

“The One Who Decides on the Exception”: The Sovereign and Sovereignty in Slavoj Žižek’s Political Theology after Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben

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Abstract: At the intersection of “the theological” and “the political,” the situatedness of the sovereign dictates the task and method of political theology. It is the sovereign, in particular, positioned between “the theological” and “the political,” that is responsible for existentializing what is theologized and what is politicized through the power of sovereignty. Through this sovereignty, the sovereign creates, defines, and oversees all the existential dimensions of a theological-political environment, especially with respect to exclusiveness and inclusiveness, marginalization and belongingness, and what is accomplished by the state of exception. To understand the nuances of what a sovereign is and how sovereignty operates, as the one that develops the state of exception through an act of exception, this essay will examine the explicit and implicit political theologies articulated by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, in an effort to construct Slavoj Žižek’s political theology from Schmitt’s sentiment about “the one who decides on the exception” and Agamben’s conceptualization of “*zoē*” and “*bios*.” From Schmitt and Agamben, Žižek’s political theology makes use of the dialectic and references to notions of symptom and trauma, which ultimately culminates in a religious-oriented understanding of the sovereign’s act of exception as the “theologico-political suspension of the ethical.”

Keywords: Žižek; Political Theology; Sovereign; Agamben; Schmitt

The fundamentals of “political theology,” through a postmodern understanding of the term itself as the dialectical relationship between “the theological” and “the political,” begins with the political thought of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985)—the manner in which we do “political theology” today, as it is currently articulated within the bounds of postmodernity, can undoubtedly be traced to its conceptualization in Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) and, later, his *The Concept of the Political* (1932). Indeed, though Schmitt’s “political theology” is influenced by Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) and his use of the term in “The Political Theology of Mazzini and the International” (1871) and, to a certain extent, also influenced by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and his *Leviathan* (1651), what is found more precisely in Schmitt speaks more directly to the relationship between modern theologizing and modern politics, which Schmitt contextualizes in a theologizing and politicizing about the Weimar Republic (or the “German Reich”) and then Nazi Germany (or the “Third Reich”).

Not only is Schmitt considered as the “leading jurist during the Weimar Republic” (Schmitt 1985: vii) during the pre-Nazi years of Germany, he is also considered, upon the rise of Nazism in 1933, as “the crown jurist of the Third Reich” (Frye 1966: 818-830). It is this latter consideration that overshadows the first, and rightfully so, such that Schmitt’s support of Nazism becomes integral to how we come to understand his view of political theology. Yet, Schmitt’s Nazism, as such, is complicated—just as Nazism is rather complicated for Schmitt’s contemporary Martin Heidegger.

Though Schmitt’s brand of political theology is chiefly illustrated in *Political Theology* and *The Concept of the Political*, both of which were published before Schmitt’s allegiance to Nazism, these texts are reassessed in relation to another noteworthy text that was, in fact, written in a presumed advocacy of and influenced by Schmitt’s Nazism: *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol* (1938)—here, it is with his *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* that we have a more mature form of Schmitt’s political theology calibrating the relationship between “the theological” and “the political” in terms of the development of the Nazi State. The maturity of this latter text is grounded on the complicated nature of Schmitt’s Nazism—this latter text comes at the time when Schmitt, as it has been noted in George Schwab’s introduction to the 1996 translation of the text, has “left’ the Nazi legal organizations that he had joined in 1933 and confined his activities to those primarily associated with a university career: teaching and writing” (Schmitt 1996: ix). Schwab contextualizes this with respect to “vitriolic attacks on [Schmitt]” made by the

SS publication, *Das Schwarzes Korps* in December 1936, which strongly questioned Schmitt's allegiance to Nazism and used Schmitt's earlier criticisms of Nazism against him as inculpatory evidence (Schmitt 1996: ix). These attacks deeply embarrassed Schmitt, in one sense, and made his status in the Nazi Party tenuous, especially, as Schwab points out, "in the context of the rapidly emerging totalitarian one-party SS state" (Schmitt 1996: ix). In light of this, when contextualizing Schmitt's *Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, Schwab comes to the following conclusion:

What is argued is that Schmitt used his writings on Hobbes to provide an assessment of and a response to emerging political realities. Stated succinctly, because of the Nazi failure to heed his advice on the necessity of forging the new Germany into a qualitative total polity, Schmitt insinuated the demise of the Third Reich (Schmitt 1996: x).

Schmitt's envision of a "new Germany" is what drew Schmitt to Nazism, based on the idea that National Socialism could develop the Germany state "into a qualitative total polity"—the fact that, as Schmitt viewed it, Nazism did not actualize what Schmitt had hoped it would become underscores his complicated relationship with National Socialism. For that matter, stands to reason that Schmitt would be critical of "emerging political realities" set forth by Nazism and the extent to which "a new Germany" was less likely to reach its full fruition as Schmitt had hoped when he first aligned himself with Nazism in 1933. The promises of Nazism, the "emerging political realities," and Schmitt's desires for a "new Germany" were increasingly misaligned.

For Schmitt, this misalignment arises from his sentiment at the opening of *The Concept of the Political*, in which Schmitt proposes that "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political" (Schmitt 1995: 19). In particular, Schmitt finds, when defining "the political" as such, "in its literal sense and in its historical appearance the state as a specific entity of a people" (Schmitt 1995: 19). Said this way, Schmitt recognizes that, even before joining the Nazi Party in 1933, Nazism itself would give rise to "the political" inasmuch as the Nazi Party becomes a representation of "the state."

