A Discussion of and around *Incident at Antioch*:
An Interview with Alain Badiou

by Ward Blanton and Susan Spitzer

Susan Spitzer: In your introduction to your 1997 book *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, you stated: ‘Fifteen years ago I wrote a play whose heroine was named Paula.’ This would suggest that the play was written in 1982, the same year that *Theory of the Subject* came out. Can you situate the play for us and comment on the difference in perspective between *Theory of the Subject* and *Incident at Antioch*.

Alain Badiou: In fact there are three drafts of this play. The first one was finished in 1982 and the second one is 1984 and the third one just for the first public reading of the play in Lyon, France by the great French director, Juan Vitez, who was also a friend of mine, was in 1989. I remark that from 1989 to today, twenty years after, we have the second public reading of this play. So it was genuinely emotional for me and I am really grateful to the organisations involved and to hear my play in English, which was a surprise. So just a very short remark concerning the difference between the first draft in 1982 and the second in 1984. I think first the second draft is less explicitly referred to the French situation, it is much more metaphorical, if you want, and also much less explicitly referred to Marxism and all political conception of the 60s and the 70s in France. It’s more general, more lyrical, more poetic maybe, true, that was different, the first difference. And the second, the construction is simpler, the first version was with many characters, with a number of voices and so on. So simplification and generalisation, that is the difference between 1982 and 1984. We are in the beginning of a new political sequence, I think, and so the transformations of the play is also in the movement of the new situation. A new situation we can see as a bad situation, alas. It was not real progress but it also was the birth of something new. Concerning the *Theory of the Subject* which came out in 1982 in fact, it’s my first great philosophical book, before *Being and Event* and before *Logics of Worlds* but this book is composed of seminars of the 70s, so the content of the book is not at all the beginning of the 80s. The seminar was between 1974 and 1978, something like that. And so it is a book of the 70s really. So it is a book of the first sequence and not exactly, like the play, the beginning of the new sequence. So it is not really the same political background and not the same ideological battle. So, in fact, to go to *Theory of the Subject*, which is really a revolutionary philosophical book, to the play we have to go from 1978 to 1984, so six years. But during these six years the situation is very different, a very important transformation of the situation. From, if you want, the Red Years – the end of the 60s, May 68 and so on - to the Black Years, something very different. It is why, to conclude from your questions, it is why I think that we have to

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think that the play is much more like a meditation concerning the aims of the preceding years rather than something which is in the first sequence. And it is why there is something creative and affirmative in the play, but why, as maybe you have it here, something also melancholic. Certainly the play is a search for a new politics but it is also the idea that something is finished; the last century, if you want, is finished, really, in the political field and so we have to do something really new but we don’t know precisely what. And it is exactly Paula at the end. I can say some principles, for example, politics without obsession or hope, political activity which is not either obsession or hope... And so there is a mixture of radicality of the question - we must find a new way of political action - and something like a nostalgia or melancholy concerning the end of the last sequence.

SS: In 1979 your play The Red Scarf, which also deals with a revolutionary movement, was published. Indeed some of the issues raised in it, especially the internal struggles of the revolutionaries, seem to prefigure those in the Incident. What is the connection between the two plays? And what, more generally speaking, is the relationship between your theatre and your more properly theoretical works?

AB: The Red Scarf was practically finished in 1975. So it is a play of the 70s. So we have the same answer. The new play is a play of the 80s and the preceding play is a play of the 70s. It is more affirmative, much more, in classical Marxism, much more a revolutionary play in an epic sense. There are two common points between the two plays, the great difference is a political one. The Red Scarf is really a play of the historical narrative of the victorious revolution. It is possible to think of the victorious revolution at the beginning of the 70s but it is absolutely impossible to think of something like that in the middle of the 80s. So it is really a model. There are two common points. The Red Scarf is also based on Claudel’s play, The Satin Slipper. In any case the subject of the play is the relationship between personal subjectivity and revolutionary movement. There are big differences concerning the preservation of revolutionary movement. But in any case the problem is always: what is exactly the construction of subjectivity in a political context? What is, if you want, something like the new political subject? And in the first play the new political subject is very near the Classical revolutionary subject, with organisation, heroism, sacrifice and so on. And in the second play this form of subjectivity is problematic. And so we have first different possibilities and something like a question, the new political subject is unclear.

