

**Elisabeth Paquette, *Universal Emancipation: Race Beyond Badiou*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 212 pp., \$100, ISBN 978-1-5179-0943-7**

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In *Universal Emancipation: Race Beyond Badiou*, Elisabeth Paquette proposes an articulate thesis against the French philosopher Alain Badiou's reasoning about emancipation and race. These two crucial words, "emancipation" and "race," are the leading concepts she uses to try to demonstrate that Badiou's theorization of emancipation and political theory is limited because it cannot account for race or racial emancipation.<sup>72</sup>

Although Paquette's thesis is persuasive, we could say that Badiou's arguments, at least on a purely logical level, are equally convincing. However, when the fallout of the theories on a practical level is analyzed, it is Paquette who appears the more credible and convincing. She underlines how, according to Badiou, a change that brings justice cannot arise from within a specific cultural environment because such an environment is itself incorporated into the oppressive logic of the state. For Badiou, a "new" truth must transcend a given oppressive framework, that is, the oppressive state itself. Badiou believes that true politics is not located in the state<sup>73</sup> and explains his theory under an original heading: "a subtractive theory of politics."<sup>74</sup> Paquette clarifies Badiou's theory by pointing out that his concern is a conception of politics that exists independently of the logic that organizes how objects are represented within a given state.

For Badiou, politics must turn to something that exists outside of the current logic or law of the state.<sup>75</sup> This sounds logically persuasive

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<sup>72</sup> Elisabeth Paquette, *Universal Emancipation: Race Beyond Badiou* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2020), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 21.

but I agree with Paquette's suggestion that such a conception of politics is not reflected in reality. To agree with Badiou risks diminishing the singularity of the concept of "Négritude" and the events connected to it. Many theoretical issues also arise from Badiou's conception of race. He asserts that race is an expression of a specific cultural environment and, being a particular and not a universal concept, should be overcome to attain universal emancipation (universal justice and equality).<sup>76</sup> Badiou conceives of race as a particular and concrete result of racism and it follows from this reasoning that race is irrelevant to emancipation, politics, or thought, for the simple reason that race cannot rise to universality. The conceptual goal Badiou wants to reach is to affirm that it is truth alone that is indifferent to differences and the same for all.<sup>77</sup> Here, Badiou proposes a truly interesting theory. In his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, he provides an account of identity that is bound up with the capitalist system. Identity is functional for the capitalist system, and this allows us to understand Badiou's suspicion of identity, as the oppressive state itself is the power that legitimizes the identities created by capitalism. In a similar vein, Paquette mentions Madhavi Menon, a Badiou scholar, who defines identity as the demand made by power. According to Menon, power tells everybody who she/he is, so that power can then tell them what they can do.<sup>78</sup>

From this, we can understand Badiou's rejection of the concept of race, whether as Négritude or any form of specific identity. It also allows us to understand even more clearly Badiou's linguistic and conceptual expression: indifference to difference. For Badiou, it is not possible to arrive at any form of true universal emancipation starting from the problems, or presumed problems, of a specific racial group or a group claiming an identity. Hence, he proposes a policy that is indifferent to the requests of a group that attributes a precise identity to itself, because it cannot represent the universal demands of an entire society in which many particularities coexist. Paquette disagrees with this view, arguing that Badiou adopts an inadequate and limited conception of race. In contrast, she argues that race is not a particularity that must be overcome to achieve universal emancipation. To defend this point of view, she ana-

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 31.

lyzes arguments from various authors who have highlighted the importance of the concept of Négritude, a term coined by the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire. The problem of the meaning of the term “Négritude” arises from the interpretation adopted. It can be explained, according to Césaire, from a socio-economic point of view, referring to the exploitation of black people sold as slaves in North America. According to another perspective, proposed by Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Senegalese poet, politician, and cultural theorist, there exists a kind of Black essentialism, a view which has received a good deal of criticism.<sup>79</sup>

From Badiou’s perspective, race was an invention (socially constructed, according to Sartre) that benefited white European people for exclusively economic reasons. That most of the population in Africa was black has to be interpreted as pure coincidence. Therefore, for Badiou, there is no true or real “black” race. It follows that, if there is no black identity, no black revolution would make political sense.

