Catastrophe and Human Order: From Political Theology to Political Physiology

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“Disease is shock and danger for existence.”
Kurt Goldstein, *The Organism* (1934)

If catastrophe is in its essence an unpredictable, devastating interruption of the normal rhythms of human community, it is, strictly speaking, impossible to speak of “permanent catastrophe.” But the phrase alerts us to a new understanding of catastrophe, one that emphasizes not just the “act of God” (whether literal or figural) but also the myriad ways that normal human order itself can contribute to the violence and devastation.¹ To say that catastrophe is permanent is, in a way, to say that the threat to human community comes not just from outside, but sometimes from within its normal modes of functioning. Catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina exposed the failures and shortcomings of many institutions, underlying economic conditions, large-scale urban organizations, and structures of political authority and responsibility. Even the human catastrophe of the Holocaust, however inexplicable at its core perhaps, laid bare sinister logics that can be seen operating in all modern industrial societies. Failing to see the deep relations between catastrophe and human order can only perpetuate the regular appearance of the unpredictable. As Adi Ophir has written, “by focusing on catastrophes and their victims, contemporary humanitarianism dissociates the catastrophic event and the camp where its survivors live from a series of interrelated economic, political, and cultural processes that have made the catastrophe possible.”² Indeed, it is possible to argue that the spectacular forms of catastrophe can occlude the permanent catastrophic tendencies of human activity. Naomi Klein, for example, has shown how “disaster capitalism” of our contemporary era thrives in the midst of catastrophe, feeding off these strange new hybrid political forms, the marriage of neo-liberal economic principles or institutions and hyper-

militarized state apparatuses. And Slavoj Zizek points out that the suddenness and intensity of an event like 9/11 can often serve to reinforce the very structural conditions that helped to prepare it – terrorist catastrophes in the West, he suggests, can blind us to the “dreary permanent catastrophe” of, say, the Palestinians under occupation.

It was Walter Benjamin who first theorized this idea of permanent catastrophe, the idea that history was not so much an ongoing progressive movement but a series of catastrophic events, piling up on each other with no logic other than violence itself. The angel of history “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” The notion was at once theological and political. History was not divinely ordered, Benjamin said, and nor did it have even a secularized eschatological structure. The “messianic” moment that interrupted historical continuity was engendered by catastrophe itself because the sudden turn alone could expose the underlying fragility and impermanence of human community. That impermanence was a structural flaw, for Benjamin, because the political order of any community functioned as the permanent protector of order. Political forms were therefore founded on a primordial violence, a “mythic” violence that legitimated the ongoing, permanent violence that was necessary to preserve law and the political system. Only what Benjamin called “divine” violence – meaningless, foreign, totally devastating, truly catastrophic – was capable of reminding us that our human orders were founded on an oppressive logic of negation. And so he wants “to bring about a real state of emergency” to counter the current condition where the exception has become the rule, where states of emergency are paradoxically the permanent form of political rule.

Since 9/11, the apocalyptic tone of Benjamin’s writings in the 30s and 40s has returned. And given the religious dimension of the new “clash of civilizations” that the wars in the Middle East have spawned, it is hardly surprising that interest in religion and in the theological structures of modernity has only surged since 2001. The complex intersection of political and theological concepts – what Carl Schmitt called political theology – now shapes much of the contemporary theoretical debate on the nature of

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human political authority and its propensity for catastrophic violence (of both the spectacular and dreary kind). If the state as a theoretical problem had all but disappeared in political theory debates at the end of the 20th century, it has now reemerged as a significant question. Is it the site of dangerous emergency tendencies or the protector of rights? Is it the bastion of human rationality against the excesses of religious radicalism, or does its very secular foundation support a globalized violence that rivals the most brutal theological conflicts? Lurking behind these questions is the key issue raised by political theology: when Schmitt declared that all political concepts are secularized theological concepts (in their history and in their essential form) he challenged us to think metaphysically about the structures of political authority and legitimation.  

The complexities (and confusions) surrounding politics, religion, and theology in the present moment are many. I want to focus on one crucially important aspect of political theology that is often glossed over, namely the claim that political concepts are secularized theological notions. Schmitt argued, the methodological third chapter of Political Theology, that the way human beings understand political authority must be substantially consistent with contemporary theological thinking, which was another way of saying that there is always a dominant metaphysical belief that was the foundation that structured the analogies between the different conceptual spheres. The challenge of this kind of analysis today is twofold: first, one must identify what the dominant metaphysical beliefs are, and only then go on to trace the political analogies in order to draw out potential problems and possibilities.

My suggestion is that the political-theological perspective what Benjamin thought was the “permanent catastrophe” of modernity fails to take into account that we have already come to the end of theology, metaphysically speaking that is, and that new metaphysical categories have to be understood as dominant in contemporary life. While the end of theology (or even the “end” of metaphysics) can itself be the object of a certain apocalyptic framing of modern secularism, I want to argue that “political theology” as a category of analysis was largely exhausted in Schmitt’s own epoch, and Schmitt himself clearly recognized this. If he went on to elaborated a political and legal philosophy

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6 Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, tr. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006).
grounded in the retreat of theology, a historical perspective reveals that early in the 20th century a new metaphysical orientation was developing in the biological sciences that was remarkably congruent with pressing contemporary issues concerning the nature of political authority and especially the problem of maintaining and preserving human order in times of struggle, crisis, and even catastrophe. The interwar period marks a transition, I will argue, from political theology to what we can call political physiology. A focus on how organisms were understood to be material systems capable of maintaining unity despite radical deformations and injury reveals a new way of understanding central categories of the political, such as sovereignty, legal norms, and so on.

I will begin with the “end” of political theology in the work of Carl Schmitt himself by focusing on his idea of the kathechon, developed during and after the Second World War. Appearing in Saint Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians, this figure “restrains” the anomie of the Anti-Christ, delaying the moment when Christ will appear and sweep away the chaos and violence of lawlessness by his own presence. The katechon is therefore not a positive incarnation of divine order, but instead a negative (and resolutely secular) instrument of order. We can then track the evolution of political theology in our own era through the figure of the katechon, as it appears prominently in the current work of two emblematic theorists of catastrophe, the Italian philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. In both cases, the reflection on the katechon helps to frame the relationship between sovereignty, so central to Schmitt’s thinking about political theology, and an alternative form of political control that Foucault called biopower. On the one side Agamben privileges the concept of sovereignty and uses it to explain the emergence of the biopolitical regularization of human life, and predicts that the continuation of a “permanent state of exception” can only lead to a coming “biopolitical catastrophe.” On the other, Esposito argues that sovereignty and the legal technologies of power are just one of many tactics deployed by what he calls “immunitary” regimes, regimes that are designed to protect individuals from the ever-present threat of catastrophic collective violence. Like Agamben, Esposito warns that this threat reappears in the form of the biopolitical and sovereign powers that are meant to preserve life. In both cases, the example of the “thanatopolitics” of the Nazi regime
grounds their analysis of contemporary developments. Both look to the figure of the katechon to untangle the relationship between violence and the logic of restraint.

