

Political Theology or Theological Politics:  
Paradox at the Heart of Democracy

Shane Akerman  
M.A. Student, La Sierra University

**Abstract:** Bonnie Honig's *Emergency Politics* employs the work of Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig to combat the theses on political theology offered by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt's argument is that politics is dependent upon an absolute and sovereign will that imitates the God of monotheism; Rosenzweig, on the other hand, understands God as being an open and dynamic interlocutor. A new model of sovereignty is thus offered in which the people interact creatively with power. This essay puts forward a third alternative which draws upon the theology of G.K. Chesterton and the Marxist political theory of Slavoj Žižek in order to supply the democratic project with a new foundation which is both theocentric and revolutionary.

**Keywords:** democracy, paradox, political theology, Marxism, sovereignty

Several paradoxes are intrinsic to the democratic project. This essay will confront what Bonnie Honig refers to as the paradox of politics (or, the paradox of democratic legitimation).<sup>1</sup> Honig asks the Rousseauian question of which comes first: good people (who make good law) or a good law (that defines good people)? In other words, where is democratic sovereignty really located? Honig would suggest that, because of the analogy between political and theological notions of sovereignty, a new model of sovereignty can be gleaned by reimagining theology. This understanding of the relationship between theology and politics goes back to Carl Schmitt who used the term "political theology" to describe the way in which theology functions as an analogy for politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009)

The alternative offered in this essay is “theological politics.” Instead of enjoying theology as a wellspring for creative political metaphors, as in political theology, theological politics is understood as a political response to explicitly theological claims. So long as God is imagined as a mere metaphor for sovereignty we will continue to search in vain for one worthy to exercise this divine authority, and the paradoxes of democracy will remain insurmountable. If, on the other hand, the divine is considered an actual locus of sovereignty, transcending any human authority, then the incessant paradox of legitimation can be overcome.

This essay, therefore, is composed of three parts: (I) the paradox of politics, (II) political theology, and (III) theological politics. The first explores the problems associated with democratic legitimation. In the second, Schmitt’s conception of political theology is considered along with Honig’s rebuttal. Finally, the works of G.K. Chesterton and Slavoj Žižek help to define theological politics. In this model, God is conceived as the paradoxical rebel-king—the one to whom full sovereignty properly belongs, but who, through the incarnation, incorporates humanity into the divine life, thereby electing the *demos* to exercise sovereignty in his stead.

### **The Paradox of Politics**

According to Honig, via William Connolly, the paradox of founding is not merely a matter of chronology.<sup>2</sup> By the paradox of founding I refer to the apparent impossibility of a society that is governed by laws fashioned by that society. It may be understood as a classic which-came-first paradox, but this is precisely what

---

<sup>2</sup> William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Borderlines v. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

Honig is rejecting. She claims that even if we locate a definite beginning (a law which forms a democratic society, or a society which creates a democratic law), the paradox is unresolved. Because law is always constructed by society while simultaneously governing it, the question of how one legitimates the other is constantly recurring. Here one must recognize that the law always comes with a certain excess. Law, in its regulative form, must mysteriously be more than in its political form. It is naturally acknowledged that when an individual breaks the law, he or she cannot cite the democratic nature of the law in order to avoid punishment: "These laws which you accuse me of breaking are nothing more than inventions. You all just made them up!" Perhaps a legislator might even say: "I created this law; it has no real authority over me." When the law performs its regulative function it necessarily transcends the subjects that authored it in the first place.

Rousseau cuts through the problem by directly addressing the question of genesis. He recognizes that if the law that governs the people emerges from the people themselves, it cannot carry the necessary authoritative weight to govern them. It is the law itself that converts the unruly, discordant multitude into the people; the latter is able to govern itself, the former is not. Rousseau therefore posits a primordial lawgiver.<sup>3</sup> The paradoxical relationship between law and demos is therefore given a definite answer: the law came first. And it was the law that taught the people to be good (and presumably, formed them in such a way that they were able to continue to generate good law and reform unjust laws). Honig's criticism, however, is that since Rousseau does not properly account for the recurring

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, bk. II, ch. 7, trans. G.D.H. Cole (Cosimo, Inc., 2008)

paradox of law and demos he does not really solve the problem with which we are confronted. And this is a point well taken. When democracies create new laws or abolish antiquated ones, how can we know if this is in keeping with the original intent of the lawgiver?

Perhaps the strongest element of Honig's critique of Rousseau's lawgiver is that he, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, "trades off legitimacy. . . for rationality."<sup>4</sup> The law that the lawgiver imparts is a violent imposition of a certain will that excludes some (of the multitude) in order to form the people, the demos. Honig asserts, "The lawgiver may get the law really right but he enables the people's self-governance by compromising their autonomy."<sup>5</sup> She recognizes that this kind of violence is the only way of escape from the paradox of politics.<sup>6</sup> Her response, therefore, is not to propose an alternative solution to the paradox but to embrace it.

