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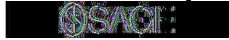
## Reassembling individual subjects: Events and decisions in troubled times

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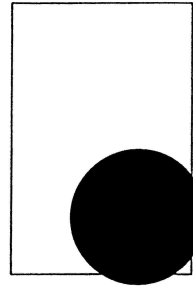
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# Reassembling individual subjects

Events and decisions in troubled times

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## Abstract

The troubled times in which many anthropologists work require the conceptualization of singular analytical subjects: individual actors who are constituted as subjects in particular circumstances. The difficulty of this task lies in the fact that 'the death of the subject' has been convincingly argued for in so many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Yet several deconstructivist philosophers have also proposed ideas that reassemble the subject, and this article discusses the work of Alain Badiou.

Badiou defines the subject as one who recognizes the truth of a great historical event, but it is suggested here that anthropologists need a rather different theory capable of analysing individuals in more mundane circumstances. Here truth is not the issue, but fixing, if only temporarily, on 'who I am'. Debating with depictions of persons as actor-networks (Latour) or changing effects of perspectival relations (Strathern), it is argued that 'decision events' are occasions when the multiple strands of personhood achieve unity and singularity.

## Key Words

event • history • individuality • multiplicity • singularity • subject

Certain kinds of anthropological experience seem to require the conceptualization of singular analytical subjects: individual actors who are constituted as subjects in particular circumstances. Such experiences could be the advent of new regimes, convulsions wrought by wars, schisms of former social wholes and, in general, the overturning of accustomed patterns of intelligibility and the advent of a radically new idea. Anthropology has mostly privileged the everyday and the repeated rather than ruptures (Robbins, 2007),<sup>1</sup> and although there is a vast literature on the 'person' and the 'self', it has only more rarely attempted to theorize the subject in situations of innovation or improvisation. In circumstances of breaks with the past, singular personalities burst into the field of vision. What kind of account could be given of the Russian Revolution, for example, without Lenin? Yet if the actions of particular people are seen to divert and direct these

changes and to maintain the line of a new direction, the requirement is not the accustomed anthropological exercise of constructing yet again the category of 'the person' in a given 'society' or 'culture'. All three of those concepts are thrown into disarray in such situations. Rather, it is necessary to think about how a singular human being might put him or herself together as a distinctive subject by adding to, or subtracting from, the possibilities given by culture as it has been up to that point, through the very process of taking action.

The difficulty – some would argue the impossibility – of this task lies in the fact that 'the death of the subject' has been convincingly argued for in so many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. 'All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre [of the Cartesian subject]', wrote Žižek (1999: 1), while in anthropology Daniel Miller introduced a recent book as 'concerned with rites of burial of the subject' (2005: 37). It is not necessary to subscribe fully to any of the various deconstructive critiques in order to agree that it is no longer possible to assume the simple presence of 'the individual subject', as if that idea had not already been radically undermined by generations of philosophers and anthropologists of the 20th century. The alternative visions propose multiplicity of one kind or another, whether they be discursive fields, rhizomic processes, dividuals, or actor-networks, and in each case they divert attention from the subject, downgrade it to a shifting subsidiary or dismiss it altogether as an effect of a concatenation of other elements. Yet some very basic considerations point up the unsatisfactory nature of the present vague anthropological consensus that would dispense with concepts of subject or individual. One is that anthropologists, as well as historians, need to be able to give an account of 'what happened', one that does not dissolve into a processual-relational haze, nor resort to explaining only the underlying conditions in which such a happening might occur (as if it could not have been otherwise). Another disappointment is the sameness that often appears in such analyses. It might not be a problem for a philosopher, indeed it might be regarded as good, that their particular concept is to be seen as the universally present stuff of existence: networks (for example) are everywhere and all dynamic processes are to be accounted for in terms of networks. Yet an anthropologist might want to explain what is not captured by such an idea, such as the advent, distinctive contour or local understanding of some new arrangement. A third consideration is that of truthfulness to the people we study – for they do speak constantly of singular subjects and their deeds. They talk of the consequences of *someone's*, a named person's, actions. It is to this singularity, or the originality of some particular person as an actor in a given cultural situation and specific historical circumstances, that this article draws attention.

Perhaps at this point it would be best to give the example of my own fieldwork to clarify the kind of troubled times in question. In Inner Mongolia, China, the people of Urad South Banner (an administrative district) have, in living memory alone, experienced the sacking of their Buddhist monastery (twice); incursion of Chinese nationalist forces; Japanese military invasion; defeat of the Mongol nationalist leader, Prince De; murder of a great reincarnate lama; the emergence onto the scene and subsequent assassination of a woman political leader; the 'peaceful transformation' of the Communists; Land Reform and the Great Leap Forward; the Cultural Revolution; the new policy of economic development of the Chinese government from the 1980s; and the revival of the Buddhist monastic tradition. This was not quite a period of endemic, chaotic

warfare, but even so, structure and system are difficult to discern in such turbulence. During the 10 years of fieldwork visits (1995–2005) there were remarkable changes in this small region, all of which strengthened my conviction that as anthropologists we must pay attention to *events* and ‘*decision-events*’, an idea discussed later in this article. It will be argued that events bring about the sudden focusing or crystallization of certain of the multiplicities inherent to human life and thus create subjects, if only for a time.<sup>2</sup>

It should be clarified that of the many kinds of human complexity (genetic, physiological, cognitive, emotional, and agentic, including relations, ideas and affects coming from outside, referred to in this article as ‘multiplicity’) I shall be concerned here primarily with a subset of special concern to anthropologists, the variety of ideas people hold about what it is to be ‘myself’, an individual person. And arguing that we need a way to talk anthropologically about personalities, it makes sense to develop my analysis by reference to an ethnography – that of the Mongols – in which personalities have a recurrent and dramatic presence. In Mongolian culture, furthermore, ideas of the self present a daunting thicket of overlaid possibilities. There are at least seven or eight, and perhaps several more, different ways that an Urad person, at different times, counts him or herself as an individual, ranging from the ‘biological’ inheritor of physical qualities, to Buddhist notions of a unique ‘soul’ persisting through uncountable lifetimes, to a genealogical kin-person, to a combination of life-forces vulnerable to attack by spirits and ghosts, or to unique specification by astrological co-ordinates. Each of these implies a different framing of time. Some of these ‘positions’ are relational and some are essentialist. Several are distributive and recognize personhood outside the physical body. I should add also that the resolution of these ‘ways’ into a distinct subject is not a constant preoccupation of Mongols; for they are also concerned with abstract, de-personalized and mobile vitality and fortune that, when realized, serve rather to disperse and transcend the self. Yet, amid this kaleidoscope of possibilities, Urad people have a fascination with the winding thread of what holds together, with the ‘one’ who changes, the individual personality who has not just lived through the *bouleversements* of the decades but taken action in their own way, for better or worse. Events and decision-events, it will be suggested, shake up and focus the cloudy concatenation of possibilities into a definite, action-oriented, subject. This article is concerned with the subject, rather than ‘the person’, ‘the self’ or subjectivity, as the concept most closely tied to action.

