

DOSSIER

“PODER Y SOBERANÍA: LECTURAS TEOLÓGICO-POLÍTICAS”

Teología Política: El nuevo paradigma de la soberanía y el poder

ARTÍCULOS

Del Catolicismo Romano al Leviatán: Sobre las disyunciones teológico-políticas en el pensamiento weimariano de Schmitt

Hannah Arendt and Political Theology: A Displaced Encounter

Carl Schmitt, Saint Paul and Paradoxical Truth

Escatología, política y administración a partir de la obra de Alexandre Kojève: El problema del “fin de la historia”

Universalidad y mesianismo: Para una teología política desde el pensamiento de Hermann Cohen

El ángel de la modernidad. La figura del Ángel en el pensamiento contemporáneo

Hobbes, Spinoza y Locke sobre la herejía

El mito de la biografía, o sobre la imposibilidad de toda teología política

Poder Pneumático. Una reconsideración del problema teológico-político

Por una política sin teología política

Ely Orrego

John P. McCormick

Nathan Van Camp

Daniel Nicheanian

Tomas Borovinsky

Emmanuel Taub

Rodrigo Karmy

Manfred Svensson

Emanuele Coccia

Fabián Ludueña

Alfonso Galindo

ENTREVISTAS

Miguel Vatter

Samuel Weber

Pensar la política desde la Teología Política (Entrevistado por Ely Orrego)

Theology, Economy and Critique (Interviewed by Diego Rossello)

RESEÑAS

Pablo Pavez

*Qué hacer con el *vivir*... (Qué significa volver a vivir). Lecturas y pre-textos a propósito de “Políticas de la interrupción. Ensayos sobre Giorgio Agamben”. Rodrigo Karmy (ed.), Ediciones Escaparate. 2011.*

James Martel

Miguel Vatter, ed. “Crediting God: Sovereignty and Religion in the Age of Global Capitalism.” Fordham University Press. 2011.

THEOLOGY, ECONOMY AND CRITIQUE (INTERVIEWED BY DIEGO ROSSELLO)*

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Samuel Weber, Avalon Professor of the Humanities at Northwestern University and Paul de Man Chair at the European Graduate School, discusses his latest work on theological economy. Professor Weber draws on Walter Benjamin's essay "Capitalism as Religion" to suggest a link between the Christian conception of guilt, and the capitalist understanding of debt. According to Weber, since debt and guilt share the need for redemption, an economic crisis not only reveals financial anxieties, but also religious ones. Professor Weber also discusses the implications of theological economy for critical theory, in the works of Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno and, specially, Jacques Derrida.

KEYWORDS: Theology, Economy, Critique, Benjamin, Derrida.

Diego Rossello (DR): The question of political theology features prominently in several of your essays and books. However, in some of your latest essays you turn to reflect upon the links between economy and theology. In your view, which are the links between political theology and theological economy that you find more thought-provoking?

Samuel Weber (SW): It's true that in recent years I have come to the conclusion that the questions posed by "political theology" benefit by being connected with what I, and many others, have called "economic theology". Political theology, at least insofar as it has been associated with the work of Carl Schmitt, construes "modern" political theory in general,