And in The Red Scarf there is also many discussions in the middle of revolutionary action, and so on, and finally we have something like a political line. And we can describe the second play as something where the question of the true line, the good line, becomes obscure. Probably we can summarise all that by saying that in the first play, The Red Scarf, the centre of the problem is the originary organisation, the Party in its classical sense, in its Leninist sense, the Party which is, if you want, the church of the revolution, an establish church of the revolution. And in the second play, naturally, the question is also the question of the church but in the negative sense. So we pass from the foundation of the church as the representation of the working class,
of the revolutionary movement and so on, to the question of the church as maybe not only a new means for revolution but a new obstacle, a new difficulty.

For the last part of your question, the relationship between my theatre and all my theoretical activity, two small thoughts. The first one when I was a very young man I was a Sartrean philosopher. Jean-Paul Sartre was really my master. And as you know Sartre has written many plays, so maybe it is only really an imitation of the master. And Sartre has written some novels, and me too, and Sartre was an engaged philosopher, and me too, and so on. The difference is in the philosophical concepts, which are very, very different. And so all is different but not the forms, the image of what is a true philosopher. And it is in the tradition of our eighteenth century in France. We name philosophers during all the eighteenth century in France, with Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and so on. In fact many writers, they a philosophers but they are more fundamentally writers, they wrote novels, plays, and so on, exactly as Sartre. So I can say something like: Sartre and me are the true last eighteenth-century philosophers.

SS: Incident at Antioch is based on Claudel’s play The City. Your decision to stay very close to this play, even to the point of including lines written by Claudel in what we might today call a kind of musical sampling, leads me to ask about the deep connection between the two works and what made you decide to write a play unabashedly based on another. And now we know that The Red Scarf was also based on Claudel’s writings.

AB: It is really a problem because Claudel was a really reactionary writer. So it was another form of imitation, of someone who was very different from me. He was a Catholic, he a reactionary, he was also a very official man, in the academie, in the Ministry of Affairs and so on, something completely different. Maybe three answers to your question. First, a tradition: we know that in our Classical French theatre - Racine, Corneille, Moliere and so on - there have always been imitations of some plays of the past, generally Greek or Latin plays, but sometimes an imitation which is very precise, an imitation which goes in the details, if you want. And so my attempt is to do the same thing today, that is to take a play which exists and to write something from this play but in another direction. And I did that first for Claudel two times, with The Red Scarf and The Incident but also for a play of Moliere, Les Fourberies de Scapin which is a comedy, and therefore very different, in the style of mourir.2

If you want, it is something like a Classical gesture, there exist many plays which are excellent which are Classical and so on I can write once more the same play but in another direction. The second reason is specifically in Claudel we have the question of the relationship between subjective determination and something like a general movement or a general ideological framework. It is at the very heart of the plays of Claudel. Naturally for Claudel that is the question of religious faith not at all the question of political adventure. But maybe in the French theatre, not Classical, Claudel is the most important writer, I think, to organize the play around this question: the becoming of subjectivity across ideological and religious questions. So it is always the question of how we can do something which is bigger than us, which is more important than that which we can commonly do. And this has a close
relationship to my theory of the subject because I name subject not the individual but
what the individual is capable of, so the new possibility which can open the individual
to a new subjectivity. And so this problem of the creation of the new form of the
subject is naturally the question of Claudel in a religious framework: how we can
come really a new religious man or a new religious woman, that is the question of
Claudel. And it is very important that in Claudel we find the idea that it is really a
movement, it is not something which is natural, it is not something which is a
necessity, it is really a struggle, a struggle to accept the new possibility. Against the
acceptance of the new possibility we have old conservative dimension of the
individual, the individual is also like an animal they want to continue his or her
common life. And for Claudel the question is to accept life, to accept the grace in fact,
because the grace is a proposition, it is not a determination in the Catholic vision of
Claudel, which is not a Calvinist. And the vision of Claudel’s grace is a pure
proposition we have to do something with this proposition. We can refuse the
proposition, we can continue in the same manner as before. And there is in my vision,
for example, of the political subject, but it is also the same for the love subject or the
artist, we have something which is like that. There is an event, an encounter with
something, something which is outside the individual and which is like a proposition.
And we can accept the proposition, we can refuse the proposition but we cannot deny
there were lives likely to be faithful to the proposition of the event, or we can on the
contrary continue in the same frame. And it is the problem of all the plays of Claudel,
including the to accept love, for example, and it is also my problem and it is why I
write once more the play of Claudel in a revolutionary framework and not a Catholic
one but with the same problematic vision of what is a subject.

