

# UC Merced

## UC Merced Previously Published Works

### Title

A brief genealogy of the category of the subject from Althusser and Foucault to Badiou's Theory of the Subject

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4bk8s24z>

### Journal

Res Publica Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas, 26(3)

### ISSN

1576-4184

### Authors

López-Calvo, Ignacio

Ortega, Jaime

### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5209/rpub.92193

Peer reviewed

# A brief genealogy of the category of the subject. From Althusser and Foucault to Badiou's Theory of the Subject

Ignacio López-Calvo<sup>1</sup>; Jaime Ortega<sup>2</sup>

Recepción: 29-10-2023 / Aceptación: 03-11-2023

**Abstract.** This essay traces the genealogy and evolution of the category of the subject as it developed in the thought of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Alain Badiou. As will be seen, within the fruitful and complementary dialogue about the subject and subjectivity formation among these three French thinkers, there are major discrepancies in their approaches, from Althusser's seemingly passive view of the subject as a victim of state oppression, to Foucault's one, embedded in power but with the capacity of resistance, and, finally, to Badiou's understanding, in his book *Théorie du sujet* (*Theory of the Subject*, 1982), of the subject as the one who courageously takes risks to put into practice the truth brought about by the event in order to radically transform the present situation.

**Keywords:** Subject; Althusser; Foucault; Badiou.

## [es] Breve genealogía de la categoría de sujeto. De Althusser y Foucault a la teoría del sujeto de Badiou

**Resumen.** Este ensayo rastrea la genealogía y evolución de la categoría sujeto tal como se ha desarrollado en el pensamiento de Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault y Alain Badiou. Como se verá, dentro del fructífero y complementario diálogo sobre la formación del sujeto y la subjetividad entre estos tres pensadores franceses existen grandes discrepancias en sus enfoques, desde una visión aparentemente pasiva del sujeto como víctima de la opresión del Estado por parte de Althusser, hasta otra concepción del sujeto aprisionado dentro el poder pero con capacidad de resistencia en Foucault, y, por último, la idea que tiene Badiou, en su libro in *Théorie du sujet* (Teoría del sujeto, 1982), del sujeto como aquel que se arriesga valientemente a la hora de poner en práctica la verdad que saca a la luz el acontecimiento con el objeto de transformar radicalmente la situación actual.

**Palabras clave:** Sujeto; Althusser; Foucault; Badiou.

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. Althusser's Subject. 3. Foucault's Subject. 4. Badiou's Subject. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

**Cómo citar:** Ignacio López-Calvo, I.; Ortega, J. (2023). A brief genealogy of the category of the subject. From Althusser and Foucault to Badiou's Theory of the Subject. *Res Pública. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas* 26(3), 309-317.

### 1. Introduction

This essay traces the genealogy and evolution of the category of the subject as it developed first in the thought of Louis Althusser, then in Michel Foucault's rewriting, and, finally, in Alain Badiou's redefinition in his book *Théorie du sujet* (*Theory of the Subject*, 1982)<sup>3</sup>. As will be seen, within the fruitful and complementary dialogue about the subject and subjectivity formation among these three French thinkers, there are major discrepancies in their approaches, from Althusser's seemingly passive

view of the subject as a victim of state oppression, to Foucault's one, embedded in power but with the capacity of resistance, and, finally, to Badiou's understanding of the subject as the one who courageously takes risks to put into practice the truth brought about by the event (rare disruptions of the social order, such as political revolutions, that allow the creation of new realities) in order to radically transform the present situation.

The final section of the essay reconsiders Badiou's contribution, in his *Theory of the Subject*, to the trajectory built first by Althusser and then contradicted

<sup>1</sup> University of California, Merced. Contact email: [ilopez-calvo@ucmerced.edu](mailto:ilopez-calvo@ucmerced.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank Nicholas Birns and Juan E. de Castro for their valuable feedback.

by Foucault, coming to the conclusion that, in a way, it represents a step back in the reconsideration of the entanglement between the category of the subject and its milieu, including power and knowledge. In other words, rather than teleologically transcending its predecessors, Badiou's Marxist and universalist take on the category of the subject at times reads as a sort of withdrawal or devolution that simplifies and homogenizes the subject once again. This essay, therefore, traces the historical importance and continued relevance of the category of the subject, as evidenced in the debates among these three thinkers within their social, historical, cultural, and political contexts.

