Theopoetics to Theopraxis
Toward a Critchlean Supplement to Caputo's Radical Political Theology

Calvin D. Ullrich

Abstract   The theological turn in continental philosophy has beckoned several new possibilities for theoretical discourse. More recently, the question of the absence of a political theology has been raised: Can an ethics of alterity offer a more substantive politics? In pursuing this question, the article considers the late work of Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo. It argues that, contrary to caricatures of Caputo's "theology of event," his notion of theopoetics evinces a "materialist turn" in his mature thought that can be considered the beginning of a "radical political theology." This position is not without its challenges, however, raising concerns over deconstruction's ability to navigate the immanent but necessary dangers of politics. In order to attempt to speak of a form of "radical political theology"— i.e. a movement from theopoetics to theopraxis—the article turns to some of the political writing of Simon Critchley. It is argued that a much desired "political viscerality" for a radical political theology is supplied by Critchley's anarchic realism. The latter is neither conceived as utopian nor defeatist, but as a sustained program of inventive and creative political interventions, which act as responses to the singularity of the situation.

Keywords   Caputo, John D.; Critchley, Simon; Radical Theology; Theopoetics; Theopraxis

✍ Calvin D. Ullrich, Ruhr-Universität-Bochum / Stellenbosch University, Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Universitätsstr. 150, GA 7/152, 44801 Bochum, Germany   ✉ ullrichc@sun.ac.za   ◉ 0000-0002-7129-1488

> *Le roi est mort, vive le roi!*
> The king is dead, long live the king!

This well-known epanalepsis, most likely originating in the early sixteenth century at the interment of the French King, Louis XII (Kantorowicz 2016, 410–12),[1] was a funeral-ceremonial rite performed to secure the public perpetuity of the sovereign, while simultaneously announcing the death of the old monarch. In modernity, and right through the twenty-first century, this logic of replacement is well seen in the collapse of old sovereigns and the institution of new ones. Perhaps the modern form of this desire for a sovereign is captured best by the infamous remark of Jacques Lacan (Lacan, 207) made to the disgruntled students in December 1969: "what you desire as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one." Indeed, since the advent of the Death of God, we cannot help but proclaim the reign of new gods to take his place. It is with prescient insight that the political theorist, Carl Schmitt, understood approximately 50 years earlier that there is always a need for a sovereign/master, and in his case, a political theology of presence designed to break the dead-lock of bourgeoisie parliamentary Weimar liberalism: But is there not another way to read this, "*Vive le roi—Long live the king*"?

   In this article, the latter is pursued through the work of John D. Caputo by considering his radical theology and theopoetics. What is of primary interest is an attempt to push Caputo's work in a more "political" direction through an exploration of what will be called here the possibility of a "radical political theology" that moves from theopoetics to theopraxis. The question of political theology in Caputo's work is nascent, although it will be shown that it is far more overt in his theological writing, at least to the extent that he engages with Derrida, Carl Schmitt and the notion of sovereignty (part I). Caputo himself, while conceding that he has always been weary of writing a politics or constructing a political theory, nonetheless, confirms this political impulse in a recently published interview with Clayton Crockett: "everything I have written about for the last twenty-five years has to do with weak theology and the weakness of God, everything I write is political—in a "nascent" way" (Putt 2019, 39). This notwithstanding, the political-ethical implications of Caputo's radical theology are seen for some to be too compromising in the face of the hegemony of the neoliberal order. A theology of the event on this reading still dreams of a "world-disclosure" that appears to denigrate the materiality of the particular because too much

---

1. Kantorowicz suggests that earlier versions can be traced back to the succession of King Henry VI in 1422, then still only an infant.

distance is created in the passage from undecidability to the decision. A version of this reading is proffered by Slavoj Žižek, which occasions the need to clarify what precisely constitutes the ethical moment in deconstruction for Caputo and, therefore, the heart of what a radical political theology might mean and seek to accomplish. Anticipating the reference above to Žižek's dialectical materialism, it will be suggested that at the heart of this discussion is whether Caputo can sufficiently account for "the material" in his radical theology. Arguing in the affirmative, it is demonstrated that there is a discernable "materialist turn" in Caputo's thought, granted that one takes into account the shift which occurs from his first theological texts to his later and more recent publications (part II).

However, on this author's reading, one must go beyond Caputo if a materialist reading of radical theology is not to remain at the level of abstraction, that is to say: Can one speak of an "effective" politics, a corresponding "praxis of politics" or what will be called a "theopraxis" with respect to a radical political theology? To this end, an attempt will be made to tease out a positive and constructive theopraxis by turning to some of the writings of Simon Critchley, whose formulation of an "anarchic-meta-political-ethical moment" comes very close to what Caputo calls a "sacred anarchy" (part III). In what will be called a "Critchlean supplement" to radical political theology, ethical subjectivity emerges in the Levinasian encounter with the infinite demand of the Other, and though this occurs in situation-specific articulations, it can be generalized into a (*meta*) politics of hegemonic aggregations that provide the motivational force for a politics of resistance. Such an inventive or insurrectionist politics of resistance and subversion agitates against the Whole in the form of an anarchic realism which eschews the temptations of revolutionary utopias. In this way, then, a tentative answer and conclusion to the question of how Caputo's radical political theology might be instructive for political action, is through the reformulation of Critchley's (2008, 120) Kantian axiom from Critique of Pure Reason i.e. that ethics (theopoetics) without politics (theopraxis) is empty, and politics (theopraxis) without ethics (theopoetics) is blind (A150).

