

**Reviews of Alain Badiou, *The Incident at Antioch: A Tragedy in Three Acts*, Introduction by Kenneth Reinhard, translated by Susan Spitzer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013; and Pier Paolo Pasolini, *St. Paul: A Screenplay*, Foreword by Alain Badiou, Afterword by Ward Blanton, translated by Elisabeth Castelli. New York: Verso Books, 2014.**

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*The Incident at Antioch* is a play by Alain Badiou, originally composed in French (*L'Incident D'Antioche: Tragédie en Trois Actes*), begun in 1982 and revised in 1984 and 1987-89, exploring the political implications of Pauline thought via a dramatization of the conflict between Peter and Paul. Susan Spitzer's translation appears opposite-page to Badiou's original French, along with a translator's introduction, a framing critical essay by Kenneth Richard, generous end-note annotation, and a very brief foreword by Badiou himself.

Alain Badiou, most famous for his contributions to continental philosophy (particularly political theory, Marxism, and aesthetics) and critical literary theory, has composed at least six plays, the most successful (arguably) being *Ahmed le subtil*. He based *Antioch* upon Claudel's *La Ville*; Claudel himself tended to draw heavily from classical theatre (such as Aristophanes). Badiou interweaves dialog from *La Ville* into his own. The play is surrealist and absurdist (and very minimalist in set and overtly literary, suggesting simultaneously modernity and timelessness). To my knowledge, as of this writing, the play remains un-staged (though it has enjoyed public readings in English and in German). The action of the play is stylized and minimalist, too. It is a wordy play; at least in English translation, its text is often more intellectual and profound than it is pleasant to the ear.

Badiou sets this play loosely on the life of Paul and covers Paul's conversion, radical breach with Peter (Cephas) which is outlined in Galatians 2:11f., and a concluding act reflecting upon the future of the movement. Badiou's Paul is female, Paula, a young statist, converted into a Marxist revolutionary. Act I revolves around Paula's conversion. Act II follows the calcification of revolution into a new tyranny, with the conflict between Paula and Cephas as crescendo. Act III, at "Nicea," explores the final failure of revolution by descent into tyranny, with Paula continuing to struggle to hold on to her idealism. *Antioch* is set in a modern age (though it is unclear where this modern state-system exists). The play follows the rise of the radical anti-statists into power and the imposition of a new regime of terror and oppression. Badiou writes:

Truth be told, my play superimposes on Claudel's story another source, which is quite simply my interpretation of the life and writings of the

Apostle Paul. Paula's "conversion" to the revolutionary world-view is clearly akin to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Afterward, Paula opposes the proponents of the violent law of revolutions; she opposes the idea that the only important issue for the revolutionaries is that of State power. Essentially, she opposes the communist law of the Party-State the way Paul opposed Jewish law as embodied in Peter...As is well known, the confrontation between Paul and Peter was a very violent one, especially in Antioch, when Peter refused to eat with non-Jews ... [A]s is also well known, Paul said that political power should be left its prerogatives, because the true kingdom was not of this world. In the same way, Paula vehemently confronts Cephas, who wants the Party to have a monopoly on politics, just as Peter wanted the true religion to be the Jewish community's monopoly (p. xi).

Influenced by Nietzsche's Paul as founder of Christianity as organized (and controlling) religion, Badiou still clings to idealism as he leaves us with a Paul(a) who, in turn, clings to ideological purity, disenchanted by the movement's turn. At Nicea, she offers her own creed:

I have confidence that a politics is real through myself, free from the State's grasp, unrepresentable, and endlessly decoded.

I have confidence that following what's indicated in the intelligence of the will gradually leads a Subject's inner resolve to except itself

From the rule of domination.

I know that path lies in the uniqueness of its tenacity and in the relentless subtlety of its thought.

I have confidence in infinite liberation, not as a pipe dream, or a dictator's smokescreen, but as a figure and a working model, here and now, of what makes human beings capable of something other

Than just the highly organized structure of ants (Act III.5; Badiou, p. 115. Line breaks as in original).

No doubt, contemporary critics of Paul will note several moments of concern or critique in Badiou's choice of parallels for Paul's pre-conversion Judaism and the subsequent nascent Christianity (indeed, "conversion" is even a contested space). Despite the radical nature of Paula's ideology (not to mention the choice to cast Paul as female), Badiou reflects a traditional view of Paul which sees Paul's main interest as a rather wooden "Law versus Freedom" and a German-influenced reconstruction of nascent Christian history. The play exploits, indeed depends upon, Badiou's insight that Paul's mission was political and not merely theological. Badiou uses this insight to explore the ever-present tensions in revolution: in many ways, the real enemy of revolution is organization and pragmatism; revolution's greatest risk is often victory and the subsequent entrenchment (and brutality) it brings.

In 1966, Pier Pasolini began work on a script for a film, *Saint Paul*, which he revised in 1968 and 1974. It was never shot, deemed too controversial in the face of its potential costs by studio heads, particularly in the wake of *Teorema* and the early work on *Salò*. The script, in Italian, was published in 1977 (just five years before Badiou began work on *Antioch*), and a translation of the work into English

has recently appeared with, as it happens, a preface by Badiou and excellent critical essays by Elizabeth Castelli and Ward Blanton.