## 2. Althusser's Subject

The Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault's professor at the École normale supérieure in Paris, studied power, how the state oppresses the population, and how ideology interpellates citizens as individuals, offering a somewhat passive image of the subject. His subject appears to be controlled by both Ideological State Apparatuses (school, family, and Church) and Repressive State Apparatuses (police, army, legal system). According to Sara Mills, this type of focus presents "a one-way traffic of power, from the top downwards", thus turning individuals into "simply dupes of ideological pressures"<sup>4</sup>. But even with all these potential flaws in his interpretation, Althusser still managed to open the door to the questioning of the category of the subject not only within Marxist philosophy but also within philosophical discourse in general. The French structuralist questioned the understanding of the subject that Marxist discourse had inherited from Hegelianism, phenomenology, and existentialism. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a single work, his 1970 "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche)" ("Ideology and ideological state apparatuses [notes toward and investigation]")<sup>5</sup>, which has received widespread criticism, is often considered the one in which he best articulates his critique of the category of the subject. Here, however, we propose a broader approach to the analysis of the category of the subject in his entire oeuvre, including structuralist texts, such as *Pour Marx (For Marx, 1965)* and *Lire le Capital (Reading Capital, 1965)*, and those associated with his "self-criticism," in which he abandoned the structuralist tenets, such as the unfinished *Sur la reproduction* ("On the Reproduction", 1995)<sup>6</sup> or other posthumous works.

Althusser opposed how to the category of the subject was understood by the dominant ideological formations in the 1960s, including the humanism that became fashionable after the discovery of Karl Marx's *Paris manuscripts (1844)*<sup>7</sup>, and the individualism of Anglo-Saxon empiricist, philosophical discourse. Eventually, he would articulate his own theory and critique of the subject through the theme of ideology. Whether through the debate about its humanist character or about the place of law in modern society (i.e., the juridical form of subjectivity), the conceptual link between ideology and subject was always present. In fact, Althusser reformulated the category of ideology by displacing the centrality of a sovereign, self-conscious, and totalized subject; instead, he blended a variety of discursive forms to develop a notion of ideology that reshaped the category of the subject: it was no longer the source of ideological forms, but, rather, it was the ideological forms that configured the category of the subject.

It is important to locate his line of thought within the Marxist philosophical debates taking place before Foucault's contributions to the topic. The French field experienced a return to what is known as "philosophy of consciousness" in which the concepts of consciousness, ideology, and subject appeared with great force. The Hungarian, Marxist philosopher György Lukács's *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein – Studien über Marxistische Dialektik (History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, 1923)*<sup>8</sup>, the key work in Hegelian Marxism, began to be read and problematized by figures such as the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (especially in *Les aventures de la dialectique [Adventures of the Dialectic, 1955]*)<sup>9</sup> and Jean-Paul Sartre (in *Critique de la raison dialectique [Critique of Dialectical Reason, 1960]*)<sup>10</sup>, who revived the spirit of "consciousness" and therefore the centrality of subjectivity within Marxism. According to Merleau-Ponty, "there was a practical criterion: whatever can be explained to and be accepted by the proletariat, not through pure obedience but in conscience, is proletarian"<sup>11</sup>. For Lukács, "life-experience the identical subject-object, the subject of action; the 'we' of the genesis: namely the proletariat"<sup>12</sup>.

In turn, Althusser articulated a critique of the epistemological and political consequences of the arguments presented in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, arguing that the Hegelian element should not be interpreted as a critique of Hegel himself, but, rather, of his presence within Marxism. In other words, it was a critique of the idea that history had a meaning, a finality, and that this process was embodied in a social class. Through his concepts of ideology and subject, Al-

<sup>4</sup> S. Mills, *Michel Foucault*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> L. Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes toward and investigation)", translated by Ben Brewster; *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press 1971.

<sup>6</sup> L. Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, London, Verso, 1984; L. Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, Allen Lane, [1965] 1969; L. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, New Left Books, [1965] 1970; L. Althusser, "Reply to John Lewis", in *Essays of Self-Criticism*, LNB, 1976; L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, London, Verso, [1995] 2014.

<sup>7</sup> K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Paris Manuscripts)*, trans. Marti Milligan, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1959.

<sup>8</sup> G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, London, Verso, [1960] (1991).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

thusser questioned the teleological version that inspired Lukács's Hegelian Marxism and that, in France, was echoed in the works of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, thus demobilizing the political form that it had taken in communist organizations. Therefore, Althusser's critique of the subject and his distancing himself from Hegelianism have a political background.

For Althusser, Lukács's version of Marxism reestablished an idea of *telos* or finality, since it assumed that there was a subject of history: the proletariat. The central idea of Marxism—both of the Hegelian version and its Stalinian vulgarization in the post-war period—responded to this conceptual certainty: history had development laws that suggested that proletarians were to lead its progress. For Lukács, the fact that the proletariat was the producer of the totality of the social order, rather than just its result, was a philosophical certainty. Capitalism, in turn, was just a chapter in the laws of history that was producing its own gravediggers: the proletariat, the very builder of this chapter of human history, was also destined to end. On the other hand, Marx's 1844 Manuscripts opened the door to thinking these same ideas from the perspective of a strong notion of individualism and thus of humanism. Thus, in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982)<sup>13</sup>, Marshall Berman claims that there is a possibility of thinking a new type of society and community that are not at odds with the development of individual capabilities: "They have come together to form a new kind of community: a community that thrives not on the repression of free individuality in order to maintain a closed social system, but on free constructive action in common to protect the collective resources that enable every individual to become *tätig-frei*". Along these lines, whereas in Lukács's work the proletariat was the subject that embodied the future and project of history, in that of humanists the subject was replaced by the idea of "the human".

