

Ernesto Laclau on Political Theology: A Comparison with Schmitt and Derrida

Alejandra M. Salinas

*Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero/Facultad de
Ciencias Sociales, UCA*

Introduction

In the following discussion, the term *political* pertains to the organization and governance of society; *political philosophy* encompasses the categories used to analyze issues such as power, authority, legitimacy, and order; and *political theology* involves “the analysis and criticism of political arrangements . . . from the perspective of differing interpretations of God’s ways with the world.”¹ This article analyzes Ernesto Laclau’s views on political theology, which remain understudied despite increasing attention to his work.² His theory draws from various disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, history, philosophy, and theology, to articulate critical thinking about the nature of the political. Given the potential to enhance understanding of his thought, a more detailed examination of his views on political theology was in order. To that end, we draw parallels with Carl Schmitt, whose theory is often associated with Laclau’s,³ as well as with Jacques Derrida, whose strong influence he acknowledged.⁴

A comparative analysis can shed light on the authors’ shared interest in establishing analogies with theology to elucidate the study of the political. With this objective in mind, the text pivots around the following questions: How do Schmitt’s and Laclau’s theories overlap, and how do they differ? To what extent is it plausible to speak of a “Schmittian” Laclau? How are Derrida’s and Laclau’s readings of the apophatic tradition connected? How does the notion

of deconstruction relate to mysticism and pantheism? Are their views consistent accounts of the analogy between politics and theology? What are the respective political implications? What is the specific contribution of Laclau to political theology? Can it be considered revolutionary? How is it complemented with his reading of psychoanalysis?

To respond to these questions, the argument is organized as follows. We begin by presenting Schmitt's political theology, establishing a framework of reference for the ensuing discussion. According to him, every theological conception gives rise to a particular understanding of the political order. Until the nineteenth century, the idea of a God-governed world found secular expression in monarchical legitimacy and the correlated view of the sovereign's exceptional intervention in politics. The underlying assumption to that worldview was the permanent danger of evil and the consequent need for exceptional interventions to counter threats posed by antagonism. This *sprit du temps* changed with late modernity when immanence, scientism, and democracy became the new prevailing conceptions. For Schmitt, a problem arose with the abandonment of transcendence as the foundation of the social order, the denial of confrontation as essentially inherent to politics, and the illegitimacy of the sovereign's exceptional intervention in the legal-political order as ultimate arbiter in times of conflict.⁵ Schmitt's theory constitutes a reference point for a posterior analysis of the justification of authority, the foundations of democracy, and the antagonistic nature of politics found in Laclau.

Next, we address Derrida's efforts in reformulating the thought of the Left to abandon the rigidity of communist orthodoxy, since he challenges its "philosophical responses that consist in totalizing, in filling in the space of the question or in denying its possibility [of] the metaphysics of the 'proper,' of logocentrism."⁶ Along these lines, he proposes a "deconstructive thinking" on the grounds that the historicity of thought and language always demands new readings. Embarked in this task, he reflects on the theological concepts of promise, messianism, and eschatology to re-elaborate Marx's project of liberation. He advocates for a renewed and more plural-

istic theory, one that nonetheless preserves the Marxist messianic promise of an “eskhaton.”⁷ To this end, Derrida draws from negative theology, which he considers a “subversive stance” in that it highlights the human incapacity of fully grasping transcendent truth. From the limitations of discursive reason underscored by the apophatic tradition, he concludes with the impossibility of relating thought and language to metaphysical grounds. In the social realm, this translates into the idea that there are no ultimate justifications or legitimizations of social practices and institutions, an idea shared by Laclau.

The analysis of Laclau’s thought occupies the third section of this article. His perspective is less well known but also important, since he can be referenced as the leading theorist of populism,⁸ and from that angle he adds a new perspective to politico-theological debates. We approach Laclau’s works in two parts. First, we present his theory of hegemony as developed in a series of writings published in the 1990s, and second, we address his book on populism published in 2005.⁹ Like Derrida, Laclau rethinks “the political character of social relations in a theoretical arena that had seen the collapse of the classical Marxist conception of the dominant class—the latter conceived as a *necessary and immanent effect* of a fully constituted structure” (emphasis added).¹⁰ He disagrees with the presuppositions, methods, and finality of classical Marxism; he rejects its reductionism and economic determinism, and the universalism of the working class, because they ignore other forms of oppression and noneconomic struggles that are defined contingently and not in a “necessary and immanent” fashion. He explores an alternative theory that could account for a plurality of political identities and demands.¹¹

Laclau adapts Derrida’s concepts to the political field: “hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain requires that the contingent character of the connections existing in that terrain is fully shown by deconstruction.”¹² Just as the deconstruction of meanings would be necessary to shake the foundations of Western thought, the theory of hegemony challenges dominant political theories. In this sense, Laclau seems to

have also been influenced by Derrida's considerations on mysticism as a logic that speaks to the limits of rationality and the debatable nature of the established categories to approach reality. However, it would be misleading to think that in embracing the arguments of negative theology they hold a kind of Christian heterodoxy; rather, they use the apophatic tradition to examine analogies that might illuminate the understanding of a post-Marxist philosophy at the service of deconstruction.

Laclau recovers the mystical method by appealing to the ineffability of any transcendent instance, the contingent nature and variability of the negative attributes of that transcendence, and the identification between the parts and totality. He also posits that mysticism has pantheism as a corollary, implicitly suggesting that his own theory may be associated with a pantheistic worldview. We analyze here how the reference to mysticism and pantheism in correlation to his political theory presents some conceptual tensions that problematize the analogy. Besides said analogy, Laclau also compares his populist logic with psychoanalysis, according to which the people aspire to a union with a plenitude that is inaccessible in its totality, in the face of which they get only temporary, partial unions. We argue that the idea of human limitations to understand transcendence and to achieve an experience of union with totality underscored by negative theology and psychoanalysis serves him to formulate a theory based in the contingent, partial, and temporary character of populist orders, unlike Derrida's focus detached from more practical or concrete considerations.

The fourth and last section offers a comparison of Schmitt's and Laclau's formulations. Although Laclau did not engage with Schmitt's works (save for one exception), they share formal similarities.¹³ Schmitt's thesis on modern immanence correlates with Laclau's critique of immanence understood as an order of things that harmoniously unfolds according to laws of its own, which would obliterate the political, as explained in what follows. They both reject Enlightenment rationalism; they criticize the dynamics of liberal orders and advocate for the moment of exceptional or

hegemonic decision, among other common themes.¹⁴ However, whereas Schmitt speaks of a “metaphysical truth,”¹⁵ Laclau rejects “any metaphysical grounding of the social order.”¹⁶ Also, whereas Schmitt conceives threats to order as a sign of danger, for Laclau anomie opens a welcome opportunity to change the established liberal order. All in all, to speak of a “Schmittian” Laclau in the field of political theology is to overlook that Schmitt did not contribute to shaping Laclau’s views on any subject and that they crucially differ in their approach to the foundations and arrangements of political life.