The third and final answer is the question of how is it possible to write concerning
problems which in some sense are abstract or theoretical, how is it possible to write
something which is really a piece of writing and not a proof, not an abstract text and
so on. And so we find in Claudel some poetical means concerning this very difficult
question, how we can write something concerning the destiny of individuals, the
becoming-subject of individuals in a new framework, without being completely
abstract and so the answer is of poetical nature not of theoretical nature.

And we have in Claudel a new language, really a new language in French, a language
with new images, and with an immanent relationship between abstraction and images,
something like a new metaphorical way to examine the most important problem of
human life. So: tradition, my Classical nature, if you want – I am not a moderne.
Second, a common question, the same question sometimes. And third, poetical - a
new relationship between poetical language and abstraction.

Ward Blanton: I want to pick up on this Claudel of transforming Claudel on the
one hand and also this question of the Party and the connections to the Church.
I’m interested in the way in which you radically subvert Claudel, in a sense, for
example aside from your theatre aesthetics, I can hardly imagine a sharper
contrast between your Paula who, among other things, is a figure of ungrounded
lit subjectivity, a herald of the political renunciation of the power and the
triumphalist Bishop in the third act of Claudel’s play, The City. And for those
who haven’t read it at one point one character allows, says, ‘Allows the truth and
reality of that which is to replace the place of dreams.’ With ecclesiastical
realities essentially displacing dreaming, misguided revolutionaries in *The City*. So in all of this Claudel’s final act is almost the antithesis of the call of Paula at the end of *Incident at Antioch* or at Antioch and how should we understand this. For example, have you confronted Claudel’s triumphalist Christendom with a hyper-protestant or perhaps even atheistic call?

**AB:** It’s a difficult question but I’ll give an answer. You know the play is very near Claudel in its construction, in its generality, but its very origin is not Claudel in fact. It’s very origin is much more Paul, the apostle Paul. The play is something like a new directive between the Catholic interpretation of Paul and Paul himself, a Catholic interpretation of Paul along the lines of the construction of the Church, because it is said Paul is the first clear proposition of the construction of the Church, and another possibility of an interpretation of Paul, which is not at all Paul as foundation of the Church, but Paul is the foundation of a new conception of universality, of universalism. And that the Church is only something which is like a technical organisation of this new possibility concerning universality. And so in the play of Claudel we have something like the old Paul, that is, as you say the victory of the Church, because at the end of the play there is the priest, the bishop, we say ‘the troops’. There is a conflict between that sort of image of Paul and another one, which is Paula, Paul as Paula, who is in a completely different direction. Finally the play we have the presentation of a fundamental conflict, which is not the same as at all as in Claudel, because in Claudel the most important conflict is between nihilism and Church. Finally, if we are not organised in the Church, maybe in the Party too, we are purely reduced to individuality and individuality, finally, is always of a nihilist nature, that is the Claudelian affirmation: The individual alone is not able to be free, to be a real human being and so salvation is by the church only. And this is what is said at the end of the play *The City*. And my idea was absolutely different and maybe the reverse. Because the end of the play when Paula says that it is impossible to reduce emancipation, to reduce revolutionary vision to something like a Church or Party or a State. It is always in the fundamental critiques of any stable entity that the possibility of the novelty of thinking, of existence and so on, is created. And so the play of Claudel is a play which says that we must exist in the Church to be saved. And my play says we have failed, or we are free, only when we go beyond that sort of problem, so beyond the church but also beyond revolutionary organisation. And so the difficulty. For, for Claudel, the difficulty is how we can go to the church, Why the church? Why the Church, is really the organisation of the salvation of man. And for me the difficulty is how we can go beyond that sort of institution. And in the case of Claudel the difficulty is to go from disorder to order, that is the movement, from a terrible disorder, violence and nihilism, to a new order, which is in fact the old order of the church. And in my plays, the movement is how to go from order to disorder, how to find a new disorder if you want. Because it is always when the most important is a question is a question of an order of the state, of an institution, that we have violence. So we can say also that the question of violence is a subject of Claudel also of mine. For Claudel, violence is a result of disorder and I’m forced to say that for me violence is the result of order and not disorder. But the play organised an understanding of the difficulties of this movement, and in Claudel too, in Claudel we have the difficulty is of the movement which goes from disorder to order and in a sense in my play the difficulty is the difficulty of the movement which goes from...
order to disorder. And so I may say my play is the New Testament Paul revisited in the Claudelian for the apostle is not the property of Claudel. And maybe as you suggest that my play is a protestant one in a perfect form.