I. CARL SCHMITT, JACQUES DERRIDA, AND THE GOD-TO-COME

To map the political-philosophical context of Caputo's radical political theology we turn first to some of the late work of Jacques Derrida and its relation to Carl Schmitt. Derrida's interest in the theologico-political and sovereignty in his later work is unambiguously tied to the thought of Schmitt. Reluctantly passing over the deep and vast industry of Schmitt studies here, important for us is that Derrida is in clear agreement with Schmitt

on the theological analogue to the political. Where they disagree, however, is on one's commitment to this analogy. For Schmitt, his voluntarist God is able to break the deadlock of debate because he operates by definition as both the founder and destroyer of the law. In times of political crisis, it is he who decides on the state of exception—homologous to the sovereign God—who is able to unilaterally decide who is a friend and an enemy, and thereby reestablish a true concept of politics based on antagonism (Schmitt 2007). Unlike the immanent tradition stemming from Spinoza's *Tractatus*, Schmitt wants to re-instantiate a Hobbesian appeal to transcendence for political legitimation. Derrida, on the other hand, demonstrates that the commitment to the vision of the sovereign God, to which modern politics remains attached, dissembles itself and thereby opens up a space for a non-sovereign. He pursues this gesture in a number of places in his writing, and even if not explicitly mentioned, Schmitt is always in the background. In what follows, we will trace this polemic with Schmitt in two movements: first in his "Force of Law" essay where he reconstitutes the notion of justice and decision, and then secondly, to parts of his "Rogues" essay, which not only offer some of his clearest formulations of sovereignty and democracy, but also points to a new opening of the theo-political.

The distinction between law and justice that Derrida formulates in his much-commented on essay, "Force of Law," replays the recognizable opposition between generality and singularity, that is, between the representational edifice of the legal system and the irreducibility of justice that is owed to the other. One would miss the radical force of Derrida's claims if one were to reduce this opposition to a simple priority for the singular at the expense of the general. Law may be the "element of calculation" and therefore is not justice, but "it is just that there be law" (Derrida 1992, 16). The paradox involves, on the one hand, the necessity of law to relate to the other in the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the situation (otherwise it could not be said to exercise itself in the name of justice) and on the other, the necessity of justice to take on the general form of law in order for it to be "en-forced" or actualized. The experience of justice is not a pure instance around which the law congeals to establish its representative system, but rather, as Derrida has been saying since his earliest writing, the pure event or originary act of justice is always already inscribed within an iteration or repetition, and thus, the distinction between law and justice is not so much an opposition as it is a mutual contamination. Justice, for Derrida, does not simply come to rest in the back-and-forth of this tension, rather, its mutual contamination is the requirement of "the very experience of the aporia," (1992, 16) which is what he means by the "mystical" foundation of

authority. This foundation is not to be understood as a synthesis of these oppositions, indeed, it is rather a non-foundational "differential of force … of force as *différance* or force of *différance*," (1992, 7) what we might call a "weak force."[2]

   This "mystical" foundation of authority alludes to Schmitt's counter-conception of an ultimately Christian subjectivity—insofar as it is an autonomous, self-positing sovereign that makes an exception of itself. In discussion with Montaigne and Pascal, Derrida points toward the "fictional" (and thus mystical) foundation of laws; laws are extended credit and belief not because they are just, but simply because they are laws.[3] The implication being that, in the absence of natural law, the self-positing anchoring of Schmitt's modern Christian subject that creates positive laws, has its foundation not entirely in itself, but in the fiction/faith entangled within this self-positing. At this point we see the emergence of the "new concept"—an originary faith or fictional law (the "law of law") which precedes the distinction between faith/fiction and knowledge/fact.

   But what does all this mean for making judgements or decisions, how does this translate into practice or, indeed, asking along with Derrida himself: "Que faire"—What is to be done? (Derrida 2005a, 297). How does one confront decision/judging justly with respect to law without devolving into Schmittian decisionism on the one hand, or paralytic indecision on the other? Derrida introduces three aporias in a legal context: the first, "*Epokhē* of the Rule" or "aporia of suspension," the second, aporia of "The Haunting of the Undecidability" and, finally, "The Urgency That Obstructs the Horizon of Knowledge." The first aporia states that for a judge to judge justly it is never simply the application of a norm to a situation, the law must be suspended to address the case's specificity and then provide a "fresh judgement." At the same time, for a judgement to be just and responsible it cannot destroy the law but must be regulated by it. Hence, in the aporia the judgement is just when the law's regulatory rule is preserved precisely by its suspension or deregulation (Derrida 1992, 23). We might describe the approach in this aporia as more pragmatic, especially

---

   2. "Weakness" here does not intend to re-instantiate the weak versus strong binary. It is better understood as the differential forces that makes this binarity possible. Below it will be argued that this locution of "weakness" is ultimately confused by readers of Caputo, because it brings to mind the opposition just mentioned. This is why Caputo somewhat departs from this language in his later *Insistence of God*.).

