate of the term “Idea.” There are only rare exceptions, such as the “Christian Idea” (see Badiou 2016a, p. 7).

⁷ Badiou 2017b, p. 100. See also Badiou 2004, p. 27.

was one. Plato was the first to set up philosophy in relation to its four conditions,⁸ and he marks a turning point in the history of thought. Badiou is not blind to Plato's mistakes and errors, and can sometimes be quite harsh on him⁹; however, for Badiou, "Plato's problem—which is still ours—is how our experience of a particular world (that which we are given to know, the 'knowable') can open up access to eternal, universal, and, in this sense, transmundane truths" (Badiou 2011, p. 106). That is the main reason why Badiou not only devoted many years of his seminar to Plato, but also no less than six years of his life to the "(re)translation" of Plato's *Republic* (Badiou 2012a; 2013b). Or, as Badiou put it in 2015: "I've always desired to affirm a Plato who would be our contemporary" (Badiou and Kakogianni 2015, p. 11). And in this context, leaving all other interesting subtleties aside, it is not unimportant that in his first *Manifesto for Philosophy* from 1989 Badiou declared his project as one of a "Platonism of the multiple," while in the *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* from 2009 he changed this formulation to a "Communism of the Idea" (Badiou 2011, p. 125). So, the Idea is not something marginal, but one of the pivots of Badiou's system; he even goes as far as to describe his *Second Manifesto* as devoted to the "return of the affirmative power of the Idea" and as structured around the question: "What is an Idea?" (Ibid., pp. 5, 6)¹⁰

Yet, *what is* an Idea? Is it the perfect model, the arch-design, the ideal that must be pursued, for instance by love, poetry, or theater? Is the Idea their essence; is Badiou an essentialist? Absolutely not, for he never talks about the Idea of love, poetry, or

⁸ "The fact is that today—and on this point things haven't budged since Plato—we only know four types of truths" (Badiou 2010b, p. 71).

⁹ See, for instance, Badiou 2016b; 1989–1990; 2007–2010; 2004, pp. 49–58. On Badiou and Plato see Bartlett 2011; Klepec 2017.

¹⁰ In a sense, perhaps all of Badiou's work, starting with his *Concept of the Model*, could be understood as a variation on the theme of the following question: "What is a Form/Idea?" (see Badiou 2007a, p. 102)

theater, but rather about their relation to the Idea. In this context, recall that Badiou never speaks about “true ideas” or “the Idea of Truth,” but rather about “the Idea of the True.” In other words, the Idea is not some Ideal one would try to realize, copy, or get as near as possible to; it is not some perfect paradigm regulating our actions, acts, or deeds. Moreover, and unlike in “vulgar Platonism,” for Badiou an Idea is never an “idea of something”: “I am a sophisticated Platonist, not a vulgar one. I do not uphold that truths pre-exist in a separate ‘intelligible place’ before becoming mundane and that they are born simply by descending from the heavens above” (Badiou 2011, p. 26). What holds for truths, also holds for ideas, but one has to be mindful of Badiou’s terminology, for he does not speak about “ideas” but about “the Idea.” Is there only one idea? Is, then, the Idea “the One”? Rather, it alerts the reader/listener to the fact that, here, we are *not dealing with the usual understanding of what an idea is*.

For Badiou, the Idea is not a representation, an image or a notion, but something actively taking place in the form of a fiction: “the Idea exposes a truth in a fictional structure” (Badiou 2010a, p. 239). Contrary to the philosophical category of Truth, which is a sort of seizing (“pincers”), the Idea is more like a framing. It is therefore neither the essence nor the truth in the usual sense, but rather a “schema,” a “frame,” something that resembles Lacan’s *matheme*. What kind of schema or frame is it? I will disregard a possible parallel between Badiou and Kant concerning “schematism,” a parallel that—via the well-known discussion between Heidegger and Cassirer apropos of Kant (and via the parallels between Heidegger and Badiou)—would lead us to psychoanalysis and to Lacan’s conception of fantasy or phantasm.¹¹ What is clear, though, is that for Badiou the Idea is always already here for everybody, and that truths (and Ideas, one might add) are

