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Change We Can't Believe In: Adrian Johnston on Badiou, Žižek, & Political Transformation

Peter Gratton - Department of Philosophy, University of San Diego.

In “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” Jean-François Lyotard argues that for an event to be considered as such, it must pose to thought the idiocy of the question: is it happening? To Heidegger’s notion of the *Ereignis*, the “it is happening [*Es ereignet*]” of the event, Lyotard notes that any pre-signification or *a priori* knowledge that presupposes what the “event” in question would be would annihilate the event as such. The real, far from being a happening as such, comes, if at all, in the form of the question that poses to thought “is it happening?” It must not signify anything, in a sense, lest it simply repeat all that fell within the given symbolic regime supposedly displaced by the event. The event is wholly new or it is not an event worthy of the name.

I begin with Lyotard here not as a partisan of his work, or of those considered post-modern in general, though I realize in taking up Adrian Johnston’s recent work on political transformation, I cannot mention the “postmodern” without a sense of irony, given its place in his work as the by-word for all that is wrong politically these past several decades. (I also first met him in a course that covered Lyotard’s work.) What interests me is that Lyotard’s essay, collected in *The Inhuman*, situates what he infamously dubbed the “postmodern” as nothing but the event of this question, and it is implicitly this question that is repeated with a certain urgency in several key places in Johnston’s work. What I want to address in what follows is just this sense of urgency, which is not the event of the future,

but one that, as Johnston claims, asks us to make the move, here and now, from the plaintive “is it happening” to the praxis of the “it is happening, and I am with it in solidarity.” To Johnston’s recent work’s great credit, this is a thinking of the event that has, I think, been left aside for a supposed revolutionary thinking of the “future” in much contemporary work, and marks anything but. In this essay, I take the measure of Johnston’s “transcendental materialism” for reconceptualizing or rethinking the event of contemporary philosophy. My claim is that if we are to think political transformations, we need to concentrate first and foremost on what Johnston discusses under the heading of the “pre-evental,” that is, a certain fidelity to the event that desiring (and desirous) subjects would engage prior to the event as such—and even acting without any reasonable expectation of such an event. In light of this, we need a critical vigilance, since too often the “event” and the “new” are treated fetishistically as an inherent good, though Johnston too tips his hat in this direction at several moments in his texts.¹ To think the event is to think its risk, as Žižek often argues, and this marks the fact that the event is the most precarious and most dangerous of things, if it is to be an event. But just as importantly, the event may even be something *passé*, that is to say, not something *futural* or ever-new, but coming from what we have deemed comfortable and from the past as a “known entity.”

Thus perhaps change would come from what is immanent and transformative within the *past* of the very systems we oppose—put to the question with the immanent event of the “is it happening?” In what follows, I will test the wager that rethinking the event may mean more than outpacing other theorists in thinking the purity of the evental encounter outside ideologies, structures of power, linguistic systems, etc. To borrow from the messianism one finds often on the contemporary Continental scene, perhaps the point is less to think the event in terms of the innocence of a virgin birth that transcends a fallen past, than to think the event as that which is a bastard thing, a return of a strange admixture of the past that nevertheless immanently provides for change, however impure it may be. Marching much in line with Johnston’s “cadence of change,” I’ll be led nevertheless to a certain promiscuity that political strategy, if it is free of structural determinism, must engender. What I have in mind will become clear when I turn in the final section to Johnston’s conceptualization of the “vanishing act.”

