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## On the Collective Subject: Lacan *avec* Badiou

### Keywords

collective subject, One-Multiple, mathematics, politics, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou

### Abstract

The article aims to theoretically construct the collective subject from Lacan's Borromean turn which contains a reflection on knotting, mathematical groups and the Freudian "single trait" translated as "unary trait." Through his teaching of the One and its relation with the "unary trait," not to mention the Borromean clinic, I will develop a Lacanian collective subject. From triadic knotting to generalized Borromean, we will see how the One turns to the multiple as more than one cuts become necessary to dissolve the Borromean chain. This shift has implications for the Lacanian collective subject. This subject is non-totalizable and radically democratic with a series of One-multiples, forming the collective. The article then goes on to connect this collective subject with Alain Badiou's insistence on the inherent collectivity of the political subject and dwells on the resistant and "evental" possibilities of this collectivity. In Badiou's thought, radical politics is an evental creation of "collective" or "generic humanity." The collective subject of fidelity in Badiou is theorized at a distance from parliamentary democracy and its delegation-based representational politics. In both Lacan and Badiou, topology plays a key role in collectivizing the logic of the subject. Foregrounding this debt to mathematics, this article thinks through the ways in which the collective subject topologically reconfigures the relationship between the individual and the community by "voiding" the one of the individual with the one-multiple of the commune. The purpose of the article is to show how mathematical thinking supports the psychoanalytic and philosophical thinking of the collective subject as a political concept.

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## O kolektivnem subjektu: Lacan z Badioujem

### Ključne besede

kolektivni subjekt, Eno-Mnoštvo, matematika, politika, Lacan, Badiou

### Povzetek

Članek si zastavi cilj teoretske konstrukcije kolektivnega subjekta iz Lacanovega boromejskega obrata, ki vključuje premislek vozlanja, matematičnih grup in freudovske »ene same poteze«, ki jo Lacan prevaja kot »unarno potezo«. Na podlagi njegovega poučevanja o Enem in njegovem razmerju do »unarne poteze«, če sploh ne omenjam boromejske klinike, bom razvil lacanovski kolektivni subjekt. Od triadnega vozlanja do posplošenega boromejskega vozla bomo pokazali, kako se Eno, ko je za razpust boromejske verige potreben več kot en rez, preobrne v množstvo. Ta premik prinaša posledice za lacanovski kolektivni subjekt. Ta subjekt je netotalizabilen in radikalno demokratičen, sestavljen iz niza Enih-mnoštev, ki tvorijo kolektiv. V nadaljevanju članek ta kolektivni subjekt poveže z vztrajanjem Alaina Badiouja pri inherentni kolektivnosti političnega subjekta ter se zadrži pri uporniških in dogodkovnih potencialih te kolektivnosti. V Badioujevi misli je radikalna politika dogodkovna kreacija »kolektivne« oziroma »generične človeškosti«. Kolektivnega subjekta zvestobe Badiou teoretizira v odmiku od parlamentarne demokracije in zastopniške politike. Tako pri Lacanu in Badiouju topologija igra ključno vlogo pri kolektivizaciji logike subjekta. Z izpostavitvijo zadolženosti matematiki članek premisli načine, na katere kolektivni subjekt topološko rekonfigurira razmerje med individualnim in skupnostjo z »izpraznjenjem« Enega individualnosti z enim-mnoštvom skupnostnega. Namen članka je pokazati, kako matematično mišljenje podpira psihoanalitično in filozofsko mišljenje kolektivnega subjekta kot političnega koncepta.



### Lacanian Groups: Borromean One-Multiples and Collectivity

Is there a “group psychology” in Jacques Lacan? Derek Hook in “Towards a Lacanian Group Psychology” answers this question via “trans-subjectivity” (what you think the Other thinks about you) by building on Lacan’s idea of “logical time.”<sup>1</sup> He mobilizes the object and offers a theorization of the signifier,

<sup>1</sup> Derek Hook, “Towards a Lacanian Group Psychology: The Prisoner’s Dilemma and the Trans-subjective,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no. 2 (2013): 115–32. Other writers hinting at the idea of group in Lacan are, for example, Scott Conkright who explores

but the argument is limited to the early Lacan. Hook does not deal with the Borromean logic in Lacan's later teachings (books 20 to 25 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*). In what follows, I will use Lacan's work on Borromean knots, number theory, mathematical sets and groups to establish a Lacanian collective subjectivity that moves from the One to the One-multiple. We will then forge a dialogue between Lacan's mathematically oriented subjectivity and the Lacanian philosopher Alain Badiou's idea of the collective subject. The purpose of this dialogue is to show how the subject in psychoanalysis and philosophy is not to be reduced to the individual of liberal individualism. The subject could have a group or collective status. Lacan and Badiou's mathematical maneuvers ensure that the collective is not an oppressive totality. For Lacan, there is no collective unconscious but the singularity of one unconscious as a speaking-body speaks to another in a Borromean way. For Badiou, the collective subject is not totalized or unified. The only One it retains is the mathematical function of "count-as-one." Lorenzo Chiesa has drawn attention to the continuity between Lacan's "unary trait" and  $S^1$  on the one hand and Badiou's "count-as-one" on the other.<sup>2</sup> I want to extend the political implication of this continuity under the banner of the collective subject. The function of mathematics in generating this collective is our key question for both Lacan and Badiou.

Before delving into Lacan's extraction of the phrase "unary trait" from Sigmund Freud's "Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego," let me make a comment on Freud's text. Freud sees the group-mind through identification in which the individual may give up on their ego-ideal and substitute it for a group ideal, incarnated by the leader. How the individual mind changes in the group remains Freud's abiding question as he explores the complex identification that happens between one group member and another, leading up to the leader. Groups have a multi-layered identification: "*A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego*

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*jouissance* and group therapy but without any intent on developing a collective subject and Macario Giraldo whose *The Dialogues in and of the Group: Lacanian Perspectives on the Psychoanalytic Group* (London: Routledge, 2012) develops a clinic of group therapy but the orientation is more clinical than political.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, "Count-as-one, Forming-into-one, Unary Trait, S," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 2, no. 1–2 (2006): 68–93.

*ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.*”<sup>3</sup> If members identify with the leader in a mediated sense via the object, they also identify with other members of the group in a more immediate way. When Freud modifies Wilfred Trotter’s appellation of the human as “herd animal” to “horde animal,” he suggests that the group is not completely equal. Equality applies to the members but not to the leader.<sup>4</sup>

Identification is a key concept in “Group Psychology.” What Freud calls “a single trait” is the second of the three types of symptomatic identification in which the subject “borrows a single trait from the person who is its object.”<sup>5</sup> His example is Dora imitating her father’s cough. Freud calls this a “partial” and “extremely limited” form of identification.<sup>6</sup> For him, this identification is regressive and does not make a libidinal object-choice.<sup>7</sup> In the first type of identification, there is “the original form of emotional tie with an object,” in the second identification (via a single trait), there is an “introjection of the object into the ego” and in the third, identification emerges with a person “who is not an object of the sexual instinct.”<sup>8</sup> In *Seminar V*, Lacan calls Freud’s “single trait,” an “insignia.” For him, this insignia means that “for the hysteric her impasse opens wide the doors to the other— at least, the doors to all the others, that is, to all possible hysterics, even to all hysterical moments of all others.”<sup>9</sup> Lacan’s gloss stipulates that hysterical identification through a single trait takes a collective form of subjectivity: the hysteric can identify with not only “all” other hysterics but also with the hysterical moments of non-hysterical subjects. The single trait is a portal that unlocks a collective subject, but does the “all” signal totalization? I would say no. It is not for nothing that Lacan spends so much time on the feminine logic of “not-all” in *Seminar XIX*, dedicated to his teaching on the One! The One is “not-all.” It is not total.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 18:80; emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, 18:89.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, 18:64.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, 18:64.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, 18:64.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, 18:65.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 411.

To continue with Lacan's reading of Freud's "single trait," he offers a mathematical translation of "single trait" as "unary trait": a written mark that the subject receives from One signifier. This first identification forms the ego-ideal.<sup>10</sup> One signifier is sufficient to produce this initial identification. This first signifier, a "unary signifier," emerges in the Other's field and represents the subject for another signifier.<sup>11</sup> As Lacan clarifies in *Seminar XVII*, the unary trait is "Being, marked *one*."<sup>12</sup> He positions the unary One in the Cartesian "I think therefore I am" turning it into "I am thinking, 'Therefore I am.'"<sup>13</sup> The "therefore I am" is the thought of the first I who thinks. The psychoanalytic contention is that there are two "I"s in the Cartesian axiom and not one. This subjective division is the effect of the "unary trait" because the One is always already a one-multiple: "the unary trait is never alone. Therefore, the fact that it repeats itself—that it repeats itself in never being the same."<sup>14</sup> Unary trait is the mark of the One that differentially repeats itself and produces a subject that is never quite alone. I would call this a collective subject.

This group-subject is installed *qua* 1 that repeats as the mark of pure difference in a series of Ones. There is something of the One: the One all alone. The catch is that it is not one One but many Ones all alone and yet together in a Borromean chain. The  $S^1$  is thus punned with the multiplicity of "swarm" (*essaim*) in *Seminar XX*.<sup>15</sup> Justin Clemens reads this "swarm" as a Lacanian group without a master or a group in which the master has become a swarm. For Clemens, these '+1' bodies are grouped together with a unary trait and not with a phallus. He calls these swarms "both pre- and trans-individual."<sup>16</sup> While his reading of the swarm (as the technologically redefined human) is sinister in evoking destructiveness, the communitarian subjectivity I am developing here is affirmative. In *Seminar*

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 684.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 218.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, 155

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, W. W. Norton, 1999), 143.

<sup>16</sup> Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 165.

VIII, Lacan emphasizes the collectivizing nature of Freud's "single trait" by designating it as "a common trait":

In order for all those subjects to collectively have, at least for a moment, the same ideal, which allows virtually anything to happen for a rather short period of time, all external objects must, he explains, be taken to have a common trait, an *einzigster Zug* [a single trait].<sup>17</sup>

The unary trait can create a commons: a collective form of subjectivity by linking multiple subject-bodies into a chain where the "+1" is the link. In the above passage, time is of essence, as it is when Lacan uses the expression "collective logic" in a sub-section title of his essay on logical time.<sup>18</sup> He indicates that such a "collective logic" may "complete classical logic"<sup>19</sup> but never spells out this logic of collective subjectivity.

There is an enigmatic footnote in Lacan's essay on logical time. Therein, from Freud's conceptualization of group psychology he deduces the formula that "the collective is nothing but the subject of the individual."<sup>20</sup> Does this mean Lacan is cancelling the distinction between the individual and the group? Is he crossing out the possibility of the collective subject and returning us to the individual? My answer is in the negative. The word "individual" in the formulation above is the One of the unary trait and not the individual in the liberal individualism of self-love. The leader of a group is not always one person but a shifting function in (or even out of) the group. As we witness often with political organisations or parties, the leader-function shifts from one individual to another. What they carry is a common trait: a shared object of ideology. This individual trait links more than one subject-body and produces a collective. In *Écrits*, we read:

Contrary to what people imagine, in collective identification it is by an individual thread that subjects are informed; this information is shared only because it comes from the same source. Freud emphasized that what is at stake is the

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Transference*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 395; the phrase *einzigster Zug* in German in original.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits*, 173.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Lacan, 175.

identity that narcissistic idealization carries in itself, and allows us thus to complete the image that serves the function of the object there with a schematic trait.<sup>21</sup>

The passage above offers an explanation for Lacan's aforementioned footnote. It is not that the collective subject does not exist, but it becomes collective when stitched by the One or what Badiou calls the "count-as-one." We will return to Badiou's point but to continue glossing Lacan's passage, the collective subjective identification happens through a schematic unary trait. The individuality of the unary trait creates a homology between the collective and the individual. In *Seminar VIII*, Lacan spells out this homology in relation to Freud's "single trait," which he calls "common trait": "It [common trait] interests us because what is true at the collective level is also true at the individual level."<sup>22</sup> Lacan's formula confirms that the subject is both collective and individual. It is the same subject that assumes both positions. We will go on to read Lacan's foray into set-theory, number theory and Borromean logic as an attempt to solidify this collective subject.