Another way of articulating this problematic relationship between law and demos is to locate it as existing in the paradoxical duality of the demos itself: the relationship between the people and the multitude is also construed by Rousseau as the general will and the will of all.<sup>7</sup> Here the will of all is what the multitude actually wants (and this will is always divided, unruly, and without any necessary legitimation; there is nothing intrinsically good, or wise, or right about the will of the all) while the general will is "what they would believe to be in their collective

---

<sup>4</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 1, no. 1 (April 1994), 29-30; Honig, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Honig, 20

<sup>6</sup> "...we can deny or disguise the paradox of politics only by suppressing or naturalizing the exclusion of those (elements of the) people whose residual, remaindered, minoritized existence might call the pure general will into question." Ibid, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. II, ch. III.

interest if they were properly enlightened.”<sup>8</sup> Here, even if there is a primordial lawgiver, the paradox returns. How can the general will somehow inhabit the will of all and, more importantly, by what means can we tell the difference between the two? Because the paradox constantly returns, the lawgiver would only be a real solution (and not just a shifting of the problem) if the lawgiver constantly re-emerged to decide what was the general will. The obvious problem with this line of thinking is that the very notion of democracy with which we have started begins to slip away. What is the role of the people at all if they are constantly dependent on the lawgiver?

By this point it is clear that the specter of political theorist Carl Schmitt looms over Honig’s work. Schmitt’s oft-quoted adage, “sovereign is he who decides the exception,” speaks right to the heart of Honig’s wrestling with the Rousseauian lawgiver and the paradox of politics. Schmitt recognizes that since the whole established order of law can be chronologically traced back to this moment of primordial sovereign will, then that will is present in even the law’s mundane functions. The sovereign may therefore remain invisible, diffused in the banal procedures of day-to-day governance, but occasionally the sovereign is revealed in the exceptional situation. In fact, it is the sovereign himself who decides when the situation is exceptional. Here the normal functioning of the law is suspended and the (hopefully righteous) will of the sovereign is applied directly without recourse to the law as we know it. This suspension of the law is, in the end, for the law’s own sake. Just as the law was originally created (*ex nihilo*) by the will of the sovereign, so

---

<sup>8</sup> Honig, 17

too in these exceptional moments the sovereign re-appears (though it was never really absent) in order to rescue the order of law.

This is the problem it seems that constitutional democracy attempts to overcome. There is a constant need for a kind of meta-law to regulate democratic legislation itself. The constitution performs basically this function. (Of course, the document of a constitution cannot really be the properly Schmittian sovereign, since it is the sovereign who decides when something, even the constitutional constraints, must be suspended.) The constitution is, in some sense, what we have already referred to as the law's excess. The people, even as they construct the law, are bound to the constitution. For Honig, however, we find ourselves doing nothing more than shifting to another paradox. We begin with the paradox of law and demos, and in attempting to escape it confront the paradox of general will and will of all. Here we encounter another dead end:

In place of the synchronic paradox of politics. . . and in place of the paradox of democratic legitimation's difficulty of securing general will over will of all, we now have the still difficult but far less knotty problem of how to find freedom in relation to a past we are stuck with and did not author. . .<sup>9</sup>

In other words, why are we accountable to this constitution? Jürgen Habermas may be introduced to help clarify this question. Habermas notes that the question of legitimacy reaches further back than the framing of the constitution. We are caught again in an infinite regress. Habermas offers that, instead of seeking to find a termination of the regress, we “understand the regress itself as the understandable expression of the future-oriented character, or openness, of the democratic

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 28

constitution.”<sup>10</sup> This shifts the burden of legitimacy from the past to the future. Habermas wants us to see that freedom and rule have never coincided, but the political process is oriented towards a future where such is the case. We might describe the difference between the two accounts as the difference between justification and vindication.<sup>11</sup> On the Habermasian account, democracy is never justified (in the past), instead it works towards vindication (in the future). And this is almost the conclusion to which Honig has been driving. Indeed, Honig, upon recognizing the constant slippage of democratic theorizing, wants to posit the gap between will of all and general will (the gap between rule and freedom, the gap between good people and good law, and so on) as constitutive of the democratic process.

Honig, when confronted with the paradox of politics, aims not at its resolution (knowing that only Schmitt, or an account like his, can even attempt to resolve it) but instead embraces it. Honig does not attempt to offer a history, or a myth, of origins, because for her the paradox of legitimation is constantly recurring. And the fact that it is constantly recurring is, for her, generative of a new kind of politics. Given that the sequence of law making good people, and people making good law, regresses *ad infinitum*, she suggests that we are thrown into the sequence that has always already been in play. Honig’s anti-foundationalism leads her into conflict with Habermas with whom she otherwise finds much agreement.

