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The Value of Nothing and the Price of Labour

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Alain Badiou's theory of the event has attracted much interest over the past decade, but questions remain about the ability of his theory to prescribe action for after the event. Hinting at this problem, Peter Hallward, for example, has argued that Badiou's theory would benefit from a privileging of history rather than logic, and a theory of determination and political will rather than 'truth' and 'body' only, which seems to suggest Badiou's theory would benefit from a more strategic approach to politics.[1] However, I would like to argue that Badiou's dialectical (rather than historical) materialist approach, and those of other recent materialists, can enable us to grasp events and provide an immediate impetus for *tactical* action, instead of dwelling on the flight of the owl of Minerva. It also allows us to extend Marx's critique of value and revitalise the case for workers as political subjects, regaining ground which has been lost to anarchist political theory and tactics in recent years.[2]

[1] Peter Hallward, 'Order and Event: On Badiou's Logics of Worlds', *New Left Review*, 53 (2008), p. 121.

[2] Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism (*Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), p. 18; also see Saul Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

This approach emerges from Badiou's aim of preserving the consequences of political events, with a further philosophical twist that I believe is more action-oriented and aimed at self-valorisation. This twist is developed from the speculative materialism of Badiou's former student, Quentin Meillassoux, and interpretations of this approach by Elie Ayache, who argues that Meillassoux's thought is conditioned by a 'Badiou-event'.[3] Rather than a theory espousing the 'absolute commencement' of a new order, the philosophical case for absolute contingency can be applied to the value imposed on labour, providing the grounds to disprove the dogma that free market values have come to rely on. By developing this approach, post-evental political tactics are given a firmer philosophical basis.

For Badiou, there will always be an excess of inclusion over belonging, meaning that of all the elements included in a state, there will be some which do not belong, and are not presented as such by the state.[4] However, after an event the question of belonging emerges in a new way. If a group, such as the proletariat, presents itself during an event where it was previously included in a count-as-one such as the nation-state but did not belong in the regime of presentation (that is, the way in which the state does or does not present the various multiples it includes) where does it belong? Badiou notes that, for ontology, the event is *not*, because self-belonging is, for axiomatic set theory, prohibited. This would mean that political subjects cannot simply hope to belong to a situation where the regime of presentation claims otherwise, and to acknowledge self-belonging would be to acknowledge a void in the situation. However, self-belonging is, for Badiou, constitutive of the event. This is why an intervention is required to decide on the existence of the event, but this wager is 'unpresentable' and ontologically illegitimate because the event is not presented and legitimate within the structure of the count-as-one, or the state. The subject therefore

[3] Elie Ayache, *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 156.

[4] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 85. As Badiou puts it, 'no multiple is capable of forming-a-one out of everything it includes'.

has to preserve the consequences of an event that cannot be discerned by the structure.[5]

In other words, the event is too radical for the state to acknowledge its existence and belonging to a particular situation. The state cannot acknowledge a void on the edge of a situation, or that which its ideology has excluded. This is true for all events, and not just those based around class. To take an example from recent years, whether or not Black Lives Matter is a class-based movement[6], state violence against black Americans has long been ignored by the state, but with the increased prevalence of footage of such violence, the real of *singular* events with *universal* relevance for those included in a state has been exposed by protests that have followed this violence. The state may continue to deny there is an excess of inclusion over belonging, but this is why subjects to the event need to make an intervention to determine that an event belongs to a situation.

I maintain that Badiou's demand – fidelity to an event – should be taken at face value, which means preserving the truth that was there presented rather than adding to it various non-evental demands, as reportedly happened in the Occupy movement where identity often displaced class, diluting the singularity and universality of what began as a class event, pitting the '99 per cent' against 'the one per cent'.[7] Badiou is quite flexible as to what this class, or the proletariat, looks like, arguing that we should go beyond a pure nothingness (a class that should not exist, in the Marxist sense that all classes should cease to exist), in favour of a genericity built

[5] Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 190, 507, 210-211. The practice of excluding anything that is 'ontologically illegitimate' from the regime of presentation can be seen as an ideological act, similar to how, in Badiou's earlier work, *Of Ideology*, class revolt is 'irreprésentable' in the dominant ideology. See Alain Badiou, *De L'Idéologie*, French edition (Paris: La Découverte, 1976), p. 36.

[6] On the motivations behind Black Lives Matter, including racial capitalism, see Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, 'Introduction', in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017*)*, pp. 9-18.

[7] Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 200-201, 219-220, 69.

on differences united around a singular and universal event.[8] But given that Badiou largely avoids prescriptive post-event strategies, how might we tie what is always the approximate truth of the event[9], and the subject's wager in staking their fidelity to this truth, to actual modes of politics?

My answer is that we should turn to Badiou's former student, Meillassoux, as well as Ayache's work in applying Meillassoux's speculative materialism to the derivatives market, questioning the belief that the pricing of derivatives follows the logic of probability, rather than contingency. In other words, pricing in the derivatives market is whatever participants say it is, and the only absolute in the determination of prices is contingency. I argue that the same can apply to the determination of wages in the labour market after an event has made subjects aware of capitalist exploitation, enabling labourers to make wage demands against the capitalist construct that is the 'going rate'. Those on the side of 'the markets' claim to have the final word on pricing, but this can be opposed with values emerging from the political event. This opens up a political tactic that is responsive to events, while also not being inimical to Marx's thought.

