Prophetic Political Theology

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Abstract • This article probes the writings of the Jewish Trotskyist thinker Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) in light of recent debates on political theology. In contrast to what is sometimes explicitly referred to as 'apocalyptic political theology', it makes a case for what may be described as a 'prophetic political theology'. Yet it is not obvious to claim Bensaïd as a proponent for such a project, since he explicitly denounced the meddling of theology in political thinking. The article therefore starts out by explaining the sense in which Bensaïd was committed to the profane nature of politics. Secondly, it suggests that Bensaïd's 'profane politics' could nonetheless be framed as a political theology. Despite his rejection of theology, Bensaïd simultaneously drew on a certain strand of Jewish prophetic thinking in his continuing revision and refinement of his original Trotskyist position. Having explored Bensaïd's radical thinking as a prophetic political theology, the article concludes by indicating why and how it offers a productive way of responding to the challenges of our time.

When political theology was revitalized in the early 2000s, it reflected an increased theoretical interest in Carl Schmitt and his understanding of the political. That fascination with Schmitt's work had grown by this time was no coincident. In the tense aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration advocated policies and practices under the rubric of emergency that suggested a similarity to key features of Schmitt's thought. Indeed, as several debaters pointed out, there was at least an indirect influence, linked to the role of Leo Strauss (a prominent student of Schmitt) within the neo-conservative circles that provided the intellectual sources for President George W. Bush (Schüssler Fiorenza 2013, 39–42).

At the same time, however, there was also a renewed and intense interest in Schmitt on the far left. Thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek drew on Schmitt's critique of liberalism to reveal the self-defeating arrogance of Western democracies – epitomized in Bush's 'War on Terror'. To be sure, all of these thinkers knew that Schmitt's critique was part of a deeply conservative theory of the state. To the extent that the 'Crown Jurist of the Third Reich' had used disruptive categories (decision, exception, friend versus enemy, etc.), it was in the service of an authoritarian thinking which aimed at preserving order and keeping political chaos at bay (hence the description of Schmitt as a 'katechonic' or 'avertive' apocalyptic thinker; see Falk 2022). And yet there was in Schmitt a radicalism that – if detached from his own authoritarian agenda – could be used to conceive of a revolutionary break with the political deadlock of the liberal world and its perceived injustices.

To understand the revitalization of political theology, it is these developments on the

far left that hold the key. What thinkers like Agamben and Žižek found attractive in Schmitt was not only his critique of political liberalism but also the way in which he raised the question of the pre-political, ultimately *theological*, prerequisite of any political agenda. For if it is the case, as Schmitt famously claimed, that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts' (Schmitt 1985, 36), then this is true for liberalism as well. More precisely, Schmitt argued, the theology on which liberalism relied was that of deism: the idea of a God who is unable to transgress the laws of nature 'through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order' (Schmitt 1985, 36–7). By contrast, faced with the toothless liberal constitutionalism of the Weimar Republic, Schmitt called for a theory of the state that had its theological precursor in precisely those concepts that deism denied: the idea of an omnipotent God that plays by his own rules, including the possibility of miraculously suspending the laws of nature.

In the two and a half decades that have passed since 9/11, the appeal of Schmitt's critical analyses has continued to grow among radical thinkers. The more democratic backsliding and parliamentary impotence have become apparent, the more Schmittian conceptions of radical interruption and extra-legal suspension have become attractive. As a consequence, not only the term but the entire academic discourse today labelled 'political theology' has become closely associated with critical thinking based on the concepts and theories of Schmitt. The question is whether this development comes at a cost. For even though most discourses of political theology are animated by emancipatory objectives, the fact remains that they are structured on the quasi-apocalyptic features of Schmitt's thinking.

For reasons that will become clear throughout this paper, I want to suggest that this paradigm of political theology is becoming increasingly obsolete. Not because it is too radical or too critical but because it is not radical enough in the sense of being capable of inspiring real political engagement. In its fixation on rupture and negation, it rather tends to hamper constructive political commitment in a time when such commitment is urgently needed. This also raises the question of what an alternative political theology may look like, one better suited to confront the challenges of the present time.

In what follows, I will pursue this question by turning to the writings of the Jewish Trotskyist thinker Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010).[1] In contrast to what is sometimes explicitly referred to as 'apocalyptic political theology' (see Lynch 2019), I will make a case for what may be described as a 'prophetic political theology'.[2] Yet it is not obvious to claim Bensaïd as a proponent for such a project. Those who are familiar with his philosophy will know that Bensaïd was determined to keep theology at arm's length from political thinking, committing instead to what he described as the profane nature of politics (Bensaïd 2008). I will therefore start out by explaining the sense in which Bensaïd understood his thinking as profane. In the second part, I will nonetheless suggest that Bensaïd's 'profane politics' could also be framed in terms of a political theology. Despite his strong rejection of what he once referred to as 'theology and its jumble of graces, miracles, revelations, repentances, and pardons'

1 For a brief biographical introduction on Daniel Bensaïd, see Rachel Pafe's contribution to this special issue.

2 See also Svenungsson 2024 and Svenungsson (forthcoming), in which I engage critically with examples of apocalyptic political theology and begin to draw the contours of a prophetic political theology.