Once More Unto the Breach

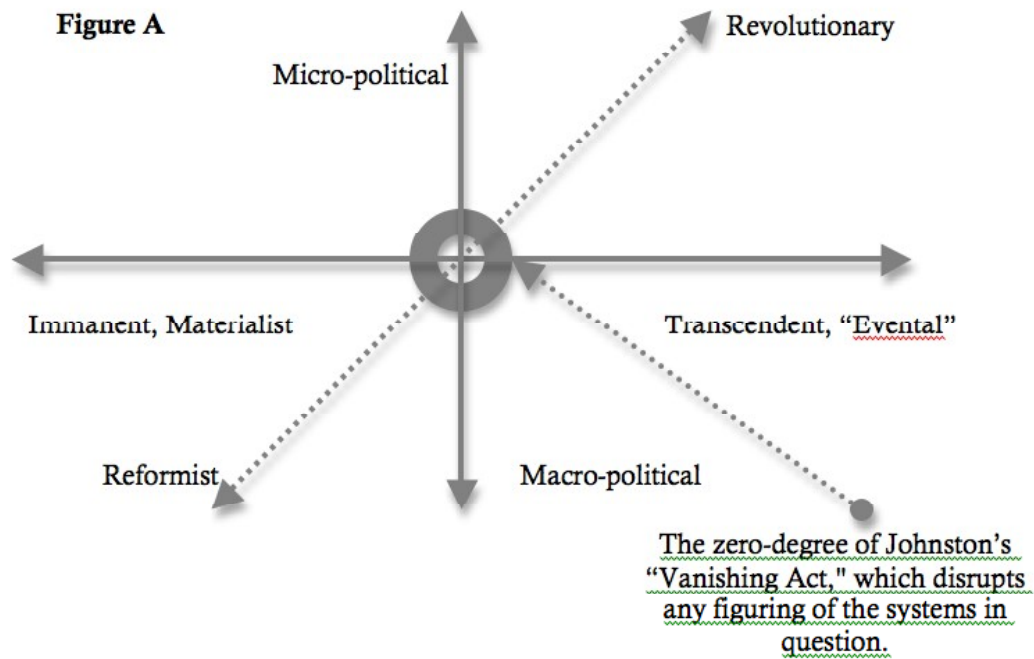
If there is an event in thought today, it is *not* the event of thinking the event as such. If one were to sum up a crucial presupposition of all manner of contemporary philosophy, it would be this: the event *as such* must be championed. It need not matter the risks of said event, or that such events may lead to the worst as well as the best. We have seen at least since Heidegger, but also by way of Levinas, Badiou, Žižek, and Derrida, that the “futurity” or the “to-come” of the event must be respected; it must be treated as “wholly other” in the strict sense if it is to mark the *Ereignis* of the *Es ereignet*. To anticipate the event is to render it null, and an openness to the event is an openness to the radically new that is by definition unforeseeable. Whether ensconced in Heidegger’s epochal thinking, Levinas’s revelational and relational ethics of the other, Derrida’s considerations the to-come (*à-venir*) of the future (*àvenir*), or Badiou’s evental “subtraction” of the unrepresentable in a given encyclopedic set of knowledge, the event as other has been anything but other to contemporary philosophy. The event has marked the wholly other precipitate of philosophies engaging in structuralist (Foucault), poetic (Heideggerian), post-messianic (Benjamin, Arendt), set theory-inspired (Badiou), and psychoanalytic (Lacan, Žižek, Johnston) accounts of political transformation. At this point, I might be expected to explicate for critique a supposed ideological background subtending these disparate but similar accounts. But this point is not raised as part of a simplistic critical move by which such an event is said to be merely derivative of a shared ideology (e.g., capitalist) that, too, has a fetish for the new and wants to detach itself from any grounding in the past. That kind of essay pretty much writes itself, and the reader steeped in post-Marxist ideological critique is invited to mire away a few moments doing so.

In light of this, it would help to set out Johnston’s project as it has been announced in quick succession in *Žižek’s Ontology* (2008) and *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (2009). There is little need to argue for the fact that Žižek has resurrected a number of Lacan’s central theses for a new generation of theorists put off by Lacan’s numbing prose and often illusive pronouncements. But Žižek’s theoretical reconstruction of Lacan has not come without its costs. Anyone who has taught his work can tell you how readers end up confronting his ideas less for their theoretical heft than in terms of its explanatory power for interpreting Hitchcock movies, *The Dark Knight*, and European toilet habits. The force of Johnston’s writing has been to short-circuit this theoretical disavowal, by focusing unremittingly on the arguments and concepts that Žižek

has brought to bear in dozens of books over the last two decades. Johnston has reinvigorated scholarship on Žižek for those too prone to treat him as a punch line and sometime documentary movie star. If one agreed only with him about the power of Žižek's readings of canonical figures from Descartes to Kant to Hegel to Lacan and beyond—and I do—then this would be enough to bolster Johnston's claim that Žižek is a philosopher of the first order.