Lacan designates the "single trait" as a sign but not as a signifier.<sup>23</sup> It is a sign of the signifying chain but not a signifier. It is a mark of the One that can conjure the entire signifying battery of language. In *Seminar IX*, devoted to the topic of identification, Lacan calls his translation of "single" into "unary" "set-theoretical."<sup>24</sup> The strokes of the unary trait are associated with written letters in this seminar. Through the mathematical function of writing the subject negotiates with number, whether or not they are able to count at this *ur*-stage. We may remember Lacan's reflection on what he saw in the museum saint-Germain: the primitive hunter's marks on the Magdalenian rib bone. These unary marks form the one-multiple: "the one manifestly designates multiplicity as such."<sup>25</sup> The difference of these unary traits is not qualitative: "each one of these traits is not at all identical to its neighbour, but it is not because they are different that they function as different, but because the signifying difference is distinct from anything that

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," in *Écrits*, 400.

<sup>22</sup> Lacan, *Transference*, 395.

<sup>23</sup> Lacan, 355.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Identification," trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of December 6, 1961), PDF document.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, December 6, 1961.

refers to qualitative difference.”<sup>26</sup> The difference introduced by the letter of unary trait is the quantitative difference of the one-multiple. When Lacan connects the unary trait with the unit (*monas*) in Euclid’s *Elements*, he underlines the mathematical character of the unary One.<sup>27</sup> Unary trait is a support for numerical difference. This 1 of difference serially builds a collective subject. The collective subject may look like an “all” but the “not-all” as a de-totalizing function punctuates it. The strokes are not superimposed. There are gaps between them. If they were superimposed, it would be a unified totality. The differential distance from one notch to another on the rib-bone is countable, irrespective of whether the hunter knows counting. Unary trait initiates the idea of number independent of counting. These numbers that generate a unary series on the infinite line embody a subject that is collective but not unified or totalized.

There are allusions to Gottlob Frege’s *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884) throughout *Seminar IX*. In *Seminar XII*, though Lacan himself says little on the relation between the One of unary trait and Frege, Yves Duroux and Jacques-Alain Miller make presentations on Frege’s number theory. They discuss how Frege’s series of natural whole numbers is haunted by the mark of lack in the 1 that repeats itself at each interval in the passage from one number to another. Duroux highlights how the number series begins from the contradiction that “the concept equal to zero and not equal to zero is the number zero. [. . .] Because zero is the object which falls under the concept zero and which at the same time is not equal to zero.”<sup>28</sup> The object zero is both equal and not equal to the concept zero. This contradiction is a crack in the passage from zero to one. It is this zero as one that repeats itself in the succession of numbers. As Miller elaborates, zero is not self-identical and this is the lack that generates the number series. Its psychoanalytic insight is structural. The contradiction in the passage from zero to one is homologous to the contradiction between the subject and the Other. According to Miller, “the representation of the subject in the Other, in the form of the one of the unary trait, is correlative to its exclusion outside of this field.”<sup>29</sup> Unary trait produces the first identification with the Other. The subject is represented in the Other as One but it is also excluded from this field

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<sup>26</sup> Lacan, December 6, 1961.

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, December 13, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Crucial Problems of Psychoanalysis,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of January 27, 1965), PDF document.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, February 24, 1965.

because the One is the mark of lack: zero. Miller rounds off: “the relationship of exteriority of the subject to the Other [. . .] constitutes this Other as unconscious in so far as the subject does not reach the Other.”<sup>30</sup> The intersubjectivity of the unconscious is riven by the cut between the subject and the Other. Frege’s number theory is a mathematical support for this topological cut. A Lacanian collective subject must make a link not by negating the contradiction but by accommodating it. The zero as One that repeats itself as the mark of pure difference is a mathematical trait that facilitates the construction of the collective subject.

In *Seminar XIX*, Lacan returns to Frege while talking about the One and designates number 1 as the “signifier of inexistence.”<sup>31</sup> One is founded on the concept of inexistence because it is founded on zero. For Lacan, the One emerges from where the One is missing.<sup>32</sup> It stems from its lack in zero. Zero’s predecessor can only be zero. This is why zero is equal to zero (equal to itself) and at the same time, it is not equal to zero (zero as its own predecessor). In Frege, there is no difference between these two zeroes and he forms the One on the basis of this identity.<sup>33</sup> For Lacan, zero as predecessor and successor are different and one of these two zeroes—the successor, spectrally repeats itself throughout the number series as the “+1” or the one-multiple:

In Frege’s logic, the logic that is laid out in the *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, you will see at once the insufficiency of any logical deduction of 1, because it has to pass via 0, which cannot be said to be 1, and yet everything unfolds in such a way that the entire arithmetic sequence proceeds from the fact that 1 is missing at the level of 0. Because already, from 0 to 1, that makes two. From this point forth, it will make three, because there will be 0, 1 and 2.<sup>34</sup>

Zero and one do not add up and make two but they are two countable numbers. If we count the zero, 1 becomes 2 (0, 1), 2 becomes 3 (0, 1, 2) and so on. This is the function of the “+1” that does not add up but repeats in the passage from one number to another. Lacan differentiates between unary trait and *Yad’lun* or

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<sup>30</sup> Lacan, February 24, 1965.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, . . . *or Worse*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 46.

<sup>32</sup> Lacan, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Lacan, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Lacan, 114–15.

there is something of the One.<sup>35</sup> But, unary trait as number reiterates his point: “*there is no other existence of the One but mathematical existence.*”<sup>36</sup> To translate this formula into Badiou’s language, the One is only a mathematical count and in a Fregeian way, there is a miscount in it. The One fails to count itself. The count is not counted as 1. We will return to this thesis in the section on Badiou. For now, let me agree with Lacan that the One has nothing to do with the individual.<sup>37</sup> The One is a “+1” of repetition in the numerical order. It marks the subject’s relationship with lack (zero). Lack as the starting point of desire binds the subject with the Other. The subject’s lack appeals to the lack in the Other. This is the opening toward a collective subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Lacan’s thesis on the One in *Seminar XIX* not only has implications for arithmetic but also for set theory. He argues that set theory complicates the gap between “o” and “1” by making a distinction between the “1” of set and the “1” of element.<sup>38</sup> Each set has the empty set as its element or subset. The empty set ( $\emptyset$ ) is thus counted as One. It follows that “o” is counted as “1.”<sup>39</sup> Set theory at this fundamental level supports the bifidity of the divided One; one element in the set [o, ( $\emptyset$ )] already gives us two subsets. We are back to Frege’s “+1.” Set theory helps Lacan advance a mathematical idea of infinity. He holds that it performs a “*Cantorization*” of the status of number by including the transfinite number.<sup>40</sup> Lacan approaches the problem of the infinite set – “a set that is equivalent to *any one* of its subsets”<sup>41</sup> – to arrive at the figure of the One as an egalitarian *any-one*. He raises questions about the use of induction in demonstrating the denumerability of the parts (subsets) of infinite sets.<sup>42</sup> I cannot go into these intricacies. They are not relevant to collective subjectivity but let me mention that this problematization comes back to the bifidity of zero and one. “o” in exponential power produces “1”: “a number to the power of o is always 1.”<sup>43</sup> The ambiguous passage from “o” to “1” that underwrites the number series is the generative

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<sup>35</sup> Lacan, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan, 165; emphasis in original.

