

DEMOCRACY AND THE SECULAR: MOVING BEYOND THE LIBERAL MODEL

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Introduction

The attempt to separate philosophy from theology especially with regard to the legitimate foundation of political authority has been a fundamental philosophical challenge of modernity. To many that challenge seemed successfully met given the progressive affirmation of democratic Enlightenment and secular politics since the 18th century throughout the globe. Yet there are reasons today to think otherwise.

The recent resurgence of religion in the public sphere –as if talking about resurgence is appropriate at all– together with the remarkable scholarly diverse re-consideration of the role religious convictions have in political life¹, have re-opened the question of the secular thereby indicating that the relationship between the theological and the political is far from obvious.² For since residue of religious themes can be seen at play in fundamental concepts of secular political philosophies such as sovereignty and the law³, it is not clear whether, and to what extent, secular political philosophies are emancipated from theological sources and thus from metaphysical commitments to transcendence. That is, resources and commitments typical of very the modality of thinking modern political philosophy set out to overcome.

These preliminary observations suggest that the fundamental challenge mentioned above is still haunting the politics and philosophy of our times. The permanence of religion in politics shows that the confinement of religion to the private sphere established by secular (liberal) politics has not been that successful at the practical level, or at least its success is qualified and contentious. Most importantly, it raises the question whether the attempt to separate reason and faith in view of establishing the authority of the former especially in public life, which has characterized much of modern European philosophy has been, and is, philosophically well-considered. If this is correct, there seems to be no more urgent questions for politico-philosophical reflection today than to ask whether alternative post-secular forms of political life that go beyond the quest for a robust normative ground central to both secular reason and

¹ In political theory, see William Conolly, *Why I am not A Secularist*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jürgen Habermas *Between Naturalism and Religion*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); *An Awareness of What is Missing. Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). In continental philosophy: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); *Dis-Enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 2008, New York: Fordham University Press; Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); *After Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). In sociology: José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); 'Secular Social Imaginaries: Introduction', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 21 (2008). In anthropology: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

² A similar concern has been recently addressed by Michael Gillespie who focuses in particular on the origin of modernity in view of defending the central role religion and theology played in the formation of the idea of modernity. See Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, tr. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University Press, 2005).

religious faith are possible, without this implying a return to a mode of thinking that seek to ground communal life on transcendent foundations.

I contend that Derrida's thought offers powerful resources to open the space for rethinking such forms of life, and thus I here propose to carefully consider his perspective on the political domain. I begin by explaining his argument as to why temporality is not a 'given' in politics. This leads on the one hand, to a criticism of secular modes of thought that understand history teleologically and politics as a vehicle for its actualization; on the other hand, to the introduction of the 'messianic' as a mode of thought alternative to both teleology and theology. I then connect these issues to Derrida's reflections on democracy and the secular, and suggest that his deconstruction of sovereignty, besides showing deep problems connected to traditional understanding of democracy and secularism inherited by liberal thought, opens up the space for thinking new political imaginaries.

1. Temporality and the political domain

The question of time has been a longstanding concern, if not an obsession, of Derrida's work. In his *Given Time* he asks 'What is to give time?'⁴ as a way to question the meaning of what we ordinarily take time to be, of that which allows beings and the world continue to be, endure and survive beyond a specific moment. In particular, he addresses whether time belongs to anyone as if time could be ever owned and thus given. Further he relates this to a discussion of genuine giving as giving without expectation of return, i.e. giving as gift. Derrida's strategy to deal with the question of time is to articulate a perspective that radicalizes the idea of human finitude and thus historicizes time in a manner that unsettles any recourse to an ultimate supersensible and extra-temporal instance.

Following Heidegger, Derrida takes issue with a particular view of time established by Aristotle which has profoundly influenced the entire western philosophical tradition: time as a linear and circular movement or process of succession of 'nows' whose full presence in the mind is graspable by reflection. Such a view is to him problematic for a number of reasons. First, the question of time is posed in terms of being (does time belong to being or non-being?) which simply means omitting the very question of time, namely whether time is part of being or not. Second, it represents time as a sort of nostalgic return (the circle) to an origin or original ground as if there ever was one re-appropriate. Finally, it subscribes to what Derrida calls metaphysics of presence: a philosophical approach typical of the western tradition from the Greeks according to which a permanent and rationally ordered reality is supposed to exist, and whose fundamental ground, origin or *arkhe* –which manifests itself in terms of being, idea, truth etc – is accessible to human thought. In other words, the metaphysics of presence conceives of being as presence, that is, as founding principle, telos or *ousia* present to consciousness in a clearly identifiable and distinguishable way from the conditions in which it occurs. Thus the thinking of time from within the metaphysics of presence assumes that the origin to which temporal 'nows' returns can be presentable to consciousness in the form of presence.

These points have a clear Heideggerian genesis and resonate with the view of time he develops throughout his entire thought, a view which might be useful to briefly pause on. In *Being and Time* Heidegger says that the question of being and of its meaning has fallen into oblivion and, to reformulate it, he proposes an investigation of being within the transcendental horizon of time (and within it an existential analysis of the temporality of *Dasein*). To be precise, he reformulates that question in terms of what he calls 'ontological difference', that is in terms of the difference between beings and being. Although the employment of the notion of ontological

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3.

difference allows for initially making visible the question of the meaning being, and Heidegger's notion of transcendental horizon of time (i.e. temporality as the condition of possibility of being's disclosure) points toward a finite historical ground, the overall vocabulary of inquiry easily brings us back to metaphysical mode of thinking that conceives of a metaphysical ground (being as the ground of beings), which is to be sought and recovered through the investigation of beings.⁵

For Heidegger, the forgetting of the question of being that characterizes particularly modern philosophy is due to an understanding of being as being-present or presence, which in turn is intimately linked to an interpretation of time as a succession of moments or nows recognizable in the mind as present. This view, for him, is deeply problematic: it seems to place the investigation of the meaning of being within a metaphysical framework conceiving as possible the mental representation of a motion from a being (*Dasein* or human being) to another being (temporality as the meaning of being as such). In this way, that approach still excludes from its horizon of inquiry the existential context in which the investigation occurs as it presupposes the subject/object distinction. That is to say, the subject is made capable of thinking from a (metaphysical) perspective that is separate from, and posited against, what is questioned, the object.⁶

Heidegger further explores these issues in his later writings. In *Identity and Difference* he considers the history of philosophy as the history of metaphysics, which in turn is a history of the reduction of being to particular mental experiences or abstract ideas of reason.⁷ He names this approach onto-theo-logical by which he means that the idea of being has been not simply understood as the ground (*Grund*)⁸ of all beings (ontology) but also as the most fundamental ground, ultimately the ground of itself, which is the metaphysical idea of God (theology).

For Heidegger no one idea or concept can grasp being in itself, which can be approached only in its withdrawal, or difference, from a particular being or idea. Indeed, for him, the problem connected to the onto-theo-logical nature of metaphysics is that it leaves unthought the unity of beings and being.⁹ This is so because according to metaphysical thinking both being and beings appear to us by virtue of their difference but that difference *as such* is never explored. Being as ground is always thought in the genitive form as the 'being of' beings; beings, in turn, are always conceived as 'beings of' being. Heidegger's central point is then to think the ontological difference not as 'difference between' but as 'difference *qua* difference'.¹⁰

Derrida agrees with Heidegger that no concept can grasp substantially what the truth of being is.¹¹ But, unlike him, he does not consider Being, however conceived, as the preferential site where truth can be found since all we can have access to in terms of cognition –as we shall

⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time, A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, tr. J. Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

⁶ Although Heidegger seems to often consider Plato as the progenitor of the subject/object distinction, it is worth noting that he identifies the genesis of that distinction in modern science, and the Cartesian epistemology grounding it. On this, see his *Being and Time*. Before Descartes, the *subjectum* denoted the object, or what most common interpretations would call the subject matter or the substance of what we are discussing. Descartes distinguished the thinking subject or conscious self from the world of extended objects. See Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. Donald A. Cress (Cambridge: Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, tr. J. Stambaugh, (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2002).