Althusser's structuralist work underpinned the negation of this paradigmatic set. His "theoretical anti-humanism" made it possible to assert that there was no such thing as a subject of history; instead, his notion of ideology allowed him to speak of *subjects in history*. By replacing "of history" with "in history", he began a critique of the conception of time. Whereas the notion of teleology prevailed in both the Hegelian and the humanist versions of Marxist thought, in the Althusserian critique historical time was subjected to criticism. It is not by chance that his work is often associated with conjuncture, since it expresses a certain indeterminacy, together with a search out of the teleological prison. The consequence is evident: if there is no subject of history because there is no single version of the historical, neither can we see the existence of a "sovereign subject". Unsurprisingly, Althusser's proposition gave rise to both the "crisis of Marxism" and "post-Marxism", two forms of theoretical discussion that have at their core the critique of teleology and the centrality of the proletariat as the architect of the meaning and realization of the purported laws of history. Althusser's critique of

the subject, embedded in post-war communist militancy, made him a critic of the then dominant scientist prison of Marxism.

Althusser's critique affected other areas, such as the widespread Marxist assumption that there was a "true" consciousness and a false one. While, at the time, the most common view of ideology was that of a self-conscious subject opting for a particular conception of the world, Althusser maintained that ideology was neither false nor true, as it existed beyond the criteria of verification. Thus, there was not a subject that acquired "class consciousness" but, rather, a situation in which subjects were constituted by varied and contradictory ideologies, which were often understood in an incoherent manner. What was important, however, was the change of terms, the various ideological formations that constituted the subject and not the other way around. Along the way, this de-emphasized the place of political parties as "vanguards" or the locus of "true consciousness". Here, the play on words was in his favor: ideology "subjected" individuals, that is, it prevented them from moving from their own conception of the world.

In his first major work, *Pour Marx*, ideology was already thought of as a system in which men and women represented to themselves the live—and therefore unconscious—relationship with their world. Thus, at the heart of the Althusserian proposal is the notion of ideology, which is then articulated with that of the subject. The identification as subject made by individuals was, therefore, part of an ideological framework that was eternal, that is, it existed beyond specific social relations (whether capitalist or not). The "interpellation" made by ideology allows individuals to assume that they are identified with a unique and irreplaceable unity. In Althusser's words, "I only wish to point out that you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects"<sup>14</sup>.

The concept of interpellation is the one that most firmly connects ideological formations (unconscious, multiple) with the constitution of the subject. Here, Althusser moves in favor of considering juridical categories such as citizenship or even the individual as the result of the confluence of multiple discursive formations, thus snatching from them the fetish with which they are developed in dominant thought. This approach also generated clashes with discourses such as those of European humanism, rooted in the notion of "the human", as well as with Marxist humanism, which celebrated individual freedom. Humanism, individualism, and other forms of placing a sovereign subject were the result of the very ideological formations of capitalism and, therefore, he insisted on criticizing them, as he also criticized the category of class.

Why is the operation of constituting the subject in various theoretical and political constructions part of an ideological process? Essentially, because it sets up a theater of operations in which the subject appears

<sup>13</sup> M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York, Penguin, 1982, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, op. cit., p. 189.

as fully autonomous, capable of acting freely, eluding its indelible link with social relations in such a way that social classes, individuals, consciousness, and other categories are subject to the structure of social relations and discursive links that are characteristic of ideologies. Within Marxism, this operation is crucial because it clears away any belief in a transcendental subject that is above and beyond the concrete practices for the reproduction of society. This Althusserian operation deeply affected Marxist thought, but there was a barrage of criticisms in an attempt to dismantle what were considered the most pernicious effects of his intervention in the field of philosophy. It also gave rise to some questioning of Marx himself regarding his Hegelianism, teleological conception of historical time, and transcendental and Promethean vision of history, leading to discussions that shook Western Europe under the names of the “crisis of Marxism” and, subsequently, “post-Marxism”.

One of these criticisms, perhaps the most famous, was the one elaborated in 1978 by the British socialist historian –although not a Marxist– E. P. Thompson in his essay collection *The Poverty in Theory*, which is representative of a way of understanding and highlighting the Althusserian contribution with respect to the subject. As Natalia Romé (2014) points out, the Thompsonian dart—and, by extension, those of many other critics—was placed in a category with which Althusser crowned his theoretical proposal: that of history being a “process without a subject”. Thus, Althusser wrote,

When that is clear, the question of the “subject” of history disappears. History is an immense natural-human system in movement, and the motor of history is class struggle. History is a process, and a process without a subject. The question about how “man makes history” disappears altogether. Marxist theory rejects it once and for all; it sends it back to its birthplace: bourgeois ideology<sup>15</sup>.