(Bensaïd 2011, 42), Bensaïd simultaneously drew on a certain strand of Jewish prophetic and messianic thinking in his continuing revision and refinement of his original Trotskyist position. Rereading Bensaïd's radical thinking as a prophetic political theology, I will finally, in the concluding part, indicate why I think it offers a more productive way of responding to the challenges of our time than neo-Schmittian political theologies generally do.

In praise of profane politics

If the academic left took on a more radical tone during the 2000s, it was, as already indicated, in response to the blatant transgressions against basic democratic principles that took place in the aftermath of 9/11. Drawing on Schmitt's theory of the state of exception, Agamben, in particular, pointed to how liberal politics routinely relied on exceptional measures and thereby operated within a framework it could not justify (Agamben 2005). Among the far-left thinkers who were engaged in the critical conversations surrounding 9/11 was also Daniel Bensaïd. One may even say that much of his mature thinking grew out of a struggle to come to terms with what has often been described as the post-political era (defined by the shift of power away from national governments to transnational actors, with ensuing erosion of real democratic influence; see Žižek 1999; Mouffe 2005).

To a large extent, Bensaïd shared the critical analyses of thinkers like Agamben, Mouffe and Žižek, including the appreciation of Schmitt's theories as a tool for deciphering the geo-political developments of the time. Hence, for example, Bensaïd relied heavily on Schmitt in his scathing critique of the ongoing depoliticization of warfare through the practice of 'pre-emptive' military strikes or 'humanitarian' interventions across the globe (see Bensaïd 2008, 99–152). What he did not share, however, was their ideas of how to respond – politically as well as philosophically – to the post-political condition.

It is in this context that Bensaïd begins to use the term 'profane' more frequently, culminating in what may be seen as his politico-philosophical testament: the comprehensive study *Éloge de la politique profane*, published in 2008, two years before his premature death. Bensaïd uses the term not primarily to distance himself from traditional theological modes of thinking (although he does have a few things to say of neoconservative moralism with Catholic undertones as well). What concerns him is rather a tendency on the far left to respond to the current predicament by means of a general anti-statist and anti-nomian rhetoric inspired by a specific set of theological categories (such as grace, miracle and revelation). Although Bensaïd engages with a large number of Marxist interlocutors (including Agamben, Rancière, Žižek, Hardt & Negri, and Laclau & Mouffe) in *Éloge* and elsewhere, the thinker who most typically manifests the features he has in mind is Alain Badiou.[3]

More specifically, Bensaïd points to Badiou's tendency to reduce true political commitment to the moment of revolt, to an act of faith, reminiscent of apocalyptic forms of theology that emphasize the disruptive nature of the redemptive event. The critique is not far-fetched for those who are familiar with Badiou's philosophy of the event. Inspired by a certain reading of St Paul, Badiou famously defines the revolutionary event in terms of fidelity: just as the emancipatory truth of the risen Christ for Paul is determined by those who recognize it and stay faithful to it, so too is the revolutionary event sparked the moment a group of people declare themselves a political subject and swear fidelity to the revolutionary cause

3 As I detail in Svenungsson 2024, Bensaïd entertained a long and friendly intellectual relationship with Badiou, and his critique should be seen against this background. On the relationship between the two thinkers, see also Segré 2016 and Roso 2024, 638–67.

(Badiou 2003). By this logic, the revolutionary event can never be deduced or predicted from existing conditions, nor can it find support in present legal-political norms: 'Detached from its historical conditions, pure diamond of truth, the event … is akin to a miracle. By the same token, a politics without politics is akin to a negative theology' (Bensaïd 2004, 101).

Typical of this apocalyptic logic is also the assumption that the present order must be rejected in its entirety for redemption to be achieved. Thus Badiou consistently defines politics in opposition to the state regardless of its particular shape (authoritarian or democratic) or various dimensions: 'Politics will not be subordinated to power, to the State. It is, it will be, the force in the breast of the assembled and active people driving the State and its laws to extinction' (Badiou 2011, 14). In a similar way, Badiou also ends up in a polarization between truth and opinion, justice and law, event and durability. Truly political moments, on Badiou's account, are rare and belong to the order of exceptional events rather than to complex historical processes or the day-to-day administration of society.