But Johnston goes further, reading Žižek in terms of his lineage from the German idealists in order to formulate a “transcendental materialism” that has as its guiding principle the idea that immanent genesis can produce transcendent affects at both the subjective and political levels. In *Žižek's Ontology*, Johnston worked out this principle in terms of Žižek's writings on Kant, Schelling, and Hegel in particular, and in *Political Transformations* he turns head-on toward a conceptualization of temporality and change that must be worked out if a “transcendental materialism” is to have any meaning beyond the seeming contradiction of these two terms. The point for Johnston is to consider how systems rupture as a result of genetic mutations from *within* those systems, producing “events” that mark a new system on the scene.

These “events” are the mark of a certain transcendence irreducible to previous systematic causes. In *Žižek's Ontology*, Johnston asks, “In light of what is presently known regarding the deterministic influences operating at historical, psychical, and biological levels, is there space left for a subject that could be said to be free in any meaningful sense?”² His answer, in terms of Žižekian ontology, is affirmative: “Being free is a transitory event arising at exceptional moments when the historical, psychical, and biological run of things breaks down, when the determining capacities of natural and cultural systems ... are temporally suspended as a result of deadlocks and short circuits being generated within and between these multifaceted, not-whole systems” (*ŽO*, 286-7). In *Political Transformations* Johnson extends this thinking to offer a discussion of the “exceptional moments” of political and historical events. But it's also the case that Johnston's *Political Transformations* touches upon classical philosophical aporias that arise from both transcendental and immanent accounts of change: if all change is immanent, then how is something *new* to come into existence? On the other hand, if what is new is wholly transcendent, then how is this “Other” to disrupt an immanent system such that this change can even be noticed?



Johnston stages these questions through a juxtaposition of the work of Žižek and Badiou. For heuristic purposes, I would suggest that something akin to the diagram below (see figure A) is implicit in Johnston's account of the event. Along the first axis, we can chart out philosophical positions that move from immanentist to transcendent, whatever problematic assumptions we would need to build in for such purposes. Along the vertical axis, we can also chart out recent work in Continental philosophy on the political that stipulates on one extreme that only micro-political change is available given the society of the spectacle and the somnambulant inertia of a paradoxically hurried society (Kristeva, the late Deleuze); on the other side would be those that argue that the only transformation that matters at all is large scale, that is, the only true political act is one that does away with the whole political order as such (e.g., Agamben's gestural politics that locates Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida and an entire tradition of the West in a seeming one-All sovereigntist logic). Along a third axis, we thus also pin down political projects on the left that are "reformist" or "revolutionary" in orientation. The point is not to offer up graphic disjunctions that, frankly, any particular philosopher we could mention would contest. Nevertheless, at the least, it is true that various theoreticians' critiques of other political positions suggests that those others do indeed fit somewhere along these axes. For example, Žižek worries that Badiou's post-evental praxis is too transcendent, too otherworldly to speak to the praxis of those engaged in political struggles here and now. In other quarters, one hears that

Derrida's "democracy-to-come" is both too reformist and too transcendent at the same time, while critiques of classical Marxism berate it as a form of determinism that can't think the event given its immanentist historicism.