It is from the relationship between "the state" and "the political" that the concept of sovereignty develops, as Schmitt argues at the opening of *Political Theology*. What allows "the sovereign" to venture from merely "the political" into "the theological" is predicated on the fact that "the sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 1985: 5). This is certainly so, when remembering that Nazism as "the political" and the Nazi Party "the state" positions Hitler as "the sovereign," or "the one who decides on the exception."

We need not say, here, what Hitler, as “sovereign” decided on as “the exception”—we need not look any further than Nazi concentration camps and the Holocaust for a practical example of Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty.

In this way, the rationalization of situating “the sovereign [as] he who decided on the exception,” even we remain true to the genocide of some six million Jews, becomes a realization of “the theological.” This orientation, as Schmitt argues in *Political Theology*, comes by way of the following proposition:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts (Schmitt 1985: 36).

Here, by recognizing that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” Schmitt’s kind of theologizing about God becomes a theologizing about sovereignty, such that the sovereign’s power itself is theological. It is the theological power of sovereign that allows for the existential meaning of “the state of exception” to orient itself theologically, in order to existentialize those that are included in the state from those that are excluded from it.

At the intersection of “the theological” and “the political,” the meaning of doing political theology, for Schmitt, is based on a theologizing of the sovereign, to the point that this kind of theologizing theologically transfigures the meaning of the state and the concept of the political—in turn, the meaning of the sovereign’s act of engaging in the state of exception existentializes the theologizing of the sovereign, such the sovereign becomes *the one who decides on the exception*.

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In his introduction to *Homo Sacer* (1995), Giorgio Agamben proposes that the “the protagonist of [*Homo Sacer*] is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert” (Agamben 1995: 12). Agamben’s interpretation of “the life of homo sacer” is derived from “an obscure figure of archaic Roman law” (Agamben 1995: 12), but is particularly appropriated with

respect to how human life, in the general sense, is included in or excluded from the overarching political structure, in the narrow sense. Human life “in the general sense” can be likened to what Agamben calls “the bare life”—it is a simple form of human existence that, as Agamben suggests, “is originally situated at the margins of the political order” (Agamben 1995: 12). Conversely, human life “in the narrow sense” is denoted by a political order, or a structural politicization that functions, in part, “along with the disciplinary process by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific subject” (Agamben 1995: 13). The analytical possibility of human life existing in “the general sense” as bare life and “the narrow sense” as political life is respectively represented with *zoē* and *bios*.

But, more importantly, the relationship between *zoē* and *bios* seems tied to the dialectic between essence and existence. If so, does Agamben view *zoē* as “essence” or “existence”? In other words, if we understand that *zoē* precedes *bios*—or that *zoē* opens up the possibility for *bios*—does Agamben ascribe to the traditional notion of *essence preceding existence*, or the Sartrean reversal of *existence preceding essence*? I think this is a very important distinction to make, even if charting Agamben’s posthumanist project along the lines of Karen Barad’s “mattering” of essence and existence (Barad 2003: 827). If essence is *zoē*, then *bios* as existence concretizes “being” by building upon it. On the other hand, if existence is *zoē*, that is existence is “bare” because the essence of *bios* concretizes “being” in a Sartrean way into something meaningful.

Clearly, Agamben’s notions of essence and existence are situated in “scientific” and “political” representations—bare life as *zoē* is “bare” because it is only scientifically represented by something that exists outside a “system,” while *bios* is politically represented by something that can exist both inside and outside of a “system.” This latter sense—that is, political representation—is the means by which *zoē* performs in the world, particularly a world construed by Baradian onto-epistemological performativity (Barad 2003: 811-818). If following Agamben’s conceptualization a bit further, the existentialities (or the possibilities of meaning-making by performative means) of *zoē* and *bios* “in large measure corresponds to the birth of modern democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an *object* but as the *subject* of political power” (Agamben 1995: 13).

When considering “the birth of modern democracy,” Agamben defines modern democracy—as opposed to classical democracy—“as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*” (Agamben 1995: 13). To be clear, Agamben envisions modern democracy as a power-based structure capable of ultimately providing a Derridan “freeplay” for the *bios* of *zoē*.

That is to say, Agamben's notion of the *bios* of *zoē*, or what I would term as the political existence for bare life, is grounded not on the objectification of *zoē* by the *bios*, but instead, on the subjectivization of *zoē* through the *bios*. Note the difference *between by the bios* and *through the bios*. For Agamben, the goal of modern democracy should be to vindicate and liberate *zoē*, but also function at a "historico-philosophical level, since it alone will allow us to orient ourselves in relation to the new realities and unforeseen convergences of the end of the millennium" (Agamben 1995: 13).

With these "new realities and unforeseen convergences," the means by which any vindication and liberation of *zoē* becomes possible is through biopolitics—in order to "make it possible to clear the way for [biopolitics]," Western politics must construct an existential link between *zoē* and *bios*. Yet, just as Agamben argues, Western politics "has not succeeded," since Western politics—which operates in opposition to biopolitics—is "founded on the *exceptio* of bare life" (Agamben 1995: 13). Agamben's new politics—one of "both modern totalitarianism and the society of mass hedonism and consumerism"—is based on Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty, the possibility of a "sovereign" capable of deciding on "the state of exception," and the extent to which sovereignty exists paradoxically.