   3. Montaigne writes, "Lawes are now maintained in credit, not because they are just, but because they are laws. It is the mystical foundation of their authority; they have none other" (Derrida 1992, 12).

when seen with respect to the second aporia. In the second aporia, Derrida (1992, 24) again replays the undecidability between the generality of law and norms ("respect for equality and universal right") and the singularity of the idiosyncratic ("the always heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example"). However, the "undecidable" here—contrary to what critics perceive as indecision or relativism—is the experience or "the test and ordeal" of being delivered over to this "impossible decision." Even if the "test and ordeal of the undecidable [has been] passed ... the decision has again followed a rule ... it is no longer *presently* just, *fully* just" (24). The italics here signal that the just judgement is always inscribed by the undecidable and therefore, strictly no decision is ever "fully" just. Caputo (1993, 104) interprets Derrida thus: "far from undermining decision ... 'undecidability' is what assures that judging will be judging, and not merely mechanical operation. Undecidability is the condition of im/possibility of decision." The undecidability of justice, which is neither present nor absent, "hovers over the decision, before, during and after" (104) like a ghost or specter. In virtue of justice being an infinite idea, "infinite because it is irreducible," and "irreducible because it is owed to the other," it demands to be made felt in the present—which is at the same time the risk of "injustice" (Derrida 1992, 25). This is why Derrida insists on the "quasi-messianic" since messianicity as a form invokes a Kantian horizon that precisely places a limit on justice. The third aporia is, thus, aptly described as "The Urgency That Obstructs the Horizon of Knowledge." A decision must be made in "a finite moment of urgency and precipitation." It has no assurances of any regulative idea of justice and, therefore, "the instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard" (Derrida 1992, 26).

Justice as undeconstructible is "the weak force of a call" and a "promise of an event," which is not a pure ideal as some like Martin Hägglund (2008; Caputo 2011) protest, for that would be another condition or description of justice. It is rather, an unconditional-undeconstructible justice, "an unconditional but dangerous demand, a pure promise which cannot be insulated from a pure threat" (Caputo 2011, 69). If we read the structure of this promise/threat in the context of hospitality, the danger here does not describe merely the "violent exposure" of what may be knocking at our door, but rather, a "hyperbolic ultra-ethical injunction"—what Critchley will call the "infinite demand"—which is meant to "actualize our 'desire' for unconditional hospitality and to do so 'in the name of the unconditional'" (Caputo 2011, 76). The same then is true for law: an undeconstructible idea of justice deconstructs law and calls us to make laws that are more just, because justice—the "very idea"—does not exist, and because laws do exist.

Clear from this reading is that Derrida's deconstruction of law and justice severely problematizes Schmitt's theory of decision-making. Schmitt's logic of the friend-enemy distinction and the sovereign decision to "decide" allows no space for questioning. If the sovereign indivisible decision were subject to contestation, that is, if the decision by the sovereign was not final and absolute, then there would be no certainty about the enemy's identity. Political "killing" would be indistinguishable from murder, for example. As Schmitt (2005, 12) writes in *Political Theology*, the sovereign decision "frees itself from all normative ties and becomes in the true sense absolute." If this absolutism is questioned, then the power of the sovereign is divisible and undermined. At stake for Schmitt is that questioning is ultimately depoliticizing. For Derrida, Schmitt's emphasis on decision is not of itself a problem, he does not deny the necessity of decision, but rather that the sovereign decision Schmitt advocates, in fact, is not a decision *as such*. It assumes "concrete" identification or knowledge that leaves the distinction between friend and enemy a matter of programmability. Schmitt would bemoan Derrida's notion of undecidability as a form of political nihilism. But on the contrary as we have just seen, Derrida is "confirming—but not by way of deploring the fact, as Schmitt does—an essential and necessary depoliticization" (Derrida 2005a, 104). This depoliticization, Derrida says, is not "neuter or negative indifference," but through it "one would seek to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy" (2005a, 104).

Following this movement from ethics to (theo)politics, Derrida deploys in his *Rogues* essay the biologistic trope of auto-immunity in order to show how the sovereign democratic state commits its own "autoimmune suicide." In the context of post-9/11 geo-politics, this suicide turns on the effort to secure democracy by denying the very principles of democracy. The theo-logic of ipseity—that is, of God's sovereign self-exceptionality in being able to at once institute and destroy the law—referred to by the *autos* of autoimmunity, is homologous here to democracy. Just as the axiomatic of a sovereign subject that is the law (*nomos*) unto itself (*autos*), and thus by definition must resist or eliminate contact with the other (the *heteros* of the law), so too is democracy auto-deconstructing, for insofar as it must defend itself, it must deny itself in this defense. The classic example being the United States desire to protect democracy through anti-democratic mass surveillance. But what is crucial for deconstruction, however, is that the autoimmune process of sovereignty and democracy is not merely self-destructive, it is at the same time embedded in a salvific gesture. Here one should note the not-inconsequential natural or material implications of

the semantic use of auto-immunity: the bodies auto-immune system acts precisely to preserve life, the material world, to preserve democracy by positing an opening to its body, an Other to the sovereign self, or a "to come" for which it could not be prepared (Haddad 2016, 505–20).

In a final move at the end of the first essay in *Rogues*, Derrida makes a remarkable, indeed, a rogue-ish reflection after his investigations into autoimmunity, democracy, and sovereignty. He states that "in preparing for this lecture, I often asked myself whether everything that seems to link the democracy to come to the specter … might not lead back or be reducible to some unavowed theologism" (Derrida 2005b, 110). He goes on to say that he does not mean the figures of sovereignty in the western canon (the Abrahamic God, monarchy, or the "people of gods" in democracy), but rather "on account of the to-come, I asked myself whether this did not resemble what someone in whom we have never suspected the slightest hint of democratism said one day of the god who alone could still save us" (2005b, 110). Heidegger's infamous comments from the *Der Spiegel* interview to which Derrida is referring, are interpreted here as a spectral "god to come," and for the very specific reason that ultimately, for Derrida, it is God the sovereign which anchors the modern ideological conception of sovereignty. What remains to be thought, then, is this god-to-come. A god-to-come, the figure of the King after the death of the King, who would no longer serve a Schmittian political theology but would rather be in service of a "radical political theology." While it is not unsurprising, then, that all of Derrida's last works after *Rogues* would reflect on these themes (materiality, animality and the political-theological specter of sovereignty) it is to John Caputo where one must look to imagine this god-to-come, for it is Caputo who takes Derrida to a place where Derrida himself does not wish to go.

