

The legacy of Weimar ?: Trump as Schmittean sovereign & Taubesean katechon

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The Republican strategist Rick Wilson, a vocal opponent of Trump, concluded his indictment of Trump and Trumpism by recognizing that there are wider, long term effects even if Trump only survives one term of office. He observes:

Trump is a problem we'll be a long-time in solving. The damage to our institutions, our hopes, and our reputation in the world won't be undone overnight or with a few sweet words.¹

This essay seeks to use a particular, non-American perspective and history to make sense of what we can call the problem of Trump. There is an ever-expanding accumulation of books, articles, podcasts and documentaries that engage with what can be termed the problem of Trump (the man, the movement, the idea) as a political, social and cultural problem. This chapter (and the wider edited project) does something different, by deliberately engaging with the problem of Trump from the perspectives of radical theology and philosophy. To do so situates Trump as first and foremost both a problem of thinking and a problem for thinking. If the first problem is interrogating what thinking gave rise to Trump, then the second problem

is how to think about Trump. So, our question – and problem – is how might we think Trump, think the rise and momentum of Trump, think what Trump symbolizes and expresses drawing on the insights and possibilities offered from radical theological and philosophical thought?

Given the alignment of Trump with conservative theological and philosophical forces and movements, it is both timely and important that radical theological and philosophical voices combine to offer a counter-narrative. The radical theology position that drives this engagement with – and critique of – Trump as a problem is aligned with one of central statements made by Robbins and Crockett regarding the role of theology in the work of Charles Winquist: “Theology was a discourse formulation that functioned to fissure other discourses by pushing them to their limits and interrogating them as to their sense and practicality”² Over the years, I have often returned to this and the following points made in response to Winquist because to my mind they speak to the continuing relevance of what I term ‘the necessary problem’ of theology in modernity. What do I mean by this? How can a problem be termed ‘necessary’? My answer is that theology, as what I term ‘the claim of an alternative’, is a central challenge to the self-reflexivity of modernity. Therefore theology, and radical theology in particular, is a problem that is ‘necessary’ because, as a critical endeavor, theology challenges the closed systems of modernity and the enlightenment by demanding a type of critical thinking that exists as an “argumentative discourse”³. To this end, Helmet Peukert declares that both Enlightenment and theology are unfinished projects within the larger unfinished project of Modernity in that both are continually to having to self-reflexively prove themselves anew as critical endeavours.⁴ This is one reason why this discussion of the problem of Trump refers to a central, decisive moment of early 20th century modernity, for that project is unfinished. But the project has not gone in the direction that many may have wished or wanted it to. The problem of Trump is therefore also a problem of – and for – the unfinished project of Modernity.

To relocate this back to the challenge of Winquist’s thought: theology in its critique of existence itself, operating as what Robbins and Crockett name as “reason in search of itself”⁵, acts as the self-critical reflexion on both society and religion, because theology operates across disciplinary boundaries. Trump as a problem is therefore, in this line of arguing, a problem that requires the fissuring of theology to enable us to make sense of Trump – and make sense of the discourse of Trump (both for and against him). To take this further to where my fissuring of Trump

begins, we must also traverse via what Carl Raschke, like Robbins and Crockett engaging with the legacy of Winqvist, in tracing a lineage back to Kant, argues: “To think intensely what remains concealed in the depths of thought is to think theologically”, and yet, because of the Enlightenment, such theological thinking has become “a very difficult, if not impossible, peculiar labor”⁶

The challenge occasioned by this is the fissuring of secular modernity itself whereby theology is now “a thought that has learned to think what is unthought within the thought of itself”⁷. The problem of Trump is therefore a task that can and perhaps should be approached via theology because theology provides us with the hermeneutic tools to, in this case, think what is unthought in the thought of Trump – that is, what is as yet unthought in how we think about Trump.

In this essay, radical theology is used to critique Trump and all he and his supporters claim to stand for and endorse. Likewise, philosophical critiques are offered that go beyond the standard, as yet ineffective responses. I use the term ‘ineffective’ intentionally, because in the main, philosophical critiques of Trump have only served to confirm the status-quo views of those who oppose Trump. What has, to my mind, been more interesting are those who offer a philosophically-based support for Trump such as that by Victor Davis Hanson which is engaged with later on in this discussion. For such conservative philosophical support often makes a far better case of putting Trump within a wider socio-cultural and political context than most mainstream anti-Trump philosophy. Similarly, most theological opposition to Trump could be said to fail to really understand what gave rise to the problem of Trump, or why so many religious folk support Trump to some degree. This is not to deny the anti-Trump religious centre and left, but rather to say most of it does not dig deep enough or cast its critical net wide enough.

