

alain badiou

live theory

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on the whole of Badiou's work,
from his very first articles to
some decisive developments in
Logics of Worlds.'*

Quentin Meillassoux

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations for Badiou's articles and books will be used in the body of the text:

BE	<i>Being and Event</i>
CM	<i>Le concept de modèle</i>
CT	<i>Court traité d'ontologie transitoire</i>
DI	<i>De l'idéologie</i>
LM	<i>Logiques des mondes</i>
MM	'Marque et Manque'
PP	<i>Peut-on penser la politique?</i>
RM	'Le (Re)commencement de la dialectique matérialiste'
SI	'La subversion infinitésimale'
TC	<i>Théorie de la contradiction</i>
TS	<i>Théorie du sujet</i>
TW	<i>Theoretical Writings</i>

The Althusserian Years

Epistemology and the Production of Change

Introduction

‘Le monde va changer de base’
‘The Internationale’, French version

It is early May 1968. Alain Badiou, a high-school philosophy teacher in Rouen, is scheduled to give the second part of a lecture in Louis Althusser’s seminar on philosophy and science at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*.¹ Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, Francois Regnault and Pierre Macherey are participating in the seminar which is attended by over three hundred people. The first part of Badiou’s lecture, a stinging critique of positivist epistemology in cybernetics and structuralism and a careful dissection of Carnap on the mathematical concept of model, had already been delivered. His colleagues were awaiting not only a full demonstration of the concept of model but also an explanation of its import for the greater concerns of the seminar: the distinction between science and ideology, the question of the emergence of new knowledge. But Badiou’s second lecture was postponed: the students hit the streets, the paving stones began to fly, and Badiou, already an experienced militant through protests against the Algerian War, joined the occupation of part of the *École Normale*. His chief role was to calm people down, including René Scherer, now the grand old man of philosophy at Paris VIII but then an affirmed anarchist, keen to rain typewriters down on the riot police who were battering down the front door.² When an apparent calm returned to the Latin Quarter and the *École Normale* carried on business as usual, Badiou’s lecture was never rescheduled. However, a year later both lectures resurfaced in written form, published by François Maspero and prefaced by a warning that spoke of the text’s ‘theoreticism’, assigning it to a ‘past conjuncture’ since now ‘no longer

can we name a target and not hit it'.³ With this text, Badiou's early period comes to a close and his second, Maoist period begins. The text, just back in print, is *Le Concept de Modèle*.⁴ Its target is the first object of the present chapter.

The following corpus of texts constitutes Badiou's 'early work':

- 'L'autonomie du processus historique', *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* Paris: École Normale Supérieure, No. 12 13, juillet octobre 1966, 77 89.
- 'Le (Re)commencement de la dialectique matérialiste', *Critique*, Tome XXIII, No. 240, mai 1967, 438 67.
- 'La subversion infinitésimale', *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, No. 9, June 1968 (Paris: le Graphe, 1968), 118 37.
- 'Marque et Manque', *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, No. 10, Jan 1969 (Paris: le Graphe, 1969), 150 73.
- *Le concept de modèle* (Paris: Maspero, 1970).

To complete this list one must add the exoteric texts: a series of documentaries in which Badiou interviewed the leading French philosophers of the day — Raymond Aron, Georges Canguilhem, Michel Foucault, Jean Hyppolite, Paul Ricoeur — on philosophy's relation to sociology, science, psychology and language. Then one must add the less exoteric interview with Michel Serres, subtitled 'Concept of Model, the film'.⁵ Finally, the most important exclusion from this philosophical corpus is that of Badiou's earliest work which is literary. In 1964, at the tender age of 25, Badiou published his first novel, *Almagestes: Trajectoire Inverse*, one of a trilogy including *Portulans*, published three years later, and a third novel, *Bestiaires*, that never appeared — giving rise to the tempting hypothesis that his entire philosophical project is a substitute for the completion of an impossible literary trilogy.⁶