Although Badiou, in Bensaïd's view, is the thinker who most clearly manifests the tendencies that raise his concerns, he saw Badiou's Paulinian 'preoccupation with purity' as symptomatic of a broader tendency to evade the historical and material complexity of political reality in favour of categorical demands for a radical break with the existing order. The problem with this absolutist logic is that it ultimately renders politics impracticable: 'The preoccupation with purity reduces politics to a grand refusal and prevents it from producing lasting effects' (Bensaïd 2004, 101). Typically, the uncompromising desire to have it all also tends to breed resignation, as the perfect revolution will always fail to materialize. Thus, Bensaïd remarks, again with Badiou as his specific target: 'Holy purification is never more than a short step away from voluptuous sin. If, as Badiou was claiming already in 1996, "the era of revolution is over", the only available options are either to withdraw into the haughty solitude of the anchorite or learn to get used to the contemptible state of current affairs' (Bensaïd 2004, 103; see also Bensaïd 2008, 349–50).

In sharp contrast to such defeatist attitudes, Bensaïd passionately defends a notion of politics as endurance and perseverance – a commitment to the struggle against the relentless order of things even when immediate results fail to appear. This is also how we should understand his plea for the profane nature of politics. For Bensaïd, the profane signifies the condition of politics in the modern era. With the wars on religion in seventeenth-century Europe, questions arose about the legitimacy of power in a world without divine absolutes. If the authority of the law no longer comes down from heaven, on what should sovereignty be based? And how to prevent sovereign power from being perceived as unjust or abusive, exciting rebellion among the subjects? These were the questions that early-modern political theorists – from Bodin and Rousseau to Hobbes and Locke – grappled with, and the result of their efforts was the modern political paradigm as we have come to know it: an understanding of politics as an art of contingency, manifested in the ideals of power balance, diplomacy and emerging international law (Bensaïd 2008, 18–33).

Bensaïd authored *Éloge de la politique profane* at a time when this paradigm was rapidly being undermined by liberal globalization as well as by the rights violations mentioned above. Without deploring the weakening of certain aspects of the modern paradigm (notably the central role it ascribed to the nation state), Bensaïd nonetheless looked with concern at the loss of the profane commitment of politics. More precisely, he perceived the post-political condition to be fettered between two illusions: the 'political illusion' that saw free-market

liberal democracy as the end-station of history, and the 'social illusion' that imagined that emancipatory movements could be kept out of 'the impurities of power' (Bensaïd 2008, 9). Whereas the first illusion was mired in a fetishization of the present shape of Western democracy, the second – represented by Badiou and the other far-left thinkers against whom Bensaïd polemicized – was seduced by the temptation of succumbing to a rhetoric of pure negation with theological undertones. Bensaïd defined his own intervention as an effort to navigate the narrow strait between the two illusions. Staying committed to the profane nature of politics is to steer clear of the Scylla and Charybdis of complacency and defeatism. It is to affirm politics as an uncertain adventure, deprived of any transcendent security: 'Instead of pretending to wriggle out of the contradiction between unconditional principles and the conditionality of practical living, politics means taking a stand there and working to surmount it without ever supressing it' (Bensaïd 2011, 42).

If Bensaïd recognized that politics entailed a certain degree of pragmatism and compromise, this should not be interpreted as an abandonment of his revolutionary commitment, nor – as in the case of Badiou – as a resigned concession that 'the era of revolution is over'. However, staying true to the idea of revolution necessitates rethinking the implication of revolutionary engagement in the light of continuous historical experience. Instead of placing all focus on the climactic moment of revolt, Bensaïd suggests, we need 'to clear the steep paths of a revolution of deceleration and slowness, to imagine another temporality' (Bensaïd 2008, 35).[4] A truly radical thinking, on this account, is a thinking that assumes the enduring tensions and conflicts of this world and yet never gives up the commitment to counteract injustices and to restrain violence. Especially in his mature works, Bensaïd tirelessly emphasized that radical commitment entailed 'always beginning again in the middle'.[5] Radicality, he concluded in his political memoirs, was for him not about 'devoting oneself to this or that fetish, taking up a sublime cause, but rather [about] being unreconciled to the world as it is' (Bensaïd 2013, 16).

Bensaïd's understanding of radicality should be seen in the light of a long life of ground-level political work (in France as well as abroad, notably in Latin America).[6] If he sometimes expressed a frustration with the moralizing 'theoretical elitism' of some of his fellow radical colleagues (see e.g. Bensaïd 2004, 10; Bensaïd 2013, 80), it was because he was well acquainted with the compromises and ambiguities of real political life (including the disillusionments that regularly follow when ideas are put to the test of practice). Equally important for understanding the profoundly non-utopian form of Marxism that Bensaïd championed was his Trotskyist legacy. I am here referring not only to his role as the leader of the French section of the Fourth International, but, more significantly, to the way in which his political thinking was shaped by Trotskyism. Let me therefore end this section by saying a few words about Trotskyism before moving on to the question of how Bensaïd's profane political thinking could be framed as a prophetic political theology.