What is the Proletariat?

Badiou consistently refers to the proletariat in his theory of the subject, so in considering the further philosophical case for how subjects can defend the consequences of an event, a focus on the proletariat as the subject to an event is understandable. However, I will briefly address why I use this term and why it is still relevant. I am concerned here with the proletariat as a collective subjectivity that challenges capitalism, even if it has become an unfashionable concept. The radical collective Tiqqun, for example, sees the notion of class struggle as a strategic straight jacket from another age.[10] As

[8] Alain Badiou, *The Subject of Change: Lessons from the European Graduate School*, ed. by Duane Rousselle (New York: Atropos Press, 2013), p. 66.
[9] Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 397.
[10]Tiqqun, *This Is Not a Program*, trans. by Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 12.

is common place, the existence of a 'middle class' has complicated their view of society, such that while the idea of exploiters and exploited remains present in their work, there is a 'non-class' to be added to the bourgeoisie and proletariat: it is 'those who take no sides: the petty bourgeoisie'. This refers to those who remain neutral in the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: the small business owners, minor bureaucrats, managers, professors and journalists, 'middlemen of every sort' who 'make up this non-class in France'.[11]

The existence of a growing middle-class has been used to discredit traditional Marxist class theory, and marks a development which has been contextualised in various ways. Erik Olin Wright has pointed towards a number of these explanations, including Nicos Poulantzas's view that the middle class is a segment of some other class rather than an expanding bourgeoisie, such as the 'new petty bourgeoisie'; or that it is a new class entirely, perhaps a managerial class of sorts. The rise of such a managerial class has also led to attempts to replace the concept of exploitation under capitalism with that of domination, though I would argue that a wholesale replacement of the concept of exploitation with that of domination does not withstand scrutiny.[12] A manager may both dominate and be exploited, dominating those they manage, but be only semiautonomous, given that they are also exploited for their labour. For Wright, the concept of domination should not be adopted at the expense of the concept of exploitation, as the former does not necessarily mean that the interests of the dominated are different to those of the one who dominates. The concept of exploitation, on the other hand, maintains that there are objective interests that the exploiter is pursuing in exploiting someone (appropriating

[11] The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 45 and 67.

[12] See Erik Olin Wright, 'Understanding Class: Towards an Integrated Analytical Approach', *New Left Review* 60, Nov/Dec (2009), pp. 101-116. Wright maintains that both the concepts of domination and exploitation remain necessary.

surplus value, for example).[13]

While this analytical understanding of class remains important, and we can see that it is still possible to discern a divide between the exploiter and the exploited, or the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, much of what Marx and Marxist theorists have written has depended on the subject seeing for themselves what their place is in the totality of social relations. This is true of Badiou's understanding of the proletariat whereby the multiplicity of the proletariat can be analysed, but the rules of the political world that govern appearance means that it does not appear in this world[14], or what he would earlier refer to as the 'splace', or the space of placement of the bourgeoisie, distinct from the 'outplace' associated with the proletariat[15]. However, for Badiou it is the event that opens the door for the proletariat to operate as a collective subject in the name of a truth, and this performative aspect is present in Marx too.[16]

While Marx does provide a more analytical understanding of the proletariat, he does not leave us simply with a clear cut exploiter/exploited, bourgeoisie/proletariat divide. We see, for example, the aspiring bourgeois in the shape of the artisan, but we could argue that in the midst of the communist event (whichever interpretation one wishes to follow in Marxist theory), the collective political subject that is the proletariat sees social relations as broadly divided along exploiter/exploited lines. It is a broadly performative notion of class, crystallised in the act of identifying oneself as belonging to a class in the moment of crisis which marks the event.

In the same fashion that Marx argues one should change the world,

[13] Erik Olin Wright, 'What is middle about the middle class?', *Analytical Marxism*, ed. by John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 115-117.
[14] Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy,* trans. by Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 61.
[15] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009) pp. 130, 115, 127.
[16] Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2007), p. 17.

rather than simply interpret it, Badiou's philosophy is built on an ontology that helps us understand truths as revealed by the event, rather than producing them or the event itself, but with the clear instruction that subjects loyal to the event then need to defend its consequences.[17] Marx undoubtedly privileges the proletariat as the agent of change, but Badiou describes the rarity of the event and the appearance of truth, and the importance, therefore, that subjects to the event (usually the proletariat, for Badiou) defend its consequences.

So the terms 'proletariat' and 'bourgeoisie' can be described at length analytically, but what matters is the event and subjects' identification with it, rather than seeking to settle the analytical terms once and for all. The latter approach may be futile, and we have seen how Giddens' thoughts on the 'third way' of the 1990s labels the proletariat not as a working class, but rather as a form of enterprising human capital.[18] Not only is labour seen as capital, but capital can also include savings in a bank under the contemporary vernacular of the corporate world (and those it influences), instead of wealth that is used to accumulate more wealth through the extraction of value from others (as an employer or rentier capitalist, for example). Such analytical nuances are left to academia and the corporate world, or to ideology, while the theory of the subject I am concerned with is a collective political subject not constrained by such analytical concepts. 'Proletariat' is a useful term that we may apply to a certain kind of political subject, but the Marxist subject is not created by (or necessarily concerned with) such concepts, instead emerging performatively through material circumstances or events.