However, if we can agree that political theology had already lost its efficacy as a viable category and was ceding it position to what I am calling political physiology, then the intersection of sovereignty and biopolitical forms of governmentality – along with the permanent threat of catastrophe this intersection has supposedly engendered – can be rethought. As I will show, once we take seriously the structural analogies between physiological concepts and political concepts in the crisis ridden 20th century, the possibility that catastrophe itself might be integrated into the sphere of politics, without permanently contaminating the promise of human security and stability, can at least be entertained. In its physiological instantiation, catastrophe can be the catalyst for reorganization and not self-destruction, and therefore the question of the political would turn to identifying the analogues of organismic behavior. Finally, one important note here at the outset: remember that Foucauldian bio-politics is not in itself a political physiology – just as political religion or theocracy is not really political theology in the Schmittian sense of the term.

**The Katechon at the End of History**

In 1997, Mark Lilla delivered what was intended to be a withering critique of Carl Schmitt’s life work in the *New York Review of Books*, perhaps to counter what was becoming a veritable Schmitt Renaissance, globally, but especially in the English-speaking world. His tactic was to expose the irrationality of Schmitt’s intellectual orientation. Citing Heinrich Meier’s *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts* [*The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*], Lilla noted how important it was to hear, as Meier did, the “deep religious chords” that lurked in all of Schmitt’s text “beneath the surface of his seductive prose.” Lilla went on to remind his readers that Schmitt, who could be celebrated on the right and left for his hard realism and his existential approach to political decisions, in fact believed that political enemies were really part of “a divine order, and that war has the character of a divine judgment.” Not only that, he romanticized the Catholic Church, and went so
far as to describe himself after the Second World War as a *katechon* – the restrainer who holds off the Anti-Christ until the Second Coming. Schmitt’s lesser-known (at the time) work on the new “nomos” of the earth, which was published in 1950, was dismissively characterized by Lilla as “the messianic longings of an aging apocalyptic thinker.”

Of course, only a few years later, in the wake of 9/11, Schmitt’s work over a long career became only more relevant. First, after years of debate about “deliberative democracy,” the public sphere, and the politics of performative identity, political theorists were now scrambling to make sense of the return of such issues as emergency powers, the sovereign exception, and the political significance of “just war.” Second, translations of Schmitt’s postwar works on international law and the significance of asymmetric warfare (*Nomos of the Earth* and its short follow up *Theory of the Partisan*) found new audiences, alongside parallel efforts (for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s 2000 book *Empire*) to conceptualize new global structures of power and violence. Third, despite Lilla’s rather shrill warning, Schmitt’s deep commitment to political theology only added to the attraction and interest in his work, precisely because the post 9/11 world was saturated with religious and civilizational conflict. An earlier (prophetic?) “messianic turn” in critical theory and political philosophy took on new significance as well in this period, with the ideas of figures such as Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Jean-Luc Nancy sparking debates on the future of democracy and cosmopolitanism in the era of “homeland security.”

It is precisely in this new intellectual context that a central question concerning Schmitt’s ideas and method has become more pressing. Was his theorization of the political as an autonomous category always determined (or better, contaminated) by his theological commitments, as Meier and others have argued? Or was Schmitt’s political existentialism just a facet of his own political theology, that is, only a mark of analogy between his own theological thinking and his political concepts? Many causal readers of Schmitt are struck by the various theological analogies he invokes in his infamous definition of sovereignty in his short 1922 book *Political Theology*: the juridical exception, he noted, is like the “miracle” in theology, the sovereign decision is like the intervention of the theistic god, and so on. But one of Schmitt’s central concerns in that

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text was the question of what kind of theology could possibly work as an appropriate analogue for the modern parliamentary state, wracked as it was with dissension and conflict, and the disappearance of any genuine notion of representation of a unified “people.” The problem, Schmitt saw, was that no serious intellectual (or even serious theologian) really believed theistic, deistic, or pantheistic interpretations of divine presence, theologies that were successively dominant in the previous three centuries, were at all plausible. This rendered the question of any political presence problematic.

Schmitt’s depiction of the sovereign in Political Theology as a purely juridical figure, one whose suspension of the law in the exception was legitimated only by his successful protection of the possibility of a future legal order, was an evacuation of sphere of the political of any positive forms of identity. The sovereign was never meant to “incarnate” or even represent any metaphysical political subject – whether that was understood to be a nation of citizens, an ethnic identity, or an economic class. The metaphysics of the political was completely displaced. For Schmitt, the challenge of the exception pointed to the fact that the sovereign was to refound and maintain only the unity of a community in crisis, but this unity was not invested with the kind of sacred aura that earlier sovereigns (including democratic ones) usually possessed. In a way, Schmitt’s notion of sovereignty was fundamentally a-theological, as his concluding quotation of Kierkegaard in the first chapter would suggest: the exception is no longer an opportunity for “divine” presence, Schmitt implies, but only a reminder that any faith in permanent regularity and normality was always misplaced (theologically and politically).

Schmitt’s concept of the political as the foundational decision on the friend and enemy was similarly structured – the essence of the political and its foundational legitimation was not the incarnation of some prior identity but only the “neutral” effort to maintain the existence of any historically constituted community. The political “does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives religious, national ..., ethnic, or of another kind...” The political decision, in other words, was governed by the strict logic of preservation and should never be contaminated by the principles inherent in the community’s own beliefs.

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Indeed, Schmitt often insisted in the interwar period even that the political was an essentially pluralist category. Here we might glimpse Schmitt’s own political theology: the aim of the state is to preserve a “fragment” of order on earth, alongside other fragments.\(^9\) The abstraction of order pointed to the ongoing aspiration to escape conflict and chaos on earth; in this form any political order was an echo of some otherworldly divine order; but it was never the instantiation of this order.

