

Book Review

“An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics” by Blanton, Ward, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and Noëlle Vahanian

Reviewed by Niall McKay

An Insurrectionist Manifesto is a complex collection of politically resistant approaches to the hallowed spaces of (Christian) theology. Arranged philosophically around the fourfold Heideggerian categories of earth and sky, god and mortals, and with an ironic nod to the form of the New Testament evangels, *An Insurrectionist Manifesto* seeks to (re)discover insurrection within, behind and below the presenting theological traditions. In particular, the binding good news for the key contributors – Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins and Noëlle Vahanian – is that the relativisation of theological transcendency has opened spaces for reclaimed political immanence and that the resurrection of the body natural might become insurrection for the body politic.

An Insurrectionist Manifesto proposes an ambitious task of reframing the intersection of theology, theory and politics in a new way. And the breadth of the undertaking could well leave the reader lost in the middle of an ocean of competing currents. The introduction, then, is a critical aspect of this work, and clearly outlines what kind of insurrectionist theology these 21st century evangelists will proclaim. Not surprisingly, the first “filiation” of this insurrection is with radical theology, with the traditions of thought around and against Christian orthodoxies which poke and prod the weaknesses and infelicities

of dominant ideation. In particular, the “deaths of God” traditions, explicitly pluralised, give rise to a resistant tradition against (a kind of) God who is worshipped by those who benefit from the status quo. Insurrections are always against something, and that which these evangelists are against is identified early on.

The second claimed filiation of the work is with the “ontology of the Real” in the reframed psychoanalysis of Lacan and Deleuze and continued into the work of Žižek and Laruelle. Interestingly, however, while all these thinkers shape the text, it is Deleuze who seems to have the strongest voice. In a number of sections Deleuze’s recalling of (the language of) God in biological terms hints at a “real” in which God is both materialised and ineffable. For the purposes of their interrogatory method this unspeakable, and (as-yet) unsymbolised Real, leads to a plastic and malleable theological materialism (borrowed from Catherine Malabou). Insurrection is thoroughly materialist in affect, but never reductionist in imagination.

In practical terms, then, the new proponents of good news are avowedly leftist but eschew dogmatic certainty, pointing to a political *and* a theoretical struggle which seeks Life “beyond” the overdetermining realities of 21st Century capitalist (neo)liberalism. Such a mammoth journey has no clear next step forward at any one stage and, thus, experimentalism is needed for, “... everything is up in the air, staked and at stake” (2016, 4).

On Earth

In parallel with the first side of the Heideggerian quadrilateral, the first Gospel sits on the edge of the earth. And it is against earth that the ecological system of capitalism “presses up against real limits” (quoting David Harvey 2016, 28). For the first evangelist Clayton Crockett, an insurrectionist and materialist theology is one which takes into account the most immediate and pressing material reality realised in the limits of the earth. What is needed, suggests Crockett, against “this terminal crisis of global capitalism” is a “new way of being in and of the Earth”(2016, 28). And to do this requires a collapse or mediation of the typical opposition of materialism and theology by reframing (kinds of) theology as energy, as the dynamics of matter. In a rather complex (pseudo)-scientific hypothesis, Crockett proposes that in the attention to energy, and in particular energy conversion, the insurrectionist Earth theologian might find a new way to cast theology in materialist terms, building conceptual links between the poetics of spirit and life, and the empiricism of localised negative entropy. For though it would be unwise (and un-materialist) to suggest that the second law of thermodynamics does not apply universally, energy conversion in biological systems at least, demonstrates a localised resistance, an insurrection against the domination of nature. For Crockett, there is space here to theorise

a new materialist theology. This energy-driven theology will both critique, and potentially re-energise, the emerging schools of ecotheology, bringing them more closely into conversation with broader left politics, and curbing some of the more naïve romanticism of the movement.

Crockett is generally supportive of the emergence of ecotheology as it allows a reimagining of the divine in the material, and because ecotheology offers a “radical critique of both traditional theology and modern technological and economic practices” (2016, 34). The key point here is that the critique offered by ecotheology is a critique of practice as much as it is a critique of concepts. If theology is simply that which theologians do, then the routine avoidance of immediate political criticism, in favour of an almost platonic fascination on transcendence requires challenging. Ecotheology’s refocus on earth and the environment begins to unpick the divine. Unfortunately for Crockett, most ecotheology, tied as it is to its Christian theological roots, does not go far enough. Because ecotheology sees the rich and complex material world as a bearer of the “authentic” and ultimate divine, the world itself cannot have value in itself. In not casting off all the shackles of traditional theology, ecotheology remains limited to those for whom transcendent “religious and spiritual values” remain convincing, but mere instrumentalism for other “religious practitioners” (though Crockett is not clear who these are exactly).

