

CALVIN D. ULLRICH

Sovereignty and Event

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Mohr Siebeck

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Calvin D. Ullrich

Sovereignty and Event

The Political in John D. Caputo's
Radical Theology

Mohr Siebeck

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Printed in Germany.

For my sister, Chloé.

Preface

In the evolution of any book one learns that it is never a wholly remote undertaking, occurring across several junctures that interact and blend into a variety of dynamic contexts; intellectual, geographic, and personal. As is often the case, graduate study provided the catalyst at the genesis of this endeavor, more precisely, after reading the philosophical writing of Simon Critchley and his 2012 work, *Faith of the Faithless*. The general tenor of the latter was that faith was more ambiguous than simply observing normative religious beliefs and that it could also operate exterior to confessional boundaries, while being implicated at the same time in a complex process in which political subjects are constituted. This thesis provided the architectonic for the present study's central interests. But while Critchley innovatively situated the poles of continental philosophy and political theology, respectively, an approach which amounted to a secular ethics, it did not satisfy the conditions for an adequate theological perspective. I then encountered the 'radical' theology of John D. Caputo; in particular, his *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997) and *Weakness of God* (2006). Reading these texts, it became possible to imagine an alternate horizon for theology; one which might resist the temptations of coerciveness or desire for ideological stability. Moreover, this original and idiosyncratic theological architecture, would also not have to relinquish Critchley's appeal to non-confessional persuasions, nor at the same time would it have to be an obstacle, but rather could be deployed as a critical resource for invigorating traditional and confessional convictions too. If Caputo's work established a novel project which decoupled some of theology's associations with force and violence, then it was the implicit connection to power, and therefore the implications to 'the political,' that still needed to be drawn out and made explicit; that is, the question of how a radical theology could be (or become) political. This is what the present book will describe as a 'radical political theology.'

The notion of political theology has a complex and textured history in the country I call home, South Africa. Indeed, the nationwide student-protests that occurred there while undertaking graduate study at Stellenbosch University in 2015–16, could be explained as a tacit response to the ongoing effects of the theologically-inspired politics of apartheid. But just as unconventional a theological confrère was Caputo in that context, so too was the way of entry

into political theology. Diverging from the dominant mode of theologizing in the ‘post-apartheid’ dispensation, which emphasizes the ‘public’ nature of theology and draws from the archive of liberation theology, my energies instead turned to the political theology of the German jurist, Carl Schmitt, during my time at the *Tübinger Stift* in Baden-Württemberg in 2017. Between walks along the *Neckar* and days spent in the *Theologicum* library, it was not the figures of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann, but rather Schmitt’s political theology of sovereignty and the subsequent hermeneutic link it forged with Caputo’s radical theology, which occupied my energies. This ultimately gave shape to the current monograph. What followed appeared to be a relatively straight-forward attempt to map this link onto Caputo’s project of a radical theology of the ‘event.’ However, amidst further investigation it also became necessary to trace the genealogy of Caputo’s radical theology and its key concepts. In compiling these stages together, then, this book seeks to reconstruct Caputo’s œuvre according to the analytic of ‘sovereignty and the event’; beginning in his early engagements with Heidegger – where the discourse concerning event first emerges – to Derrida and the ethics of the event, and finally to religion and theology, where the encounter with the political is more acutely revealed. In a broad sense, what emerges in this philosophical-theological exploration, is a vindication of the continued significance of the relationship between postmodern thought and theology, and specifically, a certain gravitas that is to be accorded to Caputo’s contribution to this ongoing dynamic. Finally, and more controversially perhaps, not only does *Sovereignty and Event* argue for the indispensability of radical theology for problematizing the nature of power and politics in secular democracy, but also for a poetic efficacy that radical theology produces in the ongoing struggle to re-imagine new political ways-of-being.