<sup>37</sup> Lacan, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Lacan, 124.

<sup>39</sup> Lacan, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Lacan, 125; emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan, 138; my emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Lacan, 138–41.

<sup>43</sup> Lacan, 141.

point of inexistence (not nothingness, as Lacan reminds us throughout *Seminar XIX*) for existence. It is the starting point for the collective subject that does not stop at “1” but at “0” as “1.” Zero as stopping point for the collective subject prevents it from becoming a unified totality.

The collective subject supported by the one-multiple of the unary trait is a serial mathematical subject. Number (with or without counting) is introduced into the subject by the written letters of the unary trait: “the entry into the real as inscribed signifier – and this is what the term of primacy means – of writing. The entry into the real, is the form of this trait repeated by the primitive hunter of absolute difference in so far as it is there.”<sup>44</sup> The unary trait is “what precedes all counting and includes it and supports it, namely bi-univocal correspondence, the trait for trait.”<sup>45</sup> Lacan’s comment clarifies the unary trait’s set-theoretical status as bi-univocal correspondence or bijection: a mapping between two sets in which each element of the first set is paired with a unique element of the other set; put simply, no two elements in set A are mapped to the same element in set B. This one-to-one correspondence in set theory is a consequence of Lacan’s unary oneness. It creates a unary relation between multiple elements across sets nevertheless. This multiplicity in the One supports the collective subject. The set-theoretical bijection bridges the unary One with the Borromean logic.

In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan links Freud’s “single trait” and his Borromean principle of knotting as a form of mathematical (geometric) inscription:

I’ve been taking an interest in this business of writing, which I promoted the first time I spoke of the unary trait, Freud’s *einzigster Zug*. By virtue of the Borromean knot, I have given this unary trait another support. [. . .] This is not the first time you’ve heard me speak about the infinite straight line, which I characterize through its equivalence to the circle.<sup>46</sup>

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The Borromean knot is a support for the unary trait. The knot originates from the principle that the infinite line is equivalent to the circle. Therefore, it has

<sup>44</sup> Lacan, “Identification,” February 28, 1962.

<sup>45</sup> Lacan, May 30, 1962.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Sinthome*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 125.

an intrinsic link to infinity. Three parallel lines get knotted at the point of infinity.<sup>47</sup> It is a minimally triadic knot (one cannot make this knot with two rings) founded on topological warping. It inscribes the relation between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary for later-Lacan. For him, the knot is a subjective support. I would argue that it supports a collective form of subjectivity. This geometric inscription refers to a non-trivial Brunnian link in which there is no one-to-one relation among the three rings and the structure is equivalent. One could potentially plait rings three by three and produce a Borromean infinity: “You can plait for as long as you like, provided you stick to a multiple of six, as long as you like, the plait in question will always be a Borromean knot. Already just by itself this seems to open the door to an infinity of Borromean knots.”<sup>48</sup> Or again: “It is this +1 which ensures that, eliminate that one for example, there is no longer a chain here, there is no longer a series since from the simple fact of cutting out this one-among-others, all the others, let us say, are freed as ones.”<sup>49</sup>

In this Borromean infinity of multiple subjective braids, we are talking about identifications by which one R-S-I knot plaits with another R-S-I knot. This is how subjects get collectivised. Jean-Michel Vappereau has shown that if we go beyond a certain number of rings, the Borromean property – cutting any one of the rings releases the entire chain/knot – changes. After a certain threshold, instead of any one ring releasing the chain, we must consider the minimal number of cuts required to release the chain. If  $m$  is the number of cuts to release, the generalization of Borromean link consists of going from  $m = 1$  to the numbers, any  $m$  about a chain of  $n$  circles where  $n > m$ .<sup>50</sup> If the number of rings is fifteen, as long as the minimal number of cuts is less than fifteen, it will be called a Borromean chain. What changes in this “generalized Borromean knot” is the status of “1.” It is not that any “1” can collapse the collective anymore but the number of cuts must be minimal and less than the Ones that constitute the chain. Lacan only glimpses the generalized Borromean knot in *Seminar XVI* but never fully deploys it. Lacan’s bent toward it nevertheless indicates how

<sup>47</sup> Jacques Lacan, “R. S. I.,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of May 13, 1975), PDF document.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Les non-dupes errent,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of March 12, 1974), PDF document.

<sup>49</sup> Lacan, “R. S. I.,” January 14, 1975.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Michel Vappereau, “Sa claque: Du nœud borroméen fort généralisé. Définition, fonction et champ de la généralisation,” *Essaim* 21, no. 2 (2008): 47.

Borromean logic, once expanded, can contain infinitesimal collectivity. Perhaps Lacan stops at “4” (fourfold Borromean knot, *sinthome* being the fourth order of a binding symptom for R-S-I) as he does not want to give up on the egalitarian Borromean property where releasing *any one* ring collapses the entire chain. Be it the pluralised names-of-the-father or *sinthome* as the fourth order constructed on top of the R-S-I knot, the binding entities in Lacan’s Borromean clinic suggest a group subject.

Borromean link connects with number and we will see how it becomes a way for Lacan to support the “+1” function discussed above. In *Seminar XXII*, he mentions the concept of the “fundamental group” for a knot. It consists in the number of journeys (of the infinite line) and crossovers for that particular knot. The fundamental group is a number that varies from one knot to another.<sup>51</sup> The mathematical idea of the group clarifies the link between knot theory and number theory. In *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan returns to the fundamental group to state that one must count the holes in a knot to get the number of trajectories it has been constituted with.<sup>52</sup> There are multiple holes in the three and fourfold knots. One must consider not only the central hole of each torus but the hole inside the torii as well. The external holes are intercut when the link is made. Internal holes remain as they are, but they house the possibility of another knot insofar as each torus of the Borromean link can have another Borromean link inside it. This group-hole in the Real constructs the collective knot-subject.