II. THE THEOPOETICS OF RADICAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY

If Derrida's engagement with Schmitt is a not-so-subtle polemic against the latter's political theology, then he also opens-up the possibility to think political theology otherwise—an opening that we will now pursue by means of John D. Caputo. After his early engagements with Martin Heidegger, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, Caputo's book published in the mid-nineties, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), was instantly ground-breaking not only in the field of continental philosophy of religion but also in that of theology. There, Caputo argued that Derrida could be interpreted as a quasi-religious (specifically quasi-Judeo-Christian) thinker. Following its publication and a number of important volumes which interrogated his reading, Caputo launched into a series of more explicitly

theological texts that moved him into the terrain of weak or "radical" theo-
logy, including among others, *The Weakness of God* (2006b)*, The Insistence
of God* (2013) and recently, *Cross and Cosmos* (2019). Through these texts
Caputo offered a radically different view of Christian theology, one that
challenged not only the static formulations of God found in traditional dog-
matics, but one which also produced a dynamic approach to reading Scrip-
ture and tradition itself, a quasi-methodology which he calls "theopoetics."

Before turning to his notion of theopoetics, as already indicated it can
be argued that everything Caputo has written in the past twenty years
is "political," if what we mean by this term is understood with respect
to the polemic against the Schmittian impulse. If such is the case, then
what is the character of Caputo's Derridean inspired alternative to politi-
cal theology? To understand this, one should first situate Caputo's "weak"
theology with which he contrasts "strong" theology—the latter being the
discourse that refers to God as the master signifier *par excellence*. This is
theology which construes God as the paradigm of terrestrial sovereignty:
God as the Lord of History, the *archè*, the timeless *principium*, the *prima
causa*, the unnamable name of negative theology, the *summum ens*, the
Platonic Good beyond being, and so on (Caputo 2006b, 32–9; 2006a; 2003).
For Caputo, the task is to think of God without these conditionals, but not
merely an unconditional God (for that would be negative theology), but
God as the name of an unconditionality but without a strong force. This is
what Caputo means when he refers to "weak" theology; not a "weakness"
if by that one means the simple opposition of strong but, rather, a God who
names the call of an event, which nonetheless lays claim on us—calls us for
a response without imposing itself coercively. Caputo performs his own
quasi-phenomenological reduction here by describing God not as an entity
but as a paradigmatic name for an event, or in the language of Derrida's
Rogue's essay, a "god to-come" (*à venir*).

There are a number of further pathways into this idea in Caputo's
thought. For our purposes we single out one particularly useful formula-
tion, since it provides a way to imagine what a "radical political theology"
might look like, i.e. what he calls the "kingdom of sacred anarchy" (Caputo
2006b, 127–54; 2002, 230).[4] For Caputo, this kingdom simply is the king-
dom of God as found in the New Testament, specifically in the synoptic
Gospels and is not only connected to the sayings and parables of Jesus of

---

4. For a commentary on the development of this theme in Caputo's thinking see (Putt 2019,
3–17). The "kingdom of sacred anarchy," Putt notes, comes very close to Kevin Hart's notion
of the "basilaeic reduction" (Hart 2014, 131–32).

Nazareth, but also in a heightened sense to Jesus' death on the cross. What the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and for which he was ultimately murdered signifies, is a wholly different political order. It is an order that is not dominated by an *archè*, or governed by a power or authority, it is rather an order which confounds this very hierarchical logic. Indeed, it is "sacred" because it is God's foolishness, the paradoxical death of himself, Jesus, which puts on display, not God's ultimate strength, as is the case in classical Christologies, but the model for subversive protestation on behalf of those who are excluded and suffer at the hands of the oppressive powers of the world. The logic of the cross is not a logic of an archic sovereign who docetically gives up his power; it is rather the perverse a-logic of an-archic powerlessness, which cries out in protest on behalf of the least of these, the *ta me onto*, the nothings and nobodies. For Caputo, the figure of resurrection would, on this reading, have nothing to do with the man Jesus coming alive again in human flesh, it is better understood in a Bultmannian gesture of demythologization, where to re-mythologize in this context means the life-proclaiming, life-calling, or calling-of-life that emerges and persists through death and suffering (Caputo 2019, 36–8). To configure or to reconfigure oneself into this impossible "kingdom of sacred anarchy," therefore, is to take on an alternative ontology—a different way of interpreting and being-in-the-world—by entering into the procedure of what Caputo calls "theopoetics."

At this point one needs to distinguish between two stages of Caputo's development of this concept, which will be loosely referred to as a move from "Kantian theopoetics" to a subsequent "Hegelian theopoetics" (Caputo, 2013; 2014). The move to the latter is more a reformulation of the former than it is a revision of its central thesis, and this is due to a combination of mis-readings of Caputo's religious interpretation of deconstruction and a series of external philosophical pressures, the latter of which we will not be able to pursue fully here, but includes inter-alia, the "carnal-turn," Object-Orientated Ontology, Speculative Realism and Hegelian Materialism.