⁸ The original German for ground is *Grund* which is more easily translated into English than French. However, when used in the negative, *Abgrund*, it is not as readily translatable as what is groundless and foundationless is not absymal as it is in German. I owe clarifications on this point to Ed Andrew.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) p. 21.

see later on in the paper – is a ‘trace’ of what one might identify as the most basic experience.¹² For Derrida, we do in fact think being as the site of truth but only because this is a propensity towards metaphysical concepts that is intrinsic to language and thinking due to words’ tendency to become abstract concepts removed from the variation of their empirical reference.¹³ Yet there is no philosophically sound rationale to think being as an ontological reality, as this will still presuppose the capacity to grasp a fix ground, even if as withdrawal, where truth manifest itself.

To go back to the question ‘what is to give time?’, Derrida affirms that time ‘gives nothing to see’ by which he means that time is not *something* given or an object, not even an object of thought like a concept that gives itself to be seen. In contrast, it is ‘visible’ only by what is not, namely the object that is made visible *in* it.¹⁴ Hence time designates somehow the form in which things are visible. From this several consequences follow. First, time cannot belong to anyone and no one can give it, as it is not a thing. As such, it breaks the common logic of economics, namely that of reciprocal (circular) receiving and giving or exchange insofar as no one can give or expect to receive time.¹⁵ Most importantly, time does not belong to temporality since by not being a thing is not conditioned by it, it is not a temporal thing. So how should we understand time then?

If time is not a temporal thing and it interrupts the circularity of economic exchange, it cannot be represented as a circular movement of ‘nows’ that return to an original donor. Rather, Derrida suggests, it can be associated to a genuine gift, a giving that is not recognized as such and is given without return.¹⁶ Indeed, for Derrida, a genuine gift can appear only in its effacement in that if it enters the circuit of economic exchange then it is not anymore a gift but something else. For if a gift becomes apparent either to the donor or the donee it creates a sense of indebtedness and expectation, which is nothing but the (re)activation of the economic logic of exchange. Thus the very preservation of the gift requires a lack of identification and recognition of its very reality by self-conscious subjects, which is to say that the reality of a genuine gift –provided that there is any, Derrida emphasizes –would be possible only *before* any relation to human consciousness.¹⁷

Now, Derrida connects time to the gift to illustrate that the structure of the former resemble the latter’s: time, like the gift, is a ‘giving that gives but without giving anything and without anyone giving anything’.¹⁸ But what does this mean? To better understand this point, a brief return to Heidegger is necessary, as Derrida himself suggests.

As mentioned, Heidegger’s later writings mark an attempt to flee metaphysical thinking. In addition, they show his shift towards thinking the question of being from within the transcendental horizon of time to what he calls *Ereignis* (event of appropriation), and suggesting that both being and time condition each other.¹⁹ Derrida tells us that, in *On Time and Being*, Heidegger focuses specifically on the giving or gift implicated in the notion of the *es gibt*, which he initially introduced in *Being and Time*.²⁰ The German expression *es gibt*, generally translated

¹² Ibid., p. 20.

¹³ See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago), p. 280.

¹⁴ See Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Derrida presents the paradoxical or aporetic structure of giving which can be roughly summarized as follow: giving is commonly understood as a relationship between a donor and a donee and as an exchange that generates debt, this meaning that it remains within a logic of reciprocity (or economic exchange). The structure of giving is important to our purpose here as Derrida connects it to that of time. See his *Given Time*, p. 6ff.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹ See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, tr. P. Emad and K. Maly, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁰ See Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, tr. J. Stambaugh, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) p. 20.

in English as ‘there is’, when applied to being and time, should read ‘there is being’ (*es gibt Sein*) or ‘there is time’ (*es gibt Zeit*) as opposed to ‘being is’ or ‘time is’. What Derrida seeks to emphasize in this regard is Heidegger’s attempt to make us read the *es gibt* or ‘there is’ as ‘it gives’, as if the ‘there’ of the ‘there is’ stands for an ‘it’ that gives a gift (being and time) but is not a being or a temporal thing that gives anything to anyone, and yet relates time to being.²¹ Moreover, he highlights how for Heidegger, the question of being (and time) becomes eventually a question of elucidating the *proper* relation between being and time, which are given to the thinking subject as gifts.²²

It is precisely on this last point that Derrida disagrees with Heidegger’s trajectory, though he inherits from him the association between time and gift. For Derrida, Heidegger’s notion of ‘giving’ shows an implicit desire for origins:

‘In the very position of this question, in the formulation of the project or design of thinking, namely, in the order to think Being and time in their ‘own element’ the desire to accede the proper is already, we could say, surreptitiously ordered by Heidegger according to the dimension of the ‘giving’. And reciprocally. What would it mean to think the gift, Being, and time *properly* in that which is most proper to their own, that is what they can give and give over to the movement of appropriation, expropriation, de-appropriation or appropriation. Can one ask these questions without anticipating a thought, even a desire of the proper?’²³

Derrida sees Heidegger’s articulation of the giving or gift of the ‘there is’ in terms of some longing for a proper or original –and one might well say true –grasping of the manifestation of being, the event of its happening, in time. And this does not simply mean believing such an event to be recognizable on the basis of a fixed ground or origin, the proper relationship in fact. It also means that it can be expected, foreseen and calculated exactly like the repayment of the (false) gift entrapped within the economic relationship.

But how is Derrida’s association between time and gift compatible with Heidegger’s then? For Derrida, the gift involved in the *es gibt*, supposing there is a genuine one, cannot be part of any calculative reasoning. Nor can it be implicated in a modality of thought that anticipates and conceives as humanly possible the return to an origin (the proper), as this would merely be re-instituting the circularity of the exchange that he questions.

In contrast to Heidegger, Derrida conceives of time as gift as a figure of possibility and impossibility.²⁴ Time, like the ‘it’ or the ‘there’ of ‘there is’ is given to thought and, on that basis, its ‘visibility’ is possible. However, as time constitutes the form *in* which things are visible, its ‘visibility’ as time is impossible, as genuine time disappears as soon as an object appears *in* it. In other words, the conditions of possibility of time as gift indicate at the same time the conditions of its impossibility.

Thus Derrida’s view of time as gift indicates that there is something untimely in our finite experience of time. On the one hand, the temporalization of time amounts to a violation of its

²¹ Although Derrida says that the common English and French translations of the *es gibt* are respectively *there is* or *il y a*, it should be noted that the translation is not as smooth as it might seem. The *there* and *y* are respectively the German and French *da* as in *Dasein*. *Es gibt Sein* or *il y a Être* does not have the circularity of ‘there is being’. The *es gibt* formulation, which serves to avoid vicious circles, is the basis of Derrida’s reflections on gifts. Possibly, the notion of gift could be translated as *given* –what is given to us in thought is not, a gift of anyone, and only metaphorically an anonymous gift.

²² See Derrida, *Given Time*, pp. 20–21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

gift-like nature which leads to the problematic implications associated to metaphysical thinking just discussed. On the other hand, our being *in* time presupposes an otherness that makes temporality, being-in-time, possible. This otherness is simultaneously beyond reach as it is time-giving but also very near as it is inscribed within the form in which things are visible.