## **A POST-DECONSTRUCTIVE THEORY OF THE SUBJECT**

How could an anthropologist ‘reach’ in a theoretical sense such singularity, and even a certain unity implied by the idea of a human subject? The starting point has to be multiplicity as the way things are, the plurality intrinsic to a person, a thing, a text or a culture. Diverse depictions of such multiplicity have been formulated by philosophers as different from one another as Deleuze, Lacan, Foucault, Levinas, Derrida, Latour, Eco and Badiou. Yet, while anthropologists continue with the long-running onslaught on the sovereign individual, in philosophy there have emerged from amidst the deconstructed ruins of the old subject several complex post-deconstructive formulations, Subject Two as one might put it, notably the ‘self’ who engages in techniques of the self of Foucault (1986: 37–68), the relational self in its bond with the Other of Levinas (2006: 1–10), Derrida’s idea of the individual as an island (seminar in 2003, discussed in J.H. Miller,

2007: 30–58), and the process of subjectification created by the ‘fold’ of the exteriority into interiority of Deleuze (1993: 77–8).<sup>3</sup>

An initial inspiration for this article was the work of Alain Badiou, with his proposal that it is events that enable the emergence of a Subject Two. Badiou insists (2007a) that the event is not the concentration of a continuity, a deformation, or a fold, as in Deleuze (1993), but a pure break with the becoming of the world. For him, the ‘death of man’ (i.e. the dissolution of the old taken-for-granted individual) is fully compatible with an idea of the engaged subject and, as he puts it, ‘rebellion, a radical dissatisfaction with the established order, and a fully committed engagement in the real of situations’ (Badiou, 2001: 7).

The great advantage of Badiou’s theory for the purposes of anthropological analysis is that he accounts for the conjuring up of the subject in what he calls ‘the situation’, that is, real, substantive, historically and geographically particular conditions. Thus, unlike many philosophers, he acknowledges the social and historical conditions of the formation of a subject. In a given situation, but not limited by it, the *event* is an extraordinary happening that brings about a rupture of previous knowledge(s). It proposes a new truth that belongs to a different dimension from opinions (Badiou’s dismissive term for bodies of knowledge). The singular innovations of the event persist by means of conscious acts of witness by individuals who constitute themselves as immortal subjects by their fidelity to its truth; by acclaiming such a singular truth a human animal changes ontologically to become in this respect immortal – as, for example, St Paul became a subject in his affirmation of the event of the resurrection of Christ. The event has no objective content, it can only be acclaimed. So what is an event for one person may not be for another. There is thus no Truth in general, only truths in the plural, those established by events in situations. Consequently, there can be no human subject in the abstract, for there are as many subjects as there are truths (2001: 28). However, it is central to Badiou that not just any idea is a truth. It is a truth when an idea is available to everyone; truth is what, in the situation, is addressed ‘for all’, whatever their interest or social status, though individuals may decide whether or not to acclaim it. The argument is that any such general affirmation cannot be made ‘in theory’ by means of previous knowledge – a truth can emerge only through the epistemological break sparked off by an event, which by definition eludes previous classifications. Thus, ‘what is *universally* human is always rooted in particular truths, particular configurations of active thought’ (Hallward, 2001: xiv).

These ideas could be very significant for anthropology, because they acknowledge the diversity of actual configurations in the world as well as the heterogeneity of both instituted knowledge(s) and the new truths immanent in ‘eventual’ situations, and yet they also uphold a notion of universal human capacity – to decide for and to adhere to a truth. Furthermore, Badiou suggests a way of thinking about the subject in time and history. It is a commonplace of anthropology-speak these days that human ‘subjects’ or ‘individuals’ are created/constructed, and yet the temporal implications of the fact that creation happens in time have hardly been explored (see, however, Robbins, 2007). Here we have a notion of how time may be divided: before the *Affair* (the event) and after the *Affair*. If the event is both revelation and catalyst, if it marks the beginning of a new time, it is made by action.

A problem with Badiou – of course some might see it as a merit – is the transcendental character of his politics. He was labelled a Stalinist (not literally, because he

denounced Stalinism) in condemnation of his espousal of revolutionary violence in the 1960s, for acclaiming the Chinese Cultural Revolution as an event, and more generally for his rejection of the possibilities of ordinary good lives in favour of communities-to-come grounded in the truth-event (Žižek, 1999: 172; see also Seigel, 2005: 4–5). However, Badiou himself has reconsidered certain of his own ideas (2001: liii–lvii) and there is no reason for us not to do likewise. At any rate, he is good to think with. The Mongol people of Urad lived through the Cultural Revolution, and it radically changed their lives. Yet, unlike among many Chinese, I did not meet one local Mongol, in all their variety from communist cadres to Buddhist monks, who said they had acclaimed ‘the truth’ of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, it was not an event *in Badiou’s sense* for them. But this does not mean his general theory is a useless one. In the history of the region from the 17th century to the present, there *were*, in my view, at least two events of a public kind that one might call Badiou-ian,<sup>4</sup> and the philosopher’s work is helpful in trying to think about why and how they differed from other turbulent happenings.

What is likely to be most shocking in Badiou’s work for anthropologists is his purist rejection of the relational subject (the subject defined by its relation with an other).<sup>5</sup> Against the whole consensus underpinning cultural studies, multiculturalism and so on, he argues that ethics should not be based on recognition of difference (the Other), exemplified by the potential victim of violence or misrecognition.<sup>6</sup> Badiou argues that theories which subordinate the identification of the subject to the recognition by the evil done to her or him (e.g. by the state, capitalism and so on) tend to reduce the subject also to sufferer, recursively ‘subjectified’ by what she or he opposes (2001: 9–11). Furthermore, unless the Other is carried by some principle of alterity which transcends experience (in which case it becomes not a philosophical but a theological idea, as in Levinas), ‘the finitude of the other’s appearing can be conceived as resemblance’ (2001: 22) and, to put it bluntly, it becomes difficult to explain how a *new* subject could ever appear. I shall return to this topic towards the end of this article.

There is, of course, also an anthropology of events, notably Veena Das’ seminal work on critical events (1995, 2007), Marshall Sahlins’ discussion of structure and event (1991, 2004), Bensa and Fassin’s issue of the journal *Terrain*, ‘L’Événement’ (2002), and Hoffman and Lubkemann’s edited collection on warscape ethnography and the anthropology of events (2005). The literature draws attention to the narration of events: the ways in which people relate events to the self through narrations (see also Nair, 2002: 18–28) or problematically filter events when talking about them, which is always retrospective and bound to a certain repeatability and thus misses their singularity (see also Derrida, 2007: 228), both important topics to which this short article, focused on subjects, cannot do justice. However, these works, valuable as they are, do not refer to one another, nor to Badiou, and for the most part they do not concentrate on theories of the subject. What is clear is that different concerns produce diverse conceptions of ‘event’, a topic I cannot do justice to here. The aim of this article is to think again about subjects and ‘individuals’ for anthropology in the light of philosophers’ contributions. It is possible to run with some of their illuminating ideas, while leaving others to one side, and there is no reason not to disagree with and/or to supplement some areas of their theories that seem inadequate to deal with ethnographic materials.

## A BADIOU-IAN EVENT IN INNER MONGOLIA

This account distinguishes between descriptions given by local Urad historians (indented) and observations I have added to make sense of the sequence for a European reader. The text has been arranged this way to draw attention to the lack of ‘explanations’ and ‘interiority’ in the Mongol accounts.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1920s, the Urad people still preserved locally the political structure that had existed for centuries under the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The Urad West Banner, a small more or less autonomous polity, was ruled by a hereditary *gūng* (‘duke’) and ranked noble officials below him. The common people were serfs, owing duties to the Banner, the nobles, or to one of the numerous Buddhist monasteries. To cover their own debts, Banner officials had sold large tracts of land, used by commoners, to Chinese settlers. The protagonist Enghbayar (henceforward Bayar)<sup>8</sup> came from a family dispossessed in this way.