Sections of chapter two, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” have appeared in “On Caputo’s Heidegger: A Prolegomenon of Transgressions to a Religion without Religion,” in *De Gruyter: Open Theology*, 6 no. 1 (2020): 241–255 (doi: 10.1515/opth-2020-0020); sections of chapter five, “The Event of Sovereignty,” have appeared in “Theopoetics to Theopraxis: Toward a Critchlean Supplement to Caputo’s Radical Political Theology,” in *Forum Philosophicum*, 26 no. 1 (2020): 163–182 (doi: 10.35765/forphil.2020.2501.10). I would like to thank these journals for their permission to include parts of these texts into this monograph, which is the realized product of my doctoral dissertation, completed in 2019.

Calvin D. Ullrich
August, 2020, Cape Town, South Africa

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Introduction

What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one.
Jacques Lacan¹

The question of the master raised by this utterance of the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, or the notion of the ‘sovereign’ in the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, as we will see shortly, is the fundamental political-theological question which motivates the present book. On the one hand, the master or sovereign figure is a political one, not only because it has to do with power and authority, but also because it raises questions of political legitimacy, autonomy, freedom, and democracy. On the other hand, the concept of the master/sovereign also has a particular *theological* resonance, and to that extent requires theological reflection. The point of departure for this resonance is obtained from the political theorist Carl Schmitt, who can be credited with bringing the formal concept of political theology back into twentieth and twenty-first century debate. In its most basic form, Schmitt’s hypothesis was that the political sovereign receives its conceptual force from the sovereign omnipotent God. It is this God which will need to be reflected upon, lest we acquire a new master that we neither want nor deserve.

The importance of Jacques Derrida in what follows lies not only in the connections he makes with Carl Schmitt, but also in his influence on its central interlocutor, the American philosopher and theologian, John D. Caputo.² While Derrida’s writing contains a number of theological characteristics, it is Caputo’s work which has become most well-known for its theological interpretation of deconstruction. Since the political-theological concept of sovereignty requires *theological* reflection, and because Derrida does not engage this systematically himself, the aim of this book can be said to be an explora-

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 207.

² John D. Caputo is presently the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University.

tion of John D. Caputo's 'radical theology of the event,' as an exemplary site in which this reflection takes place. It will be argued, more specifically, that Caputo's radical theology presents resources to reimagine the sovereign and thus aims to contribute to the ongoing quandary of the status of theological sovereignty and its relation not only to the political, but also to ethics and religion.

To this end, the scope of this book consists in a systematic *theoretical* and philosophical-theological reflection on the work of John D. Caputo. While taking its point of departure from the theological-political sense of sovereignty given by Carl Schmitt, the study traces this concept through Caputo's oeuvre as it specifically interacts in the various domains of his thought with what is called 'the event.' The event takes on a heuristic function here, as an organizing concept that demarcates the unique contributions of Caputo's philosophical and theological project. From the influence of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, Caputo incorporates the concept of the 'event' into a 'radical theology' that not only challenges dominant modes of theological discourse, but also offers an alternative and novel mode of theological reflection. This mode of reflection, which Caputo calls 'theo-poetics,' undermines traditional notions of God and theology insofar as the latter is a 'logical' discourse which mediates on the former as both an omnipotent and sovereign Being. Theo-poetics, on the other hand, suggests a mode which attempts to think of God *without* sovereignty. To think of God *without* sovereignty is to think of a 'weak' God beyond the order of a Supreme Being or Infinite Entities. Part of the claim of this book will be to show, however, that 'God's weakness' does not mean 'God's impotence' but rather alludes to a 'weak force' of God which lays claim on us. Theo-poetics is the discourse that endeavors to articulate this weak force and, therefore, will be central to the project of imagining a God *without* sovereignty.