I contend that time as gift is a figure that furthers our understanding of time in conditions of radical finitude. For if the gift (of time) interrupts the circle/cycle of economic exchange then it cannot be referred back to an origin, an original donor which lies outside temporality and gives it, as it were. The question of time has therefore its place before, yet does not need to bridge us beyond, the relation to an original donor. This is so in that, were the latter supposed to exist, it would look very much like a replica of that fundamental and extra-temporal ground Derrida is radically questioning.

To further substantiate this position, Derrida shows that and how time is historicized by spatial mark of its passage, or 'trace', which points towards something that is neither fully present(able) nor absent(able) to the mind. The 'trace' comes in for Derrida to account for an inaugural, and yet nonoriginary, synthesis between time and space, and allows for a more complex understanding of what a 'now', present moment or interval might be. Says Derrida:

In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as 'originary' and irreducibly nonsimple, (and therefore, *strictu sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks... that I propose to call arche-writing, arche-trace, or difference.²⁵

What Derrida is trying to do in the quoted passage is to give an account of the temporal instant which is the 'now', and emphasize that the latter, to be possible, must be visible and enduring in time. And this in turn requires a spatial inscription, a trace or *spacing* as he calls it, allowing something to be recognizable at all in time, and in spite of temporal flow. This is what Derrida calls the becoming-space of time. However, for there to be a trace in the first place, which can be recognized only after its spatial inscription, space has to be related to the flow of time and therefore be temporalized –otherwise no *after* would be possible for recognizing the trace.²⁶ So if the spatialization of time makes the inaugural synthesis possible, the temporalization of space disallows its founding on an indivisible ground that is not itself exposed to the coming of what can contaminate its purity.

The understanding of Derrida's argument about the irreducible spatio-temporal constitution of the trace seriously undermines the metaphysics of presence. For if mental contents available to human understanding at any particular moment contain something from a previous experience, there is no mental content in consciousness that is separable from the content in the preceding moments, which is to say that any present content is to a certain extent a repetition.²⁷ This, in turn, implies that ideas in consciousness are always trace-bounded and trace-constituted so that no idea can be ever fully present as a pure monad.²⁸ So construed, the idea of 'trace' dissolves the problem of dualism, and hierarchy, between transcendence and immanence, the intelligible and the sensible, that affects much of contemporary philosophical reflection, including political reflections on the proper foundation of communal life. The 'trace' refers in fact to that

²⁵ See Jacques Derrida. 'Différance' in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), p. 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, tr. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 85.

²⁸ This argument is reiterated by Derrida in his discussion of Freud in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in Jacques Derrida *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 87.

limit point in which transcendence and immanence are silently related in such a way that there is no sharp line distinguishing the one from the other, and thus such a distinction remains within the plane of undecidability.²⁹

Grasping the idea of ‘trace’ as the material sign that disrupts the presentability of the ‘now’ in consciousness as a pure, undivided presence has also another effect: it allows for a deeper appreciation of how Derrida debunks teleological thinking. For if undecidability characterizes the most original moment of reflection, there is no philosophical rationale to reject the idea that no transcendent origin is not already immanent, no origin is not already a becoming, no original origin is available to the subject. The most we can aspire to find in the search for beginnings or grounds is ambiguity, constant deferral of the point of departure or contamination of the purity of a mental representation, being this named essence, telos, or truth. Hence, once the clear identification of telos is undermined the movement towards its actualization is derailed.

But what does all this have to do with political thought? The point of the matter here is that if western political thought has inherited and relied upon the same metaphysical assumptions characterizing western philosophy more generally, it is subject to the same challenge Derrida poses to philosophical discourse at large. Indeed, for Derrida canonical understandings of political thought and politics presuppose precisely the understanding of time which has characterized the western tradition since Aristotle. For example, concepts such as sovereignty, law, power, freedom as well as normative categories such as legitimacy and justification, are all underwritten by that very understanding of time and purity of ideas so far identified as problematic. This is so in that such concepts have been elaborated as if it were philosophically sound, or even possible, to isolate the temporality of the subjects thinking them and their contexts.³⁰

Therefore the radical re-posing of the question of time has fundamental political implications for the type of foundation political thought is justified to put forward. In particular it enables a robust criticism of secular modes of political thought that understand history teleologically and politics as a vehicle for its actualization. Indeed, the commitment to a longing for origins and a teleological mode of thinking that understands history as the fulfilment of a telos does not really seem an exception within the tradition of western political thought. Such a mode of thinking conceives the telos as an ideal end that can be rationally grasped in the present as an idea that one can hope to approximate (Kant’s regulative ideal and Habermas’ ideal speech situation), work towards actualizing (Hegel’s historicization of Spirit and Marx’s advent of communist society), or expect as arriving at the end of time (religious messianisms). If this holds, it might be thus argued that the extent to which philosophical understandings of time as longing for origin have informed political thinking, institutions and practices they have contributed to promote the universalization of a monistic, and thus exclusionary, form of politics grounded on ideas allegedly, and yet unwarrantedly, grasped in their purity.

On the whole, the goal of calling the attention to Derrida’s position on time and its connection to political thought and political domain is this : to emphasize that the omission of the question of time within politico-philosophical reflection has not simply cooperated to the continuous reliance of political concepts, institutions and practices on deeply problematic metaphysical commitments. Most importantly, it has contributed to the petrification of time into a metaphysical conceptuality establishing a particular order of hierarchies (ground, telos or essence as ideas, or the intelligible viz. the material manifestation of these, or the sensible), which are implicated in the production of conceptual schemas that unjustifiably discriminate against alterity. This is evident especially in the way in which throughout the entire history of political thought the nature, extent and justification of political authority –of which more will follow –has been

²⁹ See Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 54.

³⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 101.

implicated in some onto-theo-logical dimension characterized by the quest for transcendent foundations to justify the political order. For traces of that dimension can be seen at play in fundamental concepts of secular political philosophies such as sovereignty and the law, which, although framed in a secular language have retained a modality of thinking that is committed to an unconditioned ground grounding all beings.

Now, the most relevant implication following from the above consideration is that by seeking to found communal life on such a type of ground, much of politico-philosophical thought has remained entrapped in metaphysico-teleological assumptions. Most importantly, it has remained implicated in their intolerant implications, to the extent that the attempt to approximate a telos implies violence towards any singularity that resists incorporation into a system precisely because its nature, as singular, cannot be defined in advance according to a fixed rule.³¹ Thus if one of the key motivations in the attempt to separate philosophy from theology was to remedy the intolerance of latter³², one might say that much of modern political-philosophy, and especially liberal thought, did not live up to its aim. Indeed, a significant level of intolerance and coloniality³³, previously manifested by religion and theological discourse, can be ascribed to certain secular attempts to affirm, on the globe, a chiefly European conception of reason through imperial policies justified by philosophical arguments. As Burke would put it, with the progressive affirmation of modern philosophy over theology the line of succession changed but not the principle of inheritance as the claim on exclusive prerogative on fundamental questions of human life grounded on metaphysical thought was transferred from European theology to philosophy. Affirming this is not to consider the whole of modern political philosophy and, within it, the project of the Enlightenment fundamentally faulty. Rather it is an attempt to address some of its most problematic aspects and emphasize that the interpretation of what Enlightenment means is not necessarily exhausted by its most dominant (liberal) appropriation(s).