It may be a bold claim, but radical theology and philosophy’s position as outside the mainstream means they are uniquely positioned to engage with such a big problem as Trump. Not only because outsider positions can provide a different perspective of Trump the political outsider (that is, the one who comes as disruptor to the establishment and orthodoxy) but also because, as ways of thinking, radical theology and philosophy are focused on fissuring the big issues of meaning, value, power and claims of – and against – Truth. This is why Trump is not only an American problem, Trump is a global problem: the signal of a shift in politics and society that must be resisted not only by bodies but perhaps, most importantly, by minds. Therefore, to resist Trump, we must be able to re-think, to critique, to

deconstruct Trump: to provide iconoclastic thought against Trump the man, the movement, the problem. Part of this also means reading and interpreting the works of those who support, to greater or lesser degrees both Trump and the wider programme and shift that can be called Trumpism.

To do this, I draw upon what can be termed Taubesian hermeneutics; that is, the type of hermeneutics undertaken by Jacob Taubes (1923-1987), the Jewish scholar, Professor of Hermeneutics at the Free university of Berlin, whose thought and also correspondence with the legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt enables, I claim, a way to re-think Trump.

Taubesian hermeneutics was described as drawing “from authors such as Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin and above all Carl Schmitt. The rule of thumb is this hermeneutics reads:

“Against whom is this text written?” or “what key sentence was this text written to conceal?” It is the matter of a hermeneutics on the trail of the implicit and the marginal because it assumes that that which is disguised governs a text more than that which is articulated. It further assumes that the trace of a decisive truth proceeds diagonally toward an encoded communication.⁸

One way to proceed is to read the books written about Trump and Trumpism – from all sides of the problem – to attempt to identify that trace of a decisive truth, that which is disguised or to identify what is that key sentence. But in order to do so requires a wider frame of hermeneutics, a wider underlying argument to read from and to. In this case I want to consider Trump and Trumpism as having some parallels to the issues of the Weimar Republic that resulted in a reactionary turn signaling the rise of authoritarianism and fascism. It is here that the notions of sovereign and katechon as arise in the letters to Carl Schmitt by Taubes provide a means of critique and a way to rethink Trump. But before we go to Weimar, we also need to go back before Weimar, to that time of turmoil at the end of the Great War when a new form of modernity and the politics of modernity were arising.

Count Harry Kessler, aesthete, diplomat and diarist left an intriguing record of the issues facing Germany in the early 20th century, a record of a time of both revolution and counter-revolution as expressed in his observation of the artist George Grosz: “He is reactionary and revolutionary in one, a symbol of the times.”⁹ I want to raise the possibility that Trump and Trumpism are, a century later, a contemporary

symbol of the times, both revolutionary and reactionary in one and that perhaps the rise and election of Trump is paralleled in ethos if not in politics also by what Kessler recorded the Italian socialist Modigliani commenting in 1922 with the rise of Italian fascism; Italy was experiencing counter-revolution before revolution.”¹⁰ This sense of the twinning of counter-revolution or revolution is central to understanding what has happened with the rise of Trump, because Trump and Trumpism plays on both elements of revolution and counter-revolution.

Here the work of Furio Jesi in his book *Spartakus, the symbolism of Revolt*, provides our first means to undertake Taubesan hermeneutics. I want to read this book, a critique and analysis of the 1918 Spartakus League revolt in Germany, as providing those disguised traces and truths that we can apply as fissuring to Trump and Trumpism. Jesi was a historian, writer and philosopher who had a special interest in the role of myth in modern times. Important for our discussion is the distinction Jesi made between a revolt and a revolution. As Andrea Cavalletti observes of Jesi’s distinctions, a revolution is whereby “a long-term strategy is entirely immersed in the advance of history”, whereas a revolt is “a sudden insurrectionary explosion [and] well and truly a ‘suspension’ of historical time.”¹¹ This is the first problem of Trump: is Trump and Trumpism a revolution or a revolt? One way to think about this is that for Jesi, normal time is restored after a revolt¹² and this raises the question of will normal time be restored after Trump – and what indeed is normal time? Here we can note Jared Yates Sexton’s observation that from the moment that Trump descended on the escalator in Trump tower, “like a deity deigning mortals worthy of an audience” to announce his decision to run for president, “he had ushered the country into what will forever be known as the Post-Trump era.”¹³