This statement was one of the most difficult to defend, as numerous philosophical and political positions, all of them different from one another, began to question it. Thompson’s is perhaps the most significant, as he was a socialist historian who came from a tradition in which conceptual discussion carried less weight than empirical evidence and was, therefore, more committed to militant causes than to philosophical discussions. For him, a narrator of the origins of the working class, a militant for disarmament, and a romantic socialist, Althusser’s Marxism was meaningless. The essential point is that, for Thompson, the Frenchman’s proposal has to do with this thematic:

Althusser and I appear to share one common proposition: class struggle is the prior concept to class, class does not precede but arises out of struggle. But the coincidence is only an apparition. For in one view (a view shared by most Marxist historians) classes arise because men and women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to va-

lue in class ways: thus the process of class formation is a process of selfmaking, although under conditions which are “given”. But this view is intolerable to Althusser, since it would give back to process a subject, for the process would then be seen to be one in which men and women (however baffled, and however limited their space for agency) remain agents. Althusser however, while silent on class, has never taken one step along this dangerous “humanist” road<sup>16</sup>.

Thompsonian criticism gave rise to the perception that in Althusser’s work only the relational structures of ideology prevailed and the oft-cited essay on “ideological apparatuses” seems to confirm this hypothesis. Today, however, there is a much broader and richer view of the subject, which was largely opened up by the rediscovery of multiple manuscripts. Given that in them the theme of subjectivity is lost from the focus in which it had been treated, we briefly summarize the two elements that allow us to qualify the criticisms. A first element is the fact that, instead of a concept of history embodied in the idea of the transcendental subject, Althusser contributed his notion of conjuncture as a space of synthesis of political action. This is particularly clear in his reference to Aleatory Materialism. A second element is his reading of Machiavelli, where he highlights the concepts of “fortune and virtue”<sup>17</sup>. With both elements, he breaks with the idea that there are immovable structures that hold subjects; rather, there is a set of determinations and another set of non-determinations that do not follow rules or laws and, therefore, are open to the “incorrigible imagination” of history. As Romé points out,

The discussion with British historiography allows us to notice the place occupied in Althusser’s theoretical production process by the analysis of the notion of the Subject, its conceptualization within the framework of a theorization on ideology and its inscription in the more general territory of the link between history and philosophy. To some extent, it can be suggested that the deconstruction of the notion of the Subject tends to place the problem of action on a materialist conceptual plane<sup>18</sup>.

Althusser’s criticism of the subject, therefore, opened unexpected paths. In Marxist discourse, it propitiated a crisis with profound implications, which would later be reinforced by the crisis of Soviet socialism. In the field of theoretical and philosophical discussion, his legacy would be even more lasting, since several of his intellectual heirs would continue questioning the notion of subject, although from very different ideological and political perspectives. Foucault’s and Badiou’s works, which will be addressed in the following paragraphs, although focused on different concerns, have the same

<sup>15</sup> L. Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis”, *op. cit.* p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of the Theory: or an Orrery of Errors*, London, Merlin, 1975, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup> L. Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, translated by Gregory Elliot, London, Verso, 1999, pp. 3-111.

<sup>18</sup> N. Romé, *La posición materialista. El pensamiento de Louis Althusser entre la práctica teórica y la práctica política*, La Plata, Argentina, Edulp, 2014, p. 111.

beginning, which was the rupture in Marxist thinking provoked by Althusser's writings.

### 3. Foucault's Subject

In contrast with Althusser, Foucault, in his four volumes of *L'Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*, 1976, 1984, 184, 2018), his seminar on *L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France* (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 1981-1982), and other texts shifts from a top-down to a bottom-up movement of power that is comprised in a network of everyday social relationships affecting all social classes: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere"<sup>19</sup>. For Foucault, the subject is an effect of the exchanges between the fields of power relations and knowledge. The rejection of his former teacher Althusser's tenets is evident, for example, in the following passage in *Power/Knowledge*: "I would say that we should direct our researches on the nature of power not towards the juridical edifice of sovereignty, the State apparatuses and the ideologies which accompany them, but towards domination and the material operations of power, towards forms of subjection and the inflections and utilizations of their localized systems, and toward strategic apparatuses"<sup>20</sup>. In Foucault's view, if power were as exclusively repressive as Althusser seems to imply, it would be short-lived; instead, its origin is elsewhere: it is accepted precisely because it yields pleasure, knowledge, and discourse. And no longer just a passive receptor of ideological imposition, the subject continues to have potential agency against power.

