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### Repeating Wesley

On December 23, 1959, in the midst of his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan gives his students a recommendation:

Whatever some may think in certain milieux, you would be wrong to think that the religious authors aren't a good read. I have always been rewarded whenever I have immersed myself in their works. And Saint Paul's Epistles is a work that I recommend to you for your vacation reading; you will find it very good company (83).

Decades later, that advice is being taken up in earnest by two leading contemporary interpreters of Lacan: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. It is, as Badiou says, a "strange enterprise" (*Saint Paul* 1), but it is not an idle or leisurely one. Both Badiou and Žižek are dedicated to the cause of radical leftist politics, and in the years between Lacan's recommendation and their work on Paul, that political project has been dealt a crushing blow by the fall of Real Socialism in the Eastern bloc and the nearly unchecked spread of global capitalism since then.

For these thinkers, it is obvious that some concrete form of political action is necessary to counter these developments; the shape such action should take, however, is not obvious. It will be my contention in this paper that the work and thought of John Wesley and the model of early Methodism have everything to do with the attempt to get

out of this impasse of contemporary radical politics. In order to get there, however, I will need to do some extended theoretical exposition that apparently has nothing to do with Wesley at all.

Badiou's turn to Paul is determined not by any concern with the doctrinal content of Christianity, but instead with certain formal features of Paul's work and thought that he takes to be exemplary of the "poet-thinker of the event, as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure" (*Saint Paul* 2). More specifically, Paul "brings forth the entirely human connection... between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice that is this rupture's subjective materiality" (2). Such a thought-practice

provides the foundation for the possibility of a universal teaching within history itself. Paul's unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class. What is true (or just; they are the same in this case) cannot be reduced to any objective aggregate, either by its cause or by its destination (5; cf. *Infinite Thought* 71).

A universal concept of truth or justice is precisely what is necessary in our contemporary situation, which Badiou insists "is in no way as 'complex' as those who wish to ensure its perpetuation claim. It is even, in its broad outline, perfectly simple" (9). First, it is characterized by the worldwide market that equally confronts every particularity with "an abstract homogenization" based on the free flow of capital. Second, it is characterized by "a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies that fragmentation" (10).

Although the identitarian ideologies or nationalist movements often portray themselves as resisting the homogenization of capital, in point of fact, “the capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole,” an order that is “organically *without truth*” (11; emphasis in original). For Badiou, the word “truth” has a very specific technical meaning, and to understand this meaning, it is necessary to elaborate some details of his philosophical system. First, it must be noted that his philosophical system is both self-consciously *philosophical* and self-consciously a *system*—in contrast to the polemic of much twentieth-century thought against systematicity and against the pretensions of philosophy, Badiou insists that philosophy has a very particular role to play in elaborating a conceptual system that accounts for the coexistence, the compossibility, of its four conditions, the four available truth-procedures: art, science, politics, and love (*Manifeste* 18). He demonstrates this compossibility through his theory of the *event*.

For Badiou, all of reality is made up of infinite sets, which are themselves made up of infinite sets all the way down—reality is irreducibly *multiple* (*Theoretical Writings* 27, 36, *passim*). In this multiplicity, however, there arises a *situation*, a limited, local set that forms a unified field accessible to knowledge (121). That unity is ultimately illusory insofar as the unification of a situation always depends on a certain *exclusion*. The situation is thus the realm of knowledge, but not the realm of truth. For Badiou, truth is something that happens in what he calls a *truth-event*. In an utterly contingent fashion, something that was unknowable from within the situation intrudes and changes everything:

I call “event” this originary disappearance supplementing the situation for the duration of a lighting flash; situated within it only in so far as nothing of it subsists; and insisting *in truth* precisely in so far as it cannot be repeated as presence (122).

The one who is faithful to this truth-event, who understands what has happens and acts in fidelity to the implications of the event, is designated by Badiou as a *subject*. The conclusions that the subject draws from the truth-event and then follows out are designated as the truth-process. Life in faithfulness to the truth-event, following through on a truth-process, is the fullest and truest human life, is what enables the human being to reach genuine immortality in this world:

The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters [the human being’s] identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him. And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal—unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes [the human being]. Beyond this there is only a biological species, a “biped without feathers,” whose charms are not obvious (*Ethics* 12).