At the terminus of each axis is said to be a political quietism that pretends to be practical or strategic in orientation, but ends up providing *apologias* for those who either want to rush into the new (thus repeating past defeats), or simply await it (forever), or give up altogether. The power of Johnston's work has been to try to negotiate a means for thinking the "zero degree" of these axes in terms of what he dubs a "vanishing act" that would not create a new system, but would disappear in its very appearance. In this way, Johnston proffers a thinking of something like the provocative, performative analytic question—"Is it happening?"—with which I began, since like the "vanishing act," the question effaces itself in its very tracing of something like a path to what is irreducible to the current hegemony of power. His "vanishing act," if there is such a thing, would operate at the zero degree of the standard positions outlined above.

If there is a ghost that Johnston wishes to exorcize, but that nevertheless haunts his analyses, it is the specter of political quietism. At each turn, Johnston tests the theorization of the event or political action at issue against its potential abuse as an excuse for political quietism. There is good reason for this, since any theory of praxis that can breathe life in the contemporary deadness of political inertia must resist twin depictions prevalent in much contemporary Continental philosophy: the need for a turn to a micropolitics in light of the dominant order, or a simple awaiting for the transcendent moment to come. In this way, it has been taken for granted by some that, as Heidegger famously put it in 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, published posthumously a decade later, "only a God can save us," which, in turn, can only mean politically that no one can. Thus, while engaging the works of Badiou and Žižek, Johnston will fret that they "tend to favor models of change that risk discouraging in advance precisely the sorts of efforts at transforming the world today that they so ardently desire" (*PT*, xxviii). Ultimately, this is a risk that cannot be theoretically avoided, as Johnston avows in the book's closing pages (*PT*, 161-173). Johnston notes, rightly, "Correct theories of political transformation by themselves are unable to inoculate and immunize themselves against this ominipresent, ubiquitous risk," that is, the "twisting of theories ... into rationalizations for perpetually postponing any such changes" (*PT*, xxxii).

With all of this in mind, we can finally turn to his most recent work. Johnston begins in *Political Transformations* by retelling the most influential part of Badiou's writings, which

gesture toward a thinking of the event and the subject's formation as "faithful" to this occurrence. Peter Hallward, Nick Srnicek, Nina Power, and other commentators have argued, convincingly in his view (and mine), that Badiou's thinking of the event is too transcendent and ultimately leaves behind too many considerations of what happens political *prior* to the purified events of revolutionary action. Working through the competing literature on this point, Johnston calls for a Lacan-inspired thinking of "pre-evental" desire that would make any event inspirational in the first place (*PT*, 21-30).

To help situate Johnston's transcendental materialism, beyond the discussions above, it's worth recalling that Badiou argues in his later works, from *Being and Event* (1987) to *The Logic of Worlds* (2006), that truths are meta-historical and radically discontinuous from any previous regime. According to Badiou, there has been a cult of historicism (he seems to place doctrinal Marxism as well as Heidegger-inspired notions of historicity here) that cannot think their way out of the continuity of history to the radically *new*. For Badiou, where there is an event, "there is no common measure, no common chronology, between power on one side and truths on the other—truths as creation," but of course this raises the specter of a dualism between the time of the event and the time of history (cited at *PT*, 13). In this way, Badiou conforms to one side of the age-old philosophical *aporia* of accounting for historical change. Is there an elsewhere from beyond historicity, such that the *new* would appear within history as coming from on high, as a *creatio ex nihilo*? Or, is it the case, as Spinozists would claim, that transcendentalism is too otherworldly to think how such events would occur from within a given historical structure?

For Badiou, the "event" is not simply a reform, revision, or change within a dominant "statist ideology," which in turn has rendered for politics what is politically imaginable and practicable. He argues, as Johnston notes, that capitalist ideologies are perpetual motion machines that present mere change as events (e.g., elections of new presidents and prime ministers) and inversely depict true events and revolutions as but "temporary, correctable glitches in the functioning of the established system" (*PT*, 30). Statist ideology thus acts as the cop on the beat that moves the revolutionary masses along, claiming there is nothing to see. Badiou, though, argues that this statist ideology pushing aside revolutionary forces in the name of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* may indeed be right. We act, if at all, in a temporality he calls the "future anterior," which is the "real political time" (*PT*, 59). The political subject, on his account, acts according to a working fiction "as if" the event had *already* occurred, and thus the subject of the event may never in the end

