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BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy for Youth

Alain Badiou. 2017. *The True Life*.
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Don't let its length fool you, Alain Badiou's short book about youth is not lacking in grand assertions. Though Badiou begins by questioning his own relevance to the topic, he is nonetheless a confident champion of philosophy for youth, a group he regards as integral to the transformation of contemporary capitalist hegemony into an alternative egalitarian future. One of continental philosophy's contemporary heavyweights, Badiou is best known for *Being and Event* (1988) in which he employs set theory to examine the relationship between ontology, event and the subject's capacity to realise fidelity to truth. While similar concepts undergird *The True Life*, Badiou here abandons his usual philosophical method in favour of an accessible and polemical register.

This change in mode is explained by the book's intended audience: young people. Badiou's aim in the book, which is partly based on lectures delivered in French high schools, is to start a 'discussion between contemporary youth and philosophy about what the true life is'. (vi) The tagline—'A plea for corrupting the young'—signals Badiou's appropriation of the judgement of Socrates who was condemned as a corruptor of youth for directing his male students away from the path of money, pleasure and power. For the Badiou scholar, *The True Life* may read

like an extended footnote to an established philosophical tradition. For social and cultural researchers interested in youth as both a state of liminality and change and as an object of government, Badiou's book provides an opportunity to reflect on political orientations and disciplinary engagements with issues of young people's political inclusion and well being.

In the first of three chapters Badiou explains that young people are subject to two 'inner enemies'. (9) The first is the passion for immediate pleasures, which can undermine the life of unified meaning, while the second is the drive to success within the existing social order. Australian clickbait journalism fosters our familiarity with these opposing images of 'burning' and 'building' youth, as wasteful hipster consumers of smashed avocado breakfasts and savvy young property owners. For Badiou, while the contemporary 'materialistic cult of eternal youth' effects a 'puerilization of adults' via an 'endless adolescence', (22) youth today is subject to few traditional initiation rites into adulthood and thus 'doesn't know what its borders or boundaries are'. (24) Struggling to find a place in a world that lacks symbolisation beyond a generalised market logic, youth must, according to Badiou, avoid the 'false contradiction' between liberal democracy and reactionary traditionalism to recognise the 'true contradiction' between capitalism and communism. (39) The true life lies beyond the market, and to obtain it young people must pursue a 'thinking of departure' and alternative world-building, represented by passages from those stalwart icons of youth culture, Arthur Rimbaud and Saint-John Perse. (48)

Badiou uses his own sons and daughter for inspiration in asking how the contemporary situation of youth is different for boys and girls. Mining Freud for stories of male rites of passage, Badiou argues that whereas the sons of the primal horde once achieved maturity by revolting against the dominant male, under the contemporary cult of youth it is the father who envies 'the son's *jouissance*'. (54) The law of the father embedded in this version of evolutionary biology is tragically replaced by the anonymous law of the market which emasculates men and makes the son's participation in capitalism an 'initiation without initiation'. (59) This sorry state of affairs provides boys with three possibilities for social embodiment: the perverted body, which turns the individual toward '[p]iercing the body, drugging it, deadening it with ear-splitting music'; (61) the sacrificial body of the young terrorist; and the deserving body, which employs careerism as 'the hole-plugger of meaninglessness'. (64) Ever the Platonist, Badiou suggests the social solitude of each of these figures can be variously alleviated: the perverted body through love, the martyred body by political life, and the deserving body by 'the disinterested joys of science and art'. (69) This triad of love, politics and art-science are the truth procedures to which philosophy is related but held apart. Together they comprise the pursuits of the true life by which the son will one day become a 'father unlike any fathers who came before'. (69)