In the *Weakness of God*, Caputo gives his first substantial treatment of theopoetics by following the familiar Derridian double-gesture. First theopoetics scandalizes the logic of theo-logy by deploying itself in a new "hermeneutical situation" in which it addresses itself to and is addressed by the call of the other or the event. Crucially, following Heidegger, the phenomenality of this call resides precisely in the indeterminacy of the caller: that is, the self-concealment of the caller (being/God) is the un-concealment of this refusal, which is constitutive of the call as such and thus a "part of its positive phenomenal makeup," or "a positive function of its weak

force," and a permanent feature of the anarchic and weakened theological condition (Caputo 2006b, 113–16, 104).[5] In its second gesture, this scandal for theology becomes the symbolic space in which "the possibility for something life-transforming" can take place (2006b, 104). Paradigmatically, the symbolic space that gives life to this scandal is the "constellation of idioms, strategies, stories, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors" (2006b, 104) found in the New Testament narratives of the kingdom of God, although, strictly, this space can be anywhere where the event/call is calling and getting itself called. Importantly, this procedure of theopoetics which takes place in the symbolic space of this sacred an-archic kingdom is not a site for simply aesthetic literary ornamentation,[6] but is rather the genuine (im)possibility of thinking or creating the world otherwise—of thinking the hyper-reality of the (im)possible within the actual world.[7]

The mis-readings of Caputo (and, it may be added, more broadly deconstruction) begin at this point, where the theopoetics of the event/call is treated as a wholly different plane of existence, and thus supposedly reduces the religious to a de-substantialized form, which in Slavoj Žižek's (2009, 260) words, renders Caputo's event a function of an "aseptic, lifeless and bloodless" postmodernism or, in short, anti-material. Žižek's criticism is representative of other critical trends directed at Derrida and Caputo, which may be crudely summarized as a complaint about a Kantian gesture that tends to distance a theopoetics of the event beyond an unreachable sublime horizon.[8] To put this critique in more familiar language: material "names" like the present political order, democracy, god etc., are taken to be the Platonic "containers" for immaterial events/calls, the consequence being a classic iteration of two-world Augustinianism which denigrates matter. But events or promises for Caputo, are exactly not immaterial, insofar as they emerge as effects of names, while at the same time create

5. Naturally, the terms "hermeneutics" and "phenomenology" as presented here are to be read through Caputo's previous radicalization of them through Derrida in his *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987).

6. David Miller calls this "theopoetry" (Miller 2010, 6–23).

7. This would be similar to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of de-theologisation, where the receding of transcendent reality allows the "becoming-world" of the world, allowing it to be thought as its own event of worlding (Nancy 2008). For a succinct commentary on the relation between Nancy and Caputo, see Nikolaas Deketelaere (2019).

8. Alongside Žižek, one can also discern similar complaints in a number of recent volumes. See for example, (Zlomislić and DeRoo 2010; Simmons and Minister 2012; Schrijvers 2016). However, these criticisms re-stage many of the same problems already raised and addressed by Caputo in his early readings of Derrida. See James H. Olthuis (2002), particularly David Goicoechea's essay (80–95) and Caputo's response (120–149).

new nominative possibilities from the disturbances that they incite precisely upon the contingency of all names. The theopoetics of the sacred an-archic kingdom is not, therefore, the articulation of another place or time beyond the here-and-now, but rather presents a wholly different order of significa-tion in the here-and-now.

All this being said, however, it is clearly evident in the later books following *The Weakness of God* that Caputo has registered these com-plaints—what he calls the "Kantian residue" on his thinking—and has begun to reformulate his radical theology by producing a Hegelian read-ing that inaugurates a "materialist turn" in his later thought. This task can be most forcefully felt in the *Insistence of God*, but also more recently in *Cross and Cosmos*. In the former, what is at the center of the revolving excursions with a variety of interlocutors from Milbank to Žižek, Malabou to Meillassoux, is the effort to materialize the theopoetics of the event. The central development to Caputo's thought is his rebaptism as a "born again" quasi-Hegelian (Caputo 2013, chaps. 5–6). Principal in this move-ment, among other things, is his reading of Hegelian *Vorstellungen*—that representative "world-picture, [or] world-praxis," which mediates the truth of Spirit in pictoral form before achieving pure self-conscious thought (*Begriff*) (Caputo 2013, 94). For Caputo, what is being revealed in these imaginative, narratival representations is not the latent conceptual content of Absolute Spirit, but rather the revelation of an event of *poieisis*, which in his radical theology is the life-form, or world-disclosure structured by God's anarchic Kingdom. Theopoetics here manifests a metanoetic poten-tiality of an event that calls for an impossible ethical-political alteration of all human sociality, the efficacy of which is produced and stimulated by this symbolic and imaginative discourse. So far from creating an exception out of the material realm, this radical form of anarchic political theology is designed to emphasize that all there is, is matter, and if theopoetics gives voice to a different order of signification, it is then up to us to respond—to be the "coming" of the messiah and take responsibility for "the rigors and demands of the à venir" (Caputo 2013, 151).

III. Toward a Critchlean Supplement to Radical Political Theology

The question to which we now turn is the question of the movement from theopoetics to "theopraxis." If, as has been described above through Ca-puto's ethical-political notion of theopoetics, one can mark out a certain "radical political theology" in his mature thought, then what remains to be asked is: What implications may follow, if any, for a concretized approach to political action? Is the ethical-political framework provided by this radical

political theology empty, i.e. without a corresponding politics?[9] Is such a politics always deferred by definition? How can theopoetics become a "praxis of resistance" in the face of unjust systems of oppressions as opposed to a skeletal and abstract politics of criticism against theological hierarchies or ecclesial institutions? It is evident from the preceding analysis that Caputo's discourse on theopoetics is not a discourse from above or from "without;" it occurs as the articulation of a disturbance always-already going on "within" determinate religion. What this means is that Caputo is not against institutions, like the church, say, just as Derrida is not against legal norms and, therefore, theopoetics necessarily implies the political form of the ecclesial context which, nonetheless, is unable to fully embody the call of theopoetics. Thus, the question of "what is to be done" with this political form is to think the very movement or strategy that calls theopoetics to become theopraxis but without falling into immanentism. It is here that the political writing of Simon Critchley is particularly sensitive to these tensions and may open up new dimensions for thinking through Caputo's radical political theology.[10]