The present text is itself an impossible substitute: billed as a short introduction to Badiou, it introduces the reader to his oeuvre by following his own introduction of his name into the field of philosophy. It begins at the beginning and attempts to *briefly* first impossibility reconstitute the initial context of Badiou's work: Althusser's distinction of historical materialism and dialectical materialism, and of science and ideology; and Jacques-Alain Miller's critique of Frege's foundation of arithmetic. A long introduction would restore the place of Sartre and Bachelard in Badiou's philosophical ancestry, and reconstruct his complex relation to the dominant intellectual movement of the time, structuralism, not to mention his all too brief naming of respectable adversaries in the

persons of Quine and Carnap. But of course – and this is the second impossibility – there is no such thing as a ‘long introduction’; there are monographs, but a monograph is an entirely different animal. To introduce a philosophy is to open a door onto it as quickly as possible. If the reader doesn’t simultaneously start reading *Being and Event*, or learning French to read Badiou’s as yet untranslated works, then this introduction has not been quick enough.

But one cannot write an introduction to a philosopher’s work – third impossibility – without interpreting that work. To periodize Badiou’s oeuvre, to identify the projects specific to each period, to evaluate their fate, to map his separation from his masters, Althusser and Lacan, to posit the existence of an underlying problematic that unites the different periods: all of this is to interpret Badiou, to select and divide, choose and exclude particular philosophical themes. The interpretation I develop here proceeds via a comparative analysis of each period of his oeuvre: the early period of materialist epistemology, the Maoist period of the historical dialectic, the current period of philosophy and its conditions. The guiding thread for this analysis is the question of the relationship between the thought of multiplicity and the thought of change. However, in so far as this book is primarily an introduction to Badiou – fourth impossibility – it cannot satisfactorily fulfil the tasks of interpretation: this would require the systematization of my own concepts, concepts I begin to sketch in Chapters 2 and 3.

In this chapter, I identify Badiou’s initial projects and explain how he disengages his own trajectory from the work of his master, Althusser. The second chapter reconstructs Badiou’s Maoist period. The third chapter attempts to define a third period beginning with the text *Peut-on penser la politique*, centred on *Being and Event*, and continuing to the present day.

To return to the target of Badiou’s first philosophical text, *Le concept de modèle*, its identification will depend on three lines of enquiry: first, Badiou’s reconstruction of Althusser’s conception of dialectical materialism as a theory of social change; second, his reworking of Althusser’s science–ideology distinction; and third, his tentative use of the mathematical concept of model to think change in scientific knowledge. Each of these enquiries meets with a problem in Badiou’s argument, diagnoses it, and identifies how Badiou modifies his trajectory in response.

Structural change in society

Althusser and the Marxist theory of social change

Within this limited corpus the most consequent text for identifying Badiou's philosophical starting point is his critical review of Louis Althusser's seminal works *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. Badiou's article is entitled 'The (Re)commencement of Dialectical Materialism' and it appeared in the journal *Critique* in 1967. To situate this text one must start by presenting the elements of Althusser's project that prove to be the most important in Badiou's eyes.

Althusser himself – and this goes a little way towards explaining the formalism of Badiou's reconstruction of his project – works at one remove from the classic Marxist concepts of the capitalist mode of production and the fundamental contradiction between the relations of production (the worker–boss relationship) and the forces of production (the resources, labour-power and technology at hand). For Althusser these terms belong to the science of society that Marx inaugurates in *Capital*, the science called 'historical materialism'. This discipline is quite distinct from the philosophy initiated by Marx's discoveries, the philosophy called 'dialectical materialism'. Dialectical materialism is concerned with developing a general theory of practice (economic, social, scientific), of global or structural change in practice, and with the distinction between science and ideology within the field of theoretical practice. Althusser understood this distinction between historical materialism and dialectical materialism and his own theoretical innovations as interventions designed to clarify the confused situation of Marxism. Ever since Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress denouncing Stalin, the gulags and the cult of personality there had been, in his eyes, a poisonous flowering of liberal–humanist interpretations of Marx. Coupled with this revisionism there was a refusal on the part of the French Communist Party – of which Althusser was a member – to discuss theoretical questions and question what Althusser delicately refers to as the 'practical problems' of Marxist politics. These were the main motivations underlying the theoretical and pedagogical initiative recorded in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.⁷