Agamben is correct to suggest that there is a "paradox" to sovereignty, since the role of the sovereign is both outside and inside the juridical order. Yet, this paradox is essential—albeit, the ethical lynchpin—to Agamben's post-humanism ethically interpreted through a politicalized lens. This is because, when viewed through a politicalized lens, the sovereign must stand outside the juridical order and still belong to it, since the political structure to which the sovereign operates within and beyond grants the sovereign *freeplay*.

Not only does the sovereign exist in a politicalized construct to, first and foremost, stabilize it and make determinations about who should be included in or excluded from the *bios*, but that same sovereignty ek-sists due to an exception that is *existentially exceptional*. This sort of exception, in itself, allows the sovereign to bestow a *state of exception* that separates the sovereign's *state* from that *exception*—without the sovereign's ability to exist in a *freeplay*, or have an *agential realism*, the ability to include and exclude from the *bios* would be impossible.

The logic of exception (that is, to say who is included or excluded from the "good life" of political existence), then, is the logic of sovereignty—for the sovereign to grant a "state of exception," the sovereign must exist within his/hers own implied *state of exception* that is *existentially apolitical*. In effect, the only manner in which a sovereign can include or exclude anyone from the *bios* is from this apolitical position—this *existentially apolitical* position (a position that is both within and beyond the sovereign's political structure) is post-humanistic.

Though Agamben's post-humanism must be apolitical in one sense, to a greater degree, the apolitics of the sovereign is undoubtedly based on the necessity of having *no exteriorized other* in much the same sentiments as Baradian ethics theorizes, even for the positionality (or, perhaps "historicality," as in the historical situations of all contributing roles to the *bios*) of the sovereign with respect to all over which it holds sovereignty as *the one who decides on the exception*.

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As a culmination of the political theologies of Schmitt and Agamben, Žižek's handling of the political and the theological through the politico-theological—or the theologico-political—role of *the one who decides on the exception* presents sovereignty and the sovereign at the intersection of the thought of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx. To a certain extent, at that intersection, the historical, the psychological, and the political-ethical-economical contribute to what the sovereign is and what sovereignty does. For Žižek, Hegel, Lacan, and Marx bring a matrix of concerns to what it means to do political theology as a politicizing and theologizing that advances and complexifies Schmitt's and Agamben's respective meanings of what "exception" is and what happens to that which is relegated and regulated by a "state of exception."

The question, here, is, when *the one who decides on the exception* does so to define what "exception" is and in what manner a "state of exception" occurs, how does Žižek's political theology position itself between the concerns of the political and those of the theological?

Insofar as Schmitt's and Agamben's respective political theologies make sense of the political in terms of an implied theological orientation, Žižek's theological orientation is made explicit—Žižek's explicit references to God, over and against what is implied in Schmitt and Agamben, allows for Žižek's conception of the sovereign and its sovereignty as *the one who decides on the exception* to be oriented in a top-down approach, while Schmitt's and Agamben's approaches embody iterations of the bottom-up. When considered this way, the meaning made from *the one who decides on the exception* is either as a low-sovereignty or a high-sovereignty, such that Žižek's political theology is a high-sovereignty calibrated by the relationship between Žižek and theology.

The relationship between Žižek's and theology has been well-researched, particularly and at its most explicit in Adam Kotsko's *Žižek and Theology* (2008). Through Kotsko's study, Žižek's "theology" is assessed in reference to and in relation with the thought of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx (Kotsko 2008: 8). Not only is this an excellent means of contextualizing Žižek's general influences, but it also becomes a means to further contextualize what kind of

theologizing Žižek is concerned with explicating. What Hegel, Lacan, and Marx contribute to Žižek's theologizing can be outlined and explained in a wide variety of ways, when attending to the various means of focusing on Hegelianism, Lacanianism, and Marxism.

For Kotsko, Žižek operates at the intersection of his Hegelian, Lacanian, and Marxist influences, such that Žižek's theologizing, as Kotsko points out, "insists on [a] continued materialist orientation" (Kotsko 2008: 2). In spite of what comes with the history of ideas associated with Hegelianism, Lacanianism, and Marxism, Kotsko is careful to use Žižek's own characterization of how these influences allow Žižek to proclaim that "[he is] materialist through and through" (Kotsko 2008: 2). In following Žižek through Kotsko, how Žižek theologizes is in terms of conceptualizing "that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach" (Kotsko 2008: 2). If Žižek theologizes from a self-described materialist stance, and Kotsko surmises Žižek's theologizing as a "materialist theology," how does Kotsko come to this fundamental thesis? In this sense, "to clarify the stakes of this thesis," Kotsko presents the following three-part question: "what exactly Žižek's practice of a materialist theology entails, what brings him to theology, and what his work might mean for theologians" (Kotsko 2008: 2).

Indeed, as much as Kotsko recognizes that Hegel, Lacan, and Marx, in themselves, contribute to Kotsko's understanding of Žižek's materialist theology, a more careful handling of what "theology" means in relation to what "materialist" means for Žižek is required. This is especially so when laying a foundation for what can be meant by Žižek's "theologizing," if we take into account that "theologizing" itself can be taken differently by Hegelianism, Lacanianism, and Marxism—the meaningfulness of theologizing from Hegel, from Lacan, and from Marx are all up for debate, to which Žižek's "theologizing," if you will, can litigate at the margins of each.