---

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Constitutional Democracy,” in *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 122.

<sup>11</sup> Honig, 37

Habermas unwittingly slides back into the problems of paradox (apparently due to the seduction of foundationalism) by speaking of the “event” and its reasonable traces. Habermas does not found the democratic project, *per se*, but wants to make use of an empirical event like the constitutional assemblies of Paris and Philadelphia. On this point Habermas borrows from Kant who elevates the French Revolution to an “historical sign.”<sup>12</sup> Habermas, however, wants to move away from Kantian fidelity to revolution and instead wants to foster fidelity to the event of constitutional construction: “[T]he vision of people rising up against unjust powers may be more passion-inducing than the daily toil of just self-governance. . . . But good drama and good politics are two different things, Habermas might say.”<sup>13</sup> The event of Paris and Philadelphia is, as all moments of the past are, forever lost. But this event leaves a “reasonable trace” to which we are to remain faithful.<sup>14</sup> Honig is unable to follow Habermas down this path, however, since even the event of Paris and Philadelphia is mired in contingency. Questions of “What came before Paris and Philadelphia?” drag us immediately back into the paradoxes that even Habermas sought to avoid.

Honig’s project can in many ways be summed up as providing a democratic alternative to Schmitt’s authoritarian politics. Where Schmitt attempts to resolve the paradox by embracing the notion of sovereignty, Honig instead moves in the opposite direction by embracing paradox and using it as a moment of opportunity for a new politics. Theological implications echo in both Schmitt and Honig, and it is

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 32

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 33

<sup>14</sup> Habermas, “Constitutional Democracy,” 115



that aspect to which we must now turn in order to achieve further clarification. Indeed, Honig challenges Schmitt (and his conception of sovereignty) directly in the realm of theology.

### **Political Theology**

Schmitt introduces his direct application of theology to politics with this now canonical line: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. . .”<sup>15</sup> The central point of Schmitt’s undertaking is that there is always a systematic correlation between the metaphysics of a given epoch and its political configuration. Schmitt is careful not to reduce the conversation to one of causality—e.g., did the metaphysics create such a politics, or did the political structure generate such a metaphysic? It is not a question of causality but of analogy. Because of monotheism’s analogical relationship with monarchy, Schmitt’s discussion of the politics of theism is necessarily monarchical. The theistic god is identified with the monarch.

The theistic god (as Schmitt conceives it) creates order out of chaos, order out of pure nihil, by a pure act of sovereign will. What we now call nature, with all of its regularity and predictability, is not just a rote mechanism but is a reflection of the genuinely personal will of God. What we call the miracle is, therefore, the intervention of God into the order of nature—a suspension of the ordinary—but the miracle is enacted by God not to overthrow nature. Instead, nature is suspended for its own sake. In order for things to go on as normal, as they should, things must for a time be radically different; God must intervene directly. Therefore, the charge given

---

<sup>15</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36

to a monarch is: "Imitate the immutable decrees of the divinity."<sup>16</sup> Here we find the re-emergence of the Rousseauian lawgiver. The law must have a foundation in an absolute will, and furthermore, the lawgiver must, from time to time, re-appear in order to rescue the law by its own suspension.

Democratic politics is, for Schmitt, a systematic analogy to modern atheism. Transcendence is rejected in theology via the denial of God and in politics via the denial of sovereignty. This atheistic politic reduces governance to proceduralism. Just as nature functions according to certain laws and without exception, so too must the state abide by certain laws and without exception. And thus, for Schmitt, it seems, politics devolves into utter meaninglessness for it falls prey to exactly the democratic paradoxes that we have traced above. The people become the sovereign and are forced to say: "The will of the people is always good."<sup>17</sup> An atheistic democracy collapses under its own weight because it lacks any sovereign will-to-democracy. This is the deadlock of theory attempting to arrive at democracy by beginning with the demos. If the demos is what governs, but also what is governed, how is such a system legitimated?

Honig, in wanting to rescue democracy from the Schmittian specter of dictatorship and totalitarianism, recognizes that we are compelled to make a turn to the theological to find our solution. She looks to a contemporary of Schmitt, Jewish theologian and philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, in order to supply an alternative theology with which to combat Schmitt's sovereign god. What Schmitt and Rosenzweig hold in common is a lamentation of the abandonment of theology and

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 46

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 48

the turn towards atheism or deism. Thus, Rosenzweig's rebuttal to Schmitt is a compelling one: Is it not precisely because of the lack of evidence for an interruptive force that people have turned to atheism (and via the analogy, away from monarchy)? Belief in miracles has become basically impossible, thus the "notion of miracle as rupture, Rosenzweig suggests, is part of the apparatus that sidelines miracle."<sup>18</sup>

