

The promise of a pantheist politics

Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2019), 180pp., £15.99 pb., 978 1 50952 840 0 pb.

In *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, first published in the midst of political turmoil in Weimar era Germany, Carl Schmitt attempted a theoretical amputation of liberal parliamentarianism from democracy by excavating the contradictory principles on which each was based. Some thirty years after Schmitt's death, it would appear his prophecy has been fulfilled. As Saul Newman writes, today 'a major rift has opened between liberalism and democracy', a rift manifest in the prevalent demand for 'closed borders and a strong state', two marks by which national sovereignty is known. Newman writes that the return of this 'spectre', the 'phantasm' of sovereignty, is symptomatic of our 'increasingly abstracted and virtualised form of existence'. Yet, in his rejection of the abstract and virtual, (a rejection Newman finds in Max Stirner and anarchist thought), do we not hear, perhaps unexpectedly, a faint echo of Schmitt's own demand for the concrete, for *reale Möglichkeit*? Rather than solving the 'politico-theological problem', Newman argues (against Schmitt) for a profane politics that refuses to be drawn towards political power, and instead works around and outside it.

Newman's *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* can be grouped with a number of recent texts offering contemporised readings of 'political theology', including recent works by Adam Kotsko, Elettra Stimilli and Mitchell Dean, amongst others. These explore a number of closely related questions on the theologico-political significance of contemporary issues, ranging from debt and indebtedness to democracy, sovereignty and power. While many of these works draw heavily from the same sources – Schmitt, Foucault and Agamben are central to most – Newman's text is unusual in its attention to the anarchist theoretical tradition and includes significant discussion of Max Stirner and Mikhail Bakunin, whose critical engagement with political theology is often overlooked. In doing so, this work returns to questions Newman had explored almost twenty years ago in *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power* (2001).

Newman's central thesis is that 'the problem of political theology is really the problem of power itself'. This problem is approached through a staged confrontation between conservatism and anarchism. On one side, Donoso Cortés and Schmitt represent the conservative attempt to immunise the state against anarchism through the sovereign moment of transcendent lawlessness. On the other side stand Bakunin, Proudhon, Stirner and Agamben, who deny the need for transcendence and demand an immanent anarchist politics. Yet, as Newman notes, these two positions offer a 'curious mirror image' of the state as an absolutist structure. While one side affirms it, the other wants to abolish it. Newman's core problem, then, is one that also plagues the works of Agamben: how to provide an account for this alternative non-politico-theologico conception of politics?

Central to Newman's book is the ambition to 'explore the crisis of liberal politics and political theory through the problem of political theology'. The 'problem of political theology', or the 'politico-theological problem', as Newman describes it, is ostensibly that political concepts 'are influenced, shaped and underpinned by religious categories' – although precisely why and for whom this is a 'problem' is at times difficult to grasp. Despite Newman's univocal nomenclature, there seem to be a number of distinct problems that arise according to particular points of view: for secularists, it is a problem that their concepts are not secular enough; for Schmitt, it is a problem that secularists ignore the importance of sovereignty; and, for anarchists, the problem is manifest as the persistent demand of the general populace for substantial identity/unity in the form of transcendence. However, ultimately each of these points of view is equated with the 'problem of power'.

This calls to mind Mitchell Dean's *The Signature of Power* (2013), where, guided by Agamben, Dean attempts to develop an account of power encapsulating both sovereignty (Schmitt) and governmentality (Foucault). Newman, however, is concerned rather more with the former than with the latter. Newman emphasises the religious



dimensions of the Schmittian sovereign, referring to it as a 'sacred concept', the 'redeemer and saviour of the people'. He acknowledges that 'Schmitt is right in pointing to the structural recurrence of the problematic of sovereignty, which is revealed every time a social order undergoes a crisis of legitimation.' But for Newman, sovereignty is a phantasmic object of desire. It is a 'paranoid dream of identity – national, cultural, religious – asserted against any universalism'; a desirable but ultimately unattainable moment of transcendence that arises whenever the present order is threatened. Today, such a desire for transcendent authority derives from the demise of the technocratic neoliberal consensus, but in the 1920s it was the end of the nineteenth-century aristocratic constitutional monarchies, and before that it was the disruption of political consensus caused by the Reformation.

