Theocratic Biopolitics: From Political Theology to Affirmative Biopolitics

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In this article, I explore a path from political theology to affirmative biopolitics. More specifically, I argue for a synthesis between what I call theocratic political theology and affirmative biopolitics. Theocratic political theology is an anti-Schmittian political theology that challenges the sacralisation of sovereign power, or the various ways secular power has usurped the aura of religious transcendence in modernity. Theocracy does not stand here for 'priestly rule', but rather its opposite, the renunciation of the legitimacy of worldly or ecclesiastical authorities, through the invocation of the an-archic ('no rule') sovereignty of God (Vatter, 2020). On this perspective, political theology is not viewed as a discourse of power (Newman, 2019), or of the sacralisation of the powers of this world, but rather of their subversion or perpetual critique. Affirmative biopolitics encompasses a series of approaches that advance positive forms of biopower. Building on Michel Foucault's (1990) ambivalent treatment of modern biopolitics, thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben (2011), Roberto Esposito (2015), and Miguel Vatter (2014), among others, seem to trace the negative paradigm of the biopolitical government of life back to Christian economic theology and the ascetic practices of confession and the pastoral government of the souls. Alternatively, their brand of affirmative biopolitics calls for a radically immanent, strictly materialist, profanation of the biopolitical apparatus of political theology that can be found primarily articulated in the impersonalist philosophies and immanent ontologies of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze.

While taking note of the impersonalist outlook, I propose instead an arguably more radical strategy to affirmative biopolitics that rests on a phenomenology of 'creaturely life'[1] inspired by the Judeo-Christian paradigm of the 'suffering servant' (Paipais, 2022). The latter enacts creaturely life as a life grounded on the passible human condition, inherently fragile, vulnerable, dependent, and exploitable, but also recalcitrant, resistant, and inexhaustibly creative. The aim is to explore a paradigm of political life that counters the negative effects of biopolitical governmentality and restores the inseverable link between human life and its inherently political nature.

The Two Faces of Political Theology

The first term that needs to be probed is that of political theology. Political theology is a contested idiom that is predominantly taken to refer to the structural analogy between, and transfer of concepts across, the domains of theology and politics. For those who study it as a 20th century discourse about the representation of power and its legitimation, the term first appeared in Carl Schmitt's eponymous tract *Political Theology*, published in 1922 (Schmitt, 2005). Schmitt famously claimed that modern juridical concepts of the state are secularised theological concepts and that modern politics, especially in its liberal rendition, has never suppressed the dimension of transcendence that used to be the privileged domain of religion. As such, Schmitt's critique of modern politics was not really about the persistence of religion in public life *per se* but, rather, about what Claude Lefort (2006) has called the 'permanence of the theologico-political', the void left by the retreat of religion in modernity that the secular political concepts of the modern state anxiously tried to fill. In this respect, Schmitt's definition points to the direct manner in which secular powers have appropriated the aura of religious transcendence to legitimise themselves and secure a stable social and political order. Political theology, thus understood, becomes the mythology of the *katechon*, the mysterious figure that is supposed to withhold the apocalypse and delay the end of the world, announced by St Paul in his disputed Second Letter to the Thessalonians. In the imaginary of political theologians like Schmitt (2003), the

modern *katechon* is secular sovereign power whenever it fulfils the sacred role of restraining chaos and maintaining world order.

By delaying the end of the world, however, the *katechon* also seems to be preventing the coming of the Messiah, namely the fulfilment of the promise of salvation at the end of history (=*eschaton*). In the Christian imaginary, the latter is the *telos* of history and so the *katechon*'s mission seems to be contradicting the very core of Christian faith (see Cacciari, 2018). This ambivalence was not lost on the Jewish critics of Schmittian political theology, such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, or Jacob Taubes, but also on the Christian doyens of the new critical political theology, Jürgen Moltmann and Johannes Baptist Metz (Moltmann, 1994). Political Theology in their work becomes a discourse critical of secular power and of any attempt to make authority sacred. Instead, theology and its emancipatory potential is recruited as a resource of hope, justice, and liberation that resists any effort to appropriate religious faith in the service of sovereign power. Political theology here becomes a species of ideology critique, a manifestation of the – fundamental in Judeo-Christian religiosity – critique of idolatry (see Paipais, 2024).