A young man called Bayar, who had been sent to Beijing by the Banner as a clerk for Mongols in the capital, was enthused with revolutionary ideas. He decided to travel in disguise to socialist Outer Mongolia to contact the leaders there. In 1922, he returned to Urad West Banner and started to spread ideas about revolution.

Bayar was so inspiring that not only soldiers and herdsmen but also nobles and the chief administrator Erhedorji were enthused with militant zeal (*zorig*). Even the Duke Shirabdorji [henceforth Shirab] and Norjinhanggal the widow of the previous Duke were ready to join the ‘Red Party’. The 8th Mergen Gegen [the most senior reincarnation of the main monastery] also supported Bayar.

The 8th Mergen Gegen’s support for Bayar was shown by the fact that he allowed 20 of his lamas to join the revolution. In fact, practically the whole Banner decided to make revolution. Of notable leaders, only Dagdan Da Lama from his fortified base at another monastery obstinately held out.

This was ‘the situation’ in Badiou’s terms. For the first time since the 17th century, the Urad people were briefly in a position to suspend, reproduce, or create groups that can be called ‘political’ in the sense that they could *represent* something – exist in the name of a public or an idea.

In 1926 Bayar, having gathered more soldiers from among the rebellious vigilantes of a nearby district, took over Urt Gol Monastery. Here the young reincarnation was an enthusiastic sympathizer and immediately began military training of his lamas. Bayar and the aristocratic official Erhedorji set up a great meeting at which the Red Flag with hammer and sickle was flown. The Banner office was renamed ‘the People’s Democratic Government’ under the Inner Mongolian Revolutionary Party. Erhedorji was put in charge of the government and Party while military affairs were put in the hands of Bayar. Many hierarchical customs were forbidden, including prostrations to seniors. Bayar encouraged equality between men and women, free [i.e. not arranged] marriage, advised men to cut their pigtaileds, and lamas to return to lay life, marry, and participate in production. He also proposed a ban on opium. These last reforms encountered much opposition and were not carried out. New schools open to all were set up, including a military one at Mergen Monastery.

The Urad West Banner became a key revolutionary redoubt for the whole of Inner Mongolia.

This we could see as ‘the event’. The new revolutionaries did in fact follow socialist principles – most unusually for the period – by including poor Chinese, women and refugees from other Banners. So here was a strange situation: the very nobles and lamas, who were in principle ‘feudal elements’ to be eliminated, were heading the throng to create revolution. How can we understand this? Only if we see that there were universal ideas here, and that the deployment of a new language (‘organization-creation of the mass’, ‘common people’, ‘Party’, ‘us’ and ‘together’) was creating out of the previous inequalities a notion of a new public entity – and this was a political entity, as it stood for jointly held hope for change. In 1927, however, with the split in the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and the massacre of the Communists in south China, the whole political landscape shifted. The remaining Communists were to be chased and eliminated. Soon Urad West Banner was the only remaining centre of revolution in the region. When the strong man Erhedorji decided to change sides, Bayar’s revolution was doomed. He fled towards Mongolia, but was killed just before he reached the border.

This revolutionary episode fits well with Badiou’s notion of an event, and it can justifiably be seen as a fracture, after which nothing was politically the same in the Banner again. All Urad people were *marked* by this event (Badiou, 2006: 233), in the sense that they could no longer assume that only one kind of society was possible. Nevertheless, as soon as one tries to think in detail of this ethnographic history in Badiou’s terms, some significant lacunae in the theory become evident.

One of these is Badiou’s theorization of the ordinary human person, the one who exists ‘before the event’ as it were, or the one who cannot recognize its significance. In Badiou’s withering view this ‘some-one’ is an animal of the human species, a person who is in thrall to existing knowledge(s) and his or her own interest, not in a position to know what he or she is capable of, and is *not a subject* (2001: 44–6). Such a formulation cannot explain, however, the capacity to think or act, of which most people are, after all, capable most of the time. An event, according to Badiou, can occur in politics, love, art or science – but it is always a rarity and one must suppose that some people never experience an event in Badiou’s sense. We therefore need some further ideas to explain how people ordinarily attain individuality, how they track through, gather together, or sort out the multiplicities of their being, and how indeed someone is (or becomes) the kind of person capable of acclaiming the event when others around them do not. It is necessary, therefore, to have a theory of actors who are not subjects in Badiou’s sense, but have the potential to become so. To this end, I make a preliminary proposal, discussed further later, that individuality as an actable-on capacity may be attained through *decision*: the ‘plumping for’ a specific way of being a person, if only temporarily, and by *prioritizing*, the keeping at hand of divergent multiplicities in an emotionally cogent, internally shuffle-able array of possibilities.

In the account taken from local historians, we are informed again and again of decisions made by individuals: Bayar’s decision to go to Outer Mongolia, Dagdan Da Lama’s refusal to sign up to revolution, Erhedorji’s decision to betray the revolution, and so forth. The story of the event consists largely of a sequence of decisions. But ‘decision’ here is not exhausted by the interiorized rumination it is often assumed to mean in



Euro-American culture. What kind of actor is being presented in these local narratives that almost always leaves the 'reasons' for decisions unsaid?

### DECISION AS EVENT

Now Badiou is interested in the decision *for the event*, such as the one the Urad aristocrats made to join Bayar's revolution. He is therefore careful to distinguish the realm of decision from that of ordinary knowledge. As Hallward writes, discussing a view shared by Badiou and Derrida, 'To reduce my decision to respond to the calculus of reasons and the assessment of possibilities is to eliminate its radical character as a *decision*. The decision must always concern what I cannot *know*' (Hallward, 2001: xxv).<sup>9</sup> One could accede to this point in a general sense without accepting what Badiou seems to assume – that the 'not known' necessarily has to do with *his* kind of event. No one is better aware than scientists that there are plenty of unknowns in the realm of knowledge; and there are fractures between different kinds of knowledge even in societies where science seeks the most blanket coverage.

One conclusion from this discussion, if we now part from Badiou, is that a particular kind of decision can itself be a kind of event: this sort of decision is one that retains the key features of a break with a previous regime of intelligibility and the constitution of a new time ('after the decision'). But such a decision-event does not necessarily bring to the fore a new truth. The unknown here might not involve a universally applicable but previously unthinkable idea, as in Badiou's vision (2007b: 3), but could rather concern choice of a new position by leaping across what is not known – or not thought about – in a long-standing and inherited landscape of knowledge(s). This void could be the hiatus between bodies of knowledge kept apart in the given situation, such as Buddhism and military rationality in the case of the Urad Mongols. One could propose then to distinguish this kind of decision-event from the Event of Badiou (henceforward the latter will be written with a capital E). And likewise, one could imagine decision-making and mortal subjects in the realm of knowledge(s), as distinct from Badiou's immortal Subject who acclaims a new truth.

This suggestion about the decision-event has been prompted not simply by the abstract consideration of possibilities but also by ethnographic situations, especially the importance of divination in decision-making for Mongols. Divination is a technique to 'plump for' a course of action precisely by avoiding reasoning, by taking the state of the individual client at a particular time and discovering the unknown, which is the right decision for that person in the constantly changing and multifarious co-ordinates of the cosmos.