A key premise adopted in Newman's work is Claude Lefort's claim that 'modern democratic society ... is structured by a symbolically empty place of power, left vacant by the absent body of the prince'. Utilising Lacan's psychoanalytic nomenclature, Newman writes that religion fills this structural deficit, no longer in the symbolic register, but today in the imaginary. The result is a constant, insatiable desire for a point of transcendence, a

new form of power. Through a series of short vignettes, Newman recounts the central debates of the twentieth century on the subject of political theology, orienting each towards his question of power, and its vacant place in politics. The opening chapter alone includes a detailed account of Schmitt, a commentary on Schmitt and Strauss and the conflict of reason and revelation based largely on Meier's reconstruction of their 'hidden dialogue', and the theological responses from Peterson and Taubes. However, the real value of Newman's work lies in his retrieval of a number of anarchist responses to problems of politics. Eschewing Schmitt as a starting point, he returns instead to Bakunin's 1871 critique of Mazzini. Bakunin's criticism is that religion and idealist political theories begin by posing an abstract transcendent set of moral principles against the 'materiality of life'. For Bakunin, it is such pessimistic anthropologies that must be confronted with a materialist, atheist international socialism.

This is followed by a rehabilitation of Max Stirner, who believes 'the whole of secular modernity to be haunted by the spectres of religion it had believed itself to be rid of.' For Newman, the value of Stirner lies in his attempt to free 'subjectivity from the fixed forms of identification' which are characteristic of political theology,

but also contemporary 'identity politics'. On this point, the contemporary intervention intended by Newman's work becomes apparent. In fact, one thread running throughout the book deals with the logical proximity of today's identity politics to the Schmittian problematics of political theology. This critique of liberal identity politics is introduced through a rehearsal of Stirner's critique of Hegel and Feuerbach, culminating in Stirner's distinction between insurrection and revolution, also discussed briefly by Agamben in *The Time That Remains*. Stirner fails to offer a 'programme' for politics, but he does offer some 'useful concepts', Newman argues. Yet is Stirner's critique of essentialism really valid as a critique of Schmitt's conception of 'the political'?

One weakness of Newman's text is its inadequate attention to 'the political' as such. In particular, he neglects the relativised conception of *politische Einheit* (unity/entity) on which Schmitt's works are based. Instead, the field of possible positions is reduced to a dichotomy between essentialist homogeneity, on the one hand, and radical singularity, on the other. This simplification overlooks Schmitt's attempt to theorise a more flexible and relativised homogeneity, insofar as any distinction can be 'intensified' to the level of a properly political distinction. For Schmitt, it is only this relative conception of identity that is necessary for the properly 'political' existence of population. Without some form of unification or alignment, is there any room in Stirner's egoistic politics for large-scale collective projects, such as, for example, the Roman aqueducts or Britain's National Health Service? The recent works of the anonymous collective The Invisible Committee, which pursue some parallel ideas, are similarly haunted by a kind of new Malthusian problem of scale, which Newman's ecologically-inspired politics also cannot easily ignore. Are the localist and syndicalist politics advocated by these groups really an ethical solution in the face of the scale of contemporary populations and the ecological and agricultural pressures of the coming years?

In a chapter on the body of the sovereign, the *corpus mysticum*, Newman struggles with this problem. He traces the sovereign body through Hobbes, Schmitt, Kantorowicz and Walter Benjamin, critiquing identity politics as a demand for 'sovereignty at its most ideological, phantasmatic'. The desire for ipseity, self-hood and autonomy manifest in the Brexit slogan to 'take back

control' is present on both the right and left; in the latter, as a demand for greater democratic control. The only exit is to be found, for Newman as for many others, in Benjamin's controversial 'divine violence', identified as a 'pure means', despite the fact that, for Newman, it offers a rather specific goal in the form of a 'messianic promise of the redemption of life.' In any case, it is in Benjamin that Newman finds the concept of a 'spiritual anarchism', central to his final vision of an escape.

Shifting to the power located in government, Newman turns to Foucault and Agamben. Foucault's lectures on pastoral power lead to a conception of ethics as care of the self, while Agamben's archaeology of economy provides a link with contemporary capitalism. These are supplemented with Jacques Ellul's writings on technology and his religious mysticism. The aim is a rejection of technocratic visions of the machine-man of La Mettrie, which form the basis of the liberal technologist religion of progress. But here Newman struggles to align positions that remain in an uneasy tension. Newman embraces the demand 'to break down this economic-technical-theological machine [of modernity] ... and bring it back under human control', but must distance himself from any secular humanism of the kind criticised by Stirner and ignore the fact that the demand for human control is itself a demand for a certain kind of transcendent sovereignty.