An important way to litigate Hegel, Lacan, and Marx from the standpoint of Žižek's materialist theologizing may be best grasped by thinking of Žižek's materialist approach as a decidedly political approach. That is to say, when Kotsko refers to a Žižek's materialist theologizing, what is also at play is a political theologizing. It is "the political" that becomes, to Kotsko's inquiry, "what Žižek's practice of a materialist theology entails"—it is "the political" that also "what brings [Žižek] to theology" and, subsequently, becomes integral to "what [Žižek's] work might mean for theologians." In light of the sections Kotsko devotes to "ideology critique," "subjectivity and ethics," "the Christian experience," "dialectical materialism," and "theological responses," all are punctuated, fundamentally speaking, on an existential dialogue between "the theological" and "the political."

What becomes all the more apparent with Kotsko is that, even when acknowledging the contributions of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx to Žižek’s theologizing—if setting aside it as “materialist theology”—there is certainly more that can be said about the nature of “the political” in Žižek, and how Hegel, Lacan, and Marx politically speak to and are, in themselves, politically spoken to with Žižek’s theologizing. For Žižek to arrive at a self-described materialist approach means to do so through political negotiations, which are predicated on Žižek’s holding sovereignty over Hegel, Lacan, and Marx—how Žižek theologizes “the political” in the role of the sovereign is as *the one who decides on the exception*.

In a certain sense, the way that “the political” works through Hegel, Lacan, and Marx on the way to Žižek is with the notion of the dialectic, as that which determines what, how, and why exception occurs: the Hegelian dialectic, as it stands in relation to the Kantian version, the Marxist dialectic, as it stands in relation to the Hegelian version, and the Lacanian “dialectic,” as the “mirror stage,” as it stands in relation to Hegel. Not only are all political negotiations in Žižek’s theologizing in general, but each plays a specific role in, as Kotsko writes, informing “[Žižek’s] style of thought, his major concepts, and his political commitments” (Kotsko 2008: 8).

What arises from this trajectory of dialectics—conceptually from Kant to Hegel to Marx to Lacan—is the extent to which all dialectics, in Žižek’s hands, are informed by trauma and a symptom. Hegel’s response to Kant is one of trauma symptomatic in Hegel’s thought, just as Marx’s response to Hegel is one of trauma symptomatic in Marx’s thought. Similarly, Lacan’s response to Marx is one of trauma symptomatic in Lacan’s thought. In a similar manner, Žižek’s responses to Hegel, Marx, and Lacan are all from points of trauma symptomatic in Žižek’s thought—but where does Žižek stand in reference to Schmitt and Agamben? Is it possible to view Žižek’s political theology in reference to Schmitt’s and Agamben’s, as a traumatic response that is symptomatic in Žižek’s political theology itself?

To answer these questions, it will be prudent to explore the broader matrix of the relationship between trauma and symptom and that which exists between the political and the theological, as articulated through how dialectics and matters of negation shape how political theology concerns itself primarily with the notion of “exception” and how a “state of exception” is brought to bear by a sovereign and its sovereignty as *the one who decides on the exception*.

In “Dialectics and Hegelian Negation in Slavoj Žižek’s *Enjoy Your Symptom: Fighting the Fantasies of Trauma, Identity, Authority, and Phallophany*,” (2019), dialectics are discussed more broadly through the use of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx, as well as Kierkegaard, though these understandings are grounded in terms of a dialectic between “trauma” and the “symptom.” In this regard, when reading *Enjoy your Symptom* (2007), it has been argued that “Žižek presents

the notion of ‘trauma’ as critical to understanding the scope and meaning of the ‘symptom’” (Woodson 2019: 2). The relationship between “trauma” and “symptom” requires a kind of theologizing about God that must be “political” in nature—to define Žižek’s political theology, as such, means tempering the direct influences of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx, as well as the indirect influence of Kierkegaard, on the manner with which we can say that Žižek theologizes about God through construing selfhood as “a relation that relates itself to itself” (Kierkegaard 1983: 13). That relation, when viewed as what relates trauma to symptom—or symptom to trauma—is just as much about the political as it is about the theological.

Recently, in Bojan Koltaj’s *Žižek Reading Bonhoeffer: Towards a Radical Critical Theology* (2019), Koltaj explicitly discusses Žižek’s “political theology,” doing so with Hegel, Lacan, and even Kierkegaard in mind, but without any mention of Marx. Even so, Koltaj suggests that “for Žižek, it seems, theology forms one of the most complex ways of speaking about radical change” (Koltaj 2019: 51). What this attends to, then, is the extent to which political theology makes explicit, in Koltaj’s words, that “theology is political and the political is theological [such that] political theology is not only possible but necessary” (Koltaj 2019: 51). As thoroughgoing as Koltaj’s assessment of Žižek’s “political theology” is, what makes Žižek’s theologizing “political” and politicizing “theological” have as much—if not mostly—to do with Marxism as it does with the contributions of Hegel and Lacan. Koltaj’s lack of a Marxist voice in his understanding of Žižek’s “political theology” begs to question, if, as it is presented, there can even be a “political theology” for Žižek without Marx. This stands to reason why, as Koltaj notes:

The attempt to think politically, without religious categories, was a failure, Žižek argues, and contends that today’s political thought has been turned into an ethics and a legal philosophy that promotes moral values and ethical policies. Seeking change in this way, Žižek argues, is a closed loop where every attempt to transgress the law, insofar as it is carried out within its framework, actually affirms it (Koltaj 2019: 51).

The extent to which there is “an ethics and a legal philosophy” to Žižek’s political theology arises tangibly through “moral values and ethical policies.” The former is translated into the latter by a political theology espoused by sovereignty, such that the sovereign, as *the one who decides on the exception*, frames the manner with which “ethics and a legal philosophy” are enframed by “moral values and ethical policies.” By “enframed,” consider Heidegger’s conceptualization of it (Heidegger 1977: 20). The framing of the framed and the enframing of the enframed elicit a relation that relates Hegelianism to Lacanianism, insofar as Žižek’s political theology—a

politicizing of the theological and a theologizing of the political—fundamentally depends on *the one who decides on the exception*.