It will be demonstrated that to think or imagine a God *without* sovereignty is not just a cerebral exercise, but is an urgent and necessary task requiring sustained theological reflection. Reasons for this reside in the conviction that modern democratic life is not a value-free zone, but is rather imbued with theological referents. To the extent that sovereignty is one of the central concepts that continues to influence the way in which democracy is both conceived and carried out, it cannot be left to the realm of political or legal theory. Much theological discourse, to be clarified further below, has already sought to interrogate the dangers of a political theology of sovereignty which might serve as justification for potentially violent political ambitions. This reflection has usually consisted in submitting alternative political theologies that conceive God's sovereignty as a *transcending* force that is able to critique 'this-worldly' projects of statecraft. While the argument offered here would affirm such political-theological approaches, it would insist that maintaining this connection to God's sovereignty is always a risk, no matter how

transcendent it is of the political realm. Therefore, by running together this political-theological notion of sovereignty and Caputo's theo-poetics of radical theology – which imagines a God *without* sovereignty – an attempt will be made to formulate a 'radical *political* theology' that might not only be more prepared to manage this risk, but which also offers an original and 'constructive' mode of theological discourse with which to engage political challenges.

A. Protests, Masters, and Events

I would like to begin this introductory chapter by making some brief remarks regarding the motivational genesis of this book. In 2015, universities across South Africa were emerging from a wave of animated and, at times, violent student protests. What started in January as a small demonstration relating to defaulting student fees at the University of the Witwatersrand, soon took a dramatic turn far exceeding the critical failures of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) the purported source of the tension at the time. The catalyzing moment, however, occurred on Monday, March 9, when Chumani Maxele, a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), hurled human excrement onto a large concrete statue located in the center of UCT's campus. The statue was that of the notorious British mining magnate, former prime minister of the Cape Colony, and veritable symbol of colonial imperialism, Cecil John Rhodes. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall began trending across the country and beyond, igniting protests as far as Rhodes' alma mater, Oriel College, Oxford. Exactly one month later the statue had been removed from UCT's campus a prescient moment, indeed, as one reflects in 2020 on the Black Lives Matter movement.

But Pandora's box had been proverbially opened. Further energized by the spurning of university executive committees to amend tuition-fee policies, as well those events at UCT, activist groups and self-styled 'movements' began forming across campuses nationwide under the banner of #FeesMustFall. It became quickly clear, however, given the assortment of issues being raised,³ that what was at stake did not simply reside in access to higher education or the presence of colonial statues. Two underlying but significantly inter-related objects of discontent could be identified. The first was the perceived

³ At Stellenbosch University, for example, a historically white Afrikaans institution, the 'Open Stellenbosch' movement that mobilized in April, called for greater inclusion by means of adjusting the university language policy, which, they argued, ultimately excluded students whose first language was not Afrikaans. See Tammy Peterson, "Students protest in Stellenbosch over language," News24, www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Students-protest-in-Stellenbosch-over-language-20150727 (27 July, 2015).

failure of the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), to make good on its promises of a ‘post-apartheid’ era that would inaugurate a new dispensation of prosperity, at least, that is, for a generation of ‘born-free’ black youth – those born after the formal end of the apartheid regime. Alongside the pillaging of state resources, cronyism, and state corruption, many felt that an economically progressive agenda which had been promised, was ultimately compromised by deals made with white-owned businesses. The majority of black people, it was argued, had been left behind.⁴ Secondly, underpinning the latter was the meta-historical argument of the still-felt implications of European colonialism. At the university but also in wider public discourse, this was, and still is, variously referred to as the persistence of ‘white privilege.’ The phenomenon was not only to be recorded in the celebratory symbolic status of colonial statues or even in acts of overt racism, but was rooted more deeply in the very *experience* of ‘coloniality’⁵ itself, or what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano called, ‘the coloniality of power.’⁶ In short, the indignation of the student protestors directed at South Africa’s colonial history and the persisting forms of structural oppression and exclusion, under the negligence of the state and its commitment to an overly neoliberal model for economic growth, marked a turning point for South African democracy. A turning point, which, notwithstanding the unique challenges facing any fledgling democracy, is less surprising when juxtaposed with global trends of political pessimism. Liberal democracy may indeed be receding in practice – the purported ‘ground’ upon which it laid its foundations trembles as authoritarianisms dressed in different garbs continue to surge. But the vigorous responses to this universal moment, whether grass-roots movements or new forms of political articulation, suggest that detachment from the ideological transcending of limitations (ontological, moral, or collective) may point to a self-revision that is of salvific importance. It is in this context that the motivations for this book and the analysis it contains, have emerged.