From political theology to biopolitics

Obviously, these contrasting takes on the nature and purpose of political theology disagree fundamentally on the question of the legitimacy of power and the grounds of political authority. The Schmittian katechontic project of political theology seeks to outrightly defend the role of political power in securing order. When the notorious German jurist drew a direct link between theology and the question of sovereignty in modernity, he wished to remind his oblivious liberal opponents that the legitimacy of modern state power, and with it the very nature of the political in the West, were premised, at least since Hobbes, on the capacity of a transcendentally sanctioned authority to secure survival and the conditions of an orderly and industrious life. Even more so, Schmitt aimed to salvage the dignity of sovereign authority as the expression of a public life experienced as a 'spiritual' event, as an 'idea' or form that gives value to life beyond its biological dimension or its reduction to a private event.

For Schmitt, the legitimacy of the political hangs on its ability to safeguard the power of life against all those forces that seek to 'de-politicise' or 'neutralize' it. In effect, what Schmitt (2005: 15) calls the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*) is nothing but this power of life that becomes political only when it takes the form of an existential decision between friend and enemy, breaking away, in the process, from rules, constitutional limitations, and other neutralising factors (Schmitt, 2007). It is the power of human creativity and imagination that has something of the divine as Schmitt himself likens it to the event of the miracle in theology that violates natural laws and reveals the divine power. Human life power (always of course perceived as 'spirit' in Schmitt) and divine creative energy meet here in a theopolitical vindication of the Christian *imago Dei*. In essence, what Schmitt implies is that the state of exception that reveals the sovereign is nothing other than the affirmation of true human agency, a biopolitical excess akin to the Blochian *Überschuss*, that vital surplus that connects us to the divine and which in the Jewish tradition is called *torat hayim* (Bielik-Robson, 2019), a drive to life as a counterpart to the Freudian *Todestrieb* (=death drive) and an imperfect reflection of the creative act by which God made the world.

Yet, Schmitt's project reaches further as he desperately searches for ways to establish more than a science of the structural analogies between theology and politics. His purpose may be avowedly sociological (he explicitly states that he is interested in a sociology of legal concepts), but this ambition is never clearly disentangled from a polemical use of political theology. His strategic purpose is to unearth the theological, transcendental foundations of sovereignty and link the exercise of power over life with the sanctified function of the *katechon*. Life as exception/surplus is protected through a sacrificial mechanism, as René Girard (2013) describes it in his*Violence and the Sacred*, that paradoxically turns against it. This paradox, born of a situation where life itself sets up the protective mechanism (state power) that may become the cause of its repression or annihilation (by trying to immunise itself against external threats), has been thoroughly analysed by biopolitical thinkers, such as Giorgio Agamben (1998) and Roberto Esposito (2011).

The latter have expanded and generalised Michel Foucault's (2003) historical analysis of the origins of biopower in the late 18th century. The model of sovereignty that Schmitt defends reflects the traditional characteristics of sovereignty (it has the supreme right to kill life in the name of its protection). However, with the transition from