### THE MULTIPLE INDIVIDUAL

I shall return later to the many issues raised by decision, but meanwhile this discussion raises again the question of multiplicity – for anthropologists have shown in different ways that the 'individual' deciding can be seen as not simply her or himself. Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin – who are guided by Deleuze and not Badiou and therefore do not restrict themselves to a transcendental-universal concept of the event – write:

The event expresses two mirrored singularities, its own and that of the individual who provokes it. The individuality of the actors and that of the event push one another

into the compost of social life . . . these actors are traversed by collective forces that exceed them. To hold to this point of society and history, where at the same time I act and I am acted upon (*j'agis et je suis agi*) is a troubling intellectual and emotional experience. (Bensa and Fassin, 2002: 10)

The 'reasons' for a decision, in other words, may not be found altogether 'inside' the individual.<sup>10</sup> And indeed 'collective forces' might not be the only way to think of what acts upon people when they make decisions.

Because it is the most radical argument for multiplicity it is appropriate to discuss here the ideas of Bruno Latour, who writes that 'an actor is what is *made to* act by many others'. But he explicitly rejects the vague notion of 'social forces' lying behind an action and argues that we should pay attention instead to the specific agencies cited by informants, such as 'I came to this monastery because I was called by the Virgin Mary' (2005: 46–8). Indeed, Latour foregrounds multiplicities to the extent that the human individual becomes no more than a shifting network of inputs and relations (Latour, 2005: 213). In his recent book the actor is not only conceived as a network but also is 'not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming towards it' (2005: 46). In this respect the actor-as-network is no different from other networks that could be made up entirely of non-human agents.

Like Deleuze and Badiou, Latour argues strenuously against *starting* with the idea of the individual. Almost anything we once thought of as intrinsic can be thought of as elements derived from the outside (inherited eye colour, bowing to peer pressure, stories learnt at the grandmother's knee, a good prayer chanting technique, a predisposition to enjoy smoking). In Latour a person is not a 'wholesale' human but rather is composed of bits and pieces in many successive layers. The competence of this conglomerate is activated by 'plug-ins' and evidenced in traces like bytes along modems and routers. 'Being a fully competent actor now comes in discrete *pellets*, or, to borrow from cyberspace, *patches* and *applets*, whose precise origin can be Googled before they are down-loaded and saved one by one' (2005: 207). Latour has to be right that countless elements commonly thought of as 'inside' a person can be described as coming from outside (the Mongolian models of different personae are among them). Still, there is a problem with his engaging image. Who does the composing, Googling and saving, and why? Marilyn Strathern (1996) rightly perceives one central problem with actor-network theory, that it does not explain how hybrid networks – all those linked human and non-human entities – ever end, and she proposes an elegant solution in advancing ideas about how networks are cut, for example by kinship systems or property rights. For Latour, the interesting effort is the opposite one, not cutting down but building up. Individuals are not autochthonous or innately endowed with subjectivity or will; wholeness is not a starting point but the *achievement* of a complex assemblage, the more that is piled and folded in the better (2005: 206–8). In both authors the work of either cutting or assembling happens without reference to intentionality – cutting the network in Strathern is an effect of cultural systems like 'kinship', and in Latour a subject is produced by external actants, 'plug-ins' such as official and legal papers, and intention is replaced by supplementary tools ('supplementary souls') that equip people to choose and calculate (for a consuming subject these would be labels, trade-marks, prices).

On what grounds, then, could one nevertheless argue that an individual person can also be seen as a unity and a singularity? I shall suggest that such an individual is an emergent and recognized outcome of systems made up of multiple elements, and that at this emergent level we cannot write realistically about people without a concept of intention. To get to this point, however, one possible move is to try to make a bridge over one of those chasms so prevalent in academe, that between philosophy and cognitive neuroscience.

### MULTIPLICITY AND COUNT-AS-ONE

To start with philosophy, Badiou characterizes all human situations and persons as immeasurably infinite multiplicities, and thus as collections of pure differences. He writes, 'There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself. Neither more nor less' (2001: 26). This is in effect a homogenization of difference and it leaves us, as Hallward notes, with generic human stuff that is ontologically indistinguishable from pure mathematical multiplicity. The risk of this dramatic simplification is 'the effective "despecification" of situations in general, to say nothing of the truth-processes that "puncture" them' (Hallward, 2001: xxxii–xxxiii). Badiou had first made a complex argument (2006), derived from set theory, that groups (situations, animals, things, categories, individuals and so forth) are nevertheless 'counted as one', because this is how we humans perceive. Whatever is out there is first presented to us as one. Badiou is far from alone in stating that human beings cannot help seeing the world this way.<sup>11</sup> This is why the pure and inconsistent multiplicity of 'before' this operation, without categories and disordered, cannot be grasped except retroactively, for experience presents us with nothing but structured presentations – objects, happenings, persons, animals, and so forth – that have been counted-as-one.<sup>12</sup> Later, in response to the kind of objection made by Hallward (see earlier), Badiou conceded that the situation must be conceived not only in terms of its *being*, as a pure multiple, and its *presentation* or appearance as ones, but also in its *re-presentation* as the effect of some kind of legislation or recognition (Badiou, 2001: lvi).<sup>13</sup>

From a quite different starting point, one can find arguments that address the nature of the *content* of the one. It seems to be the case that this human categorizing does not happen simply randomly. Ian Hacking, in his study of Leibniz's monads, gives an arresting example to demonstrate this. He argues that if one considers the properties of the objects involved, some multiples work better when counted-as-one than others. If content did not matter at all, if just any bits of the multiplicity out there could be counted as one, then one could take some contiguous elements, such as a couple of fingers of my hand, the bottom part of my black pen and a bit of paper from the yellow pad on which I am writing, and count it as one. We could then give this bundle a name, let us say a 'berk'. But, Hacking observes, my pen and my berk differ.

As a matter of fact, but not of logic, my pen, all by itself, can be thrown, heated, repaired, crushed, locked away, and wiped when wet . . . It is hard to do many of these things to my berk, all by itself. There are vastly more true, intelligible, and for us important regularities about pens than about berks. . . . A 'bundle of qualities' is

more than a mere aggregate when it does things and has things done to it. (1972: 147)

The fact that different interpretations of the world are possible does not mean that any interpretation is as adequate as any other. A similar point is made by Umberto Eco with his argument that there are ‘resistances’ in the world that prevent us categorizing randomly.

The world as we represent it to ourselves is an effect of interpretation. The problem has . . . to do with the nature of the guarantees that authorize us to attempt a new paradigm that others might not recognize as delirium, pure imagination of the impossible . . . Something resistant has driven us to invent general terms, whose extension we can always review or correct. (Eco, 1999: 48; 51)

### THE ‘ONE’ WHO DECIDES

Hacking’s idea, in a very general sense, can make the bridge to cognitive studies, for his formula ‘does things and has things done to it’ is in accord with the picture of the human individual that emerges from recent research.<sup>14</sup> Alain Berthoz’s magisterial monograph *La Décision* (translated as *Emotion and Reason*, 2006) argues that decision is first and foremost intentional action.<sup>15</sup> Yet it is mistaken, he suggests, to see decision as only deliberation before an action. Perception itself is one such kind of action (‘perceiving resolves ambiguity; thus, perceiving is deciding’: 2006: xi). Nor is decision purely cognitive. Emotions, such as fear, anger or delight, play a decisive role in the complex mechanisms used by the brain in decision-making, being aroused by objects in the world, and through memory letting the past guide future action. These emotional effects are immediate and part of perception, not the result of prior mental categorization (2006: 29). Decision-making thus involves different elements, distinct areas of the brain and various kinds of mental activity, and in this sense confirms the notion of the human being as a multiplicity; but, and this is where unity appears, it is clear that these hierarchical and heterarchical processes have to be co-ordinated in a *global* fashion for an action (decision) to take place (see Berthoz, 2006: 58).