So Schmitt’s own political theology, in Weimar and under the Nazi regime, sought to rigorously connect the stark politics of order less with theological musing that with the concrete, historical effort of the Catholic Church to build a legal and political institution that was the earthly substitute of divine presence. In both the political and theological spheres, Schmitt was suggesting, the constitution of human order was predicated on the absence of any given order; or, to be more precise, on the idea of the loss of any positive identity that could serve to legitimate a political order.\(^10\)

Yet Schmitt began to think quite differently about the relationship between theology and the political during and after the Second World War. He now saw that the question of the political had migrated from the individual nation-state to the configuration of states in the “large spaces” of the world defined by colonial extensions of European power. His point was that the emergence of a European notion of international law after the wars of religion helped to bracket or neutralize the potentially catastrophic episodes of violence, by displacing the military “tests” of power to the free zones beyond Europe, in the outer regions of the globe. Schmitt was offering a new political theology appropriate to the Age of Empire. The figure of the katechon was invoked to show that human political and legal order did not represent positively some value or identity, but instead served to prevent the worst excesses of conflict and chaos.\(^11\) In Paul’s description, the Katechon struggled with the “lawless one,” the force of chaos (usually taken to be the anti-Christ) in order to delay the Second Coming of Christ. If at first Schmitt was critical of this idea (precisely because of this notion of a delay of the return), he quickly adopted

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it as the structural parallel of his new international, planetary view of political order.\textsuperscript{12} The first Katechon was the Roman Empire (this was Tertullian’s interpretation of Paul), a structure that maintained order across disparate peoples and communities, thereby preventing the lawlessness of war and civil war. Schmitt would suggest that the Holy Roman Empire and then the \textit{jus publicum europaeum} of the modern age took on this role. With this turn political theology began to blur and perhaps even erase the distinction between the political and the theological. Once Christ and the divine presence were thoroughly evacuated from human historical time, political action was secularized. Revelation would not occur in history. A strange inversion takes place: the \textit{theological} structure of the political is itself a thoroughly \textit{secularized} notion of history.

Benjamin had already pointed this out in his late “Political-theological fragment”: the Messiah only redeems history by consummating it, by completing it. “For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the \textit{telos} of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not a goal, but an end.”\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, in Karl Barth’s “crisis theology” the possibility of divine presence in human institutions (even the Church) is resolutely denied. Writing in the aftermath of the devastating and futile violence of the Great War, Barth pronounced the utter impermanence of all earthly institutions. One could return to God only by renouncing historical time altogether: “the possibility of religion must be dissolved catastrophically.”\textsuperscript{14} A turn to the divine can take place only when “dissolution and catastrophe are encountered,” because that shows how “useless and ineffective” purely human action is. God is “\textit{beyond the catastrophe}.”\textsuperscript{15}

Once Schmitt radically separated the first and second coming, human history became radically secularized even within the Christian eschatological condition. He noted that the Christian era was not a “long march,” but instead “a single long period of waiting, a long interim between the two simultaneities...”\textsuperscript{16} The katechon figure was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item[15] Ibid., 290; my emphasis.
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wholly negative, in that the delay of the end was effected through human institutions with no inspired foundation. The threat of catastrophic disorder was therefore a permanent threat. And with the experience and memory of catastrophe came the legitimacy of human order – not any particular order, that is, but the general goal of secure order in any substantial form. Hence Schmitt’s celebration of the jurist as the one who finds order and elaborates it from within any institution. The main point was this: the history of the 20th century was now opening up into an unknown future. With the emergence of a new “large space” configuration in the Cold War, new opportunities for devastating conflict were prepared – indeed, the total destruction of humanity was at stake in this age of nuclear weaponry, making the appearance of a “restrainer” all the more urgent. In this context, whether the katechon was understood to be purely theological, or as a structural concept with purely secular implications, there was no real difference, since human history was in both cases still abandoned to itself.

Schmitt’s postwar work therefore pushed political theology to the very limit. Ultimately, the katechon creates and preserves order only to resist the permanent threat of the evil that is disorder, chaos, which can occurs whenever humanity is turned loose with no restrictions. In the secular space of politics, this katechontic role was legitimated only existentially, that is, by the anthropological claim that man is both unpredictable (dangerous) and desiring of security and community (a social animal). This a-theological perspective of course maintains the trace of its theological framework in that it resolutely excludes morality and redemption from the political sphere. But with this move, we are back to Schmitt’s concept of the political as a sphere that is independent of all other concerns. The political is a purely existential concept even as it must derive its energy parasitically from particular forms of human community.

The conclusion we can draw from Schmitt’s prolonged engagement with political theology and existential politics? That the theology appropriate to our times is a Christian eschatological concept that reminds us that human order is thoroughly historical, and therefore always temporary. The essence of human history is its discontinuity. All secular philosophies of history (progressive or not) were in fact only weak theologies and hence dangerous because they moralized politics. No doubt Schmitt would approve Benjamin’s evacuation of the divine from history. But he would not have accepted Benjamin’s
conclusion: “The concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things ‘just go on’ is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is.” So Benjamin would look to the “fissures” in the “ongoing catastrophe” for some form of redemption, and he advocated actively interrupting human continuities to remind us of this. Schmitt would resolutely condemn this blurring of revolution and “divine violence.” He believed profoundly that to locate and support the foundations of order in legal institutions and political practices was the only bulwark against the catastrophic condition of lawlessness.

A Biopolitical Katechon for the Modern Era

In his commentary on Romans, The Time that Remains (2000), Giorgio Agamben took up Schmitt’s postwar concept of the katechon, but reinterpreted as fundamentally conditioned by Schmitt’s early, famous definition of the sovereign, in Political Theology, as “he who decides on the exception.” Agamben’s own theoretical work on the nature of the political, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995), was prompted by what he calls the “bloody mystification of a new planetary order.” In this book he argued, as Schmitt did in Nomos of the Earth, that with the current “dissolution” of the great state structures we are now confronted more clearly with the very threshold of the political. For Agamben, the essence of the political was the “sovereign ban,” when bare life, zoe, was “excluded” in the foundation of political order. According to Agamben, the primordial state of nature is what sovereign authority protects us from by excluding it from the political-legal order. However, that form of bare life is always included in the political sphere because the sovereign (and here Agamben follows Schmitt closely) is defined not in terms of a positive order or rule but in terms of the exception, when “real life” breaks through normality. The sovereign is always poised on the edge of law and nature, since the law produces from its own normativity the exceptions that the sovereign must decide.