So what of the fate of girls and their rites of passage? In Badiou's historically ill-defined age of tradition the status transition from 'attractive virgin' to 'overburdened mother' was mediated by men and marriage. (73) But the decline of marriage means contemporary girls are considered 'at risk of having always already become the woman-adult that they ought to actively become'. (80) These days, girls are 'prematurely' women, at least in Badiou's judgment: 'Look at most girls in modern society. They are no different from women ... They dress and are made up like women, they speak like women, they know about everything.' (81) Already mature, the contemporary question for girls is not one of youth but one of femininity rolled into four familiar figures: 'Servant, Seductress, Lover, and Saint.' (87) Women's emancipation from the religious authority of the father to participation in the logic of 'consumer capitalist individualism' is for Badiou simply a transition of power between genders rather than the creation of a new egalitarian world. (97)

Despite their increased paid labour participation, Badiou suggests women remain tied to the immanence of childbirth and thus to the figure of the Servant. (101) Concerned that if the preference not to have children were generalised it would bring about ‘the end of the human race’, Badiou argues that ‘the One of the capitalist feminine’ is divided ‘into a creative duality and thereby raises a very difficult subjective problem for it.’ (102) The problem, from this perspective, is how can we escape the contradiction of women working *and* having children? While paid parental leave and the gendered division of domestic labour might come to mind for Australian readers, Badiou assures us that ‘the starting point can be neither biological nor social nor legal’ and instead employs the strategy of ‘gynesis’ to suggest that the feminine provides a philosophical gesture, including the capacity to create new symbols that would differentiate childbearing from ‘reproductive animality’. (103) Badiou is satisfied that a philosophical space between tradition and the dominant contemporary will develop because women themselves are theorising it: ‘What I’m sure of, without really knowing why, is that they’ll invent a new girl.’ (105)

Allow yourself a moment to recover. Broadly, *The True Life* makes three claims: 1) that modernity has undermined traditional structures and rituals which distinguished youth from adulthood; 2) that without these structures and rituals boys are arrested in adolescence and girls become prematurely adult; and 3) that young people should look to philosophy for an alternative to capitalist hegemony. These are declarations cultural studies practitioners have heard before. The first claim is familiar from the sociology of Anthony Giddens. The second is central to the past fifteen years of Hollywood bromance and popular debates about girls’ sexualisation. While certain of Badiou’s assertions are likely to generate offence—for example, his characterisation of religion as ‘a desperate substitute, a return of obsolete symbols’ (69) and his patronising statement that ‘a woman is always herself the earthly proof that God doesn’t exist, that God doesn’t need to exist’ (95)—most of *The True Life*’s outdated generalisations are simply banal. Rather than continue to point out critical limitations that would be readily apparent to any reader versed in cultural studies or feminism, I will use the occasion of the book to offer some comments regarding the figure of the girl and inter-generational politics that I think have use to the field.

Badiou’s book is typical of cultural theory’s tendency to exploit the plasticity of ‘the girl’ as an index of social change and consumer capitalism. From the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry to the Birmingham School’s fetishisation of masculinist subcultures, the girl has been equated with docility and commercial vulnerability. Even in contemporary studies, feminine consumption and style have been understood as more significant to the identity formation of girls, and more symptomatic of their co-option by capitalism, than, for example, the smart phone use of any adult. Badiou’s story reproduces this clichéd equation of femininity and consumer subjection while also suggesting that girls have been erased and replaced by always-already mature woman. Like the rest of us, sociologists of education will hardly be beguiled by Badiou’s contention that ‘girls are able to do with impeccable talent anything they’re asked to do’ (82) since this is a conventionally gendered understanding of student maturity and performance that renders boys’ academic success as remarkably ‘against the odds’. In this rigged game, girls unable to satisfy the requirements of disciplinary education (or the philosophical gesture of gynesis) are conceived as not only failing their schooling but also their gender. Consideration of actual girls living through systems that actively erase them as youthful agents is entirely absent from *The True Life*. Such focus on how girls variously experience exclusion, take pleasure in conformity and negotiate conflicting gendered demands is necessary to understand the basis from which a ‘true life’ vision of the future can be developed and for whom.