[17] Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 11; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 574.

[18] Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.122.

Why Speculative Materialism?

What the speculative materialist approach gives us, I argue, is the means to apply Badiou's concern for the plight of the proletariat to a theory of contingency which ultimately enables subjects to the event to realise their freedom to make decisions after the aleatory event, developing values (in my example, wages) that make good the subject's fidelity to the event.

Meillassoux begins his exposition of speculative materialism with a succinct example of correlationism by comparing primary and secondary qualities - when you burn your finger on a candle, you do not touch a pain that is present in the flame (what might be its primary quality), but sense the way your nerves respond to the flame (a secondary quality). This example can be extended by the correlationist to all of our encounters with entities, with the distinction between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-us' at the heart of what Meillassoux calls the 'correlationist circle'. The correlationist relies on the 'capacity-to-be-other' of everything, especially other than things are for us, except that they will not admit that this prohibition on knowing anything other than it is *for us* is, in fact, an absolute. They remain steadfastly opposed to such a concept as the absolute while believing that we cannot 'absolutely' know anything.[19] The correlationist, without realising, relies on the absolute of contingency. However, it is not the correlation, but the 'facticity' of the correlation that reveals this.

With what Meillassoux calls 'strong correlationism', the correlation is not just the best we can hope for given the (Kantian) circumstances, but unwittingly becomes absolute through its attempt to de-absolutise and make the in-itself unthinkable (leaning more towards Martin Heidegger in this respect). If the correlation is absolute and we cannot think the in-itself, Meillassoux writes that 'it seems the wisest course is simply to abolish any such notion of the in-itself'. The absolute becomes unthinkable, and what we are left with is facticity, or the facticity of the correlation itself. Facticity is the 'structural invariants' that strong correlationists would say govern

[19] Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 1-2, 54.

the world - they may differ from one correlation to another, but they are used to describe the world rather than deducing (as Hegel would) anything absolute, since we cannot, according to this view, ground these in necessity. As Meillassoux puts it, 'if contingency consists in not knowing that worldly things could be otherwise, facticity just consists in not knowing why the correlational structure has to be thus'. Facticity does not describe an objective reality, but instead faces the 'limits of objectivity'. Facticity does away with the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason, with there being no way to prove something as true, and no principle of non-contradiction.[20]

While speculative materialism and object-oriented ontology has been criticised for propping up the very thing it wishes to critique[21] (that is, neo-Kantian philosophy, or correlationism[22]), the use of Meillassoux's work in this essay is based on the premise that his speculative materialism provides a convincing defence of contingency, but also a refutation of finitude through a revival of the notion of the absolute in the form of contingency, offering new tools with which to critique capitalist values, especially by political collectives.

There have already been Kantian readings of Marx, including Kojin Karatani's utilisation of Kant to challenge capitalist value[23], but a non-Kantian approach is possible as well. If speculative materialism tells us that the thing-in-itself is hidden as the result of correlationism (initially at least), and any number of things may reveal themselves given that nothing can be ruled out (this is the absolute of contingency), we cannot simply defend existing values against contingent demands on the grounds that they are extant. William E. Connolly critiques apparently self-organising processes,

[20] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, pp. 35, 37, 39.

[21] Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media Ltd., 2014), p. 6.

[22] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

[23] Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003).

such as the neoliberal trust in the free market, and systems such as Kant's that disregard pluralism through the selectiveness of the assumptions on which they are built in an attempt to provide us with an entirely 'rational' system, when such systems in fact involve decisions and are not completely autonomous.[24] It follows, I argue, that we cannot simply trust free-market determination of values - such values are often corporate self-valorisation, defended merely through ideology.

Speculative materialism does not directly link events to the critique of capitalist use and exchange value, but does give primacy to contingency over thinking what the thing-in-itself may be through a restrictive metaphysics, as this limit placed on thought is the product of correlationism - that we can only know things as they are for us through their secondary qualities, not their primary qualities and the thing-in-itself. Following the Marxist approach to value, this might be compared to exchange value having little to do with the thing-in-itself of something, but is perhaps seen by some as the closest we may get to this using the correlate of 'the market' (that we can only know value as it appears in the market for us). Marxian theory may be seen as a critical theory at odds with speculative materialism, but the latter strengthens the case for the contingency of the event. It may not be possible to know the thing-in-itself of value, but there are grounds for challenging exchange values determined (or excused) by the correlate of the market with values determined by subjects to an event.

This may not be a typically Marxist approach, but it is an approach that supports self-valorisation by the proletariat at a time when revolution and a 'changing of the guard' as sovereign is viewed with suspicion,[25] and non-representative and direct democratic politics, such as with the Global Justice Movement, is seen as the template for anti-authoritarian politics

[24] William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 16-17.