¹¹ As regards this particular point, the parallel between Kant and Lacan has already been proposed by Bernard Baas and Slavoj Žižek.

created in one world, but are valid in all possible worlds. This fictional structure is simultaneously eternal and contemporary. For Badiou, to be a contemporary means “to partake of the trans-temporal, or really, trans-mundane, and not to be finally subject to time but to inscribe eternity in one’s own time/world under the general name of Idea. Philosophy, for Badiou, is contemporary to the material and materialist conditions that in their own time produce the new discourses of time, and also to the Idea itself as the composition of this contemporaneity” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 10). Accordingly, the time of the Idea is a paradoxical time; it is the time of the future anterior, or the future perfect, the time of a “will have been,” torn between “always-already” and “not yet”: “The idea [of an education by truths] is always yet to come. At the same time, it is always already *there*” (Bartlett 2011, p. 231). A *decision* is taken that “there is an Idea”: “The philosophical act always takes the form of a decision, a separation, a clear distinction” (Badiou 2012b, p. 12).

But this decision in at least one firm and absolute point also presents a point (of view) *from, and in relation to, which everything else is defined or thought*. *Mathematics*, for instance, “has always been the place-holder of the Idea as Idea, the Idea as Idea to which Lacan gave the name of *matheme*” (Badiou 2017b, p. 207). *Love*, which (contrary to sexuality) exists only in the element of the Idea, as “the power of the Two” carves “out an existence, a body, a banal individuality, directly on the sky of Ideas” (Badiou 2010b, p. 32). *Cinema* is an “art of the trace of the Idea,” *theatre* “the site of the Idea’s living appearance,” *dance*, as a metaphor for thought, is “the representation of that which the body is capable of without reference to the Idea” (Badiou 2015a, pp. 59, 63, 62). *Opera* “is the connection between the infinite and purity as an index of the Idea” (Badiou 2010c, p. 142). *Poetry* “is situated at a twofold distance from the Idea,” but it also “subordinates sensible desire to the aleatory advent of the Idea. The poem is a *duty* of thought” (Badiou 2005, pp. 17, 20). *The soldier* has no

proper name and is but “a conscious part of a great discipline, under the power of the Idea” (Badiou 2012b, p. 47), etc. Many authors dear to Badiou, such as Plato, Beckett, and Mallarmé, are presented in relation to the Idea. For Plato “the experience of love is an impulse towards something that he calls the Idea” (Badiou 2012c, p. 16). Questions proper to Beckett’s work can be summarized as a “functional reduction oriented towards the essence or the Idea” (Badiou 2003, p. 4). The supreme operation of Mallarméan poetics “is this operation that yields the Idea, and Mallarmé was perfectly aware of it” by putting “the poem in the Idea’s service” (Badiou 2017b, pp. 58, 60, 61).

Note that Badiou is speaking strictly about “the Idea” and not “an idea.” This was not always the case, and one can even speak about a certain tendency in his opus of pointing out three features of the idea. First, the tendency to gradually abolish the indefinite article in favour of the definite article (from *an* idea, we eventually shift to *the* idea); second, there is a shift from ideas taken and spoken about in plural to idea in the singular, i.e., to the idea as one; and finally, there is a change in writing from “idea” to its capitalization (“the Idea”). When Badiou talks about the Idea, in the vast majority of cases, at least nowadays, the word is capitalized and used with a definite article, and in the singular. There are some exceptions, of course, which—at least in part—are definitively due to accidental reasons (one such prominent recent example is found in *In Praise of Theatre* that speaks strictly of “the idea” instead of “the Idea”).¹² But in other rare cases, when Badiou talks about ideas in the plural the emphasis is the same as in his later use of “the Idea.”¹³ This is most clearly visible in his early work from 1976 *De l’idéologie* (written together with François

¹² For instance: “the theatre, when it takes place, is a representation of the idea” (see Badiou 2015a, p. 56; 2013c, p. 63).

