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Gustav Landauer's Anarcho-Mysticism and the Critique of Political Theology

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Abstract This paper explores the anarcho-mystical thought of Gustav Landauer as a critical response to sovereign-centric political theology. It is argued that Landauer's political thought - central to which is a mystical withdrawal from existing state institutions and social relations - effects a radical displacement of the concept of state sovereignty through the emergence of new and autonomous forms of subjectivity, affinity and community. The paper starts with a discussion of Carl Schmitt's critical response to anarchism which, I argue, is the register through which we must interpret his version of political theology. I then turn to Landauer's original articulation of anarchism, defined through spiritual or micro-political self-transformation and the mystical experience, as a way of decentring sovereignty. Lastly, I develop some parallels between Landauer and recent interventions in Italian (im)political thought, in which the sovereign representative function of political theology is radically called into question. I conclude by suggesting that anarcho-mysticism, as a critical engagement with political theology, not only broadens out this category, but offers a way of interpreting new forms of political activism and protest in which sovereign representation is fundamentally delegitimised.

Recent interventions in political theology have sought to go beyond the parameters of a debate that has been largely dominated by thought of Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt's oft-cited definition, political theology refers to the way that modern political and juridical concepts, particularly the sovereign state, are founded upon a secularisation of theological categories. However, for Schmitt, the significance of political theology lies in more than simply a sociological interpretation of the political institutions, but consists in a new way of legitimising, through the state of exception, the idea of absolute sovereignty.

Alternatively, thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Massimo Cacciari and others have tried to, as it were, de-throne political theology by, for instance, displacing it within the field of economic theology, or by gesturing towards alternative concepts of community and co-belonging that transcend the 'immunitarian' impulses of the biopolitical sovereign state. Yet, what is generally neglected in such approaches is anarchism, which constitutes the most radical rejection of state sovereignty. This was a tradition of thought and politics that Schmitt himself took seriously, recognising in it his genuine ideological enemy. Indeed, Schmitt's engagement with key anarchist figures such as Bakunin and Proudhon points to an important, yet overlooked, aspect of the debate over political theology and its meaning and significance today.

In this paper I will explore the importance of anarchism as a critical response, not only to Schmitt's political thought, but also to the seeming inescapability of sovereignty as the dominant category of our political experience. When the spectre of sovereignty has 'returned' to the centre of political debates today, when it becomes the rallying cry of authoritarian populisms, it is vitally important to find resources for a critical interrogation of this concept. The recent and growing interest in political theology speaks to the desire to understand this renewed demand for sovereignty that, as phantasmatic as the concept might be, has tangible effects in the form of intensified border controls, enhanced surveillance and security and heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. At the same time, we witness new forms of political mobilization that

combine a sort of millenarian and antinomian spirit with modes of organization and expression that can only be described as anarchistic, particularly in their rejection of formal channels of political representation. Here one could point to movements as diverse as the so-called Gilets-Jaunes in France and the global Extinction Rebellion, not to mention mass protests taking place in many other parts of the world. As amorphous as such movements are, they need to be understood as part of a new and emergent political paradigm in which the representative authority of the state is fundamentally called into question. And it is here that re-thinking political theology in relation to anarchism can be of some help in understanding what is at stake here.

It is in this context that I want to focus on the fin de siècle German anarchist theorist and militant, Gustav Landauer. I will argue that Landauer's thinking, which I will describe as anarcho-mysticism,¹ represents the true critical counterpoint to Schmitt's sovereign-centric political theology, more so even than the more familiar strains of revolutionary anarchism that Schmitt contended with. Instead, Landauer's anarchism², inspired in large part by Christian mystical traditions, opposes the 'spiritual' to the theological or, rather, to the politico-theological and dissolves the concept of the unified sovereign state into new forms of voluntary association and community. Indeed, rather than simply opposing the sovereign state and calling for its revolutionary overthrow - and thus in a sense mirroring its absolutism - Landauer refuses to recognize the state as a transcendent entity, showing instead that it is composed of a series of individual relationships that can be transformed and spiritually redeemed. Moreover, as I shall argue, Landauer's conception of autonomous, voluntary and self-organized community life based

¹ See here also Simon Critchley's important essay on 'mystical anarchism' in which discusses Landauer. 'Mystical Anarchism'.