Paquette offers a different perspective, suggesting that race should be considered important for an emancipatory politics, and therefore should not be excluded. To clarify this position, in opposition to Badiou, she cites the Haitian revolution as an example of a political movement of emancipation. Badiou’s thesis, according to Paquette, runs the risk of falling into the trap of Eurocentrism. In this way, the emancipation problem revolves around a conception of whiteness, and it is precisely this interpretive trap that prevents a serene reading of the specificity of Blackness.

According to Paquette, if we don’t understand the particularity of the Haitian revolution, if we interpret it according to the model of the French Revolution or later Marxist theories, we cannot understand the specificity of race. Indeed, it means denying the political value of the Haitian revolution concerning the problem of race. It is precisely this interpretive line of Badiou’s that Paquette criticizes. As is well-known, the Haitian revolution was led by a group of freed slaves against the French colonial government for the abolition of slavery. Badiou’s interpretation involves a failure to recognize that the Haitian revolution was political because he does not recognize the political value in a racial revolt. For Badiou, the Haitian revolution was a political revolt but there would be

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 42.

no reference to the question of race, simply because race is a particular aspect that does not have the strength to foment universal emancipation.

In her book, Paquette mentions the famous debate concerning the role of race in political emancipation that took place between Sartre and Fanon, assigning divergent roles to race and race consciousness. She asserts, echoing Fanon, that Sartre's project is limited insofar as it fails to provide a positive conception of race. Sartre empties the concept of Négritude of its soul and specificity. Sartre absorbs it into the mass of the proletariat's problems, for the simple reason that the oppression suffered by people of color falls within the broader horizon of the exploitation of the proletariat. It follows that, for Sartre, there would not be a specific problem regarding people of color, but nowadays his thesis appears weak. Paquette adds that, for Césaire and Fanon, it is necessary to situate emancipation in the concrete and the particular, and to assert that Blackness ought not to be relegated to a secondary position. For support, Paquette refers to Charles Mills's *The Racial Contract*, in which the author states that racial categories should be understood as creating, not simply racial exploitation, but race itself as a group identity.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, one of Paquette's most important goals is the maintenance of a category of race so as to avoid patterns of Eurocentrism, thus supporting political resistance to conceptions of sameness by affirming both universality and equality, on the one hand, and difference on the other. She proposes that a positive conception of race/racial emancipation can be understood as maintaining (at least) the following three characteristics: (a) race is relevant in peoples' lived experiences and in family and cultural relationships, (b) race ought not to be reduced to racism, and (c) race and racial emancipation ought not to be construed as something politically deficient and therefore in need of being fulfilled by something other than themselves.<sup>81</sup>

In the final chapter of the book, Paquette describes how a new form of universalism becomes possible through the affirmation of particularities, thus preserving the importance of a positive conception of race.<sup>82</sup> The risk, as she underlines, is that underestimating the specificity of the concept of race leads us to fall into Eurocentrism or, at the very

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 125.

least, an interpretation that considers the white man the referent for understanding any historical-cultural phenomenon.

Without siding with Paquette or Badiou, it is interesting to recall what Zygmunt Bauman tells us about identity in his book *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. He argues that identities are also a way to erect borders, despite the desired dialogue between cultures and the alleged defense of cultural specificities.<sup>83</sup> This is a reminder that the concept of identity must be treated with “delicacy” and should not be taken for granted. Elisabeth Paquette has rightly examined various conceptual positions, with which one may or may not agree, but this examination manifests the versatility to which the interpretation of a complex concept, such as that of identity, lends itself.

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<sup>83</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2001), 16.