This book has been in the making for a long time. “Too long,” my friends and family say, while others are perhaps whispering quietly to themselves: “Not long enough.” At least some of the circumstances behind the book’s conception and eventual production, however, exceed the usual domain of personal anecdotes, and they might actually shed some light on the nature and goals of the project itself. For this reason perhaps I may be allowed to recall those circumstances in the prefatory remarks that follow. Besides, do we not all secretly turn to a book’s preface and acknowledgments—or, in their absence, to the endnotes—in the perverse hope of catching a glimpse of the anecdotal and the autobiographical as well?

Two encounters, one personal and the other bookish in nature, could be said to have given birth to the idea for this work. My first meeting with Alain Badiou happened in the summer of 1998, in his country house in Saint Gaudens, just south of Toulouse. For several months prior to this meeting we had been writing back and forth in preparation for Badiou’s visit to Harvard, his first solo trip to the United States, which was scheduled to take place in the winter of that same year. Unable to meet up with me in Madrid, as he had originally proposed, Badiou enthusiastically approved of the idea, suggested by my partner, Simone, that the two of us cross the Pyrenees for a short visit. The parking lot in front of the small railway station of Saint Gaudens would be the place for our rendezvous.

It was hard to understand how this tall man could fit in the small Volkswagen Golf that was waiting for us at the station when we arrived after, I should add, considerable delay. Badiou, pretending to show more surprise than genuine irritation at his latecomers, drove out in front of us and led the way as we went winding down the small country road to his home, where we would spend the rest of the day talking, eating, drinking,
and laughing. With Françoise we made fun of the ponderous tone that Badiou adopted when it came to defining a series of possible titles for his talks at Harvard: “Being and Event,” “Being and the Event,” and so on. After all, Badiou retorted by way of justification, is this not implicitly the title for all works of philosophy? Once the organizational matters were taken care of and put aside, our conversation drifted to more entertaining topics, such as the latest Jackie Chan movie and even the awful Armageddon, which had just been released. This gave Simone pause, much to the delight of Badiou, who saw an occasion to take revenge for our chuckling at the pedantry of his titles, to mock the elitism of my taste in films and showcase my complete ignorance of popular culture. Later, when the three of us retreated into the smoke-filled backroom, the discussion turned once more academic. Badiou, showing a great sense of curiosity that I would come to appreciate many times over in subsequent years as he would rummage through my personal library in Manhattan or Ithaca, asked us about the exact meaning of the field of “cultural studies” in the United States, about the place of “French theory,” about our own ongoing scholarly projects, and, of course, about the reception of his work. This reception, it must be said, at the time was still nearly inexistent. Thus, when, back in the United States I would ask people if they had read Badiou, quite a few would answer with a mixture of indifference and reassurance: “Oh sure, Bourdieu”!

In fact, even though Badiou’s major work, Being and Event, had been published in French a decade earlier, by the mid to late 1990s few people outside of his home country were familiar with the portentous ambition of its main theses—to give philosophy a new beginning by grounding ontology in mathematics over and against Heidegger’s poeticizing hermeneutics—while still fewer bothered to return to the intensely militant political writings from the 1970s and early 1980s, which culminate in the famously obscure, Lacanian-style seminar called Theory of the Subject. Even in France it would not be until a major conference in Bordeaux, held in the fall of 1999, that Badiou was to receive official and widespread recognition from fellow philosophers, mathematicians, and literary critics—after having been ostracized for many years not only by his obvious ideological adversaries but by many of his peers as well, in large part because of the strident and polemical style of his Maoism.