4 Translations from French are my own unless otherwise indicated.

5 Bensaïd picked up the words 'recommencer par le milieu' from Gilles Deleuze (to whose thinking he otherwise had an ambivalent relationship; see Bensaïd 2008, 153–76).

6 On the details of Bensaïd's political engagements – from his role in founding the French Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR) in 1966 to his partaking in the launch of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) shortly before his death, see Bensaïd 2013. See also Rachel Pafe's contribution to this special issue.

To get a sense of Trotskyism as a political-philosophical tradition, it is necessary to understand the extent to which it grew out of failure and defeat: the shock of what Marxism was transformed into in Stalin's Russia as the revolution successively turned into a regime of bureaucratic terror.[7] When the Fourth International was founded in 1938, it was in the wake of a series of defeats for the international workers' movement (not least during the Civil War in Spain) but also against the backdrop of the Moscow Purge Trials that were being played out by this time. Thus, for example, the Fourth International took a clear stance on the necessity of political pluralism, the independence of the trade unions from the Party and the state, and the irreducible heterogeneity of the people beyond the conquest of power. Picking up on Marx's concept of the permanent revolution, emerging Trotskyism also shifted focus away from the glorious revolutionary moment, placing emphasis instead on the patient work of organization and education. Finally, Trotskyists rejected the concept of 'social-fascism', which likened social democracy to fascism and no longer made any clear distinction between parliamentary democracy and fascist dictatorship. Drawing practical conclusions from Spain and elsewhere, they argued instead that all forces of the Left Opposition should keep a united front against fascism, joining, if necessary, Social Democratic parties in their respective countries (see Bensaïd 2009, 19–38; Fourth International 2015 [1938]: 153–68).

It is not difficult to see how all these features resonate in Bensaïd's commitment to the profane nature of politics, including his celebration of the uncertain, pragmatic and unfinished character of any revolutionary engagement. What may seem less apparent is how Bensaïd's Trotskyist political philosophy resonates with theology, let alone with the biblical legacy of prophetism. In the following, I will nonetheless suggest that it does.

Strategic prophecy

When Bensaïd turned against the tendency to reimport theology into the political-philosophical debate, it was, as I have shown, a specific type of theology he had in mind, one built on motifs such as grace, miracles and revelations, rather than, for example, law, deeds and reason. Although Bensaïd rarely designates this type of theology as Schmittian,[8] it nonetheless resonates clearly with the kind of theist theology of miracles that Schmitt revealed as the precursor of his own authoritarian theory of the state. Especially in his critical analysis of Badiou, Bensaïd detects what may be described as a structural similarity to Schmitt's political theology. Inspired by theologemes such as grace and miracle, Badiou, like Schmitt, regards true political moments as belonging to the order of exceptional events rather than to the concrete and lasting organization of societies. Likewise, Badiou shares Schmitt's assumption that a truly political decision is an act of will that frees itself from existing legal-political norms and becomes absolute. Finally,

7 Needless to say, this is not to deny Trotsky's role in the original violence of the October Revolution and its aftermath, nor is it to smooth over the totalitarian nature of his original ideas as testified to in his writings from this time (notably *Terrorism and Communism* from 1921). For this reason, it is important to distinguish not only Trotsky's later ideas from his earlier, but also Trotskyism from the person of Trotsky (with the caveat that there hardly is such a thing as 'Trotskyism', since the movement is notoriously fractured). For a level-headed and nuanced critical overview of Trotsky's personal intellectual trajectory as well as of Trotskyism's evolution, see Bensaïd 2009.

8 An exception is Bensaïd 2011, 21–2, where he links the quasi-theological features in Badiou and Rancière to the revitalization of Schmitt's thought.

for both thinkers, the true subject of political sovereignty appears in this absolute decision (which for Schmitt is the decision on the state of emergency, and for Badiou, the declaration of the revolutionary event).[9]

It is clear that, for Bensaïd, this conception of theology is synonymous with theology as such, which is why he rejects it in favour of his concept of profane politics. However, as Schmitt himself admitted, it is still possible to conceive of other forms of theologies, yielding other conceptions of the political as well as of politics. Thus, as already noted, Schmitt detected deism as the theological precursor of liberalism. The question is whether the political in its modern Western shape has ever been entirely detached from the theological in the sense of constituting a secular break with the biblical past that has so profoundly shaped its concepts of law, justice and redemption over the past millennia. This was the question John Milbank aimed to bring back to the table when he famously stated that 'there are only theologies and anti-theologies in disguise' (Milbank 1990, 3) in his controversial 1990 book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.