In short, a reading of Laclau on par with Schmitt and Derrida is relevant to understand the formal similarities and common analogies among three distinctive theoretical models and their contrasting political implications. Laclau, like Schmitt, uses secularized theological concepts to think of political antagonism, and like Derrida, he appeals to mysticism to deconstruct traditional thought. However, unlike Schmitt, Laclau negates a metaphysical foundation for the political order and the need to stabilize the dynamics of power. Also, Laclau goes beyond Derrida’s destabilization of meanings and practices to investigate concrete political orders in what eventually becomes a defense of populism.

Besides the comparison among the three authors, the article highlights the specific contribution Laclau makes to political theology, which can be unpacked as follows. Laclau takes the apophatic idea about the limitations of human reason to access a transcendent totality, and transforms it into a political theory of a representative hegemonic instance. His view of political totality is novel and posits original avenues for further research on populist leadership. Additionally, by reinforcing theological-political analogies with insights into the affective, symbolic, and unconscious dimensions of power relations, he draws interesting bridges between psychoanalysis and the political. In sum, in resorting to these two disciplines to better illustrate his theory, Laclau offers both apologists and detractors new tools to approach the study of hegemonic logic.

Schmitt's Political Theology

As is well known, Schmitt defends the idea that legal and political concepts are “secularized theological concepts” in terms of their historical development and their “systematic structure.”¹⁷ Schmitt tackles the political phenomenon on the basis of a conception of nature and human reason entwined with transcendence. He assumes as initial premises a political order grounded in transcendent authority of the sovereign’s will and a limited human nature marked by “the temptation to evil inherent in every power.”¹⁸ Regardless of who the sovereign may be (the king, the president, the parliament, or the people), they are perceived as the subject wielding the ultimate power in shaping the political order and determining exceptions to it—specifically, the suspension of the legal order. It is the sovereign subject who has the unique attribution of implementing the state of exception: “the authority to suspend valid law . . . is so much the actual mark of sovereignty . . . [that] the question of sovereignty [means] the question of the decision on the exception.”¹⁹ His notion of the sovereign as the one who decides on the state of exception shares similarities with the idea of divine intervention to disrupt and transform human affairs: thus “[t]he exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”²⁰

Schmitt’s analogies denote a specific correlation between the theological, legal, and political perspectives of each epoch. In the seventeenth century, absolute monarchy structured and validated itself around a theistic worldview. The shift from a God-governed world to a science-governed one occurred in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, abandoning revealed Christian theology for the system of natural scientism and limited monarchies. In the nineteenth century, transcendence gave way to immanence, and monarchical legitimacy was replaced with democratic legitimacy, which he sees as “the expression of a relativistic and impersonal scientism.”²¹ For him, the problem with modernity would be the abandonment of transcendence as foundation of the political, and of the sovereign’s exceptional intervention in the legal order to act as the ultimate arbiter in times of conflict. In this regard he asserts,

"The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world [and rejected] the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order."²²

What Schmitt takes to be a rationalist and materialist vision of the modern era is associated with a view of the world as a machine, which follows laws of its own,²³ and where "there must no longer be political problems, only organizational-technical and economic-sociological tasks."²⁴ Thus, the modern focus on economics would downplay the political element and stall the moment of decision needed to deal effectively with the consequences of critical instances of antagonism.²⁵ As summarized by Michael Hollerich, Schmitt attributes to modernity the "distinction of public and private in politics and law, state fragmentation due to society's pluralistic forces ('depoliticization'), the pure normativity of law divorced from its roots in personal authority and decision-making, power division in parliamentary democracies, sovereignty fragmentation, replacing decision-making with debate, elevation of private property and laissez-faire economics, reduction of meaning to material production and consumption, and value neutrality concerning morality and belief."²⁶

Schmitt thus decries the immanent character of modernity, the removal of contestation from the realm of the political.²⁷ For him, a genuine politics emerges only from recognizing antagonism, which requires decisions that transcend legal and procedural constraints in times of crisis. The parallel with the concepts of a transcendent God as sovereign will serves him to criticize modern ideas and institutional arrangements. Schmitt provides useful categories to approach the legitimacy of authority, the nature of representation, and the notion of antagonism, also present in Laclau's theory.

The interest in political theology as a critique of Western liberal politics and institutions reemerged in the 1960s, albeit from a completely different angle. That decade was marked by social revolts, the processes of decolonization, the opposition to the Vietnam War, and the rise of guerrillas, all in a worldwide tide that

called into question the dominant political order. The turn to political theology to explain and justify social changes was motivated by different rationales and local contexts; it was not influenced by Schmitt's take on the subject.²⁸ Schmitt acknowledges this when pointing out that the renewed interest in political theology during the 1960s was thought of as a "discovery," but it was something he had already formulated forty years before.²⁹

Starting in the 1980s, left-oriented philosophers reinvigorated discussions regarding the theological connections of the political. Theirs was a response to the crisis and downfall of communist systems, the consolidation of a global capitalist order, and the rise of conservative movements, which demanded alternative narratives to rethink the critique of existing structures and ideologies. In that sense, political theology offered another conceptual framework for explaining the crisis and imagining new avenues for social and political transformation. There was the Left's "Schmittian turn" at the time,³⁰ although many authors remained alien to it. Among the latter, Claude Lefort explored the persistence of theological motifs in contemporary societies, and Jean-Luc Nancy offered a critique of the cultural and ideological dimensions of political practices.³¹ Along similar lines, Derrida and Laclau, prominent thinkers of the New Left, referenced politico-theological themes, to be examined in the next two sections.

Contemporary Interpretations of Political Theology: Derrida

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida examines the notions of responsibility, faith, and mystery in religion and in the history of ideas, and he relates them to political history and to "the very essence or future of European politics."³² Thus, he translates the theological take on responsibility, faith, and gift into a reading that stresses the responsibility for our decisions and actions in a terrain that is better described as "undecidable" (with no fixed meanings and categories), where despite the risks and uncertainties of social life, we are involved with "the transcendence of the other."³³

Besides responsibility, faith, and gift, the theological lexicon of mystery and sacredness converts into the secular notions of secrecy

and fervor. For Derrida, Western politics unfold in unpredictable ways, but some elements from the past remain below the surface: "history never effaces what it buries; it always keeps within itself the secret of whatever it encrypts . . . [and it] bears witness to a *return of the sacred* in the form of an enthusiasm or fervor" (emphasis added).³⁴ Derrida himself digs in the theological sediments, the "crypt" of history, in search of concepts that he then applies to his critical analysis of the global political order.