In his review of these texts Badiou identifies an unfinished task in Althusser's philosophy; the theorization of structural change in society and in the domain of scientific knowledge. In 'On the Materialist Dialectic', a key text for Badiou's exegesis, Althusser begins this task by attempting to identify the specificity of the Marxist theory of historical

change, otherwise known as the dialectic. His working hypothesis is that Marxism lacks an explicit theoretical formulation of the dialectic; in other words, Marx never wrote a book on dialectics as a method, but that this method is already implicitly at work in both *Capital* and in key Marxist political texts.⁸ Among the latter he chooses certain letters in which Lenin tries to explain how a proletarian revolution, contrary to Marx's predictions, occurred in a backwards country that had not even witnessed the triumph of the bourgeoisie and capitalism.⁹ According to the *Communist Manifesto*, it is only when the contradiction between the relations of production and the forces of production is exacerbated to the point of incompatibility that a revolution becomes possible, a proletarian revolution which collectivizes the ownership of the means of production. In contrast, on the basis of Marx's concept of unequal development, Lenin argued that what actually played a crucial role in creating the instable situation of 1917 was not one but a whole series of contradictions each of which reinforced the next, making Russia into what Lenin famously called the 'weak link' of the chain of imperialist great powers. Althusser seizes this argument as clear evidence of the difference between a Marxist dialectic and the Hegelian dialectic. Hegel was Marx's master — as Althusser was Badiou's — and in the absence of an explicit formulation of the Marxist dialectic the default model of change in Althusser's eyes is always Hegelian; and as such it leads to theoretical and political problems. In the Hegelian model of change, a unity splits into opposing moments or forces thus forming a contradiction. Over time, this contradictory antagonism creates a new unity that negates the earlier separation, a unity that conserves some of the qualities of the earlier stages and yet contains something new. Our concern here, of course, is not fidelity to the complexity of Hegel's dialectic, but how Badiou's trajectory is affected by Althusser's characterization of Hegel.

Countering the thesis of a simple unity at the origin of change, Althusser argues that for a Marxist historical change begins within an always already given complex structured totality. Subsequently, the beginning of historical change does not contain in any manner the figure of its end, in contrast to the teleology of the Hegelian model which promises a return to unity, a final synthesis. Note that for Althusser Hegelian teleology is no straw target but an internal threat in that it underwrites the well-established interpretation of Marx known as 'economism', a tendency Engels himself fights during the Second International. Economism claims that capitalism develops in a univocal and teleological manner: the contradictions of the economy will inexorably lead, by means of whatever historical accidents and detours, to a

proletarian revolution and socialism. The last aspect of the Hegelian model of change concerns the location of the motor of the dialectic, the very agent of change: it is present everywhere and yet nowhere.¹⁰ In contrast, Althusser stipulates that in a strictly Marxist model of change the motor of change must be a particular element of the complex totality – and so in the case of social change, a particular social practice. When Marxists speak of Hegel’s ‘idealism’ they are referring precisely to the impossibility of locating the agent of change.

But the Hegelian model is not the only rival to emerge in the thinking of change: one can also construct a *transcendent* model of change in which the agent or motor of change exists independently of and separate to that which changes, whether the latter be society, or a field of knowledge. Just such a model is at stake in Aristotle’s analysis in Book 7 of the *Metaphysics* of a builder’s production of a new house. Althusser identifies a further rival – the *mechanist* model of change – in which change also occurs as the result of something external, but this time it is a multiplicity of forces that are not unified into a single agent endowed with intention; the consequent change is arbitrary. In contrast, Althusser prescribes an *immanent* model: one in which the motor of change resides within that which undergoes change.