I want to argue that Trump and Trumpism quickly became a revolt during the Republican primaries, a revolt that continued when he secured the Republican nomination. I argue this in light of how Jesi explains the revolt:

On the occasion of the revolt, their most responsible members are confronted with extremely serious problems and contradictions in the face of which every choice has decisive consequences for the future life of the party...And it may turn out, that in the hour of the revolt, those in charge of the party...must choose to favour the revolt they did not want, all the while energetically criticizing it.¹⁴

While it is easy, perhaps too easy, to make a direct correlation between this and the revolt within the Republican party that gave rise to Trump, I would argue that the Jesian categories of revolt and revolt, on the cusp of the Weimar Republic, enable us to rethink the problem of Trump, especially when we then extend the discussion into the possibilities raised by Carl Schmitt and Jacob Taubes.

So to contextualize; regarding the question of why turn to Germany, to Weimar Germany to understand the problem of Trump? The answer is that which Jesi puts forward to understand modernity: “The German situation seems to us the most revealing, the most schematic and, at the same time, the most rich in the elements from which can draw conclusions of a general character.”¹⁵ Or, as the editors of the incredibly substantial *Weimar Republic Source Book* articulated:

a laboratory for modernity, the Weimar period offered a panoply of political, economic, social and cultural models...The result was a frantic kaleidoscopic shuffling of the fragments of a nascent modernity and the remnants of a persistent past¹⁶.

This is why Weimar is still central, a century on; for to be modern is still to live in the wake of Weimar. To approach this from another angle, as Andrew Turner raised in his discussion of Schmitt and Weimar in *Te/los* (2011), we need to remember “one of the hidden sources feeding the Schmitt problem – the question of responsibility for the demise of the Weimar republic”.¹⁷ To understand this via a Taubesan hermeneutics, we could say that today: we need to remember one of the hidden sources feeding the Trump problem – and that is “the question of responsibility”. Whether or not it is to be responsibility for the demise of the American republic is yet open to debate, but what I want to argue is that there are parallels that can be drawn, including as we will turn later, to using tropes raised by Schmitt and Taubes.

First however, let us undertake a detour via the raising of the possibility of what is termed, “the Weimar moment”; that is, the moment of the time when the Weimar republic failed. This time, this moment, this event of failure resonates across time and space, as Rudy Koshar notes, “because of the tremendous political and moral costs entailed by the failure.”¹⁸ The result of this failure means, even in the 21st century, the issue of ‘the Weimar moment’ continues to re-emerge “well beyond the point of its

inception.”¹⁹ In the 21st century the Weimar moment is and can be drawn upon because as Jeffrey Bernstein observed,

Weimar teaches us about the growing dissatisfaction with liberal, political thought, the ensuing (largely, but not exclusively, Protestant) theological-political critiques, and the sense of urgency preceding a possible breakdown of republican forms of government.²⁰

Another analogy that can be discerned between Weimar and the current day is that both actual and discursive violence was undertaken “by the Nazis to create an atmosphere of civil war” and while there is at the moment only a discursive civil war occasioned by Trumpism, what is most analogous to Trump and Trumpism is how the Nazis, having created and sustained such a situation “offered themselves as both embattled survivors and saviors.”²¹ This links to another close analogy of the current times, especially in America, but also in many modern western states, with Weimar; that is, the turn to populist and fascist politics by a middle class which was “scarred, economically and psychologically”²² and this meant “that Weimar did not collapse as much as it was toppled by political groups that hated it for its achievements.”²³