In this sense, his book *Specters of Marx* offers a reflection on Marx's theoretical legacy in the face of the failed communist regimes. Derrida gives a new meaning to politico-theological terms by advocating "a certain experience of the emancipatory promise[:]. . . a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice—which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights—and an idea of democracy—which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today."³⁵ Along these lines, Derrida calls into question the orthodox reading of the Marxist legacy or "trace." In its place he proposes to defend "a radical alterity and heterogeneity."³⁶ The return to Marx in the new capitalist era implies for him leaving behind the notion of liberation necessarily brought about by one messiah (the Communist Party), to rethink alternative roads to emancipation more amicable to the social heterogeneity of a democratic order. In this way, a renewed theory must leave behind the teleological determinism while preserving the messianic promise of an "eskhaton."³⁷ In this sense, Derrida does not take the road of other postmodern authors interested in theology, who defend strife for a total transformation of existing power structures.³⁸ Rather, he calls for a "performative utterance . . . to produce events, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth."³⁹

Embarked on this task, Derrida finds inspiration in Heidegger's approach to mysticism.⁴⁰ Just as mysticism emphasizes the unsurmountable limitations of human language and thought, Derrida holds that political thought and language must be deconstructed so as to find new meanings to social philosophy.⁴¹ What he admires in the apophatic tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and

Angelus Silesius is their “subversive stance” within the history of theology and the Church and their emphasis in the impossibility of fully grasping transcendent truth, advocating that understanding through negations is more accurate than attempting resemblance-based arguments.⁴²

Recall that Pseudo-Dionysius initiated negative or apophatic theology with his work “On the Divine Names,”⁴³ where he claims the impossibility of affirming with certainty full knowledge of transcendent truth.⁴⁴ Similarly, Eckhart, inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius, explored cognitive limitations in comprehending the Absolute: “God transcends all human conception. No man knows what God is. God is such that we apprehend him better by denial than by affirmation. To argue about God from resemblance is to proceed falsely, but to argue from negations is to do so correctly.”⁴⁵

Derrida assimilates these ideas and puts them to use for the defense of a postmodern philosophy that seeks to liberate language from authority and norms. The limitations of discursive reason underscored by negative theology, and its inclination to lean on imagination and emotions,⁴⁶ are an aspect mirrored in Derrida, who sees mystical union as an “immediacy of presence,” not alien to the “experience of fascination in general.”⁴⁷ Applied to the field of political theory, the deconstructionist use of negative theology is part of Derrida’s larger philosophical project to challenge the foundations of legal systems and claims of sovereignty and authority.

In this sense, Derrida posits that law lacks an ultimate rational justification or legitimization, and he questions concepts such as property, freedom, will, and conscience.⁴⁸ He challenges the idea that the founding decision of the political-legal order stems from a God-created natural order, and he argues that it instead originates from a situation imposed by force, which society takes as legitimate. In this vein, Derrida departs from the intellectual tradition “which gives rights to the State, the nation, more generally to the philosophical community as a rational and logo-centric community.”⁴⁹ These ideas have direct political impact, since they seek to undermine the assumptions that shaped legal and political Western institutions and therefore to erode the legitimacy of the latter.

Let's now evaluate Derrida's association of deconstruction with negative theology. There are two main critical comments to make, of an ontological/epistemic and linguistic nature, respectively. First, the ontological basis of negative theology contradicts the deconstructive rejection of any transcendental, metaphysical notion. In negative theology, God is an existent, transcendent, sacred, and divine being. Conversely, deconstruction disclaims any assertion of being or essence. Derrida acknowledges this in the conference "La Différance" (1968), where he contrasts negative theology's categories of essence and presence with his own theory that invokes "neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent."⁵⁰ However, in subsequent writings he omits to consider that the nothingness claimed by deconstruction cannot be equated to the mystical recognition of the Presence. This problematizes the validity of the analogy between mysticism and deconstruction. Absent the divine being that challenges human understanding, why retain the condition of unknowability? In other words, if the complexity of God poses problems for our cognitive capacities, why would a world without God be equally complex to understand? The cognitive problem detected by the mystics differs from the ones posed by the use of philosophical and scientific approaches to explain complex social orders.

Second, negative theology emphasizes the limits of words and ideas, whereas deconstruction employs a method to analyze words and texts and therefore focuses on the possibilities of language. It seeks to open up new possibilities for understanding the nexus between language and thought, in contrast to negative theology's search for contemplation, which would amount to a silence of reason and speech. If this is so, the refuge in contemplation and mystical union would be at odds with the linguistic engagements advanced by deconstruction. Consequently, deconstruction differs from negative theology because of its appeal to language and thought rather than silent spirituality. The concept of stability may further expand this epistemic difference: while in negative theology our cognitive limitations are assumed to be stable—that is, our

conceptual ignorance of God is permanent—from Derrida we infer the possibility of accessing at least some temporary knowledge (subject to eventual deconstruction) that emerges from detecting the “traces” of meaning in history mentioned earlier.

Last, and regarding its political implications, Derrida’s thought has been rightly read as an attempt to deconstruct the notion of sovereignty anchored in a single instance of authoritative decision.⁵¹ Thus, Derrida’s prescriptions translate into an “anti-authoritarian politics.”⁵² There are, of course, other readings of the political implications of deconstruction. Some speak of a “conservative” thrust in his theory, of an “essential passivity,” insofar as his discourse is inattentive to results and, more important, it preaches a “radical uncertainty” that may debilitate political action.⁵³ Along similar lines, deconstruction may weaken the motivation for immediate political involvement, bearing no political consequences “except in a very indirect and long-term way.”⁵⁴ In this regard, as we will see, Derrida differs from Laclau’s efforts at formulating a theory that might explain and justify actions conducive to changing the existing political practices and arrangements.

Laclau’s Perspective

Laclau is also a confessed deconstructionist, by “showing the structural undecidability of increasingly larger areas of the social [that] expands the area of operation of the various moments of political institution, [he argues] the central theme of deconstruction is the politico discursive production of society.”⁵⁵ In a text where he analyzes Derrida, we read, “I could, *prima facie*, relate what I have called hegemonic logic—which silently deconstructs Marxist categories—to the logic of the specter as described by Derrida.”⁵⁶ Recall that the logic of the specter is one of undecidability, without fixed meanings and categories. Laclau reads this as a way to “direct the historical-political forms back to the primary terrain of their opening to the radically heterogeneous . . . as that condition from which no course of action necessarily follows. This means that we should not make it the necessary source of any concrete decision in the ethical or political sphere.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, both hegemonic

logic and the logic of the specter invoke political theology: a “spirit, as it has no content of its own, can exist only through its parasitic attachment to some particular body [that] becomes the embodiment of fullness. . . . Deconstructing law—which is finally what politics is about—is possible because of this structure of experience in which the messianic, the promise, and justice are categories in a relation of mutual implication.”⁵⁸ It follows that although post-Marxist thought has no specific economic or political content, it still appeals to secularized theological concepts.