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and the theory of the “secular” state in particular, as informed by many of the concepts of theology, and in particular, Christian (and especially Catholic) theology. For instance, the executive “decision” to suspend the constitution in the “state of exception” is, according to Schmitt, heir to the Catholic notion of the “miracle”. But Schmitt believes that the development of bourgeois “economics” with its (Max Weberian) rationality of calculation, quantification and instrumentalization, is fundamentally opposed to and different from the tradition of political theology he is concerned with. By contrast, Walter Benjamin, in his fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,” argues that Capitalism itself is the heir to and continuation of a certain religious tradition, which he identifies above all with Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. In contrast to Max Weber, however, Benjamin argues that Protestantism (Calvinism) did not merely “promote” and further Capitalism but actually developed into Capitalism, which, he wrote, seeks to address “the same cares and concerns” that traditional religions sought to address. The notion of “economic theology” strikes me as useful in developing Benjamin’s suggestive but unelaborated insight (although all of his later work can be seen as an implicit elaboration and exploration of the connection between Capitalism and Christian Theology). The “cares and troubles” addressed by traditional religions Benjamin associated with “guilt”: Capitalism, he argued, was the first religion that did not seek to provide a solution to the problem of guilt, to de-culpabilize, but rather to universalize it. But if this is true, it means that modern politics, insofar as it is increasingly dominated by capitalism –today, by finance capitalism on a global scale– has to be understood in the context of a tradition that treats guilt in a very particular way– particular, because this tradition is not in its origins global: it claims universal validity but is itself associated with what is called the “religions of the Book,” the Biblical religions and hence with various forms of monotheism. This I think is important: it is the Logic of a Universal and self-identical theos, a Creator God, that is the origin of Guilt, and hence at the origin of Economic Theology and the political (but also cultural) tradition it informs. The problem is quite simply this: if God is One and the Same, Self-Identical, and above all, immortal –or rather beyond Life and Death– then mortality, which characterizes all living beings qua living, and finitude, which characterizes all beings qua singular, whether animate or inanimate, has to be explained in a way that does not call into question the unity, unicity and self-identity of their divine origin. In the First Book of Genesis, or Moses, this is explained through the “fall”: which is to say, through the transgressive action of Adam and Eve (but especially Eve) in eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Their transgression is the origin of Guilt, and it is their Guilt that “explains” the arrival of death, mortality, suffering and scarcity into a Creation that with previously free of all such features. Guilt, then, describes the “loss” of the original “oikos” –

Eden— through the violation of its divine “nomos”. Christianity, by contrast, promises the recovery of that oikos, once again by a deliberate act of self-sacrifice: that of God in Christ and of Christ in His Crucifixion. Through this deliberate, volitional act of self-sacrifice, the Self can be “saved” or better, “redeemed” from its debt and guilt: what was lost by Adam will thus be redeemed (note the conversion of economic and theological discourse) in Christ— or if you prefer, through the Messiah (although in the latter case, the form of redemption is less “concrete,” less tied to an individual, visible figure and body).

Let me translate this narrative into more structural categories: economic theology, as I have just described its mythical infrastructure, depends on a notion of identity, of the Self, as reflecting, or mirroring, the unity of the one Creator-God. This God is outside of time and space, but nevertheless has to communicate with both, since they are both of His Creation. Everything Created, as the House Father speculates about Odradek in Kafka’s tale, seems to have been created with a purpose, a meaning, and hence as finite: but the identity of the creature, if it is to truly reflect its origins, must in some way remain self-identical in and through all alterations of time and space, which is to say, despite its singularity and its finitude. Economic Theology thus seeks to provide a framework in which to resolve this “problem” —which however is not strictly a problem of theological dogma at all, but a very prosaic problem of how identity is construed and conceived. In the tradition of Economic Theology, and of the Political Theology informed by it, such identity is conceived as somehow recovering the meta-temporal, meta-spatial quality of its divine origin, and this even in “secular” societies —and perhaps especially in such cultures, since they take for granted the compatibility of this notion of identity and the Self with a world of immanence and finitude.

In such a secular world —“secular” here marking, as already mentioned, the extension of the theological rather than a radical alternative to it—the speculative-specular movement of Capital is not simply, as Schmitt (and perhaps Max Weber) thought, a mere quantification of a previously qualitative tradition, but rather also its culmination: money, and monetary (financial) “value” ostensibly “materializes” a relationship that places singular beings and phenomena in relation to a process that can never be entirely reduced to phenomenally, but also never entirely separated from it (any more than “exchange-value” can be entirely separated from “use-value” in traditional political economy, including Marx). This problematic but indissoluble conjunction is reflected in the peculiarly American —but to some extent also bourgeois— tendency to separate “economic” discourse from “political” and “cultural” —“spiritual”— matters: a separation that has contributed to the ease with which finance capital has taken control of

political processes in the United States, and increasingly in other parts of the world.

DR: You seem to suggest, with Benjamin, that the “secular” economy is not an alternative to the theological, but rather an extension of it. According to your argument then, capitalist economy would be a kind of extension of theology by other means, namely, a “secular” redescription of the “cares and troubles” addressed by traditional religions now reformulated in terms of money, credit, debt, etc. In this context, money (and the financial system) would be a kind of medium where the Self rises and falls (suffers ups and downs) in such a way that evokes (or perhaps even repeats) Christian anxiety towards salvation. Do you see a link between the “ups and downs” of the economy and the question of salvation as conceived by Christianity?