Power, for Foucault, cannot possibly be controlled by just one person (a king, president, dictator), government, or state at the top of the social hierarchy; rather, it operates by circulating widely throughout all societal sectors in an extensive network of multiform micro-relations of domination in which individuals can function as its vehicles, its oppressed victims, or both. Either way, subjects keep their agency to choose whether they want to back or challenge power. In fact, he adds, power relations always involve some type of resistance that materializes in the same location where power is effected. Foucault believes that subjects, including marginalized ones such as the mentally challenged, criminals, or homosexuals, can actually offer resistance to the very effects that constituted them. Foucault believes that subjects, including marginalized ones such as the mentally challenged, criminals, or homosexuals, can actually offer resistance to the very effects that constituted them. Multiple, mobile channels of power and force relations, therefore, end up influencing discourse production and, as a result, constituting the subject: "rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that sub-

jects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc." (1980: 97). And as stated, subjects can also become sites of power, be part of it: "—Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather, consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always «inside» power...?"<sup>21</sup> These "polymorphous techniques of power"<sup>22</sup>, in turn, affect behaviors: "—Power comes from below. That is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations"<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, for Foucault, rather than being fixed and transhistorical, subjectivity—the individual experience of how we understand ourselves and our place in the world—is created and modified by discourses and power relations depending on particular social, cultural, economic, and historical forces. Then, discourses, which are structured on power relations, can be either a tool or an effect of power, but also a spark for the very resistance that can undercut it.

On the other hand, the relationship between truth and the subject pervades much of Foucault's opus. How subjects think is never independent from these contexts that regulate what is seen as normal, moral, or acceptable at the time. But rather than about universal truth, Foucault chooses to talk about a "regime of truth", which is "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements"<sup>24</sup>. In this way, he conceives of subjectivity diachronically, that is, considering the particularities of different historical periods and cultural contexts. He concludes that the subject is a direct outcome of specific historical conditions and discourses:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true<sup>25</sup>.

In this context, in his *History of Sexuality* Foucault provides an insight into the evolving conceptions and regulations of sexuality throughout different periods of history, coming to the conclusion that it is nothing but a social construct and a discursive formation depending on socioeconomic and cultural specificities. As is well-known, his theory of the subject is inseparable from his ideas of power and discourse. In later books associated with his so-called "ethical turn," such as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2001), Foucault approached subjectivity formation from a different angle, pointing out how "technologies of the self" (self-examination and self-care, meditation, psychotherapy) allowed individuals to become their chosen type of subject.

<sup>19</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, Vol. 1, New York, Vintage, 1990, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Nepham, and K. Soper. translated by C. Gordon, New York, Pantheon, 1980, p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, *op. cit.* p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 131.

In his book *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (*The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, 1966), Foucault argues that every human era has been ruled by a distinct, concealed set of assumptions or episteme. An episteme can be associated with ways of thinking about truth and discourse, a sort of paradigm shift. In Nicholas Birns's words, "an episteme refers to any given period's set of organization practices and ways of classifying knowledge"<sup>26</sup>. As he states in the Preface to *The Order of Things*,

What I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds in positivity and thereby manifests a history that is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility; in this account, what should appear are those configurations within the *space* of knowledge which have given rise to the diverse forms of empirical science<sup>27</sup>.

As a result of this historicity that penetrates things and affects them through the radical changes in the arrangements of knowledge, the cognitive status and the ideas that are considered true and acceptable evolve and change in each historical period. Likewise, the subjectivity of any given agent in that era is always conditioned and limited by that very episteme<sup>28</sup>. By determining the epistemic origins of disciplines such as linguistics, economics, and biology, Foucault's intellectual history reveals these ways of thinking predetermine what ideas and what discourse about the category of the subject can be conceptualized as true and acceptable. Yet the subjects' acknowledgment of their own constraints and limitations is, in a way, liberating. Even though Foucault disavows Truth with a capital T, universal truths, he is not entirely pessimistic about some kind of truth emerging. Similarly, even though he was somewhat pessimistic about the subject having agency, he was still optimistic about it being able to voice itself in a way that would have some sort of impact. And even if they understand how their own thought is being framed by this episteme, subjects must continue to struggle against it. In his later works, Foucault rejects the idea that there is no truth or that the subject is devoid of power. Instead, he posits that even though subjects have little power and are restricted by the power of discourse, they still can act and speak truthfully, an effort that should not be disregarded as it is even more valuable because of the extreme obstacles. In fact, Foucault, in his later works such as the 1983 lectures *The Government of Self and Others*<sup>29</sup>, advocated the search for truth. Resorting to the Greek word *parrhesia*, meaning "bold speech", he ad-

mired how it resisted conformism and posited a sort of truth that, even though it did not possess metaphysical certitude or claims to universality, it still yielded a truth in the immediate circumstance. In Birns's words, "Foucault insisted that the individual must be the occasion for truth, even if, by definition, truth did not emanate from organic roots in a deep subjectivity. For this act of truth speaking, he used the Greek word *parrhesia*"<sup>30</sup>.

Overall, Foucault's writings about the hidden or suppressed discourses in Western societies destabilized the idea of the way in which the individual subject was constituted by impersonal discursive processes and ideologies. As Sara Mills points out, in Foucault's theoretical articulation of the subject, it becomes an effect of discourse, social contradictions, and power dynamics that evolve in different ways throughout history as affected by moral, economic, religious, medical, and other types of beliefs, including the stigmatization of mental illness and certain sexual practices; the subject is structured by the abstract forces of discourse, becoming a site where different discourses are played out<sup>31</sup>.