In a parallel track, Laclau revisits the legacy of Christianity in order to deconstruct Marxism. He posits that a quest for universality or totality originated with Christianity that introduced three pivotal concepts: an absolute and ultimate source for all existence, a predetermined course for history, and an empowered agent in history whose individual form expresses a universality surpassing it.⁵⁹ Laclau elaborates on the ways in which these ideas were translated into a social philosophy. If in the past the Christian understanding of history relied solely on revelation, modernity amalgamated reason with Christian eschatology. In the particular case of classical Marxism, it assimilated rationalist logic into the notion of a universal class and a secular eschatology. He writes, “A discourse of radical emancipation emerged for the first time with Christianity, and its specific form was *salvation*. . . . [It was] the image of a future humanity—or post-humanity—from which all evil would have been eradicated . . . [and its] incarnation requires connection between two elements through the mediation of a third external to them.”⁶⁰ From this angle, the Christian notions of universal salvation and the problem of evil were appropriated by Marx, who assigned the proletariat the role of the mediator, in what Laclau considers a form of “essential determinations.”⁶¹

Against such view, Laclau gives new meaning to the theological-political concepts of evil, incarnation, salvation, and promise. History no longer becomes the necessary unfolding of certain evils but instead moves on “contingent grounds” subject to “transcendental” operations.⁶² Besides, “rather than a privileged historical actor with universal responsibilities, there exists a growing plurality

of social agents constructing their demands from particular perspectives, none claiming to represent humanity as a whole.”⁶³ Against the Marxist notion of fixed social classes, Laclau argues that “hegemonic articulations were from the beginning conceived as contingent, precarious and pragmatic constructions.”⁶⁴ In other words, we cannot know who will be the actor that represents the universal and how that actor will lead the rest on the road to emancipation, since this is open to unforeseeable historical circumstances and a variety of forms to carry out that task. This means that given the contingent nature of social reality, there is no preordained goal; it is to be defined by the instance that incarnates a particular form of emancipation or “fullness.” Laclau preserves Derrida’s theological rhetoric of promise and incarnation, albeit as transient and specific moments within a historical process, as he declares, “A hegemonic relation is one in which a certain body presents itself as the incarnation of a certain spirit.”⁶⁵

From this angle, emancipation from the existing political structures demands rethinking their politico-theological basis: “We can do away with the teleological and eschatological dimensions, we can even do away with all the actual contents of the historical messianisms, but what we cannot do away with is the ‘promise,’ because it is inscribed in the structure of all experience.”⁶⁶ However, Laclau’s is not Derrida’s idea of a promise about the justice and democracy *to come* but an aspiration to improve a concrete political order by replacing established practices and institutions. In this sense, he highlights “the attempt to break with the status quo, with the preceding institutional order [and] the effort to constitute an order where there was anomie and dislocation.”⁶⁷

It should perhaps be evident by now that Laclau’s political theory has no normative foundation, no “fundamental values, behavioral dispositions (‘virtues’) and/or action-guiding principles.”⁶⁸ When he speaks of justice, order, and solidarity, he envisions the concepts as devoid of permanent content; they reflect only the desire for an undefined “absent fullness” that is perpetually unachievable because of the persistent gap between human achievements and expectations.⁶⁹ This latter assessment bears no

grim news, since for Laclau its implications for democratic theory are positive. Democracy becomes possible because it lacks any predetermined normative ground: "it is no longer a question of finding a ground from which an ethical injunction should be derived."⁷⁰ Democracy becomes a field of contestation to define who will be the instance that incarnates the promise of fullness.

It is time to analyze the connection between the precedent arguments and negative theology. Just as Derrida found inspiration in Heidegger's writings on mysticism, Laclau seems to follow Derrida when looking at the apophatic tradition.⁷¹ The latter serves as a point of comparison to show the formal similarity with his theory: "the [political] need for representing an object—a fullness—which, by definition, transcends all representation [is], at its purest, the problem of the mystic."⁷² To elaborate on that comparison, Laclau addresses both Jewish and Christian mysticism. He first quotes from Gershom Scholem's view on the many divine attributes invoked in a prayer's litany: "the only meaning that each of these attributes keeps in the enumeration is the positive value that those terms have in ordinary language."⁷³ Scholem's take on mysticism represents a form of "equivalential logics,"⁷⁴ in that it expands the attributes indefinitely. A similar operation characterizes a political discourse that attempts to go beyond all particular meaning, expanding the enumeration indefinitely, in order to "symbolize an absent fullness" with "mobilizing effects."⁷⁵

Laclau's reading of mysticism is complemented with references to Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart, who conceptualize God as ineffable and unintelligible, making it impossible to attribute a specific, positive content that directly represents God through language. Laclau quotes Pseudo-Dionysius's notion of a God with "no soul, no intellect, no imagination,"⁷⁶ pointing out that the enumeration of absent divine properties correlates with a political articulation in which different partial elements are assigned to a whole. On the basis of this analogy, Laclau presents the following conclusions:

1. The names God, people, or order refer to a totality as an "absent plenitude" and serve as "empty signifiers," symbols or names

that come to represent the unity and identity of the people. These symbols or names lack predetermined content and are therefore open to a contingent interpretation on the quality and quantity of their attributes.

2. Ethically, it follows that a priori determination of moral actions is impossible. Morality's contents are variable, reflecting the "postmodern experience of contingency."⁷⁷
3. At the political level, a hegemonic representative constructs a "chain of equivalences," wherein any element within that group can be bestowed with the name of a totality.

In sum, Laclau compares his political theory with Scholem's views on indefinite enumeration and with the apophatic view that strips the transcendent instance of specific positive contents. He also appeals to the mystical realm to accentuate an experience of unity or identification between the parts and totality. In the end, acknowledged only in a footnote, he affirms, "From the perspective of mystical discourse's logic, pantheism is the only ultimately coherent position."⁷⁸ Laclau does not explain why this is the case, but the quote suggests that by inference, insofar as his theory shares with the mystics, it could be associated with pantheism.

Before further engaging in our assessment of his thought, a commentary is in order regarding the extent to which Laclau's political theology can be considered revolutionary, as some think.⁷⁹ Indeed, in the 1990s he sees violence as a plausible response to an established order that impairs the search for "fullness" triggered by "a social lack resulting from the absence of God."⁸⁰ But eventually he discards "the total revolutionary event,"⁸¹ and he rejects advocating violence as a new foundation to the social order: "I am a reformist, not because my social aims are limited but simply because I do not believe that society has such a thing as a foundation; [however] I am very much in favor of reintroducing the dimension of *violence within reform*" (emphasis added).⁸² Therefore, his stance is hardly compatible with Montserrat Herrero's premises that in Laclau "revolutionary violence is the core of the political," that "God's infallibility has the same structure

as revolutionary will,” and that hegemony is “violence produced through discourse.”⁸³ Such reading overlooks the strong Gramscian tone in Laclau, according to which hegemony is a combination of consent and force or coercion, the former achieved by gradual political movements, and the latter seen only as a subsidiary or complementary aspect within a long-term strategy in the “war of positions.”⁸⁴ It seems also problematic to affirm, with Herrero, that Laclau’s political ontology rests on a view where “God is not-presentable and hence not-representable.”⁸⁵ In my view, Laclau does not hold or presuppose a belief or understanding of a *divine* transcendence. He only provides an analogy between his political logic and negative theology and, by inference, with what he considers to be its natural extension: pantheism. In other words, he makes use of theological reflections to formulate and illustrate better his political theory. Furthermore, Laclau seeks to explain how a particular form of *representation* takes place in his theory, which is why it is strange to associate Laclau’s perspective with what is not representable.