Rather than construing miracle as a "ruptural divine decision," Honig, following Rosenzweig, suggests that we conceive of it as "an ambiguous sign that thrusts upon humans the responsibility to receive it."<sup>19</sup> For Honig the miracle is not an intervention into or a suspension of nature. As Rosenzweig puts it, an intervention into the established order by God cannot be a sign of God's perfection. The truly perfect creation would be the one that requires no intervention at all.<sup>20</sup> This interventionist model tends toward what Honig pejoratively refers to as magic—the unpredictable breaking of nature. True miracle is wrapped up in predictability, what we might call prophecy. For instance, what makes the parting of the Red Sea miraculous is not that God intervened supernaturally in order to make a way of escape for the Israelites. Despite the explicability of the event, it is the timing of the event and the people's orientation towards it that makes it properly miraculous. What this means in the correlative discourse of politics is not exactly clear. Certainly the major difference between Rosenzweig's and Schmitt's account of the miraculous is that the people are not a factor in the latter. Rosenzweig's

---

<sup>18</sup> Honig, 94

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 95

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 96

introduction of the role of the people in the miraculous re-orient the center of politics on the demos (a naturally democratic move). Here the emphasis lies on the responsibility of the people to respond to seemingly exceptional moments. In this way there is no need of an external sovereign to decide the exception. Instead, the people are oriented to perceive the exceptional case, and to use it as an opportunity to resist sovereignty in favor of popular action. To return to the Red Sea, the issue is not that the laws of nature were suspended by a supernatural sovereign; what took place was that the Israelites gave a creative reinterpretation of the law of nature, such that they discerned in the events of the Exodus an arc of history which bends towards justice and liberation.<sup>21</sup>

It is perhaps to Rosenzweig's credit that his account of the miracle gives a role to the people. The democratic implication drawn by Honig is clear enough. But it is to his detriment that, ironically, his account leaves no room for God—at least not very much. God is relegated to the hand of providence, but what this means exactly in terms of politics is very unclear. Certainly it is to be distinguished from the political deism in which God (the lawgiver) establishes order and everything operates mechanistically according to the original laws. Honig's immanent theology seems to offer the opportunity for novelty (it at least expresses this desire) but what is political providence for Honig? What does God actually do? The clearest example of Honig's alternative theology is her use of the Talmudic narrative in which Rabbi Eliezer debates the Sages regarding a certain point of the law:

---

<sup>21</sup> "...it was not the miracle's rupture of divine and natural order that as an event recemented the people's relation to god [sic] by revealing him in all his power to them. It was rather that the event followed a certain arc: It was predicted, prophesied, and the event then occurred." Ibid, 97.

Rabbi Eliezer went to great lengths to persuade his colleagues, but failed. Finally, he gave up persuasion and resorted to demonstration, saying: "If the law agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" The carob-tree moved a hundred cubits out of its place. (Others say, four hundred cubits.) Said the Sages: "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree."

Again he said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. Said the Sages: "No proof can be brought from a stream of water." Said Rabbi Eliezer: "If the law agrees with me, let the walls of the study hall prove it!" Whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls, saying: "When scholars are engaged in halachic dispute, what have you to interfere?" Hence they did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume the upright position, in deference to Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer said to his fellows: "If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!" There then issued a voice which proclaimed: "What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer? The law is as he says!" Rabbi Joshua stood on his feet and said: "The Torah is not in heaven! . . . We take no notice of heavenly voices since You, God, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah to follow the majority."<sup>22</sup>

Since Honig plays by Schmitt's rules, her question is not, "Is this a good theological legitimation of democracy?" In fact, she admits that it is not a very good model for theology if we want to avoid a "proceduralized divinity." But a good theological model is not the concern of political theology. Instead she asks, "Is it a good model for a democratic politics?" Her answer is that it depends on the ending of the story. If the story is concluded by the claim that the Torah is not in heaven, "we might be left with a sense of unease about this legalistic coup d'etat."<sup>23</sup> The proceduralism expressed by Rabbi Joshua is not the kind of democracy that Honig is looking for because sovereignty would rest, at last, with the law. The important conclusion to the story comes when Rabbi Nathan asks the prophet Elijah what was

---

<sup>22</sup> Honig, 110. Cf., Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b.

<sup>23</sup> Honig, 110

God's response. Elijah tells him that God, "smiled and said: My children have triumphed over me, my children have triumphed over me."<sup>24</sup>

What is important, therefore, is not that the law has shown itself to be self-sufficient to the point where even God's opinion is irrelevant. Honig is right, that is a terrible model for politics: a conservative constitutionalism that ultimately deprives the demos of any power whatsoever. But, given the statement of God's delight over his own defeat, we can see that it is really the Rabbis who have been victorious in their creative response to sovereignty. This tale teaches us the importance of, "[r]esisting the irresistible, demanding accountability from those who present themselves as beyond such demands, [and] taking exception to the exception. . ."<sup>25</sup>

In political terms, might this represent an executive power of which the people are ever watchful, always ready to oppose in the name of their own sovereignty? This appears to be what Honig is advocating, but in such a case one would be compelled to ask why such an executive is not dispensed with if he only represents a threat to popular sovereignty. Honig sums up her Rosenzwegian perspective thusly:

[S]overeign are they (prophetic are they) who declare the exception or refuse to and/or resist its invocation in the name of an openness to something beyond or apart from the norm-exception binary, something that might disturb or unhinge the binary. . . [T]he exception that revitalizes must itself break the norm-exception binary and the conception of vertical sovereignty that anchors it; it must be an exception, in short, that . . . "takes exception to the exception."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b.