SW: Your first point marks for me the real insight of Benjamin: Capitalism is not simply promoted by Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist version, as Max Weber had argued, but rather preserves some of the essential tendencies and functions of Theology –and I believe not just of “theology” or of “religion” but more particularly of Christianity– although it obviously has implications for all Biblically based religions.

The key to the familial continuity, but also change –Benjamin writes of Capitalism as “heir” to Christianity– is the notion of “guilt”, which in German, and following Nietzsche’s discussion in the Second Book of his *Genealogy of Morals*, is also associated with “debts” (*Schuld - Schulden*), which Benjamin argues is universalized in Capitalism, and at the same time, and consequently, deprived of the perspective of “redemption” (*Erlösung*). Today, just at a moment when the question of the redeemability of public and private debt appears to be threatening the very credibility and stability of the established political, economic and juridical order –in short when the danger of “default” appears not just to threaten private debt (enterprises, banks etc.) but also the public institutions that seek to “guarantee” the functioning of that order –so-called “sovereign debt”– at a moment when Sovereignty itself is thereby called into question –the insight of Benjamin developed in the early years of the Weimar Republic seems particularly apposite, not to see prophetic. So we are discussing here not just abstract theoretical issues –which I would be the last to belittle– but at the same time eminently practical and topical ones. What seems to me most often overlooked in discussions of these issues, both theoretical and practical, is a point that Marx never ceased to return to, and that Derrida in his own way amplified: namely, that the “economy” –whether religious or secular, Christian or Capitalist– is ultimately based on the notion of “appropriation” and in particular, “private” appropriation of wealth. Here is where Max

Weber's insight into the connection between Protestantism and Capitalism is important, for Protestantism takes the "personalist" perspective of redemption and privatizes it, so to speak, as a protest against the abuses of the collective "universal" Church.

But "private" implies "singular" and as already noted, living beings qua singular are inevitably finite, i.e. mortal. This augments the tension between the mortal, finite individual, who in the Biblical and Christian perspective is mortal as a punishment for his transgression act—"original sin"—and the perspective of an original structure of life as emanating from an Eternal Creator God, who is above Life and Death. "Guilt"—and subsequently "debt"—then becomes the necessary "down"—the "fall"—required for man to "arise" and return to a quasi-Edenic state. The fall is as "fortunate" as one's debt: in the U.S. someone without a "credit history" is a non-person, at least from a financial perspective (and not only that). But Debt is not equal to Credit: Credit, as the etymology of the word says, requires "belief"—belief that one's guilt and debts can and will be redeemed, that the sheet will ultimately be balanced and indeed show a positive "return". All of the concepts of bourgeois economy, of double bookkeeping, are theological (and primarily Christian) concepts (despite the early ban on usury). The Christian fascination with the usurious Jew is the symptom of the uncanny proximity of Christian redemption to financial speculation: which means, to the shadow of a speculation that is never "risk-free", never sure of its redemptive conclusion. Jewish Messianism tends to place the redemptive return in an uncertain future. The uncertain of the future, however—one could say, from the perspective of the living individual, an ultimately inevitable uncertainty—is precisely one of the dangers that "religions", according to Benjamin, were invented to address—and to assuage.

But "danger" is always, as *Freud in Inhibitions, Symptom, Anxiety* emphasizes, is always danger for and to a system, an organization. And the systemic organization that Christianity has helped to establish is one that construes identity, and the Self, as capable of staying the same over time. To stay the same over time, however, is to resist the effects of entropy, of a time that wears individuals down and out rather than providing the medium of their fulfillment and recovery. This I think is the secular correlative to those "ups and downs" to which you refer: time becomes a medium of mortality through guilt; through credit it becomes the medium of possible redemption.

From the Christian, and even more, Capitalist perspective, the Ups-and-Downs (of the Boethian Wheel of Fortune) are thus both inevitable, and also salutary, since they alone provide the possibility of the survival of this Self. This is a paradigm that is present in the Biblical religions as the notion of the purgative Apocalypse, the Last Judgment, but also in its secular opponents as the notion of Revolution, especially in its more

nihilistic forms. Benjamin himself was very tempted by this nihilistic notion of Revolution, which is why I have never been very attracted to his –or any other– notion of Messianism. Hölderlin’s notion of *Umkehr* (inversion) or Caesura is I believe quite different. Hölderlin therefore insists –in his “Remarks on (Sophocles’) Antigone”– that a “total A turn-around (*Umkehr*) in these things, as with turn-arounds in general, without anything to hold on to, is not permitted to humans as cognitive beings.”