There were, of course, a few isolated exceptions: the Collège International de Philosophie devoted a workshop to Being and Event, which
included brief responses from the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière; and the book also received a brief commentary, which ended on a harshly critical note, in Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?* In Saint Gaudens I even found out that a major study of all of Badiou’s philosophy was already in the making. Indeed, shortly after our arrival at his country house, Badiou had pulled out a massive, 250-page, fully bound manuscript, then still titled “Generic Sovereignty,” which he proceeded proudly to put on the table with the recommendation that I get in touch with the author, Peter Hallward—whom I would in fact have the pleasure of meeting and befriending a year later, at the conference in Bordeaux. By that time, though, I had already begun to notice a strange trend in the reception and interpretation of Badiou’s work, a trend that would only become stronger over the years and that finds its sharpest and most eloquent formulation not only in a polished and much-revised version of Hallward’s manuscript, published in 2003 as *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, but also in the chapter on Badiou’s reading of Saint Paul in Slavoj Žižek’s *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, which in 1999 offered one of the first widely accessible—though in my eyes also somewhat problematic—accounts of Badiou’s philosophy.

Both Hallward and Žižek, each in his own inimitable style, proceed to follow up their praise with a strong critique, to the effect that Badiou’s philosophy would fall in the traps of a dogmatic, sovereign, or absolutist understanding of the event and of militant, not to say blind, fidelity to it, without giving due consideration either to the question of relationality and historical mediation (Hallward) or to that of negativity, repetition, and the death drive (Žižek). What these authors could not have foreseen, however, is the extraordinary echo that their criticisms, often without even as much as a hint of the praise that originally framed them, would find in the English-speaking world. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that this reading of the event as a dogmatic or downright mystical notion, diametrically opposed to the banal normality of the order of being, has now become tiresomely and overbearingly dominant in the reception of Badiou’s philosophy. Above all, a similar reading was adopted overnight by a growing army of opponents, akin to those whispering voices mentioned earlier, many of whom undoubtedly feel relieved at the prospect of not actually having to read any of Badiou’s books, even though they cannot resist the opportunity to lambast their author either.
My own trajectory is quite different, in fact almost the opposite. This is no doubt due to the second, strictly bookish encounter, which chronologically came long before I personally met Badiou. Indeed, it was around 1994, when I was finishing my PhD, that I first stumbled upon the French original of Badiou’s *Manifesto for Philosophy* in a bookstore in Brussels. Leafing through the book, I was immediately struck by the possibility of a convergence between Badiou’s proposal of a “Platonism of the multiple” centered on the concept of the “generic,” which is the title of the *Manifesto*’s last section, and my work as a Latin Americanist who was writing a dissertation on Jorge Luis Borges, puzzled as I had been for some time by a remarkable footnote in “History of Eternity” in which Borges all of a sudden asserts that he does “not wish to take leave of Platonism, which may seem glacial, without affirming that the generic may, sometimes, be more intense than the particular.” However, from this shared interest in Plato and the generic, not to mention the strange question of immortality (another enigmatic one-liner from Borges, after all, says that “life is too impoverished not to be immortal”), my attention was soon drawn not to the magnum opus *Being and Event*, for which the brief and didactic accompanying piece of *Manifesto for Philosophy* should have prepared me, but rather to Badiou’s Maoist writings from the mid-1970s, most notably *Theory of Contradiction* and *Of Ideology*, both of which I put to work in the rather unorthodox construction of a Borgesian “theory of ideology,” before deciding to take on *Theory of the Subject*.