If I claim that the Borromean knot is a mode of thinking the collective subject, it has multiple implications: first, it is an equivalent or egalitarian structure where each One has the same importance. Each one is indispensable. It is not like the Olympic knot where only cutting the median ring will unknot the structure. If *any one* Borromean ring is cut, the entire structure collapses. Each ring imitates the other in this equivalent structure and one cannot distinguish the rings without coloring them. This collective braid problematizes the individual. Every one is the same and it is from this structural equivalence (read equality) that a particular attribute like colour can mark differentiation.<sup>53</sup> The second implication

<sup>51</sup> Lacan, “R. S. I.,” May 13, 1975.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Lacan, “L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of January 18, 1977), PDF document.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan, *Sinthome*, 40.

is that Borromean logic is triadic and not dyadic; it avoids the isolationist, fusionist and narcissistic possibilities of a coupledom that does not see beyond itself. The two is constructed by the three as a “+1” in this knot. In the quadruple chain, “3” and “4” as a double-buckle produce the “2.” The third aspect to this collective is that it is possible to collapse the chain minimally. It is a collapsible community and not a dogmatic, unbreakable party-subject. Each ring (a torus) of the knot can also have a Borromean knot inside it. This way the link is both inside and outside. The fourth point to derive from this mathematical structure as a support for the collective subject is that it combines the one and the many. Each ring is alone by itself but together in a triadic logic. This collective combines the individual and the community in a way we witnessed with Freud’s group psychology and Lacan’s reading of it, especially via the unary trait. The fifth point that makes Borromean logic immune to totalization is the impasse of the Real. The knotting happens at the level of the third, i.e., the Real. Lacan insists that Real is not only one of the rings of the link, but the knotting itself is Real.<sup>54</sup> When a group is not connected by language (symbolic) or ego (imaginary) but by the impossible (real), its collectivity is non-unitary, contingent and collapsible. It is the third ring’s (as the line circles up by splicing its two ends) twist around the hole shared by the two other rings that produces the Borromean triad. What binds this collective is the true hole of the Real, ratified by the infinite line that bends and warps around it. A knot-subject collectivized by the Real resists totalization since the Real can never be fully formalized. Borromean generalization reaches impasses wherein the “any one” function fails and one must think about more than one cuts to collapse the chain.

There is no dyadic relation in the Lacanian collective. The Ones in the knot have no direct link. In *Seminar XXII*, discussing the Freudian group that all subjects are part of, Lacan expands on the social group as a Borromean knot:

The start of any social knot is constituted [. . .] by the sexual non-relationship as a hole, not of two, at least three, and [. . .] even if you are only three, that will give four. The plus-one person will be there, even if you are only three, [. . .] this will make a Borromean knot if one started from the idea of the cycle, as it is made from two knotted even if you were only three, that will make four, hence my expression plus-one. And it is by withdrawing a real one that the group will be unknotted. For

<sup>54</sup> Lacan, “R. S. I.,” December 17, 1974.

this you must be able to withdraw a real one to give the proof that the knot is Borromean and that it is indeed the three minimal consistencies that constitute it.<sup>55</sup>

We do not have the scope to address sexual non-relation here, but the above passage indicates that the Lacanian social knot of a collective subject is founded on the non-relation of the Real or the “not-all” that gets added to the “+1.” This is the mathematical formula of Lacanian collective subject: “+1” punctuated by “not-all.” With this combination of “+1” and “not-all” in mind, let me now turn to Badiou’s conceptualization of the collective subject.

### **Badiou’s Collective Subject: Evental Politics and Mathematics**

Having established a collective subject through mathematical thinking in Lacan, in this section I will connect it with Alain Badiou’s political subject as an inherent collectivity and analyze the role of mathematics in its construction. The term “collective subject” has not received much critical attention in Badiou studies. Though Badiou gets a mention in the introduction to issue 4 of the journal *Subjectivity* on “collective subjects, emancipatory cultures and political transformation,” the collective nature of the Badiouean subject is hardly discussed there.<sup>56</sup> For Badiou, the subject comes in the wake of an interruptive event. The subject is not the individual. The event as a contingent supplement to a situation changes the given situation and vanishes as soon as it appears. Subjectivity is constructed as a post-evental process of truth. An individual may exist before the event but provided there is fidelity to the event, we have a subject after it. In Badiou’s mathematical ontology theorized in *Being and Event*, being is a pure multiple, i.e., the multiple of a multiple. Its stopping point is not the one but the void. He uses the term “collective subject” for the political truth procedure.<sup>57</sup> Badiou calls such a subject “the truth of the collective’s being.”<sup>58</sup>

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In *Being and Event* while discussing how the state does not recognize individuals but only a class of individuals, Badiou encounters the coercive statist collective. This is not the collective subject. The collective subject works against this

<sup>55</sup> Lacan, April 15, 1975.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Dunst and Caroline Edwards, “Collective Subjects, Emancipatory Cultures and Political Transformation,” *Subjectivity* 4 (2011): 1–8.

<sup>57</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 392.

<sup>58</sup> Badiou, 17.

pseudo-collectivity. There can be no true collectivity without attending to its members (not as individuals but members). Since the logic of the group and that of the member are similar, a group must recognize its members. The state does not recognize subjective singularity. It takes an evental politics to recognize the member as constitutive of the collective in their very being. Badiou reads Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "general will" as one such "collective operator" that "splits particular wills"<sup>59</sup> and leads to the creation of a "collective humanity."<sup>60</sup> He calls Rousseau's contract a "collective event."<sup>61</sup>

Badiou's One, like Lacan's, is only a count. It does not have any ontological grounding. The individual is not absent in Badiou but they are seen as elements of a collective principle of subjectivity:

One sees how topology is disidentifying in nature. That which in topology applies to a term, a point, an individual. by way of the determination of its site, its local adherence, must also always hold true for others, for a collective, to which this individual belongs.<sup>62</sup>

Badiou agrees with Lacan's thesis that what applies for the members individually holds true for the collective.

