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"Friends, Enemies, and Others: Political Theology and the Art of the Encounter"

To adopt a phrase from the liturgy of monarchical succession: Political theology is dead, long live political theology. In what follows, the argument I hope to sketch out concerns the link between sovereignty and politics. For Carl Schmitt, who first coined the phrase "political theology," this link is fundamental. Schmitt defines sovereignty as the ascription of a singular point that has the power to decide over the exception, and politics in terms of the dyadic distinction between friend and enemy that such an ascription frames and enables. I argue, by contrast, that this link is broken (if it ever functioned), that there is no such singular point (if there ever was), and that the friend/enemy distinction is, and always has been, a misleading distortion.

Along the way, I will not even pretend to be a medievalist, for which I hope you will forgive me. The case study that I will be analyzing, through which I will be reading Schmitt's concepts, is about as contemporary as one could imagine: it is the ongoing legislative uncertainty around Britain's projected withdrawal from the European Union, an event that should have happened yesterday but which may now take place on April 12 or May 22, or sometime, or never. Brexit is an unusually odd and complex affair; it is, in every sense, exceptional. But it is an exception that does not ground traditional conceptions of sovereignty (as Schmitt would have it); it radically undermines them. And I argue that Brexit is symptomatic, that it tells us something about the limits of political theology today (and perhaps always), and not only in the UK.

One response to this dilemma might be to jettison political theology. In the end, however, I suggest (all too briefly and cryptically) that political theology can still be redeemed, perhaps via a return if not to the Middle Ages (though Geoff Koziol's discussion of ninth- to eleventh-century insurrections suggests that the Carolingian era might provide fertile ground) then at least to the Early Modern, and to a counter-tradition that has run parallel to the contractualist orthodoxy that is now utterly exhausted.

The promise as well as the pitfalls of the concept of political theology are clear enough from a glance at current parliamentary discussions around Brexit in the United Kingdom. At issue is the question of sovereignty, which opponents of Britain's membership in the European Union claim has been incrementally surrendered to Brussels. The Brexiteers' principle has always been the need to "take back control" from transnational institutions such as the European Council and the Court of Justice of the European Union. If, as Carl Schmitt famously defined it, sovereignty is a matter of the power to decide, specifically the power to decide "on the exception" (*Political Theology* 5), then the point is to reclaim that power for the British state. In the first, exemplary, instance, Britain would both establish and exercise its sovereignty by leaving the EU, by (permanently) suspending its obligations under the Treaty of Rome and its successors, that is by excepting itself from the Union. This is the most literal of exceptions, as is evident from the fact that the Latin root of the term is _excipere_: to take out or withdraw. Sovereignty here is then both established and exercised in that it is at the same time the end of the process, its purpose or goal, and also its means, indeed the basis on which it can happen in the first place. The paradox of Brexit is that in so far as the UK manages to leave the EU, it demonstrates that it already has the sovereignty that it purportedly seeks to gain by leaving. By implication, it is as though the site of sovereignty were elusive, perhaps even radically undecidable: does Britain have it or not? For sovereignty itself has first to be decided upon.

Here things get murkier still. For the issue becomes who gets to decide on the decision. Let us put to one side the thorny matter of the negotiations between Britain and the EU, beyond noting that the starting point for those negotiations was a clause within what is effectively the Union's political constitution, the Treaty on European Union, whose Article 50 states that "Any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements." Let us look instead at those "constitutional requirements" of the United Kingdom, which famously has no single codified written constitution, but which relies instead on a patchwork of statutes, jurisprudence, and precedent. Brexit has put that patchwork under the spotlight, beginning with then Prime Minister David Cameron's promise, in the run-up to the General Election of 2015, to call an "in or out" referendum on the question as to whether the UK should leave or remain. Though the results of that referendum were not legally binding, in effect they have been treated as such by almost all the major parties--including for instance the Scottish Nationalists, who of course take a rather different position on

sovereignty than do Labour or the Conservatives, but whose opposition to Brexit is bolstered by the fact that the proposition was defeated by voters north of the border. In short, as politicians who may have voted to remain (most notably the Prime Minister, Theresa May) repeatedly promise to abide by the referendum result, won by Vote Leave, they effectively cede sovereignty to the people. Moreover, Remainers who argue for a second referendum, or "People's Vote," which they hope will reverse that previous decision, likewise concede the same point: that it is the people who should decide.