When Badiou reconstructs Althusser’s theory the location of an immanent concrete agent of change forms a major concern: he calls it the problem of *structural causality* (RM, 449). Another major concern for Badiou is to account for the consistency of the social whole: this is what is lacking, in his eyes, from Althusser’s theory of social change; there is no concept of the totality of social practices.

But why must one account for the consistency of the totality when the goal is precisely to think its transformation and thus dissolution? It so happens that in order to think change, one must be able to identify two different points or states of affairs between which change occurs; these might be the starting point and the endpoint of the change – but not necessarily since the change might continue indefinitely before and after these two points. If one cannot identify two separate states of affairs between which the change occurs, one is forced to oscillate between two incompatible theses: either everything is continually changing, or everything is absolutely the same. Either every single parameter in a given space is in continual variation and so measurement is impossible or all parameters are completely static. To think a specific change one must be able to identify what is changing and how it changes. In Althusser’s case what is at stake in his reading of Lenin is theorizing the passage – via revolution – from capitalist society to socialist society and

so he needs to be able to identify not only the consistent structure of capitalist society, and the consistent structure of the society that emerges through the change, but he must also think the change itself *as a consistent process* rather than a haphazard multidirectional affair. He does so by positing that social change happens within a structure that has a number of invariants. The first invariant is that any society is structured both by a dominant contradiction and by secondary contradictions.¹¹ The second invariant is that the dominant contradiction is determined and conditioned by each of the secondary contradictions: this conditioning is what Althusser, after Freud, calls 'overdetermination'. These secondary contradictions may exist within the domains of religion, ideology, the judiciary, international relations and the political system. The third invariant is that the dominant contradiction is always economic and so in capitalist societies it is the contradiction between capital and labour. This is how Althusser formulates Marxist principle of the 'determination in the last instance' by the economy.¹² According to Althusser's reading of Lenin's analyses and also Mao's classic essay *On Contradiction*, what happens in a revolutionary change is that these secondary contradictions 'condense' or 'accumulate' their determinations of the dominant contradiction to form a 'unity of rupture'.¹³

Althusser's argument caused a furore in Marxist circles: their main objection, as he characterized it, was that if one substitutes a pluralism of determinations for the monism of the Marxist conception of history, one destabilizes or calls into question the fundamental law of the development of capitalism, the law that guarantees the passage to socialism. For Althusser, such an argument fell into the category of economism and its rigid teleology: he returned to Marx's 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* to show that what economism failed to take into account was the unequal development of contradictions within different societies. Nevertheless, at one level at least, Althusser's critics were quite right: the account of overdetermination and the plurality of contradictions does result in the simple recognition that the passage from capitalist to a socialist society is not a historical necessity. There is no longer a teleology to history: if historical change does occur, it does not slowly but surely realize a predetermined end or an internal necessity. It is precisely at this point that modality enters the theory of social change: the key modalities of change being impossibility, possibility, necessity and contingency. Much later on in his work, after he and Badiou parted ways, Althusser confirmed the anti-teleological import of his theory of change by explicitly embracing *contingency*, re-baptizing his philosophy an 'aleatory materialism' or a 'philosophy of the encounter'.¹⁴

