John Van Houdt (JVH): From Kant to Husserl, and now to your work, the move to transcendental philosophy has, for the most part, taken place in times of “crisis.” For Kant it was the potential failure of classical accounts of rationality at the skeptical hands of David Hume, for Husserl it was the collapse of the spirit of philosophy under the joint pressure of modern science (the critiques of psychologism) and the onset of Nazism (the Crisis), and for you the problem is what you call “the crisis of negation.” How do you define “negation” and why it is in crisis today?

Alain Badiou (AB): My answer is a simple one, in fact. The very nature of the crisis today is not, in my opinion, the crisis of capitalism, but the failure of socialism. And maybe I am the philosopher of the time where something like the “Great Hypothesis” coming from the nineteenth-century – and maybe much more, for the French Revolution – is in crisis. So it is the crisis of the idea of revolution. But behind the idea of revolution is the crisis of the idea of another world, of the possibility of, really, another organization of society, and so on. Not the crisis of the pure possibility, but the crisis of the historical possibility of something like that is caught in the facts themselves. And it is a crisis of negation because it is a crisis of a conception of negation which was a creative one. The idea of negation is by itself a negation of newness, and that if we have the means to really negate the established order – in the moment of that sort of negation – there is the birth of the new order. And so the affirmative part or the constructive part of the process is included in negation.

Finally, we can speak also of the “crisis of dialectics” in the Hegelian sense. In Hegel we know that the creative part of the negation was negation of negation, so the negation of negation was not a return to before, but was on the contrary, the degradation of the content, the positive content of negation. And there are so many things of the failure of this vision that so proves that very often negation is under a negation. And that is the crisis of negation. On all sides today we know that the pure views of negation are
practically very often militant to negation, and to the future of negation’s negations. Exactly, that the future of revolution, victorious revolution, has been finally a terrorist state. The complete discussion of all that is naturally much more complex, necessitates dates, and all that, but philosophically there is something like that.

So therefore we must pronounce that there is a crisis of negation, and from this problem, there are two possible consequences: first to abandon purely and simply the idea of revolution, transformation of the world, and so on, and to say that the capitalist world, with moderate democracy, and so on, is the best world after all — not so good but not so bad, and finally we have with that answer, the first vision. And so it is a vision where in some sense the relationship between philosophy and history is separation. Because it is my conviction that if the history of humankind has as its final figure the figure of our world, it is proof that history is of no philosophical interest, that there is only left a pragmatic position, and so the best is business. In that case, the best is not philosophy but business! So that is why if, precisely when I speak of the “crisis of negation,” I name “negation” the revolutionary conception of negativity which was dominant from the French Revolution until sometime at the end of the last century; it was the 80s I think. The 80s, something like that, the time of your birth, maybe?

JVH: Yes, indeed, it is. So if that is the case, if we are facing this situation of the crisis of negation, where do you think French philosophy fits within this situation, not just in your own work but where is French philosophy in general going? What do think is the “future” of French philosophy? For instance, in the 80s you talked a great deal of the role played by the nouveaux philosophes in denuding philosophy of that impact, of that possibility of negation. Do you think that there is a future for French philosophy? Is there a hope for negation?

AB: I think there is. Certainly in the actual forms of existent French philosophy there is something which is source of direction, not only of my work, but more generally. There are, for example, the attempts which are included in “speculative realism” in England, which is not only in England but which is also in France with Quentin Meillassoux, and so on. And we don’t know what is precisely the future of all that. But I can say this is a world which searches for new forms of negation, certainly. A new vision of the world where negation is not exactly dialectical negation, but something else. And in all the currents, all the articles politiques et philosophie in France today, if you discuss with young philosophers, you generally agree that the question is, in fact, the question of the failure of classical negation, if you will. Naturally, I formalize all that in my manner, but I think that there is a future of French philosophy today. There is a good chance much of it will be around this question.
And so, it is very important to say everywhere that French philosophy is not dead. Really. During a period of practically twenty years my hope was a limited hope because there was a sequence where many French philosophers abandoned finally the political vision, accepted the established order, allied with the analytic current, you know, Anglo-Saxon form, or in a political vision of absolutely a non-transformative nature. So during this period from the end of the 70s or so to the beginning of the 90s, the situation was not a good one. And I was practically the last negative critic (dénoter). Now today that is not the case. Today there is a new generation which after all of that sort of debate is not the generation of May ’68, which is without personal objections to the past and is open to the idea that we must find something new, find a new way. So I think during the ten or twenty years which are coming, there will be a new order of French philosophy.

JVH: In the Preface to the second tome of Being and Event, Logics of Worlds, you describe your new method as a kind of “calculated” phenomenology (phénoménologie calculée). Obviously phenomenology was one of the dominant forms of philosophy in the last century. In fact, in a telling passage of Logics of Worlds, you refer directly to your relationship to Husserl’s method. Can you elaborate on your relationship to previous forms of phenomenology, especially those of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl?

