

Event and Decision: Ontology and Politics in Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead

by Steve Hulbert

This conference, celebrating “Event & Decision,” was the inaugural event of the recently established Whitehead Research Project. The WRP, under the direction of Roland Faber, was established to further the commitment of the Center for Process Studies to Whitehead scholarship, with an emphasis on “the texts, philosophy, and life of Alfred North Whitehead. WRP explores and analyzes the relevance of Whitehead’s thought in dialogue with contemporary philosophies in order to unfold his philosophy of organism and its consequences for our time” (Whitehead Research Project, Mission Statement).

With this mission in mind, WRP partnered with Claremont Graduate University and its annual Bradshaw Conference, by presenting this fascinating Conference emphasizing the thought of Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead vis-à-vis event ontology and politics. The promotional literature advertising the Conference emphasized the distinct approaches these three thinkers take regarding this subject - “For Whitehead event is the realization of becoming, the actualization of the “groundless ontological ground” of creativity, the process of self-decision on possibilities yet undecided, the aesthetic and ethical impulse of existence; for Deleuze it is the expression of Life without possession, bodies without organs, the virtual or actual reality of singularity and novelty. For Badiou, on the other hand, the event breaks from the situation, in which we always count (reality) as one, multiplicity as united. Making a difference begins with a revolution; it erupts as decision. Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead – these thinkers stand in contrast to the ontology of being and a gnoseology of permanence and repetition in

order to seek novelty, multiplicity, and uniqueness. Consequently, for all three thinkers, this necessitates a radical politics that critiques social bodies, cultures, and art.”

This year’s Bradshaw Conference, held December 6-8, 2007 consisted of sixteen lectures, including two public lectures and four student presentations. The public lectures were held



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on the evenings of Dec. 6 and 7, while the student presentations were delivered on the morning of Dec. 8. There was much to be excited about, and far too much to give a full-blown report on everything, so I’ve chosen to present a few of the high points, as space permits:

“Substance ontologies underpin the ‘common sense’ view of the world as made up of individual material objects that endure in space and time. If events are allowed in this view they are occurrences that happen to things or that things undergo or experience. In event ontologies by contrast events are fundamental, and things or substances can be variously viewed as ‘effects’, ‘products’ or temporary ‘structures’ of events, simply sets of properties or patterns recognizable in events. In the event ontology of Badiou, Deleuze and Whitehead each will claim that their ‘event’ is the immanent movement of creativity itself, a self-realizing ‘moment’ of activity out of which the actual makes itself” (Keith Robinson, “Between the Individual, the Relative and the Void: Thinking the ‘Event’ in Badiou, Deleuze and Whitehead”).

“An event is something that happens to a subject. Anyone who is willing to devote his or her life to philosophy must know what it

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is like to be affected by the event. The event is the chance encounter with an influential lecturer, the chance reading of a particular text; it is what suddenly makes you realise that you will never be able to think the same thoughts again, it is the absolute break from everything that was ever before and the emergence of a new world. This is the moment where we have become a subject..." (Jeremy Dunham, "A Politics of the Stars: Event Thinking in Ontology & Cosmology").

"The first problem that arises when confronting a genuine philosopher is that he or she must – at least initially – *stupefy* you. You *must* not know how to respond...if you simply respond to the intervention with uncritical assent, then you also fail the argumentative conditions for philosophy, perhaps even succumbing to a kind of religious enthusiasm. Philosophy will be rational, or it will not be; but if it seeks to reimpose (established) rationality at all costs, it also will not be" (Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham, "The Thought of Stupefaction; or Event and Decision as Non-Ontological and Pre-Political Factors in the Work of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou").