To take the most common example of the truth event, let us think of what happens when we fall in love: we are simply going about our business in a quite familiar way, when, quite unexpectedly, a relationship intrudes into our lives and changes everything, causing us to rearrange our lives entirely in order to live in faithfulness to this new love. At no

point, however, can we “prove” that the lightning-flash of the event called “falling in love” really happened, except through our faithfulness to that event.

As stated before, there are four fields in which this immortal subject may arise: art, science, politics, and love. Atheist that he is, Badiou does not reserve a space for the religious, and so for him, Paul is a political figure, a formal model for the rise of a genuine political invention—that is, Paul is what it looks like for a new way of living together to come into being, a new way of living together that potentially applies to every person. For Žižek, matters are somewhat different. Where Badiou spends a great deal of time articulating the Pauline subject’s relationship to the event, Žižek focuses more on the concrete result: a specific and identifiable social body that has identifiable members and identifiable enemies. In a particularly vivid passage, he recounts a panel discussion by a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a Southern Baptist, in which

Only the Baptist—a young, well-tanned, slightly overweight and repulsively slick Southern yuppie—insisted that, according to the letter of the Gospel, only those who “live in Christ” by explicitly recognizing themselves in his address will be redeemed, which is why, as he concluded with a barely discernable contemptuous smile, “a lot of good and honest people will burn in hell.” [...My] basic premise... is that, cruel as this position may sound, if one is to break the liberal-democratic hegemony and resuscitate an authentic radical position, one has to endorse its materialist version (*On Belief* 1).

In essence, whereas Badiou is seeking to find a replacement for the “party militant” “installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the [twentieth] century” (*St. Paul* 2), Žižek is seeking “not to return to Lenin, but to REPEAT him in the

Kierkegaardian sense” (“Repeating Lenin”)—that is, to draw on his original impulse while learning from his mistakes. Thus, while Badiou implicitly agrees with Hardt and Negri (who will come up again later) that party politics is a dead end, Žižek calls for a new form of the Party for today’s circumstances.

We’ll leave the task of parsing out that theoretical debate aside for the moment in order to point out something that is completely excluded in the contemporary discussion of Paul: that is, the idea of actually *repeating Paul*. Badiou’s Paul ends up being so closely identified with Badiou’s general philosophical project, so reduced to formal structures, that it is unclear how these insights could apply specifically to *our* situation, and Žižek’s Paul ends up being merely a stand-in for a refurbished Leninism. What no one thinks to ask here is whether there has been a concrete attempt to recapture the Pauline or early Christian impulse *specifically* under the conditions of capital. That is, not as something completely out of left field, like Mormonism or any of the other fringe groups that are derided as “cults” by mainstream Christians, and not as an arbitrary imposition of a supposedly “traditional” way of life as a feeble sandbag barrier against the flood of modernity—but instead, has there been a reactivation of the Pauline impulse that rightly, even if fragmentarily, identifies the idolatrous empire of death as “capital” in the same way that Paul rightly named it as “Rome”? I answer this question with a resounding “Yes!” Yes, there has been an explicit, though fragmentary, anti-capitalist reactivation of the Pauline impulse, a reactivation that arose just as modern industrial capitalism was forming but before it was named as such by Marx—and that reactivation was achieved by John Wesley.

Strange enterprise. Some skepticism would of course be justified. First, Wesley's own politics were quite reactionary, royalist, and high church. Second, the concrete result of his movement in the present day is a collection of sects who currently exist at various removes from an original petty legalism and that are all too eager to discard the most distinctive doctrines of their founder in order to be absorbed into the homogenous banality of what in America could be called generic "church growth"-style evangelical Republicanism. I am referring, first and foremost, to that most embarrassing doctrine of all, "entire sanctification," the doctrine that theologians continually re-think, re-explain, and re-considered, even as the hope for that gift moves further and further from the center of church life.

