The latest fad in Continental philosophy is an unexpected one. Goodbye to Lacan and Derrida and even Deleuze. Hello to the Apostle Paul. Atheist philosophers like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek have coopted Paul to their own agendas, and in their wake Jewish thinkers like Jacob Taubes and radically orthodox Christian theologians (the usual suspects) have given fresh attention to the apostle. Of course, this is not the Paul of the Reformers or even the Paul of New Testament scholarship. He is a radical Paul, sometimes a revolutionary Paul, always a political Paul.

One of the most thorough, textually-based, and interesting contributions to the field, and one of the widely ignored, is Bruno Blumenfeld’s *The Political Paul* (Continuum, 2003). Blumenfeld examines Paul from the tradition of Hellenistic political thought, that grab-bag of Plato and Aristotle that survived the collapse of the Greek *polis*. From this angle, Blumenfeld’s illuminates the specific ways in which Paul’s usage of *ekklesia* (church), *oikos* (household) and *basileia* (kingdom) is anticipated by earlier Greek writers and the specific ways he innovates.

For instance: *Koinonia* (“fellowship” or “partnership”) was a well-established political term deriving from Aristotle, but Paul is the first to link the concept with a system of social assistance spread throughout the empire (Romans 12:13; 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13). Practically, this system, Blumenfeld suggests, “is probably the single most important factor in the success of early Christianity”; theoretically, Paul is expanding a traditional political category beyond the *polis* to a world-girdling community. For another instance: Romans is written on the model of *The Republic* or the *Politics*, a critique of existing order and an outline of an ideal alternative (the church), and in this context “justification by faith” means “God’s gracious restoration of just order through Christ’s trust and Christ-like trust.” *Pistis*, trust in God-in-Christ and trust in the ones who are in Christ, founds the righteousness, the justice, that undergirds the new Christian city.
Blumenfeld is aware that he is telling only one side of the story, and says he is not trying to “diminish traditional readings of Paul.” But the book is heavily seasoned with sentences like “Aristotle provides the basis of this Pauline theme” and “Paul’s usage has nothing to do with Judaism.” That leaves Blumenfeld uncomfortably close to the de-Judaized liberal Paul of Kant and company, and also ignores the quite obvious influence of the Old Testament and first-century Judaism on Paul. When these limitations are kept in view, however, Blumenfeld’s book is superbly stimulating. I am tempted to call it “essential.”

Blumenfeld + the New Perspective, Luther and Calvin presiding: Now, that’s a match made in heaven.

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Since Marcel Mauss’ seminal essay on The Gift (1924), gift-exchange has become an obsession among social historians, anthropologist, philosophers, and, more recently, puffing to catch up, theologians. For philosophers and social theorists, “gift” is most valuable as a solvent for aging modern dichotomies. Gifts cannot be coerced; yet there are occasions when they are expected and even socially mandatory. From the perspective of “the gift,” freedom and obligation are not opposed, but complementary. We want to gratify the recipient with our gift, but giving is gratifying to the giver too (this realization led Derrida to stress the inescapable impurity of gifts). From the perspective of “the gift,” self-interest and altruism are not opposed either.

Jacques T. Godbout’s The World of the Gift (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) covers much of this familiar ground but also makes some important contributions of its own. Like many of the insights of cultural anthropology, Mauss’ discovery of a “gift economy” in tribal societies provided a stance to critique modern social and economic institutions, as well as a wall of separation between pre-modern and modern societies. Godbout disagrees: Gift-exchange is still with us, just as vibrant as ever, even if it tends to be invisible to most forms of social and political thought.

Godbout also criticizes Mauss for thinking of gift-exchange as an alternative economy. He proposes instead that gift-exchange is of a different order altogether. Market exchange and political action are “secondary” forms of sociality, but these patterns of social life presuppose and depend on the “primary sociality” that occurs at the dinner table, over the back fence, on the tram, between hospital volunteers and patients.

Stout writes a “moral history” in the sense that he examines the Civil War and its participants in the light of traditional just war criteria. It makes for anguishing reading. The moral center was the decision to wage war “deliberately on civilian populations.” Even the Emancipation Proclamation was a “lever” (Lincoln’s term) for total war on the Confederacy that deliberately targeted civilian farms, cities, and – in at least five thousand instances – civilian lives.” The phrase “total war” didn’t exist, but Stout thinks it accurately captures the reality of the war.

More depressing still is the near total absence of moral leadership from the churches. Pastors were “virtually cheerleaders all,” pumping up war wrath and entirely neglecting to raise just war criteria. “On all sides,” including the church, “the historian searches in vain for moral criticism directed at one’s own cause.”

Stout’s title explains why there was so little self-examination. As moral criteria eroded before the sheer terror of war, a new justification was born: Total war had to be waged to save the nation. In the incredible blood-letting of the war, something “mystical” was happening. What the Revolutionary War did not achieve, the Civil War did: Through the sacrifice of thousands, a nation was born, a new American religion, with its high priest (President), sacrifices (in war), sacred sites, songs, and objects (flag).