Badiou's theorization of consistency

For Althusser the social whole consists of a set of interlocking practices: in his commentary, Badiou criticizes Althusser for positing this combination and hierarchy of practices without having first theorized the actual space in which these practices are placed (RM, 458). It is here that Badiou first turns to mathematics for aid in resolving a philosophical problem. If there is any 'mathematical turn' in Badiou's work with *Being and Event* it is in truth a *return*; his philosophical work starts in partnership with mathematics, specifically with regard to the task of theorizing the collective unity – the consistency – of Althusser's 'always already given complex structure'. This mathematical theory must meet two other requirements: first, this structure of practices must be endowed with a hierarchical order; second, one must be able to account for the overall change of this order. In response to the first requirement, Badiou assumes that to posit an order it is sufficient to determine a maximum, or a 'dominant practice'. Note that in *Logiques des mondes*, published forty years later, to construct an order one must first demonstrate the existence of an orientated relation between any two given elements and then the existence of a minimum element. Back in 1967 the dominant practice is given the role of both unifying and dictating the identity of its particular structure: for instance, the dominant practice in a given social structure might be juridical, ideological, or religious, and so this practice will give that society its particular historical identity.

In response to the second requirement Badiou declares that change can be understood as the displacement of the dominant practice (RM, 456). The question is then what causes such a displacement. Althusser develops an immanent model of change and so the cause of change must be a locatable part of society: Badiou calls it the 'determining practice'. In line with the fundamental theses of Marx's historical materialism, the determining practice is always the economic practice (RM, 457). The subsequent difficulty for Badiou's reconstruction and theory of structure is that this practice must both form part of the interlocking hierarchy of *determined* practices and at the same time be present at another level as the *determining* practice. The starting point of change is thus in a position of *internal exclusion*; that is, it is internal in that it belongs to the order of determined practices, but at the same time it is excluded from that order since it determines the latter. This is the question of 'structural causality': note that the extent of Badiou's flirtation with structuralism in this epoch consists in finding echoes of the question of structural causality in Levi-Strauss's concept of the zero-signifier,

an echo which loses its importance in proportion to the multiplication of other echoes, such as with Spinoza's concept of *natura naturans* (SI, 128; RM, 457 n. 23).

Badiou fulfils these requirements for a theory of structure by constructing a mathematical structure that can be read as a 'conjuncture'; that is, as a unified order of social practices including both a dominant and a determining practice. There are two salient features of this mathematical construction for our enquiry. First, rather than directly working on a set of elementary practices, Badiou uses the mathematical concept of function to order a set of 'instances' where each instance is an articulation of two practices: a practice placing another practice (RM, 461; LC, 64). This proto-ontological construction is thus not atomistic but relational at base. Second, Badiou's construction both orders these instances and includes an instance that determines which instance is dominant; this relationship of determination is held to model the form of change. However, the weak point of this construction is that the initiation and intensity of change, and any possible variation in its form, cannot be theorized. Change is evident, says Badiou, which may be true from a macroscopic perspective on history, but certainly not at the level at which a militant philosophy is supposed to intervene; the level of a particular political practice (RM, 455). In Chapter 2 I will have reason to baptize this macroscopic perspective on change since it is a voice that resurfaces again and again in Badiou's philosophy. In this mathematical structure the one window which Badiou does leave open is the direction and effect of this change; its modality is pure possibility in that it is completely open which of many practices will become the dominant one if change occurs.

But there are further problems with this theory of change: Badiou argues that economism – a target he adopts from Althusser – consists in the identification of the dominant practice with the determining practice, the practice that changes a conjuncture. Thus according to economism all societies are dominated by economic practice (RM, 457). Yet it is not clear how Badiou's position – all societies are determined by economic practice, where determination – consists in the selection of the dominant practice – avoids economism in turn. Moreover, in this mathematical structure the order of practices is quite unified, but at the price of eradicating any possibility of the emergence of a new practice: change is theorized as the reshuffling of the same practices into a different order. According to my diagnosis, what lies behind these problems is the influence of a figure whose shadow extends far further than that of Hegel: Aristotle.