⁴ See Roger Southall, “How ANC’s path to corruption was set in South Africa’s 1994 transition,” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-ancs-path-to-corruption-was-set-in-south-africas-1994-transition-64774> (6 Sep, 2016); see also Roger Southall, “The ANC for Sale? Money, Morality and Business in South Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 35 no. 116 (2008): 281–299.

⁵ It is perhaps worth drawing a distinction following Ramón Grosfoguel between colonialism and coloniality: the latter is the “continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system.” See Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms” in *Cultural Studies* 21 no. 2–3 (March/May, 2007): 211–223, 219.

⁶ See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, trans. Michael Ennis in *Nepantla: Views from South* 1 no. 3 (Sep, 2000): 533–580.

The epigraph above refers to Lacan's infamous remarks to disgruntled students on December 3, 1969, at the newly established 'experimental' Université de Paris VIII at Vincennes (included at the end of Seminar XVII: 'The Other Side of Psychoanalysis'), following the widely commented-on revolts of May 1968. In the gathering from where these words were recorded, Lacan was faced with a group of heckling students who wanted him to perform a 'self-criticism,' since they were disgusted at the formalized inclusion of the psychoanalytic discipline in the university curriculum.⁷ To the contrary, they thought, psychoanalysis was supposed to be the discourse providing the very means by which the bureaucratization of the university could be undermined. Instead, by creating a department of psychoanalysis, the disruptive and non-formalizable nature of the discourse, they argued, was now being coopted into the university itself. Though sympathetic with the students, Lacan's tone toward them, as his biographer Élisabeth Roudinesco noted, was more of a 'stern father,' perhaps even a little authoritarian.⁸ Paradoxically, the question could be asked: Was the threat of psychoanalysis to the university not to be found in its marginal status but rather in the inherent anti-egalitarianism of its master-slave/analyst-analysand dialectic? As one of the hecklers put it, "[w]e already have priests, but since that was no longer working, we now have psychoanalysts."⁹

And yet, in the aftermath of '68, Lacan was certainly convinced of the radical potential of psychoanalysis, as the distinction between the famous 'four discourses' makes clear. In university discourse "knowledge loses its capacity to radicalize," since it is 'flattened' and 'bureaucratized,' whereas psychoanalysis "calls this kind of knowledge into question," Stephen Frosh notes. Consequently, "what happens 'in' the university is at odds with psychoanalysis, even when psychoanalysis appears in the university itself, and even when what happens in the university is a rebellion against the university."¹⁰ Lacan's point to the students was that it does not matter whether you are 'inside' or 'outside' rebelling against the system, you are always 'stamped' by the mode of university knowledge. When a student cantankerously interjects Lacan's lecture, complaining that he did not understand Lacan's usage of the word

⁷ The Department of Psychoanalysis would be the first of its kind in the French university system and would fall under the umbrella of the Department of Philosophy, headed by Michel Foucault. It boasted a fresh list of admirable young philosophers at the time, including Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and Jean-François Lyotard. See Stephen Frosh, "Everyone Longs for a Master: Lacan and 1968" in *1968 in Retrospect: History, Theory, Alterity*, eds., Gurminder K. Bhambra and Ipek Demir (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 100–112; 100–101.

⁸ Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 343.

⁹ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 200.

¹⁰ Frosh, "Everyone Longs for a Master," 102–103.