2. Messianic thinking as ‘normativity without telos’

In contrast to the view of time and teleology he attacks, Derrida puts forward the notion of the ‘messianic’. Here I cannot commit to a detailed exploration of his view on the matter, which I leave to another occasion. However, I would nevertheless like to offer a very sketchy picture of how this notion allows for a different thought of temporality, one that might help us moving beyond traditional understanding of temporal concepts such as teleology, eschatology and messianism that have characterized western political thought and that still underpin most political movements, both progressive and conservative.

The ‘messianic’, firstly introduced by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*, names a modality of thought which is receptive to the always possible rupture of the narrative unity giving coherence to human experience. Further, it refers to the affirmation of an emancipatory promise that keeps

³¹ Note here that the emphasis put on singularity to illuminate the violence implicit in teleological thinking need not imply its dogmatic celebration. Derrida is in fact well aware that the mark of difference can be instrumentally used to justify racism and exclusions. See Jacques Derrida ‘Schibboleth’, in *Midrash and Literature*, eds. Geoffrey Harman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986)

³² This is one of the themes of Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*. It is worth noting, though, that Locke was intolerant of Quakers (who refused to take off their hats to their betters) and atheists (who allegedly would not honor contracts). See John Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983)

³³ I take coloniality to be distinguished from colonialism which refers to an historical period. By coloniality, I mean to refer to a paternalistic type of mind-set that establishes a preferential site of enunciation, which arbitrarily establishes an Archimedean standard according to which judgments about what it means to be human should be evaluated. And this indicates that the terms for self-interpretation at the disposal of the colonized subject are established independently of his will, historicity, context and particularities, these being elements constituting the substance of any recognizable form of human life.

deferring ‘not what it affirms but deferring just *so as* to affirm’ an open future by resisting to determining any horizon of expectation or prophetic pre-figuration.³⁴ Applied to the political domain, Derrida’s notion of the ‘messianic’ can be called ‘normativity without telos’, which is essentially a modality of (political) thinking that strives to keep open the political space to the other, to the meaning of central political concepts and forms such as democracy and justice through the affirmation of a formal normativity –that is, without a pre-established end or content. Put differently, ‘normativity without telos’ is a disposition or orientation to be open to the otherness of the other and of the self, namely the multiple possible actualizations of the self whose essential identity cannot be reduced to autonomy or self-determination only. The openness here can be thought of as receptivity to the other’s singularity that cannot be simply conceived as difference as if one were judging from a standpoint ascribing properties of sameness and difference, which allow for translating what is alien into what is familiar. It must remain untranslatable to stay singular and yet moving toward translatability if it is to be receivable and receptive at all. Openness, then, would be a disposition to receive without aiming at the consummation of such receptivity in terms of closing oneself to the other’s reality were this to differ from what an ideal end (telos) established in advance. And this, for Derrida, is precisely what the logic of spectrality inaugurated by some of Marx’s writings entails: pointing toward a thinking of time and the event that exceeds the binary logic or dialectic of teleological thinking, which seeks to preserve the distinction and hierarchy between the ideal and the empirical, where the former provides the telos that the latter should seek to approximate.³⁵

As ‘normativity without telos’, the messianic goes beyond the quest for pure ideas of consciousness and fixed metaphysical foundations characterizing both secular philosophies and theology.³⁶ Holding this, however, need not undermine the normative dimension of political thinking. Insofar as it normative in form, messianic thinking retains the ethical commitment to act and be responsive to the other’s singularity and context. Yet, insofar as it lacks a particular telos, messianic thinking does not exhaust pre-emptively the content informing decision or action.

In this way, by keeping alive the tension between ethical demand and political responsibility, and more generally between theory and practice, Derrida maintains open the space for critiquing current laws and institutions while offering powerful resources to foster a responsibility to the particularity, ambiguity and temporality that characterize the political domain. This is possible insofar as the normativity animating ethical demands –the injunction to act– remains essentially formal without at the same time giving in to an ‘anything goes’. Indeed, for Derrida, normative judgments about what should be done are to be assessed on their ability to respond as appropriately as possible to the singularity of subjects and of situations, and thus cannot be formulated in advance (in pre-eminently ideal terms) or before being exposed to them. And this seems central to thinking about politics in a way that disentangles human freedom from the attempt to approximate or actualize the fulfilment of ideal ends typical of teleological modes of

³⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 19.

³⁵ A concrete example in this regard would be the supporter of liberal-democracy as an ideal (or telos), who consider a success, for example, the spread of liberal democracy since World War II in the West but consider the actual historical failures in many non-western contexts not to be a sign of that ideal’s failure but simply deficient actualizations.

³⁶ It is worth noting, though, that messianic thinking does not fully reject metaphysics. Indeed, Derrida does not attempt to break *tout-court* with the concepts of metaphysics as he warns us that the propensity towards them is intrinsic to language and thinking due to words’ tendency to become abstract concepts removed from the variation of their empirical reference. On this, see note 13. Rather throughout his entire work he forcefully and relentlessly indicates the risk of thinking finding rest in fixed or absolute grounds. Thus while necessarily working within the boundaries of metaphysical thought which he critically exposes together with their exclusionary implications, Derrida proposes an approach which is weary of the metaphysical temptation inbuilt in philosophical speculation but escapes its full entrapment through a conscious navigating of its margins.

thought. Arguably, if politico-philosophical reflection were to limit its scope to what has been already realized or what is presently conceived as feasible, critical thinking would lose its capacity to distinguish what is from what might have been, and politics would be reduced to a device to maintain the status quo rather than attempting to further freedom.

3. The theologico-political character of politics: illuminations on the secular

In the previous sections, I have tried to show why, for Derrida, temporality is not a 'given' in politics. This has led on the one hand, to a criticism of secular modes of thought that understand history teleologically and politics as a vehicle for its actualization; on the other hand, to the introduction of the 'messianic' as a mode of thought alternative to both teleology and theology. In the next two sections, I shall connect this view to Derrida's reflections on the secular and democracy to illustrate how his perspective makes up room for thinking them in ways that might bridge us beyond the dominant liberal model and towards new political imaginaries.

Let us start with the secular. My aim here is first, to present and discuss Derrida's view of the political as theologico-political; and second, to illustrate the idea that both the theological and political domains are characterized by the notion of autoimmunity. Derrida's perspective on the secular, conceived as that dimension of theory and praxis addressing the relationship between political authority and religious order, is to be found in a series of political writings published around the 1990s'.³⁷ It is there that he articulates his view of the political domain as essentially theologico-political. He says: 'the fundamental concepts that often permit us to isolate or to *pretend* to isolate the *political* –restricting ourselves to this particular circumscription –remain religious or in any case theologico-political'.³⁸

But what does theologico-political mean? How should we understand the hyphenation between the two terms? As conjunction or distinction? As interdependence or subordination? But most importantly, how should we go about trying to understand such a complex relationship? Derrida uses the notion of theologico-political to refer to the political domain in a way that resembles Spinoza's.³⁹ That is, the theologico-political is an interpretative matrix indicating, through the hyphenation, the irreducible relationship between the theological and political domains, which is to say that religion and politics are not susceptible to a final synthesis. To illustrate this, he explores the issue of political foundings through the analysis of the American 'Declaration of Independence'⁴⁰ and the analysis of what he calls the 'mystical foundation of authority'.⁴¹

In 'Declarations of Independence' Derrida offers a textual analysis of the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and organizes his exploration by way of addressing the following question: 'Who signs, and with which proper name, the declarative act which founds an institution?' Derrida's investigation focuses on the nature of the declarative act, which founds a new state of affairs as much as it describes it as that act 'does what it says it does'.⁴² For him, the event of founding a political community, a people, involves a performative

³⁷ See Jacques Derrida 'Declarations of independence' in *New Political Science* (1986) Volume 7.1:7–15; 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority' in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Anidjar Gil, (New York: Routledge, 2002); *Specters of Marx*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); *Politics of Friendship*, tr. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997); 'Des Tours de Babel' in *Acts of Religion*; 'Faith and Knowledge. Two Sources of 'Religion' in *Acts of Religion*.

