

# New Europe College *Ștefan Odobleja* Program Yearbook 2012-2013



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Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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ISSN 1584-0298

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# THE THEOLOGICAL TURN OF CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THEORY

## **Closing the circle of political theology**

In his famous commemorative piece on Carl Schmitt, Jacob Taubes pointed out the radical divergence between their own politico-theological projects: "I ask after the political potentials in the theological metaphors, just as Schmitt asks after the theological potential of legal concepts"<sup>1</sup>. Two completely opposed understandings of the same 'political theology' thus stand out: one which proceeds from the political and legal concepts, in order to unearth the theological dimension concealed in them; the other, moving in the opposite direction, from the "theological metaphors" to the political potentials that they contain.

Can one apply these opposite approaches to the same body of texts? Or, even better, can these two divergent trends of political theology be applied, successively, to one another? Our present attempt rests on the assumption that indeed, they can. And even more, that they should. Thus, the closing of the politico-theological circle (from the political, legal and social categories to their theological background, and back again, unearthing the political potential of this initial theological displacement) is not just a question of (logical or methodological) possibility, but one of opportunity and significant contemporary relevance. This is the operation we intend to apply to the theological turn of contemporary critical theory.

Even though still subject of dispute as to their exact meaning and consequences, the so-called 'return of the religious' and 'post-secular condition' are, by now, unquestionable realities for the contemporary social sciences. No school of thought has remained immune to this newly found irreducible statute of the religious phenomenon: from the most rationalist liberals to the most fiery Leninists, theological issues and concepts have started to populate the research agenda. In an unexpected new wave of Schmittianism<sup>2</sup>, every concept and notion that, until recently,

seemed to belong to the post-religious constellation of secular modernity and enlightened reason, has been unmasked as carrying with itself a heavy charge of theological content. Thus, even though these trends of thought started from different presuppositions and followed different paths, they all seem to verify Schmitt's endeavor of 'asking after the theological potential' of our basic legal, political and social categories. Thus, after almost two decades since this theological turn has left its mark on the contemporary critical theory, it is only natural that we draw an inventory and ask: what has been the *political* effect of this theological translation? Where, in terms of political theory and social agenda, has this new political theology taken us? It goes without saying that this line of enquiry is consistent with the guiding intentions of the authors involved: after all, from Rawls and Habermas, through Derrida, Nancy and Vattimo, up to Žižek, Badiou and Agamben, the theorists concerned with the theological substratum of our political categories are political philosophers, not theologians; their concern with political theology is, thus, intended not towards a religious awakening of our moribund democracies, but towards a new articulation and understanding of our political condition. If this is the case, our present attempt, of closing the politico-theological circle and assessing the political effect brought about by the theological turn in contemporary theory, means nothing less than evaluating this project in the light of its own programmatic intentions<sup>3</sup>.

## **Mapping contemporary political theology**

The opening step in this direction would be to chart the terrain standing before us. Thus, in this section I will try to draw a quick panoramic view of the contemporary politico-theological landscape, while in the next section I will attempt to refine the view and systematize the different trends on display, ranging them from the point of view of their underlying dialectics of form and content.

The first trend of thought worth mentioning here is what is known as liberal post-secularism, whose basic outlines have been drawn by Rawls and Habermas.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be stated from the beginning that this approach is not exactly political theology. Its wager is actually fittingly captured by the recurrent heading under which the texts and lectures of this school of thought are usually placed: religion *and* democracy. Thus, this is not exactly the Schmittian perspective on the irreducible and

fundamental theological background of our political and legal dispositive; rather, it is an attempt to keep, as much as possible, democracy and religion neatly separated, or at least to articulate a possible peaceful coexistence between the two. The starting point of this project is the historical evidence provided by our epoch, in which the 'unfinished' or interminable nature of the modern project (enlightened reason plus secularization) is revealed. According to the post-secular liberal's view, the contemporary return of the religious is an undeniable proof that secular reason cannot be all-encompassing, cannot evacuate the religious phenomenon without turning itself into a totalitarian unreason. The irreducible nature of the religious phenomenon implies not only that the secular reason cannot vanquish all religious superstition, but that it is not even desirable: doing so would force the minimalistic liberal reason (conceived in terms of reasonability, proceduralism and form) to become thick with content, a comprehensive doctrine whose oversaturated content would preclude its desired universalism. In brief, an all-encompassing and triumphant secular reason would be as particular ('Eurocentric') and unreasonable as the religious superstitions it tries to fight.

Thus, if liberal democracies cannot get rid of religion without becoming undemocratic, liberal post-seculars conclude with the necessity of articulating certain rules of cohabitation between the public, political reason, and the private religious beliefs: namely, a set of rules of translation by means of which the private, religious claims can participate in the democratic dialogue only once they are translated into public discourse, deprived of their anchorage in various religious contents and couched in reasonable (that is: potentially accessible to all) terms and arguments. Interestingly, among the various contemporary trends of political theology, this is the only one in which one can still find the old Illuminist critique of religion as superstition and unreason – namely, in the works of Rawls' famous disciple Ronald Dworkin. The liberal vein of this critique is visible in its idealist bias: the religious beliefs and ideas are taken at their face value, as theses to be validated and tested (and most probably discarded), without concern for the social and historical determinants of the resurgent religious phenomenon.

The second contemporary politico-theological project is more difficult to delineate. However, with the risk of oversimplifying things, one could range this theoretical project under the banner of 'post-metaphysical theology'. Here, we can include theorists originating in (or influenced by) poststructuralism and postmodernism, from Derrida and Jean-Luc

Nancy, to Vattimo, Caputo, Critchley, and the so-called school of Radical Political Theology. This project starts from a similar thesis as the post-secular liberals: the demise of the triumphant and all-encompassing secular reason, and the historical destruction of both its political project (the 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianisms) and theoretical inspiration (the metaphysical tradition, the ontology of presence). However, in comparison to the post-secular liberals, here the politico-theological move goes in the opposite direction: it is not an attempt to salvage our democratic arrangement by its delimitation from private unreason and idiosyncratic belief, but rather a chance to save democracy via the religious. The reason why this is indeed possible is the fact that, after careful inspection, democracy proves to share the same (or at least a very similar) post-metaphysical structure as the messianic promise: that is, the zero degree of the religious opening, the pure messianic form without any particular and determined content. Just like this irreducible 'messianism without messiah', democracy has the same structure of pure opening, pure promise: it is a 'democracy to come', the open space and pure form of the promise of justice, which is irreducible, even though it is betrayed by any attempt to actualize it or fill it with content.

Hence, while for the post-secular liberals, the solution is to keep, as much as possible, public reason and private religion neatly separated, for the post-metaphysic theorists the solution is exactly the perceived threat: a certain idea of religion, a certain theological dispositive – the messianic apparatus – can remind to our contemporary democracies their initial and forgotten promise of justice. Confronted with the resurgence of the religious phenomenon, our democratic societies should recognize in its threat their own forgotten essence and original promise.

Finally, the third trend of contemporary political theology is represented by what I will call the Leninist messianism, mostly in the works of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. In this case, we are no longer dealing with a defensive reaction to the demise of the universalist project of secular reason. Rather, we are dealing with a counter-reaction to this defeatist reaction of scaling down the universalism of secular reason and accommodating the religious experience. In brief, it is a reaction not only to the end of secularism, but mostly to the new post-secularism: a renewed appeal to universality, against the triumph of the particular and the relative; and a new founding of a revolutionary politics (with its specific dispositive of subjectivity, collectivity and history) against both

the pragmatic reasonableness of political liberalism, and the hopeful resignation of post-metaphysical theology.

Thus, the Leninist messianists cover the third logical possibility in our schema: their project is an attempt to rescue the rational, modern, progressive kernel of Enlightened reason via the very messianic apparatus. Their wager is that there is a modern, revolutionary and universal nucleus in the messianic event, which should be opposed to the obscurantist and reactionary wave of fundamentalism, new age spirituality and cultural relativism.

### **The dialectics of form and content**

The previous section attempted to draw a panoramic view of the various trends in contemporary political theology. While the differences and similarities between these body of texts have been underlined, we are still in need of a more structured and systematized scrutiny of their conceptual positions. This is the task of the present section.

Its guiding idea is that one can arrange these three trends of political theology in a more revealing manner once they are approached from the standpoint of the relationship between form and content: that is, once we focus our attention on the way in which these currents of ideas negotiate and articulate the relationship between politics and theology, democracy and religion, secularization and post-secularization in terms of a certain dialectic between form and content. After all, already the panoramic presentation sketched in the previous section bumped repeatedly into the issue of form and content, only to leave it aside for the moment. Now it is time to approach this issue head on.