More than anything else, it was the experience of making my way through this last book, an experience that was as exhilarating as it was labor intensive, that left me dumbfounded and as though struck by lightning. For many years my theoretical and philosophical interests had hovered around figures whose work offered some kind of alternative to the dominant tradition of Heidegger and Derrida, without being blind to the conceptual accomplishments in the deconstruction of metaphysics. Jean-François Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo, back in my days as an undergraduate at the University of Leuven, had been important guides along this tenuous path, and after my arrival in the States I continued to read pretty much everything they had ever published, together with a great deal of Foucault, Nietzsche, and American thinkers from William James to Richard Rorty to Judith Butler. But now along came a philosopher who, in *Theory of the Subject*, mapped out what I perceived to be a complete overview of the
contemporary theoretical and philosophical conjuncture, from Althusser to Deleuze to Lacan, and, at first only implicitly but later also explicitly in Being and Event and Ethics, from Heidegger to Derrida to Levinas. The fact that this map or, to use the language of Theory of the Subject, this topology included a long section devoted to Mallarmé’s poetry and another to Greek tragedy between Aeschylus and Sophocles only heightened my interest as a literary critic, just as Badiou’s Maoism dovetailed with—or revealed for the first time—a whole Maoist undercurrent that previously had gone unnoticed in many of the most original political and literary experiments that I was studying at the time in Latin America, most notably in the writings of the Argentine novelist and literary critic Ricardo Piglia, who, it turned out, in the early 1970s had been a fervent Maoist and one of the first to publish Badiou (specifically his 1966 text “The Autonomy of the Aesthetic Process”) in Spanish.

The Argentine connection, incidentally, did not end there. Already in the summer of 1996, as I was browsing through the section of current periodicals in Widener Library at Harvard, near the Italian journal aut aut, which I was actually consulting in connection with “weak thinking” or pensiero debole, I happened to come across another journal, Acontecimiento: Revista para pensar la política, which from the title alone sounded as though there might be a link with Badiou’s theory of the “event” (événement in French, acontecimiento in Spanish). After picking up a current issue, I found that this journal, printed in a small in-house venture that eventually would culminate in a political collective under the name “Grupo Acontecimiento,” for more than two years had been investigating the politico-philosophical situation from an angle deeply marked by Badiou’s work, including sharp analyses of the significance of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 in Chiapas as well as of the originality of organizations such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. What is more, later that same summer, or winter in Buenos Aires, in a lengthy discussion with the journal’s editor, Raúl Cerdeiras, I was also able to confirm several of the working hypotheses that would eventually form the basis for the present book.

First, a historical and geographical hypothesis, namely, that Badiou’s work, which was barely beginning to be “discovered” by English-language readers, had been a familiar reference for many radical intellectuals and militants in Latin America and Spain—from the Basque country, where Theory of Contradiction was commonly used in the 1970s, all the way to
Mexico and the Southern Cone, where Badiou’s review of Althusser’s canonical work, together with Althusser’s own “Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism,” had been widely distributed as part of the popular “Pasado y presente” series of Marxist divulgation edited by the Argentine exile José Aricó. This familiarity, moreover, was not limited to Badiou’s early works: *Being and Event*, for example, was translated into Spanish, in a giant collective endeavor spearheaded by Cerdeiras, long before it would appear in English; and several talks, seminars, and even whole books have appeared in Spanish, Galician, and Brazilian Portuguese that are as yet inexistent in any other language, including Badiou’s native French.

Second, the political hypothesis that the formative experience behind the underlying continuity between Badiou’s Althusserian work and the grand synthesis of *Being and Event* is to be found in what I would call a generic Maoism. To use the words of Cerdeiras’s “Political Manifesto” that would reappear as the opening statement in the first dozen or so issues of *Acontecimiento*: “Mao Zedong constitutes the last practical attempt that fails to break with Marxism-Leninism. Its major guideline was to make the revolution after the seizure of power. It was pointless. Marxism-Leninism was exhausted.” This leaves open the task of formulating the principles of a post-Maoism, which would effectively break with the so-called metaphysical, class-based presuppositions behind Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

Third, and finally, the more strictly theoretical, not to say merely exegetical, hypothesis that *Being and Event* or for that matter *Logics of Worlds*, which at the time of my conversation with Cerdeiras was already in the making, cannot be understood without also considering *Theory of the Subject*. Indeed, for Cerdeiras, too, this earlier book’s redefinition of the materialist dialectic, as a way of drawing up a systematic balance sheet of the militant accomplishments and dead ends of the 1970s, had been what originally brought him to establish contact with Badiou and start a long collaboration that continues until this day.