¹³ See, for instance, the idea that theater spreads ideas and works with “theater-ideas” in Badiou 2015a, and 2005, p. 72 ff.

Balmès) where Badiou talks about “communist ideas,” “ideas of the masses,” and “just ideas” (*idées justes*).¹⁴ But these uses are all related to the questions: of orientation and that of providing direction; of universality; of something that does not “vary” or “change” (Badiou speaks of “communist invariants,” whereby in late Badiou invariant¹⁵ is eternity);¹⁶ of force and action; of scission and regeneration (something similar to “resurrection” from the *Logics of Worlds*).

“The Idea,” therefore, is not just “one single idea” or some general idea; it is not this or that idea, let alone *just any idea*; and last but not least, it is not *an idea*, but *the Idea*.¹⁷ How are we to think that? Two associations arise here: one is Spinoza, with his “*habemus enim ideam vera*” (“for we have a true idea”) from §33 of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; and the other is Godard’s statement frequently mentioned by Badiou: “*Ce n’est pas une image juste, c’est juste une image*,” i.e., “This is not a just image, this is just an image.” It seems that what matters for Badiou is first and foremost that “the Idea” is not *just an idea* in Godard’s sense of an image being “just an image,” but rather one without which we are lost: “to put it in one word: we need courage to have an idea. One big idea” (Badiou 2018a, p. 56). The latter can be written as Idea in the sense of a worldview, an ideology,

¹⁴ See Badiou 2012d, pp. 152, 159, 167, 172.

¹⁵ But neither early nor late Badiou conflates invariant and program: “the invariant of the Idea is the measure of the action”; however, “the Idea is not the program for the action.” (Badiou 2017c, p. 12).

¹⁶ The role of “communist invariants” in early Badiou was highlighted by Hallward (2003, pp. 30, 36), Balibar (2004, p. 37), Toscano (2004, p. 140), and Feltham (2008, 35 ff), however, it was Bruno Bosteels who insisted most on this point, perhaps to back up his argument as to the continuity of the “early” and the “late” Badiou (see Bosteels 2011, p. 277 ff). The parallel between the works *Of Ideology* and *Logics of Worlds* concerning the logic of “communist invariants” and the Idea is proposed in Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 207.

¹⁷ There are exceptions, of course; see, for instance, Badiou 2014, § LXXII, p. 105: *une Idée*.

or—if you wish—a fundamental fantasy. There are ideas, indeed, but only one of them is “the Idea” (which Badiou himself takes part in). That clarifies Badiou’s claim—in the controversy with Jean-Claude Milner—that idea/Idea is “unfortunately nothing in itself positive,” for “there are criminal ideas,” such as Nazism (Badiou and Milner 2014, p. 25), and there are reactive ideas. Furthermore, there is some cruelty linked with ideas/Ideas: “the only veritable cruelty is that of the Idea” (2007b, p. 117). There is also something violent and cruel in the act of thinking as such: “Thought is unpalatable precisely because it breaks the individual apart” (Jones 2018, p. 183). In this context, Badiou likes to quote Deleuze: “Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think” (Deleuze 2001, p. 139). But while, on the one hand, Badiou points out the moment of encounter—“the word ‘encounter’ is essential” (Badiou 2015b, p. 38; see also pp. 36–40)—or affirms, in his parlance, that “there are truths,” he conceives of “the Idea” as a connector, an operator, an orientation towards “truths.” Or, as one might put it following Spinoza: “one has to have (a true) Idea.”

The very expression “to have a true idea,” or “the Idea of the True” (or, simply: “the Idea”), implies several things. First, it means that if there is no event, if there are no truths, then there is no Idea. Here is Badiou’s recent explanation:

I name “Idea” that which, regarding a given question, proposes the perspective of a new possibility. The Idea, in politics, is not directly political praxis nor is it a program; it is not something that is going to be achieved by concrete means. It is rather the possibility in the name of which you act, you transform and you have a program.