The attempt to define the conceptual positions of the three trends of political theology in terms of various combinations of formalism and materialism will lead to their structuring in an incomplete semiotic square. Thus, a fourth element – a further variation of the formalism-materialism mix – can be deduced merely by means of the inner logic of their arrangement. This fourth trend of thought, as we will see below, stands with regards to proper political theology in the same quasi-marginal way as the liberal post-secularism. In this politico-theological dispositive, it is actually the element symmetrically opposed of liberal post-secularism, the opposite margin of political theology.

The wager of this section – and, as a matter of fact, the central hypothesis of this paper – is that one can range the three trends of political theology – liberal post-secular, post-metaphysical theology (or radical political theology), and Leninist messianism – under the categories of formal formalism, material formalism, and formal materialism. Thus, as one can easily deduce from this progression, the missing fourth term could be labeled material materialism – which, as we will see below, covers mostly the position of historical materialism. The two-worded denominations of these various trends (formal formalism, material formalism, and so on) are to be understood as following: the second term describes the political theory of these different currents of ideas – their views on democracy and on what should count as a just society; the first term names their view on the relationship between this ideal political organization and the revenant issue of religion; in other words, it stands for the way in which these different political theologies understand or prescribe the correct rapport between politics and theology, democracy and religion, or, in a word, the very issue of secularization or post-secularization.

The first position in this semiotic square of political theology is what I call the formal formalist one. It names the liberal post-secular approach. The formalist character of its view on democracy and the just society is expressed in its proceduralist bias: in articulating the fundamentals of a democratic and just society, political liberalism takes great care in articulating a basic set of procedural rules and formal constraints, without presuming any positive content. Political liberalism is traversed not by a *horror vacuum*, but, on the contrary, by a horror of fullness, by the threat of the saturated content. The reason for this horror of the positive content is the defining universalism of political liberalism: in order to appear as universal, the ideal liberal arrangement has to stipulate only the minimal set of formal rules, that could be agreed upon by any ‘decent’ person, without regard to his or her particular values, beliefs, etc. Hence, in order to be universal, political liberalism has to be grounded in a set of principles as thin as possible; the ‘original position’ of political liberalism is an Ikea-like landscape of minimalist, basic rules, which can be implemented in any society, regardless of its particular history and cultural values.

Not incidentally, the same formalist bias dominates also the liberal’s understanding of religion. As we already saw in the previous section, even though liberals are led to agree, because of our historical evidence, that the religious phenomenon is here to stay, even in our most enlightened and developed societies, their reaction consists in formulating a set of rules of

translation by means of which democracy and religion can coexist without denaturizing one another. Thus, even though at first sight religion appears as a menace to the liberal, reasonable order, it can still be democratically tamed by being enclosed in the private space. Its heavy, comprehensive baggage of values and positive contents can still be filtered by the liberal rules of translation into public reason. Thus, apparently everybody gains: the democratic societies become even more democratic, by allowing religious-minded people to join in the public debate; on the other hand, since these religious citizens are to translate their religious-based set of particular values into arguments couched in terms of public reason, our open, yet so fragile societies are not running the risk of being overwhelmed by an army of dissonant and aggressive comprehensive views.

Overall, the same horror of positive content dominates both the political theory and the 'political theology' of the liberal post-seculars. This is visible in the way in which liberal theory portrays its main enemies: totalitarianism, for what concerns political theory; fundamentalism, for what concerns political theology. In both cases – totalitarianism and fundamentalism – the danger, the *hubris* is the same overcrowding of the reasonable and universal form with saturated content. As a matter of fact, because of the basic delimitation operated by the liberal theory, between the public political space of reasonable procedures, and the private, enclosed space of particular positive religious values, every possible contender to the hegemony of liberal theory is perceived as a sort of religion in disguise: not incidentally, socialism has been usually discarded by the liberal theorists as a sort of barely secularized religion. Its view on the just political society is just too thick, too demanding, too fanatical.

There are, obviously, several problems with this attempt to reconcile the pure form of liberal democracy and the threatening army of positive comprehensive doctrines, be they political or religious. The first one concerns its very attempt to accommodate religion by relegating it to the domain of the private space. This magnanimous offer made by the liberal theorists will hardly pass for any religious person as an offer one simply can't refuse. After all, religion is – among other things – a certain view on what should count as public and what should count merely as private. And the religious delimitation between the public and the private space hardly coincides with the liberal one. It rather stands in an exactly opposite way: for the religious person, what the liberals relegate to the private space can pass as the eminently public concern (such as the issue of abortion); while what for a social liberal can pass as the utmost public

issue (a certain relative egalitarianism and social justice) is, for the religious person, an issue pertaining to the private domain of our families, clans, tribes, or at least inner soul. Thus being the case, the attempt to apply the liberal rules of translation religious values into public reason can only lead to deadlocks. An illuminating picture of the ridiculous results of this process of translation when applied to various religious pop-stars from the old Yugoslavia has been brilliantly depicted by Boris Buden.<sup>5</sup>

Even more, the basic problem with the formal formalism of the liberal postseculars is the same, old, structural problem of political liberalism: it is the fact that, once a pure formalism is proclaimed as the political optimum, this form inevitably ends up by generating its own, exclusive content. Thus, what initially appeared as the most open-ended political arrangement, since it presumes only the most minimal and reasonable formal arrangements, starts being perceived as a genuine *pensée unique*, precluding any possible political alternative. This obviously has to do with the original history of liberalism: not only the fact that liberalism has originally been an economic theory, later expanded into a political one, for the purpose of legitimating the nascent capitalism; even more, it is the fact that the basic operation of this economic-political theory of liberalism is to separate the economic sphere (that is, all issues concerning the rather irrelevant material reproduction of society) from the proper political sphere. Not incidentally, any attempt to question this line of demarcation between politics and economy (a line which, again, repeats the same opposition between public form and private content) is perceived as a threat perfectly similar to the one represented by the fundamentalist stance. In brief: liberalism is nothing but the most plastic and accommodating political theory of the minimal formalism; however, since all of liberal's contenders start by questioning its fundamental divide between politics and society, public form and private content, they are all to be discarded as unreasonable, quasi-fundamentalist and proto-totalitarian threats. Thus, liberalism, as the open space of the plural and dynamic play of political alternatives, is, in the end, the only reasonable alternative: the empty form fills and saturates all political content.

Now let us pass to the other two trends of contemporary political theology. Since, in the next sections of this paper, I will dwell exclusively on the characteristics of the post-metaphysical theorists and the Leninist messianists, for now I will offer a shorter presentation of these two trends, just enough to stabilize them under the respective banners of material formalism and formal materialism.

The political theory of the post-metaphysical theorists and of the so-called radical-political theology (which is the politico-theological projection of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of 'radical democracy') is, for what concerns its aims, perfectly consistent with the liberal one: democracy as the open, empty space in which the pluralistic political dynamic of the society can take place. However, the means for enforcing this aim are perfectly opposed to the ones prescribed by the liberal post-seculars: while for the latter democracy has to be shielded from religion, for the post-metaphysical theologians the pure formalism of democracy can, and should, be re-enchanted by a strong dose of messianic essence. (Certainly, this alternative has also visited repeatedly certain liberals: hence, the idea of a necessary enchantment of the rather dull, formalistic and proceduralist liberal arrangement, an idea which resurfaces from time to time under the banner of Habermas' 'patriotic constitutionalism' or of the various avatars of Rousseau's idea of 'civil religion'. However, in the liberal's case, these openings towards religion – or a sort of religion of democracy – are always done reluctantly). Overall, hence, the post-metaphysical political theology presents us with the image of a more enthusiastic liberalism: the political theory of liberalism becomes here a genuine political theology. The cold, rational proceduralism of the liberals is turning here into a theology of the pure form, pure openness, pure difference. The form generates, or rather becomes, its own enchanted content. The liberal formal formalism becomes a passionate material formalism. The political stance of the post-metaphysical theorists can thus be described best by Loren Goldner's apt phrase 'middle class radicalism'<sup>6</sup>: the good old liberal principles of openness, difference, pluralism, are elevated into a militant arsenal of passionate values, by means of which modern democracies are to be brought back to their original, messianic promise. The theoretical outlook of this position bears the marks of its historical birth, that is, its origin in the milieu of the 60's and 70's 'new Left' in the West and the anticommunist dissidents in the East. Hence, its insistence on the necessary effort of reforming our political arrangements via the rather apolitical and quasi-religious notions of morality, integrity, intransigence, courage, imagination, creativity, loyalty etc. While this current of ideas generated a certain momentum in its initial phases, when it seemed able to articulate a plausible alternative to both the Stalinisms of the East and the routinized and dull democracies of the West, historically its effect was to re-enchant the image of the Western democracies and thus contribute ideologically to their victory in the Cold War. Whether

willingly or not, knowingly or not, the post-metaphysical discourse (with all its offsprings – post-structuralism, postmodernism, radical democracy) has stabilized itself into a moralist critique of the existing status quo and, thus, into a rather convenient sentimental supplement to global capitalism.

