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ST. PAUL AND THE EVENT

A review of “Saint Paul Among the Philosophers: Subjectivity, Universality and the Event;” Conference held at Syracuse University April 14-16, 2005.

I. Boyarin

IF DANIEL BOYARIN IS CORRECT, then an event would not have taken place at Syracuse University on April 14-16, 2005. That is, the conference on “Saint Paul Among the Philosophers” staged an encounter of sorts between philosophical readings of St. Paul—Badiou, Žižek and to a certain extent Richard Kearny, and historical biblical scholarship on Paul, represented by E.P. Sanders, Paula Fredrikson and to a certain extent Dale Martin. Boyarin occupied a central role, in that he was best able to mediate between the theoretical and the historical issues. At the concluding roundtable discussion, Boyarin offered a distinction between systematic (philosophical) and nonsystematic (historical) scholarship. Boyarin located himself on the systematic side, and argued that systematic thinkers necessarily impose their constructions upon historical events, whereas nonsystematic scholars simply attend to those actualities in all of their messiness.

Boyarin’s distinction, however, raises the problem of whether an event can or did take place, or whether the participants were doomed to talk past each other. Building upon Paula Fredrikson’s critique of Badiou’s appropriation of St. Paul as historically inaccurate, and her strong distinction between history and philosophy, Boyarin’s suggestion that history is nonsystematic whereas philosophy is systematic, implies that the project of historical scholarship is not only empirical and messy, but it is also historicist and positivist. If historians simply investigate and report on what is the case, then there is no conflict or no argument with philosophical explanation, but ultimately there is no encounter either. If Boyarin is correct, there would be no event, except to the extent that historians also engage in interpretative discussions that possess systematic implications. This distinction also begs the question whether there could be an unsystematic philosophy, or whether such a notion would be immediately

contradictory, an oxymoron, or at worst, a sophism.

II. Badiou

If Alain Badiou is correct, there would be the possibility that an event could take place. Badiou's Platonic, quasi-mathematical ontology provides the necessary condition for the possibility of an event. Paul's theology was an event, a revolutionary event of thinking, and its formal repetition is necessary in our current sociopolitical context, shorn of the content of Paul's theology, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. This is the significance of Badiou's opus, *L'être et le événement*, as applied to the situation of St. Paul. Being is circumscribed in terms of contemporary set theory, which prescribes the possibility for an event to take place. For Paul, the single event is tied to a unitary Truth, the truth of God's resurrection of Christ into a new life, and its promise for Christian believers. According to Badiou, however, there is not one Truth, but multiple truths, and he identifies four sites of truth: art, science, love and politics.

Badiou returns to the power of Paul's thought as testimony of the event in order to intervene into the war between enjoyment and sacrifice. According to Badiou, enjoyment, which is related to the French word *jouissance*, is a sort of death in life, while sacrifice is a life in death. Our appropriation of Paul's truth affirms the weakness of truth, which is a fidelity to the event, or at least the possibility of a new event. The possible event is an event of new life, a life beyond sacrifice and enjoyment. This life represents a peace that is not merely a compromise or a truce in the perpetual war between sacrifice and enjoyment, a peace that is not simply enforced peace of our American Empire.

To return to Boyarin's comments at the roundtable discussion, he also raised a question about the praxis of thinking in affinity with Badiou's political concern. Which thinking makes for the best politics, or provides the most resources for political intervention at this time in our contemporary world, a Platonic thinking or a sophistic one? I think Boyarin would affirm the multiplicity of truth that Badiou articulates, but he disagrees with Badiou's ontology for both epistemological and political reasons. Boyarin defends a sophistic conception of truth, and he presented a sophistic reading of St. Paul, against Badiou's Platonism. It may be the case, however, that a sophistic understanding of truth may be more "correct," however that word is understood, but a commitment to a Platonic notion of Truth may be more effective politically, whether the more conventional Platonic notion of Truth as One or Badiou's re-description of truth as multiple. In any case, however, for or against Badiou, for or against Boyarin,

and even for or against Plato, we would be seeking the best practical and theoretical conditions for the possibility of an event, to phrase the issue in nakedly Kantian terms. An event may or may not have taken place in Syracuse in April concerning an understanding of St. Paul, but we would have a better grasp on the theoretical conditions for its occurrence.