‘aphasic,’ the moment becomes illustrative:¹¹ revolutionary displays from ‘outside’ of the university are nothing more than just that, displays of ignorance (the student doesn’t understand basic Greek) and which are themselves put on display. With condescension, Lacan replied: “for you fulfil the role of helots of this regime. You don’t know what that means either? The regime is putting you on display. It says, ‘Look at them enjoying!’”¹² Thus, the revolutionary impulse of the students is ultimately a search for a more totalizing university discourse and “this search for unity produces totalitarianism in the form of a master – and in hunting for revolutionary upheaval in the way that they do, that is where the students will end up.”¹³ The new master which the students were given, one memorably recalls, was an even stronger Gaullist party.

With perceptive insight, as the renowned Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has been variously elaborating for the last couple of decades, Lacan’s words about the master’s return continue to haunt movements which agitate against the dominant global-economic and western-democratic apparatus, including the likes of Occupy Wall Street, the *Indignados* in Spain or Syriza in Greece. Referring to the now defunct Occupy movement, Žižek described the art of politics as the insistence on a demand that is ‘realistic’ insofar as it disturbs the hegemonic order but which also is de facto impossible. The paradox, therefore, is that “we should indeed endeavor to mobilize people around such demands – however, it is no less important to remain simultaneously *subtracted* from the pragmatic field of negotiations and ‘concrete’ proposals.”¹⁴ Žižek’s political analysis here is an expansion on the central Lacanian insight that a true revolution is the *Freudian* revolution, according to which the desire for total knowledge is suspended in the process of ‘transference’ when the analysand comes to realize that the analyst is *not* ‘the one who knows.’ The subject is thus left to fall upon its divided-self or what Lacan called the *pas-tout* (non-all/non-whole): “without this *pas-tout*, there will always be a demand for a master.”¹⁵

Lacanian psychoanalysis and especially the conceptualization of Freudian subjectivity allows one to view the student protests through a helpful critical framework. Reflecting on the recent South African student protests, the philosopher, Achille Mbembe remarks, “the winds blowing from our campuses

¹¹ “But outside what? Because when you leave here you become aphasic? When you leave here you continue to speak, consequently you continue to be inside. INTERVENTION: *I do not know what aphasic is*. You do not know what aphasic is? That’s extremely revolting. You don’t what an aphasic is? There is a minimum one has to know, nevertheless.” Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 205–206.

¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

¹³ Frosh, “Everyone Longs for a Master,” 106.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 84.

¹⁵ Frosh, “Everyone Longs for a Master,” 100.

can be felt afar ... it goes by the name 'decolonization' – in truth a *psychic state* more than a political project."¹⁶ While Mbembe is categorical – “this is not May 68,”¹⁷ – it is not difficult to discern and consequently evaluate the protests through the Lacanian lens as others have done at length.¹⁸ Instead of pursuing this line further, however, this contextual heuristic, and in particular the reference to the 'master', now function as a pivot for introducing the central themes and concerns of this book.

In its most basic form, the consequence of '68 was the decline of the old (authoritarian) master and the emergence of the new master-figure in the form of the 'expert' (university discourse). The problem, as Žižek points out, is that these experts show themselves not to be experts or masters at all, but rather impotent bureaucrats who pave the way for the unsurprising return of strong-man authoritarians who inspires the populist alternative.¹⁹ Much of this can be mapped onto the situation described above: i.e. the decline of the old colonial master or the Apartheid state, only to be replaced by a new regime of experts that are struggling to consolidate a positive social vision in the context of a young and vulnerable democracy. The students require a master. But the question that emerges is what will the precise character of this new master be? It can neither be the return of the authoritarian nor the depoliticizing neutrality of 'university discourse.' This question, therefore, raises the issue of the complex relationship between mastery or the analogous notion of sovereignty and the (theological) foundations that allegedly consti-

¹⁶ Achille Mbembe, “The State of South African Political Life,” *Africa Is A Country*, www.africaisacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics (19 Sep, 2015). Although short, this concise essay provided an accessible statement of the state of South African politics during 2015, it was also widely disseminated.

