

BOOK REVIEW

ST. PAUL: APOSTLE, MILITANT, COMMUNIST

Liam A. O'Donnell

Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003. ISBN: 0-8047-4471-8

It may seem curious that a philosopher who thinks that the basis of ontology is mathematics, and who still identifies himself as a communist, should be interested in St. Paul. This book is not, however, concerned with ontology; instead, Badiou, like St. Paul himself, is concerned here with that which 'is' other-than-being. According to St. Paul, this other-than-being is Christ's resurrection. Badiou sees this myth as one of the first attempts to think the true nature of the subject as a process of subjectivization and universalization. In *Saint Paul*, Badiou argues that to become a subject is to labour for the universalization of love; another name for this task is communism. It should be added that neither communism nor resurrection have any guarantees.

Badiou's account of St. Paul as the apostle of universal love is the exact opposite of the received opinion of him as the father of a life denying authoritarian brand of Christianity that corrupted Jesus's original teachings—a misreading perpetuated by Nietzsche among others. Paul was in fact the first one to write down the authentic insight of Christianity, universal love, in a coherent form. This insight is not, however, a philosophical system, or a set of laws that set forth rules of behaviour. Love is precisely that which is beyond the law. In this sense, St. Paul is an anti-philosopher rather than a philosopher. What both St. Paul and Badiou call for is a turn to the subject as the necessary bearer of truth and universality. The unfashionableness of these three terms—the subject, truth and universality—shows the force of this text's polemical intervention in our postmodern moment. Part of Badiou's purpose is to reclaim these ideas for a left that has all too often indirectly boosted the ideology of capitalism by acceding to cultural relativism and channeling its energies into identity politics. Badiou is here following Marx, who doesn't simply reject the bourgeois call for equality, but rather asks why it hasn't been

realized. The enthusiasm for Badiou among certain circles surely comes from the relief in reading a thinker who is prepared to reclaim the proper ground of radical thought. It would be a major error, however, to think that Badiou's thought is merely a polemical intervention: to see him this way would be to misunderstand the very nature of the relation between our particular political conjuncture and the universal itself—the universal always emerges out of a particular situation.

Two related questions must be raised. Firstly, what is the status of this text within Badiou's *oeuvre*, and secondly, what is the status of religion for Badiou? There are, I'm aware, Badiou purists out there who say that the only serious route into Badiou's thought is via mathematics and an immersion in the weighty tome that is *Being and Event*. Undoubtedly this is true, but *Saint Paul* is also a free-standing elaboration on the idea of the event and the subjectivizing truth procedures it makes possible. Consequently, this text works as a perfect introduction to his thought, without the mathematics. Before clarifying the status of religion for Badiou, we need to clarify the status of philosophy. At first glance, the claim Badiou makes for philosophy seems very modest; thus, ontology is found in mathematics, not philosophy, and philosophy has no truths of its own: it 'merely' reveals and coordinates the truth procedures that are to be found in the four spheres of love, art, politics and science. Where does St. Paul and religion fit into this schema? Badiou's answer is as follows:

Its [Paul's concept of the universal] bearing, in a mythological context [religion] implacably reduced to a single point, a single statement (Christ is resurrected), pertains rather to the laws of universality in general. This is why it can be called a *theoretical* break, it being understood that in this instance 'theoretical' is not being opposed to 'practical', but to real (SP 108).

So St. Paul is not a philosopher, but he is one of the first theoreticians of the universal and truth. While St. Paul's truth is not real (as a truth in art, science, love or politics is) his discourse still tells us something essential (general) about truth itself. Perhaps we can say then that St. Paul's truth tells us something true about truth in general, while it contains no particular truth.

