Peter Slotterdijk, tr. Wieland Hoban

***In the Shadow of Mount Sinai: A Footnote on the Origins and Changing Forms of Total Membership***

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Alain Badiou, tr. Robin Mackay

***Our Wound is Not So Recent: Thinking the Paris Killings of 13 November***

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Reviewed by Eric D. Meyer

*Dateline: September 11th, 2016.* After fifteen years of the international war on terror, it’s curious that Western intellectuals have scarcely asked the questions: What has caused this clash of civilizations between the West and the Muslim world? In the 1980s, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978) made Western intellectuals aware that the theoretical frameworks they applied to the study of Middle Eastern cultures were still implicated in 19th Century Western colonialism. But Said’s thinking of Western colonialism is clearly dateable to the Postwar period of Pan-Arabism, Nasserism, and Third World decolonization (ca. 1945-1989), and does not specifically address the clash between Western globalization and Islamist terrorism in the 21st Century war on terror. Peter Sloterdijk and Alain Badiou can then be applauded for having the courage to confront the contemporary situation directly, and attempting to see it through non-Western eyes. But it still might be asked whether the theoretical frameworks they apply don’t contribute to the problems they hope to solve, by preventing them from recognizing the starkly different world-views and strangely different motivations of the Muslim holy warriors and Islamist suicide bombers who are the stereotyped enemies of the West in the international war on terror.

In *God’s Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms* (Polity Press, 2006; hereafter *GZ*), Sloterdijk argued that the international war on terror is a result of the clash of monotheisms between the three Abrahamic religions---Judaism, Christianity, and Islam---which are characterized by a strictly exclusive covenant between their devout believers, which, in turn, engenders zealotry toward apostates and outsiders. In *GZ*, Sloterdijk also argued that religious zealotry is characteristic of monotheism per se, and made no specific distinctions between the three competing monotheisms. *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai* (*SMS*) is clearly written in response to critics of ‘the clash of monotheisms’ thesis (*SMS* 3-7); and Sloterdijk swears he “will avoid the term ‘monotheism’ as far as possible[,] and instead focus on discussing the phenomenon” of zealotry “with reference to certain religious norms” characteristic of the three Abrahamic religions (*SMS* 4). But Sloteridjk still finds it difficult to resist discussing zealotry in terms of the clash-of-monotheisms thesis, or to avoid stereotyping the three monotheisms by their violent propensities. In “The Sinai Schema” (*SMS* 25-41), for example, he announces that he has “finally arrive[d] at the question of how monotheism and violence are connected” (*SMS* 27). But he still insists he is referring, not to the “religio-theoretical construct called ‘monotheism,’” but to the “ethno-plastic systems of rules” (*SMS* 8) and “the covenantal singularization project” (*SMS* 28) characteristic of the Abrahamic religions.

‘The Sinai schema’ then refers to the covenant established among the Ancient Israelite tribes, when Moses, after meeting *Yahweh* upon Mount Sinai, performs the Covenant sacrifice by splashing sacrificial blood upon the Israelite people (Exodus 24:1-8), although this covenant is subsequently broken when Moses brings the stone tablets down from Sinai, only to find the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, and, in a rage, breaks the tablets and orders a massacre of the apostates (Exodus 32:1-29). The Sinai schema consists of “the narrative triad of the sealing of the covenant” between *Yahweh* and the Israelites (Exodus 19:24), “the breach of the covenant” in the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32), and “the restoration of the covenant” (Exodus 34) (*SMS* 33) through which the Israelite tribes become the Nation of Israel. But it is the breach of covenant which most concerns Sloterdijk, since it is the Israelites’ apostasy which brings about the outburst of zealotry, in which Moses, speaking as “‘the LORD, the God of Israel, says’” to the Levite priests: “‘“Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp … each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.” The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died’” (Exodus 34:16-18; *SMS* 29). The Sinai schema then serves, Sloterdijk argues, “as the primal scene of ancient Jewish anti-miscegenation policy” (*SMS* 25), to constitute the Israelite tribes as “a zealous collective” (*SMS* 43), and to enforce conformity to its sacred blood covenant through the “phobocratic” fear (SMS 42ff.) of exclusion from that zealous collectivity.

Although Sloterdijk insists that the Sinai schema can’t to be taken literally, that it “amounted to only vehement verbalisms that were not followed by any real actions” (*SMS* 42), he still argues that the Sinai schema can be extended to describe the ethno-genesis of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. “It would be a grave mistake,” Sloterdijk argues, “to assume that the effects of the Sinai schema were restricted to the religious constitution of Israel,” since “the basic structures of the Sinaite constitution were passed on to Judaism’s religious successors, namely Christianity and Islam” (SMS, 48-49). The Sinai schema can explain, not only the violent propensities of the three Abrahamic religions, but also the virtual obsession with “the problem of apostasy (*ridda*)” displayed, for example, by radical Islam, specifically by “the fatwa committee of al-Azhar University in Cairo,” which determined that “under certain circumstances, apostates must be killed as traitors to Allah” (SMS, 51): a *fatwa* implemented by the Islamic State in carrying out public executions of apostates by beheadings, firing squads, and defenestrations from high buildings and cliffs. The self-destructive violence of the war on terror can then be explained as a result of the clash of monotheisms *within* and *between* the three Abrahamic religions, because zealous believers of the three Abrahamic religions each regard each the others as apostates from the aboriginal monotheism, established by the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and enforced by the Sinai schema.

