

POLITICAL THEOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE NEW AGE OF THE EXCEPTION

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Forward

“Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 5).

Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* was written in 1922, seven decades before the development of the internet. With the advent of global communication, the sovereign manipulation of information has created a potent state of exception. The illusions of liberalism fall victim to Schmitt’s *Political Theology* as sovereign exceptions become more prevalent. In the Digital Age, sovereign is he who manipulates the multitude.

The American president has increased his sovereignty using networks of communication. The contemporary American population has become dependent on dictatorial authority. This dependency leads to an increase in visible sovereign presidential action. As Schmitt denotes in *Political Theology*, “if such action is not subject to controls (checks and balances)... then it is clear who the sovereign is. He decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it” (7).

The American Sovereign

The most prominent modern global sovereign figure is the President of the United States. He commands the most capable military of the last remaining superpower. He has the ability to command technology and control information using tools such as the NSA (National Security Agency) spying program and the Patriot Act. He can manipulate the Western media's dominant message using envoys and the "bully pulpit." The technological advantage gained by the American sovereign due to his command of government capital, as well as his ability to define the multitudes use of technology through government manipulation of law and message, is unparalleled. The president commands secrecy: he can leak secrets at will and prosecute others who do the same. As sovereign, he controls the exception of secrecy. He controls the narrative. He can silence critics using the Espionage Act, which allows him to prosecute anyone who leaks the information he commands.

The American president is the protector; he uses secret methods of violence such as the drone program, torture, and detainment. He decides on the exception, based on security, without checks and balances. He has the ability to destroy the world with his command of the American nuclear arsenal. He has been able to manipulate the liberal concept of law

(liberty) by deciding on the exception. He can deny basic liberties found in the Bill of Rights, as well define exceptions in the Geneva Conventions: policies on torture, detainment, and assassination. These cases of exception are decided upon based on protectionism, and acted upon in practice. President Barack Obama states, “The president’s highest priority is to keep the American people safe” (WH). The modern American sovereign is a Hobbesian Leviathan who commands his kingdom using technology to manipulate the multitude.

Schmitt’s theory of sovereign power warns us that the sovereign can adapt to any contemporary design to gain more authority. In the Digital Age, the sovereign can, and does, manipulate information through defining the exception. Modern technology allows for an increase of Western ‘theo-secular’ control. Our information sharing world is based on more, rather than less, consolidated control. The position of the sovereign is above the secular, or allows him to use the secular, because of his ability to decide (define and act) on the exception by controlling information and technology. The control is based on liberal constitutional concepts that replace the sovereign of the king and dictator, with the sovereign of ‘an enlightened’ presidential figure.

The American sovereign masks his autocracy with “ordinary day to day jurisprudence” which forms an illusion of liberalism. The execution of presidential sovereign decision-making is seen as a “disturbance” rather than usurpation, because it maintains “order in the juristic sense... even if

not of the ordinary kind” (Schmitt 12). Contemporary Western political power structures enhance the public’s acceptance of such “disturbances” by dominating the multitude through the use and control of information technology. These “disturbances” are often crafted in the form of religious analogies, or secular concepts.

It is estimated that the United States has conducted over 500 drone strikes under the Obama administration. These numbers are taken from journalist reports because of the program’s secrecy. The number of deaths is estimated at 2,379 people, of which 88% are non-combatants. These strikes occur in many nations; including Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and others not known due to the secrecy of the program (Newsweek). Regardless of exact figures, the United States acknowledges it is conducting these attacks and then killing foreign nationals without a declaration of war or public permission from foreign governments to operate drones where the attacks occur. This is a part of the realm of secrecy, which allows the sovereign to decide. Several United States citizens have been targeted without due process. The United States acknowledges that it has killed four U.S. citizens overseas with the secret program (Baker).

The Patriot Act and the NSA spying program display cases of the exception within the constitutional framework of liberalism. In these cases, sovereign authority has suspended constitutional (legal) protections through the use of exception. The exception is protected by control (secrecy). We now know that the NSA gathers huge amounts of informa-

tion which can be manipulated by authority. This manipulation is done with collaboration from new age producers such as Google and various other global cellular phone and internet companies. Liberties such as Fourth Amendment protections, and fundamental ethical liberal considerations of privacy, are suspended by the sovereign under a veil of secrecy.

America developed an extra-legalized form of torture (water-boarding), as a secret policy. When discovered, the policy of torture was continually justified as an exception due to the sovereigns mandate to defend the people.

Liberal Eschatology¹

President George W. Bush was able to use his command of information to form a manipulation of the multitude that led to the invasion of Iraq based on eschatological (theological) design. A design partially constructed from images of Old Testament fire and damnation (nuclear holocaust). The president was then able to alter the original premise of the invasion from the threat of “weapons of mass destruction” to an exercise in nation building: a creation of Iraq in a Christian democratic image. What Talal Asad may refer to as secular exceptionalism. The eschatological design of ‘Last Judgment’ transitioned to the design of ‘Salvation.’