The problem accordingly is to think *Umkehr* –turn around or about– as something other than just “overturning” what is. But when Benjamin, in “Capitalism as Religion,” insists that the specificity of Capitalism is that it includes God in the process of unredemptive culpabilization, he describes a situation that reveals the quandary of “globalization” today: when everything becomes irremediably guilty and indebted, when Rating Agencies like States, Corporations and Individuals, all appear equally “guilty” and non-credible, this does two things: it calls the credibility of credit itself into question, but at the same time causes so much anguish and uncertainty that a widespread response is to seek a plausible “culprit” to punish. As Nietzsche says, in an untranslatable phrase, “Where there is a *Tat* (a deed), there must be a *Täter*” (a doer- but above all an evil-doer, a “culprit”). This perpetuates the view of radical contingency as itself the result of deliberate, conscious action. And therefore seems to justify mobilization against the “culprits” –the “enemies”. If death is the result of guilt, and as retribution inseparable from deliberate action, then everything that is held to threaten the perennial status of the Self must be met with force ... and ultimately annihilated. It is just a question of finding the right culprit, and the “media” are ready to guide people to the desired “target”.

DR: Your reading of Benjamin and Schmitt suggests a doubling of theology. On the one hand, Schmitt’s political theology reclaims the centrality of “secularized” theological notions for understanding the political. On the other, Benjamin reclaims “secularized” theological notions for understanding capitalist economy. Theology is therefore linked, at the same time, to politics and economy. Theology becomes a kind of missing link, a *tertium quid*, between politics and economy –a link that Marxism tried to establish somewhat obsessively, perhaps subordinating politics to economy. Our exchange is therefore leading us to a kind of theological-political-economy whereby the notion of “sovereign-debt-guilt” can be redeemed neither by the classic Marxist (materialist) understanding of revolution nor by the Benjaminian (messianic) understanding of divine violence. If theology continues to be the key of our contemporary political-economy, how can we unplug from it? Is the notion of *Umkehr* that you

propose via Hölderlin, a kind of negative theology? Can it be conceived perhaps as “the other” of theology?

SW: There are so many different aspects to your remarks, and questions, that I am not sure where to begin. Perhaps with the notion of “theology”: in “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin doesn’t write much about “theology” but about “religion” –or rather, “so-called religions”, leaving open the question of whether there are “others” that would not simply be “so-called”, i.e. which would be authentic without being so-called (this is a thought that he explicitly stresses at the end of an earlier essay, “Dialogue on Religiosity in the Present”, where one of the dialogue-partners argues for the necessity of distinguishing a “religion of the time” from the “historical religions”). In the “Capitalism as Religion” fragment, Benjamin characterizes Capitalism as a religion of “cult” –which he elsewhere distinguishes from “ritual”. Cult seems to have to do more with idolatry than ritual, but what distinguishes both from “theology” is the practical nature of the practice involved. Capitalism as Religion consists in the unrelenting and universalizing cult of “culpabilization” and “indebtedness”, to the point where even “God” is drawn into this eminently human practice. It is not “theological” in the sense of consisting essentially in a series of dogmas –in a “theoretical” system– but rather in the Kantian sense perhaps “practical”, as that which by its very nature exceeds theoretical comprehension and cognition (but which also can inform it).

But Benjamin, like Marx (and many others!) is much clearer about what he wants to change than about how to change it –not just instrumentally, but also in what direction a true alternative can be sought. In the period during the First World War and the decade following it, references to a positive alternative do often invoke the name and certain concepts of Hölderlin: *Umkehr*, *Nüchternheit* (*heilig* or other) and above all, Caesura –suspensive interruption. But I think it would be a mistake to assimilate that to a “negative theology”, when in fact it tries to present an alternative to theology, negative as well as positive. As I read Benjamin –and certainly there are many different and in part conflicting tendencies to his thinking and writing– but what I value most in it, what I’ve learned most from, has to do with what I would call a Kierkegaardian emphasis on the irreplaceability and irreducibility of the Singular and Unique –which is not to be confused necessarily with the theological tradition of monotheism. Indeed, I think it can be argued –although Benjamin is much less clear on this– that monotheism betrays the Singular by identifying it with a Universal and Self-identical Being, with an exclusive Creator-God. To the extent that this serves as a model of self and of self-identity, it cannot do justice to the unique singularity of living beings, or of inanimate ones as well.