traditional sovereign power to bio-power (where, according to Foucault, life itself becomes the object of concern for power), the lethality of sovereign power has intensified. The 19th century coupling of sovereign power and biopower through the *dispositif* of racism inaugurated the era of sovereign *thanatopolitics* (=the politics of death), briefly broached by Foucault in *Society Must Be Defended*. In Schmitt's (2003) *The Nomos of the Earth*, negative biopolitics is reflected in the revolutionary character international politics takes after the collapse of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum* and the rise of universalist political ideologies, such as liberalism and socialism, since the 19th century. For Schmitt, the political suddenly assumes an extreme destructiveness as enmity ceases to be the possibility of antagonism in politics that can be tamed, 'pruned' (*Hegung*),[2] as in the golden days of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, and is, rather, enacted directly in politics in the form of liberal wars (that reduce war to police action). As the classic European idea of limited war as a legal 'duel' between legal equals collapses, the possibility of total war is introduced as a zero-sum existential confrontation that threatens to annihilate the political. Paradoxically, this is brought about through a hyperpoliticization that criminalises the enemy and renders the old European concept of the *justus hostis* (=legitimate enemy) useless. It is no accident that Schmitt writes *The Nomos of the Earth* on the eve of the Cold War when this idea of zero-sum conflict assumed global proportions threatening the planet with thermonuclear annihilation.

And yet, this is a favourable reading of the Schmittian sovereign, a reading which, although close to Schmitt's spirit, glosses over the many contradictions in his conception of the political. A more critical approach would focus on Schmitt's aim to establish the sovereign as a figure that derives transcendental legitimacy from the sanctification of power. Such a politico-theological argument has its origins not in the modern 'politicisation of theology,' as Schmitt thought, but in the 'theologisation of politics' (Assmann, 2000). Indeed, Schmitt's rendition of political theology is mediated by a tradition of jurisprudence that harks back to efforts by the German Holy Roman Emperors and the legal scholars at the court of the Norman and Tudor kings of England to place princely rule on the same par as papal authority, to appropriate the sacral allure of ecclesiastical power. This process of sanctification of power, superbly documented in Ernst Kantorowicz's (2016) *The King's Two Bodies*, is largely responsible for the mystical aura surrounding sovereign rule in the medieval and post-medieval modern West. Schmitt (1996) is direct heir to these genealogies essentially claiming that, after the collapse of the Papal/Catholic *complexio oppositorum* (as the possibility of the Catholic Church and the Pope embodying/representing a 'union of opposites', a balance of secular and heavenly order) and of united Christendom, the Pope's absolute authority (*plenitudo potestatis*) was usurped by the modern sovereign state (see also Elshtain, 2008).

The reaction to this treatment of the power of life as effectively hostage to the biopolitical appetites of sovereignty is led primarily by Giorgio Agamben and a series of thinkers of affirmative biopolitics (Esposito, 2008; Prozorov, 2019; Vatter, 2014; Negri, 1999; Virno, 2022; Lemm, 2020). Sovereignty is attacked as a biopolitical instrumentality that reduces human life to 'bare life' (*blosses Leben*), a mere biological substratum, a denuded life exposed to death with impunity (*homo sacer*), reminiscent of the wretched, disfigured natural bodies of Shakespearean rulers after their dethronement, as Benjamin (2009) describes them in his work on the origin of the German *Trauerspiel*. The inverted reflection of these sacrificial victims is the displaced, persecuted, surveilled, abused or drowned bodies of refugees bearing the marks of their biopolitical denudement by the apparatuses of neoliberal governmentality.

Yet, the objection that can be raised here against those devotees of affirmative biopolitics who are quick to distance themselves from the political theology of sovereign transcendence, usually through a Spinozist pantheism or an immanent messianic vitalism, is that they seem to posit some reservoir of pure life in opposition to its juridical-political organisation. The antagonism between life and sovereign power is then fixed as an ontological given and, in the process, life is perceived as an unscathed, unalloyed vital resource while sovereignty is reduced to a transcendental apparatus that perceptually separates life from its 'spiritual' organisation. While the exaltation of life as pure animality is possibly, and perhaps rightly so, the result of suspicion against its 'spiritual' superimpositions, the biopolitical surplus of life arguably can be reduced neither to a pristine animality suppressed by the signature of sovereignty nor to an abstract vitalism of pure life. The latter converts the non-essentiality of human life (the fact that it is in a constant state of becoming as a result of its own activity) into something essential through its articulation as an ahistorical attribute.