Several of the personal meetings that motivated me to begin writing the present book are thus still a distant result of that singular encounter, more than a decade ago, with *Theory of the Subject*. Indeed, no sooner did I put down that book than I wrote a personal letter to Badiou, telling him about the impact his work had had on my way of understanding the current theoretical conjuncture, proposing to do some translation of his writings into English, and inquiring about the possibility of his visiting Harvard. It
was in answer to this letter that Badiou sent me a handwritten note of appreciation, the beginning of a long correspondence, in which he also explained that while Manifesto for Philosophy had already been translated by Norman Madarasz, and Louise Burchill was preparing Deleuze: The Clamor of Being, his short book on Ethics seemed to him to be the next logical candidate for translation into English. As for a visit to the States, this was something that we could discuss further down the line, as indeed we did, on that long summer day in Saint Gaudens.

In the meantime, by the end of 1999 Slavoj Žižek came to Harvard to participate in a public debate with Cornell West on the subject, among other topics, of Saint Paul. To an audience so packed that firefighters came in and threatened to cancel the lecture, Žižek spoke for almost an hour about the nature of the Pauline act. Not once was Alain Badiou's name mentioned. And yet I could not help thinking that, despite numerous insuperable differences to which we will have occasion to return below, everything that was said that evening about the “act” was, to say the least, strongly reminiscent of the way in which Badiou develops the notion of the “event” in his own book on Saint Paul. When I asked Žižek about this strange confluence during the Q & A session, he quickly added that, of course, he implicitly had been referring to Badiou’s book all along and that he probably should have prefaced his long intervention in the debate with Cornell West by saying that he was going to pay homage to Badiou, whom he promptly labeled the greatest philosopher of our time. Then, in private, we went on to talk about the urgent need for a translation of Badiou’s Ethics, which Žižek promised to endorse with the already considerable weight of his personal name and ever-growing fame.

Žižek certainly kept his promise and two years later did in fact publish Peter Hallward’s excellent translation, with a long introduction, of Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil in his “Wo es war” series for Verso. Badiou, however, for health reasons, had to cancel his planned 1999 visit to the States, but he made up for this last-minute cancelation with a double visit the following year to both Harvard and Columbia. At Columbia, incidentally, Badiou’s visit coincided with that of Ernesto Laclau, who was participating in a major international conference in honor of Cornelius Castoriadis. We chose instead to attend an individual lecture by Laclau on the rhetoric of hegemony and the role of empty signifiers, with Badiou being forced—owing to his poor English at the time—to follow from my
instantly translated handwritten notes while a homeless person was caus-
ing a ruckus over the fact that her personal couch in the lounge of Philos-
ophy Hall was being taken over by students for the entire duration of 
Laclau’s talk, which in retaliation she continued to dub with a shrieking 
voice worthy of Antonin Artaud. The next day, the three of us got together 
for lunch, joined by Simone, to discuss plans for a major seminar on the 
concept of politics, to be held behind closed doors so as to avoid the 
sinister effects of the public eye, with a dozen or so political theorists and 
philosophers who would vouch to submit themselves to an open and 
honest discussion, as polemical as needed be, on the basis of a fixed num-
ber of pages from their published work. Regrettably, this seminar, which 
otherwise could have included the likes of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 
who came to say hello to Badiou after Laclau’s talk and who already then 
proposed a public eye-to-eye debate, did not take place and nowadays is 
less likely to occur than ever before, as Badiou and Laclau seem to have 
parted ways almost as much as Laclau and Žižek. Spivak, however, made 
good on her part of the offer by addressing “Badiou and Other Asias” many 
years later in a talk on postcolonial studies at New York University. Except 
indirectly, through Hallward’s comparison of Badiou and Spivak in the 
translator’s introduction to Ethics, however, this debate too has remained 
one-sided.