**SS:** To return to your introduction to *Saint Paul*, you had this to say about Paula, the heroine in *The Incident*: ‘The change of sex probably prevented too explicit an identification.’ Why did you make a woman the protagonist and can you elaborate a bit on what you meant about needing to prevent too explicit an identification with Paul?

**AB:** To go from the Paul of Claudel to my Paul, it is more simple to go from Paul to Paula because certainly it was for Claudel absolutely impossible that the apostle would be a woman, so it’s a clear difference. In fact the change of sex is a metaphoric gesture, something like that, a poetical gesture more importantly, to go from Paul to Paula. Because the old vision of the difference between the sexes casts religious or philosophical theory and political action in masculine terms always and my gesture, Paula and not Paul, signifies that this vision in which we have on the masculine side properly not only philosophy, not only religious reaction, but also political action, political forms of power, I think that vision is something of the past. There have been struggles and so on and we have to continue but this is fundamentally something of the past. And so the problem is much more, is not today feminine theory an essential part of a new politics if a new politics is not based on power. If we have the idea of a new politics which is not based on power but which finds a new way of action, which decides the power at any price, I suppose that in that case women are of a new importance. Possibly I have no real proof of this point, because we have seen many women with a big taste for power, so I have no proof but it is something like an intuition which is naturally related to the great feminine movements of the last century. And I think that Paula too has no proof of this point. She only says she is Paula, so she says that we have to find in the political field something which is not absolutely organised around power. She does not say that it’s a feminine question, but my intuition is that it is. That in the new relationship between the difference between the sexes and the political field, not when the political field is organised around power but when we have something which is beyond the question of power, maybe relationships are a question of power, but finally beyond the question of power. And in a way it was after all the vision of Marx incidentally, the vision of Marx, of Communism, of the idea of the State in communism after which we have no State at all at the end. But if we have a choice of political vision, certainly the subject of politics is not the State, is not precisely the subject *for* the power. So the political subject, if you want, is not a politician if we define a politician, which is possible, as somebody who wants a part of the power. It’s a possible definition, most possible definition of the politician. So the political subject is not a politician. If proper subjectivity is not organised by the question of power, it’s a big change, which can sometimes experiment with change in political movement and this change is maybe in relationship to the question of the difference of the sexes. That is my hypothesis, without proof.
WB: I want to put a question now of Paul as a critique of a particular sort of religion in order to think of Paul also in your work as a form of critique religion wholesale. I’ll start by flagging up one of your great philosophical interlocutors, and say that since Hegel, of course, but also closer to our own time with theologians like Mark C. Taylor or philosophers like Jean Luc-Nancy, Derrida and others, some aspect of early Christianity has been taken up as an indication of religion’s negation, religion’s destruction or its overcoming, and of course the classic example are the theological writings of Hegel where God dies in early Christianity and is reborn as community spirit. Paul has been in this tradition and ironically but nevertheless profound source of critique against religious establishments and their traditions. In your own book about Paul you urge audiences not to allow Paul to be subsumed within an economy of thought that is religious or theological. A politically useful Paulinism, it would seem, needs to remain atheistic in a fairly precise sense. Can you say what it is about the religious or theological appropriation of Paul that one must reject, and what is it that we must save Paul from in order to preserve his name as a bearer and signifier of this political legacy?