³⁸ See Derrida's 'Faith and Knowledge', p. 63.

³⁹ See Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008).

⁴⁰ See Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence'.

⁴¹ See Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', p. 57.

⁴² 'Declarations of Independence', 8.

operation that brings into being what it names and describes, since prior to that event such a new entity does not yet exist.

This view raises immediately a philosophical concern that is not simply logical. How is it possible that, as in the case of the American Declaration, the people declaring to be free and to be a ‘we’, a ‘people’, can do so without previously being already free and a ‘people’? At issue is the complex and paradoxical nature of a declarative act of independence with regard to which Derrida emphasizes the problem of taking a conclusive decision on whether, *at* the event of foundation, the act is constative or performative. He says: ‘One cannot decide –and that’s the interesting thing, the force and the coup of force of such a declarative act –whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance.’ That is, one cannot decide whether the ‘people have already freed themselves in fact and are only stating the fact of this emancipation in [*par*] the Declaration’ or rather whether ‘they free themselves at the instant of and by [*par*] the signature of this Declaration’.⁴³

For Derrida, the founding event is characterized by a structural co-implication between the performative and the constative: the declarative act is intelligible only if the two are taken as irreducible to one another so that adjudication of priority or hierarchy is not possible. Indeed, such adjudication is a matter of undecidability, which, rather than marking an interpretative impasse, enables instead the founding act with an instituting ‘force’. In other words, the undecidability between the performative and the constative is no impediment to the founding act but ‘is *required* in order to produce the sought-after effect’, namely the retroactive legitimation of the new established politico-legal order.⁴⁴

The notion afterwardsness connected to the ‘sought-after effect’ is particularly relevant here as it illuminates Derrida’s understanding of the temporality of founding acts. He refers in fact to the declarative act of founding a people in these terms:

‘But this people does not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, it does *not* exist, *before* this declaration, not *as such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end [*parvenu au bout*], if one can say this, of his or her signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity’.⁴⁵

The declarative act produces a deferred effect, a ‘fabulous retroactivity’, namely a deferred action bringing into being a new entity (a people or a state), a new legal subject.

As Bonnie Honig has shown, the adjective ‘fabulous’ is crucial as it *enables* retroactivity and indicates the form in which the event of foundation is displayed after its happening: a fable or story.⁴⁶ The story is a fabulous re-telling of the unfounded event of foundation, which brings into being, through the temporal modality of the future perfect, the people that “will already had” the right to sign the act.⁴⁷ ‘Already’, here, signals the temporal anteriority of the people, which must be *already* presupposed as a ‘we’ in order to be brought into being and accepted as legitimate. Indeed, since what legitimates the new entity is the event of its institution, that very event cannot rely on what it legitimates if its legitimating-giving property is to be retained. Otherwise the question about the legitimacy of what gives legitimacy can go *ad infinitum*. It can only rely on its

⁴³ ‘Declarations of Independence’, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 9–10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁶ See Bonnie Honig, ‘Declaration of Independence. Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic’, in *The American Political Science Review* 85 (1991), 97–113.

⁴⁷ “Declarations of Independence”, 10.

own unfounded reality which is disguised through a retroactively rendering invisible its own political and violent character.

The fabulous retroactivity of the 'Declarative Act' has, for Derrida, several implications for our understanding of the founding event. First, such an event retains highly ambiguous features insofar as it leaves opaque what the relationship is between the event of founding on the one side, and exclusion and physical violence on the other. Second, in being political, it is a contingent event that is always susceptible to unsettlement. Finally, it is characterized by a feverish and spectral feature as it contains records of traumatic events, which, however well concealed, exceeds the founding act and carry continuing effects into the future; events that haunt, as it were, later generations.⁴⁸

For Derrida, then, the modality of being of the founding act displays both the giving-legitimacy property and the illegitimacy of the founding event, which in turn disclose the contamination between a performative and constative dimension. In describing what it founds, the founding act must perform a recurrence to some anchor heterogeneous to itself that secures its own functioning. Such a recurrence, however, needs to be disguised as rational discourse and described as an autonomous self-positing showing that the sole source of the new founded reality is that reality itself. Understanding the structural contamination between the performative and constative dimension is thus central to appreciate why the declarative act shows both the giving-legitimacy property and the illegitimacy of the founding event. The groundless beginning illustrates that the founding event, in establishing the law, establishes also the standards of legitimacy. Yet by being prior to legitimacy such an event is not accountable to those very standards, and thus is, in some sense, 'illegitimate'.

It might be objected that by celebrating the contamination between the performative and constative dimensions of the founding event Derrida blurs the distinction between the two and thus ends up undermining the validity of collective self-determining acts. While pertinent, the objection does not quite capture the complexity of his perspective. For Derrida, acknowledging such a contamination does not imply eliding the distinction between the performative and the constative. Rather it implies recognizing the philosophical dubious status, given their co-implication, of any attempt to separate them and fixing their proper relationship *at* the act of founding. Such acknowledgment also implies recognizing that at the core of founding predicaments there is an opening created by the play between the performative and the constative; an opening indicating that founding acts are always exposed to a resistance that can disclose new possibilities for freedom to the extent that neither the constative nor the performative can provide a conclusive foundation to the political order.⁴⁹

However, the question arises about what exactly is the status of the founding event, which founds, is groundless and yet it appears to exist as an entity independent from what it founds. As Noah Horowitz has argued, what is at issue here is not simply the reality of the political event of founding but the general reality of the event.⁵⁰ What is its ontological and epistemological status, what makes an event possible and cognizable?

⁴⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, tr. by Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴⁹ See Bonnie Honig, 'Declaration of Independence', 108. Honig illustrates how Derrida resists the constative moment as a stable anchor for the founding moment through his politico-philosophical intervention, which aims at showing that the structural co-implication between the constative and the performative enables the founding moments in a non-conclusive and thus resistible way.

⁵⁰ See Noah Horowitz, 'Derrida and the Aporia of the Political, or The Theologico-Political dimension of Deconstruction', *Research in Phenomenology* 32 (2002), 156–177. In what follows, my analysis is highly indebted to his article.

The stakes involved in what these questions circumscribe are philosophically and politically delicate, and Derrida is well aware of that. It is thus worth quoting him at length on this.

Among the immense consequences of this strong logical necessity, we must reckon with those concerning nothing less than revelation, truth, and the event: a thought (ontological or meta-ontological) of conditions of possibility and structures of revealability, or the opening on to truth, may well appear legitimately and anterior to gaining access to singular events of revelation—and the stakes of this irreducible anteriority of *good sense* or *common sense* methodologically are limitless. ‘In fact’, ‘in truth’, it would be only the event of revelation that would open—like a breaking-in, making it possible after the event—the field of the possible in which it appeared to spring forth, and for that matter actually did so. The event of revelation would reveal not only this or that—God, for example, but revealability itself. By the same token, this would forbid us saying ‘God, for example’.⁵¹

Here Derrida addresses the relationship between an event of revelation that grounds what can become apparent, and a general structure of revealability that comprehends revelation *as such* without further recurrence to a particular event. In particular, he emphasizes that while the general structure of revealability seems to account for a particular event of revelation and thus it is not reducible to it, the latter allows for an opening up of a whole field of possibilities as well as for the apprehension of its general structure. But what is the relationship between revealability and revelation? It is aporetic or paradoxical. Says Derrida:

In its most abstract form, then, the aporia within which we are struggling would be perhaps the following: is revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) more originary than revelation, and hence independent of all religion? Independent in the structures of its experience and in the analytics relating to them?[...]Or rather, inversely, would the event of revelation have consisted in revealing revealability itself, and the origin of light, the originary light, the very invisibility of visibility?⁵²

So here is the puzzle: on the one hand, the examination of a particular event is necessary as it opens up a domain of possibilities and thus appears to have a certain priority; on the other hand, the general structures of the event makes the latter possible and knowable in the first place and cannot thus be denied priority. Like with the issue of time, Derrida’s position on this is that of undecidability which he manifests in several of his writings.