Still in New York City, Josefina Ayerza from Lacanian Ink contacted me 
in that same fall of 2000 to organize the first in what would become a long 
series of annual talks by Badiou in distinguished art galleries in SoHo 
and the Upper East Side. The instant success of Badiou’s performance at 
Deitch Gallery, however, did not mean that his work at this point had 
already gained a solid foothold in the Anglophone market. On the con-
trary, when around this time I sent out proposals for the translation of 
Handbook of Inaesthetics and Metapolitics to several American university 
presses—some of the same presses that would later scramble to obtain the 
rights for these very same books or any other by the same author, for that 
matter—they either rejected the project, on the grounds of its questionable 
financial feasibility, or did not bother to answer at all.

In sum, by the time of Badiou’s first visit to the States in 2000, some-
thing was clearly in the making that stirred up great intellectual excite-
ment and already some controversy, even though nobody could quite foresee 
exactly what was going to happen. I, for one, was becoming increasingly
baffled by the way in which Badiou’s work was now starting to be received in English. Indeed, everything in this reception, regardless of whether it was purely dismissive or expressed an underlying sympathy, seemed to contradict the conclusions I had drawn a few years earlier from my own interpretation of Theory of the Subject. Above all, Badiou was now being charged with defending an authoritarian, if not doctrinaire, allegiance to the fleeting upsurge of a purely self-sustaining event, which is precisely what he himself seemed to be arguing against in the historical dialectic propounded in that earlier book. I began to suspect that perhaps this divergence was due to the fact that English-speaking readers almost by default had to limit themselves for quite some time to the later and shorter books, starting with Manifesto for Philosophy all the way to the deceptively simple and perhaps overly polemical Ethics, while others tended to come to Badiou’s philosophy only from neighboring traditions, for instance, by focusing on his Deleuze or on the “event” of Christianity as addressed in Saint Paul. Until recently, in other words, extremely few interpreters turned to Badiou’s works from before Being and Event, which meant that most readers continued to ignore twenty years of solitary philosophical labor. In my eyes this was not just a chronological imbalance at the level of the exegesis, but it actually produced a lopsided interpretation of Badiou’s entire philosophical project as well. Part of my aim in the pages that follow consists precisely in shedding some light on this conceptual imbalance in the dominant interpretations of Badiou’s work.

In conjunction with the working hypotheses enumerated above, then, the basic presuppositions behind my reading of Badiou’s philosophy are the following:

1. The openly dialectical writings from the 1970s and early 1980s, steeped in the experience of French Maoism, only seem to have been abandoned after 1988 with the so-called mathematical turn introduced in Being and Event. In reality, while much of Badiou’s work in the 1990s is indeed phrased in the dangerously ultraleftist terminology, borrowed from Deleuze, of nondialectical or even antidialectical “disjunctive syntheses,” I argue for an underlying continuity behind this work and the earlier arguments in favor of dialectical materialism—a continuity that reemerges and becomes explicit later on, especially with the defense of the materialist dialectic in Logics of Worlds.
In my introduction this choice is further explained in my answer to the question “Which Badiou?”

2. Of the four types of “truth procedure” that operate as “conditions” for philosophy according to Badiou, politics is by far the most consistent and elaborate. Even though Badiou has written extensively on art and literature, as well as on psychoanalysis as an immanent reflection on love as a truth procedure, there is no match for the depth and complexity of Badiou’s interventions in the field of politics. But then the next question to be answered in the introduction is “Whose politics?”

3. This still leaves us with a third question: “Whither mathematics?” In fact, many readers will argue that this is precisely the most distinctive feature of Badiou’s work, so that mathematics would actually meet, if not exceed, the importance of politics as the principal condition for his philosophy. However, as soon as we exit the domains of strict ontology and logic in the way Badiou defines them, namely, as the discourses, respectively, of being and of appearing, then the role of mathematics becomes heuristic at best and analogical at worst. This justifies, in my eyes, the modest role attributed to mathematics in my reading of Badiou and politics.