The President of the United States used the threat of nuclear holocaust to initiate a sovereign decision through manipulation of contem-

¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines eschatology as “The department of theological science concerned with ‘the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell’.”

porary medium: through his sovereign control of the information placed in the media for public consumption. The decision was thrust upon the world using the presidential position of knowledge (all knowing), which is understood because of the United States' domination of the economically based technological realm. The president's knowledge is displayed to the world with the release of graphic secret images. President George W. Bush, an Evangelical Christian, pushed the narrative of "good vs evil" and justified his authority by playing heavily on his sovereign position as the protector. His electoral victories in 2000 and 2004 were secured in part by the Rove strategy: a mobilization of the evangelical base. After 9/11, Bush stated to the world that the "evil doers" are to be brought to justice (judgment), and the world is to conform to this decision. "You are either for us, or you are against us." This is American exceptionalism: the will of a nation, or nationalism, expressed and acted upon directly by the sovereign. A sovereign who decides who is evil and which nations will be targeted or spared. It is the globalization of American executive sovereign authority. It displays both layers of the Schmitt's concept of sovereignty; the president is deciding on the exception as a matter of fact in terms of what the exception is, and he is making the decision on what action will be taken in regard to the exception he has made. As sovereign, he is both defining, and acting upon, the state of exception without checks and balances. In the words of Jürgen Habermas in his work *The Future of Human Nature*, "the language of

retaliation... had an old testament ring to it" (102). The "bully pulpit" was used to increase control of the multitude using technology. The president's ability to manipulate technology to provide a message, combined with his ability to decide on the exception in releasing of classified material, was sovereign.

The exception for the invasion was attacking the nation of Iraq without direct provocation. A new doctrine coined as "preemptive war." The exception was created partially by promoting a climate of fear: the looming danger of an Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" program that could kill millions of Americans. Various envoys of President Bush reinforced his sovereign position by spreading this message (gospel) globally, using the technology of the Digital Age:

President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell and George Tenet, to name a few leading figures, built support for the war by telling the world that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling chemical weapons, feverishly developing germ warfare devices and racing to build a nuclear bomb (New York Times).

On September 7th and 8th of 2002, a major information push for war using modern technology allowed the sovereign to manipulate, rather than inform, the multitude. On 07 September 2002, Dick Cheney on *Meet the Press* stated, "That he [Saddam Hussein] is in fact actively and aggressively seeking to acquire nuclear weapons" (MSNBC). Cheney warned that the first "smoking gun" of the Iraqi "nuclear weapons industry" may be a

“mushroom cloud” (CNN).

This eschatological warning of possible world destruction was issued using the Western media. The sovereign control of secrecy was paramount. By referring to “information” (secrets held by the sovereign) that only the president can legally release for public consumption, the cherry picked specifics of the Iraqi weapons program were fed to the multitude. The public was warned that the Iraqi’s were procuring “yellow cake uranium” and “aluminum tubes” to “enrich uranium.” The President could discuss publically what others in the intelligence community could not. In October of 2002, the United States Senate approved the *Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution*. A 77 to 23 vote approved the invasion of Iraq, even though the opposing party (Democrats) had control of the Senate (WAP0). Sovereign was he who manipulated the multitude.

President Bush also utilized the global media bias discussed by Talal Asad in his work *Formations of the Secular*; “Finally, the mass media, increasingly owned by corporate conglomerates and often cooperating with the state, mediate the political reactions of the public” (4). Bush was able to use his messengers and his bully pulpit to gain the advantage of “manipulation of the message,” partially through the natural bias of the secular media. Secretary of State Colin Powell was dispatched to the United Nations (UN) to present evidence of Iraq’s weapons program on February 2, 2003. The presentation involved the release of classified satellite imagery, which Powell proclaimed were mobile Iraqi weapons laboratories (U.S. State).

Powell gave the brief to convince the UN as well as the American public that the Iraqi weapons program presented a clear and present danger.

This information later turned out to be false. The trucks were not weapons labs. Iraq did not have current nuclear or chemical/biological weapons programs. Still, the sovereign's ability to control the message through divulging secrets (all knowing) gave him a control of information that manipulated the multitude. This is an example of the manipulation of global law based on the exception produced by targeted information sharing. Powell performed before the public and the United Nations using the release of classified information (mobile weapons labs) to manipulate the multitude. The threat of annihilation from a "rogue state" was displayed using the technology controlled by the "legitimate state": using satellite imagery as well as secret information, released to the legitimate (legal) world order (United Nations).