know if the event indeed has taken place. This epistemic ambiguity for the subject is an important element of Badiou's theory. Indiscernible, the subject must "force" through "courageous discipline" *after the event* the circumstances such that the event will have taken place. As a depiction of radical change, there is much that Badiou offers here: political movements never can know if ontologically the breaking point of a given system has already occurred when they have yet to act. And yet, without this "forcing," which Badiou links up with revolutionary and no doubt often violent *praxis*, the truth of this event cannot be brought into a system of knowledge: the fact that this event happened only rises to the level of "the encyclopedia of established, recognized knowledge" if the subject is faithful to the event at issue. Hence, as is well known, the paradigmatic moment of revolutionary action, on Badiou's account, is the act of "nomination" in which a revolutionary group names and brings about performatively the event this naming entails. This nomination is a "subtraction" of the new from the current "set" of circumstances.

Johnston's contends that, strictly speaking, there are in Badiou two events: Event₁ and Event₂. The former, on Johnston's account, is the ontological rupture in which, in terms of one set or "world," nothing precisely happens, since the occurrence cannot be marked in terms of the prevailing order, just as one can't record baseball stats on old scorecards from cricket. The second event occurs through the declaration by an "anonymous hero" of the previously unacknowledged event. What Johnson argues is not that Badiou refuses to think the "pre-evental"; he doesn't argue that Badiou refuses to think modes of action that would bring about revolutionary events. Instead, in an ingenious move, he argues rather that Badiou fails to deal with what happens *between* Event₁ and Event₂. Badiou maintains that there is a given set for the historical systems in which we live, and that only through a subtraction process of what is unavailable in that set can transformational change come about. Political actors, then, do not produce events but are produced by them, since they are subjects through their fidelity and militant discipline to the event that gives rise to them in the first place.

Johnston's critique of Badiou should not be taken to mirror a "pre"/ "now-event" / "post" "statist" time that Badiou himself calls into question. If Badiou provides an account of a disciplined "fidelity" to the event *after* its occurrence, this should not be taken to mean that there is a neat cordoning off of the temporal modalities of before and after. As Johnston notes, Badiou argues that one must always act "as if" the time of the event had indeed arrived (*PT*, 57-59). The task is to step out of (this statist) time such that one is faithful to the event that one could then, by discipline, redeem in the past. This is the

upshot of Badiou's discussions of Christian grace, which he pointedly argues, in *Logic of Worlds*, is to be differentiated from the "Franciscan theology" on offer in Agamben's work, since the latter merely calls for a monastic awaiting for the event still to come.

Nevertheless, Johnston is right in terms of his emphasis on the intra-evental, since Badiou's discussion is deflationary in motivating political subjects. The pivot point for Johnston's line of approach is "to suggest the viability of a third materialist position" between history as it is lived (what Badiou calls in *Logic of Worlds* "democratic materialism") and the heroic life of the engaged subject (the life as lived in the "materialist dialectic") (*PT*, 79).

This third position would mark an interstitial, *intra* and *inter*-evental space "within which a human being struggles to exceed his or her status as an all-too-human individual (along with the entire surrounding environment connected with this identity) while not (at least not yet) being clearly identifiable a proper subject vis-à-vis a distinct event-level happening" (*PT*, 78). Johnston writes, "*perhaps* [my emphasis] this third position should be labeled 'transcendental materialism,' a materialism striving to account for how more-than-corporeal structures of subjectivity immanently surface out of the odd materiality of human corporeality" (*PT*, 79). Thus, if his previous work attempted to sketch out a "metapsychological" account of how transcendental and irreducible events, such as freedom, generate themselves out of corporeal materiality, his account of political transformations tries to show how "perhaps" there is similar movement to be found in the material development of history. The upshot of this approach, for Johnston, would be to show how the "pre-evental" (or better *intra* and *inter*-evental) subject could "harbo[r]" the possibility for a readiness or responsiveness to the transformative effects of evental interpellations" (*PT*, 79). As such, he asks Badiou what motivates the subject of the event behind or beyond the "subtractive" and deductive process announced by his use of set theory.