I am convinced that some people do receive that gift. On a formal level, so is Alain Badiou. Noticing that homology in my study of Badiou is in fact what prompted me to embark on a more detailed study of Wesley, a study that has really only just begun but that has already proven to be tremendously fruitful. First, it is by now a commonplace among Wesley's interpreters that Christian perfection does not require one to become a flawless Superman who never makes any mistakes. Rather, Christian perfection is living out perfectly the vocation of a creature of God, restored to the divine image by the saving work of Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit—and living out that vocation, or truth-process, in the particular situation in which one finds oneself. Such a perfect fittedness to a vocation cannot be produced by the application of any kind of written code, but instead by the spontaneous living out of the broader "moral law" which is epitomized in the law of love. The sanctified subject experiences herself as acting freely, rather than in conformity to an outwardly-imposed rule, through the circumcision of the

heart. This does not obviate the need for normal human planning and decision-making, nor does it mean that the Holy Spirit enables one always to pick the best stocks or to pass every test, but rather, it means that one is enabled to cut through the Gordian Knot of Romans 7, most importantly in one's social interactions. I could prove this through extensive quotation, but this seems to be a consensus view (see, for example, Runyon, esp. 222-233).

Badiou's model is of course different in very significant ways. Perhaps most importantly for Christian readers, he omits the reference to Christ, specifically referring to the resurrection as a "fable" in his book on Paul (4). In place of the work of the Holy Spirit that assures me that Christ "had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death" (qtd. in Runyon, 49), there is the generic *event*, which is, however, always the event of *a given situation*, always an event that calls for a subject's decision to be faithful (cf. *Theoretical Writings* 98). In addition, Badiou does not posit any agency outside the subject that guarantees continued fidelity, on the model of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. Yet at the level of materiality, it seems as though a faithful Badiouian subject and a sanctified Wesleyan subject would act in ways that would be difficult to distinguish. One of Badiou's examples from his *Ethics* is particularly revealing. Railing against the impoverished notions of ethics promoted by modern institutions, he writes:

[Conventional] ethics prevents itself from thinking the singularity of situations as such, which is the obligatory starting point of all properly human action. Thus, for instance, the doctor won over to "ethical" ideology will ponder, in meetings and commissions, all sorts of considerations regarding "the sick"... But the same

doctor will have no difficulty in accepting the fact that *this* particular person is not treated at the hospital and accorded all necessary procedures, because he or she is without legal residency papers, or not a contributor to Social Security. Once again, "collective" responsibility demands it! What is erased in the process is the fact that there is only one medical situation, the clinical situation, and there is no need for an "ethics" (but only for a clear vision of *this* situation) to understand that in these circumstances a doctor is a doctor only if he deals with the situation according to the rule of maximum possibility—to treat this person who demands treatment of him (no intervention here!) as thoroughly as he can, using everything he knows and with all the means at his disposal, without taking anything else into consideration. And if he is to be prevented from giving treatment because of the State budget, because of death rates or laws governing immigration, then let them send for the police! Even so, his strict Hippocratic duty would oblige him to resist them, with force if necessary. "Ethical commissions" and other ruminations on "health-care expenses" or "managerial responsibility," since they are radically exterior to the one situation that is genuinely medical, can in reality only prevent us from being *faithful to it*. For to be faithful to this situation means: to treat it *right to the limit* of the possible. Or, if you prefer: to draw from this situation, to the greatest possible extent, the affirmative humanity that it contains (14-15).

Or, if you prefer: "give all you can; nay, in a sound sense, all you have," as Wesley says in his sermon on "The Use of Money" (355). Or, if you prefer: "I mean, first, love me," as Wesley says in "Catholic Spirit" (306).

As we have said, if we were to put the Wesleyan sanctified subject into Badiouian terms, through the event of conversion, she would understand herself as a creature of God, restored to the divine image by the work of Christ, through the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, the corresponding truth-process entails following all the teachings of Scripture and the traditions of the Church of England, and he repeatedly emphasizes that these requirements are an integral whole by employing the principle, “What God hath joined together, put not asunder,” for example in the sermon on “The End of Christ’s Coming” and in many other places (449). Certainly this is one of many examples of Wesley’s habit of taking biblical quotations out of context for use as slogans, of which Theodore Jennings is rightly critical (164), but there is a certain inner necessity in expanding the meaning of a saying originally referring to marriage to apply it to the concrete practice that Wesley understands as actualizing the law of love. And so there are the sermons such as “The Duty of Constant Communion,” in which Wesley berates those who neglect the sacrament, depriving them of any possible excuse for not participating, and there are the many sermons in which the questions for self-examination are heavily geared toward acts of piety.