² Landauer is often considered as a forerunner to new forms of anarchism, for instance 'post-anarchism'. See for instance Newman, *Postanarchism*, and Day, *Gramsci is Dead*.

on affinity offers an alternative to Schmitt's idea of a political community constituted through authority and enmity. My claim is that to find ways out of the bind of political theology and the politics of sovereignty, we must look to both mystical and anarchistic ways of thinking about politics.

God and the State: Schmitt's engagement with anarchism

Schmitt's 1922 work *Politische Theologie*, which today is the point of departure for most discussions of political theology,³ contains his theory of the state of exception, an expression of political authority that derives from the notion of the miracle in theology. Indeed, political theology, on Schmitt's terms, refers to the way that theological ways of thinking, which started to be secularized in the sixteenth century, came to underpin modern political concepts; thus, the sovereignty of God was translated over the course of several centuries into the secular sovereign state.⁴ Here it is important to understand the context to which this radically conservative thinker was responding. Writing during the instability of the Weimar period, Schmitt is reflecting on what he saw as the crisis of modernity, in which the combined forces of technology, bourgeois economics, materialist philosophy, atheism and revolutionary politics had all but eroded the foundations of legitimacy in society.⁵ The symbolic legitimacy that Schmitt believed was once provided by the figure of Christ and the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, and which served to give shape and form to the social order, was no longer present in secular modernity.⁶ The place of the sacred was in danger of being eclipsed in a flattened out world of immanence and nihilism. Nowhere was this clearer, according to Schmitt, than in the transformation of the

³ See, for instance, Kahn, *Political Theology*.

⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

⁵ Schmitt, 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations', 79-95.

⁶ See Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*.

state from an institution imbued with *auctoritas*, the absolute sovereignty that transcended society, into a mere administrative machine in the service of the economy and the needs of society, its political ‘spirit’ obscured by the liberal secular preoccupation with ‘culture’. Liberalism, which Schmitt regards as anti-political, attempts to rein in sovereignty through the rule of law and constitutional limitations. Schmitt’s notion of the state of exception, in which sovereignty exceeds its normal legal limits – paradoxically grounding the constitutional order by suspending it - is his way of restoring to sovereignty its sacred dimension, its former theological lustre.

However, while most commentators focus on Schmitt’s critique of liberalism⁷, the later sections of his work on political theology suggest a much more intense, though oblique, engagement with anarchism. Indeed, it is anarchism, rather than liberalism, that emerges as Schmitt’s genuine political enemy.⁸ As a fundamental thinker of the relation of opposition or enmity, Schmitt regards the revolutionary anarchist as the greater threat to state sovereignty and to the theologically-determined political order he wants to defend. Schmitt’s dialogue with the anarchist enemy is articulated through a series of conservative Catholic traditionalist thinkers such as Donoso Cortes. Like Schmitt, Cortes, writing in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, also saw the social and moral order as threatened on all sides by atheism, liberalism and revolution; the only solution to which was sovereign dictatorship. Cortes saw this struggle in quasi-theological terms: he saw ‘only the theology of the foe’.⁹ Who was Cortes’ (Schmitt’s) foe? Unlike liberals, for whom he had nothing but contempt, Cortes regarded the anarchist as his true enemy, one for

⁷ See for instance, Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*; and Dyzenhaus, *Law as Politics*.

⁸ This is also clear from another work of Schmitt’s written around the same time as *Political Theology*, in which there is a portrait of the anarchist Bakunin who, in his critique of political theology, is depicted as a barbarian striking with ‘Scythian might’ against the foundations of European Christian civilization. See *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, 36.

⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 62.

whom he at the same time had a certain sort of respect, even admiration, as if recognizing his own reverse mirror image. What the counterrevolutionary conservative and the revolutionary anarchist shared was a certain extremism and absolutism, particularly with regard to the sovereign state. The reactionary defends the principle of state absolutism absolutely, while the anarchist – who also regards the state as absolutist in principle – *absolutely* rejects it and seeks to abolish it. In other words, for the reactionary, the sovereign state, which can only ever be absolutist, is an absolute good, or at least an absolute necessity; while for the anarchist, for whom it can *also* only ever be absolute, the sovereign state is an absolute evil and an unnecessary encumbrance upon otherwise freely formed social relations.¹⁰