To be fair, the Italian school of biopolitics (Chiesa and Toscano, 2009) favours Averroes' conception of a life that is

active intellect (based on Aristotle's *nous poiētikos*). Life as intellect makes no separation between life and spirit and aims to reconstruct the idea of the commons on the basis of the multitude constituting a world, or general, intellect. Such an approach cannot be readily reduced to pure naturalism or ontological vitalism (Vatter, 2017). In Negri (2008) and Virno (2022), for example, the biopolitical surplus of living labour is 'spiritualized' (i.e., returned to the commons) through cooperative networks of production that resist dead capital, what Negri (1999) in *Insurgencies* calls the constituent power of living labour. In Agamben (2016), it becomes the syntagma 'form-of-life' where life is not separated from its form but renders the anthropological machine of sovereign power inoperative, restoring man's pure impotentiality (a coming community of sabbatical animals that Agamben identifies with a taskless post-historical existence). In contrast to Negri, Agamben perceives this process not as the manifestation of the constituent power of the multitude but as the affirmation of human beings' *destituent potential* (the reappropriation of man's constitutive *worklessness*). In Esposito (2013), the same idea is expressed through the concept of the 'impersonal' or 'flesh' which is another name for the return to *communitas* as life in a community, not of persons-subjectivities, but of singularities. What these approaches share in common is a vision of a life that is always already political prior to its reduction to a biological substratum by sovereign power. A life that carries within it a creative potential, a normative power to construct new forms. Life and politics are here constitutively linked not as expressions of the exceptional as in Schmitt's decisionism, but rather as an immanent *potenza* of life that is inherently political/normative and does not simply restrain or manage the evil of this world.

Theocratic biopolitics

Be that as it may, these approaches still exclusively associate the sacred with the legitimation of power (a *dispositif* of negative biopolitics), rather than with the possibility of justice as, for instance, is the case in the messianic tradition that inspires Walter Benjamin (2007a). This objection strikes at the heart of the relation between life and politics if life is viewed as always already political/historical. Namely, not as a transcendent exception or a vitalist potential, nor as an invulnerable post-historical or 'thinking' community, but as the biopolitical surplus/excess that resists capture by either surpassing or falling short of the mechanisms that are trying to capture it. If the true contrast, then, is never between two pure forms of life and power but between two 'spiritualised' versions of the flesh of life that are already political, then the issue is never the restoration of life's assumed superabundance against the anthropological machine of political theology. Rather, it comes down to the formulation of a political theology of life, a theocratic biopolitics that would re-signify the sacred and affirm the politicality of life in all its deprived dimensions (its vulnerability, mortality, wretchedness) but also its excess, spectrality, and wondrous contingency. The Benjaminian invitation in the first thesis of his *Theses on the Concept of History* to enrich the political with the mystical power of theology assumes here its true meaning (Benjamin, 2007b). Not that which sees in theology only the triumph of a transcendent discourse that sanctifies power and dominates or manipulates life (like the dwarf pulling the strings of the puppet, in Benjamin's famous parable), but that which reads it as the agent of the messianic promise of another life and another justice emerging, paradoxically, in the place of the profane, that is, in the place of an inverted sacrality.