Negative theology orients itself on that very Universality, however: it is a dogma that seeks through negation to transcend finitude: not this, not that, etc. I think Benjamin's notion of "interruption" (with respect to Brecht) or *Umkehr* (with respect to Hölderlin, or indeed as an alternative to "Capitalism as Religion") seeks to do justice to situations – "constellations" – that define but also delimit the possibility of change, of "turn-around" or "–about". This defines the task and distinctive possibility of the "critic" – as which he saw himself: not in the Schlegelian sense of constituting an infinite progression but as bringing out what a given writer (such as Goethe) or age (such as the German Baroque) precisely did not want to know about its problems, yearnings and anxieties. But this is also why Benjamin paid such close attention to his own writing style, and especially to the rhythm of its syntax, his "way of meaning," which suspends, interrupts, anticipates, repeats and surprises but is rarely linearly continuous in its utterances. Of course it helps to be able to follow his text in German, since such "nuances" – which are in reality essential – tend often to disappear or diminish in translation. I think this interruptive-suspensive rhythm is in turn quite different from the kind of divine intervention he describes in *Toward A Critique of Violence*, in which the Clan of Korah is wiped out without a trace, once and for all; and it is also different from the continuity of temporal disintegration that he describes in what Adornolabeled his "Political-Theological Fragment". Benjamin was not at all immune to a Nihilistic temptation, it seems to me: he assumes and asserts its value, as did many others in the period in which he was writing. Understandable perhaps given that period, which it is easy to forget or ignore or simplify today – but which we do at our peril, given similar tendencies that are at work.

But there is another question that complicates any attempt at a straightforward answer to your questions: it is the increasingly problematic status of the basic concepts on which we rely, and on which your remarks also rely, necessarily perhaps. "Politics," "economy," "theology," "religion". Take "politics": to what extent is it dependent upon a notion of place – namely as "container" – that is increasingly tenuous today, in view of the interacting development of the technology of "communication" and travel, as well as the digitization of relations through the electronic media? And the same is true of "economy": the *oikos* like the polis are both, it seems to me, not just historically dependent on that notion of place qua container that has been in the process of transformation for centuries, while at the same time producing very strong and often dangerous counter-reactions, fueled by anxiety and channeled into aggressivity. I think the historical lesson to be learned from both Marx and Benjamin, among many others, is not to succumb to the compartmentalization of reality and knowledge that is temporarily reassuring but increasingly incapable of articulating the complex overlapping and interacting of different areas: this strikes me as

particularly true of “economics” and “politics,” but also, as we have been developing, of the relation of both to “religion” and religious “issues”. Marx was much less of a determinist than is usually made out, as Marcuse argued many years ago in his book, *Soviet Marxism*. The determinist argument dates from Eduard Bernstein and was used, then and since, as a way of disqualifying the Marxian critique of capitalism. Then as now, the charge of economic determinism often functions as a way of not confronting the very real and difficult interaction of politics and economics –political economy, economical politics– that is so painfully obvious today. Just look at the various “official” discourses on the current crisis, with respect to the “market”: the latter is elevated to a kind of supernatural judge of value, which is a way of equating the very real power of those who dominate market-relations with a kind of ontological or natural inevitability. Finance capitalism of the most speculative and rapacious kind is thus portrayed as the only game in town, with the so-called “market” as the divine arbiter. This is what we are seeing today, most crassly with the so-called “rating agencies” deciding over the fate of so-called “sovereign” nations –who are no longer “sovereign” since their “sovereign debt” depends on the agencies and the holders of capital.

I think it was Marcuse who insisted, repeatedly, on Marx’ refusal to outline his notion of a post-revolutionary society. In the *Grundrisse* one of the very few characterizations of it –as distinct to the transitional state involving the dismantling of capitalist power relations through a proletarian revolution– involved the reduction of the work-week, i.e. of that part of human existence spent on labor. The significance of this perspective can be gauged today when one surveys the scorn that was provoked by the French Social Democrats reduction of the work-week to 35 hours: the entire Protestant Ethic bared its teeth in condemning the anti-economic laziness of the French, and indeed it has been a major aim of the French Right to roll back the work-week, which has been largely successful. Similarly, scapegoating of certain groups such as teachers, to distract from the increasingly lopsided distribution of wealth in US and other societies over the past decades, also is framed in terms of laziness, lack of work-time (not to mention the attack on “welfare” or unemployed recipients). This is not to say of course that individuals don’t take advantage of such programs, or try to, but as a systemic effort to disqualify all life that would not be “productive” in this sense it remains a negative indication of what a true alternative to traditional theological-political-economy might look like. Of course, “leisure” brings with it its own set of problems ...and even demons!