[25] Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), p. 34.

today.[26] Furthermore, I would say this approach is compatible with Badiou's understanding of Marxism as a political endeavour, applying organised knowledge to the realisation of an egalitarian society, rather than viewing Marxism as solely concerned with political economy.[27]

Badiou, Metaphysics and the Critique of Value

We are seeking, then, to develop Badiou's theory by tying post-evental political tactics to the aims of Marxian thought given Badiou's frequent references to the proletariat, making it relevant for more recent mass movements that favour anarchist thought, and doing this by extending his approach through the use of speculative materialism. But to what extent is Badiou's thought, including his fairly minimalist critique of capitalism, compatible with speculative materialism? While I argue that Badiou cannot be called a true Kantian, Meillassoux argues that Badiou does not get around correlationism, instead manifesting a certain 'misfired correlationism' alongside Žižek, Freud, Derrida, and Lacan. It is, according to Meillassoux, 'always for a subject that there is an undecidable event or a failure of signification', and the subject is a speculative one, 'assured a priori, and according to a properly absolute Knowing, for which things always turn out badly in its world of representations'.[28]

Still, Meillassoux acknowledges that Badiou's work is crucial in freeing us from calculatory reason through his interpretation of Cantorian mathematics, enabling us to conceive the detotalisation of being-qua-being.[29] Because Badiou goes some way towards avoiding the pitfalls of correlationism, with the event not being presented in the situation and being undecidable, he privileges the subject as the only means of making an

[26] Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism*, p. 175.
[27] Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 7-9.
[28] Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 166.
[29] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 103.

intervention and a wager that backs the event. Meillassoux's approach is to rely instead on the facticity of the correlate rather than a subject.[30]

However, as Ayache has pointed out, while events condition the discourse of philosophy for Badiou, they remain outside its domain. When Meillassoux refers to the 'Hume-event', the 'Kant-event' and the 'Galileo-event', Ayache argues that he is implicitly acknowledging that his philosophy is conditioned by the 'Badiou-event', and that 'Meillassoux, as subject, is presently making the decision to embrace serious contingency, or the event, and obtaining, as a derivative consequence, the un-totalization of possibilities'.[31]

Ayache, with a background in trading derivatives, has been instrumental in applying Meillassoux's theory of contingency to the everydayness which Badiou's event seeks to disrupt – in Ayache's case, of pricing in the derivatives market. Ayache draws on Meillassoux, along with Badiou and Deleuze, to critique probability theories in finance, arguing that the market is the medium of contingency, not possibility. Ayache is opposed to theories of possibility and probability, and in relation to the market argues that 'To bet is not to expect; it is a material, almost corporeal, commitment, which doesn't even involve thought'. It is the act of writing that matters for Ayache, and Meillassoux's theory appeals to him for its absolute contingency that retains necessity (the necessity of contingency).[32] Badiou's influence can also be seen in Ayache's discussion on the rolling of a die. The transition from the probable to the real (when the die actually lands as a six, for example) gives probability its meaning, but this meaning is mythical and 'really concerns an ultimate and global event with no relation or correspondence to the local throw'.[33] The probable is not the Badiouan event, opposed as he is to absolute commencement and the dawn of false universality opposed to the aleatory event. Probability

[30] Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, p. 167.
[31] Ayache, *The Blank Swan*, p. 156.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 149.
[33] Elie Ayache, 'A Formal Deduction of the Market', *Collapse VIII* (2014) p. 971.

theory, including that at work in the market, limits possibility and ignores contingency, as we shall see.

In Badiou's view, capital assigns everything a value in terms of numericality, but not in terms of what he calls 'Number', which is akin to the ontological approach and a deeper understanding of being.[34] We accept capitalist values, but these are parasitic on other representations and states, rather than representing themselves, as Alberto Toscano explains.[35] Others defend values under capital, but it lacks any deeper ontological defence, tying itself to the free circulation of commodities, or simply what we, or more often the bourgeoisie, want to believe.

The advent of speculative materialism and object-oriented ontology complements Badiou's theory of the event, and can make it especially relevant for a critique of the state and capitalist values. Given that speculative materialism targets the neo-Kantian approach, we should briefly deal with the charge that Badiou has Kantian tendencies. This is Žižek's view, since what was once hidden (or excluded) in Badiou's theory appears through the event and is inscribed in the (symbolic) order of ideology.[36] It is as if Badiou had already anticipated this charge in *Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics,* arguing that there are things that are exposed to the thinkable, but that these things are linked to ideas, and to link these ideas to thought 'it suffices to decide upon the appropriate axioms', calling such an approach a 'metaphysics without metaphysics'.[37] Badiou accounts for the way things appear in a world or situation, but what is not Kantian is the event itself, and the fact of contingency is key for Badiou.

It is, therefore, a stretch to argue Badiou is a Kantian, but he does provide a bridge between critical theory and its realist tendencies

[34] Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 213.
[35] Alberto Toscano, 'From the State to the World? Badiou and Anti-Capitalism', *Communication & Cognition* Vol. 37, Nr. 3 & 4 (2004), p. 213.
[36] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 185.
[37] Alain Badiou, 'Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics', *Pli* 10 (2000), p. 190.