#### 4. Badiou's Subject

In turn, Badiou disagrees with Foucault's critique of epistemic practices, cultural history, and periodization in his historicized version of the subject. In *Theory of the Subject*, he resorts to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical elucubrations to suggest that truth is transhistorical. He also proposes the existence of a universal subject (not necessarily an individual or a social class) that is autonomous from historical contingencies and ready to eradicate the old order and improve society. Free from the influence of sociohistorical and cultural circumstances, we now find timeless subjects who interpret themselves and their world in connection with universal ideals. As Bruno Bosteels explains, "Badiou's insistence on the eternal, transhistorical, or transtemporal nature of all truths is meant in the first place to avoid the relativistic consequences of a thoroughly historical account of the subject"<sup>32</sup>. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Badiou's defense of the universal and absolute can be better understood if one considers his critical stance toward the presumed relativism and apoliticism of deconstructive, post-structural, and postmodernist thought.

Like Foucault, Badiou also contests Althusser's depiction of the subject as a passive prey of manipulative ideological and repressive state apparatuses; instead, he underlines the subject's aptitude for uprising, as it has "the potential to influence the very apparatuses in which they find their existence—just not in the ways that the classical bourgeois notions of a «free» subjectivity de-

<sup>26</sup> N. Birns, *Theory after Theory. An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century*. Ontario, Canada, Broadview Press, 2010, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* [1966], New York, Vintage Books, 1994, Preface, xxii.

<sup>28</sup> M. Foucault, M. *The Order of Things*, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, M. *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Edited by Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> N. Birns, *Theory after Theory*, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>32</sup> B. Bosteels, "Translator's Introduction", in A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, translated by B. Bosteels, London, Bloomsbury, 2009, pp. vii-xxxvii, p. xxiii.

scribe it”<sup>33</sup> This opposition is openly expressed in *Theory of the Subject*:

the syntactical mode of thinking is retained, as far as Marxism is concerned, in Althusser’s argument that the class is the nonsubject resulting from the articulation of the different instances in the overdetermined social totality. There is therefore an undecidability between, on the one hand, the combinatory and its mainspring as lack, which throws the materialist tension back to the signifying inscription, and, on the other, idealinguistry<sup>34</sup>.

As to the universal mode, according to Bruno Besana’s interpretation of the concept of the subject in Badiou’s works,

A subject is the finite and organized fragment of the exposition of a truth that is universal, that is indifferently addressed to each element of the situation. As such, the subject, although rare, is never isolated: it is under condition both of situation and of an event, and more specifically it participates in a specific and *finite* sequence of unfolding the consequences of an event. At the same time that it is *contingently* finite; it is *essentially* infinite<sup>35</sup>.

Badiou argues that this truth that emerges as a result of the event or historical cut retroactively opens the subjects’ eyes, making them aware of their own limitations that were previously unknown to them:

It is by realizing its interior unity, by purifying itself of its determination (of its division) by the bourgeoisie, that the working class projects itself expansively in the destructive battle against the imperialist space. “Solicited” by bourgeois oppression, it only acts as force, and only enters into a combative correlation with the adversary, by determining itself *against itself*, against the internal form of its former impotence.

And, likewise, an individual only arrives at his or her singular force within the given circumstances by entering into conflict with the network of inert habits to which these circumstances previously confined him or her<sup>36</sup>.

In Geoff Pfeiffer’s words, it reveals “truth that is *ex post facto* read back into her remembered existence prior to the event and transforms it such that she comes to see herself as always having been such a subject and subjected to such universal truth”<sup>37</sup>. At the same time, Badiou warns his readers about the fact that revolts in themselves are insufficient to turn the proletariat into a

subject, using as a cautionary tale the case of the Soviet Union’s new bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Another danger for the dramatic epistemological cut carried out by the political subject is the stern determination of the ruling class to preserve the repetition of the status quo at any cost.

For Badiou, there is a robust connection between subject and universal truth, which is not a fixed or static concept: to have access to it, subjects must radically interrupt the existing situation, question received truths, and submerge themselves into a subjective process that involves force and destruction, then recomposition and, ultimately, a split into superego and justice. Through the symbolic order of a revolutionary event, the subject will make this truth transform the structure of the present status quo or “the splaced ground of repetition”, as Badiou calls it in *Theory of the Subject*<sup>38</sup>. In other words, through its fidelity to the event or revolutionary change, the subject becomes the agent that reveals the universal truth and radically transforms the current situation. As Besana explains,

set between an event, of which it unfolds the consequences locally, and a truth, a subject is the local, finite form of the consequences of such a truth. The subject, suspended between an event and a truth, is the point at which, on the one hand, the empty, universal truth, carried by the event, is verified and, on the other, is the point through which the event of the appearance of this truth is retrospectively made true by the unfolding of its consequences<sup>39</sup>.