AB: My response is a simple belief: What I accept from the phenomenological vision is that we must have to the world a sort of descriptive position which neutralizes our effect. It is a Husserlian position, mind you, my Husserlian vision – epoché, suspension of judgment and all that – and the possibility to absorb or create what I name precisely a “logic of the world.” Not an esthetic description of the world, not a pure science of the laws of the world, but the possibility to propose a configuration of the world in the sort of logical framework the center of which is the idea of the consistency of the world – why the world is consistent and not a pure chaos.

And so it is really a Husserlian perspective. The point of divergence is that finally Husserl reinstitutes correlationism which is: everything is referred to consciousness and all the movement of time, and so on, is referred to consciousness. And I negate the same thing because, finally, there is properly no history of the world as such; there is a history of Dasein, and the history of Dasein is also the medium by which the world is always the horizon of subjective experience. And so this is why I speak purely of an objective phenomenology, a phenomenology which assumes that there is no subject at all. It is naturally paradoxical, it is a paradoxical expression, but it is my attempt. And so it is the idea that appearing and the existence of the world is not constituted by subjective experience but it is a manner in which the world exists as such and that we have to (and this is why I agree with the realism of my friends from London), we must be realists, that is, a proper or
true relationship to all that, which must be free of any deference to constitutive subjectivity.

And so, I can speak of phenomenology in the sense, first, that it is not ontology properly (because ontology properly at the beginning of Being and Event is finally the formal ontology of multiplicities), and so it is not ontology, and it is something like a description of the possible logical structure of appearing, but without any reference to consciousness or subjectivity. And it is also my relationship with Hegel which I explain to a certain extent. I agree with Hegel that we can describe some figures of experience, but these figures of experience are not the consistent history of Spirit.

And finally, to conclude this point, it is why I speak of “calculated” phenomenology – because the result of objective phenomenology is always the abstract formalism of a possible figure of the world. And so, the possibility to have a rational description of the world without reference to subjectivity is, in art and science, finally, disposed in this formalism – which is not the formalism of pure multiplicities but is the formalism of relations.

JVH: Calculated phenomenology then seems not to return to “things-in-themselves,” for instance, in order to analyze the intentional stances we can take up toward an object, but instead treats general phenomenon as given and only then creates formal, that is, mathematical, models to explain that given phenomenon. These logical formations help to explain how that given phenomenon functions, the “logic” of the situation, and also helps to isolate those features of the situation which are not reducible to that situation, what you call the site of the “inexistent” in the situation. As an example, you describe Carl Schmitt’s political logic of the “friend–enemy” binary as an example of “classical” logic for which the distinction is governed by the principle of “non-contradiction” (or identity) and whose separation is protected by the principle of “excluded middle.” If the method of calculated phenomenology constructs formal paradigms to interpret phenomenon, is there not something arbitrary or contingent about these formal paradigms and does this not undermine the “necessity” of logical relations? Moreover, is there a general “logic” governing the application of this logic, or is this what you mean by “Greater” and “Ordinary” logics?

AB: You have to understand that the formal paradigms are not contingencies of formal paradigms if you understand formal paradigms not as a formal dimension of precise worlds but as an exploration of what are the paradigms of possible worlds. So we can take empirical examples, and we can engage from empirical examples some formal paradigms. But these formal paradigms are in relationship to a pure world, on the one side, and on the other side are only possible forms from possible worlds.

It is then interesting the fact that we assume there exists an infinity of different worlds. This is why it is the first thesis of all the development in the
Logics of Worlds. Because with paradigms – if you hold that there is one universe and if you want to propose a formal paradigm for this world – you must demonstrate that this is really the paradigm of this world and not to propose a paradigm by an arbitrary choice. But this is not the case with an infinity of different worlds. And I propose some paradigms which are certainly examples of possible paradigms for existing worlds. And after that, I observe that there exist only a few fundamental relations to construct these paradigms. So, all the discussions are not concerning the possible final possible paradigms. I speak of actual worlds, I speak of worlds with inexistence, and worlds without inexistence, and so on – but much more – the fundamental relations are the important ones. And for this it is the idea of a logical structure of what exists as such.

My proposition is at the beginning to formalize not what the paradigm of the world is but what the fundamental relations are which formalize, finally, the fact for a multiplicity to be the world. That is the point. After that, when you know what the transcendental is, what the discussion of the multiplicity of the transcendental, and so on is, you can propose many forms, in fact an infinite multiplicity of different forms of the paradigm of the world. And so, I cannot make an arbitrary choice, but only to say that this world seems to propose that sort of paradigm. So if someone wants to criticize the construction, it is a construction which is absolutely open for discussion, you must begin from the beginning. The structure, the nucleus structure, of appearing of a thing as an object in the world, is reasonably shown by these relations and is known by these sorts of operations. But for the moment nobody really proposes to me another type of operation. But that is not a proof.