It is, then, fairly close to “principle” — “act in the name of principles” — but it is more precise. The Idea is really the conviction that a possibility, other than what there is, can come about. The “event,” in the sense we’ve stated this to involve the creation of a possibility, can very well be said to create an Idea. An Idea is associated with an event because the event is the creation of a possibility and the Idea is the general name of this new possibility. (Badiou 2013a, p. 14)

In other words, “regarding a given question,” the Idea “proposes the perspective of a new possibility”; it somehow connects us to truth. “To have one true idea” means that one is a subject of an event, and therefore a subject of truth: “This ‘entry into truth’ is what the Idea brings about” (Badiou 2011, p. 108). So, strictly speaking “we have one true idea” (Spinoza) only conditionally.

Here we should emphasize two things. First, “to have an idea” does not mean that we somehow consciously manipulate it, or possess it as “individuals.” It is rather the other way around: we are “subject to truths/the Idea” (one of the meanings of the French word *sujet* is also “being subject(ed) to,” being obedient, subordinate, governed), or as Badiou himself put it: to live is “to live under the authority of an Idea” (Badiou 2016c, p. 74). As Kierkegaard ingeniously put it: “I belong to the idea. When it beckons me, I follow. When it summons me, then I wait day and night. No one calls to dinner, no one waits supper on me. When the idea calls, I leave everything, or more correctly, I have nothing to leave. I disappoint no one, distress no one, by being true to it” (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 75). And second, “the Idea” in Badiou is the name of many things at once: first, it pinpoints the moment of fidelity and subordination; second, it stresses the moment of “the true”; third, “the Idea” then is always “the Idea of the True”; fourth, as such, it is the present orientation-point; fifth, it is a point of view; sixth, it is something that can be transmitted; seventh, it is something one can partake in.

“The Idea” is a kind of trinity, a knot of various triplets. For instance, “the Idea” is a triplet of a decision, a principle, and a

hypothesis:¹⁸ it is a *hypothesis* that has to be proven and in which one believes in advance;¹⁹ therefore, a *decision* has already been taken to rely on the hypothesis as a *principle*. “The Idea” can be presented in terms of another triplet, this time inspired by Lacan: “the Idea” is simultaneously a pivot, a knot, and a *matheme* (see Badiou 1991). It is a *knot* that binds together many different registers (Badiou himself speaks of “the Idea” in terms of Lacan’s three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real²⁰); it is a *matheme* due to its transmissibility—“the idea of universal transmissibility is called by Lacan *matheme*, *matheme* is addressing all” (Badiou 2015b, p. 25); “the Idea” is a *pivot* because it plays a central role in Badiou. It is not irrelevant here that the same word (*pivot*) was used by Lacan to describe the importance of transference, which is “the pivot on which all of psychoanalytic treatment rests” (Lacan 1998, p. 132). One might say that for Badiou “the Idea” is the pivot from which everything is seen, thought, and *done*, since for Badiou thought itself is not the final goal: “what matters to me: the Idea and its development [*devenir*] in reality” (Badiou and Gauchet 2016, p. 55). What matters for Badiou is the deployment of “the Idea,” i.e., what might become of it. In this sense, as a *hypothesis*, a supposition of a certain knowledge, “the Idea” is also a precondition for producing *new knowledge*; as such, it always takes a form, but its task is also “to propose new form” (Badiou 2017d, p. 55). Hence, it is nothing but “a general scheme of thought that can give rise to concrete experiences and

¹⁸ I have borrowed this triplet, and the basic arguments for it, from Oliver Feltham’s argument in favor of Badiou’s proposition “mathematics is ontology,” deployed in the “Translator’s Preface” to Badiou’s *Being and Event* (see Feltham 2005, p. xxii).

¹⁹ The dimension of belief is an integral part of every Idea: “Traditional society is completely different, because it imposes a belief, and therefore an Idea.” (Badiou 2017a, p. 85)

²⁰ For a detailed development of this point, see Badiou 2010a, p. 238.

can thus be gradually embodied and verified”²¹; it is therefore a *decision* and a belief that cannot be rationally grounded²²; and yet, it is also a guiding and orienting *principle*. “The Idea” is nothing but a *matheme* that can be transferred and transmitted to others, and that operates in other worlds: it is, therefore, a *knot* of all of its features and registers; it is *eternal*, *universal*, and *transmundane*; finally, as such, it is the *pivot*.