Is there an alternative here? Must one choose between these two orders? [...] Must one choose between the priority of *revelation* (*Offenbarung*) and that of *revealability* (*Offenbarkeit*), the priority of manifestation and that of manifestability, of theology and theiology, of the science of god and the science of the divine, of the divinity of God?⁵³

This is the whole question of the relationship between the event of the religious revelation (*Offenbarung*) and a revealability (*Offenbarkeit*), a possibility of

⁵¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, tr. George Collins, London: Verso, 1997). p. 18.

⁵² See Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, pp. 54–55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.18–19.

manifestation, the prior thought of what opens toward the arrival or toward the coming of such an event.⁵⁴

There are two points worth highlighting in these quotes, which manifest a clear debt to Heideggerian themes.⁵⁵ First, Derrida sees the undecidability between the orders of revealability and revelation as constitutive of the general structure of the event. No decision can be made about which order is prior since the reality of the event is characterized by a co-implication of the two orders so that partying with one necessarily implies doing so with the other. Second, the undecidability associated to the structure of the event retains a connection with the theological as it is modally informed by the event of revelation, which, as Derrida says in the quote above, would nevertheless not be limited to religious experience only and thus to the Abrahamic filiations, but be about ‘revealability itself’.⁵⁶ And this shows that the understanding of the reality of the event, its truth as it were, is always implicated in the paradoxical relationship of revelation and revealability.

This last point brings us back to the initial concern of this section, namely the idea of the political domain as always already theologico-political. If the structure of the event, any event, is always caught in between revealability and revelation, namely it is always implicated in a theological dimension, the political act of founding too is so. That is to say, the political domain is from the event of its foundation always already theologico-political.

To illustrate this point, let us return to ‘Declarations of Independence’ where Derrida provides us with an example that might be helpful to clarify things. He notes how at the occurrence of the founding event, the performative act is enacted through a reference to God, who would be that heterogeneous anchor the declarative act needs in order to make its constative effects lasting. God does not only secure the declarative act’s ‘force’, thereby ensuring its enduring effect. He also supports, as it were, the facing of the abyss over which such an act is suspended.⁵⁷ Derrida notes in fact that ‘for the Declaration to have meaning *and* effect, there must be a last instance. God is the name, the best one, for this last instance and this ultimate signature’.⁵⁸ The reference to God has does on the one hand, supplements and override the people as the authorizing agent so that the contingency of the founding act is disguised as a sort of necessity, and its abyssal character concealed. On the other hand, it makes possible the co-originary of the performative and constative dimensions of the declarative act, a co-originary that is about fact and right. After having quoted a passage from the Declaration which ends by saying that the ‘Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states’ Derrida observes:

‘Are and ought to be’; the ‘and’ articulates and conjoins here the two discursive modality, the to be and the ought to be, the constatation and the prescription, the fact and the right.

⁵⁴ See Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Although, in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the terms *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* indicate the realm of public manifestation and publicity, in his ‘Phenomenology and Theology’ Heidegger uses the same terms as signifying the manifestation and dimension of being within which events appear. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 338; ‘Phenomenology and Theology’ in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998: 39–62). It is precisely the latter use that his relevant here. In that essay, Heidegger suggests that if we were to write a theology, god and being should be kept separate since the former requires a faith going beyond reason. Yet it is through the experience of being that one can encounter god since being gives us access to revealability (*Offenbarkeit*), namely the condition in which revelation (*Offenbarung*) can be received by man. It is this complex relationship between revelation and revealability that Derrida explores without attempting to collapse one into the other.

⁵⁶ See Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ ‘Declarations of Independence’, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

And is God: at once creator of nature and judge of what is (the state of the world) and of what relates to what ought to be (the rectitude of our intentions).⁵⁹

The reference to God establishes him, not the declaring agent(s), as the ultimate instance guaranteeing the coming into existence of the new entity. This reference is a countersignature since the people can only authorize their signing the declaration by being countersigned by God 'in the name of which' they sign.⁶⁰ That is why Derrida affirms that in founding moments 'there are only countersignatures'.⁶¹

For Derrida, then, the reality of the founding act in the American Declaration, and more generally of founding acts, is inextricably linked to some form of transcendence, an anchoring to a last, unifying instance, that enables the institution of a new entity. The reference to a transcendent instance is both functional and irreducible: it is functional since transcendence operates as a hypothesis about a unity (God) making the founding act functioning as a foundation. It is irreducible as an ultimate instance is required to authorize the self-legitimizing force characterizing the performative *coup de force* that the declarative act is. To a deeper level, though, other than guaranteeing such 'force', the reference to a countersigning transcendence reveals, beside an only apparent circularity and unity, the abyssal structure of the founding act and thus the provisionality and instability of the order the latter institutes. Thus rather than providing an ultimate ground as in traditional theological discourse, the reference to transcendence and to a theological dimension illuminates the instability of any ultimate ground or unity.

An appreciation of this point can help us clarifying the sense in which Derrida attributes a theological dimension to the political domain. Although Derrida seems to agree with Schmitt on the theological origin of modern political categories, the connection between the political domain and theology need not be inscribed within a traditional political theology considering the political constitutively grounded on a revealed transcendence. Nor is that connection to be taken in the form of analogy as Schmitt does when he associates the establishment of political sovereignty to 'the miracle in theology'.⁶² Indeed for Derrida, the transcendent and theological dimensions of the political domain do not merely depend on whether an explicit reference to God is made or to any theological theme. Rather it is implicit in the exceptionality of the event of founding to the extent that, at that very moment, the institution of the law remains suspended, to use Derrida's words, 'in a void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone'.⁶³ Before the law, to employ an expression dear to both Derrida and Kafka⁶⁴, lies the uninterpretable (and hence mystical, for Derrida) source authorizing the law.

Thus it is precisely the reference to the transcendence implicated in the founding act that illustrates why the political domain is theologico-political already at its birth. By the same token, one might say that since revelation remains always implicated in political foundings, for the reasons we saw earlier on when discussing the general reality of the event, revealed religion too is always already theologico-political. Proving the contrary is a burden of the critic who, as Derrida suggests, would have the hard task to demonstrate that the predicates of the religious domain *as such* are clearly dissociable from the political one, not to mention the economic and juridical.⁶⁵ Accordingly he would also have to justify why religion is to be understood as merely or primarily

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 11.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (op.cit.) 36.

⁶³ See Derrida, 'Force of the Law', p. 270.

⁶⁴ See Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Muir Will, (New York: Schocken Books Inc, 1995).

⁶⁵ See Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', p. 63.

concerned with theological claims and their epistemological validity, which seek to exhaust the cognitive field, as much of modern and contemporary political thought seems to assume.