Things stand a bit differently with our third alternative, the Leninist messianists, namely Žižek and Badiou<sup>7</sup>. The focus in their political theology is not on the articulation of the basic principles of a just society, but rather on the way in which we can reach such a just society. In brief, their political theology is a theory of revolution. While the liberal post-secular and the post-metaphysical political theology are theories of the political ‘substance’, the Leninist messianism is rather a theory of political strategy. The messianic apparatus is recovered here precisely as the ready-made conceptual dispositive of revolution. However, this is exactly where the problems start: in Žižek and Badiou’s return to St. Paul, what we get is a Marxist (or rather Leninist, considering its voluntarist and subjectivist stance) theory of revolution, which is presented and proclaimed as a mere form: the pure ritual of the messianic event. Hence, theirs is a paradoxical undetermined materialism; or, to put it into more familiar terms, a sort of combination of Schmittian decisionism and romantic occasionalism<sup>8</sup>. The basic move here goes in the exact opposite direction as to the post-metaphysical theologians: while in the case of the latter we witnessed a sort of ontologization of the form (hence, the title of material formalism), with Žižek and Badiou we get a formalization of the ontological: hence, what I called its formal materialism. A ritualized Leninism, in which the concrete historical determination of the political action is abstracted and pre-ordained in the ready made procedural structure of the messianic event. Certainly, in spite of its abstraction and unhistorical nature, it is not difficult to trace the historical origin and determinants of this trend of thought: it is the disappearance of the so called ‘historical transcendence’, already famously decried by Marcuse<sup>9</sup>, which makes it so that the concrete signals to a possible higher stage of our political societies have all been evacuated from history. Our contemporary history is no longer, as it used to be for classical Marxists, ‘on our side’, pointing the way forward, opening chances for its supersession from prehistory into proper history. But this is not that bad as it seems, would argue Žižek and Badiou. Not so bad, because even if concrete history has abandoned us, we already have the messianic dispositive – and, even more, the messianic event – already structured, ready made and just waiting to be applied. Thus, thanks to the already available messianic apparatus, the barren landscape of

contemporary history, which offers no hope, no immanent transcendence, no concrete opportunity, is transfigured into a space full of promise: if it is true that history offers us no concrete occasion for its overcoming into a just order, it is also true that, thanks to the messianic apparatus we rediscover in St. Paul, every moment can become such an occasion. It all depends on the subjective commitment and loyalty to this originary promise. Hence, decisionism; hence, occasionalism; hence, formal materialism.

In the next sections of this paper, I will come back and dwell a little longer on the characteristics of the post-metaphysical radical thought and of the Leninist messianists, in an effort to trace back these aspects in the texts of their leading authors. For now, let us close our semiotic square and deduce its fourth possible term: material materialism, or what is more commonly known as historical materialism. Just like the liberal post-secular approach, historical materialism stands rather on the margin of political theology: if there is some messianic hope that we can hang on to, it doesn't come from the passionate re-consideration of our founding democratic values, nor is it already available in an abstract, free floating and easily detachable messianic apparatus, but it should be deduced from the concrete historical evolution. Certainly, this trend covers only some aspects of the Marxian tradition, namely the focus on the critique of political economy and, in general, its unparalleled insistence on the importance of the concrete historical determinants. In contrast to the usual critique of Marxism as teleology, as preordained history, this trend of Marxism is actually characterized by its insistence on the unique particularity and dynamics of each social constellation. Surely, this is a very unstable position: it can easily slip either into a sort of 'abstract empiricism'<sup>10</sup>, or, in the opposite direction, it can surpass the historical evidence and sum it up into a pre-existing law of movement – thus falling into the trap of teleology. In this latter case, historical materialism runs the risk of making the exact opposite error of liberalism. Just like the formal formalism of liberalism generated its own, saturated content, historical materialism, in spite of its insistence on the concrete, material conditions, can turn this rich content into its own ruling and determining form.

### **The passion of the form**

The previous section attempted to articulate the differences between the various contemporary trends of political theology in terms of a dialectic

of form and content, or formalism and materialism. In what follows, I will deal, in turn, with the second and third trend – the post-metaphysical radical theology and the Leninist messianists –, taking into account some of the relevant ideas and arguments of their most important theorists. This is meant to highlight both the divergences but also the concealed similarities between these two versions of political theology.

For quite evident reasons, we will start our voyage through the land of post-metaphysical political theology with Jacques Derrida's arguments from his famous *Specters of Marx*. Derrida's understanding of the 'messianic' provides the first clear articulation of the 'passion of the form' that defines this body of thought.

What is, then, the messianic for Derrida? It is, at the same time, the pure form of the open promise and what remains after all deconstruction: the pure, undeconstructible form, that remains in spite of all the deconstruction of the metaphysical content of religion and/or ontology. It is, in Derrida's words, "the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the arrivant as justice. We believe that this messianic remains an ineffaceable mark – a mark one neither can nor should efface – of Marx's legacy"<sup>11</sup>. The reference to Marx should not confuse us: the same operation consisting in the evacuation of content and reduction to pure form is also applied here to Marx. Once we strip Marxism of all the errors and exaggerations, all the metaphysical baggage and all the concrete content, Marx's legacy, according to Derrida, is nothing more than the pure messianic form of the promise of justice. Thus, Derrida's charitable return to Marx reduces the latter's arguments to nothing but its thrust for social justice, which is the pure form underlying all his texts. Everything else – that is, everything that is specific to Marx and Marxism, namely the concrete dynamics and determination of our social injustice, and the concrete, material traces of its overcoming – are to be rejected as a metaphysically contaminated content. This return and rediscovery of Marx is like saying that we should save from Kant only some vague hope of understanding the mechanics of reason, or from Hegel some vague, yet constant interest in the unfolding of history.

Nevertheless, for Derrida, what remains alive and benefic in Marxism is only this "spirit of Marxism", which is precisely "the opening of Marxism", which is exactly what the messianic is. If this is how things stand, it goes without saying that any concrete element from Marx's thought, any determined Marxist content, would lead to the contamination of the spirit of Marxism with its heavy letter, would enclose its opening and obviously

temper with its pure messianism. Just like Hegel, Marx is right and justified as soon as he opens his mouth; but he is terribly wrong, metaphysical and potentially dangerous, as soon as he effectively says something.

Hence, in Derrida's reading, Marx is almost a random victim of the extremely stretched out argument of the imperative reduction of all content to pure form. In his place, it could have been almost anybody, almost any thinker expressing, at some point, some vague hope in social justice, human emancipation and historical progress. No point then in paying mind to the 'Marxist' inheritance that Derrida claims for himself. If he is a Marxist, almost everybody is.

Now that we cleared the way of this paper dragon, let us get back to Derrida's understanding of the messianic, approaching head on the issue of form and content:

We will not claim that this messianic eschatology common both to the religions it criticizes and to the Marxist critique must be simply deconstructed. While it is common to both of them, with the exception of the content..., it is also the case that its formal structure of promise exceeds them or precedes them. Well, what remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructible as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice-which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights – and an idea of democracy which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today.<sup>12</sup>

Almost all of Derrida's theory and dispositive of the messianic is set in place here: the 'messianic eschatology', the pure promise of justice, is common to both religion and Marxism. That is, it is common to their originary form, while it is obviously foreign to their concrete content. And this form, which after all exceeds and precedes all these concrete messianisms (be it Marxist or religious), is precisely the condition of possibility of deconstruction: its undeconstructible, yet negative, without positive content, fundament. In brief, what is worth saving in Marxism or religion is nothing else than Derridian deconstruction; what is worth discarding is everything else: that is, while Marxists and religious messianists started, just like Derrida, from the correct insight into the undeconstructible form of justice, they took the wrong way, attempting to construct and articulate some positive content on top of this negative

basis; Derrida, on the other hand, in insisting on the deconstruction of all content that would soil this pure fundament, took the right way. The right way being here no way at all.<sup>13</sup>

But there is something more here, namely a bizarre mix of vague Marxism and a certain liberal reasonability. And this is visible in Derrida's ruminations on the 'idea of democracy to come':

The idea of democracy to come... is the opening of this gap between an infinite promise (always untenable...) and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise... Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer.<sup>14</sup>

Democracy is thus split, for Derrida, between the ideal idea of 'democracy to come', the infinite promise of justice, and the demoralizing awareness that this will not do, that any concrete attempt to fill in this promise will betray its infinite promise. This would be a rather awkward combination of utmost idealism and realist pragmatism, if it wouldn't be, after all, so convenient. As Žižek once pointed out, here we get the underlying perversion of the 68-ers stance of 'soyons réalistes, exigeons l'impossible': since we know that our unlimited, infinite demands for justice are unfulfillable, impossible to meet, it is quite realist from our part to demand them; our impossible demands allow us to occupy the high moral ground of radicalism, while we are perfectly aware that the status quo is here to stay. Here, the classical, radical political position is enhanced with an ingredient it usually lacked: awareness, reasonability. This is the portrait of the revolutionary artist at middle age: still radical, still hoping for the impossible justice to come; yet not expecting anything, aware of our limitations and so on. This is Marxism radicalism with liberal reasonability. Or, as we already put it, liberal formalism plus radical enthusiasm.