Of course, in undertaking a hermeneutical approach, analogies can be read into being; but also consider this observation in regard to Trumpism and in particular the ‘direct-contact’ tweeting of Trump with his strident, divisive rhetoric. The success of the Nazis in overthrowing Weimar was in part because of their willingness to rely on “‘mood-directed’ propaganda” that created and drove what has been termed “a fascism of ‘feeling’ that the didactic traditions and responses of the opposition could not usefully respond against.”²⁴ In considering this, we become aware that Jesi’s discussion on political propaganda during a revolt speaks to the Trumpian moment as well, for “every political attitude that aims to employ propagandistic schemas implies a strategy that *uses* a portion of historical time to make it coincide with the immobile time of myth”.²⁵ The problem of Trump is how do we position Trump and Trumpism within this? On the one hand, Trump as revolution is part of historical time while Trump as revolt is the interruption into historical time of myth. However, if we think of Trump and Trumpism as revolt that became revolution on his election, then we can perhaps position the central slogan and appeal of “Make America Great Again” as a contemporary expression of what Jesi describes as “a strategic

crystallization of the historical present so as to evoke the epiphany of mythical time."²⁶

To understand this, we can engage with Jesi's categories of revolt and revolution. Both these actions aim to seize power, but as noted, the revolution does so within historical time while the revolt does not have a long-term strategy. Trump's opponents understandably wish to view Trump and Trumpism as a revolt, after which historical time is restored; on the other hand, revolution is undertaken by those

who are conscious of wanting to alter in *historical time* a political, social, economic situation and who develop their own tactical and strategic plans by constantly considering the relation between cause and effect in historical time.²⁷

Yet as always when thinking about Trump and Trumpism, the delineations are not perhaps so clear; this gives rise to the question, was Trump and Trumpism a revolt that, with Steve Bannon in the Whitehouse became a revolution; and yet that, following Bannon's departure, has become a revolt again? Or, do we have the continuation of the Trumpian revolution that is still viewed as only as revolt by Trump's opponents? Here Jesi offers a way forward because, in his schema, the revolt is the suspension of historical time and therefore if you take part in a revolt you do not know nor can you predict the consequences. For the revolt is a collective battle that suspends historical time and societal space wherein individual battles become collective ones. A revolution can however emerge from a revolt, via the incorporation of a new version of historical time and so the revolt becomes permanent due to the revolution. In this schema the inauguration of Trump as president saw the revolt become a revolution because there was the emergence of a new historical time, the time of Trump and Trumpism. Or to consider it another way, after the revolt, says Jesi, each individual goes back to a society *as it was before*.

To apply Taubesan hermeneutics, let us consider again, in light of Trump becoming the Republican nominee, that statement by Jesi on the revolt. To reiterate, Jesi's claim is that:

On the occasion of the revolt, their most responsible members are confronted with extremely serious problems and contradictions, in the face of which every choice has decisive consequences for the future life of the party...And it may

turn out, that in the hour of the revolt, those in charge of the party...must choose to favour the revolt they did not want, all the while energetically criticizing it.²⁸

While Jesi approaches the question of revolt and revolution from within Marxist terms and framework, that is, as a revolt against capitalist society and the revolution as the overthrow of capitalism, I believe we can and must – as in the context of Weimar – apply Jesi's terms in a different, amended fashion. So, we must talk of counter-revolt and counter-revolution as that which occurs to advance capitalism. In this Trumpism is first a counter-revolt and then a counter-revolution against capitalism as globalization, against the effects of neo-liberalism; that is as a counter-revolt and then a counter-revolution in favour of nationalist, populist capitalism. Therefore, Trumpism was a revolt and is then a revolution that occurs from within capitalism and not against it.

It is here that we can bring in the discussion of Carl Schmitt and Jacob Taubes as recorded in *To Carl Schmitt* because to undertake the next stage of this hermeneutical discussion we need to introduce the categories of the sovereign, the katechon and the anti-Christ that arise from Schmitt and Taubes. In Schmitt's political theology, the sovereign is the one who makes the exception; while in the letters to Schmitt of Taubes, arises, via Taubes, the notion of the katechon, the restrainer of the anti-Christ and of the apocalypse that follows. To engage with these concepts, I believe we must read any discussion of Trump and Trumpism through what has almost become the Schmittian cliché from *Political Theology* (1922) that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts".²⁹ If this is this case, then thinking of Trump and Trumpism, but in reference to Weimar, we can raise the question that do we not find ourselves within a series of decisions such as those in Weimar grappled with, seeking "to unravel the meaning of modernity and to push it in new directions, some emancipatory and joyous, others frightfully authoritarian, murderous and racist"?³⁰ This unravelling and pushing in new directions required decisions to be made and, most importantly for our discussion, decisions as to what would or could be 'the exception'? It was in this context that Schmitt perceived that 'the decisive question' was "who decides?"³¹ Following on from this, is decision making, that is decision making that makes an exception to the norm in not ratifying the expected decision, an act of sovereignty? As I have argued elsewhere³², Political Theology, in arising from Schmitt, as debated