Of course Berthoz is writing about ordinary decisions in the world, of which each individual takes hundreds every day. The ‘decision-event’ is a particular class of higher-level decisions, just as what I call the subject is to be analytically distinguished from an individual, since my subject category refers to a meta life-changing level of ‘conducting’ of ideas of the person. This level could also be called social or cultural, since the models of how one might be a person are shared in a population, and choosing between them thrusts an individual into relations with others.<sup>16</sup> But, as I see it, there is nevertheless a continuity with the kind of decision-making discussed by Berthoz. For he shows that the most fundamental and minute decision-making involves a double, an idea of the self. ‘How could we act on things if our mind had no conception of our flesh-and-blood body?’ he asks (2006: 108). To make a decision involves imagining oneself doing something and the consequences of that. Berthoz asks whether this double projected on the world is the physical body schema (2006: 113) – which suggests that it could perhaps be another kind of model of the self. This is where we could introduce the alternative Mongol conceptions of the person, which include not only the corporeal body but also

the Buddhist idea of reincarnation (a series of different bodies, each of which is a manifestation of one spiritual power) or the 'distributive' notion whereby a deceased person's ghostly power can reside in relics, such as their bones, clothes, or weapons. Such ideas go beyond anything discussed in the neurological literature, but they do not contradict it.<sup>17</sup>

### COMPLEX SUBJECTS, RELATIONAL SUBJECTS

A charm of philosophers' arguments is that they are so distant from the ways that anthropologists and other social scientists have accounted for the unity and complexity of persons by engaging with ethnography (e.g. Butler, 2005; Liu, 2002; Mageo, 2002; Quinn, 2006; Skinner et al., 1998). I restrict myself here to one account, that of Marilyn Strathern, because it is both contiguous to my own but also contrasts with it in significant ways.

Strathern suggests (1996: 517–35) that in a world conceived as made of networks, in order for a person to act they need to 'eclipse' some aspects of themselves in order to reveal, and thus render efficacious, other aspects. The problem for Melanesian persons is to cut themselves off from the relational magma by which they are constituted in order to be able to act upon it. Ceremonial displays, initiation rituals, and exchange are all ways of highlighting one strand of a person by hiding all the others. My account is similar in that decision-events also involve singling out one strand, in the act of 'plunging' that decision involves. What is different is that the decision-event is an integrating, prioritizing moment that can involve a new facet of the person (as I shortly describe with an example), rather than Strathern's severing of existing relations that leaves the actor as a residue. For if the multiplicity of the world is not imagined as an endless network, but as perceived and re-presented as 'ones', then it is the arrangement and prioritizing of these, rather than a slicing off, that is at issue. Furthermore, decision-events are *not* analogous to ceremonies, exchanges, and so forth, in that the integrative moment of the self occurs in relation to an event that is constituted as unique and unknown. In Strathern's theory, the acts of 'selection' are generic, whereas in mine they are thoroughly historical and therefore singular. Further important differences follow from this one, and they are perhaps best pursued in relation to Strathern's recent work (2005).

Here Strathern advances a challenge to the idea of the unity of the individual, based on relational and perspectival ideas. She contrasts a Euro-American understanding of the individual with the thinking described by anthropologists for other social regimes, notably in Amazonia and Papua New Guinea. Strathern notes that with the ('Euro-American') idea of the subject as a viewing self, 'everyone is the originator of a singular view, and knowledge of this fact allows one to be added to the other without expectation of closure or summation' (2005: 157–8). This idea, which Strathern calls Euro-American, is contrasted with that of other societies where people imagine finite worlds and stress the dependency of each person's status on that of others. Strathern's argument differs from the usual relativistic account of anthropologists by her injection of perspectivism: the determination of a Melanesian's status by that of others means that when a person shifts into a different status 'the signs change'. In other words, what happens with this move is an 'ontological switch' such that the world is no longer seen in the same terms.

The example Strathern provides concerns the switch between the Melanesian son and sister's son.

In the world created between a son and his father, the mother's brother may be identified with his sister as a male mother. When someone instead acts as a sister's son (towards his mother's brothers) his own father is still in that world, he has not disappeared, but the signs have changed . . . The father now appears (say) as an in-law to the mother's brother. The world alters not simply because the son comes to see his father through different eyes (his mother's brother's) but because the mother's brother has *made a different subject out of him*. He is now the son not of his father but of his mother's brother's sister's husband. This is hardly an alteration of perspective that the person can will into being. It is an ontological switch effected through the being and presence of the other relative . . . The limitations of this perspectivism is that all one can do is change the signs; if one is not this, one is that. (Strathern, 2005: 158–9, my emphasis)

This is an attractive idea and Strathern's drawing attention to self-definitions that depend on positioning relative to others is illuminating. However, there are some problems with the suggestion that only western people hold singular perspectives, while in other cultures these are constructed relationally. For not only are there venerable anthropological observations to the contrary,<sup>18</sup> but the perspectivist twist to the idea is not supported in cognitive studies, which by definition pertain to universal human abilities. Not only is understanding that one has a perspective a common human ability,<sup>19</sup> but thinking beyond it is too. Humans have a capacity to imagine other points of view from that which one is now occupying. For example, they can work out a concept of 'route', which requires imagining the same path from two opposed points of view (Janet, cited in Berthoz, 2006: 47). This suggests that 'changing the signs' is *not* all that the Melanesians can do; without evidence to the contrary, we must assume that, like anyone else, they can shift from an egocentric to an allocentric<sup>20</sup> point of view. The ability to mentally simulate relations between positions, objects or people in a way that is decentred from one's own body enables the construction of constants independent of perspective, and this is fundamental to many kinds of decision-making that involve deliberation (working out the effect of action A as against action B).

Strathern's argument implies that persons in 'other societies', conceiving the self as multiple and created relationally, ignore ideas about unitary individuals. In the case of Mongols, this is just not so. Although in Mongolia too everyone can assume different relationally defined kinship positions as in Strathern's example, they can also see themselves as constituted by a singular 'soul' (*siins*). This is not a relational idea. Or, a person can see herself as having an unchanging essential ability (*avias*) that lasts through her lifetime. In fact, it is only on certain specific occasions, such as marriage, that a person would prioritize a given kin relation to the extent that it becomes a definition of self; far more prevalent is a view of kinship as a complex field, or as Ushakin (2004: 22) puts it, a 'means of organizing life', and, through kin terms, a 'spatial' way of understanding one's own place in it. Furthermore, Mongol people reflect on their individuality. Even if we leave aside Buddhist philosophy of the self and meditative techniques, ordinary laypeople know the autobiography as a personal, and not simply stereotypical, account, though it is not as developed as in China and Tibet (Gyatso, 1998; Wu, 1990).