Now, understanding the political and religious domains as always theologico-political has remarkable philosophical implications. First, it illustrates that the political domain too is characterized by the structure of contamination Derrida sees at play in both language and temporality. Second, it shows that any understanding of secularization which assumes emancipation from the sacred is on the one hand, a *false* secularization in that the reference to the sacred or some form of transcendence remains constitutive of the political domain; on the other hand, it is still held captive by a Platonic-Christian dualism that interprets the world according to the binary opposition temporal/spiritual, and thus relies on the possibility of there being an original ground allowing for one to talk about the sacred and religion *as such*, and yet believe not to be implicated in it. And this does not simply establish some limits on how to think processes of secularization. It also offers useful conceptual resources to criticize all those theories of secularization that pretend to talk about the theological and the political from a position external to their contamination in the attempt to establish a hierarchical priority between the two, namely resolving the theologico-political equation.

The second point this section set out to explore regards the idea that both the theological and political domains are characterized by the notion of autoimmunity. Borrowing it from biological sciences, where the notion of autoimmunity names a process in which a living organism protect itself against its own self-protection by destroying its own immune system, Derrida uses this notion in discussing selfhood, community, and even God. He conceives of it as a trope that does not simply illuminate the limits to self-identity and self-determination traditionally connected to self-hood, community and, most importantly, God. He uses it precisely to show that because self-identity is always threatened and from within –being the threat at the same time also a chance for self-preservation – meaning (i.e. the proper understanding of self, community or God) cannot be fixated but remains *always already* open to its own unsettlement, and to what is to come.

In ‘Faith and Knowledge’ Derrida uses the notion of autoimmunity and immunity to show why the attempt of any particular religion and theological discourse to immunize themselves, namely to maintain their fix identity, against both internal and external aggression is doomed to fail. For on the one hand, the existence of religious communities that attempt to establish what is proper to religious faith are constantly threatened by internal dissenting forces.⁶⁶ On the other hand, the attempt to secure such an immunity against the attacks of ‘natural reason’ and modern science is at odd with the sophisticated technologies that religious, not to mention fundamentalist, groups make use of today in order to sustain and spread faith in opposition to ‘natural reason’.⁶⁷

Similarly with the theological domain, Derrida illuminates how the political too is characterized by autoimmunity. In *Rogues* he talks especially about democracy’s ‘constitutive autoimmunity’ in order to illustrate how democracy ‘protects itself and maintains itself precisely by limiting and threatening itself’.⁶⁸ He does so by using as concrete examples the 1992 suspension of election in Algeria given the concrete possibility of theocratic shift as well as Bush administration’s suspension of some civil liberties as a protective reaction to the events of 9/11 in the United States.

So what is the point of autoimmunity? It is a crucial one. Coupled with messianic thinking as anti-teleological, autoimmunity allows for a deeper critique: that of the myth of semantic closure. According to such a myth, it is a prerogative of either secular reason or religious faith, to provide the normative justification to political life on the ground of an idealized

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁶⁸ See Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 11.

telos. Derrida believes that such an operation lacks firm theoretical grounding in that, it is *in fact* impossible closing or exhausting the meaning of what it is to be human or live together on the basis of a ‘proper’ interpretation of the telos. For him, in fact, the critique of the myth of semantic closure, equally applies to faith and secular reason⁶⁹; this holds insofar as neither the theological nor the political domain can claim a privileged access to the propriety of ideals according to which living together should be organized. Therefore, autoimmunity as leading to semantic inappropriability represents Derrida’s delegitimation of any form of thinking, religious or secular, which claims cognitive ultimacy and, on that basis, seeks to affirm the truth of what is *proper* to communal life.

4. Democracy ‘to come’: against political monism

Understanding Derrida’s complex position on the secular requires also paying attention to his perspective on democracy and its animating force, sovereignty, from which I shall start. My aim here is to expound how Derrida re-thinks the idea of sovereignty to revisit its relationship with democracy and subjectivity. In *Rogues* Derrida argues that traditional conceptualizations of sovereignty from the Greeks up to Kant and liberal thought, have conceived of it as *ipseity* (in English the best word capturing this notion is probably self-hood), namely a force (*kratos*) of self-constitution and self-legislation characterized by a circular motion of relating or returning to itself as its own end.⁷⁰ Further he considers sovereignty as the metaphysical concept at the core of both individual (subjectivity) and collective (democracy) agency.⁷¹ Thus as collective agent or *demos*, democracy is seen as a sovereign power, capable to decide and determine itself in view of itself. As such, sovereignty and democracy are intimately related but in a paradoxical way: the former is inherently anti-democratic as it must originally affirm itself in non-democratic manners but democracy, to be politically viable, needs sovereignty for its institution and functioning.⁷²

Derrida’s main trouble with the traditional understandings of sovereignty is that the circularity of *ipseity* displays its unconditional, indivisible, unitary and self-sufficient character since it establishes a circular identification of the cause with the end, of the ‘by itself’ with the ‘for itself’. The origin of this view is Aristotle’s idea of Prime Mover or God, the unmoved cause of motion that makes everything returning to itself, whose long-lasting impact is remarkably present in subsequent articulations of first or infinite cause (the Kantian infinite idea, for example) as well as in Kantian and post-Kantian understandings of the self as autonomous, where *autos* stands for all that can be referred to sameness and homogeneity.⁷³ As such, unconditional *ipseity* rules out any compatibility with what in the agent (the subject or democracy), is other, multiple and ambiguous: historical in fact. And this, for Derrida, is particularly contentious for several reasons: first, because the *ipseity* of a subject or democracy is finite and historical. Second, because the agent’s identity is constructed in terms of enduring sameness (as everything return to the unchanging origin, the same) as if the agent were not relational and thus multiple in its sources so that one among these could put forward exclusive claims.

Counter to this view, Derrida articulate a view of *ipseity* as historical and finite. Sovereignty as finite *ipseity* is incomplete and contaminated since it is always already exposed to alterity and relationality, and thus cannot constitute and determine itself but through contamination and conditionality. And this implies that any finite *ipseity* is characterized by a lack of full propriety and autonomy as it never is ‘properly what it is, never *itself*’.⁷⁴ Such a lack

⁶⁹ See Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, p.63; *Rogues*, p. 36ff.

⁷⁰ See Derrida, *Rogues*, p.11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

illuminates both democracy's plasticity –the need to compromise the constitution of its identity with alterity –and historicity – in the context and moment of its happening.⁷⁵ Therefore, without doing away with *ipseity* tout-court, Derrida reconfigures the relationship between sovereignty and democracy in a way that is responsive to the particularity, temporality and ambiguity of historical contexts. He also re-articulates a notion of subjectivity that makes justice to its relational predicament.

Let us turn now to democracy. Derrida articulates his conception of democracy as 'democracy to come'. This notion is not a typical proposition but stands for Derrida's playing around with the French *avenir* (future) and *à venir* (to come). The 'to' of the 'to come' does not announce an arrival (something that is going to happen) and is suspended between an imperative injunction, the urgency of decision, and the patient and active exposure to the irruption of the event, an happening we cannot know in advance nor can have control over.⁷⁶

It is in this second aspect that the idea of the 'to come' is associated to the gift explored in the first part of this paper. The gift gives time, namely it keeps time ongoing and open to the possibility of the event and thus exposes the subject to the uncalculable coming of it. In doing so, and this is a central point, it refrains from fixating the meaning of democracy, which is always *only* promised but never given.