After laying out my answers to these three questions in the introduction, I proceed by way of a spiraling periodization to situate Badiou’s work in the theoretical conjuncture that followed in the wake of May ’68. Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of Badiou’s debts to Althusser and to the latter’s collective project for the outline of a renewed dialectical materialism, or a new materialist dialectic. Chapter 2, after briefly discussing Althusser’s later work in relation to his failure to perceive any truth in the events of 1968 in France, turns to Badiou’s settling of accounts with Jacques Lacan and with the latter’s psychoanalytical contribution to the theory of the subject. Chapter 3, which constitutes the core of the book’s political proposal, presents a detailed investigation into the role of Badiou’s Maoism for his overall philosophy, both earlier and later. Chapter 4 proposes a dialectical reading of *Being and Event*, paying special attention to the categories and operations that cut across the binary opposition of the book’s title. Chapter 5, in a partial return to the discussion with Lacan, expands on the polemical effects of *Being and Event* by tackling the question of Badiou’s relation to the tradition of French Heideggerianism. Chapter 6 offers an
account of *Logics of Worlds* that targets the continuities and discontinuities of this last major work in relation to *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*. Finally, chapters 7 and 8 attempt to begin thinking “with” Badiou—as he invites his readers to do in *Being and Event* by offering his philosophy as a conceptual toolbox—about the relation between politics and philosophy, specifically through the categories of “potentiality” and of “radical democracy.” In the conclusion I return to the question of Badiou’s debts to Marxism, following the hypothesis that perhaps he is a communist before being, or perhaps without also being, a Marxist in any orthodox sense of the term. Finally, the book closes with the inclusion, in the appendices, of two interviews, which together present a coherent intellectual portrait of Badiou in the context both of his own trajectory as a philosopher and of that of his generation.

The present book, then, offers both less and more than a general introduction to Badiou’s philosophy. It is *less*, insofar as I lay no claims on being exhaustive, in the way that Hallward’s book, for example, manages to be a complete introduction: my take is definitely partial, in the double sense of focusing on only part of Badiou’s work, namely, the part that has to do with emancipatory politics, and of doing so from the bias of a single unifying hypothesis, based on the persistence of the dialectic. However, this book is also *more* than an introduction, insofar as each chapter goes well beyond exegetical commentary on Badiou’s individual writings. Thus, in almost every chapter the reader will be able to find personal interventions in the contemporary theoretical conjuncture: the introduction includes a comparison between Badiou’s and Rancière’s respective definitions of *metapolitics*; chapter 1 outlines what I consider one of the dominant doctrines of the subject, the real, and the critique of ideology today, a common “doctrine of science” (in the Fichtean sense of a *Wissenschaftslehre*), which can be found from Jacques-Alain Miller to Slavoj Žižek; chapter 2 discusses the role of tragedy, the law, and the force of “nonlaw,” in an expanded polemic with Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida; chapter 3 includes a systematic account of the “leftist” and “rightist” deviations both in the organizational history of French Maoism and in some of its philosophical counterparts, from Deleuze to the New Philosophers André Glucksmann, Christian Jambet, and Guy Lardreau; chapter 5 highlights the polemical current underlying chapter 4 by contrasting Badiou’s so-called strong thought to the “radical thinking” that philosophers such as Lacoue-Labarthe oppose to Italian
“weak thought” (Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti’s pensiero debole); chapter 6 ends by discussing the possibility of doing work in “historical materialism” through a comparison of Badiou and Rancière on the role of history and philosophy in relation to art and politics; chapter 7 draws some general principles from this historical-materialist approach with regard to the idea that political change is somehow carried by the potential inherent in history, an idea variously subverted, displaced, or reinvented from Marx to Deleuze to Giorgio Agamben; chapter 8, though directly inspired by my reading of Badiou, represents an original intervention in the political philosophy of “radical democracy” shared—at least for a while—by many of the thinkers discussed in the previous chapters; and, finally, the conclusion contrasts Badiou’s view of the “communist hypothesis” with similar affirmations from the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy and Antonio Negri.