The starting point for Critchley's approach, to what he calls a "politics of resistance," is the articulation of an ethical subject that is defined by its relation to an infinite ethical demand placed on it by the Other. This is the central insight of his ground-breaking work, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992), which locates the ethical moment in Derridian deconstruction at precisely this structural feature of Levinasian ethics (Critchley 2014). Critchley, therefore, interprets Derrida's politics, on this basis, as the necessary response—or the "decision"—to act inventively (or, in Caputo's language, to respond to the call), despite the fact that this decision never fulfills the ethical demand placed on me (Critchley 2009, 276–7). For Critchley, this is the domain of politics: the necessary calculation that must take place with respect to the incalculable or, in other words, theopraxis as the political task in relation to theopoetics. It will be necessary to elaborate this movement from the ethical to the political in Critchley's early work, for it charts not only his unique contribution with respect to Derrida—and thereby forges the link between his and Caputo's project—but is also a crucial precursor

9. See this recent criticism by Alexander Massmann (2017, 81) when he writes: "Meinen Gegenvorschlag lautet, die verrückte Kopf-über-Welt von Caputo, die Stärke in der Schwäche, gerade in einer spezifische sozialen Dimension zu sehen."

10. One should note a similar approach has been taken up by Katherine Sarah Moody (2015), but in her case, she concentrates on the similarities between Caputo and Slavoj Žižek.

to anunderstanding of his later political explorations to which we shall turn in the conclusion of this article.

When Critchley claims that deconstruction is "ethical," or more precisely that it places a demand on us, he is interested in the radical sense of ethics as articulated in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. In Levinas' "ethics as first-philosophy," ethics undergoes a semantic transformation; no longer is it concerned with the question of the "ought" or normative procedures that can be tested according to maxims, judgements or values, but rather comes to signify the non-totalizable relation to the singular Other which exceeds ontological language. Derrida is in complete agreement with Levinas on this point (Derrida 1986, 71–5)—i.e. that ethics is the irreducible particularity of my obligation to the Other—but Critchley's argument is that Levinas can only really achieve this after Derrida's incisive intervention in "Violence and Metaphysics" (1964). What Derrida problematizes in Levinas' earlier text, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), is a certain linguistic immediacy that is not subject to question. Levinas' claim is that the ontological language of the moral tradition is surpassed by the non-ontological (ethical) relation to the Other which precedes and thus evades these ontological mediations, but that this surpassing, nonetheless, still occurs within language. For Derrida, this consigns the possibility of a Levinasian ethic to a realm of delusion, because the question of "closure" is not directly addressed—i.e. Levinas leaves unexamined the fact that to transgress the "closed" tradition of moral philosophy, one betrays this very transgression in the use of philosophical language (Critchley 2014, chap. 2). It is in this sense that Levinas' later published *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) and the entire discussion about how ethical Saying interrupts the ontological Said, should be seen as an elaborate response to Derrida's intervention. And yet, as Critchley argues, it is precisely this encounter with Levinas' ethical thinking that raises the very problematic of Derridian deconstructive reading; if Levinasian ethics is defined by its desire to respect alterity, then deconstructive reading is precisely about heading this ethical demand—or more familiarly, it is about the unconditional affirmation of the other, the yes, yes, the "Yes-saying to the unnameable," (Critchley 2014, 41) the event of theo-poiesis. While space does not permit further elaborating these Levinasian resonances, for our purposes it should be clear that the kind of ethical transcendence that Critchley identifies here in Levinas and which operates as a quasi-principle of deconstruction, becomes interpreted as the moment of "the religious" according to Caputo, and which later culminates we have seen above in his notion of theopoetics. Having forged the link between Critchley's ethical starting point and Caputo's radical theology, the provocative step in

the former's argument which now concerns us is that of the movement from (radical) ethics to politics (2014, 188–241). Not denying the extent to which Derrida had interacted with political questions, Critchley's complaint is that deconstruction suffers from an *impasse*, namely, "the treacherous passage from ethics to politics" (2014, 189) where the latter is not properly thematized as a "place of contestation, antagonism, struggle, conflict, and dissension on a factical or empirical terrain" (2014, 189–90). Critchley's contribution to a radical political theology begins to take shape here in his attempt to write this political supplement to deconstruction, since it is the thinking through of this impasse that constitutes a possible solution to the analogous impasse in radical political theology's tension between theopoetics and theopraxis.

For Critchley, while deconstruction is ethical insofar as it maintains the primacy of responsibility for the Other and is, for example, a powerful means for criticizing and subverting structures of domination, it still does not provide an adequate account of the "decision" in politics in the midst of ethical undecidability (2014, 200). Critchley's complaint here converges with those criticisms above put to Caputo and the question of the "materiality" of the event: while Derrida does not deny decision, so too Caputo argues for our material response to the event, but the question now is whether the decision/response is thematized adequately with respect to politics or theopraxis.[11] In a discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe concerning the charge that all political action necessarily falls back into metaphysics, Critchley provocatively asks of Derrida: "Is the fear of metaphysics [political action, decision, theopraxis] also the fear of dirty hands?" (2014, 216). In conclusion, I would like to propose Critchley's supplement to a politics of "dirty hands"—or the problem of whether a politics which does not reduce ethical transcendence is still possible—in two steps: the first considers Levinas' "ethics of difference" at the end of *Ethics of Deconstruction*, and the second involves a development of this thesis in Critchley's later writing towards what is called the anarchic meta-political ethical moment.