III. Žižek

If Slavoj Žižek is correct, then the event occurs as contradiction. Žižek presents a Hegelian dialectical reading of the event, but as opposed to Hegel's sweeping theory, for Žižek dialectics is compressed like a spring into the tightest possible space. Then, it erupts across history and thought somewhat like Freud's notion of the return of the repressed. The event would be the recognition and unleashing of this contradiction, and that is what St. Paul ultimately represents. Žižek's thought cuts across the tensions between universal and particular, transcendental philosophizing and historicizing, and he locates the event within this very contradiction between "history" and "philosophy." In this way, the conference on St. Paul did constitute an event, precisely in its dynamic tension between context and thought, rigorous scholarship and interpretive freedom.

According to Žižek, Paul is a precursor to Hegel, but this is a Kierkegaardian Hegel, a dialectic that is both existential and paradoxical, as well as political (Marx) and psychoanalytic (Lacan). Žižek compresses the dialectic into the smallest possible space, in order to close the gap of representation or reconciliation, which is ultimately a gap of mediation. In a more classical Hegelian framework, dialectical mediation takes place across time and space, but for Žižek, dialectic does not take place, even though it occurs as event. This is the nature of what Žižek calls the universal singular, the claim that the universal only occurs as a singular event. It is the gap between the abstract universal that is really a false universal, and the particular actual event, that constitutes universality for Žižek. Again, however, this gap does not take up space or time in a conventional sense, which is why it is so effective.

Žižek emphasizes the dialectical tension between God and humanity that coincides in a paradoxical, seemingly contradictory manner in the incarnation and the resurrection. This is, following Kierkegaard, an infinitely comical Christianity in its unification of high and low, noble and base. Reading and thinking St. Paul is a direct encounter with the event itself, the creation of a singular universal, which Žižek described at the roundtable discussion as a "fighting universal." Universality is not a static property that precedes or exists

separately from any event, but the universal is generated by and through the particular struggle. You join together and form a universal by fighting together, although this is not a war in the same sense that Badiou criticizes, but rather the refusal to compromise with any pre-existing arrangement of thinking or form of power. I would suggest, following Žižek, that an event took place in Syracuse in April, the creation of a fighting universal around the political stakes of reading St. Paul today, within and against our postmodern Roman Empire, with all its powers of war and death.

IV. Radical Theology and the Event

I would like to suggest, in the context of the engagement between philosophers and historians around St. Paul, that theology is the vanishing mediator of this encounter. Žižek picks up the phrase “vanishing mediator” from Frederic Jameson, and it refers to a third that appears invisible in relation to two other dialectically related oppositions, but in fact it is what functions and allows the encounter to occur, sort of like a catalyst. Theology is the vanishing mediator in relation to the exchange between philosophy and history in their dispute over the contemporary appropriation of St. Paul.

Theology itself is not unitary, however, but is divided at its origin in Derridean fashion. That is, theology is divided into a traditional theology concerned with restoring Paul to his originary place and stature as the primary apostle and first theologian of the resurrection event, and a radical theology, that is willing to set the ‘event’ free from the resurrection, and read Paul under the pressure of the death of God. Radical theology is here the penumbral shadow of the more properly atheistic philosophy of Žižek and Badiou. What would it mean to think the event theologically, under the pressure of historical biblical scholarship and contemporary Continental philosophy, in a manner that repeats the gesture of St. Paul in its radicality but does not submit to the authority of Paul’s example? According to Žižek, only theology supplies a frame that would allow us to approach the trauma of God, and only a radical theology could do justice to the trauma, as opposed to an orthodox theology that is dedicated to covering up or papering over it. The question of theology is therefore the question that remains, but one whose potentiality is enriched by virtue of the event.

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Crockett, Clayton. "St. Paul and the Event." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 84-88. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.2/crockett.pdf>