(including Marx) and speculative materialism. Levi R. Bryant summarises critical theory as 'any theory that contests the naturalness of categories pertaining to human identities and social relations, revealing how they are socially constructed, contingent, and historical'. What unites the speculative realists against critical theory is, according to Bryant, a defence of 'some variant of realism or materialism', and 'a critique of correlationsim'. Instead of just critiquing discourses and their essentialist claims, Bryant sees speculative materialism as offering a political opportunity arising from 'the ability of these orientations to reveal unexpected sites of political concern, unexpected ways in which power functions through non-signifying agencies, and through opening new and creative ways of responding to destructive and oppressive forms of power'.[38] These unexpected sites of political concern are what Badiou concerns himself with, despite Badiou's supposed Kantian tendencies.

These tendencies might be discernible through Badiou's repeated references to the political potential of the proletariat and the factory as a likely event-site[39], but the event nevertheless remains aleatory and removed from any probability theory. The event could leave a lasting impact on institutions or state apparatuses, but for Badiou the naming that is undertaken following the event is, for the state and situation, illegal and unpresentable, just as the event itself is for ontology. That is why the subject's intervention is a wager, and why they need to actively preserve and further the consequences of an event that remains indiscernible for the state.[40] This can include (but is not restricted to) a demand for new values in the form of wages, or a self-valorisation of labour.

[38] Levi R. Bryant, 'Politics and Speculative Realism', *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism IV* (2013), pp. 15, 26, 15, 21.
[39] Alberto Toscano, 'Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou's Turn', in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, eds. by Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), p. 544.
[40] Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 210-211.

Value, the Event and Class

Although, for Badiou, we have no control over the event (when it occurs, and where), we can still make observations over who is included in the count of any state without belonging, and who might therefore benefit from the unpredictable and indiscernible event - a practical example of Badiou's metaphysics without a metaphysics, understanding things as they appear to us while being open to contingency. After an event, decisions need to be made by those defending its consequences, and this is where philosophy, in working with truths rather than creating them, can help. For Badiou, as well as Meillassoux, events and contingency are there whether we like it or not. We cannot predict them, but a philosophical undertaking to defend them and their consequences is still required. The event may challenge capitalist ideology and values, emerging in response to it, but if there is no philosophical case for defending the consequences of an event, such as self-valorisation for the proletariat, for example, there is little hope for those making such a wager. Marxian theories of value, along with Badiou's theory of the event complemented by the speculative materialist approach, provide such philosophical support.

In considering the event a challenge to the prevailing values of the state, we can also consider the relevance of Marx's critique of value and its effect in exposing the weak foundations of the state's defence of capitalist values. And this Marxian critique of value is, in return, also complemented by theories of contingency, including speculative materialism.

Marx argued that wages are determined through the amount of labour-time required to produce a commodity and to ensure enough subsistence for the worker. However, Marx himself distinguished between 'real wages' that express the price of labour in relation to the price of commodities and the labour-time taken to produce them, and 'relative wages' that can rise or fall relative to the profit of the capitalist and how much they choose to accumulate.[41] The price of labour, as an exchange value, is also,

[41] Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital', in Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital/Value, Price and Profit* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1976), p. 35.

like any commodity, measured against the value of other commodities, and Marx noted how those who do this to determine the wages of labour are really saying that 'value is determined by value', so that really 'we know nothing at all about value'.[42] But another point is that, as Michael Lebowitz argues, Marx refers in *Capital* to a 'necessary' quantity of subsistence for the worker which partly determines the value of labour-power (that is, wages), but that does not mean that real wages remain constant. Marx wrote of a changing level of necessity (rising necessity) as capitalism developed, and Lebowitz also argues that Marx's point about necessary subsistence was simply a methodologically 'sound' working assumption for *Capital*, which may have been addressed fully had Marx's 'missing' volume on wages appeared. Indeed, writes Lebowitz, 'Nothing could be further from Marx than the belief in a fixed set of necessaries…From his earliest days, Marx rejected a concept of 'Abstract Man' and stressed the emergence of new human needs with the development of society'.[43]

Aspects of the Marxist theory of value provide a firm basis for understanding the mystification of value under capitalism - that is, how to challenge a claim that the value which emerges from a market is a commodity's true value, the thing-in-itself or the next best thing if we cannot know the thing-in-itself. Challenging values - whether it is through the self-valorisation of the proletariat that Negri saw in the *Grundrisse*[44], or through questioning the value of commodities - needs a firm footing to withstand those who defend the market as if it is something we have no control over.

My premise is that predicting the value of something, or defending it, is vulnerable to contingency, and to demands that something be valued

[42] Karl Marx, 'Value, Price and Profit', in Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital/Value, Price and Profit*, p. 28.

[43] Michael A. Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 12, 16-17. On 'necessary labour', and the complexity behind the notion of 'necessary means of subsistence', see Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 3*, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 960-961, 1004-1005.