AB: I don’t write, I don’t say exactly that to have a positive vision of Paul, to interpret Paul in another manner, we must suppress all religious aspects of Paul. That’s not exactly my thinking. But it’s really impossible in fact because for Paul the primitive event, the birth of the truth, is of a religious nature, of a sur-natural nature, because this event is the resurrection of Christ. So I have to ask you, I must ask you, that in Paul the beginning of all the process is directly of religious nature not reducible to any human activity. What I say is that we can find in Paul a very complete theory of the construction of a new truth. Allors! Why so, the theory of the construction of a new truth. The beginning of the truth is not the structure of a fact but it’s an event. So something which is not predictable, something without calculation, something which is not reducible to specificity. At the beginning of all new creation we have something like that that I name an event. After that we have a subjective process, the process of creation, of construction, which is defined by faithfulness to the event itself. Or, if you want, the subjective construction is to organise consequences of the event in the world, the concept world. The event is like a rupture and after that we must organise consequences of this rupture, and that is the subjective process of the creation of a new truth. And finally the result is a new form of universality. So we can summarise that arrangement in a very simple manner: The beginning of the construction of a new truth is an event. The subjective process of that sort of construction is the organisation of consequences of the event. And the production, the final production is something which is universal in a precise sense that I won’t explain exactly but we can define really in what sense the result is universal. The three points are explained in a very pure manner by Paul. First an event: the resurrection of Christ. After that a subjective process: faith, faith in that sort of event. And organisation of the consequences of the event, which is a subjective construction that is a debate, maybe an objective one in the form of the Church. So it’s all a bit deficient in the field of Christianity. And universality of the results, very fundamental in Paul, that is the new faith is for everybody: it’s not for Jews, it’s not for Romans, it’s not for Greeks, it’s not for males, it’s not for females, it’s really for everybody. The very famous advance that: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave...
nor free, there is neither male nor female’ (Gal. 3.28). All categories, social
differences are dissolved from the point of view of the construction of the truth. So
we can understand this theory as a particular new religious thought, certainly we can.
But we also can understand this theory as an abstract formalisation of what is the
process of the truth, with religious words naturally, but the general formalisation is
good enough for any truth. And it’s not a contradiction, it’s not a contradiction
because when you interpret all that as a new religious construction you assume the
formalisation itself. You assume, in fact, that new religious conviction is with an
event at the beginning, a subjective process with faith at the centre of the process
itself, and a universal result. And so it’s not a contradiction but it’s a clear a
difference of interpretation that we have a common path, we assume to have
something in common with the religious interpretation that is a formalisation. And so
the same idea, the same abstract or formal idea concerning what is the new truth. And
it is not the opposition between Catholic interpretation and Protestant interpretation,
it’s a difference between an interpretation which assumes the signification of the
words themselves, the iteration ‘God’, ‘the son’, and so on, and an interpretation
which is a purely formal label and we say that Paul is not only the apostle of a new
religion but is also the philosopher of the new formal construction of what is a
universal truth.

WB: One final question about political Paulinism. I mentioned earlier these lines
in my introduction to this conference, lines that have been haunting me from
your essay ‘Rhapsody for the Theatre’
°: namely that ‘events always involve a
surprising emergence of a strange grouping of characters’ and also that ‘genuine
political theatre stages something like a heresy in action’. So for the readers of
this text, or for the audience of this text’s future performance, what do you hope
the performance of Paulinism can incite today?

AB: That’s a political question, directly: What is the new grouping of today? I’ll tell
you something about that concerning maybe the situation in France, of the political
situation. You know I think that in our societies, the societies of the Western word,
the rich societies - they become poor today, more and more. They are exposed to
disaster. But in their general existence, I think there exist four groups - I don’t use the
word class because it’s too classical now - four components, if you want, of power
societies, which can support some possibilities of revolt. There exist four groups
which are able in some circumstances which are able to play a role in the direction of
real change, the form of a movement of revolt. First, the educated youth of today in
universities, in campuses, in high schools and so on. Two, the popular youth in the
banlieues in French, the popular suburbs. Third what I shall name the ordinary
workers, the big mass of people which are not absolutely poor, not at all rich, with
hard work, precarity sometimes, and so on. And four the workers coming from other
countries, immigrants, including undocumented workers and so on. In France we can
say that there exist different movements concerning these four groups, for example
mainly demonstrations of students concerning many points, riots in the banlieues of
the popular youths, with many cars burned and so on, a sort of violent revolt without
community, we have the big demonstrations of ordinary workers, in France in
December 1995, for example, with millions of people during many weeks. And we
have also organisations and important demonstrations of immigrants in the workforce. So all these four groups are capable of revolt. But the point is that that sort of revolt is always practically the revolt of one of these four components. And so I can say something like that is your idea of a new grouping. I name revolt of movement simply when we have demonstrations, riots and so on, of one of these groups. And politics begins when we have something which is not reducible to revolt of movement because there are two, three or four components engaged in the movement.