However, “the Idea” differs from the notion of Idea in both Plato and in (vulgar) Platonism. If the former posits the Idea of the Good, or “the Idea of the Supreme Good,” Badiou parts ways with Plato, or at least with a certain dominant understanding of Plato. The Idea is not something general; it is not the Truth, but something local, singular, concrete. But first and foremost, “the True” is not the same as “the Good,” or “the Idea of the (Supreme) Good.” This means that Badiou distances himself from Plato on this point; this is evident from Badiou’s *Plato’s Republic*. His (re)interpretation of Plato focuses on three main points: 1) There is no division in Plato between the sensible and the intelligible; this world is all that we have—Plato’s thought is not dualistic at all. 2) The Greek term *ousia*, for which a proper translation is yet to be found, is not some kind of essence, entity, or substance, nor should it be translated as such, but “what of being exposes itself to thought” (“*ce qui de l’être s’expose à la pensée*”) as Badiou put

²¹ “I give the word ‘hypothesis’ a technical meaning, similar to the one it has in epistemology. A hypothesis, in this instance, isn’t a more or less fanciful assumption of the mind, a more or less credible invention of the imagination. No, I mean ‘hypothesis’ in the experimental sense, as a general scheme of thought that can give rise to concrete experiences and can thus be gradually embodied and verified. This meaning is closely akin to another part of my culture, my militant commitment. The communist hypothesis thus refers to the possibility and testing out of a scheme provided by the Idea—‘the communist Idea.’” (Badiou and Gauchet 2016, pp. 49–50)

²² One important reference I cannot go into here is Pascal, and the moment of the Pascalian wager in Badiou: “Ultimately life is the wager.” (Badiou 2010b, p. 509)

in his seminar of 19 May 2010. 3) “The Idea of (the Supreme) Good” is not to be understood in some moral or theological sense, but strictly in the sense of a principle, or an orientation towards *ousia*. At best, it provides a guarantee that we have “true ideas” and therefore “the Idea of the True.” These three points are scattered throughout many of Badiou’s seminars on Plato, but most clearly presented in his seminar of 14 April 2010. In Badiou’s published works, they are most clearly and concisely expressed in the following passage:

This sense of the word “Idea” instantiates my own interpretation of the Platonic idea, and particularly the “idea of the Good” [...]. By replacing the word “Good”—used by too many moralizing theologies from the early Neoplatonists on—with that of “True” we [...] can open up access to eternal, universal and, in this sense, transmundane truths. For this to come about, according to Plato, this experience must be set out “in truth,” with this immanence being understood in the strict sense that only inasmuch as it is set out *in* the element of truth can a particular object of the world of our experience be said to be known, not only in its particularity, but in its very being. That this object of the world is then grasped in its being, he adds, is because there is situated “in” truth that share of the object which only is in so far as it is exposed to thought. We are, as a result, at the point where the being of the object is indiscernible from what, of this being, is thinkable. This point of indiscernibility between the particularity of the object and the universality of the thought of the object is exactly what Plato names the Idea. Finally, as for the Idea itself, given that it only exists in its power to bring forth the object “in truth” and, hence, to uphold that there is something universal, it is not itself presentable because it *is* the presentation-to-the-true. In a word: there is no Idea of the Idea. This absence, moreover, can be named “Truth”. Exposing the thing in truth, the Idea is true and is, therefore, always the idea of the True, but the True is not an idea. // The configuration I’m proposing, by way of philosophy’s salvation, is basically a materialist transposition of this Platonic vision—unless, that is, Plato himself were already a materialist and to have created a *materialism of the Idea*. (Badiou 2011, pp. 105–107)

But if “the Idea” does not exist as a separate entity, how does it “exist”? It exists in a rather paradoxical manner, which can be rendered by Beckett’s words from *First Love* (1945): “But I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist, no doubt always will, but not with the existence I ascribe to them” (quoted in Badiou 2017b, p. 257).