In my view, while Hegelianism and Lacanianism are not overtly political and, arguably, do not directly contribute to what can be meant by “the political,” Marxism not only allows us to politicize the meaning of Hegelian dialectics, but it makes it possible to view Lacanianism through a political lens predicated on a means of handling a dialectical structure, even if, according to Koltaj, “Žižek escapes from the closed-circuit of Lacan’s psychoanalysis and emerges as a distinct political thinker” (Koltaj 2019: 31). The means by which Žižek “escapes” and “emerges” is through envisioning the sovereign as both a theologian and a politician, not only capable theologizing about God beyond the “closed-circuit” of Lacanianism, but also capable of politicizing God into another closed-circuit. In this sense, for Žižek, if following Koltaj’s point, political theology becomes a way to seek change through a “closed loop.” The sovereign in Žižek’s political theology determines this closed loop but is not determined by it. In this way, Žižek’s take on sovereignty allows itself to “transgress the law” whereby the sovereign, as *the one who decides on the exception*, carries out this transgression of the law “within its framework, actually affirm[ing] it.”

The notion of law, here, as that which can be transgressed by the sovereign, points both to a symptom and becomes a constituent of trauma. Because a symptom, as such, is understood in terms of trauma, as such, so that the notion of traumatic itself denotes a notion of symptomatic, the relationship between the two occurs in a “closed loop” or a “closed circuit”—what *the one who decides on the exception* means to matters of law, as that which can be transgressed and presents a meaning within that transgression, is the creation of a transgressed law that bestows trauma upon all that experience the state of exception, becoming symptomatic of sovereignty that excludes itself from the state of exception it dictates.

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When we speak about “trauma” and “symptom” as holding a dialectical relationship which, in themselves, hold a dialectical relationship with sovereign, we do so with the understanding that both are theologically-comported and, as such, require a kind of theologizing to fully understand what they mean for *the one who decides on the exception*—through Hegelianism, Lacanianism, Marxism, and even Kierkegaardianism, Žižek’s “political theology” is one that theologizes about God from the standpoint of the relationship between “trauma” and “symptom,” whereby the ideological effects of sovereignty become traumatic and symptomatic of a sovereign.

The very establishment of dialectics as a form of ideology points to that which must be produced and reproduced in the relationship between “symptom” and “trauma.” Even in Žižek, to the question of the meaning of political theology, if we hold to what can be made out of the theological in relation to the political, we find that there remains a sovereignty standing outside what is produced and reproduced in the relationship between “symptom” and “trauma.” Though unmentioned by Žižek, the sovereign is still positioned primordially to what is produced and reproduced in the dialectical environment of Žižek’s “political theology”—it is sovereignty that establishes the dialectical just as much as this sovereignty establishes what is theological and what is political, and how that relationship represents itself in notions of “symptom” and “trauma.”

What it means to be human, then, is grounded in “trauma” and “symptom,” so that human existence itself is situated by trauma and situates itself as a symptom—both politicize what it means to be human in terms of how we handle “trauma” and manage “symptom.” The extent to which we handle “trauma” and manage “symptom” occurs through how we theologize about God, and how, in doing so, overcome a “negation” attempting to “negate” the meaning of our humanity by distancing us from God’s existence. To theologize about God by way of Žižek’s “political theology” means theologizing the meaning of “symptom” as it physically manifests itself in the meaning of human existence and, then, theologizing the meaning of “trauma” as it psychologically manifests itself in the connectedness with God’s existence. The distinction, here, is, as found in Louis Althusser, between the material and the imaginary (Althusser 2014: 259)—in this way, notions of the “symptom” and “trauma” hold an ideological value, not only shaping the dialectic between the two, but also shaping the dialectic between human existence and God’s existence.

If theologizing about God requires defining God’s existence, the fundamental question that must be asked is what is “God” in Žižek’s “political theology”? How does Žižek conceive of God conceptually, as that which dialectically informs the political and the theological? And, for that matter, how does Žižek’s God, through political theology, frame and enframe the sovereign in a sovereignty that grounds *the one who decides on the exception*?

Let us consider how Žižek’s conceptualization of the meaning of God develops over the course of his career. Beginning with *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek explicates the God of religion as both a substance and a subject—for Žižek, the Greek, Jewish and Christian religions “form a kind of triad which corresponds perfectly to the triad of reflection (positing, external and determinate reflection)” (Žižek 1989: 201). God as substance and God as subject become a reflection of one another in the different contexts of religion—whether

attending to Greek, Jewish, or Christian forms—so that, Žižek concludes, “the significance of these at first sight purely speculative ruminations for the psychoanalytic theory of ideology cannot be overestimated” (Žižek 1989: 230). In this sense, God becomes, which attends to Žižek’s title, a sublime object of ideology, such that “the brute, senseless reality is *assumed*, accepted as our own work, if not the most elementary ideological operation, the symbolization of the Real, its transformation into a meaningful totality, its inscription into the big Other” (Žižek 1989: 230).