In *Logics of Worlds* (2006, 2009), Badiou relegates the individual to a "democratic materialism" that believes in bodies and languages alone but cannot posit any truth: "The individual as fashioned by the contemporary world recognizes the objective existence of bodies alone."<sup>63</sup> He axiomatizes democratic materialism: "*There are only individuals and communities.*"<sup>64</sup> Let us note that democratic materialism does not cancel community but unlike evental politics, for this statist political framework, individuals and communities are static, separable entities. Community in democratic materialism is understood as an ethno-nationalist

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<sup>59</sup> Badiou, 346.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, 345.

<sup>61</sup> Badiou, 352.

<sup>62</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009), 223.

<sup>63</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Badiou, 8; emphasis in original.

idea of one community or another. These individuals and communities cannot be transformed by the evental process of truth. In opposition to democratic materialism, Badiou axiomatizes ‘materialist dialectic’ as follows:

*The universality of truths rests on subjective forms that cannot be either individual or communitarian.*<sup>65</sup>

Or:

*To the extent that it is the subject of a truth, a subject subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation.*<sup>66</sup>

As these two axioms suggest, Badiou’s collective subject is neither individual nor communitarian. It merges the two by negating their mutual exclusivity. The collective subject as “one-multiple” is both individual and communitarian. It is neither one nor the other but both. The evental politics of truth produces a subtractive site where subjects are made at a distance from every particular community and by destroying all kinds of individuation.

In *Metapolitics*, Badiou’s proposal seems to contradict collectivity as a mathematical idea:

An event is political if its material is collective, or if the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity. “Collective” is not a numerical concept here. We say that the event is ontologically collective to the extent that it provides the vehicle for a virtual summoning of all. “Collective” means immediately universalising.<sup>67</sup>

The collective is universal but not numerical. Instead of reading Badiou *contra* Lacan on this point, let me return to the numericality of the collective political subject. Unlike Badiou’s other three evental truth procedures that he calls “aristocratic,” the political truth procedure is not only collective or universal in the function of address (all truths are addressed to all) but also locally collective at every point of its composition:

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<sup>65</sup> Badiou, 8; emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> Badiou, 8–9; emphasis in original.

<sup>67</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 141.

Science, art and love are aristocratic truth procedures. Of course, they are addressed to all and universalise their own singularity. But their regime is not that of the collective. Politics is impossible without the statement that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that constitutes the post-evental political subject. This statement claims that a political thought is topologically collective, meaning that it cannot exist otherwise than as the thought of all.<sup>68</sup>

In the political truth process, an “immanent subjective infinity” is the first term, unlike in others where the infinite comes into play but not at the starting point.<sup>69</sup> This inaugural infinity of the political subject makes it collective. Infinity is a mathematical concept in Badiou. The collective subject shows its mathematical character here. What makes the political truth process mathematical is the relation between the state and the event. Badiou defines the state as a “meta-structure that exercises the power of counting over all the subsets of the situation.”<sup>70</sup> Every situation has a state but the state of the situation exceeds the situation and this excess is mathematically established as immeasurable.<sup>71</sup> When evental politics happens, this immeasurable excess obtains a measure: “the political event interrupts the subjective errancy of the power of the State. It configures the state of the situation. It gives it a figure; it configures its power; it measures it.”<sup>72</sup> From this measure Badiou arrives at the “numericality” of the political truth process. The truth process that produces the political subject is deemed as numerical. In this mathematics, we travel from one infinity to another through yet another infinity in the middle: “In the case of politics, we said that its first term, which is linked to the collective character of the political event, is the infinite of the situation. It is the simple infinite, the infinite of presentation. This infinite is determined; the value of its power is fixed.”<sup>73</sup> Political truth process begins from the infinity of the collective event and via the infinity of the state of the situation, it ends with a fixing of infinity. Badiou mathematically inscribes these three as follows:

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<sup>68</sup> Badiou, 142.

<sup>69</sup> Badiou, 143.

<sup>70</sup> Badiou, 143.

<sup>71</sup> Badiou, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Badiou, 145.

<sup>73</sup> Badiou, 146.

1.  $\sigma$
2.  $\varepsilon > \sigma$
3.  $\pi(\varepsilon)$ <sup>74</sup>

The mathematical movement proceeds from an indeterminate to a determinate infinity. Badiou places the “1” as the climax of this political numericality:

Finally to count as one that which is not even counted is what is at stake in every genuinely political thought, every prescription that summons the collective as such. The 1 is the numericality of the same, and to produce the same is what an emancipatory political procedure is capable of. The 1 disfigures every non-egalitarian claim.<sup>75</sup>

The Lacanian “one-multiple” of group subject returns at this juncture. Badiou writes political numericality as:  $\sigma, \varepsilon, \pi(\varepsilon), \pi(\pi(\varepsilon)) \Rightarrow 1$ .<sup>76</sup> This “1” of equality is a counting of the uncounted via the event. He calls it “the universal truth of the collective.”<sup>77</sup> This is where Badiou contradicts himself: the collective subject is not just universal but numerical as well. The collective’s universality lies in traversing the numericality of multiple infinities (three, to be precise) to construct the egalitarian 1. In *The Immanence of Truths* (2018, 2022) Badiou juxtaposes the apparent collectivity of parliamentary democracy with the true collectivity of insurrectionist subjectivity. In the numerical festival of elections, he locates “individuals,” as “separated” from each other in the voting booth.<sup>78</sup> There is no true collective in it despite the democratic semblance of collectivity. On the other hand, from political movements, mass strikes etc., a true collective emerges. He calls the democratic semblance of collectivity “individuals and their majority count.”<sup>79</sup> It stands in contrast to the possibilities of “collective groupings.”<sup>80</sup> This collective subject is a matter of construction. It must be “created” from common resources and unlike individuals who are aligned with the finite, Badiou

<sup>74</sup> Badiou, 147–48.

<sup>75</sup> Badiou, 150.

<sup>76</sup> Badiou, 151.

<sup>77</sup> Badiou, 151.

<sup>78</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 29.

<sup>79</sup> Badiou, 30.