Analysis of Laclau’s Approach to Negative Theology

This section critically assesses Laclau’s analogy between negative theology and his political logic. A first comment that merits consideration relates to the place he gives to discourse and the extent to which it is inconsistent with mysticism (along the lines of our previous critique of Derrida). If Eckhart speaks of a “mystical silence,”⁸⁶ its compatibility with any theory that emphasizes the constructive/deconstructive function of discourses can be called into question. Simultaneously maintaining both mystical and discursive premises might be inconsistent. If mysticism upholds silence, its doing so contradicts the predominance of discourse. Laclau pretends to maintain this duality, affirming the importance of discourse while also comparing the relationship between the hegemonic instance and the people with mystic experiences. But insofar as the populist experience is discursive and the mystic experience is silent, this posits a problem. Additionally, if mystic silence obeys a “deliberate choice to renounce a vain or harmful word,”⁸⁷ it also contrasts with

any hegemonic logic that does not, by definition, find limits or restrictions to what discourses can say.

Second, Laclau assumes a top-down directionality of discourse, from the representative instance, the “incarnated body,” toward the people. This is similar to Eckhart’s attribution of existence and wisdom to God alone, which is why he infers that we should “let God work and speak.”⁸⁸ In this regard, “the human being so conforms to God that its being, will, and action form a comprehensive unity.”⁸⁹ However, in Eckhart the human being is also supposed to “transform the world . . . to work together with God.”⁹⁰ Eckhart’s mysticism is directed to foster an engagement with both oration and work. One plausible implication of this practical orientation is that we should actively engage in political life. Along these lines, some theologians propose “to democratize mystical experience” and call for social resistances that may take the form of “abstention, disagreement and dissent.”⁹¹ The reading of mysticism as an activity *simpliciter* (as in Eckhart) or as a bottom-up activity of political protest contrasts with Laclau’s theory in that the latter assumes a relatively uncritical reception of the representative’s discourse, directed to a seemingly passive people.

There is a third commentary, related to Laclau’s opinion that pantheism is the only coherent position for mystical discourse. This assertion leaves open the possibility that his political theory might be associated with pantheism as well, following the syllogism that mysticism is pantheistic, hegemonic politics is analogous to mysticism, and therefore hegemonic politics is associated, analogous, or compatible with pantheism. There might indeed be points of intersection between Laclau’s theory and pantheism, such as a recognition of the interconnectedness of diverse elements and the challenge to traditional notions of divinity and authority. However, the intersections between mysticism, pantheism, and political “hegemonism” must be further scrutinized. In pantheism the divine is incarnated in the world, so God becomes identical to the universe. But this is not the view of the mystics mentioned by Laclau. To the contrary, Eckhart’s assertion “all that God works is one” emphasizes equality of action rather than of substance.⁹²

For Eckhart, the world is not identical with God. This is distinct from the pantheistic notion of identity of substances (everything that exists is considered to be part of God or the divine). Laclau seems to have misunderstood the nature of the mysticism he invoked, which seeks to transcend the boundaries of the self and experience a deeper, more profound connection with totality but does not equate the self, universe, or nature with the divine. This type of mysticism is different from pantheism, in which there is no distinction between the divine and the natural world.⁹³

Other aspects also problematize the consistency of the analogy between hegemonic logic and pantheism implicit in Laclau's treatment of mysticism. Briefly put:

1. If in pantheism God and nature are the same, we can call it a "present plenitude," which would mean the opposite of Laclau's notion of an absent plenitude. If every created being possesses a divine nature, the representation of the universal would not be needed, in the same way that the direct experience of mysticism, by definition, does not require representation. Ergo, under these premises the hegemonic instance would have no role in representing a plenitude, since it already exists.
2. It also follows that since a pantheistic God is not a person, no personal or social relationships with divinity follow, be they either intellectual or emotional. This inference challenges the primacy of the category of relation and the role of personalism in Laclau's theory, in which a subject is bestowed with the name of the totality. By definition, the concept of incarnation implies personification.⁹⁴
3. If pantheism is taken to be an essentialist claim about divinity, associating hegemony with a mystic pantheism would contradict Laclau's postmodern philosophical stance, in which there is no ontological ground, no fixed substance.

In sum, in Laclau's theory, political identity transcends the parts that constitute it and requires an instance of representation and articulation made possible only through discourse. None of these

elements—transcendence, representation, and discourse— appear to be compatible with the immanence of pantheism, the mystical appeal to silence, and the unmediated individual experience of union with the divine. Besides, the idea of hegemony as something contingent and temporary is also at odds with the mysticism Laclau invokes, anchored in a permanent essence. However, despite the detected tensions in Laclau's reading of the apophatic tradition from the lens of political hegemony, his analogical exercise is interesting and fruitful in showing how political theology may remain a field of interest for political theorists. In this sense, his inconsistencies do not subtract merit from his attempt to call attention to the relevance of theological analogies for a better understanding of political theory.

Mysticism and Psychoanalysis in the Theory of Populism

Although Laclau's work shows continuity in terms of the goal to construct an alternative political logic, in his trajectory from socialism to populism his emphasis changed. If in the 1990s he was inspired by negative theology to explain and defend a post-Marxist stance, in his 2005 book on populism he delves into the analogy with psychoanalysis. However, his theory of populism also retains the theological lexicon of spirit, incarnation, and transcendent universality. This section shows how Laclau incorporates psychoanalytical elements compatible with his reading of negative theology and reinforces the analogies with hegemonism. In this regard, the psychoanalytical insights into the affective, symbolic, and unconscious dimensions of social relations complement his views on mysticism. Both serve Laclau to explain the process of collective identity formation and the articulation of the hegemonic representative instance, which in the later works takes the name of the populist leader.

In Laclau's theory of populism, different groups are articulated by the discourse of a leader in their struggle against a common adversary (normally, political and economic liberalism). As the number of these groups expands, their shared features become less concrete or particular and more abstract (for example, they pass

from demanding higher salaries for themselves and daycare for their children to demanding social or gender justice). The leader provides them with a unique, specific profile as a people and becomes their representative, embodying a popular identity that did not previously exist as such. In Laclau's terms:

1. "This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an *incommensurable universal signification* is what I have called hegemony" (emphasis added).⁹⁵
2. "Demands are inscribed in the horizon of a fully-fledged totality—a just society which exists only ideally."⁹⁶
3. "The hegemonic force has to present its own particularity as *the incarnation of an empty universality* that transcends it" (emphasis added).⁹⁷
4. "This [is a] transcendent, singular moment [which] leads to singularity, and singularity to *identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader*" (emphasis added).⁹⁸
5. "These *emotional ties* which pull the group together are obviously love drives which have been diverted from their original aim and which follow, according to Freud, a very precise pattern: that of identification" (emphasis added).⁹⁹

We can see how the theological elements that Laclau analyzed in his previous writings are traceable here. The notion of a universalistic totality—for example, the idea of a just society—is mediated by a singular particularity that incarnates it. What the analysis of populism adds to those elements is the role of affection sustaining that mediation. Laclau incorporates psychoanalysis and thus expands the rationale of the politico-theological logic by explaining how unity is made possible by an *emotional* link uniting the group with the leader, so that "the affective dimension plays a central role."¹⁰⁰ In this way, the unconscious identification drive and the mystic drive would both address the lack of knowledge of an identity, a condition that can be relieved only by particular unions with an elusive fullness or totality.

