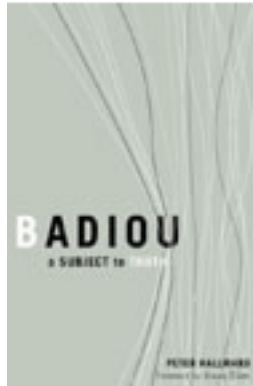


○ LAICISING THE INFINITE: PETER HALLWARD ON ALAIN BADIOU

Roland Boer

Roland Boer reviews Peter Hallward's *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 2003. Foreword by Slavoj Žižek. ISBN: 0-8166-3461-0).



There is a rumour doing the rounds, or perhaps just a hint of a rumour, that we may be on the verge of a fundamental paradigm shift (to use Thomas Kuhn's language for a moment). Not so much another theory, another method, in the increasing rush of new theories that seem to inundate us in a fashion that cannot be separated from the increasing speed of the market and the rate of consumption and commodification. Not a theory that we can add to, say, ecocriticism, the latest kid on the theoretical block, or even disability criticism, or the now slightly weary autobiographical, postcolonial, new historicist or... (insert term here) criticism. Rather, the rumour is of something that will shift us from the very need for ever new theories themselves, from the supermarket of endless choice that both draws and repels us.

And the suspicion, even if it is not voiced as such, is that Alain Badiou may indeed be a harbinger of that eschatological moment. Even if he does not give us that shift itself, then this cuddly Frenchman who drinks no wine, writes militant, punchy tracts and yet is as urbane as the best tradition of European cosmopolitanism can provide – this Frenchman may be the one of those who takes a first step in this direction. Lifelong activist on the far left, from Maoism to *Organisation Politiques*, one of the most enticing things about Badiou for me is the way his philosophy comes directly out of and feeds back into his political practice: the ideal of Marxist praxis (of whom Lenin and Mao are still the best examples).

But my review is not of Badiou himself but this book on Badiou by Peter Hallward and its implications for biblical studies. Sanctioned by Badiou himself, or at least produced out of close interaction, Hallward's *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* is a tour de force. In just under 350 pages

(excluding extensive notes, bibliography and index) of tightly argued text, this really is the authoritative survey of Badiou's work to date. Hallward, the rather cute boy of British philosophy (see the photo on the King's College London website) combines an extraordinary propensity to write – Hallward has also translated some of Badiou's work and edited a number of collections of essays on Badiou and French philosophy – with an ability to get to the point, to say what needs to be said.

For me, the most intriguing and engaging sections of Hallward's book are the Appendix and the second part on 'Being and Truth'. Most readers of this journal will have first stumbled on Badiou through his *Saint Paul* book. Here we find Paul as a prime (in more senses than one) exemplar of the procedure of truth: the event breaks into the mundane reality of life (the order of being) and leaves it eternally changed. But only if someone, here Paul, names it as such, and then forms a militant group in fidelity, conviction and certainty (the old love, faith and hope) to the original event. Hallward fills all of this out and more in the section 'Being and Truth', where we find other exemplars such as Pascal, Galileo, the French Revolution, May '68 in Paris, Mao Zedong and... Cantor's set theory.

Set theory? Well yes, and this is where the Appendix becomes so important. It is a survey for those of us not fortunate enough to have majored in mathematics in our undergraduate degrees, or indeed to have a PhD in mathematics as well as biblical studies or philosophy or whatever (that would indeed be a small academic organisation). In particular, it is a survey of the key points in the development of transfinite set theory from George Cantor through Kurt Gödel to Paul Cohen. The Appendix is worth the cost of the book as a whole, for here we find traced out the possibility not merely of an infinite set, of a mathematically precise definition of infinite numbers as numbers, but also the possibility that there may be more than one set of infinity. In other words, we have the mathematical possibility of multiple infinities, and thereby of multiple universes. Infinity is not a singular phenomenon. So what is the implication here for philosophy? It enables Badiou to argue that the truth is not an eternal reality that somehow manifests itself every now and then, that breaks through to us frail and dim human beings. Rather, truth appears uniquely and contingently: it is only in particular circumstances that truth happens, and it can happen to anyone. Here, if I may put it crudely, we have the complete infinite set of truth that is not restricted to the one – there may well be, indeed there are, more than one. Truth is, then, not singular but multiple, or rather, democratic; it is universal, but only so through its contingency.