Pasolini set his life of Paul, largely drawn from the narrative of Acts, in the modern world (though with the assumption, provided by traditional readings of the Pastorals, that Paul was tried in Rome in 60 CE, found innocent and released for more missionary work). Jerusalem becomes Paris; the United States is the Roman Empire, with New York City as Rome. Paul's dialog is almost entirely drawn from the canonical letters. In Pasolini's work, Paul was a Parisian who collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. Convicted of his opposition to God while journeying to root out Resistance cells, Paul is "converted" from his initial dedication to fascism and becomes a missionary of Jesus Christ (understood as the spirit of socialist democracy). Setting his planned film in our contemporary world, Pasolini hoped that:

The most important of these transpositions consists in substituting for the conformism of Paul's times (or better, the two conformisms: that of the Jews and that of the Gentiles), a contemporary conformism, which will therefore be the conformism of present-day bourgeois civility, whether in its hypocritically and conventionally religious aspect (analogous to that of the Jews) or in its secular, liberal and materialist aspect (analogous to that of the Gentiles). (Pasolini, p. 3)

Paul's career takes him across Europe establishing radical cells but encountering resistance from the intelligentsia who regard him as engaging and charismatic, but ultimately psychologically impaired. Civil authorities see Paul as a threat to state control. Former anti-fascists are suspicious and see him, even in reformation and penitence, as an interloper prone to dogmatism. Paul's most radical moments precede his trial in "Rome;" on his release, he is much more given to language of compliance with "legitimate" authority. The church he founds grows (Pasolini suggests under Satanic influence) from small cells of free thinkers and lovers of liberty to an organization that is detached and tyrannical. In a scene that explicitly invokes the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul is shot and killed by a mysterious assailant.

Pasolini's Paul is mercurial, even as he is highly charismatic and tireless as an organizer. He is frequently beset by a serious illness which produces seizures and, at times, dreams and visions. He has a penchant for beautiful, conservatively tailored suits. He is surrounded by devoted, largely unacknowledged followers at first; ultimately, he is abandoned. Pasolini's Paul is also rejected by intellectuals who focus on Paul's almost Oedipal "obsession" with circumcision and sex (Badiou's preface to the English translation draws parallels between Pasolini's *St. Paul* and *Oedipus Rex*). They observe in his message "A thanatophilia, clinically ascertainable"; Paul sees "everything in terms of the relationship between mother and child, between father and child"; they wonder, "Who knows for what he wants to be punished, this priest, with his longing for death" (Scene 52; Pasolini, pp. 51-52).

It is difficult to avoid comparison between *Antioch* and *Saint Paul*. Both works present a modern-world setting for the career of Paul/a, were essentially unrealized in production, and heavily use "citation" (Badiou's French theater; Pasolini's allusions to King, etc.). Both frame Paul's message as (generally

Marxist) resistance to tyranny (particularly of a type exemplified by post-WWII US cultural, economic and military colonialism). Both Pasolini and Badiou assume a Nietzschean reading of Paul and organizational power. Both comply with traditional notions of Paul that see his central message as the dichotomy between freedom of grace and the tyranny of law. Both construct an almost Platonic view of revolution: the Ideal of the revolutionary becomes flawed when actualized and particularized into the Real; revolution fails because its enemy is the pragmatism necessitated by its actualization.

Critics of the treatment of Paul in contemporary continental political philosophy exemplified by Breton (*A Radical Philosophy of St. Paul*), Agamben (*The Time That Remains*) or even Badiou (*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*) have noted the tendency of these philosophers to: 1. frame Paul's oeuvre somewhat simplistically as resistance to fascism, neoliberalism and State; 2. approach Paul in what seems often to be a pre-critical (read: "non-historical") manner. In *Antioch*, as in Pasolini, both charges are fair. Disengaged from critical work on Paul that stresses Paul's original Jewishness and continued continuity with Jewish thinking, the characterization of Paul in both Badiou and Pasolini becomes rather monstrous. In both works, Paul "converts" away from fascism (in Pasolini's case, from Nazism), a strikingly anti-Semitic equation of fascism with proto-Rabbinic Pharisaic Judaism of the late second Temple era. Facile linkage of Paul with Pharisaism, and the even more facile linkage of Pharisaism with legalistic control and abuse and not, as nuanced historical insight suggests, with the indigenous struggle against colonial control (the re-articulation of ethnicity among the colonized poor), results in gross caricature, ironically, one that plays into the very Statist and colonial systems of oppression being resisted.

Yet the degree to which a more nuanced reading of Paul is present in contemporary Pauline scholarship is the direct result of scholarly discourse in the wake of historical review of the Jewishness of Paul and postcolonial and feminist/queer readings of Paul— all work written after both *Antioch* and *St. Paul*. *Antioch* and *Saint Paul* reveal, almost artifact-like, the state of Pauline scholarship influential to later continental political philosophy. To a degree, this is both clarification of and partial apology for their vision. Badiou and Pasolini used a traditional view of Paul as cornerstone for the construction of dramas about State authority and control. Badiou and Pasolini do not construct a historical Paul (or, perhaps better, an a-historical Paul) that is anti-Semitic; they inherit it. To be frank: so did most Biblical scholarship prior to the late 1970s. Badiou and Pasolini also reveal the sharp ways that Paul's theological and mystic ideology was also political protest, a point only very recently getting attention from Pauline scholarship. *Antioch* and *St. Paul* fail to anticipate some aspects of the biblical scholarship, even as they anticipate others. Perhaps by this insight we can still find ways to retain what is valuable in the dramatic edifice they construct.



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