Without minimizing that aspect of Wesley’s teaching and practice, however, a general pattern emerges that allows us to specify more precisely the truth-process to which a Wesleyan sanctified subject adheres. A good starting point is Wesley’s sermon “The Good Steward.” Enumerating the many questions that God will ask of the believer’s management of the resources with which she has been entrusted, Wesley turns to the matter of worldly goods:

in what manner didst thou employ that comprehensive talent, *money*? Not in gratifying the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life? Not squandering it away in vain expenses, the same as throwing it into the sea? Not hoarding it up to leave behind thee, the same as burying it in the earth? But first supplying thy own reasonable wants, together with those of thy family; then restoring the remainder to me, through the poor, whom I had appointed to receive it; looking upon thyself as only one of that number of poor whose wants were to be supplied out of that part of my substance which I had placed in thy hands for this purpose; leaving thee the right of being supplied first, and the blessedness of giving rather than receiving? (428)

As a standard of economic stewardship, this is clearly quite radical—much more radical, for instance, than his teaching on communion. Recognizing that his was something of a minority opinion, one might expect him to show some degree of tolerance, to recognize that reasonable people can agree, as exemplified in his sermon on “Catholic Spirit.” That is not the case, however. Where he is willing to join hands with people who differ with him on many points of doctrine, he is precisely the opposite of tolerant when it comes to those who hoard their wealth. No other moral failing is so singled out for fire and brimstone language, and no other moral failing is so central to Wesley’s conception of why the Methodist movement has failed. (See, for instance, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity” [549-557]; cf. Jennings 157-180).

Thus, we can specify that in Badiouian terms the truth-process of the Wesleyan subject is growth in solidarity with the poor. The event of conversion to Christ is the occasion of one’s self-recognition as “one of that number of poor” (428); the intervention

of the Christ-event is what enables the believer, first and foremost, to “demystify wealth and power,” in Jennings’ terms (29). The only possible ethic that could result from such a recognition is Wesley’s most important economic rule: “*give all you can*; nay, in a sound sense, all you have” (355). Any act that contradicts that ethic of solidarity is a betrayal of the saving grace of Christ and an offense against God, who has appointed the poor to be the recipients of the benefits through which we materially show love. This provides the basis for the ascetic practices that have historically been such a distinctive mark of the denominations descended from Wesley. Whatever the validity of later reasons to retain a prohibition on drinking, for instance, Wesley originally based the prohibition of hard liquor on the concrete harm such drinks did to the poor, not only in destroying the health of the poor directly, but in depriving them of grain that should have been used for food but was instead diverted to liquor production:

[Distillers] who sell [liquor] in the common way [that is, not solely for medicinal use], to any that will buy, are poisoners-general. They murder his Majesty’s subjects by wholesale, neither does their eye pity or spare. And what is their gain? Is it not the blood of these men? Who then would envy their large estates and sumptuous palaces? A curse is in the midst of them... (352).

Indeed, Wesley recognizes the seriousness of sins of omission as well:

May not this be another reason why rich men shall so hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven? A vast majority of them are under a curse, under the peculiar curse of God; inasmuch as in the general tenor of their lives they are not only robbing God continually, embezzling and wasting their Lord’s good, and by that very means corrupting their own souls; but also robbing the poor, the hungry, the

naked, wronging the widow and the fatherless, and making themselves accountable for all the want, affliction, and distress which they may but do not remove. Yea, doth not the blood of all those who perish for want of what they either lay up or lay out needlessly, cry against them from the earth? O what account will they give to him who is ready to judge both the quick and the dead (251).

This is far removed from the frequent preacherly device of somehow “proving” that the eye of a needle was just a Galilean slang term for an uncomfortably tight squeeze.