While what makes God into a sublime object of ideology is grounded on reflection, Žižek expands this into a notion of God predicated on identity as “reflective determination” in *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991). Here, Žižek settles on the role that the meaning of God has in identity formation—much like Lacan’s “mirror stage,” Žižek’s handling of identity speaks to a mode of reflection, which is more than just about human identity reflecting on and being reflected by God’s identity. For Žižek, the development of human identity in reference to God’s identity—if we are thinking about human existence in relation to God’s existence—is constructed on “the proposition ‘God is God,’ unmasked by Hegel as pure contradiction” (Žižek 1991: 35). This contradiction is the embodiment of a reflection between “the positive God” and “the negative God,” inasmuch as, according to Žižek, both address “particular content” that reflects and is reflected by God as universal (Žižek 1991: 36). Viewed this way, with the aid of Hegel, Žižek makes the following observation about God: “the Universal is the opposite to itself in so far as it relates to itself in the Particular; in so far as it arrives at its being-for-itself in the form of its opposite” (Žižek 1991: 36). Not only does this mean, for Žižek, that God knows God as reflection of God in a “particular content” and its opposite, but it also means that we know ourselves through God—our being-for-self informs and is informed by a being-for-God.

By *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), Žižek attempts to reassess and reassert the Cartesian subject through a critique of the Hegelian absolute subject—which is revisited in a similar fashion in *Tarrying with the Negative* (2004). What is at stake, here, in light of Žižek’s pinpointing the proposition of “God is God” as that which is “unmasked by Hegel as pure contradiction” in *For What They Know Not What They Do*, is the suggestion that there is a “Hegelian ticklish subject” rooted in Žižek’s contention that “the Hegelian ‘negation of negation’ is not the magic return to identity which follows the painful experience of splitting and alienation” (Žižek 1999: 76). Instead, for Žižek, what is accomplished through the “negation of negation”—or in the relationship between subject and substance, in terms of “substance as subject”—is a “very revenge of the decentered Other against the subject’s presumption” (Žižek 1999: 76). This, of course, challenges Žižek’s sense of God as a sublime object that engages human

epistemology through a reflective determination—in a way, then, God becomes a “decentered Other” that, however “sublime,” reflects and is reflected, if modifying Žižek’s words in a bit, “against the [human] subject’s presumption.” It is because of this decentering and an underlying presumption that Žižek arrives at the following sentiment:

The properly modern God is the God of predestination, a kind of Schmittian politician who draws the line of separation between Us and Them, Friends and Enemies, the Delivered and the Damned, by means of a purely formal, abyssal act of decision, without any grounds in the actual properties and acts of concerned humans (since they were not yet even born) (Žižek 1999: 115-116).

Here, in Žižek’s reference to “Schmittian” as that which denotes Schmitt’s political theology, an acknowledgment of a “Schmittian politician” speaks to Schmitt’s understanding of the sovereign. Indeed, through Žižek, the sovereign is not only a politician, but its sovereignty is the politics in which it operates. But, more importantly, the ability of the sovereign to draw “the line of separation” comes by way of the sovereign becoming *the one who decides on the exception*. That decision, as such, is, as Žižek surmises, “a purely formal, abyssal act of decision”—it is a decision that, when thinking in terms of Agamben, ascribes either *bios* or *zoē*, to Žižek’s point, “without any grounds in the actual properties and acts of concerned humans.”

Even though the sovereign is *the one who decides on the exception* in both the political theologies of Schmitt and Agamben, Žižek’s understanding of the kind of sovereignty that belongs to “the properly modern God” is a sovereignty based on an implied reverence to the sovereign as “the Absolute.” Certainly, the sovereign’s functionality as “the Absolute” is within the conceptions of Schmitt and Agamben—where Žižek diverges, however, is with construing the sovereign’s absolutism as much more fragile than what is envisioned in the political theologies of Schmitt and Agamben. For Žižek, it is not just that the sovereign’s status as *the one who decides on the exception* is fragile, it is also that its sovereignty over that which receives the exception is also fragile.

In *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), with respect to the question of the meaning of “the Absolute” and what might be referred to as a fragile sovereignty, Žižek suggests that the sovereign’s status as “the Absolute” is:

Something that appears to us in fleeting experiences [...] but extremely fragile moments, another dimension transpires through our reality. As such, the Absolute is easily

corroded; it slips all too easily through our fingers, and must be handled as carefully as a butterfly (Žižek 2000: 128).

What makes the Absolute “thoroughly fragile and fleeting” (Žižek 2000: 128) due to the roles that identity and authority play in the development of the Absolute, which, as Žižek argues in *Enjoy Your Symptom* (1992), “God’s proper authority” as that of the Absolute, “is experienced only in the religious suspension of the Ethical” (Žižek 1992: 97). For Žižek, “this religious suspension of the Ethical is not its simply external abolition but its inherent condition of possibility, i.e., precisely that which confers on the Ethical its identity” (Žižek 1992: 97). It is this suspension of the Ethical that concretizes the fragile Absolute as an abstract Universal into a “concrete Universal,” as, Žižek describes, “the unity of the abstract Universal with its constitutive exception” (Žižek 1992: 97). Here, it becomes apparent that what makes God “God,” in the sense of representing an abstract Universal,” especially as a fragile Absolute, and even as *the one who decides on the exception*, is predicated on, Žižek writes, “exception reconciled in the Universal” (Žižek 1992: 97).