It is the faithful, political subject that takes the risk of making the truth exposed by the event become real and transformative. The materialist concept of the subject, as an operation not easily identified with just a human being, is, therefore, quite different from the poststructural approach to the subject as “a mere illusion that needs to be deconstructed”<sup>40</sup>.

As an event, truth interrupts the status quo, thus opening the door for action and, consequently, the creation of new subjectivities. For this reason, according to Bosteels, a theory of the subject “is always the theory of the formal conditions for the emergence of a universalizable truth”<sup>41</sup>. In the context of Badiou’s support of revolutionary political action to create a new social order, he underscores the importance of the subject’s ethical and political commitment to ideals, as well as its disposition to take risks. The subject, therefore, comes to being through its reaction to the event, through its willingness and courage to take risks with the goal of improving society. In the end, the symbolic (place) will be destroyed by the real (force), which, in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou often associates with the masses. Within the concept of the subject, the political subject for Badiou in this book –in which he still considers force and destruction requirements before a recomposition– is sometimes identified with the class party<sup>42</sup>, while others

<sup>33</sup> G. Pfeiffer, *The New Materialism. Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek*, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, translated by Bruno Bosteels, London, Bloomsbury, 2009, pp. 224-25. Bosteels explains “idealinguistry” thus: “A portemanteau word to the second degree, which Badiou creates by contracting *idéisme*, «idealism», and Lacan’s own portemanteau word *linguisterie*, based on *linguistique*, «linguistics», and the mostly pejorative suffix *-erie*, which suggests a «fake» or «false» version” (*op. cit.*, p. xxxiii).

<sup>35</sup> B. Besana, “The Subject”, *Alain Badiou. Key Concepts*, edited by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 38-47, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> B. Bosteels, “Translator’s Introduction”, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

<sup>42</sup> A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.



with the Maoists during the Cultural Revolution<sup>43</sup>. However, as Bosteels explains in his introduction, Badiou no longer identifies the political subject strictly with the party. Incidentally, besides the political subject, Badiou suggests, towards the end of the book, that there is also a psychoanalytical subject.

Like *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou's *L'être et l'événement (Being and Event, 1988)* also explores the subjects' role of agents in the transformation of reality. He underscores the importance, for the creation of new forms of subjectivity, of how individuals react to an event once it takes place. In Badiou's Marxist political philosophy, however, the subject is not an individual but a universal category referring to those ethically committed to take risks in the face of an event. As stated, it is the fidelity to an event, the willingness to actively work for its success, that creates the process of transformation into a subject, which is a political category. The masses make history through their radical transformation of reality. Badiou's use of the term "fidelity" here is reminiscent of the concept of blind faith close to the religious experience: the faithful subject, in its transformative activism, has to guess and respond to the intangible, unmeasurable truth of which there is no evidence before it can be verified when it emerges through the truth-making event that precedes the creation of a new society. In Besana's words, "The subject appears under condition of a radical, eventual *de-cision* that cuts into the consistency of the mode of organization of the present; it appears, then, embodying in the specificity of the situation, via a series of *faithful acts of decision*, the consequences of an eventual rupture"<sup>44</sup>. As explained in Bosteels's introduction to his English translation of *Theory of the Subject*, with time, Badiou changed some of his views, stating at one point that the subject is "rare": "Today, I would no longer say «every subject is political», which is still a maxim of suturing. I would rather say: «Every subject is induced by a generic procedure, and thus depends on an event. Which is why the subject is rare»"<sup>45</sup>.

Relatedly, according to Badiou, all popular insurrections are premature in relation to the political process that engenders them. Yet, this anticipation, this political haste is, as he states in *Theory of the Subject*, essential to the subjectivization process (based on a hasty cut to the old order and a split into anxiety and courage) that will take place in the moment of recomposition of another place and other rules. In his own words, "in the subjective process, certainty is anticipated"<sup>46</sup>. If the insurrection breaks out and produces an interruption, it is not because the masses feel that the right moment has arrived but because desperation leaves them no alternative. Courage arises precisely from the anxiety produced by this desperate and unjust situation.

Although these three theories of the subject by Althusser, Foucault, and Badiou could perhaps be consid-

ered complementary, Badiou, in *Theory of the Subject*, devotes harsh words to Foucault's approach. Thus, in the chapter "The Black Sheep of Materialism" (November 7, 1977), whose title refers to a materialism centered on a theory of the subject, he accuses Foucault of idealist tendencies and falling into the traps of what he considers a vulgar, poststructuralist, linguistic turn that he terms "linguistic idealism":

At its worst when it reduces itself to the description of vast discursive configurations that characterize the entire mental and practical process of an era, ideallinguistry excludes any subject. This is the thesis, which I call fixist, of Foucault, that Cuvier of the archives who with some bookish bones examined with genius gives you the entire brontosaurus of a century<sup>47</sup>.