The sober drunkenness of Derrida's 'democracy to come' is thus the perfect supplement for our rigid and routinized democracies: while it ensures that nothing radical, 'impossible' can alter our liberal-democratic arrangements, it makes place for a pure hope, pure promise, pure form of justice that simply haunts this barren landscape, and whose complete separation from the concrete political realities is precisely what guarantees its purity and idealism. The good old opposition between the ideal and the real, between the utopian thrust and the pragmatic reasonableness, is

resurrected here and put to good use, an even better use than the liberals might ever have thought of:

Apparently formalist, this indifference to the content has perhaps the value of giving one to think the necessarily pure and purely necessary form of the future as such, in its being-necessarily-promised... Whether the promise promises this or that, whether it be fulfilled or not, or whether it be unfulfillable, there is necessarily some promise and therefore some historicity as future-to-come. It is what we are nicknaming the messianic without messianism.<sup>15</sup>

While for the liberals, the classic opposition between promise and reality, ideal and pragmatic can always prove to be a cause for despair and frustration, in Derrida the very same unbridgeable opposition becomes a cause for enthusiasm. And this enthusiasm is all the more stronger and passionate, the more it is pure – that is, without concrete fundament and possibility of fulfillment. In a typical move for all the post-metaphysical thought (and its historical correspondent – the New Left movements and their Eastern correspondents, the anticommunist dissidents), Derrida's political contribution is nothing less than having managed to square the circle of our liberal democracies: how to reconcile our dull, routinized, and utterly unjust liberal democracies with their initial message of hope and justice? Quite simply: just keep them separated. At most, let them 'haunt' each other: thus, circling around one another without any risk of contact, they can regenerate themselves endlessly. In Derrida's recipe of political justice and 'democracy to come' – that is, hoping, waiting for justice, without expecting any – liberal democracy puts on its revolutionary, enthusiastic, radical and passionate cloths. Only its passion, promise, and justice have actually nothing to do with itself, or, for that matter, with this world.

Even if not so articulated in all its political consequences, we find a very similar view of the relation between democracy and religion in Jean-Luc Nancy. Again, a certain fundamental structure or dynamic of religion – in this case, the secularization of Christianity – is revealed as sharing a strong affinity with our present democratic arrangement. Even more, this fundamental affinity has to do with the prevalence of form over content: in both Christianity and democracy, we witness the same emptying of the form of its content, the same *kenosis* or secularization. Hence, one could deduce, in spite of its minor inconveniences, the purely

formal arrangement of liberalism turns out to be the initial promise and structure of the messianic promise. In the death of God, in the reduction of the religious content and presence to the pure form and passage of the immanent community, democracy is resurrected.

Here, again, as in Derrida, deconstruction enjoys an unchallenged pre-eminence over all its possible contenders: it is the only one that can understand religion, at least the Christian one, because Christianity is already, in its initial promise, deconstruction:

Obviously, then, we must say that deconstruction... is itself Christian. It is Christian because Christianity is, originally, deconstructive, because it relates immediately to its own origin as to a slack [jeu], an interval, some play, an opening in the origin. But, as we well know, in another sense Christianity is the exact opposite – denial, foreclosure of a deconstruction and of its own deconstruction - precisely because it puts in the place of the structure of origin, of any and all origin, something else: the proclamation of its end.<sup>16</sup>

The same Derridian dialectic of loyalty and betrayal thus lead to the same result: deconstruction is, in some sense, more Christian than Christianity, more messianic than any religious messianism (or Marxist, why not?), because it is the only one to hold on to its initial opening. Only with deconstruction, the messianic promise can be faithful to its pure formal opening, without tempering it with positive content. Nancy's 'deconstruction of Christianity' thus reveals the unparalleled Christianity of deconstruction: its unquestioned fidelity to the pure form.

In Jean-Luc Nancy's words, Christianity has to be understood as "a dimension of sense that is at once the opening of sense and sense as opening. From passage to presence, it does not cease being averred that presence always repeats passage, or that passage always leads to more opening at the heart of sense. The extreme point of that tension is attained when the absolute of parousia, the absolute of presence, ends by merging with the infinity of passage". Or, later on, "The revealed is properly that God is the revealable: what is revealed is the revealable, the Open as such"<sup>17</sup>. But if the fundamental insight of Christianity is this emptying of the form of its content, the reduction of the 'absolute presence' to the 'infinity of passage', to the 'open as such', then secularization, far from being a betrayal or deviation from our Christian legacy, is, on the contrary, its most inner dynamic and most faithful expression: "Christianity itself,

Christianity as such, is surpassed, because it is itself, and by itself, in a state of being surpassed. That state of self-surpassing may be very profoundly proper to it; it is perhaps its deepest tradition"<sup>18</sup>. And this is where the political theology of the Right (from the Christian fundamentalist stance to the more refined 'radical orthodoxy' school) goes basically wrong: their denunciation of the process of secularization as a dangerous departure from our Christian history fails to notice that secularization *is* the logical unfolding of Christianity. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it: "any analysis that pretends to find a deviation of the modern world from Christian reference forgets or denies that the modern world is itself the unfolding of Christianity"<sup>19</sup>.

So where does all this lead us, politically speaking? Just like in Derrida, the political effect of these developments is to present the contemporary hegemony of the liberal-democratic formalism as the only heir to the original messianic promise. "Christianity's fate is perhaps the fate of sense in general, that is, what has been called in the last few years, outwardly, the 'end of ideologies'. The 'end of ideologies' is at least the end of promised sense or the end of the promise of sense as an intention, goal, and fulfillment"<sup>20</sup>. The end of ideologies, the demise of the 'grand narratives', the end of 'promised sense' as 'intention, goal, and fulfillment' – that is, sense in the guise of any palpable positive content – is not so bad as it appears at first sight: our post-ideological and post-utopian societies still present us with the formal structure of sense and promise. And, considering that any positive content of this empty promise of sense can only betray its sense of promise, the post-ideological landscape turns out to be the best political arrangement. No (particular) sense at all is better than any sense, since it saves the promise of sense, the form of sense, which any particular sense can only betray. Thus, again, the contemporary political status quo is re-enchanted via a detour through political theology: the formal-formalism of liberal democracies is infused with a vital doze of abstract religious enthusiasm. Openness, pluralism, difference, proceduralism, formalism and reasonability are no longer a dull liberal refrain, but the very arsenal of passionate messianism. We are thus led back to where we started from; except that now everything is illuminated.

A quick word on a different – yet so similar – view on political theology is here in order, namely Gianni Vattimo's recent rediscovery of the Christian legacy. In the same way in which Derrida and Nancy place deconstruction in the undeconstructible core of the messianic apparatus, Vattimo localizes there his own intellectual brand – the famous 'pensiero

debole'. And the conceptual tool for this operation is a very similar understanding of what secularization means.

Thus, for Vattimo, modernity and secularization, far from being a departure from or a betrayal of the religious experience, constitute in fact its innermost dynamic. "Secularization", argues Vattimo, "is a constitutive characteristic of the authentic religious experience"; or, in even stronger terms, "secularization is the very essence of Christianity".<sup>21</sup> And in this aspect, secularization is exactly identical with the idea of 'weak thought': both of them describe and proclaim a necessary weakening of the metaphysical pre-eminence of presence, and a gradual liberation of form from its content. "The idea that the history of being has as its guiding line the weakening of the strong structures... is nothing else than the transcription of the Christian doctrine of incarnation".<sup>22</sup> The open secret of the Christian history is thus the dissolution of content and the opening of the pure form. Hence, the result of Vattimo's reading of secularization as a process of weakening is a picture profoundly similar to Derrida and Nancy's view. Is the political effect of this reading the same re-enchantment of liberal democracy that we get in French post-structuralism? On one hand, not exactly. In Vattimo's later works – for example, *Ecce comu* – we certainly find a political critique of our contemporary liberal-democracies that is largely missing in the writings of his French colleagues<sup>23</sup>. However, on the other hand, at a more attentive look, Vattimo's 'generic communism', or 'hermeneutic communism', as he later called it,<sup>24</sup> as the political arrangement adequate to our post-metaphysical condition, turns out to share all the characteristics of Derrida's messianic liberalism, except the name. The same horror of positive content, the same thrust in the inner efficiency of the pure form, and, inevitably, the same identification of our contemporary political arrangement (at least in its ideal form) with the originary messianic promise of justice. Certainly, this identification is never without some remainder; but this remainder is exactly what is needed in order to keep the democratic game and the messianic hope going.