Change or genesis: the return of Aristotle

For a seasoned reader of Badiou there is one peculiarity about his reconstruction of the problem of structural change, and that is his uncritical repetition of Althusser's use of the term social 'totality' or 'whole'. Throughout the rest of his oeuvre his critique of totality is constant; and even in this very text he singles out in passing Sartre's use of totality as ideological (RM, 451 n. 18). This peculiar silence is compounded by Badiou's assertion that the dominant practice is responsible for *both* the hierarchy of practices within the totality – their order, their degrees of relative autonomy – *and* for the overall unity of the totality (RM, 456, 461). Moreover, as mentioned above the determining practice – the practice responsible for historical change – selects the practice that will newly take up the dominant position, thus reorganizing both the hierarchy and the overall identity of the social totality and producing a new conjuncture. When Badiou speaks of the historical change of the conjuncture, he says that the effect of change in the conjuncture is confused with the effect of its very existence. Badiou thus identifies a fusion in Althusser's theory between the principle of change, the principle of order and the principle of the unity or existence of the social whole.¹⁵ In other words, for Althusser the process that causes social structure to change is the same process that determines the existence and internal order of society. At one point in his text, Badiou does recognize that these three questions – of change, order and existence – can be thought separately. He argues, quite correctly, that Althusser simply assumes the existence of the structure of places, whereas in fact neither the account of determination (change) nor the account of domination (order) can generate the 'collectivizing concept of the instances', that is, the unified existence of the whole.¹⁶

What is at stake in Althusser's fusion of these three questions is the creation of a model of change in which any transformation of the whole is thought in the same terms as the genesis of the whole. In other words, there is only one type of change and it is at work in both the formation and in any global transformation of a society. This vision is a result of what can be called the *productivist model of change*, according to which the being of change is thought under the paradigm of the technical production of goods. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* the development of this model is explicit: being is thought as substance, substance is thought under the category of cause, and a causal analysis is developed through the analysis of the artificial production of new substances such as houses or tables. Aristotle distinguishes four causes of production: the efficient

cause or agent of change; the material cause or raw material that undergoes change; the formal cause or pre-existing design; and the final cause, the goal of the process, a finished product. Althusser explicitly reproduces this Aristotelian and productivist schema when he theorizes the general structure of practice: he speaks of the raw material, the means of transformation — which include both the design and the agent and the finished product.¹⁷

The effect of this underlying Aristotelian schema in Althusser's work is the fusion of the questions of change, order and existence. In the productivist model of change, change occurs to something — a substance for Aristotle, a society for Althusser — in the form of the genesis of that something. The account of change is thus an explanation of how a substance or society acquires unity and order. In Aristotle's analysis of production, a substance acquires unity in the shape of a union of its form and its matter, and acquires an order according to which form dominates matter.¹⁸

The productivist model of change results, as we saw, in the problems of economism and change being thought purely as the reshuffling of existing elements. It can be countered in three points. First, one can argue that it is not necessary to posit the existence of unitary agents that govern and guarantee the existence and order of change. Second, one can contest the idea that change is predominantly finite, that it has simple start and endpoints: change can be thought of as continual but with varying rates and intensities.¹⁹ Third, within the example of artificial production itself, one can argue that the product is not a finished unity but rather enters into a web of interactions within its practical context of use that continually affect its identity.²⁰ As we shall see, Badiou takes up these ideas in his later thought of change but under different headings, notably in his focus on infinite multiplicity, and specifically in his insistence in *Being and Event* on the incompleteness of change and the collectivization of agency.²¹

Aristotle himself provides one key for surpassing the productivist model of change and its focus on genesis. When he distinguishes natural productions — genesis and destruction — from artificial productions, he argues that in the latter the material cause pre-exists and outlasts the actual process of change. To avoid the fusion of change with genesis, the matter that undergoes change must exist in excess of that change. That is, something has to *remain the same* during a change, otherwise one cannot speak of a change occurring *to* something. What remains the same is the *hypokeimenon* or substrate, the underlying matrix that bears all the properties of a particular substance. Twenty years after his critical

reconstruction of Althusser, Badiou adopts a similar solution; he thinks change as an infinite process of supplementation of an already existent structure, and in doing so he makes use of a concept quite close to the *hypokeimenon*, the generic multiple, which as a whole bears no one property yet parts of it bear every property. However, the generic multiple is not what remains the same but precisely what brings about change in being brought to presentation.