Laclau's populist theory has been read as a view wherein "the people as a whole is a transcendent God, [and] it is never present or visible in its full universality and completion."¹⁰¹ It has also been criticized on account of its authoritarian political implications and its "utopian condition of total social unity, homogeneity, and reconciliation."¹⁰² However, as mentioned earlier, Laclau does not invoke a theologically based ontology. God is mentioned only once in *On Populist Reason*, in an ironic reference to those who overlook the need of a leader who articulates social antagonism, in the absence of whom articulation is "left to God (or to Nature)."¹⁰³ Besides, just as the people are not God, neither do they search for a condition of homogeneity and reconciliation. Laclau discards this as a "myth" because it ignores social heterogeneity and antagonism and implies a "withering away of the political."¹⁰⁴

Last, the political implications of Laclau's theory need not be authoritarian. In principle, the hegemonic logic is democratic in that it is another political force competing to institute certain signifiers; it respects the demands of the people as opposed to imposing those signifiers. In his view, populism may be exposed to the danger of authoritarianism, but "there is no iron law that determines that succumbing to it is its manifest destiny."¹⁰⁵ The charge of authoritarianism seems partly a Schmittian reading of Laclau's theory. But the latter cannot be considered an extension, variation, or development of Schmitt's, nor a response to it, as we indicate in the next section.

Schmitt and Laclau

Schmitt was absent from most academic publications until the mid-1990s.¹⁰⁶ Once the theoretical engagements with Schmitt's work started to peak, Laclau ignored his writings with the exception of a single article that deals with the treatment of enmity and war.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, it seems incorrect to hold that Laclau radicalized, assumed, or rediscovered Schmitt's political theology,¹⁰⁸ since he never addressed the contents nor the criticism and debates on *Political Theology*. That said, formal similitudes in their approaches warrant further considerations in the light of our objectives in this text.

First, Schmitt's view on the secularization of theological concepts is an idea Laclau also explicitly holds when writing that "the initial theory of power was a theological one . . . [namely, that] the existence of evil in the world and the resulting possibility that man acts in a way that is illegitimate in God's eyes [created a] disjunction between power and legitimacy. While God operated as a source of legitimacy external to the world, the gap between power and legitimacy could conceptually be contained—more or less—within manageable limits. But when, in modern times, the search began for a source of legitimacy from which to judge the world, and yet one that was, however, internal to the world,"¹⁰⁹ "the religious notion of evil [became], with the modern turn, the kernel of what we can call 'social antagonism.'"¹¹⁰

Second, just as Schmitt decries the radical atheism and liberal deism that "depoliticize" the moment of decision, for Laclau immanence alone cannot explain social struggles because it lacks the instance of articulation. On the basis of the impossibility of a complete social reconciliation, both authors reject any view that seeks to eradicate or minimize political antagonism. Antagonism is inherent to human society; politics concerns dealing with it, especially during crises. It is during those crises that the moment of decision as defined by the sovereign (Schmitt) or by the representative instance (Laclau) has ultimate relevance. More specifically, the tensions between the norm and the sovereign decision in Schmitt, and between liberal institutionality and a populist rupture in Laclau, inhabit their political views. This leads us to approach a related topic: in the case of a crisis, resolution requires an "exceptional decision" for Schmitt and a "hegemonic articulation" for Laclau. Therefore, in both cases, a particular decision/articulation fulfills the function of rejecting (displacing) the logic of the previous institutionality.

A third point of comparison revolves around economics and ethics. Both men share a criticism of the economic perspective prevalent in the modern world. While Schmitt decries the materialistic and economic focus that displaces the protagonist role of politics in shaping the social order, Laclau argues that the current

configuration of global capitalism has a multifaceted logic of its own, in which politics plays a fundamental role: “we can no longer understand capitalism as a purely economic reality, but as a complex in which [there exist] economic, political, military, technological and other determinations—each endowed with its own logic and a certain autonomy.”¹¹¹

Also, both Schmitt and Laclau defend the autonomy of the political from the ethical. As mentioned earlier, Schmitt decries the liberal obsession with ethics that trumps the protagonist role of politics, and in Laclau the ethical is seen as an instance of (impossible) reconciliation and social balance that excludes the antagonistic logic of politics. In sum, both lament the “depolitization” brought about by modernity and seek to “repoliticize” social life.

The elements mentioned so far show their common concerns and elaborations. Yet, there are conceptual differences that problematize the similarities. First, Schmitt assumes the goodness of order and the need to restore and/or transform it when disturbed by a crisis. He conceives threats to order as a sign of danger. Instead, for Laclau disorder opens a welcome opportunity for change: “when people face a situation of radical *anomie*, the need for *some kind* of order becomes more important than the ontic order that allows them to overcome it” (emphasis in the original).¹¹² Crisis would operate as the “conditions of possibility for the occurrence of populist challenges to the institutional order.”¹¹³ Second, Laclau’s deconstructionist emphasis extends to questioning any foundation regarding the possibility of an ultimate and permanent sovereign authority. In this sense, besides following Derrida, he directly references Heidegger and joins him in rejecting the traditional content of ontology. As mentioned, when applied to classical Marxism, this means abandoning the notion of social classes and revealing the absolute contingency of categories linked to its foundations.

Perhaps it is not too simplistic to end by saying that Schmitt’s political theology reflects nostalgia for an ordered past, grounded in permanent transcendence, in contrast to Laclau, who aspires to a postmodern future defined contingently and temporarily by political/populist discourses.

Conclusion

Toward the end of last century, the collapse of communism revived an interest in political theology. According to Mario Tronti, there were lessons to be drawn from that renaissance: “[i]t is necessary to have the courage to rethink the utopian ‘kingdom’ of another world of men and for men.”¹¹⁴ We have explored how Schmitt, Derrida, and Laclau dealt with the investigation of what constitutes “another world,” by means of the categories of discourse, history, contingency, emancipation, transcendence, and/or antagonism. As shown, there are formal similarities and common analogies that warrant the joint analysis of these authors to better understand Laclau’s thoughts on the subject. He directly references Derrida as an influence on his ideas on deconstruction and also seems to find inspiration in Derrida’s approach to mysticism. For Derrida, negative theology reveals the limitations of traditional metaphysical discourse, and he calls for the possibility of a more flexible understanding of the emancipatory promise. Likewise, Laclau points to the resemblance of hegemonic representation and negative theology in that they involve the construction of meanings through the absence of a fixed, positive referent.