A more insightful critique of ecotheology offered by Crockett is against the “appeal to a kind of natural and spiritual harmony” (2016, 34). There was no golden age where humanity and nature existed in a purely harmonious state and (some kind of) alienation is like original sin, reaching back even before the distinction of the human species. Golden age nostalgia belongs to a romanticism at odds with the material reality of scientific insight. Moreover, such a naïve approach to nature can also be critiqued theoretically. Appealing to Žižek, Crockett sees naïvely elevating nature as a theologically disingenuous failing, at least for Christian thought. At the heart of Christianity the crucifixion is not a final collapse of the distance between God and humanity, or between the divine and the material, but rather an embodiment of the reality that the “irreducible gap at the heart of the human being also affects God” (2016, 36). Moreover, the natural world also shares in this “radical separation” and it is this gap, this brokenness, which is actually shared by humanity, nature and God. Any appeal to a harmonious and united golden age, whether in traditional theology, or in some kind of nature spirituality, is undone both by scientific insight and by a deep reading of separation in Christianity itself.

So where is the good news? For Crockett it emerges in a Deleuzian view of entropy, and the notions of differentiation and energy in the laws of thermodynamics. In a critique of traditional and transcendental interpretations of the Second Law, a closer look at localised intensity and “extensity” (or order, disorder and the “the arrow of time [which] runs inexorably from one to the

other” (2016, 44)), the same force “reduces gradients in the quickest and most efficient way possible” is also able to create new structures, new gradients, in “specific circumstances. For Crockett, and presumably also for Deleuze, these specific circumstances pertain directly to Life, especially as it emerges on Earth – the only active testbed we know of. Crockett then goes on to link a more variegated thermodynamics with Malabou’s notion of plasticity in biological evolution which allows organic life to “give and receive form” as well as “the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive of create” (quoting Malabou 2016, 55). Alongside Deleuze’s variegated thermodynamics, Malabou’s insurrectionist and antiorthodox introduction of “a kind of neo- Lamarckism” into the scientific orthodoxy of neo-Darwinian evolution is both model and metaphor for Crockett’s (eco)theological enterprise. For a materialist theology of the Earth, in an insurrectionist vein at least, transcendent interpretations of Nature and Life are to be avoided alongside other theological teleologies. “Crude creationism” and life as “completely random chance” are “insipid” oppositions and closer attention to organisation and energy within systems reveal “far more profound repetitions of difference..., but they do not proceed in any straight line or upward ascent” (2016, 56). Similarly, for Crockett, theology is also variegated and anti-transcendent. Moreover, theology is energy *für sich*, energy that is self-conscious in its localised and limited re-organisation of Life, a little order against the chaos of the Real.

Crockett’s complex appropriation of science and the philosophy of science, while intriguing at points, tends to throw together insights and debates from disparate disciplines far too quickly and superficially. Moreover, approaching thermodynamics through Deleuze and evolutionary biology through Malabou, allows for comparison of form only, and a level of abstraction which tends to downplay significant physical and conceptual differences between the fields in question. The resultant theological process – or theology as process – lacks coherence and depth (though for Crockett, a lack of depth is acceptable and perhaps inevitable (2016, 58)? In response to the correctly identified weaknesses of naïve transcendences in (eco)theology, my concern is that Crockett has offered a way forward so diffuse as to be interesting but ineffective – forgivable, perhaps, except in a work offering insurrection, manifesto and good news.

On Satellite Skies

Ward Blanton’s exploration of Heidegger’s second onto-theological category of Sky is a fascinating look at the complex and contended beckoning of otherness which captures human beings when we “look up”. Though claiming political and theoretical solidarity with Crockett, Blanton’s exploration is less explicitly engaged in or against a particular movement of philosophy or theology than

Crockett and his ecotheological riffing. Blanton is also more closely wedded to the limits and possibilities of Heideggerian thought – in contrast to Crockett’s swift move from Earth to ecotheology, thermodynamics and evolutionary biology. If Crockett’s materialism leads to a gospel which must be held within the conceptual framework of (pseudo)scientific abstraction, Blanton’s gospel is, instead, more a work of the humanities, a call to dance, to literature, to the novel, to the possibilities and entrapments of Sky which Blanton identifies as vampiric transcendence.