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, 30.

organises the collective subject “on the scale of infinity itself.”<sup>81</sup> He reminds us that collective resources are far greater than that of the individuals and they create more possibilities than the individual resource of a situation.<sup>82</sup> Badiou argues that the individual approached by the state is not a subject but a singleton set. The mathematical reference to set theory is notable:

It is not the individual as a potentially infinite multiplicity, capable of truth, taking part in an event, indomitable and creative, that the State takes into account, but the singleton of that individual. It is not the real individual Ahmed who is constituted by the state as a “citizen” but rather {Ahmed}. This explains the general equivalence of all individuals in the eyes of the state, their essential anonymity. They are all singletons, hence units regarded not as what they are but as minimal subsets of the state.<sup>83</sup>

The point I want to highlight (since Badiou remains silent here) is that the singleton set is *not One*: it contains the empty set as its subset— $\{\emptyset\}$ . The singleton set and the empty set are its two subsets. When the state approaches the individual as a singleton, it fails to consider that the singleton is not one but two: {Ahmed,  $\emptyset$ }. This is where the Lacanian “+1” haunts the individual. It breaks the unitary Oneness of the citizen and opens the possibility of an eventual subject to emerge from the individual.

For Badiou, the political subject is collective in a mathematical way that involves numericality, set theory and infinity. This subject is internationalist in a Marxist sense. In *A New Dawn for Politics* (2021, 2022), he writes: “It is possible to organise collective life without reference to identitarian closed sets such as nations, languages, religions, and customs. All of these differences can and must coexist in a fruitful way, but on the political scale of humanity as a whole. The future lies in a complete internationalism.”<sup>84</sup> The collective subject does not cross out the difference of identities but allows them to co-exist in it. The identitarian differences must not be treated as “closed sets.” They must function as “open sets”

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<sup>81</sup> Badiou, 32.

<sup>82</sup> Badiou, 34, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Badiou, 297. For an earlier purchase on this idea, see *Being and Event*, 107, where he associates the individual approached by the state as a singleton, a subset and not as the name of an infinite multiple.

<sup>84</sup> Alain Badiou, *A New Dawn for Politics*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), 67.

that intersect and find a transcendental in the human scale. This is the “generic” subject, Badiou rebuilds from Marx but not without reference to Paul Cohen’s mathematical discovery of generic sets from the 1960s. The generic set corresponds with “generic humanity” extracted from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*.<sup>85</sup> It remains “indiscernible” within the situation as the ontological schema of truth. Generic subsets of a set cannot be easily distinguished from one another which gives them an egalitarian and equivalent status. The event activates this generic schema of truth in a subjective way.<sup>86</sup>

Generic humanity is a collective subject: a set that needs to be constructed via the event. Badiou defines it following Marx: “to go beyond the individual, not in the direction of enjoying a withdrawal but in that of constructing a generic humanity.”<sup>87</sup> Evoking Bertolt Brecht’s poem, he calls generic collectivity an “unknown man.”<sup>88</sup> This generic subject could be anyone, much like the Borromean *any One* with the capacity to unmake the collective. Generic humanity becomes universal by stepping away from any one particular identitarian category like nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, caste and so on. It uncouples itself from these categories, but this does not mean that the categories cease to exist for the collective subject. They co-exist in the subject without the subject being reduced (“sutured” in Badiou’s language) to any one of them. They exist in the subject as serial “+1” identities but the subject is not an aggregate of these Ones. The collective generic subject is not a sum of its parts but a non-totalizable entity that makes these ones co-exist on an infinite number line. There is something more (0 as 1 in between the numbers) in the subject than these constituents. This makes the collective subject into a generic set: “a set that is as indeterminate as possible, as indistinguishable as possible from another generic set, as lacking as possible in any distinctive property.”<sup>89</sup>

In line with Cohen, Badiou situates the generic set as the “nondescript subset of a given infinite set.”<sup>90</sup> Its connection with infinity is instructive. It gives the collective subject an infinite dimension. In *The Immanence of Truths*, one of the

<sup>85</sup> Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 230.

<sup>86</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 371.

<sup>87</sup> Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 121.

<sup>88</sup> Badiou, 189.

<sup>89</sup> Badiou, 231.

<sup>90</sup> Badiou, 240.

four infinities (the other three being the infinity of the world, the infinity of the static work and the dynamic, constructible infinity covering the work's static infinity) involved in the work of truth is the infinity of the generic set.<sup>91</sup> This is how Badiou describes the process:

The truth procedure, which, starting from the trace (or “name”) of the event, “works” infinitely toward its result in the world, which is the generic subset. It is in this sense that the procedure can be called a generic procedure [. . .]. This should be understood in the dynamic sense: investigation after investigation, as it moves through the world impacted by the event, the procedure creates the form and content of the generic set. Now, the work is defined as a fragment of this process, of this becoming. It is only retroactively that ontology will consider it as a subset of the result “to come” of the procedure, that is, the *generic set*.<sup>92</sup>

The evental trace works in an infinite way to create the form and content of the generic subset in future anterior. The generic set is “non-constructible” and therefore it must be created. I would argue, this is the axiomatic task of collectivity as a subjective principle. Badiou finds continuity between Cohen's non-constructible generic sets and Marx's proletariat as generic humanity:

Paul Cohen [. . .] proved that we can admit, without introducing any systemic contradiction and without using any new axioms, hence from within the classical ontology of the multiple, that there exist intrinsically non-constructible sets, sets that will not be reached by the constructible hierarchy. [. . .] he called these sets *generic sets*.

The word “generic” has a long history. It is the word by which Marx referred to the proletariat in the *1844 Manuscripts*. He said that the proletariat was the representation of generic humanity [. . .] of humanity as such, not assignable to this or that identity, whether hereditary or constructible. What Marx meant by “proletariat” was in fact the non-constructible real core of bourgeois society: the workers, naturally, existed; they were there, but not only could the established order not construct them as a consistent set *as a subjective capacity*, as the creating of

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<sup>91</sup> Badiou, 453.

<sup>92</sup> Badiou, 456.

a communist politics, but it couldn't even imagine, let alone admit, that such a construction was possible.<sup>93</sup>

The passage above indicates that the collective subject is a generic set, non-constructible within a given situation until the event encounters and changes the situation by supplementing it infinitely to construct the non-constructible set. Within capitalism, the proletariat remains non-constructible. It takes the event that changes capitalism to create the proletariat as its generic result.