What becomes important to Žižek’s political theology, as it revolves around *the one who decides on the exception*, is that the state of exception in which the sovereign exists makes sovereignty itself quite fragile—it is, perhaps, just as fragile as the status of those that are ascribed as either *bios* or *zoē*. That fragility becomes the sovereign’s “constitutive exception,” so says Žižek, in a way that merely reconciles the sovereign’s status between its abstract and concrete abilities to be *the one who decides on the exception*. Because the sovereign straddles the abstract and the concrete, as a “properly modern God,” Žižek finds in *On Belief* (2001) that “God resides in details” (Žižek: 2001: 89-105). That is to say, even if the sovereign’s “exception [is] reconciled in the Universal,” the sovereign does not exist in the exception it grants—the sovereign only exists, as it is, in how it “resides in details” as *the one who decides on the exception*. These “details” existentialize who does the exception and those that are subjected the exception—these details allow theology to be politicized as much as it allows politics to be theologized for the sake of *the one who decides on the exception* as a fragile Absolute. Yet, as Žižek proposes in “The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy” (2005), when thinking about what is accomplished by the sovereign’s act of exception, “it is only the exception that allows us to perceive the miracle of the universal rule” (Žižek: 2005: 61).

Žižek eventually describes what is perceived of the state of exception and perceived of the sovereign’s universal rule as a kind of dissonance in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009) as a “miraculous exception” (Žižek: 2009: 88). What can be gathered from Žižek’s notion of

monstrosity is that just as the perceived state of exception is a monstrosity, so is the sovereign's perceived universal rule. To this extent, the miraculous exception is not only with respect to what is perceived as the state of exception, but also with respect to the universal rule for *the one who decides on the exception*. This miraculous exception points to the unique positionality of the fragile Absolute among all that is subjugated by the act of exception in a state of affairs where *bios*, *zoē*, and the sovereign share a common universe. It is, perhaps, with this in mind that Žižek interjects, "upon closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe—everything, every small thing that is, is a miraculous exception; viewed from a proper perspective, every normal thing is a monstrosity (Žižek: 2009: 88). In this way, Žižek's political theology considers how "the political" and "the theological" inform one another becomes, in itself, a kind of monstrosity of the interconnected roles of *bios*, *zoē*, and the sovereign as *the one who decides on the exception*.

Summoning Schmitt's and Agamben's respective political theologies, Žižek argues in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) that "today's Homo sacer is the privileged object of humanitarian biopolitics: the one who is deprived of his or her full humanity being taken care of in a very patronizing way" (Žižek: 2002: 91). Here, there is a relationship between "humanitarian biopolitics" and political theology, if attending to what is at stake for *the one who decides on the exception* for Schmitt and Agamben. Can we not say, then, that humanitarian biopolitics and political theology provide the same outcomes: *bios*, *zoē*, and the sovereign as *the one who decides on the exception*? Yes, we can indeed.

So, the question is: what is the "privileged object" of humanitarian biopolitics, if, by saying humanitarian biopolitics are always-already speaking about political theology? Is the "privileged object" what is preserved and designated as *bios* or is it the sovereign's sovereignty as that which is also preserved?

Perhaps, as far as Žižek's political theology is concerned, the privileged object is theology itself. This added nuance can be derived from Žižek's inscription of the proposition "the puppet called theology" at the opening of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). For the sovereign to be *the one who decides on the exception* within the scope of political theology means enacting a kind of sovereignty that becomes a puppeteer for theology as a privileged object. This becomes part and parcel of the "properly modern God," as previously illustrated in *The Ticklish Subject*, to the extent that what it means to theologize from Žižek's political theology means situating *the one who decides on the exception* as theology's puppeteer. What brings Žižek to suggest that "the puppet called theology" fundamentally calibrates "the political" and fundamentally attunes the state of exception to the concerns of *the one who decides on the*

exception is the sense that “the political” stands more immanently than “the theological”—when *the one who decides on the exception* operates within its sovereignty, that sovereign may orient itself to “the theological” to divinize the act of exception, even though the act of exception is, in itself, a politicized act that reflects “the theological” as a monstrosity through merely a “miraculous exception.” In this sense, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek concludes, with “reason” standing in for “the political” and “religion” standing in for “the theological”:

In the modern times of Reason, religion can no longer fulfill [the function of capturing the imagination of the masses], this function of the organic binding force of social substance—today, religion has irretrievably lost this power not only for scientists and philosophers, but also for a wider circle of ‘ordinary people’ (Žižek: 2003: 4).

Žižek’s understanding of “the modern times of Reason” certainly aligns with what he says about “the properly modern God.” Yet, it is this “properly modern God,” as a fragile Absolute, that prevents religion—or, shall we say theology—from fulfilling “the function of capturing the imagination of the masses.” Through Žižek’s political theology, it is the political that becomes the “binding force of social substance” rather than “the theological”—it is the sovereign as *the one who decides on the exception* that acts as “the binding force of social substance” through the act of exception. A state of affairs where *bios*, *zoē*, and the sovereign exist is not an organic state of affairs, since sovereignty merely allows the relationship between *bios* and *zoē* to appear organic differentiated.

The organic way that Žižek’s political theology construes the nature of monstrosity, if reminded of Žižek’s use of the word, because of the inorganic nature of sovereignty, the fragile Absolute as an inorganic Absolute, and the inorganic differentiation between *bios* and *zoē*. All that is inorganic becomes organic by way of the very nature of monstrosity—it is the sense that the sovereign, as *the one who decides on the exception*, is removed from that which it dictates in the relationship between *bios* and *zoē*. That in Žižek’s political theology can be viewed as a differentiation between neighbors and monsters respectively, if attending to the implications of the title of Žižek’s article, “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence,” as it is included in the volume, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (2005). As the embodiment of monstrosity, the sovereign excludes itself both from those that it regulates into the status of neighbors and those that it relegates to the status of monsters. There is, if noting the explicit subtitle to Žižek’s aforementioned article, an “ethical violence” at work in what the sovereign does as *the one who decides on the exception*—in one sense, that ethical violence is

“ethical” with respect to how sovereignty includes and excludes, but it also steeped in a violence that suspends the sovereign in a state of its own exception.