Any such unique personality-centred notions furthermore belie the idea of the fractal person that Strathern finds in Melanesia. In the latter, 'the part is made from the same material as the whole' (1992: 84). To hold only to the fractal view is to posit a thoroughgoing sameness at different scales, as if to hold, for example, that the starling is the same as the flock of starlings, and no basis is given for any indigenous concept of a unique personality.<sup>21</sup>

Such a kind of person, composed *only* of generic relations and devoid of any image of essential singularity (1992: 99) would be alien to the Mongol imagination. It is not that generic ideas of personhood as such are absent. For example, in a view prevalent in both Tibet and Mongolia, the self as it were 'changes colour' (fortune, capacity for success) over time according to shared non-human relations altogether beyond individual control, given by the astrological co-ordinates of a person's birth time with the cosmological situation at a given moment – in which case, as Da Col has pointed out (2007), who someone is, and consequently their perspective, is given by *when* they are. This shows that there can be a developed sense of temporal perspectives, alongside the spatial one so intensively studied by psychologists. But such generic temporalities are only one way of thinking of persons. In another way, still relational, someone can see himself as creating his individuality additively through his actions; the more of these there are, and the more varied their range and effectiveness, the more he becomes different from other people and the more he becomes himself. Now, any Mongol is likely to be aware of all of the various modes I have mentioned in this article. In other words, they know not only *of* different ways that personal ontology – 'what someone is' – can be imagined, but also *that* there are many ways, which make up a field of possibilities. (Furthermore, and especially among Buddhist lamas, these ways are compared and judged better or worse.) This diversity of imaginings of ontological human being is why we need an idea, such as the Event or the decision-event, of a 'mechanism' of transfer between them. Rather than use the word 'subject' for each of the various positions or perspectives, as in Strathern's argument (2005), resulting in an indefinite number of disconnected subjects, I prefer to reserve the term for the one who engages with (or is engaged by) the mechanism.

For a related problem of perspectivism is that the person who is at one moment a son of a father and at another a sister's son of a mother's brother also goes on being the same person – the some-one, who has been counted as one in the most ordinary way, the one who 'has big feet' or 'likes music', for example. Badiou calls this perseverance-of-self, and he discusses it, of course, in relation to his theory of the creation of a Subject by the Event. He comments that the Subject is a 'multiple singularity', wherein there is some consistency in the superimposition of before and after selves (2001: 46). A subject who has experienced an Event can manage this 'only by adhering to his own principle of continuity, the perseverance in being what he is. By *linking* (for such, precisely, is consistency) the known by the not-known' (2001: 47).

This idea can be applied not only to the case of the Badiou-ian Event, but also to the more numerous decision-events of people's lives. At these moments, a link is made between the intelligible known persona(e) one was before the break of the event and the other persona – also intelligible but belonging to a different conception/perspective – that one becomes. Among Mongols, this link is often made via the not-known, such as the hiatus between different conceptions of time, and perhaps for this reason there is

usually no idea that such a decision is the result of rational deliberation. Rather, it comes about through divination, or a terrible shock, a shamanic séance, or a significant nightmarish dream. These do not sound like decisions, but I use this term because, perhaps unconsciously, something in a person has to acclaim rather than reject the dream or divination and make a switch as a result. The Mongols have strong notions of inner affective state (*setgel*) and intention (*sanaa*), and they would insist that even if a decision is delegated to external conjunctions (fate, fortune, astrology and so on), it must resonate with the *setgel* of a particular individual actually to have effect.

So what I would like to suggest is a distinction between the more or less ordinary circumstances in which individual people keep a variety of alternative positions in play, and a particular moment (the decision-event) when they open themselves to a radically different composition of the self, a switch that has a lasting effect and involves the most significant – but not all – ways in which that person conceives of her or himself. Such a jump implies, as I mentioned earlier, a fissure, a void, a space of the unknown.

### A MONGOLIAN EXAMPLE OF A DECISION-EVENT

In the 1930s, as recounted by old lamas, the Urad West Banner returned to rule under Duke Shirab. Shirab had been a Buddhist lama as a boy. But he belonged to the noble family, and when the previous Duke died, whether he liked it or not, he became possible inheritor of the post and was removed from the monastery. Many years of wrangling now ensued, as there was another contender. During those years, when endless discussions were taking place about precedence, we can surmise that genealogical definitions of self became uppermost in Shirab's mind. When Shirab took office, however, the defeated competitor for the post did not go away and a rebellious faction formed, led by Dagdan Da Lama, who was this man's uncle. The great lama, always recalcitrant, maintained his own militia and refused to obey the Duke's commands. Shirab – now operating in the persona of governor and military commander – gathered troops and ordered them to attack, saying that a reward would be given for killing the Da Lama.

A band of soldiers chased the lama, his nephew and little great-nephew from his monastery into a valley in the mountains. The lama and his nephew were slaughtered. The boy ran away but he was caught, undressed to check he was a male, and then killed too. The soldier who killed Dagdan, in order to prove to the Duke that he had done it, cut off the lama's head and put it into a sack. Now Dagdan is renowned for having been a huge man with a massive head – when he laughed the windows rattled in their casements. The soldier took the sack to the palace and asked for an audience with the Duke. Bowing and requesting his reward, he untied the sack. Out rolled the ghastly head. Shirab was so shocked he could not at first speak, and then he screamed at the soldier to throw the head in the Yellow River. From that moment Shirab became ill in body and mind. He could not sleep and was plagued with dreams of Dagdan's spirit exacting revenge. Incapable of ruling the Banner, he ran from doctor to lama-exorcist to astrologer. He retired to his countryside encampment and spent his days in a haze of opium, endlessly chanting prayers. Many rituals were conducted, but none could cure him, and in a year or two he was dead.



The 'event of the head' was a significant one for the Banner – from this moment when the Duke was turned entirely towards saving his soul and everyone, including himself, was predicting his demise, the whole pattern of relationships among the aristocrats and lamas was shaken into a new configuration. Now, for example, his young third wife, hitherto an invisible and somewhat disgraceful character, saw her chance: she would somehow get pregnant, bear an heir, and thus take power in the Banner herself.

A Latour-type analysis would be very good at analysing the diverse active elements around and within the network called 'Shirab' – the head, for example, could play a wonderfully transformative part as an actant – but lacking any concept of an ongoing consciousness or a conscience, it would be impossible to explain why Shirab was shocked and gave up governing. But 'shock' should be a very interesting topic for anthropology. The particular instance I have given concerns an individual, but as Friedman (2007: 428) has shown in his interesting work on globalized policies of shock therapy in Eastern Europe, the idea can be used profitably to explain the emergence of subjectivities at the collective level. A perspectival analysis along the lines of Strathern (2005), could explain the different points of view Shirab adopted in his life, first as a lama, then as a patrilineal descendant in a dynastic quarrel, and then as governor of the Banner. And *perspectivism* ('changing of the signs') could be invoked too. For example, when Shirab began acting as governor, Dagdan's previous relation to him (a senior kinsman, a high lama) was annulled, and he became simply a political threat. But such an interpretation would not explain the intense tragedy of the event, which surely lay in the fact that one man's life was involved, someone who began as a young lama and ended as a mad Duke.

Above all, none of these interpretations are very good at explaining the fact that something new happened – a break with military and 'modern' rationality. The 1930s was a period when secularist, republican, socialist, nationalist and other ideas were swirling around, but Duke Shirab went for none of these. Instead the event of the head thrust him into an occult miasma. In his misery, he suddenly 'remembered' that he was the reincarnation of (i.e. he bore the soul of) an ancestor, a brilliant army general called Dobdon, who had been killed by Dagdan Da Lama's father. On the point of death the general had predicted by vow (*iriigel, gerees*) the extinction of the male line of his killer's family. This extinction is exactly what Shirab's soldiers had achieved. By recalling all this, Shirab's responsibility for the Da Lama's death and that of his descendants could be seen as the working out of the prediction-vow. This, the 'plumping for' a particular rationale, is why I speak of this tragedy as a decision-event, despite the fact that Shirab 'lost his mind' and seems to have been hardly capable of taking a decision of an ordinary kind at all.