So politics is really the construction of the new grouping which is not reducible to the four groups. And politics is always to create a passage, a passage between one group and another group. So ‘surprising grouping’ is a mixture of two, three or four because that involves components of our society. One-by-one we have only revolt of movements when we have beyond one-by-one we are in a political possibility. And a very important part of the action of the state is to create the impossibility of something like that, to create impossibility of union between two or more components of the social organisation. On this point I have a proof. I have the proof that many laws, many decisions of the state, many activities of the police and so on are entirely organised not only by the possibility to escape movement and so on but more, it’s much more important to create the impossibility of politics, if we name politics the creation of the passage between two different groups. And so the situation today is again that sort of activity of the state.

Sometimes politics engaging two components exists. For example a union, limited but real, between some students and some workers coming from other countries. The movement of undocumented workers in France, which is a significant movement, with normal difficulty, is really a movement which is a mixture, a union between some intellectuals, some young students and some workers coming from Africa and it is something which has existed now for practically more than ten years, it’s not something which vanished. You know also sometimes the relationship between a part of the students and ordinary workers, that being the case during the strike last year. So the relationship between two groups, which is the beginning of a new grouping, so the beginning of politics, exists in the limited sense. The union of four groups would be the revolution, which is why the state is the absolute impossibility of union. And I don’t know any circumstances which is really the union of the four components. And maybe it’s only in extraordinary circumstance that something like that is possible I think, for example war. For example war. And in any case it’s also a lesson of the last century, because the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the movement of liberation of people and so on, have all been in the form of a war. So the question is also, what is revolutionary politics when it’s not war but peace? And we don’t know, really. We do not have an example of a complete union of the different popular components of the situation without that sort of terrible circumstances, exceptional circumstance like war.

So the political problem of today is really first, I agree with you, one of a new grouping, and is probably the problem to pass from two to three, something like that. Because two exists in some limited manner, but then the passage from two to three, and three creates maybe the possibility of four, the possibility of global change. So my answer, my complete answer, we can define precisely not only what is the beginning of politics which is always to create maybe a small passage from a group to another group, and so a small, real novelty in the organisation of politics. But we know also what is the present stage of all that, which is in my position the passage
from two to three. Four is an event. Four is the number of an event. And three, the number of new forms of organisation. One is nothing, movement and revolt. Two is the beginning of politics. Three is beginning of new forms of organisation. And four is change. So we can hope.

Art & Research gratefully acknowledges the kind permission of Columbia University Press to reproduce this version of the interview with Alain Badiou. A full transcript of the interview - including the question and answer session which followed the discussion - will appear alongside Susan Spitzer’s translation of Badiou’s play, Incident at Antioch, in a forthcoming edition published by Columbia University Press.

1 This interview took place at the Western Infirmary Lecture Theatre, University of Glasgow on 13 February 2009 and was conducted as part of ‘Paul, Political Fidelity and the Philosophy of Alain Badiou: a Discussion of Incident at Antioch’ a conference at the University of Glasgow, 13 - 14 February 2009. The conference was organized in response to the forthcoming translation by Susan Spitzer of Badiou’s Incident at Antioch, a play completed in the mid-1980s and described by the conference organizers as ‘a work of political theatre which stages the “turn” of an ancient apostle in the context of haunting contemporary questions about revolutionary creativity and political violence’. The interview was immediately preceded by the first public reading of scenes of the play in English.

2 See Alain Badiou, Ahmed le Subtil. Badiou’s play is part of the ‘Ahmed tetralogy’ comprising Ahmed le subtil, Ahmed philosophe, Ahmed se fâche, and Les Citrouilles, which according to Bruno Bosteels was begun by Badiou in 1994.


4 As cited in Badiou, Saint Paul, p. 9.