[44] Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, trans. by Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p. 128.

differently. The key point is not that we cannot know the thing-in-itself of value, but that value is the contingent result of human action, written either by the market or as the result of a political collective which demands the writing of a value or a price following the event. It is we who write value, even if the situation might be presented as the result of a natural or rational process. Events can therefore surprise us and reveal to us values that we did not know were there.

Meillassoux goes beyond strong correlationism to deduce the absolute of contingency. The strong model of correlationism absolutises facticity despites its aim to de-absolutise, and thereby gives us knowledge of the in-itself. As Meillassoux says, 'facticity will be revealed to be a knowledge of the absolute because we are going to put back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought'.[45]

Meillassoux introduces the term 'factiality' to describe the essence of facticity, or rather the speculative essence, because the facticity of things is not actually fact. Factiality is the 'non-facticity of facticity', giving us the principle of factiality as 'the non-factual essence of fact as such', but also its necessity: 'To be is necessarily to be a fact, but to be a fact is not just to be anything whatsoever'. Factiality is speculation, just as facts are.[46]

The critique of power can no longer be limited by the dogmatic argument that there are certain things we cannot know, such as the true value of something. It is not that speculative materialism reveals to us the in-itself of value, but it does point towards the factiality of value and the possibility that value can be something other, there being no philosophical reason why something cannot change.

Meillassoux does not bring Marx into his philosophy in any significant way, although he does question the approach taken by Marx (and Freud) in their attempt to resist those who oppose their realist approach.[47]

[45] Meillassoux, *After Finitude,* pp. 52-53.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[47] Quentin Meillassoux, in Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, 'Speculative Realism', *Collapse III* (2007), pp. 424-426.

This is not to say that Meillassoux disagrees with Marxist theory in its entirely, but it might suggest that the critique Marx was looking for was already within the value-form of the commodity - the impossibility of the unthinkable in-itself of value being unthinkable. We have seen already that there have been neo-Kantian attempts to critique value under capital. Now we can challenge it through factiality and the absolute of contingency.

Speculative Materialism in the Derivatives Market

The attention of some critiques of the financial markets has turned recently towards the derivatives market and away from Marxist theory. Although it may be nothing new to see theorists turning away from Marx, we have seen theorists such as Suhail Malik study the 2008 financial crisis not through Marxist theory, but through the derivatives market in particular, arguing that this is where the most sophisticated analytical tools are to be found.[48] This does not mean, though, that Marx is no longer relevant, nor that contemporary theory is inimical to Marxist theory.

Ayache uses the derivatives market in which he works as the source for his theory of contingency in the markets, and is interesting to us for the use he makes of Meillassoux and Badiou, although Marx does not figure in his works either. However, I would argue Ayache does provide us with the philosophical means to extend absolute contingency to the determination of wages, thereby extending Badiou's theory of the event to post-evental tactics which, I have argued, can help deliver a more egalitarian society and is therefore compatible with Badiou's Marxist aspirations. Just as Meillassoux finds within correlationism the source of a contingency with which he refutes it, Ayache finds within the markets the means to develop a theory of contingency with which to critique probability theories. Money is, for example, seen by Ayache as being better as a count of

[48] Suhail Malik, 'The Ontology of Finance: Price, Power, and the Arkhéderivative', *Collapse VIII* (2014), p. 640.

randomness than any chronological count of randomness associated with probability, and he casts aside the notion that time is money.[49]

While derivatives are contracts that are indexed to an 'underlying' value (of stocks or interest rates, for example) from which it derives its value, they can be traded in their own right, betting on the future price of the underlying, thereby offering 'insurance' for those who want to invest in state bonds (as with credit default swaps) or commodities (as with the futures market). Leaving aside the critique of derivatives and the impact their use may or may not have on, say, macro-economic stability and the price of wheat, Ayache's argument is that derivatives are always possible as an act of exchange, or writing, based on the knowledge we have now, and not the ability to predict the future (drawing on Badiou here in making the point that invention and creation are incalculable). Ayache argues against models of probability used in this process, and especially the Black-Scholes-Merton model, which helps traders to estimate the price of trading options for buying or selling derivatives.[50] It was this model that Nassim Nicholas Taleb critiqued with his famous concept of the 'black swan', a reference to Hume's problem that no matter how many white swans we observe, we cannot infer that all swans are white. If one black swan is eventually observed, any conclusion that all swans are white based on previous observation is refuted. This analogy can have calamitous effects on traders if they ignore the probability of the black swan, the unforeseen circumstance, one day making an appearance.[51]

Ayache sees this as a model that is used to fill in the 'blanks', regardless of what the 'real' underlying is.[52] Derivatives, which Ayache calls the 'natural offspring of the market' and 'the stuff the market is made of' are written (as a value) in order to trade, and not to be placed in an envelope to be opened on a future date. It is the act of writing that creates value, there

[49] Ayache, 'A Formal Deduction of the Market', p. 975.
[50] Ayache, *The Blank Swan*, pp. 18, 167.
[51] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 117.
[52] Ayache, *The Blank Swan*, pp. 167, 18.