In the final chapter, Newman offers his alternative: a profane politics, which is worldly but spiritual. He writes of a theology of immanence and evokes an ecological pantheism that embraces contingency, indeterminacy and multiplicity. Despite the religious register, Newman's proposal has much in common with Agamben's destitutive politics. Profane practices simply refuse to be drawn into the game of power. They embrace aspects of asceticism, self-discipline and apostolic poverty as a means to 'foster greater personal freedom and autonomy'. This also leads, however, to a disappointing turn to localism, in which 'local traditions and ways of life' are the defence 'against the abstractions' of today's capitalism.

Political Theology: A Critical Introduction ties together disparate concepts with a practiced ease. Yet it is a curious text. As the subtitle suggests, it is intended as a 'critical introduction'. But can an introductory text ever offer a meaningful platform for critique? In only 170 pages, the reader is offered a hasty tour through an im-

possibly dense region of theory and historiography that stretches from the nineteenth century to the present day, but which takes as its object of study the entire history of Judeo-Christian civilisation. As a result, there is an unavoidable tension between Newman's intention to provide introductory sketches of entire oeuvres and his aim to offer a critical perspective upon positions that, due to the requirements of the form, lack nuance and depth.

At times, Newman's writing exhibits rather less conceptual rigour than is required. This is particularly evident in his use of the terms 'theology' and 'religion', which seem to be used almost interchangeably – an obvious problem given the object of his study. Terminological imprecision and rushed abstraction occasionally seem to be the real basis for some apparent 'paradoxes' unearthed. For instance, when Newman writes that the 'state's abandonment of religion' 'leads only to the religion of the state' is there not a quite fundamental distinction between particulars hidden by his use of the abstraction 'religion'? Given his own Stirner-inspired distaste for such 'abstractions', the lack of attention to the singularity of the problems of western state-church relations seems inconsistent. A related difficulty con-

cerns his conception of politics itself, which in a text such as this deserves special attention. It is unclear precisely what marks the political as political for Newman. Clearly he rejects Schmitt's friend/enemy criterion, but no alternative is offered beyond some vague references to community.

In his first chapter, Newman skirts a little too quickly over a perennial problem for anarchist politics, the paradox of the 'corruption of man'. Newman writes that, 'for the anarchist, man was inherently good and therefore could be trusted with freedom and self-government', it was only 'the sovereign who was corrupt and whose intervention corrupted the lives of men.' But the tricky question is then, of course: is the sovereign not also human? What was the original source of corruption? On this point, we should return to Schmitt's reading of Hobbes' anthropology, and to the distinction between the Catholic claim that man is inherently evil and Hobbes' weaker alternative that man is merely dangerous. Is there really such a gulf between the anarchist position that man is corrupted by power, and Hobbes' assertion that the cause of war in nature is ambition?

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A clash of spatialisations

Chris Hesketh, *Spaces of Capital/Spaces of Resistance: Mexico and the Global Political Economy* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 240pp., £76.95 hb., £23.95 pb., 978 0 82035 174 2 hb., 978 0 82035 284 8 pb..

In *Spaces of Capital/Spaces of Resistance*, Chris Hesketh provides an overview of the possibilities and challenges for anti-capitalist politics in Mexico. As the book convincingly demonstrates, such an overview is only possible if one grasps both the historical and spatial dimensions to revolutionary transformation, through what Hesketh terms a 'historical-geographical sociology'. To aid him in this project, Hesketh draws on a range of Marxist thinkers, especially Henri Lefebvre and Antonio Gramsci, as well as his own fieldwork, which allows him to explore processes of 'uneven and combined hegemony' that put questions of scale at the centre of analysis. One of the great strengths of the book is its attention to scalar detail, too often marginalised in radical geographical work that has tended, in recent years, to privilege the

flat ontology of flows and networks, and in so doing has eschewed the actually existing politics of scale that governs so much political and social life. As Hesketh shows, political struggles over state formation involve an articulation across local, national and international processes that shape and constrain practices of resistance and domination. As such, struggles in and through territory also assume a central role in the kinds of political struggle recounted throughout the book.

The history of anti-capitalist struggle in Mexico has played out through a 'clash of spatialisations', in Hesketh's terms, as alternative spatial practices confront each other at key moments in the restructuring of capitalist relations. For example, the Zapatistas' understandings of territory, as a space of collective self-governance