<sup>25</sup> Honig, 111

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 107

We can see very clearly here that Honig's alternative conception of politics and theology is parasitic on traditional authority and classical theology. God, in this sense, has to play the part of sovereign even if only to provide something against which Honig's democracy can push back. As a theoretical account of democratic politics I find it unsatisfying that democracy can be defined only in negative terms (what it is not or what it opposes). But Honig, who admits at the outset that she is beginning *en media res*, may not share in this dissatisfaction. The real question that haunts Honig's theory, even still, is: By what means are the people legitimated in their arguing against the sovereign? We are fortunate that Honig's god delights in playful competition; of course earthly sovereigns are not always so benevolent. On Honig's reading, God invites debate and disagreement but earthly sovereigns do not. So, even if we begin in a politics which demonstrates the naked power of a Schmittian sovereign, what is it exactly that compels us to resist? It is as though there comes an injunction from on high to disobey, to resist, and to take exception to the exception. A return to Schmitt seems inevitable, for it is the people's unequivocal duty to obey the divine call to resist (earthly) authority. Without this there is no reason to suppose that the people are good in their opposition to sovereignty, or that such a resistance is somehow for the better.

Honig faults Schmitt, Rousseau, and others for attempting to somehow ground democracy in the law(giver), and claims to found this criticism on the constantly cyclical relationship between law and demos. However, on the final count, it appears as if Honig too stops the regression, this time with the people. But the people cannot be self-legitimizing. What this signals, in my view, is the

impossibility of ignoring the foundation of democracy. To suppose that the people have always been in an agonistic relationship to law does not legitimate democracy. As Honig's project well recognizes, powers of unitary sovereignty constantly loom as a threat to democracy. If the people are to continually resist such a monopoly on power, then theory, if it does anything at all, must give a reason why they should. And on this point Honig's political theology falls well short.

She has attempted to beat Schmitt on his own terms by invoking an alternative theology, but she fails because she has broken the first rule of Schmitt's project. Political theology is "not merely that kind of playing with ideas . . . which yields colorful symbols and pictures."<sup>27</sup> What Honig lacks is the very thing that Schmitt so heavily emphasizes: "fundamentally systematic and methodical analogies."<sup>28</sup> Her metaphorical appropriation of theology has political correlates that are at best unclear and sometimes non-existent. But so long as we appropriate theology as analogous to politics we will never arrive at democracy. The reason why Honig has to bend and break Schmitt's rules to arrive at a democratic political theology is because the game that Schmitt has constructed was rigged from the beginning. So long as theology serves as a mere analogy to politics (this is the essence of political theology) we will always slide back into a need for dictatorship. The necessary turn, therefore, is away from political theology and towards theological politics wherein we reject the use of God as a mere metaphor for

---

<sup>27</sup> Schmitt, 37

<sup>28</sup> Ibid



sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> For when classical theism is made an analogy of politics (as in Schmitt) there arises a need for an omnipotent human sovereign. Likewise, when Honig's more immanent theology is made into an analogy for politics, God becomes either an obstacle to freedom (i.e. a sovereign which must constantly be kept in check), in which case we should all agree that we would be better off without him, or a playful opponent, which does not map onto any recognizable political configuration. In the end even Honig, by doing politics via theological analogy, finds herself in need of a sovereign who legitimates the project of resistance.

### **Theological Politics**

We must begin, again, at the beginning. The question of the founding of a democratic order can clearly not be swept aside. The paradox of politics asks how can good people create good laws when it takes good laws to create (or determine who are the) good people. Despite what Honig claims, we must either posit that the law is the foundation of goodness (as Rousseau said) or that the people are the foundation of goodness (as Honig eventually admits, in so many words). When one ventures down Honig's path, one realizes that normativity is sacrificed. How can the goodness or rightness of a law be judged since it is good because the people willed it? Democracy cannot begin with the people themselves for they are not only the subject of governance but also its object. There must be something alien about law

---

<sup>29</sup> It seems appropriate to apply what Hebert Marcuse said of poetry to theology: "Understanding of my poetry presupposes the collapse and invalidation of precisely that universe of discourse and behavior into which you want to translate it. My language can be learned like any other language (in point of fact, it is also your own language), then it will appear that my symbols, metaphors, etc. are not symbols, metaphors, etc. but mean exactly what they say. Your tolerance is deceptive. In reserving for me a special niche of meaning and significance, you grant me exemption from sanity and reason, but in my view, the madhouse is somewhere else." Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 197.

in order for it to impose itself on the people, to create the people out of the unruly multitude. Yet, at the same time, by positing a human dictator who grounds the law by his own will we have lost democracy altogether.