by Schmitt and Taubes, meeting in the concept of friend-enemy, but also more so as the developing 20th century concept and critique, exists as a reminder of the apocalyptic in what is taken to be a secular world of the triumph of liberal democracy. Is in fact apocalyptic counter-revolution the real outside to liberal democracy and if so, can we think of Trumpism in such a fashion? In such a context the sovereign as the one who makes the exception, as the one who makes the decision that is the exception, takes on a new immediacy; likewise, the notion of the katechon as the restrainer of that viewed as anti-Christ; that is, viewed as the disrupter, the counter-authority, the challenge, the impure.

In Schmitt's political theology, central to his notion of democracy was heterogeneity and here we now first turn to Schmitt because, writing from within Weimar, he states liberalism is opposed to democracy – but his democracy, built on a concept of the sovereign-decision, is actually, we argue, totalitarian in ethos:

The belief in parliamentarianism, in government by discussion, belongs to the intellectual world of liberalism. It does not belong to democracy...Every actual democracy rest on the principle, that not only are equals equals but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires therefore first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.³³

A concern thus arises: is sovereignty – even sovereignty in the name of democracy – opposed to impurity? The echoes here of building a wall to keep out the impure, of the challenge to those viewed or declared 'un-American' is all too clear. And so, is a Schmittean democracy of the sovereign-decision (and its contemporary populist-decision counterparts) always potentially totalitarian in both ethos and action? It would seem so if, as Schmitt continues, that a "democracy demonstrates its political power by knowing how to refuse and keep at bay something foreign and unequal that threatens its homogeneity."³⁴ Impurity, of people, things or ideas, is therefore positioned as the constant threat to democracy and democracy is counter-positioned as the katechon of impurity – at least in a Schmittean frame of sovereign-decision. Our problem is that, as Schmitt argues "because inequality always belongs to equality" therefore a democracy "can exclude one part of those governed without ceasing to be a democracy"³⁵ and this is an expression of the sovereign-decision: an exception made within democracy that does not negate democracy. To understand this, we need to recognize that for

Schmitt it is liberalism that posits the equality of all persons as persons while democracy, which Schmitt argues for, is not to be confused with liberalism. We must remember this distinction when considering the contemporary moment of Trump and Trumpism and wider, other forms of political nationalism that situate themselves, in the name of democracy, against liberalism – or, as it is often dismissed, progressivism.

It is chaos that demands, for Schmitt, the necessity of the sovereign-decision; and so, it is the chaos of liberalism, the chaos of liberal modernity that claims to be democratic but is really only chaotic, that requires the necessity of the sovereign-decision. This means, for Schmitt, that the role of the sovereign is ultimately the one who, in the face of chaos, makes the decisive decision, the decision of the exception, the decision to keep order. If liberal modernity is chaos, if liberal democracy (an oxymoron in Schmitt's view of democracy) is chaos, then the only choice for the sovereign is counterrevolution; for revolution against liberal modernity can only be the further chaos of communism.

We also need to remember that what brought Taubes into agreement with Schmitt was Schmitt's referencing in *Political Theology* of Hobbes' statement in *Leviathan* that 'the law is made by authority, not by truth'. It was Taubes' concentration on history that turned him against liberalism because he could not agree with liberalism's belief in the progressive nature of a universal human subject. Rather, history is history of apocalypse, and the sovereign-decision is for counter-revolution that holds liberal chaos and belief at bay. As Taubes notes, "It was clear to me right from the start that Carl Schmitt's slim but provocative treatise *Political Theology* was a general onslaught on liberal modernity – whether as a way of life or as a form of knowledge..."³⁶, for common to both Taubes and Schmitt "is the experience of time and history as a delimited respite, as a term or even a last respite."³⁷ As noted, the sovereign-decision that arises, for both Taubes and Schmitt, is the necessity of the decision for the katechon; that is, the decision for the restrainer who holds back apocalypse. For Taubes and Schmitt, time and history are apocalyptic and it is the sovereign-decision for the katechon that is the counter-revolutionary necessity; a decision and view of time and history that both Taubes and Schmitt view as located in "a Christian experience of history."³⁸

Therefore, to rethink Trump and Trumpism in light of Weimar is also to remember the katechon is to hold back the Antichrist – and for Taubes and Schmitt the Antichrist today is liberal modernity precisely because it is impure and chaotic.