Without adopting the antagonistic tone of Milbank, his remark nevertheless reminds us that the biblical legacy – including its manifold manifestations in Jewish and Christian tradition throughout history – contains a rich variety of theological motifs that may generate quite different forms of political structures and strategies. Recognizing this plurality enables us to pose the question of what an alternative political theology may look like, one drawing neither on the theist conception of God as arbitrary will and sovereign power, nor on the deist idea of a powerless God who has since long withdrawn from the world. One may recall, for example, the efforts that were made by an array of German theologians to recuperate the concept of political theology from Schmitt's authoritarian thinking in the aftermath of the Third Reich. Drawing on motifs such as compassion, memory and hope, theologians such as Dorothee Sölle, Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann all elaborated political theologies that instead foregrounded ideals such as solidarity, vulnerability and contrition in relation to the crimes of the recent past. As Moltmann summarized their efforts many years later: in contrast to Schmitt's 'apocalyptic *katechon* which is delaying the future of God', their efforts were rather about *anticipating* the kingdom of God in the sense of a radical commitment to the work of justice in the here and now (Moltmann 2013, 4).[10]

Sölle, Metz and Moltmann were not alone in challenging Schmitt's concept of political theology. Already in the 1940s, Martin Buber developed his concept of 'theopolitics' as a conceptual antithesis to 'political theology'. Although he rarely discusses Schmitt directly, it is clear – as Charles Lesch has shown in a recent study – that 'a concern about the dangers of [Schmitt's] political theology threads through decades of his published work' (Lesch 2018, 2; see also Schmidt 2009, 205–25). More precisely, Buber used biblical exegesis to point towards an alternative concept of the political. Where Schmitt gave prominence to theological motifs that served as analogues to his own agonistic ontology, such as divine omnipotence and interruptive grace, Buber instead

9 On the similarities, and differences, between Schmitt and Badiou, see also Wright 2008.

10 Moltmann's words are quoted from a talk he gave in Heidelberg in 2010, in which he looked back at the emergence and development of the so-called 'New Political Theology' in the 1960s. The volume in which his paper is published also includes a contribution by Metz (2013), who was present at the symposium too, and like Moltmann reflected on the relation of their political-theological efforts in relation to Schmitt's political theology.

foregrounded justice (*mishpat*), righteousness (*tzedakah*) and kindness (*hesed*) as the central watchwords of the Torah (Buber 1949, 96–126).

What characterizes a politics that mirrors these motifs? We get a hint in a 1954 essay titled 'Prophecy, apocalyptic, and the historical hour' (Buber 1957, 192–207). In this text, which is of particular interest for my further argument, Buber discerns within the biblical legacy 'two basic attitudes' that generate two quite different ways of organizing the human world. On the one hand, there is the attitude embodied in the ethos of the biblical prophets; on the other hand, there is the attitude manifested in the apocalyptic literature that emerges during the Hellenistic era. Although both genres shared faith in 'the one Lord of the past, present and future history' and were certain about 'His will to grant salvation to His creation' (194), they differed essentially in their view of *how* redemption would manifest itself. In the older prophetic literature, future redemption is not something already fixed in this present hour. Instead, it is conditional upon the choices made by God's people in the present, presuming the freedom of humans in every moment to turn back to the path of God (*teshuvah*) and create a different future. By contrast, apocalyptic literature presupposes that the course of history has already been laid down as the result of a superhistorical divine decision. In such a view, there is little space left for human freedom to transform the world through responsible agency.

Buber never made any secret of where his own sympathies lay. Far from the view that redemption would come about as the result of an arbitrary intervention of a sovereign deity, he was committed to the prophetic view of the world as a fragile place with no divinely predestined guarantees for peace and justice. At this point, it should be noted that Buber – unlike Sölle, Metz and Moltmann – never laid claim to the concept of political theology to describe this prophetic commitment but instead stuck with his contrasting concept of theopolitics. However, if the term political theology is not reduced to its Schmittian shape but used as a formal concept that could be linked to different theologemes, one may as well describe Buber's theopolitics as a political theology drawing on the motifs and structures of biblical prophecy. It is also in this sense that I want to suggest that Bensaïd's profane politics could be framed as a prophetic political theology.

This suggestion may at first appear far-fetched, not only because of Bensaïd's commitment to the category of the profane but also – as shown by Rachel Pafe in her contribution to this special issue – because Bensaïd, unlike Buber, explicitly inscribed himself in the 'Marrano' tradition of 'non-Jewish Jews', counting figures such as Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Isaac Deutscher among its ranks (see Bensaïd 2013, 273–4).[11] However, at a closer glance, the suggestion is not that far-fetched. On the contrary, a careful reading of Bensaïd's work will reveal that he regularly deploys the term 'prophetic', not just in a nominal way but with explicit reference to the biblical prophets (see e.g. Bensaïd 2009, 50; 2013, 18–19). What is more, he uses the term in a way almost perfectly equivalent to that of Buber – that is, to distinguish his own commitment to the fragile nature of politics from the fatalist certainty of the apocalyptic seer – albeit with the qualifier 'secular' or 'strategic':