Caught in the pincer grip of Deleuze’s “Lobster God(s)” (2016, 62ff) Blanton’s wide-ranging exploration seeks, it seems, to critique the errant excesses of “onto-theology as metaphysics” – especially as this God of philosophy ignores the material responses to (vampiric) transcendence. At the same time, Blanton also attempts to avoid reductive materialisms which “simply reshuffle the dualistic pack of the idealist hucksters” as they shift the *causa sui*, and thus the entire “onto-theological story” (2016, 81) onto a new material baseline – but without understanding that the process of onto-theologising is the problem itself. Instead, a (materialist) insurrectionist gospel grows from the materialist practice of the archivist (a favourite term of Blanton), which records and details the material gestures in order to represent the “actual world”. It is this materialist impulse that compels Blanton’s interest in kneeling, genuflection, dance, laughter and embodied ecstasy.

Blanton goes on to example his archivist identity in a reading (of a reading) of Paul of Tarsus. Delving into the epistolary material against the extant Greco-Roman philosophical (and juridical/literate) tradition, Blanton is lead (not surprisingly) to Lacan, and (perhaps more surprisingly) Jacob Taubes on Carl Schmitt. The exhumation is circuitous but ends with the strong claim of the partisanship of Paul as he repeats and deforms his Jewish tradition. Indeed, perhaps Blanton’s most insightful point is that in Pauline retelling, the Roman’s greatest failing was not simply crucifying “another rebel from Palestine” (2016, 94) but, rather, that in this “enactment of imperial control” the Roman overlords immediately open themselves to the “divinity of emancipatory partisanship”. For the “surplus or excess” which feeds the Roman beast is only imagined. A similar partisanship can be discerned in Blanton’s critique of a more recent political connection between the Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Management around the topic of “faith and globalization” under the patronage of Tony Blair. It is at this point that Blanton’s academic and political allegiances become clear. Not only does such a move by Yale betray a neo-liberal corporatisation and commodification of (religious) education, but the categories of “faith and globalisation” assume and enforce a universalising structure against the actual “solidarities” which exist in the localised gestures, the actions which interest Blanton. Yet, while I sympathise with Blanton’s rejection of such a move by Yale and Blair, and join him in his call for “archivist” attention to

specific instances of (insurrectionist) solidarities, it seems that the categorical divisions which he protests are built into the structure of the university itself. The very existence of a Divinity School establishes a universalising category – I am not sure how much worse (on a qualitative level) the partnership with Blair's Management makes the situation.

At the end of Blanton's gospel, I cannot help but feel that Blanton's presentation of partisan choice is undercooked in his example. Surely there are more interesting (and politically generative) places to archive insurrectionist theologies than in the (un)hallowed halls of George W. Bush's *alma mater*?

On Theory (and Practice) in Insurrection

The third evangelist of the insurrectionist manifesto is Jeffrey W. Robbins who riffs off the David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* in both written and cinematographic iterations. Interestingly, and somewhat refreshingly for a supposed manifesto, Robbins' gospel is more historically locatable than the foregoing chapters. If the temporally-distortable character identities of *Cloud Atlas* constitute a kind of muse for his work, Robbins repeatedly references historical instances of insurrection, particularly those of the liberative potential of North American black theologies as most clearly archived by James Cone. Set against the "white supremacy of the United States" (2016, 111), despite its title, Robbins' theory of insurrection is thus, also, a consideration of resistant practice. *Cloud Atlas*' de-temporalising (and thus universalising) of specific material (historically-fictional and true) instances of insurrectionist actions provide, then, a way of theorising the abstractions which seem to dominate Crockett and Blanton's work. Robbins' much shorter gospel, like the (orthodox) gospel of Mark, is a mapping of relatable historical incidence in a way which the other insurrectionist evangelists eschew. Moreover, Robbins neatly sidesteps the (pathological) desire to collapse the transcendent in theology and theory by simply linking narrato-historical instances together around image, form, and consequence. Most archetypically, when an ancient Jew dies on a wooden cross there are resonances with every black person who is lynched on a tree. Thus, a new kind of theory of linked circumstance, response and action emerges which becomes theorised and possibly even made transcendent (though I expect Robbins might reject this characterisation).