And to complicate things further, it is telling that Schmitt, writing to Armin Mohler in 1958, states: "Taubes is right: today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about..."³⁹ – and so sovereignty remains a theological decision that theologians do not talk about. This is why I also want to go back to Taube's doctoral thesis from 1947, that was published as *Occidental Eschatology* (2009).

In 1987, as noted in the Introduction to his *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes declared "there is no eternal return, time does not enable nonchalance; rather it is distress."⁴⁰ The time of Trump is such a time of distress and this enables us to understand where we find ourselves, for Trump time is not the expression of a cyclical concept and so Trump is not the return of or to the past, or of or to a past movement such as fascism; rather Trump time is the experience of the distress of the now. We can consider this in the light of the view of Steve Bannon on Trump as noted by Vicky Ward in her critique of Jared Kushner:

Bannon had believed and still believes – that Trump is a transformational historical figure, a disrupter, and agent of change. The man might be temperamental and deeply flawed, but his ability to connect to the forgotten man, to articulate the raw anger among the working class is extraordinary.⁴¹

Or as Jared Yates Sexton observes in *The people are going to rise up like the waters upon your shore*, his account of the 2016 election:

Trump's message of unbridled wrath was what they had been looking for. Finally, there was a person pissed-off enough to get onstage and simply scream at the system the way any of them would had they been given the opportunity.⁴²

Sexton also puts this in the wider context of what he terms 'the miscalculation' of the Clinton campaign:

Voters in 2016 weren't looking for a friend, and they most certainly weren't in the market for a new product,
They wanted representatives decrying inequality.
They wanted angry candidates warring against culture as a whole.

What they wanted, and what they would get, was rage.⁴³

To put this in the wider rise of populism and the troubles of the West, as dissected by the Singaporean political scientist Kishore Mahbubani in his provocatively entitled warning, *Has the West lost it?*, Trump, Brexit and other western populist events are signs that:

the working-class populations could feel directly what their elites couldn't. Their lives were being disrupted by fundamental changes taking place in the world order, and their leaders had done nothing to explain to them what was happening nor to mitigate the damages.⁴⁴

It is this time of crisis, a time of crisis, disruption and rage that echoes Weimar, that the sovereign who makes the exception and the katechon who holds back the chaos come centre stage; and yet, conversely, for the liberals, for the elites, for the progressives, Trump is not sovereign, he is not katechon. Rather, for liberals, elites and progressives Trump, in political theology terms, is anti-Christ, the symbol of the chaos they fear and oppose; and yet there is no liberal nor progressive sovereign, no liberal, no progressive katechon. This is why we find ourselves in apocalyptic time, in the time of the political theology eschaton, a time that has continued since the 2016 election. Brett Easton Ellis, who notes he had made Trump a hero of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, observed that on both sides “you were either virtue voting for one candidate or voting for the other and therefore evil.”⁴⁵ This is therefore a time of Manichean dualism and in such a time comes the call for the katechon, the restrainer of evil and chaos; the trouble being only one side has this and that is Trump. And yet, as Easton Ellis comments, this is a time of war, a time of conflict: “But in the age of Trump there seemed to be no escape, no peace, for anybody”, resulting in “this apocalyptic narrative about the electorate and the new president.”⁴⁶

The classicist and military historian, Victor Davis Hanson, in *The Case for Trump*, argued “Trump himself played an ancient role of the crude, would-be savior who scares even those who invite him in to solve intractable problems that their own elite leadership could not”⁴⁷; and we could say, the tragic echoes of Weimar, not noted here by Hanson, are glaringly apparent. The problem Trump identified, the rage Trump symbolized, was an argument, Hanon states, “that what was wrong was not America’s morality, but its spirit.”⁴⁸ So what was needed was a katechon, a

sovereign, who would disrupt and restore; a counter-revolutionary sovereign, whose central sovereign moment is succinctly delineated by Hanson: “Trumpism, then, was the idea that there were no longer taboo subjects. *Everything was open for negotiation; nothing was sacred.*”⁴⁹