So, finally, *what* do we “have” when we “have the Idea”? Strictly speaking, nothing, since the Idea is a *localization of the void*; as Badiou points out:

Philosophy and psychoanalysis can be compossible, since the double paradoxical condition of mathematics and love *cross over at the point where the void is localized* in the disjunction of an un-known truth and a knowledge of that truth. This point, I maintain, is that of the Idea. Psychoanalysis and philosophy both ultimately demand that we adhere to Spinoza’s unfounded and un-foundable maxim: “*Habemus enim ideam veram*”, we in effect have, but as an effect of nothing, as *localization of the void*, a true idea. One, at least. (Badiou 2017b, p. 208)

As a localization²³ of the void, the Idea is a site of thought, an operator, a universal prescription for thought or for action directing them toward the “inexistent”; but the Idea is not the void itself, but that which localizes it. In a way, it is torn between nothing and everything: “[w]ell, in the thinkable, everything is Idea,” since “the Idea is the occurrence in beings of the thinkable” (Badiou 2002, pp. 90, 36). In other words: “The Idea is not specific to the time of the situated production of truths (lower case), nor is it a substance, fullness, purity, or perfection from which all else issues or to which all is subordinated; it is that which is thinkable as the

²³ Here, Badiou simultaneously both commends and criticizes Plato: Plato recognized that thought need not be only negative but could also be affirmative, which for him was secured by the Idea as construction of “a place of the Idea”; however, “his weakness is his incapability to bring to the end the localization of the Idea.” (Badiou 2017e, p. 31)

thought of each process of innovation and invention, of event and consequence, in whatever field of thought it takes place—political, artistic, scientific or amorous” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 31). In this context, the Idea is the name for “the immanence of truths,” as something that is never easy, spontaneous, or automatic, something rare, violent, and hard, but yet blissful and joyful: every real happiness is fidelity, and only marching under the imperative of the Idea, or the true idea, destines us for happiness.²⁴ And from this perspective, the Idea is yet another kind of a triplet: it is an excess; it is a gap or a rupture;²⁵ and it is an operator of mediation, or formalization. The Idea, first, is the name for “what exceeds our possibilities”: “In any period of time, in any sequence of history, it is important that we maintain a relationship with what exceeds our possibilities—with what, as an idea, exists beyond the natural needs of the human animal” (Badiou 2012b, p. 41). To put it differently: “If we agree to call ‘Idea’ that which both manifests itself in the world—what sets forth the being-there of a body—and is an exception to its transcendental logic, we will say, in line with Platonism, that to experience in the present the eternity that authorizes the creation of this present is to experience an Idea. We must therefore accept that for the materialist dialectic, ‘to live’ and ‘to live for an Idea’ are one and the same thing” (Badiou 2010b, p. 510). An Idea, therefore, has not only a dividing but also a unifying power: “Only an Idea divides, owing to its unifying power” (Badiou and Milner 2014, p. 155). This affirmative and unifying power of an Idea is implied by the sheer variety of signifiers by means of which Badiou—especially in *Logics of Worlds*, the *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, and in the *Communist Hypothesis*—tries

²⁴ See, in this context, Badiou 2015b, pp. 57–85, and 2016c, pp. 84–105. Also see the mention of “beatitude in the Spinozist sense” in Badiou 2008, p. 144.

²⁵ The moment of the rupture, cut, and interruption has always been crucial for Badiou; happiness, for instance, is defined as the “affirmative experience of an interruption of finitude.” (Badiou 2015b, p. 10) On rupture and Idea, see Badiou and Kakogianni 2015, p. 17.