17 Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” §35.
Agamben wants to emphasize that sovereignty *produces* bare life by excising it from the political, but it thereby including it as that which may be killed – this is the origin of the traditional sovereign right to decide life and death, and also the origin of what Foucault called the “biopolitical body.” Agamben will argue here that history has revealed a gradual, but inexorable move toward the “permanent state of exception” where bodies are thrown into an ambiguous and perilous state, subject to the arbitrary decisions of sovereigns freed from the constraints of law, but also subject to all the technologies the state has produced to control life itself – this form of biopower emerges, for Agamben, as a corollary of sovereignty and not, as Foucault suggested, as its rival. Agamben claims that biopolitics is the logical consequence of a sovereign state of exception in which inside and outside are blurred, where bios and zoe are no longer distinguishable. The “killable” form of bare life, *homo sacer*, appears inside the law, and the sovereign, using its emergency authority to protect the law, may now put to death individual people or an entire people in the service of protecting “life.”

In his interpretation of Saint Paul’s Second letter to the Thessalonians, Agamben emphasizes this crucial claim of sovereignty – that it must protect life in dangerous conditions. If the katechon is the one who arrests the coming of the “lawless one” who will herald the return of Christ, then, Agamben claims, “every theory of the State, including Hobbes’s – which thinks of itself as a power destined to block or delay catastrophe – can be taken as a secularization of this interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2.” For Agamben, however, it is crucial to pause here and note the fundamental ambiguity of the katechon. He suggests that by delaying the appearance of total *anomie*, this figure delays the “unveiling” of the essential mystery of Messianic time. Inspired by Benjamin, Agamben claims that the veiling of the foundational “lawlessness” is what occludes the essential “inoperativity” of all human law. By positioning the katechon in this negative light, Agamben attempts to cast the entire history of political sovereignty as covering up of the radical, originary lawlessness that comes before all human law and therefore threatening its claim. As Agamben will repeat, the foundation of the political is the exception and not the norm because, as Schmitt already pointed out, there is no norm

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that will apply to chaos. Agamben’s conclusion is that sovereignty is founded with the claim that this primordial chaos is only a state of exception that will be “returned” to a normal condition of security. But that normative condition – the rule of law, the constitutional order – has no positive foundation. This is why Agamben makes what might seem to be a rather dubious claim: that all state apparatuses are driven to create conditions of exception, because only with the reminder of potential chaos can the core justification for their power to “preserve” human order be activated.

This explains why Agamben turned to the liminal, exceptional space of the “camp,” those places that are both inside and outside of the law – such as concentration camps, death camps, refugee camps, and the like – and where individual bodies become the object of arbitrary control because they are not governed by norms, only the essentially non-normative logic of emergency. The camp is therefore the “paradigm” of sovereignty, Agamben claims, because it is the production of this indistinct zone that blurs public political life and private forms of living that reveals the way in which all sovereign power devolves into a biopolitical nightmare. The goal, Agamben suggests, is to extricate bare life from this condition, not by returning it to “nature” (which is really just a fiction of sovereign power) but by constituting an (admittedly vague) “new form of life.” The risk of not recognizing the how sovereignty and biopolitics work together as logics of exception, will be, he notes in his last sentence, “an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe” – a rather serious claim given that the Holocaust has already served as one of his privileged examples in this book.

After 9/11, Agamben reiterated these arguments on sovereignty, arguments that found traction in the congenial setting of Bush-era emergency power. Agamben now boldly proclaimed the very end of law in a permanent (and global) “state of exception,” noting how the new forces of “security” in states like the US were just new appearances of biopolitical control and the potential sites of new violence and exclusion. In 2002 he warned:

Nothing is therefore more important than a revision of the concept of security as the basic principle of state politics. European and American politicians finally have to consider the catastrophic consequences of uncritical use of this figure of thought. ... Maybe the time has come to work towards the prevention of disorder

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and catastrophe, and not merely towards their control. Today, there are plans for all kinds of emergencies (ecological, medical, military), but there is no politics to prevent them. On the contrary, we can say that politics secretly works towards the production of emergencies.\(^{21}\)

That same year, Roberto Esposito published his volume *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, which took up related themes – the imbrication of theology, sovereignty, and biopolitics. Esposito also zeroed in on Saint Paul and the idea of the katechon. His starting point was the ambiguous place of religion in the human world. Citing the seminal work of René Girard on sacrifice, Esposito explained how the foundational violence of sacrifice is translated into law. By making the subject of “revenge” abstract, the essential violence of community formation is contained – the revenge fury “folds up into itself and is exhausted.”\(^{22}\) Girard’s theory was that in times of “overwhelming catastrophe” scapegoats are produced. But in ritualizing revenge, the community in essence “immunizes” itself from future outbreaks.\(^{23}\) Esposito was interested in how the immunitary logic operates in modern political societies. As Girard had noted, in the historical “evolution from ritual to secular institutions men gradually draw away from violence and eventually lose sight of it.”\(^{24}\) (We might think here of Foucault’s famous argument in *Discipline and Punish* that the spectacular violence of the early modern sovereign gives way to the more systematic disciplinary tactics of modern states.) Still, as Girard noted, the violence of the foundation never goes away – “this is why violence can always stage a stunning, catastrophic comeback.”\(^{25}\)

In the spirit of Foucault, Esposito highlights in his work how the initial immunitary logic of the community, one that is necessary to protect individuals from the potential threat of the dangerous “other,” inevitably produces new strategies and institutions of control – including the ultimate instrument of authority and coercion, the modern state formation. Indeed, it is in the modern state, stripped of all other modes of legitimation, that reveals most clearly the link between self-preservation and immunity –

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 307.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
that in order to preserve oneself one must submit to sovereign power, which in turn must preserve itself and its subjects by containing the lawlessness inherent in any human community: “it wasn’t modernity that raised the question of the self-preservation of life, but that self-preservation raises itself in modernity’s being, which is to say it invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus that is capable of coping with it.”