and then. The trading process is not the reiteration of values already decided upon. Despite the pricing model, contingency exceeds this. The market is a writing process that cannot be reduced to a stochastic, probabilistic process - it is a medium of contingency that cannot be reduced to possibility. Probability may decide on possible outcomes, but Ayache distinguishes between possibility, as being defined by a fixed context, and contingency as the capacity for changing the context, drawing on (the fictional) Pierre Menard's work. Ayache is clear here that he is not just thinking of the derivatives market (even if that's the ground on which he develops his theory), but also the wider markets.[53]

When we trade in the market, Ayache argues that it is because we do not know something and cannot predict something, rather than us actually knowing. Otherwise, there would be little reason to trade for profit if we already knew the value of everything. With basic assets such as stocks, commodities and currencies, value is strongly influenced by supply and demand, but with derivatives one 'steps into the market to exchange those derivatives' and to 'change the values one has just computed', seeking the liquidity of the trading floor.[54] The derivatives market makes this part of the trading process more obvious than it is with basic assets.

Ayache argues that the common conception of the market seeks to exclude its inhabitants from its ontological foundations in one of either two ways. In one sense it operates without regard to the individual as such, but as a system, while in another it could be seen as a process for generating data which is independent of individuals and which they try, but apparently fail, to discover from the outside. However, the market is a material thing, and needs an ontological foundation that includes a material element, which Ayache sees as the body of the inhabitant. It is the individual who writes the price of something to be traded, writing at the surface of the market and not at some depth that involves probability or submission to the history of the markets. Ayache calls this 'metaphysically new kind of

[53] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

process' the 'writing process' or the 'pricing process', which is the process of the 'differentiation of the virtual', drawing on Deleuze here and the realisation of that which is real but not actual.[55] In other words, traders write the price, which is essentially real even if it is not actual, with contingency traversing price. Given that this takes place at the surface, we see contingency in action rather than an acceptance that there is some in-itself lurking beneath, which we can do our best to access through probability models but never quite know.

Ayache, then, compares his view of the market to Meillassoux's factiality, writing that while it appears that the market conditions contingency, he also argues that the market is not a being, and acts, rather, as the medium of contingency. Factial speculation is carried out within the market place. Because Meillassoux has a notion of speculative thought that is necessary but not the thought of a necessary being, Ayache argues that this stands at the extreme opposite of metaphysics, and in Ayache's work manifests itself as the pricing or writing process. Instead of belonging to the realm of trading and risk exposure, speculation is instead associated with philosophy and contingency. Philosophy ceases to be passive and associated with 'depth', and instead, in traversing the correlationist circle and metaphysics, becomes active, concerned with the contingent claim and the pricing process (of the surface). Philosophy becomes concerned with the future, albeit 'not the metaphysical or chronological future, of course, but the future of thought or of the market. The future (as in speculation) as opposed to the past (as in debt)'.[56]

Pricing or writing contingent claims should, Ayache argues, be our only other way of thinking, and the way in which the relation between being and thought be settled. This can only happen in the material and non-metaphysical mode of writing. As with correlationism and its own critique being already present within it, 'Meillassoux has ipso facto established himself in the space of writing, where the un-totalization of possibilities

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.
[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 144.

was always already given and metaphysics already surpassed'.[57] Price is seen as the 'immanent translation of the contingent claim', as opposed to a transcendent claim as a value which requires the category of possibility:

> Price is the ethical obligation of the future. It is the 'value' binding the future, that is to say, the 'value' of the contingent claim. The contingent claim admits of no bound (and no binding) other than the market (the market is the future made partner of the exchange). This is an immanent binding, which depends on no transcendent principle of valuation. [58]

The market, for Ayache, can no longer defend its position as a generator of data, or of prices over time, and must be considered an 'atemporal medium that is conductive of contingent claims and then transmits them as prices'.[59] Similarly to Badiou's view of history as non-linear – the claim that history does not exist, but just historicisations in which subjects have a hand[60] – the market as the writing process is the process of history. It is not one guided by possibilities, but by contingency, and it is in this way that it is written - through contingent claims.[61]

A Democracy of 'Self-Valorisation', or the Post-Evental Pricing Process

On a philosophical level, there is no reason why the pricing process cannot be applied to the labour market. The pricing process, at least, cannot be ruled out in favour of valuation (relying on the correlation of the market), including for 'basic' assets and commodities such as labour, where there is a significant amount of supply and demand at work. There will be other reasons (such as affordability, although Marx's distinction between real

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 189.
[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 380-381.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 421.
[60] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 92.
[61] Ayache, *The Blank Swan*, p. 126.

and relative wages is relevant here) for ruling out contingent claims on wages, and the case against improved wages is regularly made whenever unions, for example, demand better pay, but they do not work on a philosophical level if we follow the speculative materialist approach. Indeed, the pricing process can be found in the labour market, although it is not as prevalent as Ayache would say it is in the derivatives market. Instead, it is more likely to be found in the better paid sections of the labour market where a price is named before employment is accepted, and you will often find what are *de facto* bourgeois unions such as the Institute of Directors defend high pay, usually attempting to use the correlate of the market, but in an unconvincing way. Such near-self-valorisation is not found in most of the labour market, but the pricing process has as much legitimacy here, philosophically speaking. However, to move towards self-valorisation and the contingent claim of the writing or pricing process, there needs to be an event which, if we agree with Badiou, would be collective political action.