This is where Johnston supplements Badiou with a discussion of Žižek's accounts of the psychoanalytic libidinal economy (the drive and affects that are productive of and produced by a subject) and radical left critiques of capitalist political economy. Johnston argues that psychoanalytic accounts of libidinal economy are not circumscribable to individual psychopathologies, and are not thus heterogeneous to the events under discussion in Badiou's writings (*PT*, 86-91). Žižek's critique of political economy has been formulated through the problem of how such a social-symbolic ought to be structured if the subject is to retain a modicum of sanity (*PT*, 89). The dominant social-symbolic long

diagnosed by Žižek is a conformist anti-conformism, by which, as in Lake Wobegon, everyone is special, above average, and outside the norm; we just all happen to believe that everyone else is conforming and mediocre, that is, a tool (*PT*, 92-3). As in Žižek, Johnston argues that fetishism is not “an aberrant, deviant phenomenon, but instead, a virtually innate structure of social reality, a necessary coping mechanism for subjects subjected to the reigning ideologies” (*PT*, 94). What makes life bearable is our common fetish for ever-new consumer products, and we latch so much onto these objects that, as Žižek has noted, it is easier for subjects to believe in worldwide cataclysms in the form of asteroid collisions with the Earth, nuclear devastation, and even alien invasion than the end of capitalism as we know it. It is in this way, on Žižek’s account, that we have “the most parasitic fusion thus far between, on the one hand, the logic of subjective desire, and, on the other hand, the social production and circulation of goods” (*PT*, 96).

The Post-Structural Event

Johnston’s “transcendental materialism” asks not only if psychoanalysis can be rethought as a materialism that would not merely diagnose the social pathologies of the present, but also *performatively* reconstitute political subjectivities. But the corollary of this thinking of performativity means historicizing psychoanalysis itself: can one think the true event, namely the very disruption of the social symbolic that would, in effect, call the *end* to psychoanalysis as we know it, since its depiction of the symbolic, imaginary, and Real would be upended through this event? What Johnston argues is that Žižek and Lacanian categories are themselves but a set of concepts that must be historicized; they are not eternally transcendent. The end of psychoanalysis is often likened to the second birth of the analysand who must break from his relationship to the analyst if she is to live on in a fruitful existence fully aware of her mortal limits. One such event depicted by Johnston is one that would bring every psychoanalysis to term, not simply because there would a curative political process in terms of political economy (with its ancillary subjective effects), but rather because the social-symbolic that gave rise to psychoanalysis would no longer apply. In short, his thinking of the event is post-structural in the strict sense of how the notion of “structure” has been laid out in Lacan.

For his part, Žižek (of course!) distances himself from such a “post-structuralism,” since he argues that this can only be, from within this social symbolic, a utopic vision of a future without politics, without desires, and thus without social antagonisms. Such a life, on

Žižek's account, is impossible, though it's the *telos* of the death drive (the desire to be done with all desire). For his part, Johnston fears that Žižek's adherence to a certain structuralist Lacan—despite all Žižek's calls for thinking a radical break from the present—may in the end leave him bereft of envisioning a truly revolutionary praxis.