We can say that in this, Trumpism secularized politics – that is, his politics took liberal political theology out of politics via Schmittean political theology; or to put it another way, Trumpism (instinctively but unwittingly) restored political theology to politics. In this context, the sovereign decision is the decision concerning what or who to sacralize and what and who to profane. Or as the anti-Trump Republican Rick Wilson commented: “Trump has opened up entirely new theological avenues.”⁵⁰

Here we find our way back to Taubes and his comments in his essay “Theology and Political Theory” that “as there is no theology without political implications, there is no political theory without theological presuppositions.”⁵¹ If Schmitt seeks the katechon who holds back the chaos and supports the sovereign decision that positions democracy against liberalism, then Taubes sees this within a wider frame of apocalypse. Taubes situates the basis of apocalypticism in the one he terms ‘the stranger’ who calls to those exiled⁵²: “All who exiled from the here and now of the world and despise the powers of “this” world, receive his call with joy.”⁵³ In this, as David Ratmoko comments, “Taubes’ study shows apocalypticism to be a revolutionary force in western history, springing from situations of *exile*.”⁵⁴ If we read this via our discussion of Jesi, then Trumpism can be rethought as the apocalyptic revolution of those who felt exiled in their own land. Therefore, we conclude that, via a substantial detour via Weimar, Jesi, political theology and Jacob Taubes, that Trump is a type of apocalyptic sovereign and katechon. Trump calls to those exiled, calling them into the turmoil of the world; calling them as the stranger who seeks to upset the worldly powers, for in Taubesan reasoning:

Apocalypticism is revolutionary, because it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate. Apocalyptic prophecy thus focuses on the future and yet is fully set in the present.⁵⁵

The central sovereign decision, the exception, the katechonic, disruptive statement of ‘Make America Great Again’ is therefore apocalyptic because in Taubesan understanding, “apocalypticism attempts to gain knowledge about the future from the past and the present”.⁵⁶ As David Ratmoko has observed, “Schmitt’s

view of history can thus be said to be *katechonic*, seeking divine legitimization of power, while Taubes is emphatically *apocalyptic*, seeking “a theological *delegitimization* of political power as whole.”⁵⁷ Yet while there may be a central division on the question of political power between Schmitt and Taubes, for many of those who follow in their wake, in *realpolitik* such a division collapses. What we see in the workings and claims of Trump and his supporters is what Ratmoko identifies as the issue with Karl Lowith’s ‘From Hegel to Nietzsche’(1941) which was a major influence on Taubes: “What Lowith seems to confuse, however, is precisely the spiritual, apocalyptic tradition with the imperial, ‘katechonic’ one.”⁵⁸ Yet we would argue that the ‘confusion’ is one that seeks a dialectic between the two positions so as to attain the possibility of a new truth of the time and a new truth of how to act. For both Schmitt and Taubes find common ground in identifying and opposing what they view as the failures and failings of liberalism. Therefore, what could be described as the confusion of Trump and Trumpism occurs precisely they see themselves as speaking directly into what can be termed the problem of liberal democracy that seeks to make people, time and history other than what they are. To oppose liberal democracy therefore requires *both* the katechon and sovereign decision of Schmitt *and* the apocalyptic of Taubes because liberalism is viewed as *both* a political and a spiritual problem; that is, a problem of and for a rethought political theology, requiring the new apocalyptic event of sovereign as katechon and the katechon as sovereign.

So how might we understand what has occurred?

One option is the statement of Henry Kissinger from 2018 that: “I think Trump may be one of these figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretence”⁵⁹. Yet to fully understand this, we need to remember that it was Kissinger, as an assistant professor, who Taubes notes did all the work that brought him to Harvard in the early 1950’s to give a lecture⁶⁰ and where he carried out a research programme in political theology.

