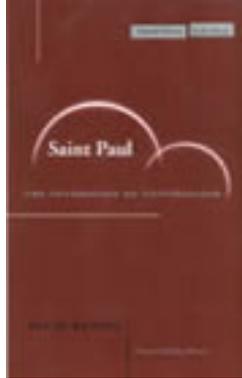


○ REVIEW OF ALAIN BADIOU'S *SAINT PAUL: FOUNDATION OF UNIVERSALISM*

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Fiona Marantelli reviews Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: Foundation of Universalism*. (Ray Brassier, translator. California: Stanford University Press; 2003. pp. 111. ISBN 0804744718.)



This study is one of an emergent group that offers not just a provocative and original interpretation of the Apostle's thought but a unique interface with contemporary political theory and philosophy. In this regard its value extends beyond its interest to Pauline scholarship. Interested primarily in neither history nor exegesis Badiou's dialogue is primarily with the Paul of contemporary cultural memory. But even this is a re-write: overwritten and claimed for a contemporary ideological cause, for Badiou seeks a practical and philosophical hero, one that can engage and critique late 20th century Capitalism, its relativism, its dissolution of truth, its cynicism toward universals and its tendency to infinitely fragment identity and culture. The most interesting aspect of this text lies in Badiou's ability to surmount purely historical concerns and appropriate Pauline ideas to a contemporary political cause. With no hint of the hagiographic sentimentality present in traditional studies, Badiou presents Paul as a political philosopher rather than a saint, and as such, he offers to invigorate Pauline studies even as he challenges it.

The prologue and first chapter are largely confessional. Badiou is unapologetic in naming his interest, his opponents and his project. His named interest is in Paul as a subjective figure; a militant anti-philosopher whom he sees as re-inscribing truth and identity both outside of politics (the Roman Empire) and outside of the specificity of cultural identity (Judaism and the law). Badiou's argument proceeds thus: Paul's truth emanates from the subjective event of his Damascus experience; *his* resurrection experience rather than Jesus'. Armed with this subjective truth Paul effectively challenges both cultural realities (Jerusalem and Rome). Central to Badiou's reading is his insistence that truth-event (Resurrection) emphatically be described as fable, thus it is the procedure rather than content that is important here: the subjective 'event' is impetus for internal change, thought and action. Further: Paul's challenge to politics and his critique of the law.

Situated resolutely in the present, Badiou is frustrated by the cultural and historical relativism that defines the contemporary milieu: our tendency to fracture society and ideas into subsets (infinite combinations of language, race, religion and gender) is seen not as indicative of freedom but as a symptom of Capitalism's endless need for new markets; the commodification of both ideas and identity. Globalisation then represents the hegemony of capital's empty universality; it renounces truth, affirms the ever-expanding inventory of minorities then offers monetarist free exchange under the guise of democracy. With this in mind he seeks to reorient the subject not in relation to cultural specificities (race, religion or gender) but in relation to truth; to score one for the possibility of universality. Hence it is not Paul's gospel specifically that interests Badiou but Paul's insistence and success in universalising his message: freeing it from the rigid enclosure of Judaism (cultural specificity), and equally refusing to have it conform to political and legal specificities of Rome: Jews, Greeks, slaves, women, *ad infinitum* (Galatians is central here). Badiou seeks to learn from Paul's method.

Chapter 2 advances Badiou's thesis on Pauline identity: his biography and philosophical project (theology). Shunning the 'sanctimonious style' of usual biographers, Badiou offers a synopsis that is pithy, satirical and prone to the type unsubstantiated speculation that others will delight to dismiss as unscholarly. Badiou knows it, and while there are some points at which he does insist on one historical reading over another, he always subordinates the unanswerable questions of biography (and history) to the more important questions of the texts themselves. In avoiding what we don't know, or can't know, about Paul the man, Badiou sidesteps the long meticulous roads to nowhere that are prevalent in Pauline studies and treats the texts on their own terms. He accepts the most cautious analysis of scholarship, reducing the Pauline Corpus to only 6 texts (Rom, Cor I & II, Gal, Phil, Thess I), and except at a few convenient junctures dismisses the *Acts of the Apostles* as an idealised 'retrospective construction [...] whose form is frequently borrowed from the rhetoric of Greek fables' (p. 18). Badiou assumes an internal coherence to Pauline texts, allowing the subjective (autobiographical) elements of Paul's writing to stand on their merit; existential fragments in the tradition of Rousseau, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche (p. 17), these fragments inform our reading of the rest of Paul's writing. The texts are then treated as literary wholes, their overtly religious aspects, their contradictions (puzzles), chimeras and impurities tolerated in deference to the overarching artistic (and political) merit of the texts.

Badiou overwrites the biography of Paul with the terms of revolution, briefly acknowledging the anachronism; the move likely (and conveniently) slips from the mind of the reader. 'Sympathizers and adherents' describe proselytes of the Diaspora, (p. 19) Ecclesia becomes a 'small group of militants', 'adelphoi' predictably: comrades. Paul's churches become, by deliberate and careful association, French *résistance* fighters during the Nazi occupation (1940–41): they and they alone uphold and represent truth (p. 20). While this string of metaphors works on one hand to animate the character (Apostle), the primary motivator is again not historical accuracy but the need to re-inscribe common perceptions of the apostle to render him useful to the present task. Badiou here recognises something about his subject: Paul is not a neutral identity. One can hardly imagine too many readers in the west without preconceptions about Paul and his writings. Badiou's biographical work then, is more palimpsest than history – though one might note that the uniform of the revolution is well tailored. Badiou's reading then is as situated in his own context and as dependant on his own subjectivity as are the Apostle's texts to his time and experience. Perhaps this is Badiou's point (here he practically demonstrates his own thesis: that event and time are

inextricably linked, and universality is contingent in its outcomes if not in its methods). The text functions (wittingly) as an allegory of context; 1st century and 20th, paired.