The problem confronted in the paradox of founding is what I consider to be the ultimate deadlock and futility of an anthropocentric politics. Honig thinks that the overcoming of the paradox of politics is necessarily a denial or a disguising, for it can only be overcome by “suppressing or naturalizing the exclusion of those (elements of the) people whose residual, remaindered, minoritized existence might call the pure general will into question.”<sup>30</sup> But democracy presupposes a suppressed and naturalized exclusion, as Honig admits just a few pages later: “The general will can never be really equally in everyone’s interest nor really equally willed by everyone.”<sup>31</sup> What democracy requires, therefore, is a primordial (pre-democratic, pre-constitutional) will, or something like a will, which provides the norm towards which the will of the people can be oriented. To be even more specific, this primordial will must will something more than that the people shall rule themselves (as an abstract universal injunction). The will of the lawgiver must be submerged in particularity. The lawgiver must be a partisan; otherwise the political process has yet to get off the ground because the will of all, by definition, can never really embody the general will. What is more, the lawgiver cannot remain in the past but must constantly re-emerge. The excess of the law must constantly be present to justify and thereby protect democracy itself. In sum, to really legitimate democracy, and to protect it against both dictatorship and relativistic majoritarianism, one

---

<sup>30</sup> Honig, 16

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 19

needs a lawgiver that is (1) benevolent—insofar as it wills the self-determination of the people, (2) omnipotent—insofar as it overrides all claims to counter-sovereignty, (3) eternal—insofar as it pre-exists all political institutions and also outlives our own, and (4) incarnate—insofar as it must be partisan, able to determine whose will represents the general will.

What if, instead of turning from Schmitt to Rosenzweig, Honig had considered Gilbert Keith Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*? Here Chesterton marks perfectly the need for fixed political aims. For so long as theology remains a metaphor for politics then the eternality of God's will transposes itself as dictatorship. But if, and only if, God actually enters the domain of the political, then Honig's desire for a people who constantly push back against (human) sovereignty becomes possible:

To the orthodox there must always be a case for revolution; for in the hearts of men God has been put under the feet of Satan. In the upper world hell once rebelled against heaven. But in this world heaven is rebelling against hell. For the orthodox there can always be a revolution; for a revolution is a restoration.<sup>32</sup>

And of the political truth of the Incarnation, Chesterton goes on to say:

That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have his back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents forever. . . [N]ow let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt.<sup>33</sup>

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek, himself an atheist, concedes that politics must turn to theology, not for the sake of pseudo-assurance (the guarantee of the big Other),

---

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2007), 102

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 129-30

but as a reminder of our absolute freedom and our independence.<sup>34</sup> And this maps roughly onto what Chesterton says in regards to Christian faith. While he speaks at lengths of the necessity of a fixed moral vision, Chesterton draws on the Christian doctrine of Original Sin in order to combat the notion of inevitable progress.<sup>35</sup> At this point Honig's mind ought to be eased. One of her fears expressed in *Emergency Politics* is that we slide into a kind of progressive fatalism. She wants to ensure that we give credit for moral actors and not to the "independent trajectory of rights as such."<sup>36</sup> But this cannot be a simple question of either/or. For without the trajectory of rights (Chesterton's fixed moral vision, or Rousseau's primordial Law), there is no way of assessing whether the moral actors that Honig applauds are in fact progressive at all. In fact, on this point Rosenzweig is not Honig's ally. As she explains the Rosenzweigian miracle she writes, "It was rather that the event followed a certain arc: It was predicted, prophesied, and the event then occurred."<sup>37</sup> Here Rosenzweig's theology is anti-democratic. His dependence on prophecy opens for the possibility of the dictator (as prophet) who can predict when new rights ought to emerge, and what those rights will be. Chesterton's fixed moral vision does not have this same danger. For despite the hope of the eschaton, there is nothing that says that the line between here and there ought to be a straight one, or even a

---

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Soul of the Party: St. Paul had it right—using religion to rock the foundations of authority," *New Statesman* (April 1, 2010) <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/soul-of-the-party> (accessed September 11, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> "In so far as we desire the definite reconstructions and the dangerous revolutions. . . we shall not discourage the thought of possible ruin; we shall rather encourage it. If we want, like the Eastern saints, merely to contemplate how right things are, of course we shall only say that they must go right. But if we particularly want to make them go right, we must insist that they may go wrong." Chesterton, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Honig, 47

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 97

curved one. In fact, this is exactly Chesterton's point in invoking the Fall: the line between Eden and the New Jerusalem is not an arc, but the most jagged of all trajectories. For Chesterton, progress is by no means inevitable, but neither is progress meaningless in its self-referentiality.