But here I would find myself in the strange position of defending Žižek from his most able student: it is not Žižek's structuralism that leads him to step back from proffering a practical program to the "new," therein perhaps "serv[ing] to facilitate the sustenance of the cynical distance whose underlying complicity with the current state of affairs he describes so well" (*PT*, 126). The question concerns the position from which one would critique the contemporary. On Johnston's account, one cannot do so from an eternally existing structure of existence (this applies to Badiou) without leaving one silent with regard to the event he calls the "vanishing act." On the other hand, though, if Žižek is right (and on this point, he is) that one's historicity marks one's work in such a way as to leave the future unforeseeable *as future* (not as the future from the view of the present), then he has good reason, beyond political strategy, to avoid pronouncing on such topics. Here, there is simply no third position, or at least Johnston has to argue for it: either one has a repetitive structure by which one can have some predictability into the future, or one doesn't. To accede to either is not to give into the worst quietism, even if that is the upshot of one's analyses—neither being a passive recipient of eternal structures or to the flow of history. This must be questioned at the level of one's ontological presuppositions, and here Johnston is likely to turn instead to the unacceptable consequences of a supposed quietism.

What Johnston ultimately offers is change we literally can't believe in, taking "belief" in the strictest Žižekian terms. Traditional accounts of praxis depict a given actor envisioning a certain *telos* or end that he brings about through his or her actions; this belief in a certain end is conjoined to praxis, and the task of theory for thousands of years has been to get the *telos* of the political right, in order to better guide actually existing political actors. Badiou, for his part, argues that political theory has been reactionary by hearkening always to the future; by doing so it protects the political structures of the present. His thinking of the event, by showing how the past itself can be upended through redemptive political action, disrupts this typical model of praxis. Johnston enters the scene by arguing that a Lacanian notion of the "act" means conceptualizing events that vanish without a trace: they can neither be believed in as a future hope, nor even in the everyday sense of being a fact that one can believe as part of an overall conceptual scheme.

Johnston begins his account of the “act” by noting that the Lacan of the 1950s and early 1960s refers to an act as “an outburst precipitated by a preexistent structural arrangement” (*PT*, 145). In this way, Lacan “tirelessly reiterates that acts are inherently linked to the register of the Symbolic, to the status of the signifier,” and Johnston works to form an unhappy marriage between Lacanian theory and J. L. Austin’s notion of the performative in order to counter this early Lacanian schema (*PT*, 147). What Johnston is after is an act that would transcend a given Symbolic, which would mean, he argues, that it can’t simply arise from a “preexistent structural arrangement.” Thus Johnston champions Lacan’s later thinking of the act as that which cannot be “comprehended or explained as outgrowths of the prior mediating matrices of any incarnation of the function of big Other” (*PT*, 145). Here we have an epistemological phrasing—“comprehended,” “explained”—not an ontological one, and Johnston faults Badiou, for example, for stipulating that the subject must retroactively “recogniz[e]” the event and be “able faithfully to elaborate the event’s truth-consequences” (*PT*, 145).

An act, rather than simply gestures or action, “is disruptive...[and] as a piece of the Real” it “shakes up and undermines the socio-symbolic Other, forcing changes upon extant configurations of reality” (*PT*, 148). Acting “essentially involves taking the risk of a gesture with no meta-level guarantee of being appropriate, correct, just, right, successful, and so on” (*PT*, 149). Badiou, Johnston remarks citing Žižek, cannot think “a change that so radically redistributes the assignation of change-category status within the field in which it occurs that retroactively revokes its own apparent evental status” (150). But Lacan, he argues, practically “insists that any authentic act is a vanishing act” (*PT*, 150). Here, the heroic metaphors of Johnston’s work begin pile up: the actor is one who silently commits a form of suicide by giving birth to a certain change while not allowing his or her acts to be recorded into the new symbolic underway. The paradigm offered by Johnston is the psychoanalyst who calls an end to the symbolic relation to his or her analysand: “in the terminal phases of the analytic work, the subject-figure of the analyst itself becomes an obstacle to authentic transformation,” requiring a “silent ‘suicide’ of the analyst itself qua quiet recession into the background following the consummated immolation” of the transference relation (*PT*, 160).

This is change I can’t believe in, but this time at the level of Johnston’s account. “The act,” he writes, “is associated with a fundamental loneliness. Each of the analysts’ acts in analysis occurs in isolation insofar as no overarching theoretical or institutional authority can vouch in advance for the correctness of these interventions” (*PT*, 153).