Badiou's position is of course more complex than that, but it is to Hallward's credit that he is able to highlight the key elements of Badiou's developing position, particularly in relation to the fundamental role of mathematics within his thought. However, I want to raise now what the implications of this might be for biblical studies. The most obvious point is his retrieval of Paul as a crucial political thinker, and this work, along with others by Žižek, Taubes and Agamben has really thrown a whole new angle on Pauline studies. But what is needed now is a historical perspective that goes back beyond Heidegger's engagement with Paul to look at the profound role of Paul, and especially the Epistle to the Romans, in the political debates that followed the Reformation, debates that took a whole new turn with Karl Barth's breakthrough commentary on Romans in the 1920s.

But there is a deeper implication, as far as I am concerned, and it is something Philip Davies has been playing with for some time, something that may be regarded as the recovery of Philo's old agenda – the claim that the Bible is indeed a philosophical document. Or rather, that it contains

material that deals in its own way with philosophical questions. What if, asks Philip Davies, we regard these ancient authors as philosophers: how then would we read and understand these texts? How then would they be understood today? It is not so much that Moses is by far a greater and earlier philosopher than Plato (so Philo). Rather, if, as Badiou implies, Paul is a philosophical thinker first and foremost – indeed the founder of the category of universalism as such – then what of the other biblical texts? What if we took texts such as Genesis as philosophical texts, or rather recognized that much of our discussion of these texts has been and is philosophical? This would require another orientation, similar to Badiou’s critical Platonism, or indeed critical Paulinism. But it would also mean that it is not so much a case of ‘applying’ various theories, from deconstruction to ecocriticism, to the biblical texts, but rather of reading these texts for their own somewhat different philosophical perspectives.

There is a further element of Badiou’s work that Hallward brings out particularly well in the first section on ‘taking sides’. And this is that Badiou understands philosophy at its heart as a political exercise: the exercise of thinking, difficult as it is, is inescapably political. You can’t help but admire observations such as the one that current politicians do not in fact think, that thinking is anathema to our versions of capitalist or parliamentary democracy (which are themselves bankrupt). In its own way Badiou’s position carries on Louis Althusser’s slogan that philosophy is class conflict in theory. But that then means, if I carry on the point from the previous paragraph, that if there is a distinct mode of philosophical reflection that we find in various parts of the Bible, then that thinking and our engagement with it is going to be just as much a political exercise – one that we can perhaps also engage with in order to counter the absence of thinking in our various forms of parliamentary democracy.

But this leads me on to a couple of reservations about the project here. To begin with, in a critical synopsis like this, Hallward cannot avoid working over a good deal of very complex material from Badiou. Hence most of the book lays out the essential points of Badiou’s evolving philosophical work, meeting occasional criticisms on Badiou’s behalf. Only in the last part does Hallward develop some criticisms, particularly hinging around the questions of ethics and the ability to discern pseudo-events. What safeguards, he asks, are there for a system like Badiou’s becoming a legitimation of some form of dictatorship? I would want to add to this: how does it avoid the whole problem of the personality cult, especially in light of the crucial role of the leader who both names the event as event and leads the militant group. In the end this is the problem of Christology, which to my mind (borrowing from Adorno) sets up the logic of the personality cult in the first place.

Secondly, I wonder about Badiou’s own propensity for militantly taking sides: Mao, Plato, Cantor, Paul, May ’68 and so on. Let me put it this way: even though Badiou is often compared to Deleuze (despite Badiou’s trenchant book *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*) they differ on at least one fundamental point. Over against Deleuze’s commitment to radical immanence, Badiou may be said to have recovered transcendence in an entirely novel fashion, to have taken sides quite emphatically with transcendence. Indeed, his project, as Hallward points out right at the beginning of his book, is a laicisation of the transcendent, or, if you like, a materialisation of grace. And yet, transcendence remains. Indeed, however much we try to banish immanence or transcendence, writing divorce settlements, cutting one off from the other – as we find in Husserl, Heidegger and Deleuze, to name but a few – before we know they are back in their old places.

The question that remains, then, is whether it is possible to think outside such a framework, to think without that all-encompassing pattern of transcendence and immanence.

The catch with such an excellent book as this one by Badiou is that, as Žižek warns us in the preface, we will be tempted to read it instead of Badiou's own work. Rather, it should excite us to read Badiou, before, after and alongside Hallward, whose book will become an invaluable reference work for Badiou.