Marx's theory of surplus value, as is well known, concerns unpaid labour time: 'The value contained in a commodity is equal to the labour-time taken in making it, and this consists of both paid and unpaid labour'. This follows the general formula for capital developed by Marx, M – C – M′ - i.e. money capital converted into commodities to extract a greater sum of money capital. The capitalist interacts with the worker as the 'mere owner of labour-power', and this labour power is objectified in the commodity, part of which the capitalist has paid for, and part of which costs the capitalist nothing, despite costing the worker labour. This is where, for Marx, the capitalist's profit is derived, from that value for which the capitalist did not pay, the commodity value over its cost price (the total sum of labour contained in the commodity).[62] In *Capital*, the sale of labour power 'always takes place for definite periods of time'. An external measurement of time, it would seem, is required in order for labour time and surplus value to be measured: 'The sum of the necessary labour and

[62] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 3*, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 133, 132-133.

the surplus labour, i.e. the sum of the periods of time during which the worker respectively replaces the value of his labour-power and produces the surplus-value, constitutes the absolute extent of his labour-time, i.e. the working day'.[63]

If we apply Meillassoux's understanding of contingency here in a parallel application to that of Ayache (although he does not discuss the labour market at length), we see a correlation and a theory of valuation, linked to time, with no reference to contingent claims. We know that Marx was a revolutionary, though, and believed capitalism would destroy itself and be replaced with communism. Marx makes various and inconsistent references to the dictatorship of the proletariat across his works (which included the Paris Commune of 1871), and hints at a yearning for contingency when stating that communism seems impossible, yet must at the same time remain possible against the impossibility of continuing with capitalism.[64] This dilemma between the impossible and the possible reminds us of the dilemma that Karatani draws our attention to in his Kantian reading of Marx, which is the antinomy that money exists, but then it should also not exist.[65] Marx strives for something beyond the correlation, and gives us revolution, rather than a theory lending legitimacy to something akin to Ayache's pricing process through which, I argue, value can be challenged through the event.

Capitalism may well take the path Marx thought it would, but to bank on this leaves us in the unrealistic realms of possibility (that is, the prediction of possible outcomes). Badiou's event, on the other hand, discards possibility/probability. He may look towards the factory or the proletariat as potential evental sites while excluding capital as an evental

[63] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin: 1990), pp. 683, 339.
[64] Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council," in Karl Marx, *The First International and After*, ed. by David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), p. 213.
[65] Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, p. 22.

site, but Meillassoux, especially in Ayache's reading of him, shows that any attempt to predetermine sites for an event is incompatible with Badiou's own theory of the event. The event cannot be predicted, and furthermore, the truth of the event is an approximate truth for the subject. The collective political action of the event involves an intervention and a wager, a process of naming similar to the process of writing or pricing, and this is the tactical approach that continues the work of Marx through the self-valorisation of labour.

Any pricing process that is led by the demands of a political collective (through a mass movement or a union, for example) is difficult when not linked to an event; but when the situation is right for an event to emerge, the prevailing conditions for those claiming fidelity to the event are much more favourable when seeking to write contingent claims, as Ayache would call them.

If there is a limit to the materialist dialectic, Raya Dunayevskaya wrote, this occurs when we treat it as an applied science. Dunayevskaya took issue with those who put their faith in the fragment on machines in the 1970s, and the 'emphasis in the *Grundrisse* on machinery as providing the material basis for the dissolution of capital as the workers stand alongside of production as their "regulator"'. Even in the *Grundrisse*, Marx 'at no time looked at the expanding material forces as if they were the condition, the activity, the purpose of the liberation', but he did, nevertheless, break with 'the entire structure of the work', and even, in the move to *Capital*, 'with the very concept of theory'.[66] Noting the challenge the role of machines posed for Marx in his correspondence with Engels, he arrived at a position in *Capital* where, far from the worker as appendage to machines, simply becoming an automaton and toiling at its speed, the resistance of workers was observed to have increased. This is a different position to that in the *Grundrisse*, where workers seem to be subsumed. Workers continue to have an antagonistic relationship with the production process. Automation does not overcome the materialist dialectic or show us its limitations

[66] Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 70.

because workers become one with capital and can choose, if they wish, to apply their intellect in other ways. The *Grundrisse*, for Dunayevskaya, instead shows us both the limitations and the indispensability of the dialectic - it is not an applied science, but one that 'has to be recreated as it spontaneously emerges from the developing Subject'. The analysis in the *Grundrisse*, taken without that which we see in *Capital*, is not concrete enough.[67] In other words, it does not develop from the action of political collectives or events, as it should.

So while the speculative materialist approach is not the traditional way in which Marxian theorists have critiqued capitalist values, direct action is a key component of Marxist politics, and the absolute of contingency is another string to its bow. It gives legitimacy to the democratic event, which philosophers should work with as and when it emerges.

[67] Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution,* pp. 71-73.