"I suggest that it is the notion of the fold that may keep an honest Deleuzian from freezing into an oppositional atheism. This suggestion entails no argument for 'belief in God,' whatever that means. It is however a meditation on the meaning of repetition in Deleuze as 'contracted contemplation,' as it will be unfolded in his dual readings of the fold, as a folding into and enfolding of the world...If the event of the fold and the fold of the event do take place within a time that unfolds infinitely, that infinity cannot be simply identified with 'God.' Nor can the name of God be successfully expunged from the repetitions that explicate and complicate the language and therefore the conceptual compossibility of event and of fold – the event-fold" (Catherine Keller, "Complicities: Folding the Event in Whitehead and Deleuze").

"Only if *all binaries*, especially that between ontology and human subjectivity and agency, are deconstructed, we revoke the *'violence* to that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes' (PR, 49; italics added) and *as experiment* 'find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a *democracy of fellow creatures*' (PR 50; italic added). It is the *inclusion* of all creatures as societies of societies on the basis of univocity – the speaking with *one, equal voice of difference* – that undermines any Establishment of a State of slavery, imperial op-



helmut maassen, david brockman, catherine keller, and graham livesey

pression and exclusion" (Roland Faber, "Amid a Democracy of Fellow Creatures" - *Onto/Politics and the Problem of Slavery in Whitehead and Deleuze*).

"...a political Event is committed to a general change in subjectivity, which, by dissolving the old lines of social demarcation, liberates people from the relations of inequality and domination that enslave them (Badiou 2006: 94). Thus Badiou is interested in a 'democratic politics' not in the usual sense of a formal democracy that incorporates a universal plebiscite, but rather in the more radical sense of an emancipatory politics that incorporates a principle of justice and equality for all" (Henry Krips, "The Politics of Badiou: From Absolute Singularity to Objet-a").

"Like Deleuze, Whitehead projects the event back and forward in time without reducing time to a causal line. This is the significance of the mirroring in Whitehead, a more gently and accessible way of thinking about Deleuze's bifurcations. The anticipation of the event is then more flexible and has more turning points than Badiou would allow, because the event is a hinge between the past and the future, not caused by them, but in the same category as Deleuze, 'determined' by them, that is, to take another word from Whitehead, 'shaped' by its past and future, yet also shaping them" (James Williams, "Love in a Time of Events: Badiou, Deleuze and Whitehead on Chesil Beach").

"Becoming is not the end result of a change, such as when we posit in the past we had X but this then evolved, or changed into Y in the present. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari outline their concept of becoming. They announce that a 'becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or at the limit, an identification.' Becoming is a dynamic movement of difference that can best be described as a non-goal orientated movement and this is why Deleuze and Guattari explain becoming 'produces nothing other than itself'" (Adrian Parr, "Memorial Culture and the Univocity of Being").

"...since societies for Whitehead, whether they be societies of humans or the societies that constitute grey stone



keith robinson, jeffrey bell, richard amesbury

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(a favorite example of Whitehead's), are inseparable from the nomadic actual entities that can then be taken up within the creative advance, the result for Whitehead is that identifiable facts and entities are always provisional. Inseparable from these facts is a society of ordered actual entities (cosmos) as well as the anti-social actual entities (chaos). This, as we have seen, is precisely how Deleuze understands the reality of the virtual, for it too is inseparable from, and yet not to be confused with, the identifiable entities that become transformed as the nomadic singularities come to be actualized by new societies. And this actualization, in turn, is provisional, for there remains the element that eludes the capturing nets of 'actualization.' This was why Deleuze argues that the 'transcendent object' cannot be 'lived within actual societies,' for such societies are provisional and presuppose the reality that will transform them" (Jeffrey Bell, "Fear of Politics: Deleuze, Whitehead, and the Truth of Badiou").

I sense I'm running out of space, so I will close by stating that this was a very successful conference in that it was well attended and our minds were stretched. Last, but not least, it was also very well organized thanks to the unflagging effort of WRP members: Roland Faber, Nichole Torbitzky, Daniel Pettus, Mary Herczog, Richard Livingston, and Deena Lin. With this kind of support the future certainly looks bright for the Project. Congratulations and thanks to one and all. ☘

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