Indeed, history, he writes, is likely rife with utterly “forgotten” vanishing acts, provided a status as “non-status” (*PT*, 160). Underlying this view of such acts is his account of the performative: “A performative speech act” is one “in which a speaker becomes what he or she says in the very act of saying it, is a form of creation ex nihilo, the inauguration out of nowhere of a new dimension of subjectivity” (*PT*, 144).

This is a dream of a certain theological power that would will itself into a lonely, exceptional existence unrecorded by history. The similarity to sovereign notions of the will here is notable. But more pointedly, a performative speech act is precisely *not* extra-Symbolic, but in fact is an *entitlement* in the strict sense of that term: you are nominated a priest or a boat captain and then you have an ability to declare someone married. The political apathy to which Johnston brilliantly responds is precisely “apathetic” because it is deprived of such sovereign performances of power; they cannot simply be in a state of exception to all laws and orders, and thus can’t simply vanish from the records of history. Such a power may be sublime in the Kantian sense, but it belies the fundamental psychoanalytic insight that nothing is forgotten, and any representation to such a power is a disavowal of fundamental repressions that make the social symbolic circulate in the first place. Johnston’s argues that Lacan’s “descriptions of the analytic act (issuing from the position of the discourse of the analyst) point to the possibility of a modest but nonetheless revolutionary vanishing act as an auto-erasing moment that generates true change precisely through quietly receding into the background.” (*PT*, 159). This would be a “suicide” that must remain silent and could not even announce itself: it would be without a trace even as it creates a new order in which it remains somehow unseen. I am thus led to ask the crucial psychoanalytic question, one stubbornly resisted, if not disavowed in Johnston’s work, about the compulsion to repeat (*Wiederholungszwang*), about the repetition that can be redemptive when it is never the same and ever arises in a different context. Lacan writes

The term *Widerholungszwang* is improperly translated in French by “automatisme de repetition,” and I think I can provide a better synonym with the notion of *insistence*, *repetitive insistence*, or *significative insistence*. This function is at the very heart of language in as much as it carries forward a new dimension, I would not say to the world [*au monde*], for it’s precisely this dimension that makes a new world possible.³

Everything in Johnston’s conception of the act, as opposed to reactionary “action,” is at stake in “precisely this dimension that makes a new world possible.” Indeed, a

transcendental materialism must negotiate its way through the parallax of the re/action. Far from suicidal, the repetition, which Lacan notes in Seminar XVII, “repeats itself so as to never be the same” and “commemorates an irruption of *jouissance*.”⁴ Or, as Johnston puts it succinctly, “repetition engenders difference” (ZO, 225). Against a whole swath of contemporary philosophy that engages the event of the new, I want to pause to ask about the impurity of the events that appear at first as mere repetitions of the same—often in vain attempts to repeat the fading memory of a once strong left (1789, 1848, 1918, 1968....). But with each repetition comes the chance for transformation, and is marked less by a suicidal disappearance than a *jouissance* that such irruptions denote.

This must be emphasized in thinking through what motivates political subjects. The cadence of change is marked through and through by this back-and-forth of repeating the past and nudging painfully towards a future worthy of the name. Thus, I want to resist a dominant modus of thinking the event as wholly new, as wholly “to-come,” as wholly unsymbolizable, not because conceptually it isn’t correct, but because our very facticity suggests what is “to come” has always already arrived. Change we believe in doesn’t just come to us from on high, but from stubbornly clinging to the repetition of a past, of the supposed *passé*, that capitalism has always wanted to obliterate. If what is past is never past, perhaps it’s time to enact that history that we are not just doomed to, but want to repeat. That is, if a revolutionary event worthy of the name is to come, we must act out a history that retroactively will have led to the history we desire, and from which we wouldn’t need to vanish.

¹ Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Political Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 78-81. Henceforth cited as *PT*.

² Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008) p. 286. Henceforth cited as *ŽO*.

³ Séminaire IV, 241.

⁴ Séminaire XVII, 181, 89.