Yet this notion of popular sovereignty is in itself exceptional, one might even say foreign to the United Kingdom. There have been only three such national referenda in British history: two on Europe (in 1975, two years after the UK had joined what was then the European Economic Community or "Common Market," and the most recent one, in 2016); and another on proportional representation (in 2011). As a matter of law, sovereignty in the UK is vested not in the people, but in parliament. Indeed, after the referendum perhaps the key event that prepared the way for the country's current quandary was the legal case, brought by Guyanese-born businesswoman Gina Miller, against the British government over the question of whether the government had the authority to initiate withdrawal from the EU without an Act of Parliament, in other words without a decision in Parliament. The matter was determined in Miller's favour by successive courts, including the Supreme Court which ruled that "the change in the law must be made in the only way in which the UK constitution permits, namely through Parliamentary legislation." The stage was thus set for what we see now: a protracted tussle between the British executive (the government) and its legislature (specifically the House of Commons) that has led to what many agree is a constitutional crisis as the government has suffered repeated defeats on the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated with the EU, including the heaviest defeat ever recorded by a government in British legislative history, and as MPs have usurped the government's traditional prerogative to determine the order of business in the Commons. The situation is thus exceptional in both the everyday meaning of the term as well as the constitutional sense employed by Schmitt: nobody seems to have the slightest clue what will happen next, or how it will all end up.

Amid the ongoing confusion in Westminster, another element of Schmitt's notion of political theology has thus come to the fore. Transposing theological terms to the political arena, Schmitt argues that "the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology" (*Political Theology* 36). At this stage, it would be something of a

miracle if Parliament were able to come to any decision. To put this another way: sovereignty is radically in question in that nobody seems to have the power to decide: not the House of Commons, not the Prime Minister, not the Cabinet, nor even the British people. All this presents a new problem, apparently unknown to Schmitt: what happens when the sovereign proves unable to decide? A dithering sovereign, caught between bad choices and ambivalent desires, is no sovereign at all. (See *Hamlet*.)

And yet politics continues. Again, this is true in both the everyday and the specific sense of the term. On the one hand, parliamentarians are lambasted for "playing politics," for putting personal ambition or party concerns in the place of the national interest. After all, the entire Brexit mess is an outgrowth of Conservative leaders (Cameron and May) and their ham-fisted attempts to manage divisions within their own party. But more broadly, politics is also threatening to become a generalized social logic, as the division between civil and political society blurs and civil society tends to wither away. Indeed, for all the indecision, for all the panoply of options that are on the table in Parliament and have been uniformly rejected by the putative sovereign--deal or no deal; hard Brexit or soft; referendum or revocation; customs union, "Norway Plus," "Canada Style," Northern Irish backstop, and so on--British political discourse at large increasingly comes to resemble Schmitt's famous definition of the political as a matter of the distinction "between friend and enemy" (*The Concept of the Political* 26).

In fact, as everything else grinds to a standstill, with all eyes focused on what will or will not take place on April 12 (or maybe May 22), it is as though the entire population were positioned in one of only two political camps: Remain or Leave. Around each has accreted an entire mythology of sociological attributes, contradictory and confused as such identifications often are. Remainers, for instance, are depicted as the latte-sipping and avocado-eating metropolitan elite, arrogant in their cosmopolitanism, out of touch with the rest of the country. Leavers, by contrast, are portrayed as the resentful vestiges of the provincial white working class, easily manipulated by false claims and base instincts. As the country polarizes, institutions that are supposed to stand above the fray, such as the BBC, otherwise long praised for its supposed balance and objectivity, are demonized for falling prey to one side or the other. Everything, in short, from food to the media, has become politicized. The friend/enemy distinction turns former friends (and family members) into enemies, and makes for strange friendships among erstwhile rivals.

In short, we see a rupture that seems to give the lie to Schmitt's fundamental declaration that "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political" (*The Concept of the Political* 19). On the contrary, the relationship between the two comes to be almost inverse: a political logic distinguishing friend and enemy becomes dominant even as the place of the state and its sovereignty is ever more diffuse and tenuous.

Not that the UK is alone in this, though the case of Brexit is particularly complex and perverse. More generally, is not the rise in (particularly, right-wing) populism across the globe, from Hungary to the United States, Brazil to the Philippines, the response not simply to economic crisis (as many have argued), but also to a sense that the state is absent and sovereignty elusive. For populism is the archetypal form that politics takes as it deepens and extends the division between friend and enemy, reducing all possible complexity into a basic antagonism between the people and its others, whether those others be migrants, elites, racial minorities, or whatever. And though populist rhetoric always positions itself against the state and its bureaucracy ("Drain the swamp!" as Trump's campaign promise had it), in practice this is in the name of aggrandizing the state, albeit now on behalf of a people that will have seized back sovereignty and control, via a charismatic leader, from its many enemies. Trump, for instance, is to reassert a sovereign power allegedly dissipated in the Obama years so as to "Make America Great Again," reclaim control of its borders ("Build the Wall!"), and make deals with foreign powers that assert and ensure US economic supremacy. Yet surely all this is reaction to and compensation for the unacknowledgeable fact that economic, social, and cultural mobilities (globalization, multiculturalism, the Internet, and so on) have irrevocably undermined what Schmitt terms the "ascription" of sovereignty to a single "terminal point," an "order that cannot be further derived" (*Political Theology* 19). In the face of what is in fact endless deferral--*différance*, as deconstruction would have it--populist leaders are simply all the more determined, Canute-like, to plant their thrones on shifting sands, covered and uncovered by the tide.