This dispute between the counterrevolutionary defender of the sovereign state and the anarchist is really at the heart of Schmitt's political theology and is, I believe, central to any adequate understanding of what is at stake in this concept. Indeed, it is often not acknowledged that the very term political theology, at least in its modern usage, comes from the nineteenth century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and his repudiation of the Italian statesman Mazzini, whom he charged with being a political theologian because of the way he mixed up religion with politics.¹¹ Bakunin's declaration of revolutionary war on political theology, on the twin idols of God and the State, is reflected throughout his writings and even led him to an avowal of Satan as the standard bearer of liberty and humanity's rebellion against religious and political authority.¹² What is really at the core of political theology, according to Bakunin, being an avowed materialist, is the philosophy of idealism. The idealist lives in the world of metaphysical abstractions and suspends above the real living forces of society an illusory and transcendent

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹¹ Bakunin, 'The Political Theology of Mazzini', *Selected Writings*, 214-231.

¹² Ibid. See also Bakunin, *God and the State*.

order, leading him or her to a defence of religious and political authority. For Bakunin, materialism, which is a celebration of life's immanence and revolutionary potential, is the antidote to political theology.

It is this that Schmitt has in mind when he suggests that revolutionary anarchism cannot escape its own politico-theological dilemma. The absolute hostility of the anarchist to both God and the State leads him into another kind of absolutism; his materialism becomes another kind of anti-theological religion, evident in the Satanic trope summoned up by Bakunin: 'and this results in an odd paradox whereby Bakunin, the greatest anarchist of the nineteenth century, had become in theory the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of the antidictatorship.'¹³ We need to take this charge seriously, not so much to support Schmitt's sovereign-centric political theology but, rather, to find more effective ways of undoing it. It is with this intention that I turn to the mystical anarchism of Gustav Landauer.

Landauer's 'thoughts on anarchism'

Gustav Landauer was a German Jewish socialist and anarchist thinker and activist who, in 1919, was murdered by right wing paramilitary forces after the crushing of the **Bavarian Republic (Räterepublik)**. Landauer's direct involvement in the communist German Revolution at the end of the First World War would have represented one of the main forces of political destabilization that Schmitt sought to defend the social order against. That is to say, the anarchist Landauer might have been, for Schmitt, the ultimate figure of the enemy.¹⁴ Here I want to argue that

¹³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 66.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that Schmitt was responding directly to Landauer in *Political Theology* – rather his interlocutors are nineteenth century anarchists Bakunin and Proudhon - nor is to

Landauer's more heretical anarchism, inspired by mystical thinking, is perhaps a more effective response to a sovereign-centric political theology than the familiar strand of revolutionary anarchism discussed above. In pitting the 'spiritual', rather than the material, against the theological, and in promoting autonomous ways of life and association rather than a direct assault on the state, Landauer avoids falling into the trap of political theology that awaits most forms of revolutionary politics.

While avowedly an anarchist, Landauer actually had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with many of the anarchist currents of his time. The assassination by an anarchist of US President McKinley in 1901 led Landauer to criticize the use of violence by anarchists as a tool of revolution. In an essay, 'Anarchic Thoughts on Anarchism' (published in 1901) Landauer argued that this sort of 'propaganda by deed' was not only self-defeating – and moreover, indicative of a certain vanity and desire for recognition on the part of some anarchists - but went against the very ethical orientation of anarchism itself, which was non-violent and opposed to all forms of coercion and domination. It was therefore impossible, according to Landauer, to build an anarchist society on the basis of violence. Rather, revolutionary action should already come to reflect the ethical principles and ideals of the social order one wanted to create, rather than being simply a means to an end: 'All violence is either despotism or authority. What the anarchists must realize is that a goal can only be reached if it is already reflected in its means. Non-violence cannot be attained by violence.'¹⁵ This invokes the idea of prefiguration or prefigurative politics, which is an anti-instrumentalist ethos that refuses to sacrifice or subordinate means to ends; a refusal that might lead some to dismiss Landauer's anarchism as anti-political but which, I would

suggest that there was any sort of 'hidden dialogue' between them. My point, rather, is that Landauer's anarcho-mystical thinking is fundamentally opposed to Schmitt's political theology.

