

Book Review

Montserrat Herrero: *Theopolitical Figures: Scripture, Prophecy, Oath, Charisma, Hospitality*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. Pp. vi, 299.)

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Montserrat Herrero's book invites the theological interpretation of modern social and political thought. This includes but is in no way limited to a search for the historical antecedents to modern political concepts and the structural analogies between historical epochs. She reminds us that to be open for theological interpretation, we should welcome a different kind of knowledge. Herrero wants to show that looking "at the signs of the sacred and their meaning in history helps to discover the consistency of the divine" (6). To point to these signs, she combines readings from the German intellectual tradition with Continental philosophy, especially French deconstructivism. Extensive materials are covered and briefly summarized in an introduction which recaptures a theological turn in political philosophy and homes in on the theme of political theology. Five chapters each deal with one of the theopolitical figures provided in the book's subtitle. Theopolitical figures are akin to "theological signatures, embedded in some institutionalized political practices. These marks speak of God and . . . reveal Him, by saying something about Him or by representing Him" (10). In other words, the quest is not an individual one; this is not about privatized belief, but socialized religion. Among the abundance of historical examples and routes suggested in the book, each reader will find different themes to latch onto and debate productively. In the following, I will single out some questions pertaining to the book's theoretical framework.

Herrero sets forth a unifying theoretical perspective—the biggest takeaway of which might be one about the persistence and uninterrupted continuation of figures she calls "theopolitical." This situates the book within a discourse about the "continuation of theology with other means" (Hans Blumenberg), that is, debates about political theology. At the same time, the book claims to go beyond a mere historical understanding of reality, following thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy ("Image and text are the two holy species of a single withdrawn presence" [32]). Another takeaway then is the reminder that philosophy of language lies at the core not only of analytical philosophy, but also of the so-called Continental tradition. Such division of philosophical styles has often been rightfully criticized, but unless literature and philosophy departments will one day fuse, it may well hold. Two small details at times hinder the reading experience and are likely the result of editorial

shortcomings: first, the misspellings in the German-language material; second, the decision to provide only endnotes, which makes it hard to follow some arguments in the book without getting lost (the reviewer was provided with an electronic copy). Interestingly, when it comes to Derrida, the focus sometimes shifts between an indirect presentation of his ideas and direct statements about reality. A clear strength of Herrero's style is the rendering of many a convoluted argument within deconstructivism or negative theology (the critique of positive and dogmatic statements about God) in plain and comprehensive English. Throughout the work, there is a noteworthy attempt to clearly state its own premises. This will not render Derrida and other figures of Continental thought intelligible per se, but it does not mystify them further. Well read, Herrero moves through the terrain of French, German, English, and Spanish thought, usually via the respective original languages.

Among the sheer abundance of the materials provided, I want to focus on one critical aspect, namely, the ahistorical exegesis of Carl Schmitt. Bluntly put: Can the author of the 1934 apology "Der Führer schützt das Recht" (The Führer safeguards the law) be read as though his ideas were merely tools for our understanding today? Granted that Schmitt was ideologically observant in the NS state following inferior motives (career and standing), even his earlier work in the history of ideas contains enough polemic elements to spoil future "applications." For instance, one might think of his *Concept of the Political* and the so-called analytic distinction between friend and foe as a metaphysical rendering of deep-seated hostility, or as a celebration of the concept of antagonism as a principle of social organization. Already in 1942, the sociologist Albert Salomon had called out Schmitt's purportedly analytic distinction as an obvious instance of "Nazi militarism." One may consider Schmitt's usage of Catholic apologetics and various anti-Enlightenment diatribes as the true foundations on which the text of his *Political Theology* rests. Employing Schmitt with systematic intentions necessarily means dehistoricizing him. In the book, this becomes very clear when Carl Schmitt's political theology meets Erich Auerbach, whose excellent 1939 essay "Figura" informs Herrero's conception of theopolitical figures. Even if Schmitt and Auerbach underwent a similarly strict *geistesgeschichtliche* education, serious objections can be brought forth against employing them in this combination. Further, Auerbach's essay is a work in conceptual history: is it fair to abstract from his historical survey, and would that not imply simplification, reductionism perhaps? To bring up another critical point, I want to briefly revisit the importance of philosophy of language in the authors employed here, whether they belong to the analytic or Continental traditions. Bible readers remember the demonstrations of basic words, and from there it is a short path to the importance of linguistic polyvalence, figurative language and reflections about the intricacies of reading. Some towering figures in this connection belong to Jewish traditions of theopolitical thought. While Spinoza gets due credit (70ff.), Maimonides and his discussion of divine

attributes are absent from the book, and their common modern interpreter Leo Strauss—a critic and interlocutor of Schmitt—is missing.

The book cover is adorned by James Ensor's beautiful and puzzling *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (1889). Underneath a banner "VIVE LA SOCIALE" we see a carnivalesque march of people, somewhere in the back a Jesus figure with aureole and donkey. A smaller banner in this march of the masses reads: "DOCTRINARY FANFARES/ALWAYS SUCCEED" and, cut off on the right side, "LONG LIVE JESUS/KING OF BRUSSELS." The painting visualizes the problem of social forces, and ultimately conjures up socialist rhetoric. Unless the reader is already reading passages of Herrero's book as indirect commentary on the idea of socialism, the question remains: Why bracket socialist political thought? What is the relation of theopolitical figures to ideas about the social root of religious phenomena? Or are views about the social construction of everything also instances of the divine? Does the story hold if there really are social forces at work underneath the "elementary forms of religious life," as Emile Durkheim had it? In Ensor's march through Brussels, the crowd follows a man with a bishop's hat whose face looks more deranged than the others. Herrero seems to want to point us again to the underestimated figure of Christ, whereas Ensor's painting may also simply be read as a commentary on the antiquated character of Christian religion. Can these two views be reconciled in a productive way? Here, the book seems to favor permanence and duration over novelty and rupture, while being careful not to provide positive statements about attributes of the divine.

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