In *Théorie du sujet*, the final work of Badiou's Maoist period, Badiou advances his own diagnosis of the model of change he inherits from Althusser in his early work. The main limitation of what he renames the 'structuralist dialectic' is that it presents a deterministic and over-complete theory of change: as we noted no room is built in for contingency or variations in the process of change, but more importantly change itself is limited to modification rather than full-scale transformation.

However, the theory of social structure was not the only foothold that Althusser's work afforded Badiou for an examination of the thinking of change. Much of Althusser's early work was devoted to theorizing transformations in the field of scientific knowledge, specifically that of Marx's development of historical materialism. It is in this context that Badiou develops his own articulation of science and ideology in reaction to Jacques Alain Miller's alliance of the two in the famous article 'Suture'.

Structural change in knowledge: science and ideology

Epistemological break as infinite process

The entire distribution of tasks within Althusser's project can be derived from his primary claim: an epistemological break occurs between Marx's early philosophical work, focused on Feuerbach's problematic of man, and his scientific work, inaugurated in *Capital*.²² As a result of this break not only did the entire field of investigation change but the scientific concepts Marx developed through the study of classic political economy no longer allowed him to even reconstruct the Hegelian and Feuerbachian categories of man or consciousness. For Althusser, this cut generates not just one but two disciplines: first, the new science itself, historical materialism, whose object is the history of the production of societies; second, dialectical materialism, a new type of philosophy whose object is the history of theoretical production.²³

Althusser claims that he simply borrowed the concept of epistemological break from Bachelard. Etienne Balibar has shown how he in fact subjected the concept to considerable revision.²⁴ For Bachelard an epistemological break designates the slow gradual process through which a science disengages itself and its results from the common knowledge of its time, which is a tissue of error and illusion. For Althusser, on the other hand, science disengages itself from ideology, but the latter is not simply the epistemological negative of science. Ideology possesses a social function: that of determining how individuals experience their economic and political living conditions. For Althusser, an epistemological break is both an event — he dates it quite precisely in the case of Marx — and an infinite process. As such, at no moment can one pronounce the break complete and designate a discourse as pure science without any inmixture of ideology. Inasmuch as ideology plays a social role it is an irreducible part of scientific discourse. The conflictual relation between science and ideology is thus a permanent fixture for Althusser. Consequently science must perform a constant work of purification in order to extract its results and its own proper objects from the *doxa* of the times. Moreover, this is not a secondary task for science but its primary task; the very core of scientific work for Althusser consists in this continual separation from ideology. In the general domain of theoretical production, the very objects that a science initially takes as its matter for investigation are constituted by an ideology.²⁵ Just as in Bachelard's conception, for Althusser science gradually distinguishes its own objects from the objects given in common, ideologically filtered, experience. Moreover it is only inasmuch as this distinction between kinds of objects has taken place — and the epistemological break is occurring — that a discourse can actually be identified as an ideology. That is, it is solely from the perspective of a science — Althusser's example being Marx's historical materialism — that an ideology can be diagnosed as such — classical political economy as an instance of bourgeois ideology.

Althusser claims that the primary function of philosophy as dialectical materialism is to develop a theory of the history of theoretical production: at a local level this means tracing a line of demarcation between science and ideology in the field of theory. The practical task of philosophy is thus to divide science from ideology. This conception has two consequences whose repercussions echo throughout Badiou's oeuvre. The first is that philosophy arrogates the task of reflexivity from science: it is not science itself that examines its own theoretical production but philosophy. As a result science is not auto-intelligible but blind and thus machinic in its production of new knowledge. This conception