And so, to conclude concerning the beginning of the question, there is in some sense a “return to the things themselves” because there is a return to the idea that it is really the things themselves which appear. There is this kind of idea in Logics of Worlds and this is why it is so difficult, in fact: that if the things themselves are pure multiplicities, if it is really a pure multiplicity which appears and nothing else, then it is being which appears. And so, there is not the Kantian distinction between the thing-in-itself, which we cannot know, in fact, and the organization of a thing which is a transcendental nature. In my region, the transcendental is the transcendental of the thing and we can absolutely know the thing as thing – by mathematics, precisely by the mathematics of multiplicity. But to know the thing not only as thing, a being-qua-being, but as being as appearing in the world, we can also know something of that. But we must only assume that there is something other than pure multiplicity in its mathematical composition, there is something which is like an indexation, like a mark, of the multiplicity which is the thing that the multiplicity appears to be within a determinate world. So it is almost a thing-itself but with the transformation of the notion of “thing.” That is the point.
Jvh: The classical philosophical tradition has been conventionally separated into two camps: the rationalist and the empiricist camps. Contemporary philosophy, beginning with the German romantics, attempted various ways of overcoming this opposition, for instance, in Hegel’s formulation: the “Total is the True,” which you criticize in Logics of Worlds. Nevertheless, in the two tomes of Being and Event you seem to build a system on the distinction described in the introduction of Logics of Worlds as the difference between “onto-logy and onto-logy.” This distinction implies a strong distinction between the empirical and formal criteria for existence. How do understand this distinction? Is there a criterion by which to judge the existence of a new possibility, or an event?

Ab: Yes, it is true that my philosophy is – concerning the opposition of rationalism and empiricism – my position is not inside this opposition, precisely. Because, in fact, if mathematics is ontology, the thinking of being-qua-being is a rational one; and if appearing is the system of the transcendental laws of a description of a determinate multiplicity of the systematic rationalism of the world, the empiricism is also rational. And if empiricism is in my phenomenology, in some sense, this empiricism is also rational. So the distinction between existing world and the experience of this existing world, and being-qua-being and rational knowledge of the empirical, this distinction is resumed finally in the opposition, in my work, between mathematics and logics. (And you know that this opposition is a very logical one, because of the way logic is mathematicized, and on the other side, there is no mathematics without logics.)

So I propose neither to abandon the opposition nor to go beyond the opposition but rather to be in the opposition. Thus, it is not a Kantian position, it is not an empiricist position, it is not a purely Hegelian position. Because I create a space where first we can have a rational vision of the relationship between being and appearing and where, inside all that, we can propose the addition of what is the truth, an event as an ontological definition and also as a phenomenological definition.

The point which is not finished in my work is the correlation between the two, concerning the two, between being and event. The theory of an event in Being and Event is not exactly the same as the theory of an event in Logics of Worlds, so we have an ontological theory of an event and a phenomenological theory of an event. But in the first case, the criterion is genericity, the set which is generic is really the ontological definition of a truth, and the second is the apparition of a new body with formal, definite features, and I don’t speak at all of “genericity,” in the second book. And so, I say sometimes with regard to these books, we have to discuss the relationship between genericity, on one side, and the universal body, on the other side, and it is the same thing, because it is the same truth, and so on. So it is not finished, but you see that I admit not the separation, not the fusion, and not
the dialectical going beyond the division. We can create a space where we dispose of this division in a unique rational space.

JVH: As a final question, I would like to ask you about your relationship to Hegel. The position of Hegel in your work is ambiguous. In Theory of the Subject (1982), Hegel plays a central, even positive role. And indeed, many of your formulations seem to take a Hegelian inspiration. But in the two tomes of Being and Event your relationship is more critical. There you criticize Hegel for being a philosopher of the One and of the Whole. While these are relatively traditional critiques, recent work on Hegel seems to make these kinds of critiques problematic (I am thinking particularly those of Bernard Bourgeois, Catherine Malabou, and of course, your friend Žižek, to name a few). How would you describe your relationship to Hegel’s work?

AB: In response to the last question, you know that I love Hegel, personally. I think that my most important masters, not of today with Lacan, Althusser, but of the past, are certainly Plato, Descartes, and Hegel. Hegel I read constantly with great pleasure and I always find something new in Hegel.

Because there are two manners of reading Hegel: the global reading which is systematic, and conforms to the maxim that “the true is the whole,“ and there is another manner in which you read some pages in Hegel, full of new ideas, and sometimes with difficulty to place all that in the whole. I prefer the second manner because I always find something very interesting. I was always saying that I cannot admit that “the true is the whole,” because there is no whole at all. So naturally, I have some difficulties with Hegel.

But my relationship to Hegel is not fundamentally a relationship of critiques of Hegel. And if a new vision of Hegel and my friendship with Žižek create new conditions to incorporate much more Hegel in my philosophy, I shall be very glad.

– August 2009, Saas-Fee, Switzerland