Esposito’s philosophical history is the exact inverse of Agamben’s. Instead of an originary sovereign “exclusion/inclusion” that sets in motion the production of the biopolitical sphere of control, Esposito begins with the “immune paradigm” where individuals must be protected from the community they belong to; this is what it means to have law, to have rights. Yet immunity must assume the very thing it must negate, and therefore there is a continual effort on the part of the “immunizing force” of sovereignty to control the body of the community – which of course includes the very bodies being protected. Modernity is constituted by the “forms adopted by the immunitary logic in order to safeguard life from the risks that derive from its own collective configuration and conflagration.” So both sovereignty and biopolitical technologies emerge from the same logic of immunity. The question is: how do we “immunize” ourselves from the very powers generated by the original, foundational act of immunization?

For Esposito, the biblical figure of the katechon is emblematic of this challenging condition. The restrainer, as we saw with Schmitt, keeps at bay the lawlessness of chaos, yet as Esposito sees it, the katechon must also preserve lawlessness in some form, because without it, the final victory will never come: “the katechon antinomically assigns a nomos to anomie, thus restraining its catastrophic unfolding.” It protects the Christian body in two ways – it contains the evil threat, but just as important, this same figure “nurtures and is nurtured by iniquity, just as the body is nurtured by the antidote necessary to its survival.” For Esposito, the question of the katechon for our own age is tied to the prevalence of state sovereign power, which is still the guarantor of order, law, and rights in political communities. And that power is still inflected by what he calls, with Schmitt, “political theology.” However, Esposito is less interested in the changing

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27 Ibid.
metaphysical aspects of power than in what he takes to be the fundamental relationship between religious figures of the infinite, and the finitude of mortal human beings.

Political theology “accomplishes and perfects the ancient function of the katechon” by incorporating within the political community the paradoxical logic of inclusion and exclusion. Citing Ernst Kantorowicz’s seminal work on the king’s two bodies (which was subtitled “a study in medieval political theology”), Esposito points out that the eternal, mystical body of the monarchy is what undergirds the concrete, but temporary and finite powers of any specific monarch. Esposito is interested in how even in modern democratic states, the legitimation of power is still predicated on this logic of infinite/finite. Any political community is defined by a transcendent identity that exceeds those subjected to power, but at the same time, that transcendent force must be embodied by these same subjects. So, as Esposito writes: “nothing in modern politics … is understandable without reference to the political theology model…. The continuity of the political body, which is what gives security to the individual “immunized” from the threat of collective violence, is an essential theological dimension of any state power, and it will never disappear. The sovereign power takes the position of the katechon: not in the Schmittian sense of restraining chaos to protect life, and not, as with Agamben’s katechon, in order to cloak the fundamental “groundlessness” of all law, but instead in order to restrain the threat of both lawlessness and law by creating a condition of normativity – a concrete order, we might say, but not one with pretensions to universality or eternity.

Here Esposito explicitly follows Foucault’s sense that the contemporary era is defined as much by law as by norms. Unlike the law, the norm is not a transcendent category. The norm is only implicit in the activity that maintains it. Turning to George Canguilhem’s theorization of the normal and the pathological, Esposito states that the pathological always precedes the norm that is established in its wake. How can that be? He writes that it is only in a state of imperfection, in a condition of “dis-ease,” that the will to live, the survival instinct, ever comes to the fore in a body. In facing that perilous challenge, the organism must establish a new form of being that can adapt to the new conditions of life. Citing here the ideas of the neuropathologist Kurt Goldstein (who had

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29 Ibid., 71.
an enormous influence on Canguilhem), Esposito asserts that the “healthy organism is measured by its capacity and willingness to experience the unexpected, with all the risks this entails, including the extreme risk of a catastrophic reaction.”

With these remarks, Esposito seems to look beyond the political theological model of sovereign authority, toward something along the lines of what I would call political physiology. Of course, Esposito’s emphasis on the core category of immunity already suggests this, however it also the case that immunity was first a political concept, and not a physiological one. (That turn only happened in the late 19th century, with Elie Metchnikoff’s highly motivated adoption of this term for his discovery biological self-defense.) But Esposito’s provocative rethinking of the relationship between organismic and machine models of the “body politic” in Immunitas opens up some interesting new approaches to the political that sidestep the problematic permanence of the political-theological form. This would counter the rather extreme claims of Agamben, and others, that the fading of theological structures of authority has only intensified the production of violence in a permanent state of exception – because the state must assert its katechontic powers – we might want to ask if there is an alternative to political theology.

This question was already posed by Schmitt, who raised the problem of political theology exactly as all models of divine presence were becoming problematic.

At this point, I want to follow a suggestive clue in Esposito’s work on the nature of norms. For Canguilhem and Goldstein, working within the sphere of physiology, were thinking carefully about the relationship between unity, order, and norms within the organism, and privileging concepts such as crisis, risk, and illness. It is clearly no accident that these thinkers were writing in the same period as Schmitt, who was concerned with parallel notions in the sphere of political and law – though this is something Esposito fails to even mention. My suggestion here is that we can locate in this epoch an important intellectual shift taking place, one that has been masked by the continuing apocalyptic discourse that marks the endgame of political theology. A starting

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30 Ibid., 143.
31 On the complexities of the discourse surrounding the body’s defense system, see Ed Cohen, A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body (Durham, South Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009). Other invocations of immunity and “auto-immunity,” most notably in Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of 9/11 in Rogues and elsewhere, are self-consciously metaphorical – that is, they are more conceptual heuristics than serious efforts to map physiological notions onto political ones.
point for a proposed political physiology has already been indicated by Esposito—we can begin by investigating what Kurt Goldstein called the _catastrophic reaction_. The task of political physiology will be to go beyond mere metaphors and to articulate the structural analogies between concepts of the organism and concepts of the political community, but the restricted aim here will be to generate some new insights into the nature of “permanent catastrophe.”

_Catastrophe and Crisis: Political Physiology in the Age of World War_

When Hans Driesch began to interfere with various animal embryos in the late 19th century, he was only intending to demonstrate the principles of mechanism in biology. What he found, however, was that the embryonic organism was often able to resist extensive manipulation and even partial destruction: an embryo divided into two would become two whole organisms, for example, and damaged ones would regain their intended form despite the defects. If Driesch explained these surprising phenomena with recourse to a new form of vitalism (by postulating the existence of “entelechies” that guided development from beyond matter), what emerged in the wake of these investigations was an approach to biological form that was neither strictly mechanist nor wholly vitalist. Rather, a new question of life itself emerged from the research inquiry in the nature of organismic unity—how was it generated in the course of fetal development, and how it was protected and maintained in the challenging course of existence? Central to these debates was the role of shock, violence, and pathology. For the genuine question of unity was raised only when organisms could refound their own identity when responding to the extreme challenges wrought by myriad forces of disorganization.