> [S]trategic prophecy, like those of the Old Testament, [is] always conditional. […] It harasses the present in the name of threatened tradition. It does not promise a guaranteed future in the form of destiny. It warns in the conditional mood of the probability of a catastrophe that there is

11 On Bensaïd's ambiguous relationship to the Jewish tradition, see also Querido 2023.

> still time to forestall. Things will end up badly, if … But they can (still) be sorted out … The prophet is first of all someone who prevents peaceful sleep. (Bensaïd 2013, 290–1; see also Bensaïd 2008, 160)

Despite his professed aversion to the term theology and the tendencies he associated with it, it is thus clear that Bensaïd saw an affinity between his notion of profane politics and a particular strand of the biblical legacy. Seemingly paradoxically, one may even say that his growing emphasis on the profane nature of politics went hand in hand with his increasing references to 'prophecy' and 'messianism'. Two factors, in particular, shed light on this seeming paradox. The first is his turn – inspired by his fellow Trotskyist friend and intellectual Michael Löwy – to Walter Benjamin in the mid-1980s (see Querido 2023, 352–4). While Bensaïd had always been uneasy with the dogmatic and positivist character of French structuralist Marxism (a 'glacial Marxism, without style or passion', as he phrased it in his memoirs; Bensaïd 2013, 80), his encounter with Benjamin stimulated him to rethink and reinvigorate Marxism in light of a certain strand of Jewish messianism. As Fabio Mascaro Querido comments, 'Bensaïd found in Benjamin an author who would allow him to return to the messianic tradition, starting with an antideterminist effort to renovate Marxism in which the praxis of the subjugated classes appears not as a lever for accelerating history but for its potential bifurcation in a qualitatively different direction' (Querido 2023, 355).

The second factor, as highlighted by Rachel Pafe, is Bensaïd's encounter in the mid-1990s with Jacques Derrida's work, especially his *Spectres of Marx*,[12] which appeared in French in 1993. Although still scarcely discussed,[13] it is clear that Derrida became a vital source of inspiration for Bensaïd during his final years.[14] One may even go so far as to suggest that the impression he took from Derrida is crucial for understanding his unique position within the far-left debates on the post-political condition referred to above. In a way that may come as a surprise to some readers, *Éloge de la politique profane* ends in what could almost be described as a tribute (*éloge*) to Derrida's thinking. Thus, having warded off the 'preoccupation with purity' of his fellow radical thinkers throughout the book, the concluding chapter distinguishes Derrida as the thinker who more than anyone understood the stakes of profane politics:

> Attentive to the relative without losing sight of the absolute, to singularities

12 In his memoirs, Bensaïd ends his most personal chapter (in which he reflects on his relationship to the Jewish legacy) with the following paragraph: 'Before his *Spectres of Marx*, I had read Derrida intermittently, following the inspiration of the moment. I should have noticed much earlier the signs of what we shared without realising it, beyond the exile from Algeria both close and distant. The experience of discordance and going against the grain, the logic of spectrality, of curiosity about the Marrano "in breach of belonging"' (Bensaïd 2013, 284).

13 An indication that this is changing is the full chapter dedicated to Bensaïd's relation to Derrida in Darren Roso's recent introduction to Bensaïd's work, see Roso 2024, 668–79.

14 A couple of sentences from a book dedication Derrida wrote to Bensaïd – quoted in a footnote of *Éloge* – suggest that the appreciation was highly mutual: 'Dear Daniel Bensaïd, this is only a pretext for thanking you from the bottom of my heart […] for what you do, think, write, are, for this amicable proximity that you show me and that I also feel (more than ever with *Résistances*, which I am now reading). We come from very different paths, you and I, and we have been quite far apart from one another, but this only makes what binds us through our intersecting paths even more irreplaceable and, at the end of the day, necessary' (Bensaïd 2008, 352, n. 2).

> without giving up the universal, he settles and works in the permanent tension between the conditionality of law and the unconditionality of justice, between divine justice and mythical justice, between common sense and truth, between necessity and contingency, between event and history. He lingers in contradiction (*Il campe dans la contradiction*), at the point, precisely, where politics takes off, where it differs from immaculate moralism and credulous purity. (Bensaïd 2008, 352)

If Bensaïd found in Derrida a thinker who placed himself at the crossroads of law and justice, history and event, and so on, Derrida was also a thinker who resisted any simple contrasts between religion and secularity, or between faith and knowledge (see Derrida 1998). This is also what made his re-reading of Marx so refreshing. Even more explicitly than Benjamin, Derrida reconnected not only Marxism but also Marx himself to his inherited prophetic and messianic past. Indeed, the very thrust of *Spectres of Marx* was to show how Marx's critical philosophy, despite its relentless suspicion of religion, relied on an emancipatory structure that ultimately drew its force from the biblical prophetic tradition (see Derrida 1994, 156–222). This is also why the contradiction between Bensaïd's emphasis on the profane and his invocations of prophecy and messianism is only apparent. If there is a perceived affinity between a certain radical spirit and the prophetic ethos of the Bible, then this may in fact only testify to the insufficiency of standard distinctions between 'religious' and 'secular'. This is also why it is often more productive to start out with alternative categories – such as, for example, Buber's distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic – that may enable us to see new unexpected patterns across the thresholds of time, history and traditions of thought.