Žižek goes on:

This is the kind of God an authentic left needs: a God who wholly "became man" -- a comrade among us, crucified together with two social outcasts -- and who not only "doesn't exist" but also himself knows this, accepting his erasure, entirely passing over into the love that binds members of the Holy Ghost (the party, the emancipatory collective).<sup>38</sup>

For Žižek, what makes for the alliance between Christianity and emancipatory politics is this Event of Pentecost-as-Resurrection. God, in fact, dies on the cross and is emptied into the revolutionary community. Despite his atheism, Žižek is, on my count, still an example of one who does theological politics and not political theology because the essential contrast between the two is that the divine, in the former, enters into the political mythos rather than being its analogical cousin. One is free to agree with Honig that our stories about the divine may be a projection, "perhaps even a fairy tale, but then democratic politics depends on such projections and tales."<sup>39</sup>

Atheism and theological politics are not mutually exclusive. However, what Žižek does not realize is that even without this atheistic turn, Christianity's properly democratic politics is fully laid bare. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "The Father

---

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, "Soul of the Party." Slavoj Žižek is also heavily dependent on the work of Chesterton. He seems to be one who has taken Chesterton up on his challenge: "[L]et the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity whoever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist." Chesterton, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Honig, 111

judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.”<sup>40</sup> Here “Son” should not be read simply as Jesus, the Son of God. The passage goes on to state that, “[The Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.”<sup>41</sup>

A number of New Testament scholars have come to recognize that the dominical expression “Son of Man” is borrowed from the book of Daniel where it is used as a symbol for the people of God who suffer persecution and whom God vindicates by elevating to a position of authority.<sup>42</sup> The same pattern is evident in the four Gospels’ use of the expression. The Son of Man suffers and the Son of Man is appointed as judge.<sup>43</sup> It is precisely this logic that is expressed in the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats. Here the Son of Man judges the people of the world according to how they treated the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, and the naked. And the punch-line of the narrative is that this refuse of society is the Son of Man. This explains where Paul gets his notion that the saints will judge the world; for God himself does not judge but commits all judgment to those dislodged members of society.

Žižek, as a Marxist, ought to have picked up on this properly Marxist notion at the heart of the gospel: those who suffer at the hands of society are those who

---

<sup>40</sup> John 5:22, NIV

<sup>41</sup> John 5:27, NIV

<sup>42</sup> See, Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1998), 65-66; Maurice Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: SPCK 1979); and Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark: A Study of the background of the term “Son of Man” and its use in St Mark’s Gospel* (Montreal: McGill University, 1967).

<sup>43</sup> In greater fidelity to the book of Daniel we should read the “coming of the Son of Man,” not as the second coming of Christ (a descent) but as the truly political ascension of the oppressed into power. “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14, NIV.

have the right and the responsibility to judge it.<sup>44</sup> What this theology points to is exactly what Honig's democratic theory ironically lacks: God the Father. The Son (the people) have a right to govern but only because God the Father, to whom sovereignty belongs, has committed judgment to the people.<sup>45</sup> God does not merely judge in favor of the people (as a benevolent dictator), instead he elects the poor to be judges in his stead. As the epistle of James puts it, "Has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?"<sup>46</sup> Democracy is dependent, for its coming-into-being, on that which is not subject to democratic approval.

Another oft-scorned discourse, Marxism, supplies additional language for thinking about the democratic paradox. The only system that is truly democratic is the dictatorship of the proletariat. Here dictatorship does not signify democracy's opposite, but rather lays bare the truth of state power (what we have, up to this point, referred to as law's excess). Consider Lenin's designation of liberal democracy as the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie; this is not to say that it is not really democratic (that the elections were rigged or that at any moment the bourgeoisie would take direct power if the democratic outcomes did not suit their ends).

---

<sup>44</sup> "Much vague and sentimental journalism has been poured out to the effect that Christianity is akin to democracy, and most of it is scarcely strong enough to refute the fact that the two things have often quarreled. The real ground upon which Christianity and democracy are one is very much deeper. . . . If our faith comments on government at all, its comment must be this—that the man should rule who does not think that he can rule. . . . If the great paradox of Christianity means anything, it means this—that we must take the crown in our hands, and go hunting in dry places and dark corners of the earth until we find the one man who feels himself unfit to wear it." Chesterton, 111.

<sup>45</sup> While I believe the shortcomings of Honig's political theology can be overcome by the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, this is not to say that Judaism is incapable of legitimating democratic politics. This essay is merely to show that theology has a decisive role to play in political theory and, as a Christian, I know no better resource to defend democracy than the gospel of the incarnate Son, through whom we are adopted into the very life of the sovereign God.