11. In discussion with Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Critchley describes Derrida's inability to account for the political in terms of the famous distinction made by Paul Ricoeur between *le politique* (the political) and *la politique* (politics). Put simply, deconstruction is able to think "*le politique*" because it aims to open up "*la politique*" in virtue of its commitment to the interruption of the Other. What this withdrawal from politics to the political does not accomplish, however, is a "re-tracing" of the essence of the political as such (Critchley 2014, 206–7). However, it should be noted that this re-tracing of the political, or the "reduction" of *la politique* to *le politique*, entails for Critchley the exclusion of politics itself (2014, 214).

First, according to Critchley, the alternative political space opened by
Levinas is one in which politics must be mediated by ethics in what he calls
a "politics of ethical difference." Politics, left to its own devices, engages
in a reduction of all social life where the political agent views society as
a Whole. Conversely, "ethical transcendence" (theopoetics in Caputo's
parlance) within the domain of politics (i.e. the responsibility accorded to
the Other), not only criticizes this totalizing gesture in political regimes
and immanentist visions of society, but also questions liberal politics in-
sofar as the latter is dominated by autarchic visions of freedom, autonomy
and instrumentalist usages of political rationality. The crucial point is that
the primacy of the ethical difference opens onto the continual criticism
and demand for a just polity, where the latter is an "enactment of plural-
ity, of multiplicity" (Critchley 2014, 225). What seems to be different here
for Critchley, in contrast to Derrida's emphasis on responsibility for the
Other and the undecidability within the midst of decision, is the "activity"
of questioning and critique—in short, the passage from ethics to politics
consists in the continual interruption of the totality of society by ethical
transcendence. A further refining move in this account, as a way out of
the political impasse in deconstruction, is Levinas' well-known notion of *le
tiers* (or the third party). This notion extends the ethical relation beyond the
mere meeting of private individuals to the community as a whole. The basic
point is that the "third party" (i.e. the community as a part of the political
and social context) also looks at me through the eyes of the Other (Critch-
ley 2014, 225–6). There is thus a paradox of the community or "doubling
of discourse" for, on the one hand, the ethical relation to the Other is an
asymmetrical unequal demand that provokes my obligation, while on the
other, this Other is also in relation with *le tiers*, a communal bond of rela-
tion among equals. Critchley's reading of Levinas here is a helpful attempt
at a solution to the problematic of our discussion, since he is suggesting
that an approximation of politics, the political struggle for a community
of equals, which one could cite as the aim of theopraxis, does not collapse
or reduce ethical transcendence or theopoetics, but is in fact based upon
it: "the coincidence of beings in a community is, for Levinas, based on
the non-coincidence of the Same and the Other in the ethical relation"
(Critchley 2014, 227). To give a reformulated summary of this first step
of a Critchlean supplement to radical political theology, one could say
(a) that the theopraxis of theopoetics is the continual political activity of
questioning and critique that interrupts any totalizing gesture in society,
and (b) that an egalitarian community for which theopraxis strives, does
not reduce theopoetics but is founded upon it.

A second and more radical final step in this Critchlean supplement, is
to try and identify the form of democratic action or actions that would
resemble the "commitment" to the political task of theopraxis.[12] For this
concluding gesture we turn to Critchley's later and more mature work in
the final chapter of his relatively short but powerful philosophical-political
statement, *Infinitely Demanding* (2007), where he argues that the form
politics should take should feed off what he calls a "meta-political ethical
moment." Here the movement from ethics to politics retains his loyalty
to Levinasian ethics, but now with the added and more radical attempt to
formally thematize the political as a concrete "politics of resistance." For
Critchley, the activation of a political subject (and one should begin to
imagine here the same activation that would occur for the subject of theo-
praxis) is derived from a "meta-political ethical moment." This somewhat
cumbersome formulation denotes that instant which provides the moti-
vational force for entering a sequence of political action that enacts the
ethical responsiveness to the other. In the language of Levinas we have
already observed, this moment is anarchic in the sense that it precedes any
notion of *archè*—the notion of the modern subject's sovereign self-mastery
that stands in contrast to a subject that is heteronomously constituted in
the ethical relation. Anarchic subjectivity does not set-up a new sovereign
subject, it is rather a subject always disturbed, a question unto itself. Ethical
anarchism then becomes political anarchism, where the latter refers not '60s
libertarianism but an agitation against the Whole, a deployment of a politics
of subversion that is bound to a hyperbolic demand of responsibility—the
event/call that issues from a situation of injustice (Critchley 2008, 123–8).
For Critchley, the "hegemonic glue" that weaves the cells of a politics of
resistance (political subjects involved in political activism) together, is the
universal (meta) ethical demand—the weak force of the call (Caputo)—that
is made in the particularity of a situation. This chiasmic logic, which we
have also already observed, where ethics without politics is seen to be
empty, and where politics without ethics is seen as blind, justifies the con-
nection to and reflects the movement of theopoetics to theopraxis. If the
theopoetics of "radical political theology" that uses the material conditions
of a particular life-world, discursive narratives etc., to articulate the event,
and therefore calls for a human response to precisely alter those condi-
tions in light of the impossible kingdom of sacred anarchy, which is to say
a movement that to a theopraxis, then what is being argued here is that

---

12. Where the category of "commitment" here would be connected to Alain Badiou's
"process of truths" or "the process of fidelity to an event" (Critchley 2008, 43).