to specify its function. In these works “the Idea” is qualified as: the “subjective operation,” “operator,” “operator of incorporation,” “mediation,” “operative mediation,” “integration,” “subjectivation of an interplay,” “what organizes subjectivation,” and as “abstract totalization.” Let me quote just two among the many illustrative passages: “The Idea is an operative mediation between the real and the symbolic, and always presents the individual with something that is located between the event and the fact” (Badiou 2010a, p. 246). But “the Idea” is not just a mediator or operator, it is also a kind of fundamental frame or base: “I name ‘Idea’ that upon which an individual’s representation of the world, including her- or himself, is based once s/he is bound to the faithful subject type through incorporation within the process of a truth. The Idea is that which makes the life of an individual, a human animal, orient itself according to the True. Or, put another way: the Idea is the mediation between the individual and the Subject of a truth—with ‘Subject’ here designating that which orientates a post-evental body in the world” (Badiou 2011, p. 105). The Idea, then, is a *mediation* between an individual and a subject, between body and truth, between the Symbolic and the Real. What does “the Idea” mediate? Does the process of mediation ever stop? Does it represent a reconciliation between two poles, or is there, rather, an irresolvable inner tension, a gap, that cannot be annihilated and abolished? Badiou writes:

We can call “idea” that which is at once immanent and transcendent. The idea presents itself as more powerful than ourselves and constitutes the measure of that which humanity is capable of: in this sense, it is transcendent; but it exists only precisely when it is represented and activated or incarnated in a body: in this sense, it is also immanent. As long as it isn’t immanent, it’s phantasmic. An idea is an orientation in existence which provides the measure of a power, all the while needing to be incarnated. The theatre, when it takes place, is a representation of the idea: we see bodies and people who speak and we see them struggle with the question of their

origin and what they are capable of. What the theatre shows is the tension between the transcendence and the immanence of the idea. (Badiou 2015a, pp. 56–57)

The task of concretely specifying all of this is left to *The Immanence of Truths* as a whole. I cannot go into it more specifically here; however, I would like to outline the importance of “the Idea” for Badiou’s project, which was constantly criticized for its supposed “dualism.” Jean-Toussaint Desanti presented an interesting overview of Badiou’s philosophy in which, *inter alia*, he claimed (following Parmenides’ reply that whoever does philosophy is two-headed): “The *dikrania* (two-headedness) proper to mortals must be fully assumed. The task of thought consists in connecting the two heads, which in the present instance means connecting two kinds of discursiveness” (Desanti 2004, p. 63). It seems that, in Badiou, there is always a rupture, a split—from the two processes in his *Theory of the Subject*, through the duo of event and situation in *Being and Event*, to the logics of the Two in love. However, this split is insurmountable only insofar as one stays at the level of “finitude,” while for Badiou we are well capable of being in touch with the Absolute. And it is precisely here that “the Idea” performs its role: “The philosopher is a worker in another sense: detecting, presenting and associating the truths of his or her time, reviving those that have been forgotten and denouncing inert opinion, s/he is the welder of separate worlds” (Badiou 2011, p. 25). “The Idea” is the name of the praxis that produces the new, and serves as a “mediating instance between the act of thought and the act of being” (Badiou 2004, p. 167). All of this implies that “the Idea” is not just any “Idea,” and that it is always “part of” and “in the service of” emancipatory project(s): “At the end of the day, every emancipatory politics presupposes an unconditioned prescription” (Badiou 2017b, p. 152).

However, here we have arrived at the most difficult and yet the most crucial problem, namely that of participation, appearing

in various disguises as participation in emancipatory politics, participation “in the True,” participation in “in the Idea.” At this crucial point, Badiou at once follows and deviates from Plato. However, in order to illustrate what is at stake in the question of participation, I would propose another path, and claim that Badiou somehow has to answer this question by way of rethinking the concept of “repetition.” Why is the concept of repetition so crucial (not only for Badiou, but for philosophy as such)? Because it is connected to the notion of the Absolute, as well as to the crucial concept of dialectics, namely that of *Aufhebung*.²⁶ The German term is notoriously difficult to translate into any language if one wishes to preserve its main meanings: to negate, to cancel, to leave, to pass behind, but simultaneously also to preserve and to lift up (English translations of *aufheben* range from “to abolish,” or “to suspend,” to “to sublimate”). For Hegel, that which is *aufgehoben* is at the same time preserved; it has lost “something” (its immediacy), but it is not annihilated altogether. In my view, this problem is recapitulated in Badiou’s problematic of the “participation in the Idea,” as well as in the topic of “repetition.”