I will close this section of the article with a discussion of Simon Critchley's political theology, for two reasons: while Critchley shares the basic assumptions of the other representatives of the post-metaphysical political theology, his famous debate with Slavoj Žižek allows us track down the major differences between their respective political theologies and, thus, to prepare the passage to the next section.

In his book *Infinitely demanding*, Critchley tries to solve a problem very similar to the one that tormented the other post-metaphysical theologians

that we already discussed: namely, how can one rescue or generate some form of enthusiasm and political passion in our post-metaphysical and post-ideological time? In the absence of the good old grand narratives and great utopias, how can one avoid slipping into passivity and political cynicism? Critchley's answer points to the necessity of religion – or, more exactly, the necessity of some form of religion. In Critchley's words, "if political life is to arrest a slide into demotivated cynicism, then it would seem to require a motivating and authorizing faith which might be capable of forming solidarity in a locality, a site, a region".<sup>25</sup> Again then, the existing democratic political arrangement, in order to survive, requires an infusion of some kind of diffuse religiosity. And again, this religion that comes to save the democratic status quo is a purely formal religion, deprived of its embarrassing content (such as the existence of God). As Critchley describes the double bind of this decaffeinated religion:

On the one hand, unbelievers still seem to require an experience of belief; on the other hand, this cannot be the idea that belief has to be underpinned by a traditional conception of religion defined by an experience or maybe just a postulate of transcendent fullness, namely the God of metaphysics or what Heidegger calls 'onto-theo-logy'.<sup>26</sup>

Or, as he puts it in another place: "Those who cannot believe still require religious truth and a *framework of ritual* in which they can believe"<sup>27</sup>. – in other words, what we need today, in our nihilistic age, when all the great narratives are dead and buried, is at least the *framework* of a grand narrative, its religious form, or even better, its practical form – its ritual. If not a grand narrative of democracy, than at least we should have a grand ritual. The dialectics of form and content, or, more precisely, the sublation of content into form displays here all its strategic advantages: "Must one either defend a version of secularism or quietly accept the slide into some form of theism? This book refuses such an either/or option"<sup>28</sup> – but it can refuse such blackmail only by playing on the dialectic of form and content, by hoping that thus we can still have the cake and eat it too – we can have all the advantages of secularism (pluralism, proceduralism, difference), with the enchanted world of religion.

So what is the political effect of this necessary religious form or ritual? A politics which could enlist the help of this form of religion would be a politics of 'infinitely demanding' – the politics of 'mystical anarchism'. In what consists the politics of infinitely demanding? This, argues Critchley, is

a politics that “calls the state into question and calls the established order to account, not in order to do away with the state, desirable though that might well be in some utopian sense, but in order to better it or attenuate its malicious effect”.<sup>29</sup> Infinitely demanding – but expecting very little, nothing more than an attenuation of the status quo. The mystical anarchism of infinitely demanding politics paradoxically coincides with the most reasonable and pragmatic reformism.

Not incidentally, we end up here with the same inevitable compromise between our infinite demand for justice and the concrete – and inevitably unsatisfactory – attempts to implement it, a compromise that we already found in Derrida. And just like in Derrida, what at first view appears as an unstable, potentially explosive tension – between infinite justice and concrete politics – is actually a very convenient and stable coexistence: their radical separation ensures the endless reproduction of both. In Critchley’s words, “politics is action that situates itself in the conflict between a commitment to nonviolence and the historical reality of violence into which one is inserted, and which requires an ever-compromised, ever imperfect action that is guided by an infinite ethical demand”<sup>30</sup>. It is precisely the fact that our thrust for infinite justice will never impact on the concrete political situation the one that, on the one hand, our ‘mystical anarchism’ will remain forever pure, forever noble, while the political status quo will not only remain in place, but will also gain the legitimacy provided by its opening to our call for justice. “I argue that the only choice in politics is not, as it is for Lenin and Žižek, between state power or no power. Rather, politics consists in the creation of interstitial distance within the state...”.<sup>31</sup> One should not attempt to abolish the state or occupy its commanding heights – nothing radical is politically possible, and this is not *in spite* of our infinite demand for justice, but precisely because of it. The most we can hope for is to create an ‘interstitial distance within the state’: mystical anarchism thus consists in creating an immanent transcendence into our status quo. Which expresses perfectly the ultimate political contribution of the stance of infinitely demanding: in the same way in which bourgeois society managed to accommodate the various radical political demands by creating small islands of freedom in its interstices (leisure time and high culture for the select few), it can perfectly accommodate the infinite demands of the mystical anarchism by offering them the necessary ‘interstitial distance within the state’ – such as, let’s say, various ‘occupied’ parks in which the noble thrust for justice is kept

alive, as in a natural reservation of political freedom, while everywhere else business goes on as usual.

Overall then, Žižek's critical appraisal of the 'politics of resistance' envisioned by Critchley and the other post-metaphysical radicals seems to be perfectly accurate: "today's liberal-democratic state and the dream of an 'infinitely demanding' anarchic politics exist in a relationship of mutual parasitism: anarchic agents do the ethical thinking, and the state does the work of running and regulating society". In other words, "the politics of resistance is nothing but the moralising supplement to a Third Way left".<sup>32</sup>

This diagnostic concurs indeed with our analysis of the post-metaphysical radical political theology that we developed so far. But how do things look in the other camp, in the formal materialism of the Leninist messianists? The next section will attempt to provide an answer to this.

### **The form of passion**

While the material formalism of the post-metaphysical theorists amounts to, as we saw, a theological repackaging of the good old democratic reformism – which is thus saved from its epochal inertia and dead-end –, in the case of the political theology of Žižek and Badiou we are dealing rather with an attempt to re-articulate a theory (and eventually practice) of radical revolution.

This attempt had its first and most notorious contemporary articulation in Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*. As Badiou clearly states, the contemporary relevance of the figure of Saint Paul consists in the need to find a "new figure of the militant, different from the party militant of Lenin".<sup>33</sup> This difference from Leninism is, however, as we will see below, rather an internal difference: it opposes a ritualized, pre-existing and purified form of Leninism (which articulates the genuine figure of the revolutionary militant) to the real and institutionalized manifestation of Leninism. In brief, it opposes the initial Lenin, Lenin's intentions, a sort of ur-Lenin, to the real one that became institutionalized and corrupted in the party discipline. This is why Saint Paul can pass, for Badiou and Žižek, as the "Lenin of Christ":<sup>34</sup> that is, the one who universalized and put into practice the teachings of the master. What Lenin did for Marx – that is, transposing the master's message into a universalizable practical form – Saint Paul did for Christ. In both cases, the operation of universalization

and putting into practice of the initial message has to pass through the decentered position of the apostle with regard to the original phenomenon.

This necessary decentering is the constitutive operation of the foundation of universality. Hence, Badiou's idea of universality has nothing to do with the traditional idea of universality, as the mere common element to be found in all differences, or as the dialectical overcoming of differences into their synthetic identity. Universality, for Badiou, the very traversal of differences – thus, it is not derived from the common substance shared by all particular elements, but rather on the very non-identity with itself of every particularity. Thus, in a way, universality always already traverses the particular and precluded its identity with itself.

This understanding of universality, that Badiou finds in Saint Paul, is crucial for our contemporary epoch because it allows us to avoid the mutually reinforcing opposition of global versus local. According to Badiou, these two alternatives – global and local – far from standing in a genuine opposition that covers all the possible alternatives, stand actually in a relation of concealed complicity: they are the two sides of contemporary capitalism, in which the homogeneous dynamic of global capital requires and effectively reinforces the manifestation of local particularities – or, as Deleuze would have put it, every deterritorialization produces a reterritorialization. Hence, the blackmail with which we are presented by global capitalism, of having to choose between global and local, between cosmopolitan capitalism and identitary resistance, is to be refused *in toto*. And the conceptual and practical source for this overcoming of the false opposition between local and global, or of the mutually reinforcing opposition between law and transgression, is Saint Paul's notion of universalism. As Badiou argues, "Paul's unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp",<sup>35</sup> without turning it into an abstract universality. The obtaining universality is not a stable substance, or an empty, abstract form, but an active operation which requires the active fidelity of the particular subjects.

Thus, in the Paulinian gesture of universalization, subject and strategy meet. Hence, the contemporary relevance of Paul's message is that it understands universality in a purely political way: universality as such is a political strategy. Moreover, it also conceives of the subject as a purely political being: in this, Paul's epistles seem to confirm Badiou's old idea that "every subject is political, and that is why we have so few subjects and so few politics".<sup>36</sup> The Paulinian gesture of universalization thus presumes a mutual founding of subject and revolutionary politics: there

is a universal politics of emancipation only as long as there is the fidelity of the subject to the messianic Event. On the other hand, the messianic Event exists – or persists – only through the community of atheist believers, of the ones that remain faithful to its call.