For Sloterdijk, the self-destructive violence of the war on terror is the result of the clash of monotheisms, which engenders religious zealotry and directs its sacred violence towards apostates and unbelievers. By contrast, for Alain Badiou, in *Our Wound is Not So Recent* (*OWNSR*), international terrorist violence is an effect of the bitter class struggle between the Westernized middle classes, who make up 40% of the world’s population, and the non-Western under-classes, who constitute 50% of the world’s people, to possess whatever portion of the world’s resources (roughly 14%) is not already monopolized by the Western elites, who, while comprising only 10% of the world’s population, nonetheless control 86% of the world’s resources (*OWNSR* 32-33). Badiou’s analysis is based upon a Marxist class schema, albeit updated to describe the conditions of the contemporary capitalist world-system; and religion, which plays a major role in Sloterdijk’s analysis, counts for nothing in Badiou’s schema. “Ah! Religion! Islam!” Badiou mocks. “But I want to say at once that religion has always been available as a pretext, a rhetorical cover, manipulable and manipulated by fascist gangs “ to disguise the class struggle behind a façade of holy war. “So it is hardly credible to lay the blame on Islam, finally” (*OWNSR 42*), Badiou concludes, insisting that “religion is just a cover” for “the omnipresence of the desire for the West,” whether that desire is the desire of the Westernized middle classes to possess what the Western elite monopolize for themselves, or, instead, is “constituted on the basis of an intimate and negative repression of desire for the West” (*OWNSR 52*) characteristic of the non-Western world.

For Badiou, then, international terrorism, like the class struggle, is inevitably driven by desire for the West; and “in the final analysis, the origins of these youths”---the Islamist terrorists---”doesn’t matter much, their spiritual origin, their religious origin” (*OWNSR 55*), since whether they admit it or not, ether they want to be Westerners, or else they want to destroy the West, in a self-destructive negative reaction against it. And so, despite his denunciations of Islamophobia (*OWNSR 42*), Badiou subscribes to the Islamo-fascist stereotype, which assimilates Islamist terrorists to the stereotyped barbarians of the 1930s Western European civil war between communism and fascism, thereby contributing to further misunderstanding between the West and the Muslim world. And this is unfortunate, since Badiou begins his analysis with the admirable proposition: “*nothing that anyone does is unintelligible*” (OWNSR 9), staunchly committing himself to understanding what he later dismisses: the spiritual and religious origins of the Muslim holy warriors. But despite his sympathy toward the miserable, downtrodden masses of the non-Western world, whom Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre once referred to as “the wretched of the earth,” Badiou’s attitude is finally as uncomprehending as that of those who dismiss the Islamist terrorists as simply self-destructive nihilists and un-civilized barbarians, thereby endorsing the self-perpetuating stereotype.

And yet Badiou is probably correct that much of the hostility of the Islamist terrorists is actually created by the West, since, as he also argues, Western violence toward the Muslim world is just as cruel, barbarous, and inhuman, as Islamist terrorism; and the West certainly can’t claim superiority to Islamist terrorism, while still carrying out bombing campaigns that kill countless women and children, along with the suspected terrorists. ”If we call killing people for nothing ’barbarian,’” Badiou argues, “ then the West [is] barbarous every day, and we should realize this. Quite simply, in the first case of barbarism, we have a deliberate and suicidal mass murder. In the case of the barbarism of the civilized, it is a technological mass murder, dissimulated and self-satisfied” (OWNSR, 60). And between these two barbarisms, the self-perpetuating cycle of escalating violence is perpetuated by the mutual incapacity of each side to stop reacting to the self-destructive violence of the other. In the final analysis, however, Badiou still sees the international war on terror, not simply as “a particularly violent and spectacular symptom” of the class struggle within the capitalist world-system (OWNSR 10), but also as an effect of the collapse of communism as a utopian alternative to “the destructive, aggressive practice[s]” of the multinational capitalism (*OWNSR* 18), which might have provided the Muslim terrorists with a constructive channel for their frustrated desires. And here, Badiou betrays his own specifically communist orientation.

In a recent interview, Badiou has protested that he has no “nostalgic longing” for communism (*Uisio Philosophy*, January 13th, 2016). But it is clear Badiou still sees the contemporary world caught up in the sterile dialectics of communism versus fascism, and is therefore unable to see the self-sacrificial violence of the Muslim holy warriors as anything other than Islamo-fascism. But in the Muslim world, the collapse of communism is associated with the downfall of the Ba’athist socialist regimes---Nasser’s Egypt, Qaddafi’s Libya, Hussein’s Iraq, Assad’s Syria---which provided a terrorist version of Marxist/Leninist communism, that now, after the Iranian Revolution and Arab Spring, has been repudiated, in favor of a specifically *Islamic* revolution. In *OWNR*, Badiou makes a sincere effort to understand the West’s enemies through non-Western eyes; but he is blocked by his Eurocentrism and its Islamo-fascist stereotypes. Sloterdijk and Badiou have therefore perhaps made a beginning in stopping the misunderstanding between the West and Islam that fuels the self-perpetuating cycle of terrorist violence. Stopping the stereotyping would be the next step, and Sloterdijk and Badiou might help us take it, even if they don’t, or can’t, make it themselves.