The God of traditional political theology is dead, and it is time to admit it. Sovereignty is dispersed beyond all recapture, even if (as I doubt) it could ever once have been located at a singular point of decision.

This is not to say, however, that God himself is dead. It may be far worse than that. The fact that sovereignty is dispersed does not mean that it has disappeared. On the contrary, it is everywhere we look. The fact that there is no single site of decision does

not mean that there are no more decisions, merely that decisions that affect life and death are made ever more contingently, even capriciously. Indeed, given the fact (argued convincingly by Agamben among others) that we now inhabit a state of exception that has become permanent, sovereign decisions are made everywhere, every day, at all the multiple points where we encounter instances of sovereign power: border crossings, security checkpoints, traffic stops, schools, government offices, call centres, not to mention at almost any moment that we connect and divulge our information online.

At the same time, the fact that the populist reassertion of the friend/enemy distinction is futile in the sense that it is a misreading or misunderstanding of politics, helplessly seeking to take back control when there is nowhere from which such control cold be taken back, is not to say that it is harmless or innocent. Far from it. The political logic of friend vs enemy, and the conception of politics as hegemony upon which it implicitly rests, is as damaging and harmful as it is ultimately ineffective. Precisely by helping to construct the image (if not the reality) of sovereignty in terms of a transcendent state presiding over a bounded territory, such a politics informs practices of more or less violent exclusion on the one hand, and demobilization and disempowerment even for those elements that it includes within the category of the friend or the national-popular. To put this another way: though there may be a populism of the left as well as a populism of the right (as Ernesto Laclau among others maintained), there is always only a populism of constituted power, which serves to repress and efface the constituent power of the multitude. Even in its opposition to the state, populism is always state fetishism, perpetuating the myth of its quasi-divine authority. As such, it is also always invested in the expansion of sovereignty, and in the politicization of what Jürgen Habermas would term the "lifeworld," tending towards a biopoliticization of the entire social order.

There are two possible responses to this exhaustion of political theology, this proliferation of the principle of arbitrary decisionism across the full terrain of life and death in a state of exception without limit. The first is a retreat from, even resistance to, the political. This would be to take at face value Schmitt's assertion that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (*Political Theology* 36), but only so as to reject those concepts. This would be the response of what Alberto Moreiras terms "infrapolitics": an insistence on the ontico-ontological difference, on the difference between Being itself and its political categorizations.

A second response, however, would be to imagine a new political theology, a political theology opposed to the monotheism of power. In short, a pantheistic or atheistic political theology. Pantheism would begin perhaps from the acknowledgement that the state is now everywhere, that there is no single point of ascription for sovereignty, that the tendency (and effectivity) of power is towards immanence, beyond or beneath representation. And atheism, paradoxically enough, would begin from the same premises: that if the state everywhere, it is therefore also nowhere; that constituted power is but a cruel fiction, albeit (quite literally) a powerful one. This second option would not refuse or reject politics, but would be better prepared to map political virtue and political fortune, rather than simply contributing to the distorted image of the political perpetuated by the fetishization of the state and the false transcendence of sovereignty. It would, in short, outline a politics adequate not only to the biopolitical state but also to a perpetually insurgent multitude. And if its risk is a potential confusion between pantheism and atheism, between an immanent Empire and the multitude, or even between multitudes good and bad, it might give us the tools to track that risk, which I propose involve the art of the encounter, supplementing politics with ethics.

All this is a tall order, sketched far too briefly and opaquely here. But there are surely resources for such a re-imagined, dissident political theology. And this is where you come in. If for Schmitt, orthodox political theology is the legacy of the Enlightenment, of a secular "theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world" (*Political Theology* 36), might not one imagine a heterodox political theology that would be the inheritor of what Jonathan Israel terms the "Radical Enlightenment," the materialist line of thinking that he associates with Spinoza above all (that great atheist theologian), but which for Antonio Negri is incarnated in the sequence Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx that runs alongside and beneath the contractualist series of Hobbes-Rousseau-Hegel. More recently, we might pick up on a thinker such as the later, and explicitly Spinozist, Althusser, as well as Negri, Agamben, and others. But perhaps the Middle Ages, before the establishment and consecration of orthodox political theology, the Middle Ages when heresies of all stripes still thrived, could also provide a key to this re-envisioning of the relationship between sovereignty and politics, between subjectivity and power, to recover a sense of the miraculous in our disenchanted world.