

## Badiou, St. Paul, and the Mass Line

The French intellectual or “philosopher”, Alain Badiou, in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*,<sup>1</sup> mentions “the mass line” on page 99. This is my commentary on that passage.

In chapter 10 of this book Badiou is trying to make a ridiculously *Big Deal* out of the simple fact that Paul, in the course of proselytizing for Jesus and Christianity in a variety of religious and ethnic communities, denies or at least strongly downplays the importance of the differing traditions and customs of the Jews, the Greeks, and other communities of people. Paul argues that these different traditions and customs, even to the extent that they had previously been considered part of different religions, were not the main issue and that it was wrong to campaign against them if that interfered with spreading Christianity. Badiou grandiosely claims that things like this demonstrate that “Paul is an antiphilosophical theoretician of universality” (p. 108). This is totally silly. All that Paul is really doing is focusing on what *he* (absurdly!) thinks is important (i.e., Jesus and his supposed resurrection), rather than on what others previously have thought important (various specific religious rites, etc.). Paul is no more a champion of “universalism” for refusing to condemn the traditional rites of different communities than anyone else would be who has his own new ax to grind and doesn’t much care about anything else.

Here is the way Badiou puts it on page 99 (including his quote of a passage by Paul from Corinthians I):

This is the reason why Paul, apostle of the nations, not only refuses to stigmatize differences and customs, but also undertakes to accommodate them so that the process of their subjective disqualification might pass through them, within them. It is in fact the search for new differences, new particularities to which the universal might be *exposed*, that leads Paul beyond the eventual site properly speaking (the Jewish site) and encourages him to displace the experience historically, geographically, ontologically. Whence a highly characteristic militant tonality, combining the appropriation of particularities with the immutability of principles, the empirical existence of differences with the essential nonexistence, according to a succession of problems requiring resolution, rather than through an amorphous synthesis. The text is charged with a remarkable intensity:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men. (Cor. I.9.19-22)

This is not an opportunist text, but an instance of what Chinese communists will call “the mass line,” pushed to its ultimate expression in “serving the people.” It consists in supposing that, whatever people’s opinions and customs, once gripped by a truth’s postevental work, their thought becomes capable of traversing and transcending those opinions and customs without having to give up the differences that allow them to recognize themselves in the world.

This is almost all wrong, almost all bull shit! And while there is a vague partial analogy to one small aspect of the mass line in Paul’s stance, it is as it stands definitely an opportunist

distortion of even that aspect. Furthermore, even to the small degree that this *is* analogous, it is by no means anything like the “ultimate expression” of the mass line! Badiou clearly shows here that he doesn’t really understand what the mass line is actually all about.

Let’s first be clear about what the mass line really is: It is the method of “from the masses, to the masses”, that is, the leadership method of: First, gathering ideas from the masses and their experiences about what to do to advance their interests; second, processing (selecting from among) those various ideas based on what our scientific theory (MLM) tells us the actual interests of the masses are—both their short-term and long-term interests (including the most essential long-term interest, social revolution)—and in light of the real objective situation; and third, taking these processed ideas back to the masses and promoting them as the basis for serious mass struggle against their enemies. This, at least, is certainly the *core* of what we Maoists call the mass line. There are, in addition, a number of associated principles of “having a mass perspective”, especially the foremost such principle of recognizing that it is only the masses themselves who make history and who must transform both society and themselves in the course of continuing revolutionizing struggle.

Now does *anything* that “Saint” Paul said or did approach any of this? Of course not! In the first place, Paul did not derive the central notion that Jesus is the “savior” *from* the masses; this is merely a nutty idea that he happened to come across himself. Secondly, the notion that *anybody* might actually be capable of being the “savior of the masses” goes directly against that central principle of having a mass perspective that I mentioned above, namely that the masses must liberate *themselves* and that nobody can do it “for them”. Thirdly, Paul did not process this idea that “Jesus is the savior” along with other ideas from the masses, and scientifically determine that this particular idea actually was in the interests of the masses—since, obviously, the idea actually was directly *opposed to* the real interests of the people. Fourthly, Paul did not then use this (goofy) idea as a basis for mobilizing the masses against their real enemies; instead he (and his church) did the exact opposite—making peace with the ruling class of the time, including even their system of slavery for many people.

It is actually nonsensical to imagine that anyone before the advent of Marxism could have really used the mass line, properly so called. There were a few truly analogous cases, however, such as Tom Paine’s production of the famous pamphlet *Common Sense* that played such an important role in the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup> But nothing that “Saint” Paul did is even anything like that.

The only thing that Badiou is thinking about here is one very secondary aspect of having a mass perspective, that of “merging with the masses”. Merging with the masses is indeed necessary in order to get a hearing from them. But Paul openly confesses that he did this in a dishonest fashion, by being an orthodox Jew when he was among orthodox Jews, but whatever else was expedient when he was among other strata. This is indeed dishonesty, and indeed opportunism! The fact that Badiou *denies* this condemns him as an opportunist as well.

We Maoists do in fact say that we need to merge with the masses, share their conditions, experiences and struggles. But we *do not mean* simply *pretending to share them!* And when we go among the masses, share their life styles and conditions, and enthusiastically join up with their struggles, we do *not* say that we should adopt their views in place of our own *unless and until* we scientifically determine through the application of the mass line and MLM theory that those views are actually more in the interests of the masses than those we originally had. We reject the idea that we should pretend to agree with the masses when in fact we don’t, and we insist on labeling this practice for what it is: unprincipled opportunism!

Badiou's implication that Paul may have somehow been "serving the people" with his Christian proselytizing is also ridiculous in the extreme. (Do I even need to bother saying why?) But, beyond that, even the part of his statement that claims that "serving the people" is the "ultimate expression" of the mass line is incorrect. One can try to serve the people, and even actually do so at times, without having any notion of the mass line and without practicing it at all. Many medical doctors throughout history, for example, have wholeheartedly tried to serve the people, but most of them did so not on the basis of leading the masses to act for themselves based on their own good ideas, but rather by these doctors trying to apply their own expert knowledge as best as they can.

"Serving the people" is in fact a politically ambiguous slogan. While it is generally a very positive attitude, it comes in two varieties: 1) paternalism, and 2) the mass line approach. What we Maoists *should* at least primarily mean by "serving the people" is helping *them* to make a better world for themselves.

It may well be that "Saint" Paul had a paternalistic attitude toward the masses; most founders of religions do, I suppose. But the fact that they *think* that what they are doing is in the interests of the people does not change the certain fact that it is actually diametrically opposed to those interests.

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Badiou's passing remarks about the mass line are thus yet another self-exposure of his ignorance and rejection of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. I also found nothing whatsoever of any value in the portion of his book on "Saint Paul" that I read. And as for "Saint" Paul himself, and no matter what he *thought* he was doing, he was just another religious nut-case and an enemy of the people. It is very wrong to be promoting him in any way.

—S.H. (3/7/08)

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Ray Brassier, (Stanford University Press, 2003), 111 pp. Originally published as *Saint Paul: La foundation de l'universalisme*, 1997, Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Tom Paine see chapter 32, "The Origin and Development of the Mass Line", in my book *The Mass Line and the American Revolutionary Movement*, posted online at: <http://www.massline.info/mlms/mlch32.htm>