The idea of destiny – the inexorable carrying out of a vow-will – is part of the culture of Inner Mongols and was not an innovative idea per se (Humphrey, 2003). But its application to this event was new: the sudden declaration that Shirab was the reincarnation of General Dobdon had the effect of casting the whole scenario in a different light. It erased, or at any rate cast a veil over, what would have been the obvious conclusions, that Shirab was a terrible sinner in Buddhist morality, responsible for taking a life, indeed the life of a high lama, and furthermore a reprehensible criminal in kinship morality, for killing all three generations of a senior relative's line (all of these protagonists were members of the ruling family). Even Shirab's own earlier practical understanding of the

situation, that he had to suppress the military opposition to his rule, became redundant. With the idea of reincarnation, Shirab was now seen as a joint person – Dobdon-Shirab counted as one – and his act became the justifiable and necessary response to the killing of Dobdon 61 years before. Also, at least for Shirab himself, the subject created by the event, a new *time* was initiated, regulated by the logic of retaliation and prophecy. His ‘mad’ state of mind is now understandable as a state of utmost dread, since just as he had been destined to kill Dagdan Da Lama, the lama’s ghost would surely take vengeance on him. That this was indeed what he feared can be seen from the desperate measures taken in the rituals that followed. These included a *jolig* (victim substitution) rite, in which one of Shirab’s serfs was offered as a propitiatory sacrifice to Dagdan’s ghost. The idea was that the servant’s soul would be accepted in place of the Duke’s. The rite did not work, as can be seen from the fact that Shirab died not long afterwards. Nevertheless, the atmosphere, if one can put it in such a vague way, changed in the Banner: ‘religious’ explanations came to the fore and stories began to circulate of Dagdan’s supernatural power and saintly character.

At this point we can return to the topic of the fissure, unknown or void. Badiou writes:

You might well ask what it is that makes the relation between the event and that ‘for which’ it is an event. This connection is the void [*vide*] of the earlier situation. What does this mean? It means that at the heart of every situation, as the foundation of its being, there is a ‘situated’ void, around which is organized the . . . situation in question. (Badiou, 2001: 375)

The example Badiou gives is the baroque style, in the heart of which lay an absence, as decisive as it was unnoticed, of a genuine conception of musical architectonics. The Haydn-Event, when a new musical writing was created, occurred as a musical ‘naming’ of this absence (2001: 68–9). In politics, similarly, the void is what is unthinkable in the situation, and the Event has the effect of transforming it using a new language. Thus, before a revolution, ‘the rabble’ is simply not conceived as a political player. Only after a revolutionary Event does ‘the proletariat’ appear as a thinkable idea, and this is a partisan concept belonging to the Subject of the revolution; it is therefore distinct from the ‘working-class’ conceived by objective sociology (see discussion in Žižek, 1999: 129). With this conception of the void, it becomes apparent why Badiou distinguished the Event from a mere accident or random catastrophe: for something to be counted as an Event it has to make visible a *significant* absence in the previous situation (significant, that is, for the Subjects who acclaim the Event – such as ‘all the people of Banner’ who acclaimed Bayar’s revolution).

If we move from the historical Event to event-decisions, the nature of the void changes. No longer is it necessary to ponder the presence of a great foundational occlusion, which would be resolved by a new truth. Rather, the void could be seen as the simple absence of connections between various ‘ones’, or more exactly between the ways of counting as ones, such as the ways of conceptualizing persons. This certainly applies in Mongolian culture. I have earlier noted the fragmentary character of Mongolian cosmology (Humphrey and Onon, 1996: 76), and Morten Pedersen has described the Darhad Mongols’ ‘finatory, combinatory, discretizing’ outlook. He writes: ‘within the Darhad animist cosmos, there has to be a deterritorialized territory (or void) for there

to be a reterritorialized grid across which the nomads are jumping, quantum-like, from one intersection to the next' (2007: 317). How do they jump? You will see that I am suggesting that the event-decision propels them, from a place/perspective as one kind of person to a place/perspective as another. But the suggestion is also that along with 'jumping' horizontally, as it were, between different personae, as Pedersen suggests, a person in their lifetime also moves vertically from one 'plateau' to another over time – these being relatively totalizing states in the sense that they establish a dominant concept of 'who I am' that spreads over various domains of activity and serves to relegate alternative personae to limited relevance. Each is related to the preceding situation by the subjective significance the new one has by contrast, and by the discovery it reveals about the person(s) one had been in the previous situation.

What makes a person 'give way' to a happening, for it to become an event for them, has to depend first of all on their capacity to embrace contingency, to be in a sense worthy of the event (see Deleuze, 1969: 174–5) – something the Mongols perhaps value particularly highly. This moment cannot be understood, however, without reference to the layers of what someone has been, to their affective state generated by memories.<sup>22</sup> Why did Shirab – as the soldier must have expected – not calmly inspect the head to check it was Dagdan's, pay off the killer, and go about his business? The person(s) he had been before as a singular individual – perhaps particularly that from early childhood when he had been brought up as a Buddhist lama taught to abhor killing – are an explanation for his complete consternation – the 'madness' that flipped him into a new state. But one would hesitate to say that they *determined* anything, especially the sudden realization that Shirab was really the rebirth of his ancestor General Dobdon. In this way, the decision-event leaves open a space for the unexpected, whether this works consciously or unconsciously.

## CONCLUSION

The subject as discussed here, being an analytical notion, is obviously not the same as the person walking down the street. In any cultural situation one could imagine, there would be countless ways the man walking along could imagine himself, or relate the person he is at that time to other people. So it would be a completely forlorn and hopeless task to try to define in advance what the subject *is* in terms of content, or to seek to find it as a natural presence in the world. What this article has attempted to show, on the other hand, is that there are resistances to completely random conceptions of individual people and that there are avenues to explore in thinking about how such people might become subjects in particular circumstances and specific frameworks of time. A subject in this perspective is a concept of someone with a sharpened and pervading sense of who they are, such that this idea dominates other possible ways of being and orients subsequent action. It has been suggested that what propels someone from the everyday moves among the various personae of their lives into such a sharpened state is a rupture of intelligibility, which splits apart the previous state and the one which follows. This rupture, which could (rarely) take the form of a Badiou-ian Event, or more commonly what I have called a decision-event, does not cut off the multiplicities of the individual but rather recomposes them, or 'archives' past identities, by fixing on the new, momentous one of the subject. The event then is a creative switch. In that it separates off times, the time of Before and the time After, it can be considered itself as a-temporal;

it could be an instant or more likely drawn out over a sequence of happenings; in either case, it breaks apart earlier bodies of knowledge or re-jigs them by forcing them to be seen in a particular light.

