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Thinking Management and Organisations through Badiou's philosophy of truths

Abstract

In this developmental paper, we will explore Badiou's philosophy of truths in order to contribute to the debate in management and organisation studies about truth and post-truth. The four truth procedures conceptualised by Badiou in art, science, politics and love will be analysed and applied to organisational life. This will allow us to reflect on the idea that truth can exist beyond power relations in organisations. Finally, we will discuss implications of the former from the perspective of democracy and pluralism.

Dr Charles Barthold, Open University, UK

Dr David Bevan, Royal Holloway, UK

Introduction

Badiou is an influential contemporary philosopher, who has been developing his ideas since the 1970s. His work embraces a variety of philosophical themes including ontology (2005, 2009), the subject (1982), ethics (Badiou, 2001 (1993)) aesthetics and politics (2010) and mathematics (Badiou, 2008 (1990)). Badiou's philosophy is ambitious and novel. It formulates a comprehensive ontology that deals systematically – through his much used lens of mathematics and set theory - and holistically, as opposed to through providing a series of fragmented analyses on ontology, politics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics and literature. This original approach places him at an intersection of the two main contemporary philosophical traditions: of *analytic*, and of *continental* philosophy.

Badiou's philosophy is generally located in the French continental tradition and, as such, he frequently engages extensively with the history and with the figures of philosophy: Descartes, Hegel or Heidegger (for instance, 2005); psychoanalysis with Lacan (see, Badiou, 2005; for an analysis: Žižek, 1998); and literature with the French poet Mallarmé or the German poet Hölderlein. At the same time he is interested in drawing on the analytic philosophy of mathematics with Cantor's set theory or the oeuvre of Wittgenstein. This interest in the philosophy of mathematics links him (if to a lesser extent) with the analytic tradition. It is this erudite ambivalence that differentiates him from other influential French poststructuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, who avoid mathematics in favour of the more socially constructed history of ideas and culture.

In the fields of management and organisation studies, there is an established tradition of engaging with continental philosophy. From the poststructuralist tradition, Foucault (Barratt, 2008; Townley, 1993), Derrida (Cooper, 1989; Parker, 1998; Iedema and Rhodes, 2010) and Deleuze (Chia, 1999; Pullen et al. 2017) have been interpreted and operationalised by management and organisational studies scholars. Additionally, readings of the works of Smith (Bevan & Werhane, 2015), Kant (Bowie, 1999), Nietzsche (Parker et al., 2005), Heidegger (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015), Bergson (eg., Painter-Morland and Deslandes, 2014; Styhre, 2004) or Levinas (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007) have informed scholarship in organisational studies and business ethics. However, there is very little work in the sphere of management drawing on the work of Badiou (see, Barthold, 2013).

Recently, with the excited stimulus of attention via social media, the question of truth is becoming relevant to management and organisation studies as a number of populist politicians, such as Donald Trump, challenge the orthodox foundation of reality with an array of 'alternative facts' (Weber, 2017). In a social and organisational context characterised as an era

of ‘post-truth’ (Knight and Tsoukas, 2018), a further reflection on the meaning and disposition of truth becomes essential. The more so when truth is characterised – drawing on the generally non-performative work of Foucault – as interconnected with power relations (eg., Munro, 2017; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016) and even fiction (Savage et al., 2017).

By contrast, the philosophy of Badiou provides a rigorous account of what truth is, and how it operates, from an ontological perspective. In particular, Badiou relies on a specific mathematical ontology, which informs his approach with analytic rigour. Based on a secular reading of Cantor, and adopting the formulations and axioms of Zermelo and Fraenkel, Badiou employs the logic of set theory to think truth. According to Badiou truth is always produced in the presence of a subject, and there is no truth without a subject. Therefore understanding how a subject emerges is indispensable to identifying the/a truth. Another important point is that subjects produce truth only according to specific modalities which Badiou calls ‘truth procedures’ (2005). Strikingly, these procedures are to be found only by reference to the four realms of art, science, politics and love. So, what are the implications for business or organisations?

In this article, we shall sample and explore what Badiou’s conception of truths may mean for management and organisational studies, and show why it is a potentially fruitful approach. In order to do so, and simultaneously refreshing earlier organisational commentaries (Meillassoux, 2011), we shall draw mainly on the three versions of *Being and Event*. The original volume 1 (2005), the *Logic of Worlds* (Badiou, 2009), and the untranslated *L’Immanence des Vérités. L’Être et l’événement*, 3 (2018). After firstly reviewing the literature on truth in management and organisation studies, we shall analyse Badiou’s four truth procedures in art, science, politics and love and explore what these could imply for contemporary management and organisation studies. Finally, we discuss how Badiou’s take on such organisational truth could expand existing discourses in management and organisational theory and practice.

This will entail to emphasise specifically how the four truth procedures – art, science, politics and love – intersect with management and organisations. In order to perform this, we will explore what art, science, politics and love mean for organisations and management. Firstly, this will allow us to interrogate the artistic and aesthetic element of organisational life. Secondly, this will allow us to analyse how science operates in organisations when it is used as a discourse – eg., management as a social science taught in business schools – to justify decisions and power relations. Similarly, we will be able to explore how natural sciences are mobilised by organisations in profit making activities that are not necessarily ethical and can be problematic for the environment – for instance biology in the biotechnological industry and physics in the nuclear industry. Thirdly, we will be able to explore the intersection of the political and management and organisations – from the perspective of organisational control but as well resistance to it. Fourthly, we will look at the notion of love in organisations and management. This will be linked to ethical interactions with others in organisational settings and different notions of love including friendship (*philia*) and charity (*caritas*).

In sum, we will reconceptualise how to think about – art, science, politics and love and organisations and management through an articulation with Badiou’s theory of truths. An important aspect will be to discuss if it is always possible to differentiate a truth procedure from a mere discourse legitimising power relations. If truth from a Badiouan perspective makes sense – as opposed to a Foucaultian perspective on a coincidence of truth and power – it needs to be credible as a discourse beyond power relations (Bloom, 2016), that is to say beyond a

purely historicist perspective. This will mean to take into account the context and the power relations from which any truth procedure takes place. Accordingly, a truth procedure would be an excess from organisational control. Finally, we will also question the politics of Badiou's theory of truths from the perspective of politics because advocating a politics of truths – in an organisational context – might involve the refusal of pluralism and a problem for democracy.

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