This is why Badiou, even if a declared atheist, is profoundly interested in Saint Paul. The apostle is relevant not a religious figure, but as the “thinker of the Event”, as the one who articulates for the first time “the invariant traits of the militant figure”.<sup>37</sup> Here we already encounter the dialectics of form and content that the messianic Leninists are led to presume. The religious content of Paul’s epistles is reduced to a minimum. Actually, argues Badiou, this reduction of the religious content to its pure form was already initiated by Paul himself, when he reduced the religious ‘fables’ to the unique event of Christ’s resurrection. This evacuation of the religious content is further pursued by Badiou, for whom even the concrete content of Christ’s resurrection is distilled in the minimal message of the possibility of overcoming the mere, biological life, and in the promise of emancipation that it carries with it. Thus, Badiou’s wager becomes perfectly clear: in Saint Paul’s writings we are supposed to find, already articulated, all the formal structure of the militant, revolutionary politics, even if still a bit muddled in the content of the religious fables. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, in order to articulate a new Leninist politics of revolutionary practice, we are to go beyond the message and practice of the real Lenin, and return to the strategic theory of the messianic event as it was articulated by Saint Paul. However, this obviously does not amount to a return to Christianity: saving Lenin from himself presupposes rescuing Saint Paul from his Christianity. What we are looking for is merely the formal articulation of the militant’s subjective disposition and revolutionary practice, as it appears in Saint Paul’s writings on the believers’ fidelity to the messianic event. Apparently, the purity of this Leninist formal dispositive is found in a more compelling and comprehensive way in the epistles of Saint Paul, even if it is contaminated with the religious content, than in the writings and actions of Lenin himself, where it is muddled with – well – its own concrete and historical content.

Before we pass to Zizek’s encounter with political theology, a few words about Giorgio Agamben’s *Th Time That Remains* are in order, since this book is partly a reply to Badiou’s *Saint Paul*. Agamben’s commentary of the beginning of Saint Paul’s epistle to the Romans is concerned with uncovering a certain messianic structure of subjectivity and history; in this respect, it is largely consistent with Badiou’s attempt. However, on

a number of issues, Agamben formulates several critiques of the political theology of Badiou, which are worth taking into consideration, since they might further clarify the stakes involved here.

Agamben's main critique of Badiou is his claim that, with Saint Paul, we witness the foundation of universality. For the Italian philosopher, this is quite wrong, since the messianic call, far from overcoming the particular differences in a superior, encompassing universality, actually splits the particular identities from within. The effect of the messianic call is to "revoke all vocations": all existing identities are suspended, and preserved in the manner of "as if not".<sup>38</sup> In short, the messianic call separates the subject from his immediate identity: under the incidence of the messianic call, the subject is to remain in his previous condition, continue to be a farmer, a husband etc., but in the mode of the "as if not". However, this operation is not at all similar to the strategy of mere pretending to be something else, the "as if" position: instead of transgressing the subject's existing condition by allowing him to identify with another, fictitious one, the "as if not" suspends the current condition from within and, in opening this internal distance, allows the subject to pass from a relation of property (in which the subject 'owns' his identity) to a relation of free use.

But in this aspect we can see the extremely modern, or even modernist, effect of the messianic call. The revocation of all vocation, this suspension of all immediate identity, is at the basis of the modern concept of class, as opposed to the concept of estate. While the concept of estate presupposes the substantial identity of its members and an organic link between the one individual and his social position, the notion of class presumes only a functional and structural common identity of its members.

However, the messianic call, when read in this way, cannot – argues Agamben – be understood as a 'foundation of the universal': on the contrary, it is exactly what precludes the formation of universality, since it subverts the particular identities from within. The problem with this critique of Badiou is that the universality that Agamben rejects has nothing to do with the universality that Badiou advocates: Agamben's target is rather the traditional notion of universality, understood as the common substance underlying or overcoming all the particular differences. Even more, what Agamben opposes to this universality is actually very similar to Badiou's understanding of universality: not the stable and immutable general identity, which transcends all particular differences, but the impossible coincidence of the particular with itself. Agamben's messianic call traverses and opens up the immediate particular identities in the

exact same way as Badiou's universality. For Agamben, the messianic cut introduces a remainder both in the subject and in history; it cuts the subject's identity with itself, and splits the chronological line of history: Messianic time introduces a remainder into historical time that exceeds the division between past and future. However, this historical cut is precisely the space for Badiou's 'immanent exception', in the same way in which the remainder to which the subject is reduced, after having his identity suspended from within by the messianic call, is precisely the 'stuff' of the universal for Badiou. Thus, in this respect, one can say that Agamben's critique of Badiou is a bit misplaced; but on the other hand, that Agamben's articulation of the condition of 'as if not' and the revocation of all vocations provides a better and more compelling picture of what Badiou meant to say with the messianic foundation of universality.

In another respect instead, Agamben's critique of Badiou seems to be perfectly accurate – namely, in the issue regarding dialectics. Badiou's avowed anti-Hegelianism leads him to the claim that the messianic apparatus is profoundly non-dialectical. It is actually meant to transgress the 'dialectics' of law and transgression, sin and desire. (In this respect, Antonio Negri's return to the Book of Job is very similar, since it also tries to find in it an alternative to the straightjacket of the dialectic between sin and punishment, measure and value – a dialectics that extends, according to Negri, in the underlying structure and dynamic of capitalism, the equation of labour time and measure of value<sup>39</sup>). However, if in the previous case we witnessed Agamben mounting a critique of universalism based on a very traditional understanding of this notion, in this case Badiou's (and Negri's) critique of dialectics is the one that is grounded in a rather poor and unidimensional – we could say: non-dialectical – understanding of dialectics. As Agamben brilliantly shows, the messianic apparatus, far from being non-dialectical, or even anti-dialectical, is actually the inspiration point for the whole dialectical tradition: the Greek term *katarghein*, designating the operation of 'revocation of all vocations', was later translated by Luther as *Aufhebung* – that is, precisely the central concept of the whole Hegelian dialectics.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for Badiou's and Negri's resistance to the idea of dialectics: it is their belief that, once we accept dialectics, we are inevitably led to accept all the errors of the infamous dialectical materialism – that is, its rigid and teleological view on history, as a preordained set of stages through which history will necessarily pass. However, in their attempt to rescue revolutionary politics from the

misgivings of its Stalinist institutionalization, it seems that they are too eager to throw the precious dialectical understanding of history together with the dirty water of revolutionary party politics. Furthermore, as we will see in more detail below, their attempt to replace the dialectical dynamic with the messianic apparatus, as articulated in the Church's founding writings, makes rather little sense, since this formal messianic apparatus stands in the same relation to its institutionalization in the Church as the dialectical apparatus stands in relation to its Bolshevik institutionalization. So, if we are to reject dialectics as having been irreparably compromised by its historical application, how come we are supposed to rescue the pure, formal messianic apparatus, even though – as Badiou explicitly admits – this apparatus has also been perverted and corrupted in the institution of the Church?

Before approaching this kind of issues head on, let us briefly review Žižek's contribution to the contemporary turn to political theology. Since his politico-theological writing comprise no less than three books explicitly dedicated to the issue, and numerous chapters and passages scattered throughout his other volumes, I will only point out the most relevant aspects for the present discussion.

The first thing to notice is that Žižek's turn to political theology comes after his famous debate with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, and as an answer to their critique that there is no possible politics to be articulated on the basis of Lacan's psychoanalysis. What his interlocutors rightly pointed out is that one cannot build a Marxist political theory, or at least a theory of the subject compatible with the Marxist materialism – as Žižek claims – on the basis of the unhistorical and unchanging Lacanian structures. Žižek's answer seems to have consisted in his turn to Saint Paul and political theology: that is, not a rediscovery of historicity and materialism, but rather a better, more suited articulation of the formal and unhistorical structure of the militant subject. For Žižek, the turn to Saint Paul is not a divorce from the Lacanian unhistorical formalism and turn to a proper Marxist materialism, but rather a better formalism, in which the political limitations of Lacanian theory are turned into just so many political advantages, without leaving the sphere of formalism and having to take into consideration the historical and material conditions for such a revolutionary politics.