Yet perhaps the most telling way of understanding, in this time of Trumpian tweeting, of sovereign statements, of katechon action and apocalyptic direct propaganda and feeling, is to remember, as Taubes comments: “...with each new apocalyptic wave a new syntax is created, and the breakdown of meaning in language makes people from the old age appear deranged to those from the new, and vice versa.”⁶¹

Postscript on the question of populism.

When I first presented this as a conference paper⁶² I was asked why I had not engaged in a discussion of populism. My response was that we have to go beneath populism, for populism is a response to what I have discussed, not that which gives rise to it. To expand: The counter-revolution within capitalism is of those who believe they are missing out and therefore not heard; or rather, not heard and so missing out within capitalism. They want capitalism *for them and for their concerns*, they do not want a release from capitalism. So, in this current context as opposed to that of Weimar, there is no viable socialism or communism to act as counter-revolutionary threat. Rather we have the hyper-real revolution/counter-revolution versus what is taken to be the *idea* of socialism or communism. What we see is therefore the belief of a revolt and a revolution – even as/if the status-quo of neo-liberalism might continue; therefore, it is also a counter-revolution versus what Nancy Fraser has critiqued as progressive-neoliberalism.⁶³ And actually, Neo-liberalism is, in its focus on the decision as exception, that is, the individual decision, a type of Trumpian political theology made manifest.

Populism is therefore versus progressive neo-liberalism and globalization; versus those who – and that are believed to – bring chaos (social and economic). This is why we see the rise up of the populist sovereign and populist katechon. But because the sovereign and the katechon arise as a counter-revolutionary expression, this is why there cannot be a liberal sovereign or a liberal katechon.

So, how can we situate this also within Neo-liberalism because Trump and Trumpism arises out of and yet against Neo-liberalism? While, as noted, Nancy Fraser has articulated what constitutes progressive Neo-liberalism, perhaps we need to consider Trump and Trumpism as the expression of populist Neo-liberalism. Therefore, populism is an example of the counter-revolution within Neo-liberalism and capitalism – the counter-revolutionary expression of identity politics – and in this, as per George Groz, is *really* the symbol of the times.

This is because populism arises as the reaction of those seeking myth-making that claims virtues out of that and those which are dismissed; and while populism may be regarded as anti-democratic by those opposed to it, it is actually, as I previously noted, deeply democratic in a Schmittean sense. Therefore, to try to discuss or label populism as anti-democratic is actually to continue to create the conditions that gave rise to it. This is also why *values* become central to populism,

for populism is not concerned with *virtues* because they are such things as moderation, responsibility – and are to be answerable.⁶⁴ If we think however, that for populism values are that which are deemed lost and in need of recovery, then populism is a counter-revolution for values *versus* progressive virtues. That is, in populism, values are regarded as a ‘pure’ strategy for navigating ‘the now’ for the masses⁶⁵; that is, values are able to be ‘recovered’ and restored – by the sovereign. But also, populism seeks to act as what I term ‘sovereign unto itself’ in making the decision for ‘the exception’; that is, those values deemed ‘lost’. Yet these values in themselves are seen also as katechonic values of the people that hold back the chaos *if* these values are able to be restored. Therefore the impeachment of Trump was, from the Democrats’ side, *both* an *attempted* sovereign decision (because to impeach the president *is* ‘the exception’) *and* an *attempted* katechonic act to hold back the chaos of Trump and Trumpism viewed as anti-Christ. And yet, such a challenge to the Trumpian counter-revolution just perpetuates the populist belief that values are under threat from Liberal virtues and that the Democrats are creating or imposing or legislating chaos that is opposed to the sovereign decision of the people. Furthermore, what does it mean if the sovereign decision and the katechonic act both fail? In blunt terms, they are revealed as lacking legitimacy; in other words, by failing in their impeachment the Democrats positioned themselves yet again as creating the chaos that requires the katechon and the Trumpian sovereign decision. Therefore, drawing on Jesi, Schmitt and Taubes, the failure of the revolt of the impeachment solidified the counter-revolution of Trumpism as the apocalyptic sovereign and katechon in a political theology of populist values opposed to liberal virtues.

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⁶⁴ I thank Monte Pemberton for making this point in his excellent conference paper "Virtues and Values in Australian Political Culture", ACSCP conference, Melbourne, 4-6 December 2019.

⁶⁵ This also arises out of Pemberton's paper.