At the very heart of Žižek’s acknowledgement of the ethical violence exerted on *bios* as neighbors and *zoē* as monsters, for the sake of abstaining the sovereign from the act of exception that it employs, is a suspension of all that allows for the possibility of absolutizing *the one who decides on the exception*. What becomes especially violent in sovereign’s act of exception is, as Žižek writes in “Neighbors and Other Monsters,” that “love that suspends the Law is necessarily accompanied by arbitrary cruelty that also suspends the Law (Žižek: 2005: 189). In this vein, for Žižek’s political theology, *the one who decides on the exception* decides for the sake of love and decides for the sake of arbitrary cruelty—in doing so, the sovereign, for the sake of accomplishing its sovereignty, must suspend Law. Because love suspends Law just as much as “arbitrary cruelty” suspends Law, the sovereign, as *the one who decides on the exception*, always-already engages in a kind of sovereignty grounded on an ethical violence projected upon *bios* and *zoē*, but also inwardly promotes the sovereign’s fragile Absolutism as a universal Absolute.

Standing in relief to what can be teased from that Žižek suggests in “Neighbors and Other Monsters,” in *Parallax View* (2006), Žižek arrives at the following understanding:

Sovereignty always (in its very concept, as Hegel would have put it) involves the logic of the universal and its constitutive exception: the universal and unconditional rule of Law can be sustained only by a sovereign power which reserves for itself the right to proclaim a state of exception, that is, to suspend the rule of law(s) on behalf of the Law itself—if we deprive the Law of its excess that sustains it, we lose the rule (of Law) itself (Žižek: 2006: 373).

Here, what Žižek articulates is what Agamben describes as “the paradox of sovereignty” (Agamben 2005: 35), which places *the one who decides on the exception* within, as Žižek puts it, a parallax view. This parallax effect, as such, allows the sovereign to avoid being categorized or defined as any one thing within the construction that the sovereign creates for itself. It is a construction that is at the intersection of the political and the theological, such that, when embarking on a political theology, *the one who decides on the exception* becomes suspended above what is decided and suspended beyond that which the exception is applied.

In this sense, the sovereign operates within, just as Žižek ascertains, a parallax view, whereby the position of the sovereign differs between the positionalities of *bios* and *zoē*, while

the sovereign's action also differs between what is perceived as an act of love and what is perceived as an act of arbitrary cruelty. Further within this parallax view, there exists a difference between the sovereign as a fragile Absolute and a universal Absolute, just as much as there exists, to Žižek's point, a difference between "the logic of the universal and its constitutive exception." Included in this parallax view is the difference, Žižek writes, between "the universal and unconditional rule of Law." At the ideological core of that lattermost parallax view, there arises that which fundamentally attunes *the one who decides on the exception* to the political theology to which it ascribes in the difference between sovereign power and the suspension of Law. Indeed, this is precisely what Agamben proposes about the paradox of sovereignty, to the extent that "as well as the need and capacity to make a decision, sovereignty establishes when and where rules can be suspended" (Hegarty 2010: 25). For Schmitt, the paradox of sovereignty also has a parallax view in the difference between "unlimited authority" and the "entire existing order" hinging on the suspension of law from a kind of deconstruction through sovereign power (Schmitt 1985:12).

Even so, when placing Schmitt and Agamben as interlocutors on the issue of what role a parallax view has on the meaning of sovereignty to *the one who decides on the exception*, Paul Hegarty finds, in an especially salient point, "for all Schmitt's near-deconstruction, sovereign power is still something 'to-hand' that can be used [insomuch as] this is still true for Agamben, but for him sovereignty is not the power to create exception, but is the operating of the exception" (Hegarty 2010: 25). Through Hegarty's handling of Schmitt and Agamben, it is possible to surmise a parallax view between the two on the issue of killing, as what Žižek would certainly consider as the ultimate and most extreme act of ethical violence. While the act of killing becomes in Schmitt's political theology "something 'to-hand' that can be used" by those that do the killing to express the political extent of sovereign power, the act of killing for Agamben's political theology is not so much about politicizing extent of power as it is about the theological extent of operating within the state of exception based on those who are killed .

Schmitt's and Agamben's respective understandings of *the one who decides on the exception* inform the extent of Žižek's political theology on the matter of the parallax view of killing between those that do the killing and those who are killed. Žižek's political theology makes an account for the ultimate and most extreme act of ethical violence exercised by *the one who decides on the exception*, through a "theological-political suspension of the ethical," which Žižek describes in the aptly-titled introduction to his co-authored, *God in Pain* (2012). This suspension of the ethical, Žižek explains, allows for a state of exception and a sovereignty where "religion can play the positive role of resuscitating the proper dimension of the political, of

re-politicizing politics: it can enable political agents to break out of the ethico-legal entanglement” (Žižek: 2012: 38). In effect, Žižek’s political theology “acquires new relevance” (Žižek: 2012: 38) in a decidedly religious orientation, such that the political context in which *the one who decides on the exception* reconceptualizes, re-politicizes, and re-theologizes the sovereign, *bios*, and *zoē* what Žižek’s political theology envisions as “an ideology of a new collective space” (Žižek: 2012: 38).

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