¹⁷ This is taken from an excerpt of Mbembe's “Diary of My South African Years” that was published online: see Achille Mbembe, “Theodor Adorno vs Herbert Marcuse on student protests, violence and democracy,” *First Thing – Daily Maverick*, <http://firstthing.dailymaverick.co.za/article?id=73620> (27 Oct, 2018). This psychic state can be understood as characteristic of a larger phenomenon that is shaping the twenty-first century, what Mbembe as recently called a 'politics of enmity.' See Achille Mbembe, “The Society of Enmity”, trans. Giovanni Menegalle in *Radical Philosophy* 200 (Nov/Dec, 2016): 23–35. This article is a translation of chapter two of Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

¹⁸ See Bert Olivier for example, “Protests, ‘acting out’, group psychology, surplus enjoyment and neo-liberal capitalism” in *Psychology in Society*, 53 (2017): 30–50.

¹⁹ As Žižek recently comments, “recall how the experts in Brussels acted in negotiations with Greece's Syriza government during the euro crisis in 2014: no debate, this has to be done. I think today's populism reacts to the fact that experts are not really masters, that their expertise doesn't work.” See Slavoj Žižek, “Are liberals and populists just searching for a new master? A book excerpt and interview with Slavoj Žižek,” *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/10/08/are-liberals-and-populists-justsearching-for-a-new-master> (8 Oct, 2018).

tute democratic life. To pursue this question further, this book will draw on the insights of Jacques Derrida as they are specifically taken up in the work of John D. Caputo and his radical theology.

For the remainder of this introductory chapter, then, I will introduce two conceptual axes which run throughout and frame the content of this book, namely, ‘sovereignty and event.’ With respect to the former, I will discuss the conditions in which sovereignty emerges as both a political and theological concept, and which finds its modern articulation in Carl Schmitt. This will allow a reflection on the reception of Schmitt’s thought, as well as the opportunity to make further remarks regarding his contribution to the present analysis. With respect to the second axis, I will present the vision of what I intend to pursue regarding Caputo’s radical theology of event, further delimiting his project from other radical theological projects, before finally situating his own work and introducing his core theological contribution. The introduction concludes with a brief word concerning methodology, followed by a short summary of each chapter.

I. Sovereignty

On the way to formulating an answer to the question of the master figure in politics, our reference now turns to another figure, namely, that of the sovereign. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (a contemporary of Lacan), in his last seminars conducted before his death explicitly links the master to the sovereign: “the master (and what is said of the master is easily transferable to the first of all, the prince, the sovereign), the master is he who is said to be, and who can say ‘himself’ to be, the (self-)same, ‘myself.’”²⁰ Derrida continues, expanding on this definition:

The concept of sovereignty will always imply the possibility of this positionality, this thesis, this self-thesis, this autoposition of him who posits or posits himself as *ipse, the (self-)same, oneself*. And that will be just as much the case for all the ‘firsts,’ for the sovereign as princely person, the monarch or the emperor or the dictator, as for the people in a democracy, or even for the citizen-subject in the exercise of his sovereign liberty (for example, when he votes or places his secret ballot in the box, sovereignly). In sum, wherever there is a decision worthy of the name, in the classical sense of the term.

In this description of the master/sovereign Derrida consciously implicates a wide scope of the tradition of liberal modernity in the semantic field of a certain *political theology*. Despite early-modern efforts to imagine an immanent account of human nature (Bodin, Hobbes, Vico, Machiavelli) – exemplified in Vico’s famous aphorism, *verum esse ipsum factum* (‘what is true is

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and The Sovereign*, eds. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [2009] 2011), 67.

precisely what is made')²¹ – Derrida concludes, nonetheless, that these attempts at 'anthropologization, modernization and secularization' remain "essentially attached by the skein of a double umbilical cord."²² On the one side of this double connection Derrida refers to *imitation*, which describes the 'human' institution of the state as "copies of the work of God." On the other, he speaks of a (Christian) logic of *lieutenance* – of the human sovereign as the taking-place of God (*tient lieu de Dieu*) and as place-taking (*lieu-tenant*): "the place standing in for the absolute sovereign: God."²³ To those unfamiliar with Derrida and the sensitivities of postmodern thought, such comments might be disconcerting for modern sensibilities. How is it that such language of God and Christianity, or even religion, could be spoken in such proximity to the political order?