DR: Our exchange on the links among religion, economy and the political has now shifted primarily toward Benjamin’s understanding of capitalism

as religion. Besides Benjamin, another important source of inspiration for your work has been the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Derrida too reflected upon questions of “theological political economy” but he did so in terms that depart from, but also remain in conversation with, Benjamin. Derrida’s discussion of the mystical foundations of political authority, of the notion of messianicity, as well as his take on the “propre,” of what is proper, propriety and ownership, seem to intersect in many ways with Benjamin’s concerns. From your perspective, which are the differences between Benjamin’s and Derrida’s contributions to “theological-political-economy” that you find more thought-provoking?

SW: You’re right about the importance of Derrida’s thinking and its influence on my work. You’re also right in pointing to his problematization of the “proper” –proper, own in English– as a decisive moment of his deconstruction. This goes together with a long-standing critique of “economy” as the “law of the proper” –the *nomos* of the *oikos*. This is perhaps more obvious given the French use of the word “*économie*”, which is used in a wider sense than just “economics” or “economy”: it really suggests more a systematization of a self-enclosed, self-serving system. A hint of that can be found in our use of the word “economize” in English: i.e. in the sense of ever greater “efficiency”. This presupposes some sort of underlying identity or goal that informs and homogenizes the space and time that have to be “economized”. Derrida’s problematizing of “the proper,” and in his later work, of “ipseity” –a term that he adopts, and adapts, from Levinas, to whose thought Derrida acknowledges an ever-growing indebtedness, even while differing from it on certain essential points. And you are also right to point to a convergence between Derrida and Benjamin, a convergence that is impossible to ignore and yet also very difficult to define precisely, given what I at least take to be their enormous differences. I should also add to this couple the work of Theodor Adorno. For although I haven’t written much on Adorno, and in many ways felt it necessary to take a certain distance from his “critical theory,” I realize as time passes how much certain aspects of Derrida seem to me to be related to Adorno’s critique of “identity philosophy” in its various guises. Like Marx himself, all three: Benjamin, Derrida and Adorno were strong critics of modern capitalism, in various ways, but also very reluctant to elaborate notions of what an alternative to it might look like. For Marx, Benjamin and Adorno, the alternative belonged to a future that it was impossible to predict, imagine or experience directly; the same is true of Derrida, but not quite in the same way. His critique of the temporal “ecstasies” of past-present-future – and indeed his insistence on distinguishing, in French, between the “future” and “what is to come”: *l’avenir*, was largely motivated by the need to argue for a more immediate

experience of “the coming”, even if it is only as “coming”, rather than as a Present that has not yet arrived.

But—and here the difficulty for me begins—every time I try to distinguish clearly between the three, and in particular between Benjamin and Derrida, I find my formulations inadequate, not sufficiently nuanced. Thus Benjamin already as a young man wrote a “Program for the Coming Philosophy,” in which the future was defined precisely as “Coming”, a present participle that suggests more than simply something that is outstanding, a not-yet-present. But Benjamin also was more dependent in many ways on traditional vocabulary, shown by his use of the word “program” —a word that Derrida from the outset problematizes and avoids. All three, Adorno, Benjamin and Derrida, are clearly inscribed in the Nietzschean tradition that problematizes identity and ontology, but the manner in which they do so demonstrates some clear divergences. Perhaps the most obvious —I’m not sure if its’ the most significant— is in the Germans’ willingness to accept and use the value of “negativity” —Adorno’s attempt to construct a “Negative Dialectic,” and in a certain sense, Benjamin’s attempt to construct a version of “Negative Theology”— this contrasts sharply with the deconstructive and post-Heideggerian suspicion and problematization of the value of the negative, as structurally a mirror image of what it seeks to “negate”. This has important political consequences: for instance you need only read or reread the short fragment of Benjamin entitled (by Adorno, not by Benjamin) “Theological-Political Fragment”, which begins (my translation): “It is only with the Messiah himself that all historical happening is completed...”. Derrida’s effort to think a “Messianicity without Messianism” also amounts to a repositioning of the figure of the Messiah, of the Messiah as figure. Without being able to even begin to unpack this incredibly suggestive but also incredibly allusive and elusive fragment, it displays a certain number of traits that I don’t think are to be found in Derrida’s thought: the conception of the Messianic as a “realm” for instance —“messianische(s) Reich”— the affirmation of a notion of “immortality” (also prevalent in Benjamin’s essay on Goethe’s “Elective Affinities”); and above all, the faith in a kind of dialectic through which the “eternal and total transience” of “nature” makes way, as it were, for the “messianic”). Benjamin concludes this fragment with an affirmation of Nihilism as the “task of world politics” —and this is something that Derrida would never have done or endorsed. Indeed, he criticized one aspect of it as it is articulated in Benjamin’s “Toward a Critique of Force,” where the extermination of the clan of Korah is cited by Benjamin as an exemplary instance of “divine violence” —divine because there is no blood-letting. The tribe of Korah is simply swallowed up by the earth, buried alive, as it were. Derrida, in *Force of Law*, found this fascination with a purifying violence, extremely dangerous.