Where did these teachings come from? For me, understanding their origin is ultimately more important than jumping to the conclusion that Wesley’s teachings on wealth simply must be implemented immediately or wishing that some brave leader like John Wesley would come on the scene to lay down the law. As I understand it, Wesley came upon his radical economic teaching *by accident*, that is, through his lived experience. He did not have the advantage of learning from Marx how the economic system under which he lived was ineluctably hostile toward the poor, still less the benefit of being convinced that the gospel is entirely about justice for the poor by Latin American liberation theologians. As a serious person dedicated to living out the gospel in a serious way, Wesley wanted to obey all the teachings in Scripture, and so he began visiting the “destitute and the marginalized” (Jennings 53). As Jennings says:

Wesley’s early motivation may have been simply to obey what, on the basis of Matthew 25, he took to be a clear command of the gospel. In his view, this would seem to be adequate motivation for anyone (54).

Yet it was through this visitation that he came to know intimately the plight of the poor, to see through the sophistry of popular stereotypes about poverty and its causes, to find whatever means he could to meet their needs—in short, *to love the poor*. Wesley's teachings on wealth were so radical and uncompromising because he *loved the poor* and saw in the dominant economic practices of his time a standing offense to the love of the poor. In response to this love, he attempted to start communities that would be radically oriented around the needs of the poor, that would reform the church, the nation, and ultimately the world in such a way as to be based on love of the poor—not the sentimental love that stands at a distance, but the real, concrete love of solidarity, of identifying *oneself* as “one of that number of poor” (428; cf. Jennings 53). Insofar as entire sanctification is “perfect love,” then, one must say that in concrete terms, entire sanctification is a radical and unreserved solidarity with the poor.

It is here that Wesley's teaching intersects with that of another body of contemporary political theory, one with which Badiou and Žižek have often found themselves at odds: the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the authors of *Empire* and *Multitude*. This is not the place to fully summarize and assess their full theoretical picture of the contemporary situation, which draws on a rich variety of philosophical, political, historical, and literary resources, but there are some fruitful parallels to be drawn. Their decentered ideal of a communism based on a network of sharing rather than on a bureaucratic model of centralized distribution and control is similar to the model advocated and to some extent practiced in early Methodism, and in some places, their formulations are verbally very close to those of Wesley; for instance, in *Empire*, they proclaim, “The poor is god on earth” (157). The most important aspect of their thought

for our purposes, however, is the hope for a future polity based on the creative and collaborative power of the “multitude.” They recognize that previous models of revolution have only led to further oppression because the model of the revolution itself *becomes* the model of the resulting society; thus, any revolution carried out by a “People’s Army” will result in a hierarchical society of control based on a military model (*Multitude* 63-96). Hence they have sought to theorize the possibility of a revolutionary movement that will already be living out what, in a recent interview, Michael Hardt has called “the politics of joy.”

The most frequent criticism leveled against Hardt and Negri is that they provide no model of how to get from here to there—that they seem to assume that people will spontaneously rise up without any leadership. Such criticism is understandable, but ultimately misguided, and the model of Wesley shows why that is. Much of Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the ways in which contemporary changes in political economy are making possible a new form of revolution are based on the insight that people are potentially being brought into *closer contact*. For instance, communication technologies allow us to form close relationships of solidarity across great distances, while economic changes are privileging “affective labor” such as massage over against assembly-line work. Wesley’s practice of visitation of the poor leading to solidarity provides us with a model of a militant figure who responds specifically to the situation of capitalism and who takes advantage of emerging trends in the mode of production.

Thus, if we are to develop a way out of the oppressive imperialism of capitalist exploitation, I propose something of a compromise between Badiou and Žižek’s search for a new militant figure and Hardt and Negri’s hope for the revolutionary power of the

multitude. I propose a repetition of the Pauline gesture of establishing a polity of love beyond the law, but a repetition that responds specifically to the situation of life under capital—thus, a repetition on the Wesleyan model. Therefore, I propose using whatever means necessary to get people into regular, meaningful contact with the poor in order to open up the space for a concrete solidarity to emerge—or, in other words, I propose we get some people saved and sanctified.

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