Returning now to where I ended the previous section, it is also in this light that we may see how Bensaïd's Trotskyist commitment resonates with a particular strand of the biblical legacy. Although rarely thematized, it is not difficult to perceive a certain affinity between the notion of the permanent revolution and those strands of prophetic and messianic thinking (throughout Jewish as well as Christian history) that place emphasis on redemption as an ongoing work of justice, calling for a constant attentiveness to what Buber termed 'the radically demanding historical hour' (Buber 1957, 203). On one occasion, Bensaïd even explicitly relates not only Trotskyism but also Trotsky himself to biblical prophecy: 'Like the prophecies of the ancient prophets […], Trotsky's forecasts were conditional rather than divinatory. They did not declare with certainty what would occur, but put forward strategic hypotheses for action' (Bensaïd 2009, 50). The occasion of Bensaïd's reflection is a comment Trotsky made on the ongoing war in an interview shortly before his death in 1940, in which he pointed to the alternative decisions that could still be made at this dark hour of history.

Finding ourselves yet again at what may be described as a 'radically demanding historical hour', I shall conclude this essay by indicating how and why Bensaïd's original political thinking – at the crossroads of biblical prophetism and a critical adaptation of Trotskyism – may provide resources for reimagining what radical commitment may entail today.

Conclusion: radicality in anti-political times

Political theologies may be defined as efforts to respond critically to the challenges of their time. Some historical moments are especially demanding. As reflected in the political theologies of Sölle, Metz and Moltmann, the traumatic aftermath of the Second World War

was one such moment. As reflected in the revitalization of Schmitt's political theology in the early 2000s, the traumatic aftermath of 9/11 was another. The episode was traumatic not only because of the attacks themselves but also because of the rapidness with which fundamental democratic principles were being swept aside in the immediate response to the attacks.

As I have shown, the fascination with Schmitt's work among thinkers on the far left by this time was in many ways prompted by the disappointment over the rights violations and double standards enacted by the liberal world. Although careful to disassociate themselves from the authoritarian agenda which Schmitt's theories originally served, thinkers like Agamben and Žižek nonetheless found resources in his conservative radicalism for challenging the political deadlock of liberal democracy. Moreover, Schmitt also provided tools for challenging what these thinkers perceived as the toothless incrementalism of the established academic left, represented, among others, by Derrida. Thus Agamben accused deconstruction of maintaining 'the law in a spectral life', implying that Derrida's commitment to a 'democracy to come' – to democracy as an unfinished task – only served to tacitly sustain the exploitive structures of this world. By contrast, he declared: 'From the real state of exception in which we live, it is not possible to return to the state of law (*stato di diritto*), for at issue now are the very concepts of "state" and "law"' (Agamben 2005, 87). Žižek, on his side, retorted to Derrida's motto in a more blunt way: 'Democracy is not to come, but to go' (Žižek 2009, 255).

Over the past twenty-five years, political theology as an academic discourse has largely remained within this paradigm, even as the concepts and theories of Schmitt have become bread and butter among philosophers and theologians alike. It is not difficult to understand this lasting attraction. With the financial collapse of 2008 and its ensuing effects in terms of democratic corrosion and parliamentary impotence, Schmitt's perceptive critique of the inherent flaws of liberalism has hardly become less relevant. And yet the challenges of the present moment are of a different and more urgent nature than those of the 2000s and 2010s. I am referring here not only to the escalating climate emergency but also to the escalating rate in which far-right authoritarianism is today undermining the conventions and principles that grew out of the experiences of the genocidal wars of the twentieth century.

It is the nature of these challenges that prompts me to suggest that we move beyond the neo-Schmittian paradigm of political theology. If 'Democracy is not to come, but to go' was an amusing rhetorical twist fifteen years ago, it leaves a bitter aftertaste today as we are watching democracy *de facto* going down across the globe. To be sure, Žižek's comment should be seen in its context, that is, the debates on the post-political condition during the 2000s. What we are experiencing at the present moment, however, is not merely the dissolution of politics (in the sense of corrosion of democracy by technological and economic globalization) but the advancement of aggressive forms of anti-politics (in the sense of outright assaults on democratic institutions), epitomized in the second term of the Trump administration. When I suggested at the outset that predominant discourses of political theology are becoming increasingly obsolete, it was in the light of these developments. My concern, more precisely, is that philosophical discourses on radicalism that place all emphasis on negativity, disruption and disinvestment merely tend to hamper constructive political commitment in a time when such commitment is urgently needed. Even more concerningly, they risk feeding into the anti-establishment agenda of the far right with its overt contempt for the rule of law and the institutions of democracy.