The collective subjects constitute generic infinity but as Badiou warns us, they cannot be taken as “pre-defined totalities.”<sup>94</sup> They are “*immanent exceptions*.”<sup>95</sup> Truth itself has the status of exception in Badiou. The collective subject too is exceptional: an eventual product that treats a situation from its point of exception. This exceptionality saves the collective from turning into a totality. The non-totalizability of the collective subject is shared between Badiou and Lacan. The collective subject is not one or the other community (e.g., Christian or Arab). Badiou holds that “community,” caught up in identitarian discourse,<sup>96</sup> becomes a reactionary term. The collective subject of truth is the real or impossible of these particular communities.<sup>97</sup> Community in the particularist sense is a marker of finitude but the collective subject is universal, infinite and generic.<sup>98</sup> Its generic universality protects it from being totalized as one ethno-nationalist community or another. Though his analysis has a different goal to the present one, let me cite Chiesa to agree with him:

Unity and totality [. . .] can only be conceived of if one begins from the multiple, which initially un-presents itself in the void-set as being without-one. The fact that both elements and sets are multiples-of-multiples and thus become indistinguishable collapses the traditional distinction between unity as an element of a totality and totality as a set of unities.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Badiou, 230–31; emphasis in original.

<sup>94</sup> Badiou, 231.

<sup>95</sup> Badiou, 231; emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2008), 172.

<sup>97</sup> Badiou, 148–49.

<sup>98</sup> Badiou, 172.

<sup>99</sup> Chiesa, “Count-as-one,” 83–84.

In the passage above Chiesa argues that Badiou's ontology where a multiple is a multiple of another multiple *ad infinitum* collapses the difference between unity and totality as it nullifies both. The collective subject is neither unitary nor totalizable.

### Collectivity in Lacan and Badiou: Politics of Mathematical Thinking

As we have seen, the mathematically constructed collectivity as a subjective principle is political in its implication for Lacan and an explicitly political subject for Badiou. Mathematical thinking serves a political purpose in both their projects across psychoanalysis and philosophy. The collective subject is mathematically political and not political despite being mathematical. Our construction of collective subjectivity opens up the political in mathematical thinking. The collective involves a political dialectic of the one and the many but it must tackle the lack or the void as the problem of the emergence of 1 from "o." The process does not privilege unity, as it does not privilege totality and individualism. This collective subject is not unitary but collapsible by the agency of *anyone*. This is what makes the collective egalitarian. Collective subjectivity does not forward individualism as the stopping point is not 1 but o. The mathematical mark of lack divides the *in-dividual*. The collective subject resists totalization in Lacan by the Real logic of impossibility and incompleteness as it does in Badiou by resisting the ethno-nationalist nomination of one particular community or another. Mathematical thinking allows us to conceptualize a structure that is collective without being totalizable or summative. Individuals do not pre-exist this collective. The collective subject in turn gives birth to members who are not the same individuals that made the collective. In *The Immanence of Truths*, Badiou calls this pre-evental individual by the name of "human animal"<sup>100</sup> but this entity only becomes a subject when the event collectivizes it and forms a subjective principle. Mathematical thinking becomes political by furnishing a structure of infinity for this collective subject. The "human animal" is finite, but the collective subject is mathematically and politically infinite.

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Before concluding, let me complete the "Lacan *avec* Badiou" circle by mentioning Badiou's own comment on Lacan's idea of collectivity. It is somewhat opposed to what I have argued here. In his 1994–95 seminar, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy*

<sup>100</sup> Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 247.

3, Badiou maintains that Lacan has a timebound and finite idea of collectivity: a group that can only go on for a short while, as long as it is working together on something. When the work ends, it should disband and make another group for another work.<sup>101</sup> Let me note that Badiou is talking about psychoanalytic groups, organisations, schools, institutions and not about collective subjectivity as a Lacanian concept. He points out that psychoanalytic institutions are “philosophical” and not “political” because they cannot make a group work beyond a particular act.<sup>102</sup> For Badiou, the Lacanian group is at best a movement but not a political organization:

“Politics” cannot simply mean that people stick together for as long as it takes to do something. *That* might be a movement, or whatever you want to call it: a group, or a grouping, or an assembly, or a gathering. But it can’t be an organization in the political sense of the term because a political organization is in fact only required insofar as there’s a need to switch from one thing to another.<sup>103</sup>

Without going deeper into the consequences of this reading, let me observe that Badiou’s position on the psychoanalytic institution may be accurate (Lacan dissolved his own psychoanalytic school in 1980) but Lacan’s thought does have a notion of collective subjectivity, irreducible to institutionalism. The collective subject is anti-institutional. Institution is a pseudo-collectivity, invested in dominant ideology. The collective subject must be formed at distance if not at loggerheads with the institutional group. Be it Lacan’s set-theoretical Borromean

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<sup>101</sup> Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 183. In his 1980 “Letter of Dissolution,” Lacan critiques the idea of the “psychoanalytic group” that becomes a religious “Church.” What loses focus in the process is the very discourse of psychoanalysis. For more on this, see Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman et al., ed. Joan Copjec (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 130. To clarify, in this article, I am not talking about group as psychoanalytic organisation or institution but group-subject as the possibility of a collective principle of subjectivity coming out of psychoanalytic theory and practice. In *Briefings on Existence*, Badiou makes a more positive remark on the relation between mathematical group theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the piece “Group, Category, Subject” by arguing that the subject-group is infinite which makes psychoanalysis “incompletable.” The group, as Badiou formulates on page 150, “works as a matheme for a thought on the subject.” This formulation aligns well with the argument of the present paper.

<sup>102</sup> Badiou, *Lacan*, 184.

<sup>103</sup> Badiou, *Lacan*, 183–84; emphasis in original.

subject or Badiou's evental subject, their politics lies in the way they encounter the Real and counter the institutionalism (the Big Other in Lacan and the state in Badiou) of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

To conclude, in this article I read Lacan *avec* Badiou to construct a category of the collective subject from their works. This subjectivity as a principle is collectivised via mathematical thinking. Its political underpinnings in Lacan become programmatic sites for political action in favour of change in Badiou. The purpose of reading Lacan with Badiou is to show how the latter makes patent what remains latent in the former i.e., the political repercussions of mathematical thinking. Mathematical thinking in its immanent materiality supports the political subject of change. As I demonstrated, in both Lacan and Badiou, the collective subject is non-summative, egalitarian, non-identitarian, anti-individualist and non-totalizable. Its collectivity is mathematical but not instrumentalist in a numerical determinist sense. If anything, the collective subject is evental and non-deterministic in its accent on the Real of collapsibility. The collective subject frees psychoanalysis (Lacan) once more from its age-old critique as an individualist clinic and makes room for evental politics in philosophy (Badiou).

### Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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