Critchley's notion of "anarchic meta-politics" serves as a potential source
for a theory of "political action" that might adequately correspond to this
radical political theology, and thus provide it with an otherwise wanting
sense of viscerality. The final question remains to be asked, then, precisely
what form of political action might complement the anarchic-meta politics
of theopoetics? What might be a model for theopraxis? These concluding
reflections to a Critchlean supplement for a radical political theology are
to be treated provisionally and as a creative attempt to open a conversation
that is yet underway, they are, therefore, not taken as conclusive but as a
possible site for further explorations and reflections.

 Critchley's mature conception of politics, that continues in the tradition
of radical democratic theory, and follows Antonio Gramsci and the work of
Ernesto Laclau, argues that, contrary to Marx's simplification of class actors,
what happens in late-capitalism is the proliferation and multiplication of
dislocated political identities. For Laclau, what these dislocations caused by
Capitalism enable, are for us to see the contingent and constructed nature of
all social life, which means that politics is not only in a state of dislocation,
but also that it can be re-articulated. This re-articulation can commence
through the harnessing of dislocation in order to create new forms of com-
monality and association, which is what Laclau after Gramsci means by
the concept of hegemony.[13] The multiplication of social actors in the face
of global capitalism, therefore, is not to be viewed pessimistically but as an
opportunity that could provide the source for a range of alternate political
possibilities (Critchley 2008, 102). However, this hegemonic praxis—the
work to be done in constructing political identities—necessarily involves
the problem of nomination. For Critchley, the moment of hegemony which
aggregates political subjects must invent names which are determined by
the particularities of the situation. What this implies—and Caputo would
agree here because he also thinks the singularity of the event of theopoet-
ics—is that political subjectivity is not determined by a pre-given ontology
(Marxian "Species-Being," Deleuzian "abundance," or Lacanian "lack"), but
through a hegemonic articulation that occurs in response to a specific situ-
ation of injustice (Critchley 2008, 103–5). Critchley gives the situation of
Mexico in the late 1980's as an example, where the expansion of neo-liberal
reforms under the Gortari government gave rise to the political "name" of
"the indigenous"—a unique political identity out of which a new phenom-
enon of (international) activism could emerge to make claims on a state
that marginalized them. Without denying that indigenous persons are real

---

 13. (See Mouffe and Laclau 1985).

people subject to real perpetrations, Critchley's point is about the political operation involved: the indigenous, as "a contingently articulated subject made possible at a determinate and transient historical point," makes claims toward the state that are mediated through "hegemonic intervention and imagination" (2008, 108). It is perhaps here, provided that the notion of hegemony is held together by a meta-theo-ethical-poetics, that a final caveat for a Critchlean supplement to a radical political theology can take place.

Bibliography

Caputo, John D. 1987. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
———. 1993. *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
———. 1997. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
———. 2002. "In Search of a Sacred Anarchy: An Experiment in Danish Deconstruction." In *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity*, edited by Martin Beck Matuštík and William L. McBride, 305–20. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
———. 2003. "Without Sovereignty, Without Being: Unconditionality, The Coming God and Derrida's Democracy To Come." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4 (3): 9–26.
———. 2006a. "Beyond Sovereignty: Many Nations Under The Weakness Of God." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 89 (1–2): 21–35.
———. 2006b. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
———. 2011. "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11 (2): 32–124.
———. 2013. *Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
———. 2014. "Theopoetics as Heretical Hegelianism." *Crosscurrents* 64 (4): 509–34.
———. 2019. *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Critchley, Simon. 2008. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance.* London: Verso.
———. 2009. *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, & Contemporary French Thought, Politics of Resistance.* London: Verso.
———. 2014. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, edited by 2. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Deketelaere, Nikolaas. 2019. "Imagining the World Otherwise: Jean-Luc Nancy and John D. Caputo on the Poetics of Creation." *Literature and Theology* 34 (1): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frz033.
Derrida, Jacques. 1986. *Altérités.* Paris: Osiris.
———. 1992. "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority." In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, 3–67. London: Routledge.
———. 2005a. *The Politics of Friendship.* Translated by George Collins. London: Verso.
———. 2005b. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason.* Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Haddad, Samir. 2016. "Reading Derrida Reading Derrida: Deconstruction as Self-In-heritance." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14 (4): 505–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550601003314.

Hägglund, Martin. 2008. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hart, Kevin. 2014. *Kingdoms of God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kantorowicz, Ernst. 2016. *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lacan, Jacques. 2007. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*. Translated by Russell Grigg. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Massmann, Alexander. 2017. "Mach und Ohnmacht in John Caputos Gottesbild." In *Gottes Schwache Macht: Alternativen zur Rede von Gottes Allmacht und Ohnmacht*, edited by Rebekka A. Klein and Friederike Raas, 73–83. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Miller, David L. 2010. "Theopoetry or Theopoetics." *Cross Currents* 60 (1): 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2010.00103.x.

Moody, Katherine Sarah. 2015. *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Mouffe, Chantal, and Ernesto Laclau. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith. New York: Fordham University Press.

Olthuis, James H., ed. 2002. *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*. London: Routledge.

Putt, B. Keith, ed. 2019. *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Schmitt, Carl. 2005. *Political Theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

———. 2007. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Schrijvers, Joeri. 2016. *Between Faith and Belief: Toward A Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Simmons, J. Aaron, and Stephan Minister, eds. 2012. *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion With Religion*. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj, and John Milbank. 2009. *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, edited by Creston Davis. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zlomislić, Marko, and Neal DeRoo, eds. 2010. *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.