In physiology work, a fundamental problem was “homeostasis,” and this would turn out to be crucial. How did the organism maintain its various steady states (blood pressure, temperature, etc., the “milieu intérieure” as Claude Bernard termed it) in a constantly changing environment? The dynamic quality of the physiological system had to be emphasized. For Walter Cannon, the American physiologist who coined the word homeostasis, the body had several internal institutions of control. His particular interest
was seeing how the body could rise to sudden and unexpected challenges to its survival. In a book on the emotion system, he examined, for example, “the elemental experiences of pain and fear and rage that come suddenly in critical emergencies.” He went on to detail just how these “emergency functions of the sympathico-adrenal system” preserved life in dangerous circumstances. The body effectively entered a new form of being, with a new set of physiological norms, in order to prepare itself for battle or for rapid flight. As he wrote: “When the body goes onto what we have called a war footing, the physiological changes that suddenly occur are all adapted to the putting forth of supreme muscular and nervous efforts.”

Cannon followed up these investigations with experiments on “traumatic shock,” based on his medical work in the First World War, as well as animal studies on blood loss and the like. His main finding: “every complex organization must have more or less effective self-righting adjustments in order to prevent a check on its functions or a rapid disintegration of its parts when it is subjected to stress.”

This notion of shock was also developed in the field of neurophysiology, which was in fact founded on pathological inquiry, since the operation of the brain and nervous system only revealed itself (in an era lacking direct imaging of active brains) in dysfunction. Localization of functions, as well as more sophisticated holistic perspectives relied on either animal studies using brain ablations, or postmortem dissections of human brains after monitoring behavior in the clinic. Constantin von Monakow’s research on the brain was particularly interesting from the perspective of neuropathology. He argued that when the brain was injured (from external attack or internal failure, as with a stroke) it did not simply lose a specific function associated with that area. Influenced by John Hughlings Jackson, the great British neurologist, von Monakow believed that the brain and nervous system as a whole functioned as a connected, complex unity. So in the crisis of injury, he suggested, what happened was a generalized shock to the whole system, since the initial failure disrupted the total normal operation of the brain of which

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33 Ibid., 385.
35 On Monakow, see Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), ch. 3.
it was a part. He called this phenomenon *diaschisis*. This reaction was only temporary however. The brain would recover its functions in the absence of failure by reorganizing itself in a new way.\textsuperscript{36} This was no automatic, mechanical procedure.

Any injury suffered by the brain substance will lead (just as lesions in any other organ) to a struggle [Kampf] for the preservation of the disrupted nervous function, and the central nervous system is always (though not always to the same degree) prepared for such a struggle; the participation in that struggle will depend on the tectonic relations between various nervous areas and the injured site and/or areas whose function is being threatened.\textsuperscript{37}

As he expressed it in a later text co-written with the French neurologist Raoul Mourgue, the brain entered a zone of risky “combat” and emerged transformed:

*Il s’agit d’un combat, d’une lutte active pour la création d’un nouvel état de choses permettant une nouvelle adaptation de l’individu à son milieu. Tout l’organisme intervient dans cette lutte....*\textsuperscript{38}

[It is a matter of combat, of an *active struggle for the creation of a new state of things that will permit a new adaptation of the individual with his environment*. The whole organism participates in this struggle....]

The unity of the organism was not some vitalist supplement to the body’s own mechanisms. Rather, unity was the expression of the organism’s very life as a dynamic entity. The organism was capable of creating a new form of being because it was defined as an active principle of organization operative within the specific organs and operations of the body, and not as a predetermined “form” or a vitalist “force” external to its materiality.

Kurt Goldstein’s thinking integrated these two contemporary notions of shock: one linked with the different planes of homeostatic action, the other with nervous system plasticity and the recovery of complex functions in the wake of injury. Drawing on his extensive experience with brain-injured victims in the Great War, and in his interwar

\textsuperscript{36} Constantin v. Monakow, *Gehirnpathologie* (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1905).
neurological practice, Goldstein theorized the relationship between shock and unity in his seminal 1934 book *The Organism.*[^39] There he identified the difference between normal and pathological states as the distinction between ordered and disordered performances. He called the latter a “catastrophic reaction” (*Katastrophenreaktion*) to the shock and stress of injury. In normal conditions, the organism responds continually to the challenge of the environment as it maintains its internal environment. With shock, the organism has no immediate response.

Events in the outer world that do not permit this [adjustment] do not become effective in the normal organism, except when they are of abnormal intensity. In this case they do not lead to actual performances but to the phenomenon of shock of the whole organism, which endangers its continuity as a system and that I have therefore called catastrophic reactions.^(105)^

But as he went on to show with many examples from animal and human studies, the organism can recover its health. This was what needed explanation, for “these shocks are essential to human nature ... and life must, of necessity, take its course via uncertainty and shock.” In the end, what Goldstein was arguing was that in both normal and pathological states, the organism sought the “closure” of unity. The catastrophic reaction, by temporarily interrupting normal operation, revealed most clearly this ability to re-found order. But this is the most significant claim: the “normal” organism is in fact constantly repeating this same kind of reaction. Every physiological action is a response to a challenge of the environment, and every action results in a new organization. “The normal person, in his conquest of the world, undergoes, over and over again, such states of shock.” The survival depends on creating situations that insure further existence. There is never a “perfectly adequate configuration of the organism and the surroundings.” A Goldstein will say: the life of an organism is a series of “slight catastrophes” (*leichter Katastrophen*) that continually produce new adjustments and reorganizations.^(227)^

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Catastrophic situations are “constantly occurring” – the organism survives not in spite of but via the experience of permanent catastrophe.40

What Canguilhem took from Goldstein was this significant reversal of norm and pathology that takes place within the catastrophic reaction of the organism to shock and danger: “the organism, in facing risks, accepts the eventuality of catastrophic reactions.” Goldstein demonstrated that shock was what defied any normative response. The creative solution was therefore an improvisation of a living creature, not the instantiation of a pre-existing physiological norm. For Canguilhem, the norm could even be an obstacle once the organism finds itself in a challenging environment. “Disease” marks the transformation of the organism into a norm creator. Health was radically redefined by Canguilhem in opposition to the idea that life obeyed predetermined norms – health, he insisted, was the capacity to establish new norms that made possible the continuation of existence in crisis.41 In crises, organs could take on new functions or take over other functions. The living being for Canguilhem was essentially plastic.42 The body did not return to a prior state “after” the struggle, but acquired a whole new order of being, one that may well be superior to the prior state.