As any teen film fan knows, contemporary culture continues to differentiate experience through a binary gender order and heterosexual matrix. Young people know this and have strategies to navigate the murky terrain between sexed bodies, socialised genders, and heterosexual subjecthood within dominant teleological models of maturation. Adults are learning these lessons too, often from young people. In girl studies, for instance, the experience and representation of trans girls has prompted renewed examination of that field's relative (and sometimes contradictory) investments in developmental and discursive models of gender. Lest 'the trans girl' become a trophy child capable of representing wider shifts in sex and gender, girl studies prioritises a methodological attentiveness to young people, their embodied social experience, and their voices, which cannot be adequately expressed by Badiou's logic of 'Ones and Twos'.

In its direct address to youth, *The True Life* calls for an inter-generational politics. In this regard Badiou proposes the 'militant idea' of an alliance between disoriented young people and under-valued, socially invisible, older people. Like a choreographed scene from *West Side Story*, Badiou imagines 'the most rebellious of the under-30-year-olds and the toughest of the over 60-year-olds' pitted 'against the well-established 40- and 50-year-olds'. (27) For youth studies, useful insights can be derived from observing the way in which youth and older people, especially retirees, are similarly constructed as market segments as well as social demographics. The teen age and the third age are both characterised as life stages where taste cultures are prioritised over paid work, just as they are both critically objectified in media discourse and governmental policy. Teens and seniors could well band together as a political bloc since their participation in public spaces and institutions is relatively curtailed by those in the middle whose interests more neatly align with capitalism in its productive mode.

Pierre Bourdieu notes that such 'generational' discourse is both useful for characterising changing aspirations and institutions and misleading, insofar as it effaces difference within age-based categories. Similarly, sociological work on 'youth transitions' has, like Badiou, been interested in those events that transform an individual's status from youth to adult. Although teleologies of citizenship—such as those captured in census data—normatively presume coherent patterns of development into independence, maturity is not simply linear but often transitory, stifled and queerly at odds with frameworks that prioritise generation, acquisition and legacy. In Australia, post-World War II economic growth and policy has established an exclusionary housing market at the centre of what passes for social prosperity but, as Bourdieu would note, this up-beat story neglects the intergenerational and familial character of capital accumulation and distribution, especially in housing-as-investment. A politics of coalition-building between youth and seniors who are also excluded from social systems, and one better attuned to dynastic axes of wealth consolidation, holds promise for different collective futures beyond negative gearing and the tax-loopholes provided by family trusts.

While Badiou's own experience in political movements might have given his call for an intergenerational politics greater depth, he is generally uninterested in the potential of thinking from an empirical basis. Occasional, brief references to actual people—'I myself have seen poor young men of Arab origin' (83)—or political activism—'the Occupy movements, not on Wall Street but in Tunis and Cairo' (33)—are eclipsed by Badiou's penchant for abstract universals: the true life, Woman, Ones and Twos, art, politics, and so on. This aversion to positivist analysis is consistent with his conception of the philosopher's vocation: 'What the philosopher cares about is less what *is* than what is to come.' (75) While I do not dispute the value of encouraging readers to gaze beyond the limited horizon of the unequal, unjust late-capitalist present, *The True Life's* willingness to generalise gender from the broad historical

narrative of capitalism bodes poorly for the egalitarian politics it hopes to inspire. The value of a universal philosophical language surely depends on its potential to articulate the diverse experiences of those who must sustain it in action.

Australian readers may recognise this tendency toward universals as the mainstay of continental philosophy. If Badiou's short book offers anything to cultural studies, it is to encourage consideration of how we regularly parse commitments to universal values (justice, equality, difference) with social and historical analysis that is complicated by the desires and experiences of individuals, and particular social landscapes. *The True Life* also prompts reflection on our strategies for communicating beyond the disciplinary field, such as when we take our philosophy into the classroom. As to whether actual young people will be seduced by this philosopher's corruption, I can only imagine Badiou's reception at Summer Heights High.

About the author

Liam Grealy is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. His research interests include youth, media classification systems, higher degree research supervision and preventive detention.