What makes Bensaïd significant in our time – and perhaps explains the resurgent interest in his works at the present moment – is that he invites us to a different way of thinking of radicality and what radical commitment may entail, more focused on strategy and tenacity than on negative resistance. At the heart of what I have chosen to describe as his prophetic political theology lies an emphasis on watchfulness, endurance and perseverance – an 'impatient patience', as he would often phrase it, with equal importance given to both words.[15]

Such a patience is *impatient* in the sense that it locates the moment of justice in the here and now in contrast to the dream of a coming perfect redemption. It echoes Buber's commitment to the 'radically demanding historical hour', calling for an urgent attentiveness to the gravity of each moment. It echoes, also, Derrida's messianic reflections on justice, recognizing that any political decision is by necessity fraught with uncertainty and always runs the risk of being to justice's disadvantage. However, acknowledging the uncertainties, risks and compromises of any truly political commitment must never serve as an alibi for not taking a stand when the moment requires it (Bensaïd 2008, 355; see also Derrida 2002, 257). This speaks particularly well to the present moment. While the generalized anti-statist and anti-nomian rhetoric of the neo-Schmittian left was an understandable response to the post-political disillusionment in the wake of 9/11, the raw power that is currently being exercised by unabashedly autocratic rulers places us at a crossroads where we must all decide where we stand. This was one of the many lessons Bensaïd drew from the Trotskyist notion of the united front: confronted with the threat of fascism, we no longer have the luxury of indulging in an uncompromising position of pure resistance but need to keep a united front with whatever democratic forces there still are (Bensaïd 2009, 32–3).

Yet the 'impatient patience' at the heart of Bensaïd's prophetic political theology is still *patient*, more precisely in the sense that it enjoins us never to give up the work for justice. Drawing on a bifurcation of the concept of the permanent revolution and Benjamin's notion of the redemptive messianic event as incumbent in every second, Bensaïd redefined the very meaning of revolutionary temporality. Thereby he also sought to move beyond the dichotomy of incrementalism versus radical disruption. As a radical, Bensaïd had little patience with reformist adaptation. However, he also saw the limitations of categorical demands for a total overthrow of the existing order, which tend to amount to resignation and passivity. Instead, he insisted, true radicality means learning 'the necessary revolutionary slowness, the courage of the everyday and the will of each day, which are again a restrained and dominated impatience' (Bensaïd 2013, 18).

Translated into concrete political terms, such slow revolutionary practice would mean shifting focus away from 'the glorious revolutionary moment' to a persisting struggle for partial or – in Trotskyist terms – transitional goals. This, too, speaks well to our present time, especially since some of the most pressing urgencies of our time – the mounting challenge of authoritarianism as well as the concomitant

15 Inspiringly enough, one may detect several other recent efforts to challenge Schmitt's conception of political theology by drawing on alternative theological sources. I would like, in particular, to bring attention to the recent work of Aaron J. Goldman (2024). Through a careful re-reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Goldman shows how a political theology drawing on the motif of incarnation may inspire a politics of responsible ethical agency that rejects Schmitt's agonistic ontology. Another thought-provoking effort to rethink responsible decision-making in contrast to Schmitt's decisionism is offered by Valentin Jeutner (2024).

disregard for the climate emergency – are of a nature that demands action before it is too late. Indeed, as suggested recently by the Greenpeace research specialist Charlie Cray: to confront the 'anti-environment crusade' of the second Trump administration, disruptive activism and mass rallies will not suffice. Instead the time has come to explore 'more boring' strategies, 'such as filing legal challenges to environmental rollbacks and working to advance local policies and climate lawsuits' (quoted in *The Guardian*, 20 Jan. 2025).

More boring, less spectacular, and less fancy, to be sure, but not necessarily less radical, if the goal is to actually effect change. If this is the kind of radicality called for at this demanding historical hour, Daniel Bensaïd provides a rich source of inspiration, both in his writings and in his person. Upon Bensaïd's passing, the British writer and activist Tariq Ali beautifully summarized his life and work by recounting a personal memory which may serve as an inspirational conclusion of this essay: 'Last time I met Daniel, a few years ago in his favourite café in the Latin Quarter, he was in full flow. The disease had not sapped his will to live or think. Politics was his life-blood. We talked about the social unrest in France and whether it would be enough to brings about serious change. He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps not in our lifetimes, but we carry on fighting. What else is there to do?"' (Ali 2013, XII).[16] ■

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16 The passage was originally published as part of an obituary in *The Guardian* and later republished in the preface to the English edition of Bensaïd's memoirs.

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