Canguilhem did not hesitate to express a version of what I am calling political physiology. He highlighted how biological notions of disease and abnormality could underwrite efforts to purge society of its own “ills” by returning it to its fundamental norms. But this notion became obsolete, he says, once biological conceptions of disease were transformed in the course of the 19th century, by Claude Bernard and others. The political implication of Canguilhem’s articulation of crisis physiology and the “catastrophic reaction” is clear: in moments of shock and danger, old norms and old structures, even the basic organs of society, may have to give way to new organizations and new norms. If the body periodically must displace its “withered, obsolete, and perhaps soon to be extinct forms”(144), the same could easily be said of political organizations as they struggled to adapt to rapidly changing conditions in the age of world war and the mass technologization of society.

Walter Cannon was even more explicit in suggesting a form of political physiology congruent with his own work on the “wisdom of the body.” A political body, like the natural one, had both internal and external relations. If the natural body has both normal and emergency modes, so might the political one: the state of emergency might “disturb the internal environment, but renders the organism more effective in a contest that may issue in life or death.”43 But on the other hand, the effective automaticity of normal internal regulations “frees” the body from attending to homeostatic operations, so that it might explore the world. The structural homology with the political is at the level of organization for Cannon: “we see that the analogies between the body physiologic and the body politic are so close and numerous as to suggest that there are, indeed, general principles of organization widely applicable to complex aggregations of collaborating parts.”(24) An important analogical connection was established by the shared starting point of identity, what Cannon refers to as the distinction between inside and outside – an echo of Schmitt’s own concept of the political as the decision on the friend and enemy. And what Cannon sees lacking in the traditional political forms of organization are effective “regulatory devices” to protect against “dangerous shifts of stability.”(23)

Yet Cannon refused to advocate a dictator figure for the political body, since leadership in the physiological sphere (centered in the brain) was he noted “acutely dependent” on all the other organs. Political life is analogous to bodily existence in that both deploy complex organizations to meet the challenges of their environments. Of this body was in a constant state of temporary shock (as Goldstein and Canguilhem would argue), then it was crucial to have these regulatory devices, devices that should be fundamentally open enough to make possible the kind of creative re-organization that was often demanded by unexpected crises and emergencies.

43 Walter B. Cannon, “The body physiologic and the body politic,” Scientific Monthly 79 (1954), 22. This essay was edited from a talk given in 1941.
Cannon’s language here was important. The idea of a “device” that could regulate complex systems pointed to another potential homology, one that intersected with the physiological sphere but one that would also have influence on the political imagination in this period – that is the homology between natural organisms and self-regulating technical systems. Cannon himself was the figure who introduced homeostasis into the newly emerging discipline of cybernetics, which was defined along the lines already suggested by Cannon – as a “general” science of adaptive organizations. Cybernetic thinkers were working in computer design, experimental physiology, neuroscience, mathematics, and eventually even the social sciences. What is relevant to our preliminary outline of political physiology is that the cybernetic thinkers were not just interested in models of complete automation, despite their privileging of the technological object in their concepts of adaptive “life.” Like the physiologists of the early 20th century, the cyberneticists were very interested in the plastic capacities of the organismic being – its ability to self-repair, to re-organize in the face of shock, its talent for improvisation, as Canguilhem put it.\footnote{On this point see my paper, “Unity, Plasticity, Catastrophe: Order and Pathology in the Cybernetic Era,” in Andreas Killen and Nitzan Lebovic, eds., \textit{Catastrophe: History and Theory of an Operative Concept} (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).}

Nonetheless, cybernetics was broadly interpreted as an effort to “mechanize,” albeit in a sophisticated way, the complex information and action systems of living creatures. But it is important to recognize that the reactions to cybernetics and “machine” theories of life were not grounded in some kind of romantic or regressive vitalism. At stake was the conceptualization of an organized, unified system that was capable of the kind of radical re-organization that was exemplified by Goldstein’s “catastrophic reaction.” If the organism was a system that was experiencing in effect \textit{permanent catastrophe}, how could that system maintain its unity as a material form of being? As the biologist and foundational “systems theorist” Ludwig von Bertalanffy put it, the living being is in fact \textit{defined} by constant transformation, something that the cybernetic systems, however sophisticated, could not accommodate. As he wrote, “the cybernetic
model does not provide for an essential characteristic of living systems, whose components are continually destroyed in catabolic and replaced in anabolic processes, with corollaries such as growth, development, and differentiation.”45 In another work on theoretical biology, Bertalanffy also called attention to the fact that “a mechanized organism would be incapable of regulation following disturbances,”46 a function at the heart of Goldstein’s and others’ work in the period. And, we might add, a fundamental attribute of any stable political order.

It was precisely this puzzling connection between stability and transformation that prompted the development of catastrophe theory, a mathematical and conceptual modeling of complex systems undertaken by René Thom in the 1960s and 70s. Building on early qualitative models of epigenesis (for example C.H Waddington’s “epigenetic landscape”), Thom attempted to explain how a unitary organismic system could, first of all, differentiate itself without any outside intervention into a complex of organs and subsystems, and then, in its mature phase, maintain that unity despite changing environmental conditions and other shocks from both outside and inside of the organism. His insight was that one could describe the organismic being as a geometric object, identifiable as a four dimension space-time entity. The transformations of the object would be considered topological transformations (twisting and turning of the original structural relations) and not material changes. Stability would be an attribute of the system’s abstract relational structure, not some external guiding principle. That is, Thom was one of the first to model the ways in which interacting determining factors can produce complex behaviors that are not entirely predictable or continuous but fundamentally stable. That was the heart of catastrophe theory, in fact. As Thom demonstrated, systems with a certain number of variables will inevitably display radical discontinuity that interrupts the previous continuous and linear behavior. If these singularities could not be exactly predicted, their inevitability could be demonstrated. As Thom showed, if the system had four independent control variables, the system (modeled

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in a 4 dimensional space) would undergo a strictly limited set of catastrophes, seven to be exact.\textsuperscript{47}

With this demonstration, Thom was suggesting a way of explaining the sudden discontinuous change of living beings as they evolved and adapted to pressures exerted on these different variables. Thom was adamant that this dynamic system could be represented by any technological object (although he allowed that some mechanisms might provide models of individual subsystems in the organism). (200-1) This was because mechanical systems did not exhibit genuine unity – here Thom would explicitly acknowledge his debt to the theoretical biologist Jacob von Uexküll, who argued in his own work that living individuals were not composed of functionally specified parts, but by unified by an integrated experience that gave meaning to all the functional parts. Thom rarely cited any other thinkers in his work, so it is significant in this context that he also mentions the name of Kurt Goldstein as another important influence on his theory. (In fact, Goldstein’s work may well have been the source for Thom’s use of the notion of “catastrophe.”)