Badiou as “the philosopher of the new” has always been reluctant to use the term “repetition,” which for him is something oppressive and conservative. Instead, he has preferred other expressions, such as—in response to Žižek’s critique—“resurrection” (in *Logics of Worlds*), or subsequently “rebirth”: “the rebirth of History must also be a rebirth of the Idea” (Badiou 2012e, p. 6). Upon a closer look, we discover many other variants of this *re-* in Badiou’s opus: from the problem of the (re)commencement (of materialist dialectics) in his first philosophical text, via the effort

²⁶ See the first lecture of Badiou’s seminar *Immanence of Truths* (14 November, 2012), and Louise Burchill’s ingenious comments on the English translation of Hegel’s term *Aufhebung* in the “Translator’s Preface” to Badiou 2011, pp. viii–xxxiv (esp. x–xxiii).

to (re)do *The Communist Manifesto*, to the subsequent resurrection, (re)activation, (re)orientation, and (re)incorporation. *Re-, re-, re-!* What repeats itself here? In my view, we can discern no less than seven conceptions²⁷ of repetition in Badiou’s opus (the number itself is irrelevant). The first conception can be discerned, at a general level, in the relationship between philosophy and its conditions, between Truth and truths, while the second conceives of repetition as oppressive and relates it to the State and to Capital. The third and fourth conceptions result from Badiou’s 1985 claim that “we have to redo the *Manifesto* (of Marx and Engels).” The third conception compares our contemporary capitalism with the capitalism of the 1840s, while the fourth is contained in the very logic and the titles of his two *Manifestos for Philosophy* and the three volumes of *Being and Event*. The fifth conception is present in the *Theory of the Subject*. The sixth is a “creative repetition” of the philosophical gesture,²⁸ whereas the seventh presents Badiou’s fully developed mature conception of repetition, which is consistent with his conception of “the Idea.”

In the lecture “What repeats itself?” from his seminar *Immanence of Truths*,²⁹ as well as in the fourth chapter of *Immanence of Truths* (Badiou 2018b, pp. 135–50), Badiou splits repetition into two, i.e., into creative repetition and circular repetition. The main idea here is that circular repetition is the one that Sartre talked about—repetition that is supported in reality by the mechanism of the circulation of capital—whereas creative repetition has a

²⁷ I developed this claim in the paper “Badiou on Repetition” which I presented at the conference organized by the Hegelian society *Aufhebung* and titled “REPETITION/S: Performance and Philosophy” (Ljubljana, 22 September, 2016). The paper was developed further and published in Slovene: Klepec 2016.

²⁸ In one of his recent texts, Badiou fully recognized the fact that—to some extent—philosophy is always the same thing, always a repetition of the same act (see Badiou 2012b, pp. 1–40).

²⁹ Badiou 2014–2015 (session from 2 February, 2015). For a video clip of the lecture, see: <https://vimeo.com/119121890>.

different (eventual) temporality: it breaks out of the circle and identity; it repeats itself in the direction of the true. This comprises the necessity to begin again, to recommence, to “*re-entreprendre*,” to declare and to say again, “*re-dire*.” Here, what we have to repeat, to redo, is the Absolute. Creative repetition makes the Absolute occur, arise, appear; to create something means to say (again) that the Absolute is possible. This means to take part, to participate in “the Absolute” via “the Idea.” Note that in French the verb “*partager*” means to divide and to share, to have the same sentiments/affects as others. To take part and to partake in “the Idea,” then, is something repetitive and something that can be transmitted. Creative repetition is at the same time the creation of something new *and* declaring that the Absolute is here: “*le redire, le refaire, le refaçonner, le recréer*,” says Badiou in his Seminar and in his book (Badiou 2018b, p. 149). And that, finally, is what “the Idea” is the name of: the (re)creation/(re)doing/(re)working of the Absolute.

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