This type of Marxist allegory and parallelism continue through subsequent chapters. Badiou deals interestingly with the Pauline texts, his letters are characterised as ‘interventions’ (p. 31) more akin to the works of Lenin than to Marx. They are foundational to Christianity; the only ‘doctrinal’ texts of the New Testament. Badiou characterises them as timeless with few traces left by genre, era, and circumstance. This characterisation reflects Badiou’s interest in these texts as philosophical rather than historical documents. Here Paul’s ‘universalised and de-centered vision’ (p. 34) is inscribed not just as an historical representation which draws curiosity, but as able to be transplanted unaltered, almost seamlessly into the 20th C, with its war, fascism, and late Capitalism. It is here that the universal core of Paul’s thought can, Badiou asserts, offer us strategies to successfully confront our context.

Badiou believes that Paul’s discourse offers a radical departure from dominant modes of 1st century discourse: both Jewish (Prophetic and sign oriented) and Greek (logic and wisdom) (chapter 4). While both require proofs, albeit radically opposite proofs, Paul’s position is markedly defined by its absence of proof (sign or logic). It is this absence that ‘constrains faith [and is] constitutive of the Christian subject’ (p. 50). Thus Paul is Badiou’s quintessential antiphilosopher, and upon this understanding he develops his conception of the subject: subjectively defined and outside of known systems. This reading offers a radical departure from mainline ecclesial scholarship with its various factions intent on aligning Pauline thought and theology to either Jewish tradition (advocating continuity) or Greek logos (advocating discontinuity). Badiou’s reading is interesting because it advocates a third stream; to read through the insights of contemporary political philosophy rather than limiting our understanding of Pauline thought to its historical milieu. In this way Badiou is able to wrest Pauline theology from the past and claim its method (if not its content) for a present application. Badiou appears to seek an appropriation of Pauline truth to and for the contemporary context, but his position is more nuanced than that. I suspect what he seeks is a new political *conviction*, here elided with the *faith* of Paul. This is seen in the second half of the text where Badiou systematically de-theologises a number of recognisable core Pauline ideas. Essentially, Badiou is seeking to appropriate and develop from Paul, a secular notion of Grace. This is important for Badiou because he sees in Paul’s experience a defining moment that shapes and motivates Paul’s faith and shapes him as a political subject. There is an essential relationship between truth as fable and faith (read: conviction). This method binds subjective experience to truth and truth to political action. Subjectivity governs conviction (the universal). The thesis is not without problems, not least the difficulty of filtering out the overtly religious nature of Paul’s thought. Badiou is unable to find a contemporary and secular example that adequately demonstrates his point. Badiou seeks a model for political change but, recognising that effective political change/activism develops from (subjective) experience and picking up on Paul’s Damascus declaration, the closest Badiou comes is in his secularisation of this key Pauline idea: a laicization of grace. Still, he struggles to find a contemporary fable that will act as such a change agent.

Badiou’s reading of Paul is part history, certainly, but also part contemporary philosophical project and part autobiographical confession. History and subjectivity make strange bedfellows; Paul’s subjectivity is acceptable because it matches the author’s own subjectivity and is bound

by his purpose: 'My intention, clearly, is neither historicizing nor exegetical. It is subjective through and through' (p. 2). The text is marked by the overt presence of 20th century political experience; French and left wing in particular. Badiou defines his project as 'refound[ing] a theory of the subject that subordinates its existence to the aleatory dimension of the event as well as the pure contingency of multiple-being without sacrificing the theme of freedom' (p. 4). The novelty of Paul lies in his unmovable fidelity to the event and his insistence on the 'termination of communitarian particularisms' (p. 108). In a move that flies in the face of the majority of post holocaust readings of Paul (which seek to address the contemporary milieu by conceptualising the Apostle and his teaching in direct relationship to his Judaic heritage) Badiou is careful to establish the singularity of Paul's position; its difference and opposition to both Judaism's perceived ethnic election (and law) and the Greek love of logic (philosophy). Evental subjectivity has need for neither sense nor law.

Badiou's reading is not without problems, his appropriation relies markedly on post-reformation memory. There is scant consideration of post-Holocaust/mainline Pauline studies in the latter part of the 20th C, rather Badiou's 'historical' Paul is a Paul reminiscent of Luther and Calvin: a reformer big on grace as a change agent. This undoubtedly reflects Badiou's own penchant for revolution and reform, hence the figures: Paul, Luther, Lenin. Indeed it is the typology of revolutionary that Badiou relies upon: Paul is to Jesus as Lenin is to Marx; each a revolutionary thinker able to put philosophy into practice.

Thus, Badiou's project is neither historical nor hagiographic. While he does not disavow claims of history he rather recognises first the primacy of the contemporary context as impetus for his project, and while most of those who write about Paul come to the man and his texts with a devotional respect, if not fervor, Badiou's atheism, philosophical training and late encounter with the writings of Paul provide him with a unique perspective. His Paul is a militant political figure and a subject ripe for an unapologetic appropriation to the cause of contemporary Marxism. It is this engagement with contemporary culture and critical theory that defines this text and makes Badiou's engagement with Paul intriguing reading. Badiou's perspective is most simply reflected in the question 'Who *is* Paul?' Badiou's reframing becomes for the reader a candid reminder that the value in understanding the life of Paul is not the value found in history for its own sake (objective or disinterested empiricism) but only in history's efficacy in addressing the questions of our own time. Badiou seeks his own revolution, with any luck he may just get one – in Pauline studies at least.