The connection of Laclau to Schmitt is of a different nature, since Laclau almost never quotes, comments, or follows Schmitt’s work. However, our comparison reveals that both use the secularized categories of evil, sovereignty, representation, and transcendence in their analysis of the political. They also share a skepticism toward the prevailing immanent/economic perspectives, with Schmitt criticizing the displacement of politics by economics and Laclau arguing for a broader understanding of capitalism. Despite these shared elements, we have explored some conceptual differences. Laclau’s deconstructionist approach questions any metaphysical foundation for an ultimate and permanent sovereign authority, whereas Schmitt relies on such foundation. Their socio-political prescriptions also differ considerably: Schmitt’s vision of a homogeneous, stable, and hierarchical order contrasts with Laclau’s emphasis on social heterogeneity and the contingency of the hegemonic articulation and of populist identities. That said, both

are eminently thinkers of political antagonism and, consequently, opposed to any conciliatory or deliberative view of the political.

Besides comparing the three authors, the article assesses some tensions in Laclau's theory, despite which it acknowledges his contribution to political theology. In regard to the tensions, we problematize the compatibility between the notions of transcendence, representation, and discourse, on one hand, and the immanence of pantheism, the mystical silence, and the unmediated experience of union with totality, on the other. Besides, we find that the idea of hegemony as something contingent and temporary is also at odds with the mysticism Laclau invokes, anchored in a permanent essence. However, Laclau's analogical exercise between the apophatic tradition and hegemonism is interesting and fruitful in showing how political theology may remain a field of interest for political theorists. In translating the apophatic idea of an inaccessible transcendent totality into a political theory of a representation as an incarnation of such totality, Laclau offers new, original avenues for further research on populist leadership. Additionally, by reinforcing theological-political analogies with insights into the affective, symbolic, and unconscious dimensions of power relations, he draws interesting bridges between psychoanalysis and the political. Both psychoanalysis and negative theology tackle the human aspiration to an impossible plenitude, a condition that political reflection cannot elude if it wishes to preserve its relevance in contemporary theoretical debates.

Upon concluding, a final question arises, one related to though independent from the analysis presented in these pages: What could be political theology's contribution to a reflection on the foundations of a democratic society? Whatever the answers might be, there should be room for a model different from Schmitt's exceptionalism, Derrida's passivity, and the submissive nature of Laclau's populism, and different as well from Tronti's invitation to revive the type of project that derails into dystopias. Neither authoritarianism nor submission nor oppressive utopias are inspirational models fit for free and peaceful societies. This is not the place to discuss the alternatives to those models, but the question seemed relevant enough to be posed here as a topic for future research.

Notes

1. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, introduction to *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 1.
 2. For an appraisal of Laclau's work by (mostly) postmodern philosophers see, *inter alia*, Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, eds., *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004); and David Howarth, ed., introduction to *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism, and Critique* (London: Routledge, 2015), 1–20.
 3. Ricardo Camargo, "Rethinking the Political: A Genealogy of the 'Antagonism' in Carl Schmitt through the Lens of Laclau-Mouffe-Žižek," *The New Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (2013): 161–88; Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 89–95.
 4. Howarth, introduction, 3, 5.
 5. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, with a new foreword by Tracy B. Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 [1922/1934]), 49–52.
 6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006 [1993]), 16, 36, 115.
 7. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 113–14.
 8. Laclau is a renowned political thinker worldwide, whose impact goes beyond Latin America. See this acknowledgment in, e.g., Giacomo Marramao, *Sulla sindrome populista. La delegittimazione come strategia politica* (Roma: Lit Editione, 2020 epub); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique* (Paris: Seuil, 2020 epub); Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 111–27; and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).
- The impact of Laclau's theory in Latin America peaked with the populist regimes of the last twenty-five years. See, *inter alia*, the texts collected in *Pensando el mundo desde Bolivia* (La Paz: Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2010), and *Debates and Combates*, no. 1 (2011), https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/193807/CONICET_Digital_Nro.a80d5540-8d14-43dc-9eed-d38835845085_B.pdf
9. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).
 10. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 89.
 11. The analysis of Laclau's theoretical construction vis-à-vis Marxism is examined in Alejandra M. Salinas, "Post-Marxist Populism in the Twenty-First Century," in *Liberty: Essays in Honor of David Gordon*, ed.

- Douglas Rasmussen and Jakub Bozydar Wiśniewski (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2022), 155–87, <https://mises.org/library/defending-liberty-essays-honor-david-gordon>
12. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 89.
 13. Ernesto Laclau, “On ‘Real’ and ‘Absolute’ Enemies,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5, no. 1 (2005): 1–12.
 14. For a comparison of their notions of antagonism, representation, unanimity, identification, the people, the enemy, and war, see Alejandra M. Salinas, “Sobre la influencia y afinidades entre Schmitt y Laclau,” *Thémata. Revista de Filosofía*, no. 66 (2022): 159–81, <https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/themata/article/view/21009>
 15. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63.
 16. Ernesto Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology,” in *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism, and Critique*, ed. David Howarth (London: Routledge, 2015), 75–95, at 79; Ernesto Laclau, “Community and Its Paradoxes: Richard Rorty’s ‘Liberal Utopia,’” in *Ernesto Laclau*, 242–56, at 248.
 17. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
 18. Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996 [1923]), 31.
 19. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 9.
 20. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
 21. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 49–50.
 22. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
 23. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism*, 9–11, 36.
 24. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 65.
 25. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 2, 63.
 26. Michael Hollerich, “Carl Schmitt,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 107–22, at 112.
 27. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008 [1969]), 124–25.
 28. See, e.g., Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, epub).
 29. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 46.
 30. See, e.g., the articles published in *Telos*, no. 72 (Summer 1987), <https://www.telospress.com/store/Telos-72-Summer-1987-p17898254>

31. Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," trans. David Macey, in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-secular World*, ed. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006 [1981]), 148–87; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 [1983]), chap. 5.
32. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1992]), 33.
33. Derrida, *The Gift*, 5.
34. Derrida, *The Gift*, 21.
35. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74.
36. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 94.
37. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 121.
38. Among theologians, see John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Among political thinkers, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Slavoj Žizek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2001). See also Creston Davis, John Milbank, Slavoj Žizek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, intro. Rowan Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2005.
39. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 130, 112.
40. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1991 [1987])). In *Of Spirit* Derrida mentions Heidegger's "constant reading of Meister Eckhart," 127n4.
41. Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 76, 78.
42. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995 [1992]), 71.
43. The text was written in Greek, spread from the seventh century onward, and translated by John Scotus Erigena in the ninth century (Charles Wackenheim, "Actualité de la théologie négative," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 59, no. 2 [1985]: 147–61, at 150).
44. Álvaro Perpere Viñuales, "Releyendo en clave política a Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita. Verdad, mediación y el problema de la tolerancia," in *Tolerancia: Teoría y práctica en la Edad Media*, ed. Rubén Peretó Rivas, Actas del Congreso de Mendoza (Porto, Portugal: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 2012), 222–23.