There are many fascinating narratological insights in Robbins' use of *Cloud Atlas*. Perhaps the most prescient is the demand for class betrayal as sacrifice of life demanded of any privileged (white, slave-owning, rich, bourgeois, consumer class) person who hopes to be part of the insurrection. Robbins does not eschew a material theology of reciprocal salvation which, perhaps, is the only path for insurrectionist practice. At a deeper level, insurrection (in Robbins' estimation) is a defiance "of the natural order" (2016, 117), carrying Crockett's critique of

naïve elevation of naturalism in ecotheology into the “natural” order of human society. Whether this eliding of the various definitions of “natural” is theoretically rigorous, I can’t help thinking that Robbins is onto something here – and that a far more nuanced and deconstructable notion of the language of nature is necessary for insurrectionist practice.

Robbins continues his gospel with an extended exegesis of the early chapters of Genesis and the book Job (framed by the New Testament) and, drawing heavily on the work of John Dominic Crossan, concludes that the “four parables” in the first eleven chapters of Genesis demonstrate the “failure of divine violence”. As this failure becomes manifest, nonviolence becomes an “original feature of creation, not an aberration from nature” (2016, 121). Yet, as Job (and Jesus) show us, this original feature of creation has been in some manner broken – that the behemoth and the leviathan “do not represent a future threat, but the rift in being at its very origins” (2016, 132). Thus Robbins holds together the (potentially paradoxical) idea of original separation in the character of God and creation with original nonviolence imbued in creation. For Robbins, then, an insurrectionist theology must hold onto both these realities – which is why liberation theology is simply the first step in an insurrectionist move. Liberation to a base state simply allows for the freedom to continue the resistance which is “generative... constantly constitutive of form” (2016, 136). At this point I presume that liberation and generative resistance happen somewhat concurrently in Robbins’ framework – rather than liberation being a precondition for generation. Finally Robbins closes his circle, returning to Cone’s original identity categories of “black” and “Christian” to conclude that we might add further identity categories (especially the category of “gender”) as forms which open the possibility of difference, and thus the possibility of material resistance, of this against that. But, for Robbins, this difference is never simply a return to a base (ideal) state. Instead difference is always generative – not the least, one presumes, at the fraying edges of rigid identity.

Word made Flesh

The final gospel continues in the footsteps of the earlier evangelists as they collapse the transcendent – the sky – into the material – the earth. In the work of Noëlle Vahanian, the final two Heideggerian categories of God and mortal are similarly “un-distanced”. Indeed, Vahanian presses the doctrinal notion of incarnation – of word made flesh – to suggest that all insurrections must (necessarily) come from within – for no other reason than the transcendent, the “without”, has been clearly shown to be a “ghost” – just like Heidegger’s “idealized Black Forest farm” (2016, 144ff). In Vahanian’s estimation, it is the insurrectionist nature of the incarnation that is in insurrection “from within” and undoes “historical and imperial Christianity”. The “Christologocentrism” (2016,

148) of dominant and dominating Christianity arises directly from the denial of the fleshy-ness of the Word in favour of an idealised transcendent form. Treading a fine line, Vahanian's "theology of insurrection is neither a repudiation of Christianity and an indictment of its universalism, nor is it a Christian apologetic clamoring the triumph of post-Christian, yet Christian, secular universalism" (2016, 149). Whether such a theological option is possible is certainly up for debate, yet the rejection of opposing, distorted and idealised, universalisms appears an admirable goal – at least in keeping with the doctrinal and creedal anti-dualism of Christian tradition.

Following hermeneutic and homiletic form, Vahanian proceeds to integrate more contemporary distortions which may cast a light on, or bring into relief, the Real(ity) from which insurrection must come. From TV adaptations of the satire of Trollope to the investment of Bernard Madoff, from the archetype of a James-Bond villain to the "real-life Kim Dotcom", Vahanian suggests that it is believing in make-belief that both seeks to transcend the material (for something better one presumes) but, at the same time, tends to be the very thing that leads to (or wantonly ignores) the fact that "it is human mortals who preach, pillage, rape, and annihilate the wretched of the earth" (2016, 150).