While I'm sure Christians will find this text fascinating, and perhaps disturbing if they read it correctly, Badiou himself is not a believer. Then again, if Badiou's reading is correct, neither is St. Paul. For one thing, resurrection is not to be understood literally: it has nothing to do with living again after biological death. Rather, resurrection is to be understood as the claim that it is possible for a subject to undergo a conversion of thinking; this conversion is from the living death in which truth and life are subordinated to the law, to an authentic disposition of thought (subjectivizing) in which truth is in excess of the law. St. Paul is both the theorist of conversion and the prime example of it; Jesus's resurrection may be a myth, but St. Paul's conversion is not. Badiou does, however, question the appropriateness of the term conversion, claiming that it doesn't quite capture how the shift was 'a thunderbolt, a caesura, and not a dialectical reversal' (SP 17). Still, the existentialist echoes of this claim are clear enough: nothing in Saul's being caused his transformation into Paul. The lessons of Badiou's early Sartreanisms live on: subjec-

tive conversion is always possible. Leaving existentialism aside for the moment, we can say that Christianity is central for revealing the nature of subjects: this is the essence of its revelation, rather than the divinity of Jesus. The essence of Christianity is therefore other than what the Christians think it is. Behind Badiou's book, however, is the assertion of the 'miraculous' nature of the human subject, which is not merely an effect, or construct, but a being that has the power to transcend the strictures of any law, a being that has the power to invent the new. The Christian insight therefore goes beyond the understanding of the subject to be found in Greek philosophy, which reduces the subject to recollection; it also goes beyond the Buddhist tradition, which dissolves the subject in Being; and it also goes beyond the Jewish tradition, which sees the law and prophesy as that which encompasses and defines the subject. For Christianity, unlike Judaism, the event has already happened, and so there is no need to wait in messianic hope.

The appropriation of religion for radical thought is not a new project. In the past, conservatives have often berated communists for simply recreating the structure of the religions that they claim to critique. The subtle communist is untroubled by this attack: for him/her, religion, in this case Christianity, is already, in its essence, communist. Fredric Jameson, following the lead of Ernst Bloch, makes such a claim. In terms of recent theory, however, the insistence on the superiority of Christianity (a very Hegelian claim) is peculiar to Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.¹ Such a position clearly flies in the face of liberal pluralism; either you accept the truth that can be extracted from the Christian legacy, or you are wrong. Similarly, you are free to believe in the divinity of Jesus, but of course you would be wrong. The doyens of difference start to hear alarm bells at this point. In my view Badiou's defense of this argument is unassailable: what is at stake in reclaiming the truth of the Christian legacy is the very status of the universal itself; it is not a question of asserting the superiority of a closed coterie of true believers, for the Christian claim is precisely what challenges the closed community. It is the exclusivity of the particular community, not the labour of the universal, that ultimately leads to death camps. What then of those who follow the law, are they to be violently challenged? If we are to be true subjects does it follow that we should, for example, be anti-Jewish? Should we, perhaps, ban head scarves? That was not St. Paul's way; it could not be his way. We must leave culture and opinion to their own devices; the task of the subject of a truth is to declare the truth in the hope that it will inspire others. As an imperative, this may sound rather weak, but we can surely take the point that insofar as one is declaring a truth, one is not merely destroying illusions (see SP chapter 10).

Although it would be hard to find a more systematic thinker than Badiou, there is enough ambiguity in his thought to give rise to disputes about its meaning. And so the question of the ultimate status of the subject in Badiou's work needs to be raised. One difficulty in answering this question arises from the fact that Badiou's thought is, in some sense, poststructuralist; and yet poststructuralism is unremittingly hostile to the subject. Like a number of other prominent French thinkers of his vintage, he also owes a debt

1. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, London, Verso, 2000.

to Althusser, the theorist par excellence of anti-humanism (and anti-subjectivity). So what are we to make of Badiou's reclamation of the Christian (or is it really existentialist?) question of the subject? Can there be a poststructuralist thought of the subject that doesn't reduce it to an effect of some otherness? Badiou argues for a non-self identical subject, a subject open to contingency, a subject beyond causality, a situated subject, a subject that is its project. The attempt to think such a subject has been done before, by Sartre. The Badiou purists will bristle at such a suggestion; the subject for Badiou is not a consciousness, they will insist; the term 'subject' is misleading, they will claim. And yet how else are we to understand it? This text is about the process of subjectivization, and in particular it is about one subject: the individual person called St. Paul. The terms Badiou uses to describe the subject are clear: the subject needs to achieve 'autonomy' and realize its own power by snatching these abilities back from the unconscious desire that is engendered by the law (SP 87-88). Moreover, what must the underlying presuppositions of Badiou's thought be such that he can make the following statement: 'Through their commensurability with a truth, *anonymous individuals* are always transformed into vectors of *humanity as a whole*' (SP 20, my emphasis). *St. Paul* is, therefore, a site of contestation for the soul of Badiou. It is also worth noting that Badiou seems to affirm here the value of the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, a move that further distances him from Althusser's explicit rejection of this theme, which the latter sees as complicit with the suspect categories of alienation and reification.² Badiou puts it as follows:

This configuration ['the automatism of capital'] imposes the rule of an abstract homogenization ... Free circulation of what lets itself be counted, yes, and above all of capital, which is the count of the count. [But] Free circulation of *that uncountable infinity constituted by a singular human life*, never! (my emphasis SP 9-10)

This dispute over the status of the subject requires a brief examination of some of the details of Badiou's argument. To suggest, as I seem to have been doing, that we can reconcile Badiou with dialectical existentialism may well be too pat. At the core of the issue is the relation between the event and the subject. An event is not a willful act, but neither is it a purely objective permutation thrown up by existing structures. What we can say is that first there is an event, which provides an opening in being that enables, but doesn't guarantee, the formation of a subject. My question though is this: must there not already be a subject in order for it to recognize the opening in being? Althusser faced a similar problem, for there must already be a subject—something he cannot explain—before it can be hailed by ideology. What if subjectivity itself is the opening? This is the Sartrean position. Badiou chooses, however, to use the word 'grace' to describe the event. Whatever he might intend this word to mean, it cannot help suggesting that the subject is ultimately enabled by the dispensation of some Otherness. Why not just call the event itself freedom and avoid this religious connotation? Perhaps the event is equivalent to the impersonal primordial upsurge of subjectivity, while the subject, in

2. See Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Graham Lock, London, New Left Review, 1976, p. 118. It is worth noting that Derrida takes up this Althusserian position in his *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, London, 1994.

Badiou's terms, is equivalent in some way to the Sartrean project: a term, by the way, that Badiou also uses. Ultimately though, the status of the event, and by extension the subject, remains unclear in my view.

Despite my hesitation in reconciling Badiou and Sartre, *Saint Paul* shows that there is undeniably a great deal of common ground between them. Both share a critique of a type of optimistic dialectic that sees the negative as a necessary moment in an ultimately positive affirmation. Badiou states that there is a *relation* of non-relation between the law (the way of death and sin) and truth (the way of life and love). In other words, there is a radical aporia between before and after, sin and love, that renders the relation non-dialectical. Badiou even states that the negative is to be abolished altogether, but to my mind the kind of aporia he is describing is the true negative (and perhaps the basis of a true dialectic). Both thinkers also insist that the universal is always singular: this is because it is always subject to an individual subjectivization. We must add that subjectivization never takes place in the solitude of particularity: subjectivity requires a declaration that is addressed to everyone (SP 90).³ Without this subjectivization the universal becomes as sterile as the law. And lastly, both reject the law because of its negativity—its 'thou shalt not'⁴—which restricts the subject to reactive passivity.

Although the event has already happened, the truth that emerges in response to it must be maintained and developed through tenacity and hope. For Badiou, hope is not an abstract wish for what is to come, but rather a present imperative to strive for the universalization of a truth: 'Faith says: We *can* escape powerlessness and rediscover that from which the law separated us. Faith prescribes a new possibility, one that, although real in Christ, is not, as yet, in effect for everyone' (SP 88). Despite protests to the contrary, this view reveals a persistent secular eschatology in Badiou's thought: the persistence of the revolutionary demand (SP 111) 'To experience a truth procedure is to become aware of the need for a society that is open to truths, open to an unfolding universality. As Badiou notes, 'no truth can be sustained through capital's homogeneous expansion' (SP 11). If we were to replace the term truth with praxis, then Badiou's continuity with the tradition of Western Marxism is striking.

3. See Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Singular Universal', in *Marxism and Existentialism*, trans. John Matthews, New York, Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979.

4. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.