Following these earlier theorists of the organism, Thom outlined a process whereby the system might recover from perturbation and even shock, by showing how the system could internally compensate for the deformation of one variable by changing others. This was no mystical event – the transformations would be explained in terms of the system’s own dynamic. Thom would even go on to speculate that living systems could experience something akin to Goldstein’s “catastrophic reaction,” when a normal adaptive compensation is not enough to maintain constancy – the affected organ is too damaged. At this point the system must “enter a zone of qualitative indeterminacy” which results in a loosening of the behavior of the system. The healthy organs become super excited and ultimately will (if successful) find a new state that compensates for the injury. The system enters here a new space of organization. That is defined by Thom as the state of pathology, and we can easily see here concrete links to Goldstein and Canguilhem, for the pathological state is in essence a discontinuity, a “catastrophe,” that generates new organization. And like them, Thom will emphasize that even the “normal”

dynamic of the system may be analogous to the catastrophic reaction. As he wrote: “our
everyday life, on the physiological plane, may be a tissue of ordinary catastrophes,” a
series of Katastrophenreaktionen, and death could only be “a generalized catastrophe,”
when the discontinuity leads to no new continuity.48

Advocates of Thom’s catastrophe theory – Christopher Zeeman in the UK was the
most prominent49 – immediately saw its potential for explaining myriad complex
behaviors, from psychological states and animal reactions, to prison riots and the decline
of civilizations.50 Whatever the excesses of this application of Thom’s rather abstract,
even ethereal approach, the formal political physiology it engendered established a key
point, namely, that complex social, economic, and political organizations were at once
self-stabilizing systems and systems capable of sudden, catastrophic change. To be a self-
stabilizing system, in the cybernetic sense of the term, would entail the inevitable
appearance of catastrophes. The effort of cyberneticists to apply the rigid principles of
control and regulation in these complex conditions could only ever result in a partial
success – or to put it another way, would always fail.

Historically and conceptually, we can see that Thom’s mathematical version of
apocalyptic warning instantiates a more general concern in the period with the permanent
possibility of catastrophe; and this concern hovers over the development of both poles of
the “political physiology” dyad through the late 20th century. Physiological systems as
much as human communities were known to be subject to discontinuity, disruption,
failure, and disorder. At the same time, living bodies and living social systems alike
repeatedly proved their ability to maintain and reproduce their forms of organization
despite the impermanence and unpredictability of their constituent parts. The conjunction
of what Francesco Varela and Hubert Maturana called “autopoiesis”51 (the maintenance
of a form of organization) alongside the theory of catastrophe (and related disciplines of
complexity and chaos) would produce new understandings of the constitutive
interrelation between structural stability and the inevitability of discontinuous change.

48 Ibid., 250-1.
50 See Peter Timothy Saunders, Introduction to Catastrophe Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1980).
51 Francesco Varela and Hubert Maturana, Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living
(Dordrecht, Reidel, 1980).
As Stafford Beer, the cybernetic theorist of management, recognized as he attempted to model human institutions and organizations with cybernetic principles, a past history of stability and autopoietic reproduction is no guarantee of future success. Using Thom’s work on catastrophe, Beer warned that the very principles underlying the stability of an institutional form could also be the seeds of its sudden collapse and destruction. His goal was to construct, out of “human relations,” a flexible, “elastic” system that could return to equilibrium after “perturbations.” Beer’s point was that only variety could “absorb” the variety of perturbations in an unstable system, and when the limit was reached a catastrophic phase would necessarily begin. Clearly, he thought, the solution was to redesign institutions by “redesigning” their human components to be more flexible, more pen, and therefore more effective. This would entail the construction of what Beer called a “liberty machine.” That such a project failed when he undertook worked for President Allende in Chile building a new political-economic information system, was, Beer claimed, only because “the rich world would not allow a poor country to use its freedom to design its freedom.” At any rate, Beer adapted cybernetic principles of equilibrium to the complex dynamic systems of human institutions, always aware of the potential for those institutions to fail entirely.

Political and critical theory of the late 20th century vacillated between celebration and fear of that disruptive and even catastrophic moment. All I want to suggest here in conclusion is that a change in perspective – from political theology to political physiology – can help analyze what is at stake in the continuing life of our social and political bodies because it recognizes not just the literal effects of biopolitics in our time, but more important the critical importance of the theoretical question of “life” across different domains. Once we finally accept that theology was over long ago, at least as a viable intellectual framework of understanding our world, we can find some of the most meaningful metaphysical questions in the sphere of life itself, including Esposito’s supposedly theological notion of the coexistence of permanence and subjectivity.

So to modify Schmitt’s earlier formulation, we can say that the most pregnant political concepts of the 20th century were structurally analogous to physiological

concepts. As an hypothesis, at least, this change in orientation would be productive because it would allow us to connect the work of theorists who emphasize structural constraint with those advocating contingency, the defenders of strict systems of legal control with neo-anarchists, Luhmann with Deleuze so to speak – since the presumed analogy between the political and the physiological was predicated on the permanent threat of catastrophe whichever side one chooses. The task of reinterpreting the question of the political – its location, its force, its possibilities – is a historical task, that much we can take from Schmitt’s theory of the essential mobility of the political. But tying the essence of the political to a permanent theological condition is not only historically suspect, it is conceptually very limited.

Rather than restrict ourselves to categories derived from old and “withered” institutions, to use Canguilhem’s phrase, new conceptions of the political will have to address the evolution of systems of control, the interaction of these systems, but also the very elements of systematicity that allow for sudden radical change and reorganization from within. Sovereignty and security are broad categories that hardly contain the complexity (and plurality) of political authority in our era. With open eyes, we might seek out the katechon figures of the 21st century – those that delay the appearance of catastrophe but, as Esposito reminded us, only by keeping it alive in some form, within the very order that contains it.