To support this view, Derrida associates democracy to *khora*, a concept introduced by Plato in the *Timeus* that I can consider here only very briefly. *Khora* is understood as receptacle, a space, or an interval, which is neither being nor nonbeing but an interval, a between in which the 'forms' were originally held and made at all possible. Because *khora* is 'other than being' it escapes philosophical categories and conceptualization, and yet is not non-being. Derrida actually says that democracy is the *khora* of the political⁷⁷ to underscore two points: first, that democracy is a reality we cannot exhaust conceptually as it always exceeds semantic fixation. Second, that democracy is that which allows for a provisional meaning of living together be determined in the first place by providing an opening, which does not necessarily lead to any particular type of politics.

Now, it is important to note that the notion of 'democracy to come', however bizarre it might seem, is not the product of philosophical extravagance. Rather it has its sources of in the history of western political thought and practice, commencing with Plato up to the modern period. For Derrida, it is in fact Plato the first one who assigns democracy a certain semantic emptiness in that he conceives of it neither as a regime nor as a name for a constitution. Democracy is for Plato a site or space where regimes are made possible or available for selection. Derrida says that, for Plato,

'if one wants to found a state, all one has to do is to go to a democracy to pick out the paradigm of one's choice. As in a market there is no shortage of *paradeigmata*. This market indeed resembles a bazaar (*pantopolion*) where one can find whatever one wants in the way of constitutions (*politeia*)'.⁷⁸

So if democracy is a site where models of constitution are made available it cannot have an essence or a constitutive meaning attached to it, which is to say that there is no absolutely intelligible idea, idea in the Platonic sense, of democracy. Empirical examples in western political history confirm this too. The plurality of forms that presented themselves as democratic in

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

antiquity (monarchic, plutocratic, and tyrannical) as well as in the modern era (constitutional monarchy, parliamentary or popular) shows that democracy is not a clearly identifiable regime.⁷⁹

But ‘democracy to come’ is not a regulative idea of Kantian sort either. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents regulative Ideas (the soul, the world, and God) as something that can be thought but not known (experienced). Unlike the categories, the Ideas do not render our experience intelligible, or at least not immediately. Rather they go beyond experience by conceiving of an object that exceeds the limitation of constitutive experience. Kant conceives of these Ideas as given to the transcendental subject, and their role to be unifying and systematizing judgments about human experience. As such, then, a regulative idea is an ideal we can never reach but provides us with a thrust for further investigation.⁸⁰

At first sight, Derrida’s account of ‘democracy to come’ shares some remarkable affinities with the Kantian regulative Idea, especially with regard to its impossible realization in practice. Further, Derrida does not rule out the possibility to subscribe to that ideal at some point when he declares: ‘I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it’.⁸¹ But not quite yet. He enumerates several reservations with regard to this comparison.

First, Derrida says that a regulative idea is often interpreted as belonging to the order of the possible ‘an ideal possible that is infinitively deferred’.⁸² He recognizes that this is somehow un-Kantian in that it posits the Idea as something that could ever be in experience, even if infinitively deferred. For Kant the Idea will never arrive; its arrival is impossible, namely beyond the possibility of human experience. Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ is also *im*-possible. However, this seems to mean not that it is impossible as opposed to possible –or that is how I take Derrida’s saying the *im*-possible in a non-negative fashion.⁸³ Rather that it remains foreign to the order of one’s possibilities if these are taken as remaining within what is predictable, calculable or knowable, and thus as impermeable to eventfulness. Therefore, when Derrida says that ‘democracy to come’ is ‘what is most undeniably *real*’⁸⁴ I take him to mean that its *im*-possibility does not imply that we cannot have experience of it but that it is beyond any particular experience and yet not beyond the realm of experience. This is exactly the opposite of the regulative Idea.

Second, for Derrida, appropriating the regulative Idea would require subscribing the entire Kantian architectonic which is something he is not prepared to do especially with regard to the idea of the self as self-conscious, self-present *ipseity* but one could also consider the sovereignty Kant attributes to the nation-state.⁸⁵ As such, the Kantian project participates in that metaphysics of presence Derrida wants to differentiate himself from.

Third, Derrida emphasizes the here-and-now of the ‘democracy to come’, and the urgency of taking responsible decisions in spite of lack of full knowledge on what is ‘to come’. This is clearly opposed to a deferral implicit in the regulative Idea.⁸⁶ Derrida seems in fact to consider the Kantian Idea as inhospitable to the event to the extent that judgments about experience influenced by the Idea or made in its name are steps towards it as if a telos, grasped theoretically, has to be practically approximated or achieved. And this lead us to the last point.

Unlike Kant, Derrida rules out teleological modes of thinking history and politics. For him, in fact, democracy has no particular essence and thus will never be fully realized. In contrast, the meaning of democracy is what is to be determined ‘every time’ and cannot be

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁸⁰ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸¹ See Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 83.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 83–84.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 83, 143.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

fixated once and for all. As discussed before in the sections regarding temporality, Derrida is opposed to the anticipation of an ideal end to be actualized in practice, since this leads to the neutralization of the very temporality of politics. And this seems precisely what the ideal of perpetual peace would seem to lead to: time is suspended perpetually and with it the variations, contaminations and ambiguities of the context of its happening.

So what can we make of Derrida's view of 'democracy to come'? Derrida shows a double loyalty towards and against the tradition of political thought thus offering us a rather resourceful thinking. In the attempt to articulate the possibility of a critical political thinking that is normative while at the same time refraining to approximate ideal horizons or deploy a program, he opens up a different thinking of democracy; one that is emancipated from teleology and onto-theo-teleology. Doing this, for him, requires another thinking of the event and temporality as uncalculable, together with a militant and interminable critique of every step taken in the name of the idea of democracy. Indeed, the insight we are left with after dwelling with his thought is to conceive of democracy as an empty sign, whose appropriation cannot be full or permanent. Critical political thinking would thus be the activity in forming the action through which the filling and re-filling of the sign's space is possible given the singularity of situations.

The critic should not worry too much about the normative risk involved in keeping the meaning of democracy open as Derrida is well aware of it.⁸⁷ Indeed, he is extremely supportive of responsible decision and conscious that practice (read politics) requires action supported by normative judgment. Openness to otherness and to the event is a kind of normativity whose most evident fault is not to provide a conclusive meaning of what democracy might mean or a robust normative ground for action. But why should we be so anxious about that?

Conclusion

I hope this discussion has thrown light on some of the most problematic and urgent issues of the political predicament of our times connected primarily to questions of political authority and community. Through the exploration of Derrida's thought I have attempted to show some of the difficulties connected to an a-temporal thinking of politics; difficulties that much of contemporary political philosophy underestimates or does not perceive as relevant.

My main focus has been two-folds: first, I have tried to call the attention to the importance of reflecting on the relation between temporality and political thought. In particular, I have attempted to illustrate that the question of temporality raises important concerns regarding whether and in which ways the interpretation of the political domain is constrained by unwarranted metaphysical assumptions. Most decisively, it raises questions about the extent to which investigating the temporality of political thought is central to any project of intellectual and political emancipation, and emphasizes how recognizing the role of temporality in such thinking might help redefining political theorizing.

Second, through the analysis of Derrida's reflections on democracy and the secular, I have suggested that his deconstruction of political sovereignty as appropriated by much of modern and contemporary political thought (liberalism especially) shows the latter to be not simply a secularization of a theological heritage. But, most importantly, to be a *false* secularization as it seeks to impose, universally, a particular ideology (liberal-democracy). My hope has been that exposing the relevance of all this might help in providing us with a more complex understanding of the stakes involved in the attempt to ground communal life: the content of that ground, or the meaning of democracy, cannot be fixated once and for all, and thus any re-conceptualization of the secular must grant the political sphere the independence from *any* doctrine seeking to universalize a monistic form of politics.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 145.