This article has focused on one 'level' (broadly speaking the historical and socially relevant) at which events and subjectivity can be considered, and it has perforce been unable to give space to decision-events in unremarkable lives or to the more minute and intricate shifts for which other ideas might be more pertinent. Yet why does anthropology need to attend to the issues mentioned here? One reason is that although for decades there have been anthropologists who have focused on individuals, and there continue to be so, this work has almost entirely ignored the mass wave of wider theory that both deconstructed and then partially, faintly, reconstructed the idea of the subject (e.g. see Thrift's discussion of his retrieval of humanism, 2008: 109–114). Second, while the attention to materiality and its mediations (e.g. Latour) and shifting perspectives (e.g. Strathern) is crucial to the way anthropology is developing, the radical step of ignoring the human subject in favour of a 'kind of flattened cohabitation of all things' (Thrift, 2008: 111) is just no help in understanding certain problems we face. This is because the societies we live in and study are so jaggedly changing, and not in any predictable way, and because the fitful overlapping and dislocation of earlier norms makes 'structure', if not entirely redundant, at best of limited use. Any structure one might describe is likely to be an element in a larger, shifting socio-political concatenation, and therefore to be overturned really quite fast and in some unforeseeable way.<sup>23</sup> Further, giving anthropological priority to ongoing process renders invisible the ways in which people co-make (with events) moments of rupture. The 'certainty of uncertainty', as Hoffman and Lubkemann put it in their work on war-torn West Africa, calls for a fundamental reorientation towards the concept of the event. In a study that resonates well in many ways with this article, they argue for an 'analytical recasting of the 'event' as a moment in which cultural creativity is harnessed to the tasks of effecting and legitimizing the social transformations that crises often demand' (2005: 315). By contrast, however, this article has tried to avoid starting with generalizing concepts such as 'cultural creativity' or 'social transformation', on the grounds that such wholes cannot be assumed and have to be (re)assembled by the analyst (Latour, 2005) even when examining the most peaceable of times. Badiou's concept of 'the situation' is a more modest proposal. Hence also my focus on 'the individual' and 'the subject' and what makes up (assembles) such ideas.

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### Notes

- 1 Robbins (2007) argues that anthropology has emphasized continuity to the point that it has not only neglected but positively sidelined evidence of ruptures; this applies to the idea of time espoused by anthropologists themselves, as well as to belief systems such as Christianity that are founded on radical discontinuity.

- 2 I am grateful to Giovanni Da Col for helpful discussions of this theme, which he has explored in an article on Tibetan ideas of fortune (Da Col, 2007).
- 3 Deleuze's early ideas (1969) on the event may have inspired Badiou, but his later work (1993) aroused the latter's opposition. In Deleuze (1993: 77) the rupture of the event becomes a series, or 'a vibration with an infinity of harmonics or sub-multiples, such as an audible wave, a luminous wave', and subjectification becomes an essentially impersonal individuality. Badiou's critique of Deleuze (2007a) argues that rupture should be understood as a radical break and he is concerned with actual historical events as much as with the event in the abstract. For these reasons I find his work more relevant to the troubled times that are the theme of this article.
- 4 These were the creation by the 3rd Mergen Gegen, reincarnate lama and poet of Mergen monastery in Urad, of a new religious-artistic sensibility in the mid-18th century, and the establishment by Enghbayar of a 'democratic socialist' revolution in the 1920s. These events are discussed in detail in a forthcoming book jointly authored with A. Hürelbaatar.
- 5 For different reasons Derrida held the same view. For an excellent comparative discussion of Derrida's bleak argument that each person is an island, that the other is ultimately inaccessible, see J. Hillis Miller (2007: 30–58).
- 6 Badiou's argument, as summarized by Hallward, is that differences being simply what there is, the question of what 'ought to be' must concern only what is valid for all. Differences *are*; the Same is *what may come to be* through the disciplined adherence to a universal truth (2001: xv). The dangerous point is where this generic Same may degenerate into evil, a theme to which Badiou devotes most of his book *Ethics* (2001).
- 7 Extracted from Buyanbadarahu (1987) and Nasunbayar (1985). Minimally influenced by European traditions of history writing, essentially only by Soviet history filtered through Chinese translations, these accounts are replete with details assuming local knowledge, omitted here for reasons of space.
- 8 I adopt the Mongolian habit of shortening names in colloquial accounts.
- 9 Hallward is here quoting Derrida (1992).
- 10 Marilyn Strathern argues that in Hagen, Melanesia, not only are causes external to the agent but intention also has no specific 'location'. 'Such capacity appears visible and locatable only in forms or versions of itself, evident as the particular causes of particular states of mind attributed to the conduct and fact of relationships' (1995: 72).
- 11 Berthoz (2006: 52–3) writes that the capacity for making a perceptual decision is fundamentally linked to the capacity to construct a perceptual unity, e.g. a bicycle rather than an assemblage of wheels, pedals and so on.
- 12 Latour, as if in tacit agreement with the count-as-one argument, comments at length on the plodding, *counter-intuitive* work that is needed to trace the multiple, often hidden or ignored, traces that constitute any network (2005: 221).
13. For not dissimilar reasons, Nigel Thrift, despite his refusal to grant centre stage to the human subject, concedes that it cannot be dropped entirely. The subject may be an illusion, he writes, 'but how things seem is often more important than what they are'. The fact is that it seems to us that we have conscious will and that we cause what we do, and this assumption is bolstered by 'the special constitutional

- significance of joint action and its particular way of understanding worlds' (2008: 13–14). This formulation is akin to Badiou's idea of 'legislation' that frames unities according to particular ideologies.
- 14 There is an important literature 'unmasking' the construction of the subject who appears in experimental psychology (summarized in Hacking, 1999: 50–3). I would agree with Hacking, however, that to acknowledge that such subjects are socially set up in certain ways and embedded in particular experimental practices does not invalidate the scientific conclusions.
  - 15 Berthoz writes that decision-making is probably the fundamental property of the nervous system and that its origin is action. 'Action is the intention to interact with the world or with oneself as part of the world. Action always has a goal; it is always backed up by purpose. It thus becomes the organizer of perception, the organizer of the perceived world' (2006: xi). Berthoz's definition of decision-making is 'an *act* by which the brain, faced with several solutions for identifying an object, guiding movement, or resolving a problem, *cuts* in favour of one solution over another' (2006: 73).
  - 16 However, the necessity of having relations with others and sharing ideas of personhood with them (even relational ideas) does not mean that a subject is constituted *only* by such relations.
  - 17 See for example Berthoz's discussion of dreaming and magical thinking.
  - 18 Melford Spiro (1993: 107–53), for example, quotes several studies that argue that all cultures have both 'sociocentric' and 'individualist' notions of the self. Similar arguments are made by Béteille (1997: 251–75), who also traces the genealogy of social thought on this question.
  - 19 Not just for all humans but also for many animal species singular spatial position, as well as a more symbolic sense of position in a social hierarchy, alters perceptions of the world (Janet, 1935).
  - 20 Allocentric – centred on, or with reference to, a person or another element in the environment.
  - 21 Strathern writes that perceiving an individual as an entity differently constituted from the relationships of which it is part can only be done by a switch in perspective (1992: 84–6). But, as there are no principles of organization that are not also found in the constitution of persons, the switch is an exchange of the same kind of thing. In the end there is 'only the one perspective, from the centre, of which others were always analogies or transformations . . . one person's periphery appeared as another person's centre' (1992: 98).
  - 22 A similar point in cognitivist language is made in Berthoz's discussion of how emotional states generated by memories establish the context in which action is experienced (2006: 226).
  - 23 This is one reason why Marshall Sahlins' important work (1991) on structure and event is not so useful to analyse troubled times, though his later work (2004) tries to determine the kinds of structural conditions in which the contingencies of individual personalities impinge on structural changes. See also discussion in Bensa and Fassin (2002).

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