These passages almost read as if Badiou had been hardly repressing until this moment in the book his need to censure Foucault's approach. In Badiou's view, the decentered subject proposed by his countryman lacks the agency and willingness to take risks in order to generate significant social changes: "At its narrowest, the subject that ideallinguistry tolerates is anything but simple centre, translucent local point, transcendental disposition, it is a question of a decentered subject, a subjugated subject, in whose eclipse the law reveals itself to be reciprocable to desire"<sup>48</sup>. For Badiou, Foucault's subject is static and conservative, resigned to accept the order of things, incapable of committing to an event or fighting for universal or universalizable truth, which, in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou associates with destruction of the existing world and the ensuing recomposition: "Of such political subject –finally restricted to the action of its place-holder, the party, body made of an opaque and multiple soul– we will never say that it constitutes history, not even that it makes history"<sup>49</sup>. Badiou's materialist theory of the subject, after all, rejects as conservative and "vulgar" idealism the notion that language precedes the world. In fact, for him, linguistic idealism is actually a byproduct of imperialism.

In this context, when he asks himself what a subject is in politics, or what makes a subject, or who are the agents of history, Badiou recalls that for Mao, those were the people, but he then asserts that "Communists: they are, in the movement of history, the political subject"<sup>50</sup>. These political subjects are the ones who must fight a ruling class that is violently and hiddenly guarding the place (or the "splace", to use Badiou's parlance) through repetition, blocking interruption ("restoring order" in the language of the state), and keeping the social division of labor. Interestingly, although we have used the concept of the political subject in this essay, in Badiou's discourse there are, besides politics, three other different domains in which it is possible to become a subject and witness an event: love, science, and art.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. x.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 251.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

<sup>48</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>49</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 183.

## 5. Conclusion

All things considered, Badiou, in his materialist dialectic (instead of historical dialectic) approach, introduces a universal, transhistorical, and eternal truth to counter the relativistic and historicized understanding of the subject described by Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers. From this perspective, in *Theory of the Subject* the subject is defined by its fidelity to that short-lived and radical interruption, rupture, break, or cut that he calls “the event”, by whether it has the courage to take risks in order to overcome the old order by implementing the truth discovered as an outcome of said event. Yet, as one reviews the discussion of the idea of the subject as it threads its way through the theoretical mesh from Althusser through Foucault to Badiou, it becomes self-evident that the trajectory does not respond to a teleological process, that it does not produce an end or *telos*. Instead, Badiou’s universalist turn in reaction to Althusser and especially to Foucault’s analysis

of cultural shifts in subjects’ awareness about their own ways of thinking reads more as a sort of retreat from the previous analyses of the inextricable relation between subject and its field of action, including power, knowledge, and order. In a way, rather than a positive development or complication transcending the limits of subjectivity, this euphoric Marxist, universalist reclassification in *Theory of the Subject*, supported by the purported objectivity of science and Marxist political certainties, represents a devolution or rollback that circumvents or, at least, de-complicates the thorny issues brought about by Althusser and Foucault in reference to the category of the subject. Perhaps because people expect a positive vision out of theory, Badiou’s notion of a positive, constructive agential subject has received much critical attention in recent years. Yet proclaiming a constructive universality for truth in *Theory of the Subject* can read sometimes like a shortcut, considering the limitations that, as Foucault demonstrated, discourses and their contingencies create.

## 6. References

- Althusser, L., *Essays on Ideology*, London, Verso, 1984.
- , *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, Allen Lane, [1965] 1969.
- , *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, New Left Books, [1965] 1970.
- , “Reply to John Lewis”, in *Essays of Self-Criticism*, LNB, 1976.
- , *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, London, Verso, [1995] 2014.
- Bermans, M., *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York, Penguin, 1982.
- Besana, B., “The Subject”, *Alain Badiou. Key Concepts*, edited by A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 38-47.
- Badiou, A., *Théorie du sujet*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982.
- , *Theory of the Subject*, translated by Bruno Bosteels, London, Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Bosteels, B., “Translator’s Introduction,” in A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, translated by B. Bosteels, London, Bloomsbury, 2009, pp. vii-xxxvii.
- Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, Vol. 1, New York, Vintage, 1990.
- , *L’herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)*, Paris, Gallimard, Le Seuil, 2001.
- , *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Nephem, and K. Soper, translated by C. Gordon, New York, Pantheon, 1980.
- Lukács, G., *History and Class Consciousness*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1967.
- Marx, K., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (Paris Manuscripts)*, Trans. Marti Milligan, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1959.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Mills, S., *Michel Foucault*, New York, Routledge, 2003.
- Romé, N., *La posición materialista. El pensamiento de Louis Althusser entre la práctica teórica y la práctica política*, La Plata, Argentina, Edulp, 2014.
- Pfeiffer, G., *The New Materialism. Althusser, Badiou, and Žižek*, New York, Routledge, 2016.
- Sartre, J.-P. *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, London, Verso, [1960] 1991.
- Thompson, E.P., *The Poverty of the Theory: or an Orrery of Errors*, London, Merlin, 1975.