And yet, when Derrida in his final interview, shortly before his death, goes on to describe his affirmation of “life” and of living, he cites Benjamin’s distinction, in the *Task of the Translator*, between “outliving” (überleben) and “surviving” (fortleben) as a source for his own attempt to construe the relation of life and death in terms of “surviving” (survivant). Not however simply as “survival” (survie): but as something that both affirms life and also departs from it. This departure was perhaps already in Benjamin’s mind, in a nuance or connotation of the German word, *Fortleben*, that Derrida perhaps did not sufficiently notice. The “fort-” of *Fortlebenis* also the “Fort-” of Freud’s *Fort/Da*: which is to say it is not just a continuation or prolongation but also a separation, a departing from. Departing from what? In a letter to Horkheimer defending his attempt to attribute a redemptive force to the critical historian –expounded in the “Theses on the Concept of History” –i.e. the historian’s power to “save” the victims of the past oppression, Benjamin accepted Horkheimer’s argument that the dead could not be resurrected in person, as it were, but he still insisted that through a change in their memory, their historical after-life could be transformed. However, as with translations, such an after-life does not modify or change the finite life of the individual (work or person). Nevertheless, and perhaps in contradiction with this notion, Benjamin seemed often fascinated by the thought of physical, material destruction as a condition of renewal and salvation (Erlösung) –a position very much shared by his contemporaries, on both left and right. Derrida, perhaps chastened by historical experience since the 30s, remained skeptical with regard to the notion of “salvation” –“salut” – and tended instead to look for other modes of transforming existing power-relations. A possible example would be his effort to mobilize the notion of “autoimmunity” as a potential motor of historical and political change. It puts the notion of “protection” and “self-protection” at the heart of a process that results in the confounding of self and other and thus opens the possibility of radical alteration. This may look like a traditional dialectical model, but I don’t think it is: nor is it the antithetical-antinomical model that Benjamin cites at the end of his book on the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, where Allegory, in taking a reflexive turn and allegorizing itself, points toward a possible “ponderación misteriosa” –in which the fall of the subject is itself turned into an allegory and “held fast” in “God”. Rather, as I understand it at least, Derrida’s outlook, for all of its insistence on “affirming life”, does not assert any sort of direct “salvational” strategy. And perhaps that is its most important “lesson” for political theory and indeed for politics today: to contemplate a change in power-relations that would not do away with them in a grand, redemptive solution, but which would, by identifying certain constraints, loosen their hold: for instance, as with autoimmunity, the constraint to “protect oneself,” to “immunize” oneself, to –and this was Derrida’s minimal definition of “religion” – keep oneself “intact” (indemne):

SAMUEL WEBER

“safe and sound”. It is the break with this more or less hidden theological goal of politics –the politics of security, if you will, or of protection– that Derrida’s thought entertains. But even in this it echoes a phrase from Kafka with which Benjamin concludes his essay on that writer, and that can serve to bring our discussion to an end, however anticlimactic and provisional: “Sancho Panza, stolid fool and hapless helper, sent his rider on ahead. Bucephalus outlived his. Whether man or horse is no longer so important, as long as the weight is taken from the back.”