45. Meister Eckhart, "Sermon XV: The Divine Being," in Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart* (London: John M. Watkins, 1924 [1857]), <https://web.archive.org/web/20010420093053/http://www.geocities.com/hckarlso/EckSermXV.htm>
46. Wackenheim, "Actualité," 154.
47. Jacques Derrida "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992 [1987]), 73–142 at 79, 82, 100.
48. Jacques Derrida, *Fuerza de ley: El fundamento místico de la autoridad* [Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority] (Madrid: Tecnos, 2002 [1992]), 32–35, 45–47, 57, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell, and Michel Rosenfeld (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–67.
49. Derrida, *On the Name*, 54, 67.
50. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1982 [1972]), 6.
51. "The main problem with sovereignty lies in its insistence on the 'One,' in Schmitt's case the one who decides on the exception. This oneness draws the political and the theological together into an antidemocratic machine of domination. For Derrida, there is no simple 'one' who decides" (Clayton Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017], 45).
52. S. Newman, "Derrida's Deconstruction of Authority," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27, no. 3 (2001): 1–20, at 14.
53. Catherine Zuckert, "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," *Polity* 23, no. 3 (1991): 335–56, at 354–56.
54. Richard Rorty, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in Simon Critchley, Jaques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Richard Rorty, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 12–18, at 17.
55. Ernesto Laclau, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism and Hegemony," in Critchley et al., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 49–70, at 61.
56. Ernesto Laclau, "The Time Is out of Joint" [1995], in *Ernesto Laclau*, 199–212, at 202. The article's title is the epigram (taken from *Hamlet*) in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.
57. Laclau, "The Time Is out of Joint," 206, 208.
58. Laclau, "The Time Is out of Joint," 204.
59. Ernesto Laclau, "God Only Knows," *Marxism Today*, December 1991, 56–59, at 56, <https://banmarchive.org.uk/marxism-today/december-1991/god-only-knows/>
60. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 8, 11.
61. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 14.

62. Ernesto Laclau, ed., *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994), 1–2.
63. Laclau, “God Only Knows,” 58.
64. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 89.
65. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 71.
66. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 75.
67. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 122.
68. N. Scott Arnold, “Radical Social Criticism,” *Reason Papers*, no. 14 (1989): 26–31, at 28, https://reasonpapers.com/pdf/14/rp_14_2.pdf
69. Ernesto Laclau, “Structure, History and the Political,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 182–212, at 191–92.
70. Laclau, “The Time Is out of Joint,” 209.
71. Although he does not quote Derrida, the dates of their respective publications indicate this might be the case. Derrida published “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” in 1987 and *On the Name* in 1992, and Laclau published his texts “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology” in 1996 and “On the Names of God” in 1997.
72. Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection,” 86.
73. Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection,” 87.
74. Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection,” 89.
75. Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection,” 88, 92.
76. Laclau, “On the Names of God” [1997], in *Political Theologies, Public Religions in a Post-secular World*, ed. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006 [1981]), 137–47, at 138.
77. Laclau, “On the Names of God,” 142–43.
78. Laclau, “On the Names of God,” 716n7.
79. Montserrat Herrero, “Laclau’s Revolutionary Political Theology and Its Backdrop,” *Síntesis. Revista de Filosofía* 2, no. 2 (2019): 9–25, https://dadun.unav.edu/bitstream/10171/59729/1/Herrero_Sintesis_2019.pdf
80. Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac, “Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics,” in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1994), 11–39, at 36.
81. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 210, 225.
82. Laclau, “Community and Its Paradoxes,” 249.
83. Herrero, “Laclau’s Revolutionary Political Theology,” 15–17.
84. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 60, 89.
85. Herrero, “Laclau’s Revolutionary Political Theology,” 23.
86. John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021 [1986]), 172.

87. Wackenheim, "Actualité," 159.
88. Amber L. Griffioen, "Meister Eckhart," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, summer 2023 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/meister-eckhart/>
89. Charlotte Radler, "Actio et Contemplatio / Action and Contemplation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 211–22, at 216.
90. Radler, "Actio et Contemplatio," 216; Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008 [2001], epub), 90.
91. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 11, 21, 124, 237, 267.
92. Alois Maria Haas, "La problemática del lenguaje y la experiencia en la Mística Alemana," in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Alois Maria Haas, and Werner Beierwaltes, *Mística, cuestiones fundamentales* (Buenos Aires: Agape, 2008), 70–110, at 100.
93. Laclau also seems to misread Erigena. He writes, "According to Erigena, evil does not really exist, for things we call evil are necessary stages that God has to pass through in order to reach His divine perfection. But this is obviously impossible without God being, somehow, *internal to the world*. From that point onward, immanentism had a long career in Western thought. . . . [I]t is going to find its highest point in Hegel and Marx" (Ernesto Laclau, "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?" [2003], in *Ernesto Laclau*, 213–22, at 215, emphasis added). However, in Erigena the relation of God and the world merits a more nuanced reading, since God is present in the world but also transcends it. Besides, Erigena emphasizes the role of free will, so there are no necessary stages in human history (see Dermot Moran and Adrian Guio, "John Scottus Eriugena," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, winter 2021 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/scottus-eriugena/>).
94. A similar point is highlighted in Caputo's reading of Heidegger: "For Eckhart, God is above all a loving father in whom we can trust, whereas in Heidegger there is no personalistic conception, no love, no trust, which is why Being has no foundation or reason; it is an unintelligible 'abyss' that admits no explanation, and becomes a 'game'" (*The Mystical Element*, 246–50).
95. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70.
96. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 94.
97. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 170.
98. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 100.

99. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 54.
100. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 71.
101. Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism," *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (2013): 143–72, at 164.
102. Arato, "Political Theology," 156, 158.
103. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 242.
104. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 63.
105. Ernesto Laclau, "La deriva populista y la centroizquierda latinoamericana," *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 205 (2006): 56–61, <https://nuso.org/articulo/la-deriva-populista-y-la-centroizquierda-latinoamericana/>
106. Jüri Lipping, "Conceptual Affinities around the Political: The Case of Laclau and Schmitt," *Telos*, no. 187 (Summer 2019): 31–50, at 36.
107. Laclau addresses Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan* [1963] in his article "On 'Real' and 'Absolute' Enemies." Derrida had analyzed that same article in *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2020 [1994] epub), chap. 5.
108. Ingeborg M. Bergem and Ragnar M. Bergem, "The Political Theology of Populism and the Case of the Front National," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2019): 186–211, at 2, 12; Arato, "Political Theology," 156. See also Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, for whom Laclau "acknowledges the importance of a Schmittian conception of political representation" (93).
109. Laclau and Zac, "Minding the Gap," 19.
110. Laclau, "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?," 215.
111. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 230.
112. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 88.
113. Benjamin Ardit, "Populism Is Hegemony Is Politics? Ernesto Laclau's Theory of Populism," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, ed. Michael Oswald (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 49–68, at 61.
114. Mario Tronti, *La política contra la historia: Política, luchas, poder* (Quito: Instituto de altos estudios nacionales del Ecuador / Traficantes de sueños), 2016 [1992]), 47.