The possibility for such claims arise in what is now a well-documented phenomenon; i.e. the crisis of secular-liberal modernity in which religion once banished from the public sphere has made a tremendous comeback.²⁴ This (re)turn or 'resurgence' is not merely private religiosity but in a number of particular ways quite public and therefore political.²⁵ The crucial move of modernity was to maintain the link between classical liberalism and secularism: the value-free space of the former in which the market could operate untethered, combined with the ideological assumption of the latter that religion could be separated from public life. However, the maintenance of this link has failed and the boundaries between the religious and the secular – and indeed, many of the modern distinctions: subject/object, faith/reason, theolo-

²¹ See Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), 6–9.

²² Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See for example; Hans Joas, *Faith as Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), Charles Taylor's, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview", in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Sharpe, M. and Nickelson, D. eds., *Secularisations and Their Debates: Perspectives on the Return of Religion in the Contemporary West*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁵ Graham Ward, for example, speaks of 'resurgence' or 'the new visibility of religion,' rather than 'return.' For him return implies continuity with the past, but the 'postsecular' phenomenon has very little to do with old forms of religiosity he claims. For example, he indicates that mainline church attendance has declined, or if anything, has remained stagnant. Ward posits a threefold typology for describing this new visibility: Fundamentalism, Deprivation, and Religion and Culture (in terms of its commodification). See Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), especially see chapter three, 117–158.

gy/philosophy etc., – have become ever-more porous, leading some to wonder how modern we even were to begin with.²⁶ An important consequence of this ‘post-secular’ environment for what follows, is that the resources of theology (or religion) used to interrogate questions of politics cannot be confined only to classical theological reflection, insofar as the very distinction between (political) theology and (political) philosophy is no longer secure. While further reasons and implications of the ‘post-modern’ or ‘post-secular’ will become clearer as we continue, it is in this context one can understand the recent fascination of a number of predominantly ‘secular’ thinkers who have begun to show interest in precisely the intellectual offerings of religion and theology. These include, among others, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gianni Vattimo, and indeed, Jacques Derrida.

One of the first to consider this complex entanglement of ‘the political’ and ‘the theological’ in the twentieth century, however, was the controversial conservative German political theorist, Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), notably in his short book, *Political Theology* (1922).²⁷ Indeed, it is thanks to Schmitt that the term ‘political theology’ has re-entered the modern lexicon, which he most likely gathered from Baruch Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).²⁸ As a part of his incisive critique of Weimar liberalism, parliamentarianism, and cosmopolitanism, Schmitt put political theology to work through the concept of sovereignty by defining it as “he who decides on the exception” with respect to the juridical-legal order.²⁹ This understanding of sovereignty for his formulation of political theology was not an appeal to religious tradition for political legitimacy, but rather involved the claim that the political order is *structurally* analogous to a metaphysical reality. The primary analogue for this claim was to be found in the sovereign God, insofar as God is that which both founds the political order and simultaneously remains a part of and external to it. Schmitt’s argument went on to define the concept of politics in a circumscription that referred to an irreducible conflict

²⁶ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1991] 1993). While this book had to do with the false distinction that modernity made between nature and society, it nonetheless captures well the general mood of the times.

²⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

²⁸ Despite the frequent reference to Schmitt as the originator of the phrase ‘political theology,’ he has no role in conceiving it. Indeed, apart from Spinoza, whom he certainly had read, the phrase also shows up in other literature, for example, Simon van Heenvliedt’s *Theologico-Politica Dissertatio* (Utrecht: Jacob Waterman, 1662). The earliest usage seems to date back to Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.E.), see Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press), 25–26.

²⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

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