¹⁵ Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings*, 84-91.

argue, leads to a different and more intense experience of the political. The ‘political’ anarchists who counselled violence as a means to the end of revolution were, for Landauer, ‘not anarchic enough’.¹⁶

Indeed, for Landauer, anarchism should not be seen as an end at all, as a certain type of society that one seeks to establish, as this would inevitably involve imposing a particular vision of society upon others: “Those who want “to bring freedom to the world” – which will always be *their* idea of freedom – are tyrants, not anarchists.”¹⁷ Rather than seeing anarchism as a future goal to be attained, it should be something of the present; it is about how one lives in the here and now. Anarchism is a certain kind of disposition, a way of being and relating to oneself and to others. Indeed, anarchism involves a kind of spiritual transformation of the self and the achievement of a level of self-understanding and self-mastery: “To me, someone without a master, someone who is free, an individual, an anarchist, is one who is his own master, who has unearthed the desire that tells him who he truly wants to be. This desire is his life.”¹⁸ Yet this self-mastery involves a kind of metaphorical self-immolation that is closely bound up with the mystical experience. For Landauer, anarchism is the spiritual redemption and rebirth of humanity, but one that first passes through the turmoil of the individual’s soul. The ethics of prefiguration, so important to anarchism¹⁹, is as much a spiritual as a political project. It is sometimes obscure and only accessible to a mystical experience, rather than something that can be articulated as a rational vision of social relations: ‘Only when anarchy becomes, for us, a dark,

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸ Ibid., 88.

¹⁹ See Kinna, ‘Utopianism and Prefiguration’.

deep dream, not a vision attainable through concepts, can our ethics and our actions become one.²⁰

This focus on the self, however, should not be confused with a solipsistic individualism or a disengagement from politics. On the contrary, for Landauer, we should still act in the external world, involve ourselves in cooperatives and associations, build local communities and organisations, and so on. Rather, we can see this singular form of anarchism in terms of a kind of micro-politics in which the transformation of society and political institutions on a broader scale begins with the transformation of the individual and his or her immediate relations with others.

The state as a relationship

The emphasis on the micro-political is the basis for Landauer's original formulation of the state, which he sees as composed of a series of individual relationships: 'The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another.'²¹ It is here that Landauer's thinking represents a real departure from political theology. Rather than seeing the state as a single, absolute institution separated from society - as both Schmitt and the revolutionary nineteenth century anarchists were, in different ways, inclined to do - Landauer sees it in the most ordinary, everyday terms, as multiple relations between individuals. Thus, the state is divested of all sacredness, all unity, all transcendence; it is deprived, in other words, of the dimension of sovereignty. Sovereignty is held to be simply an illusion that masks the state's mundaneness. It is as if Landauer is saying that power does not really exist; or, rather, if it exists it is simply a social relationship produced through our everyday interactions with others. Our sense of the state's domination over us really comes from a kind of self-domination, as well as from our domination of others; these are two sides of the same coin. This is a comment on our voluntary servitude, an

²⁰ Landauer, *Revolution*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

idea Landauer takes from the sixteenth century humanist writer, Étienne de la Boétie. La Boétie claimed that the power of the tyrant depended not on coercion but on our voluntary obedience and the rendering of our own power up to him. This meant that the power of the tyrant over us was really an illusion, that it was simply *our* power in an alienated form.²² Landauer makes exactly the same point in an essay entitled ‘Weak Statesmen, Weaker People!’ [1910]. The statesman, or sovereign, is indeed weak. He is compared to a composer, a single flawed individual who nevertheless gives the illusion of power because he commands an orchestra; yet what the audience, to continue with this metaphor, does not realize is that the composer’s power really comes from the orchestra he commands, not from himself. Similarly, the sovereign’s power derives from the obedience of those whom he governs. He is, according to both Landauer and La Boétie, a weak, cowardly individual. However, the real weakness lies in the voluntary obedience, the docility and self-abandonment of the masses who allow themselves to be ruled. In Landauer’s analysis, both the statesman and the public are caught in a kind of specular illusion, the statesman failing to recognize his own powerlessness, and the people failing to recognize their own power. The state therefore has no real power, no substance or ‘spirit’. In fact, Landauer refers to the state as a form of ‘unspirit’; it is a hollow, empty shell sustained only by the ‘ignorance and passiveness of the people.’²³ To see the state as being all powerful is to engage in a fetishism that ends up making the illusion real.