Arguably, this is the true meaning of theocracy in Benjamin's 'Theological-Political Fragment', too. In line with a tradition of Jewish theology that exalts the direct exercise of God's authority, prior to the dispensation of kingship to the Jews, as the preeminent example of anarchic ('no rule') divine sovereignty (see Vatter, 2021), Benjamin (2007c) introduces us to theocratic anarchic rule through the problematique of 'divine violence'. The latter opens up the possibility of a redoubling of the exception (what Benjamin calls the 'real emergency') that radicalises the Schmittian exception in the direction of its suspension. Divine violence opposes the logic of mastery that drives sovereign power in history and applies the 'emergency brakes' to stop the locomotive of progress, the vehicle of the victors of history. As such, Benjamin's critique exposes the ambiguity at the heart of Schmitt's decisionism: the political is envisioned as an exception (movement) that secures a territorial order (fixity), both encapsulated in the Greek word *stasis* which means both upheaval and stability. Equally, Schmittian sovereignty can never escape its ambiguous predicament both as ground that rests on a transcendent foundation (God) and as an abysmal act of grounding/de-grounding with no secure foundations, inherently unstable.

The re-doubling of the exception in Benjamin reveals the significance of an already political life, a life whose salvation coincides with its profanation in which the sacred is not cancelled but restored to its true content, that of the reception

of life in all its politicality/historicity or, more theologically, in all its creatureliness – what Rosenzweig (2005) in*The Star of Redemption* calls *Geschöpflichkeit*. Is this not the true meaning of the anti-teleological and anti-historicist Benjaminian metaphysics of transience which locates happiness (*Glück*) in the unconditional affirmation of fallenness (*Untergang*), the finitude and fleetingness of human experience? No teleology or theodicy have a place here. The theological virtue of hope and the natural history of ephemeral life enter a zone of indistinction whereby the eschatological shines in the mundane. Salvation *is* the affirmation of creaturely life, free from the illusions of the supernatural, of teleology, theodicy, and historicism; inherently fragile, vulnerable, dependent, and exploitable, but also recalcitrant, resistant, and inexhaustibly creative (see Paipais, 2022).

In Lieu of Conclusion

The driving idea behind a theocratic biopolitics is the search for a paradigm of an always already political life, a political *ethos* (= way of inhabiting the world) that would resist the sacralisation of power, effected by the contemporary biopolitical apparatuses of sovereign power and (neo)liberal governmentality, and affirm the politicality of life amidst various forms of exploitation, oppression, mockery, and farcical politics that depoliticise and oppress it. Such a life, theocratic as opposed to theo-political, can be found embodied in contemporary forms of everyday resistance to both neoliberal and populist biopolitics. It manifests itself in mundane acts of performing one's duty at the crucible where the hollowness of the apparatuses of negative biopolitical governmentality is exposed at their zero point as running on empty and the example of another life is made visible, a life lived as an embodied critique of those exploitative/mocking processes.

In his pandemic book, Agamben (2021) found it impossible to appreciate the affirmative biopolitical potential of such lives. Often against the implications of his own analysis of bare life, he called pandemic workers out as effectively 'Quislings' to a system of unfreedom. And yet, the contemporary 'suffering servants', or messianic subjects, are indeed the masked nurses, doctors, caretakers, online-teachers, the overworked and unprotected 'essential workers', who were at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic, and were either exploited, vilified, or mocked *both* by the pandemic deniers, anti-vaccine populists, and peddlers of various conspiracy theories for serving the 'system' *and* by neoliberal governmentality that exploited their labour in dire conditions – understaffed hospitals, casual contracts, underfunded social welfare systems, inhuman working hours etc. Creaturely life as political life arises in those moments and practices of everyday affirmatively passive resistance (paradoxically, in simply 'doing one's job'), rather than solely located in marginal, disenfranchised communities, insurrectionist collectives, or exceptional parrhesiastic individuals.

Notes

[1] *Creaturely life* is meant as a general descriptor for the human condition as being in a constant state of disjunction with itself, envisaged as the ecstatic quality of the Heideggerian *Dasein*, the strange familiarity of the Freudian uncanny or the Lacanian dislocation of the subject in its fundamental otherness to itself. With Santner (2006: xix), the creaturely is human life always historically located, 'a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field.'

[2] Although in Schmitt this taming or 'pruning' of war in Europe overlaps with the ostracism and displacement of disorder and predatory violence onto the extra-European world.

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