Although the information was false, that did not stop the sovereign from using this authority to manipulate the narrative in order to decide on the exception. Even though the information was false, the manipulation of the information was effective in allowing the sovereign to create, and decide on, a state of exception. The claim of sovereignty over knowledge worked. The sovereign's ability to manipulate the multitude using his control of knowledge allowed him to lawfully engage in a "pre-emptive" war. At both the federal and international level, President Bush decided on the exception by commanding information.

Operation Iraqi Freedom's (OIF) justification was then transitioned from an invasion constructed on the design of protectionism to the design of expansion. The salvation properties of Christian based ideals (enlightenment) were to bring the occupied nation of Iraq new freedom. Bush stated, "Freedom is on the march." Under the auspice of Western theocratic concepts of love and protection, the United States would bring salvation to the people of Iraq. This transition occurred during De-Ba'athification, which was managed by Paul Bremer, the sovereign's envoy (messenger). The eschatological message was transferred from the reckoning of a last judgment apocalypse to the concept of a new earth. The sovereign passed judgment to avoid damnation and bring a new awakening. These messages were very clearly understood by the sovereign's evangelical base, as well as ensconced in other parts of the American psyche because of Christian theocratic underpinnings in our concept of self and state. Americans who did not recognize the religious undertones of the message could certainly recognize the secular liberal democratic righteousness of "a free and stable Iraq." The Western process of nation building depends on a secular liberal democratic design, which regardless of debated Christian underpinnings, serves to form its own position above the non-secular in the New World Order.

Those who attempted to thwart the President's will were summarily neutered. Using the ability to control information, Bush margin-

alized and silenced critics of the war. For example, Valerie Plame was exposed as a covert operative to block a narrative that countered Bush's eschatological design. Jürgen Habermas warns about the destructive use of theocratic tendencies in his work *The Future of Human Nature*:

Orthodoxies exist in the Western world as well as in the Middle or Far East, among Christians and Jews as well as among Muslims. If we want to avoid a clash of civilizations, we must keep in mind that the dialectic of our own occidental process of secularization has as yet not come to a close... We do not want to be perceived as crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization (102/103).

Habermas believes the West has a genealogical dependence on religion, but that religion is subservient to, and should be supportive of, enlightened concepts. It is our obligation to use religious concepts as a form of common language for ethical unification rather than division. We have not done this. We have used 'theo-secular' design to create war.

The Case Against the Lowest Common Denominator

We have a choice, and that choice is reason. We are not guided by divine providence. Bush's theocracy is a metaphor in history. The metaphor is not explanatory of a definitive historical connection to theological political designs. Hypotheses that attempt to prophesize what choices will be made, how choices will be made, and where reason or economy will lead us, are fundamentally flawed. The design of such theories is flawed.

According to Hans Blumenberg, the use of connection through metaphor, as is displayed in this paper in support of Schmitt, is not relevant to a serious study history. In the words of Blumenberg, “A metaphor is after all a rhetorical artifice, nothing serious and certainly nothing that can lead to any sort of knowledge... *Political Theology* is a metaphorical theology” (19, 101).

Blumenberg surmises that the “political theologian” is guilty of picking and choosing what represents his designs, while avoiding or modifying that, which may counter his designs. When we try to demonstrate a form of construction or deconstruction that lends itself to a narrow interpretation, which places theology (or anything else) as the foundation of the modern historical, we become guilty of cherry picking. We see in everything a correlation which can be explained by religion, or economy, or cultural conflict, etc.

Truth has a formation, which is more complex than simplistic designs. It involves human influence and reason; yet we too often run to the lowest common denominator of our own belief: Marxism, theology, free market manifesto, etc. When we find the one thing that influences all, we fool ourselves with the arrogance of our preferred design, believing that our reason is superior to others. Blumenburg cites an entry in the journal of Soren Kierkegaard to demonstrate the absurdity of rigid theoretical foundations:

Honest, well-intentioned people have snatched up the lost packs and bundles and carry them panting after the Christians, but the latter pay no attention to their cries, thinking they have everything that belongs to them. Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fichte, Saint-Simon, every new theory- socialism, communism- all are only trying to restore abandoned Christianity! (120).

Conclusion

“The modern age is crypto theological” (McGillen). As Hans Blumenberg points out, there are serious flaws to any philosophy that attempts to break down political formations into a lowest common denominator.

That does not mean that these theories are not potent indicators for what we see developing globally. *Political Theology*, just like the *Communist Manifesto* or *Wealth of Nations*, serves as a way to understand valuable indicators, rather than foundations, or mere metaphors. The answer is interdisciplinary.

The ominous and potent sovereign warnings of Schmitt are ever-present, as demonstrated. The power of the sovereign to control the exception is increased when combined with the sovereign ability to command the dissemination of information. When we allow the sovereign to control us, he will. The more we understand our condition, the more apt we are to avoid the trappings of *The Leviathan* and move forward in an effort to stop the cycle of violence that currently ensnares us. With every new age comes a new possibility.

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