The programmatic intent of Žižek's turn to political theology is clearly stated in the opening pages of his works: in these times of engulfing obscurantism, one should not criticize the last remnants of religion,

especially those still to be found in Marxism; instead, one should adopt the opposite strategy and claim: “yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism; yes, Christianity and Marxism should fight on the same side of the barricade against the onslaught of new spiritualisms – the authentic Christian legacy is much too precious to be left to the fundamentalist freaks”.<sup>40</sup> The ‘authentic Christian legacy’ and the genuine Marxism thus stand in a relation of mutual founding and purification: in the same way in which Marxism preserves the genuine, revolutionary core of Christianity, the authentic Christian legacy expresses the same revolutionary and emancipatory message of Marxism. This is the same operation of the necessary decentered foundation that we encountered in the role of Saint Paul with regards to the Christian institution. In a move that resembles Derrida’s ruminations on the negative and decentered statute of the origin, here the origin, the beginning, in order to function as origin and beginning, has to be displaced and take the necessary road of the exile.

And yet, in Žižek, between Marxism and Christianity we don’t have a perfect symmetry, in which each of the two terms finds and purifies the other. The political theology of Žižek is more theology than politics: in our times of ‘religious obscurantism’, if one wants to re-articulate the genuine message of Marxism, one has to pass through the religious form of the messianic event; the opposite move – reading the messianic message in the Marxian corpus – doesn’t seem to be advisable, precisely because one would then run the risk of alienating his presumed public. Because of the obscurantist times in which we live, the re-articulation of an emancipatory revolutionary politics has to borrow the form and terms of the religious experience, and just give them a different twist and a different – more genuine – political content. Never has an appeal to a new founding of a political radical alternative has started with a more complete capitulation to the imperatives and fashion of the status quo.

So which is then the reason for which, today, the emancipatory message of Marxism is more readable in Saint Paul’s letters than in Marx’s texts, besides the statistical fact that, in our obscurantist epoch, people seem to find more reasonable and plausible the existence of a life after death than the possibility of a just society after capitalism; or the fact that, to put it a little better, people believe that it is much more plausible to reach a just society through a miraculous resurrection or subjective rebirth, than through an implausible modification of our existing social structures? The reason is that, while we have to – as Žižek assumes – pay lip service to the

tastes of our epoch and join hands with the overwhelming religious revival, we can still subvert the reactionary bias of this trend by unveiling the essentially modern and progressive kernel of genuine Christianity. Thus, a more proper and genuine Christianity is proposed as an alternative to its more common, obscurantist or fundamentalist form of appearance. The contemporary religious and reactionary wave is to be counteracted with a no less religious, but progressive stance. The return to Marx ends up in an internal war that traverses the Christian communities. The essentially modern, emancipatory and universalist kernel of the Christian stance is the only weapon against the reactionary and obscurantist contemporary revival of fundamentalism, politics of identity, new age spirituality and so on.

The reason why one can oppose a genuine, emancipatory Christian legacy to its own obscurantist debauchery consists in the fact that the very emancipatory dynamic is already the proper Christian one. In building this argument, Žižek comes as close as it gets to the understanding of secularization as the proper Christian dynamic that we already encountered in Nancy or Derrida. A few quotes from the works of the Slovenian thinker will suffice in order to prove their proximity: "My thesis is thus double: not only is *Christianity*, at its core, the only truly consistent atheism, it is also that atheists are the only true believers"<sup>41</sup>. Or: 'My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach – and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience"<sup>42</sup>.

The reason for this is the unique dialectic nature of Christianity: what is sublated in Christianity is the divine Substance itself – negated but simultaneously maintained in the transubstantiated form of the Holy Spirit, the community of believers. The community of atheist believers is, then, a purely virtual community: it exists without any transcendent support and without any internal identity – it exists only as long as its members act as if it exists. It is only atheists who believe purely, because their belief is without any support in some presupposed Big Other. This is why the proper Christian stance is an alternative to the fundamentalist and obscurantist return of the religious: against the new spirituality, which focuses on inner, undetermined and non-institutionalized belief in some generic Supreme Being, or which is based in an enclosed and substantial community, the holy spirit should be conceived of as the community of

engaged atheists – a community without ‘Big Other’, without internal identity and substance.

The inherent dynamic of Christianity is a properly dialectical move, in which it is fulfilled and overcome in the community of atheist believers. Thus, the whole point again boils down to a dialectic of form and content: the reason why we can return to the genuine core of the Christian legacy in order to counteract the contemporary onslaught of religious revivalism is precisely the fact that, at its core, Christianity is already such an evacuation of the content and reduction to pure form. As Žižek puts it: this “emptying the form of its content” already takes place in Christianity itself, at its very core—the name of this emptying is kenosis: God dies and resurrects itself as the Holy Ghost, as the form of collective belief. Or, in brief, God dies and resurrects as the communist community. The reduction of the transcendent content to the immanent form is the principal message of Christianity. In order to recover the Marxian politics of radical emancipation, one has to go all the way through the Christian dialectics. Adorno famously said that, at the concluding point of radical materialism, one encounters theology. Here, the opposite path is opening in front of us: at the end of Christian theology, one rediscovers Marxist materialism.

But what kind of materialism is the one that Žižek tries to articulate here? A more attentive look reveals that this is a very curious kind of materialism, namely a materialism which is not determined or influenced by any concrete historical and social conditioning. Borrowing heavily from Lacan’s notion of ‘pas toute’, the ‘not-all’, Žižek ends up by dismissing any final determination by the material conditions: as a matter of fact, as Žižek argues, “the historical determination, the objective conditions are never ‘total’ – they are not-all, the subjective position is already inscribed in them... The question ‘When does ordinary time get caught in the messianic twist?’ is a misleading one: we cannot deduce the emergence of messianic time through an ‘objective’ analysis of historical process. ‘Messianic time’ ultimately stands for the intrusion of subjectivity irreducible to the ‘objective’ historical process, which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become dense *at any point*”<sup>43</sup>. So, again, what kind of materialism do we get at the end of our theological detour? Definitely, a much better, permissive and promising kind of materialism, a materialism in which the objective conditions do not determine anything and in which the subjective position – that is, the subject’s will – determines everything. The theological turn thus clearly was worth the price: from a panorama of obscurantism and political despair, we ended up with an exhilarating

image in which we can still change and hope for everything, because the historical conditioning is utterly irrelevant. In the end, the search for a new, more radical revolutionary materialism cleared the stage of any possible concern for the critique of political economy and for the concrete analysis of the historical situation – all such endeavors pertaining merely to the vulgar kind of materialism – and left us with the pure form of materialism<sup>44</sup>. Not only the historical determination of this materialism is utterly absent, but even its concrete forms of organization – be it political party, class, state – are to be replaced by the vacuous and paradoxical ‘communist community of atheist believers’. The only content or matter that counts is the subject’s own will and decision, his fidelity to the messianic call; the only thing that counts as matter is the subject’s “suspensive revolutionary consciousness”: suspensive precisely because it cannot approach any kind of practice or concrete action without endangering the purity of its own form. Formal materialism is definitely the best kind of materialism: it has all the advantages of formalism (unhistorical abstraction enhanced with obstinate voluntarism), plus the prestigious etiquette of materialism.

### **Concluding remarks**

Finally, in the concluding lines of this paper, let me try to synthesize the main problems of this trend of formal materialism. Not incidentally, they all have to do with the dialectic of form and content.

Firstly, the issue of the relationship between the form and content of the religious stance. According to the Leninist messianists, our epoch forces us to reverse the famous image proposed by Benjamin in discussing the relationship between theology and historical materialism: nowadays it is no longer theology that has to keep hidden under the table of the historical materialist chess player; it is historical materialism that has to be advocated for only if couched in the categories of theology. The rearticulation of a positive radical political program has to appeal to the theological form of the messianic apparatus. In order to become plausible again, any concrete politics of emancipation has to be grounded and promoted as the ‘zero degree’, the pure form of the religious stance. The problem here is, obviously, the difficulty of smoothly separating the form from its content: on the one hand, if the messianic promise is to be reduced to its pure form, and stripped of all its positive religious content, it is bound to turn into an abstract form, dispositive or ritual that will hardly generate any more

passion or commitment than the historical materialism it is presumed to rescue; on the other hand, if this theological turn is to provide the necessary infusion of revolutionary enthusiasm and passion, it will have to carry with it a lot of its positive religious content, towards which Badiou and Žižek are nevertheless extremely reluctant. There is a good reason for which Marxist politics seem to be today in an unsurpassable deadlock: besides its historical record in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as 'state socialism', the conceptual sophistication of this theory is matched only by the growing sophistication of today's capitalism. In this context, it is hard to believe that importing a pure form from Christian theology will enhance the plausibility of Marxism, or translate today's economic realities into some more intuitive sense, or generate some new enthusiasm in this kind of revolutionary politics. Žižek and Badiou's wager that it nevertheless could amounts to claiming that one could generate a new enthusiasm in the rationalism of political liberalism by rediscovering Aristotle's axiom of logic.