<sup>46</sup> James 2:5, NIV

Instead he meant that, “the very form of the bourgeois-democratic state. . . embodies a ‘bourgeois’ logic.”<sup>47</sup> Honig attempts to construe democracy as essentially outside of the domain of dictatorial politics; thus she fears the Rousseauian move to end the regression of the paradox of politics with a non-elected lawgiver. But if Schmitt teaches us anything it is that sovereign power is unavoidable (thus my conviction that if we are to be democratic we must locate that sovereignty outside of the domain of humanity altogether). What Lenin confronts us with is the notion that democracy cannot be an end in itself. Not all democracies are created equal. Our fixed moral vision must surpass even democracy, but it must also be an end to which democracy is a necessary means. To put it another way: If dictatorship is necessary, why do we want the dictatorship of the proletariat?

Marxism has designated the proletariat as the universal class, but this, Žižek is quick to clarify, is not because it is devoid of particular interests. The proletariat, of course, does indeed have particular interests—and as we noted earlier, without a theory that stands for particularity, how can the people ever be drawn out of the multitude? “[A]ll other classes are (potentially) capable of reaching the status of the ruling class, while the proletariat cannot achieve this without abolishing itself as a class.”<sup>48</sup> If the proletariat were the ruling class it would no longer be the proletariat, but this is exactly the dialectical logic of the Communist vision. Society must remain in a vigilant state of inverting itself, by including the excess of society as the direct embodiment of society’s whole. Eventually the hierarchical structure that produced the underclass will be destroyed. Bourgeoisie and proletariat perish together in the

---

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 412

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 414



Communist revolution. Here again Žižek cannot but invoke the Christian tradition. He, I think, appropriately paraphrases the apostle Paul's injunction to resist not flesh and blood but spiritual forces of wickedness: "Our struggle is not against concrete, corrupted individuals, but against those in power in general, against their authority, against the global order and the ideological mystification that sustains it."<sup>49</sup>

True democracy, seen in this light, is not the including of the excluded into the domain of the governed, but the installation of the excluded as the governors! This is the logic of the Hegelian dialectic, the negation of negation. It is insufficient to reject one particular king as usurper. We must take the dialectic to its end and say that, "Every king is a rebel and a usurper."<sup>50</sup> But hidden in this clever reversal is the theological root of democracy: it implies that there is a higher authority against whom all (earthly) sovereigns are erected as rebels, for we cannot escape the necessarily relative nature of the term rebel or usurper. (We may also think of the example of the Communist adage of private-property-as-theft. Theology is the only way to actually make sense of this claim, namely that the earth is the Lord's along with everything in it.) It is only necessary to remember what Chesterton has pointed out to us: that when God appears as a human he is the embodiment of the paradoxical rebel-king.

## **Conclusion**

Bonnie Honig's work wonderfully elucidates the problems of legitimation that confront the democratic project. Ultimately, however, her turn to Rosenzweig

---

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, "Soul of the Party."

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 416

marks the insufficiency of her conception of paradox as generative. If democracy is to be guarded against its enemies then it is not acceptable to have a democracy that we hope to vindicate without attending to justification. As Honig well knows, the future is open and progress is not inevitable. Schmittian sovereigns are waiting to seize power—and they very well may do so—but in order to call them out as rebels and usurpers we must give an account as to why authority ought to lie with the people in the first place. Honig is right: The Rousseauian lawgiver and the Schmittian sovereign are dangerous theoretical notions given that they run counter to the democratic conscience. But try as they might, the people cannot legitimate their ascendancy to power. What is more, the people cannot even do so much as define themselves as the people. There is a paradox to be embraced, and it is the reality of the non-democratic (and theological) core at the center of democratic politics. Or, to put it another way: “Those who want to save their democracy will lose it, and those who lose their democracy for My sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

### Bibliography

- Allison, Dale C. *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Benhabib, Seyla. "Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy." *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 1, no. 1 (April 1994): 26.
- Casey, Maurice. *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7*. London: SPCK, 1979.
- Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. *Orthodoxy*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2007.
- Connolly, William E. *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Borderlines v. 1. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Time of Transitions*. Polity, 2006.
- Honig, Bonnie. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Hooker, Morna Dorothy. *The Son of Man in Mark: a Study of the Background of Theterm "Son of Man" and Its Use in St. Mark's Gospel*. Montreal: McGill Univ. Pr, 1967.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Translated by G. D. H. Cole. Cosimo, Inc., 2008.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Talmud, *The Steinsaltz Edition: Tractate Bavia Metza*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. New York: Verso, 2008.
- . "Soul of the Party: St. Paul had it right—using religion to rock the foundations of authority." *New Statesman* (April 1, 2010) <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-Žižek/articles/soul-of-the-party> (accessed September 11, 2012).