Vahanian's response to the TV-Real begins with a rejection of perfection, but in keeping with this rejection, is itself an imperfect or not-completely-formed response. At a basic level an incarnational insurrection breaks down the strict categorical boundaries between many human and theological notions, especially those of the dominant and dominating examples of monotheistic Christianity and Islam, (white) racism and Western superiorities. Indeed, for Vahanian (following Augusto Bondy), all thinking, all philosophy, is part of the "anthropological illusion" which means that humans (almost) always think in abstractions based on "constructed self-images" (2016, 169). But, paradoxically, because these abstractions are "lies", as these lies are revealed, "they succeed, unwittingly, as an expression of the lack of complete and original being". It is the insight that idealisation is a lie, and that the lie exposes the limits of the illusion itself, that allows a moment of creation, of "new life".

Vahanian's Word made flesh is not a complete denial of the Word but rather, an acknowledgement that as the Word constructs an illusion, one which would deny the material reality of existence and suffering, the very lie itself, when exposed, provides space for new material and creative insurrections. It is when the quadrilateral of oppositions – earth, sky, mortals and divinities – are collapsed that the lie is exposed for a moment. As Vahanian helpfully concludes: "Resources are limited; death is assured. We are sojourners, not here to stay forever, but to live once and for all" (2016, 171).

In review

An Insurrectionist Manifesto is a far reaching and ambitious foray into the possibilities of insurrectionist theology. It is grand in purpose, and the integration of theory, history and a kind of materialist analysis is at times brilliantly insightful. There are, however, a number of questions which are worth raising for possible critique or refinement. The first relates to the language of biology, scientific method and experiment which is adopted throughout the work, especially in the first earth-bound gospel. At the same time, a (simple) scientism is rejected by the evangelists. I do not believe that the use of (pure) scientific method and its findings is adequately explained and contextualised within the gospels. If reductionism is to be refuted, why is it that the authors rely so heavily on the results of reductive method without careful clarification and qualification? This is not to say that such an attempt is impossible – but the absence of a clearly integrated theory or philosophy of science is apparent. Simply to advocate materialism without addressing scientific method is insufficient.

Second, the politics of *An Insurrectionist Manifesto* are leftist but resist dogmatic certainty. I wonder if an unstated motivation for the works might be to (partially) close the divide which opened up between Marxism and other theoretical traditions in the 1960s? A closer engagement with the inheritance of the Frankfurt school and other anti-Stalinist Marxisms might have enriched these gospels. Though there is a smattering of Žižek, there is not a rich enough engagement with Marxism which is surely a valuable trove for the insurrectionist archivist.

Third, and again riffing of Žižek, how can the Real give rise to a new (more) liberated Real without otherness or transcendence – especially if the Real itself is, at its worst, some kind of neoliberal corporate capitalism? Though it is a central dogma of the manifesto, I cannot quite see how effective or comprehensive revolution can come entirely from within a system, even when revolution is always fleshed out in the existence – but perhaps this is a failing of imagination on my part. I do, however, believe that the obsessive drive to excise the transcendent leads to some difficult, and perhaps overly simplistic definitions. For example, can insurrection really be defined so cleanly against resurrection? In my experience resurrection has always held insurrectionist potential. Is the move, particularly by Robbins, to separate salvation from redemption (with a clear preference for one and rejection of the other) a helpful move? How does such a position gel with Vahanian's assertion that all insurrection must arise from the inescapably compromised traditions today, particularly those of (post)-imperial Christianity? Can we really pick and choose which frameworks are worth mining/reframing for the purposes of insurrection, or are insurrectionist practitioners and archivists compelled to "redeem" redemption (and other problematic terms) for the sake of resistance, revolution

and new life?

Whether the gospels reach their eponymous aims of good news is something that readers will need to decide for themselves. The gospels are certainly worth reading in their own right, but perhaps they have a deeper value as a kind of reference (perhaps even an archive), to be dipped into for liberative lode in a wide range of theological, hermeneutical and political projects. Let us hope that this work, and others like it, become tools to be used in the realisation of insurrection, rather than simply discarded underneath an unstable pile of dusty archives in the library of ideas.