Secondly, we have the issue of history and event: the possibility of the radical, emancipatory event is grounded, in Žižek and Badiou's political theology, not in the analysis of the concrete situation, but in the evacuation of all historical relevance. The only historical determination that the Leninist messianists seem to hold on to is concentrated in Benjamin's notion of 'readability': that is, the idea that the historical content becomes intelligible, readable only in certain privileged moments. But again, the historical reason for which we are supposedly reaching this readability today is, in Žižek and Badiou, extremely thin: the only argument would be that today's American global yet multicultural empire resembles the old Roman empire. But even if this were true, the political effect of the Christian opposition to the Roman empire was not communism, but feudalism.

And yet history – with all its concrete determinations – seems to be present in the background of the Leninist messianists mind, but only as a negative presence, as a stumbling block that one has to avoid. For Marx, communism was not a distant utopia, nor even a form already available, but the real movement of history.<sup>45</sup> In Žižek and Badiou, the reasoning seems to be instead as follows: if history doesn't present us with any concrete 'historical transcendence' – that is, with some concrete traces, signs and dynamics that would point towards its possible transcendence –, if communism is no longer the real movement of history and history is obviously no longer on our side, the only solution is to drop history altogether and stick to the pure, a priori form of transcendence: the messianic event. Paraphrasing Marx's famous thesis on Feuerbach<sup>46</sup>, for

Zizek and Badiou the task of the philosopher is not to interpret the world, nor simply to change it – but rather to change the world by offering a different interpretation of it; or, to put it better, the revolutionary task is to find an interpretation of the world as already changed by a proper interpretation, i.e. the messianic call. Here, the objective conditions are replaced with the subjective disposition. And since the proper subjective disposition can be summoned anytime, this formal materialism converts formal possibility into occasion, and occasion into concrete possibility. It is, as Schmitt would say, political romanticism, with its conceptual trademark, occasionalism.

Finally, it is worth saying some words about the inevitable succession of occasional fidelity and necessary betrayal that this formal materialism leads to. For all its emphasis on political organization and mobilization, this trend is utterly vague on both issues. It is, at most, mobilization for the sake of mobilization; the fact that the messianic community – just like the lacanian psychoanalyst – authorizes itself from itself, with no external point of authority, leaves this political subject and this political movement totally undetermined. Hence, there is – at least at the concrete, pragmatic level – an overlapping with the other contemporary trend of contemporary political theology, the post-metaphysical theology of Derrida. The political practice that both of these theories entail oscillates between a radical subjective mobilization (with its melancholic reverse) and an abstract metaphysics of the unfathomable Event (again, with a similar melancholic reverse<sup>47</sup>). The very purity of the messianic form precludes its proper translation into practice.

Certainly, these authors are not unaware to this circulatory logic of fidelity and betrayal. After all, their turn to theology was meant precisely to resuscitate a possible Marxist and revolutionary politics from its betrayal in the state socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it is hard to understand how can one break this short-circuit between Marxist promise and Marxist betrayal by appealing to a pure, a priori messianic form, which, according to these very authors, was not only betrayed by its concrete form of institutional organization, but already by its immediate, positive content.

The final verdict: in Zizek and Badiou's political theology, the theory (and, eventually, practice) of revolution is stripped down right to its zero degree – that is, the closing, formal stage of the material: what their theory of the messianic event amounts to is an ontological argument for revolution, whereby the existence of revolution is deduced from its unhistoric, aprioric concept – the messianic apparatus. Historical materialism survives here

only in its minimal, formal and idealist mode of appearance. There is indeed a liturgy of actual revolution and, consequently, of the possibility of history: its burial and resurrection as pure form, as the holy, immanent community of Marxist academics.

Such is, then, the sad and happy fate of our times: to reenact the good old, political opposition between bourgeois ideology and political practice (liberal democracy) versus the revolutionary left as not even a battle of ideas, but as a genuine battle of fantasies, between a mystical anarchism of the pure democracy to come (completely accommodating and even legitimizing to the liberal status quo) and a no less mystical Leninism of the revolution-as-already-there (ultimately, no less accommodating in its political effects).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004, p. 69.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Schmittianism', obviously not in the sense of a massive turn to the far Right, but in the strict sense delineated by Taubes' quoted remark: as a generalized attempt to uncover the theological substratum in our political, juridical and social categories.
- <sup>3</sup> Since I will be discussing here the political effect of this theological turn in terms of emancipatory potential and thrust for social justice, I will be dealing only with political theorists belonging to the Left – understood in the broadest sense, from liberals to Leninists.
- <sup>4</sup> See the articles in the famous Rawls-Habermas debate: Jurgen Habermas, "Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92, no. 3, 1995, pp. 109-131; John Rawls, "Political Liberalism: Reply to Habermas", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92, no. 3, 1995, pp. 132-180; John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited", *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1997, pp. 765-807; Jurgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere", *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-25.
- <sup>5</sup> Boris Buden, *Zonă de trecere. Despre sfârșitul postcomunismului*, traducere de Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu, Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2012 [*Zone des Übergangs - Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2009].
- <sup>6</sup> Loren Goldner, *Vanguard of Retrogression. Postmodern Fictions as Ideology in the Era of Fictitious Capital*, Queequeg Publications, 2011, p. 52.
- <sup>7</sup> Besides Žižek and Badiou, Antonio Negri's reading of the *Book of Job* [*Il lavoro di Giobbe*, Manifestolibri, Rome, 2002] should be included more or less in the same trend. However, as it inevitably happens with such attempts to systematize and arrange conceptually large bodies of ideas, some important authors remain non-allocated: in our case, the most relevant ones would be Giorgio Agamben and Terry Eagleton.
- <sup>8</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1986.
- <sup>9</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991, p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> To use the apt expression coined by Nicos Poulantzas in his famous debate with Ralph Miliband.
- <sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Routledge, London & New York, 2006 [1993], p. 33.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- <sup>13</sup> "[Deconstruction] belongs to the movement of an experience open to the absolute future of what is coming, that is to say, a necessarily indeterminate, abstract, desert-like experience that is confided, exposed, given up to

its waiting for the other and for the event. In its pure formality, in the indetermination that it requires, one may find yet another essential affinity between it and a certain messianic spirit" (*Ibid.*, p. 112). Derrida is being here unusually modest: judging from his own arguments, it is not only that there is an affinity between 'a certain messianic spirit' and deconstruction. It is rather that deconstruction is the only legitimate heir to this messianic spirit. As we already saw, the other messianisms (Marxist or religious) share an affinity to this messianic spirit only in as much as they share the opening stance of deconstruction.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2008, p. 149.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 146, 147.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 141. The same idea is present in the so-called 'radical political theology' trend. See, for example, Clayton Crockett: "secularization is not simply the opposite of religion, but a process inherent within it that empties it or weakens it of its strong, foundational manifestations" (Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology. Religion and Politics after Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011, p. 12).

19 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, p. 138. Hence, an essential affinity between atheism and Christian religion, linked logically and historically via the mechanism of secularization: "The only Christianity that can be actual is one that contemplates the present possibility of its negation... "The only thing that can be actual is an atheism that contemplates the reality of its Christian origins." (*Ibid.*, p. 137)

20 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

21 Gianni Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, Garzanti, Milano, 1996, pp. 7, 42.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

23 Certainly, the various 'critiques' of liberal democracy formulated by Derrida or Nancy, which function rather as a 'political' extension of their philosophical critique of metaphysics, and borrow heavily from the anti-totalitarian discourse of the Cold War, are not exactly a political critique; and, actually, they are not even a critique, since their main thrust is to rescue the pure form of liberal democracy, its originary messianic promise, from its concrete manifestations.

24 Gianni Vattimo, *Ecce commu. Come si ridiventa cio che si era*, Fazi, Roma, 2007; Gianni Vattimo, Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.

25 Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless. Experiments in Political Theology*, Verso, London & New York, 2012, p. 5.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 3, my emphasis.

- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 29 *bid.*, p. 8.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 32 Slavoj Žizek, 'Resistance is surrender', *London Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 22, 15 November 2007.
- 33 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 7.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 13. See also Slavoj Žizek, *Repeating Lenin*, Arkzin, 2001.
- 35 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 18.
- 36 Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 351.
- 37 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 4.
- 38 Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2000.
- 39 See Negri, *Il lavoro di Giobbe*.
- 40 Slavoj Žizek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For*, Verso, London & New York, 2009, p. 1.
- 41 Slavoj Žizek, *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso, London & New York, 2012, p. 116.
- 42 Slavoj Žizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2003, p. 3.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 44 As Critchley rightly points out, "Badiou is trying to establish the *formal* conditions of a legitimate politics. The more Marxist or sociological question of the material conditions for such a politics is continually elided" (*The Faith of the Faithless*, p. 96). The same goes for Žizek.
- 45 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>
- 46 Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>
- 47 Melancholic here in the quite technical sense that the term has in psychoanalysis, that is the strategy of saving the relation with the impossible, forbidden object by turning it into an object always already lost.

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