Landauer’s analysis is an attempt to dislodge sovereignty by desacralizing it, by denying it its spirit. Therefore, it is in direct contrast to Schmitt’s political theology, which is concerned with revivifying this spirit. Moreover, Landauer’s message about our voluntary servitude is essentially an emancipatory one. To the extent that we are complicit in state power, to the extent that we

²² La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*.

²³ Landauer, *Revolution*, 214.

produce and reproduce it through our everyday relations and interactions, we can also overturn it by behaving differently, by relating to others and to ourselves differently: ‘It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships’.²⁴ In other words, it is precisely because the statesman derives his power from the people that his power is so precarious, that it can be simply overthrown by the people forming autonomous and non-dominating relations amongst themselves. It is because the domination of the state over us is simply a reflection of our own self-domination that we can free ourselves from this bond by turning away from power. Revolution is not so much a direct and violent assault on political power, but rather an ethical work conducted on oneself, which results in a spiritual redemption whereby the will to be free is reclaimed by individuals.

Profoundly influenced by the German individualist anarchist Max Stirner’s idea of the insurrection or ‘uprising’ [*Empörung*]²⁵, Landauer believed that any kind of revolution begins first with a change within oneself. It is as if the revolution against external institutions, against the sovereign state, must first start with a removal of *internalized* institutions, of a statist or authoritarian mindset, of the, as Landauer would put it, ‘unspiritual’ disposition within all of us that leads to the creation of new forms of state power in the wake of every revolution. The state is as much inside our heads and hearts – perhaps more so – than in the external world of social relations.

The mystical experience

To fully grasp this notion of the withdrawal of the self from institutions, we must understand Landauer’s anarchism as a form of mysticism; a way of thinking and an approach to the world that derives in large part from Christian mystical traditions and, in particular, from the thirteenth-fourteenth century theologian, Meister Eckhart, whose radical sermons and writings led to the

²⁴ Ibid., 214

²⁵ See Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, 279-280.

charge of heresy. Eckhardt's idea of the soul's mystical unity or Oneness with God was a key influence on Landauer's understanding of 'spirit' and the mystical experience.²⁶ There are several elements of Landauer's mystical thinking that I would like to draw upon here, with the aim of teasing out the implications of his anarchism for a critique of political theology. I have already hinted at the idea of separation or detachment from existing social relations and particularly political institutions, as a way of gaining autonomy from them and fostering alternative relations. In order for the individual to reclaim his or her autonomy, he must detach himself from the external world and turn inwards. This turning inwards even involves a kind of metaphorical self-destruction, but it is this that, paradoxically, allows one to feel a deeper connection with the world. As Landauer put it in an essay on mysticism entitled "Through Separation to Community" [1901]:

I do this to feel one with the world in which my I has dissolved. Just like someone who jumps into the water to kill himself, I jump into the world – but instead of death, I find life. The I kills itself so that the World-I can live. And so, even if it may not be the absolute – which really means "isolated" – reality that I create, it is the reality that is relevant to me, born in myself, put in place by myself, and coming to life in myself.²⁷

What is important here is not only departing from the external world, but also departing from oneself, from a certain pre-existing conception of oneself. The spiritual self-obliteration that Landauer speaks of is, at the same time, a creation of a new self more profoundly connected with life and the world. This act of self-redemption, or self-creation, is necessarily preceded by a clearing of the ground, a destruction of pre-existing selves that remain attached to existing

²⁶ Landauer published Eckhart's sermons. See *Meister Eckhart's Mystische Schriften*.

²⁷ Landauer, *Revolution*, 94-108, 97.

conditions and social relations. We find a similar idea in Eckhart, who counsels turning away from the external material world and inward toward oneself in order to find freedom and achieve a closer connection to God. But this also involves a *departure from* the self: ‘Start with yourself therefore and take leave of yourself. Truly, if you do not depart from yourself, then wherever you take refuge, you will find obstacles and unrest, wherever it may be.’²⁸

Indeed, for Landauer, disengagement or withdrawal from externally defined relations, roles and identities into the self is the precondition for new forms of commonality and community to emerge:

But we can only find the community that we need and long for if we – the new generation – separate ourselves from the old communities. If we make this separation a radical one and if we – as separated individuals – allow ourselves to sink to the depths of our being and to reach the inner core of our most hidden nature, then we will find the most ancient and complete community: a community encompassing not only all of humanity but the entire universe. Whoever discovers this community in himself will be eternally blessed and joyful, and a return to the common and arbitrary communities of today will be impossible.²⁹

Through this mystical separation, the very distinction between the individual and community is eclipsed. The individual discovers him- or herself in community, and community discovers itself in the individual. The individual becomes a kind of conduit for community, but not in the sense that he or she is eclipsed by it. Rather, as a mystical experience of communion with others, with the world, with nature, individuals become, as Landauer puts it, ‘the electrical sparks of

²⁸ Eckhart, ‘Talks of Instruction’, Talk 3: ‘*On undetached people who are full of self-will*’.

²⁹ Landauer, *Revolution*, 96.

something greater, something all-encompassing.³⁰ Moreover, Landauer understood community as being more than simply a sum total of its parts, more than a collection of individuals. Instead we have a kind of composite figure in which individual and community achieve an ecstatic union, in which each finds a deeper sense of itself.

Mystical community

This new community is a mystical one, an impossible community that encompasses, as Landauer says, not only the whole of humanity but the entire universe. How can we conceive of such a community? Does not the absence of definitional and real borders and limits make such an open form of community unthinkable? There is no doubt a utopian element to this idea of community,³¹ a utopianism that he shared with Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber, for whom community was also defined by deep spiritual affinity.³² However, Landauer's mystical community must at the same time be distinguished from the messianic community. In Buber's eyes, only the messianic community could translate religious ideals into a social and political form – that is to say become a 'real' community - whereas the mystical community, while reflective of religious ideals, was essentially unrealizable.³³ To the extent that Landauer's idea of community resists direct politicization and does not take a distinct shape, it is perhaps not utopian at all. At the very least, unlike Buber's, it cannot be easily assimilated to political theology because it eschews any kind of direct translation from the theological into the political.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 101

³¹ See Ruth Kinna on Landauer's utopian anarchism. 'Anarchism and the Politics of Utopia'.

³² See Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (esp. chapter 5 on Landauer).

³³ See Schwartz, 'Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer'.

³⁴ Landauer's relationship with both Judaism and Zionism is complex. While his thinking had an important influence on the kibbutz movement, it was only later in his life that he really took an

The distinction between anarcho-mysticism and political theology becomes much sharper if we contrast Landauer's notion of community with that of Schmitt. Schmitt's politico-theological understanding of community is defined by sovereignty, by a transcendent principle of political authority that holds the community together and defines its conceptual and political borders. And it is to this figure of the sovereign that members of the community owe their allegiance and loyalty, and for which they must be prepared to sacrifice themselves. Schmitt invokes the idea of a political community held together through faith and obedience to political authority, as well as through enmity towards the other, the outsider. It is one that parallels a religious community grounded in faith and obedience to divine revelation.³⁵ This is entirely different from Landauer's anarchist mystical community in which there is no sovereign or centralized form of political authority, and in which a theological determinant is entirely absent. Instead of a community tightly bound together through obedience and blind faith, Landauer has in mind an entirely voluntary form of association. Understood in these terms, Landauer's notion of community is wholly opposed to the artificial community of the nation state. While both Landauer and Schmitt see community in 'spiritual' terms – one defined theologically, the other mystically – they could not be more radically different. For Landauer, the state as a community is the epitome of 'unspirit' (*Ungeist*) because it coerces people into a false unity, in which they live lives of atomized isolation without any genuine spirit of affinity. In this sense, the nation state is an anti-community: 'Where there is no spirit and no inner compulsion, there is external force, regimentation, the state. Where spirit is, there is society. Where unspirit is, there is the state. The

interest in Judaism and the idea of a Jewish community (see his writings on 'The Beilis Trial' in *Revolution*, 295-299). Prior to this, his main focus was on the Christian Middle Ages as an example of a genuine 'community of spirit'.

³⁵ See Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 85.

state is the surrogate for spirit.³⁶ While Landauer rejects the nation state community, he at times evokes the idea of nation as a community of spirit – but here he is thinking about the way that rootedness in shared cultural traditions and customs can form the basis for a genuine affinity between people. While this might seem at odds with his notion of the universal community mentioned above, his idea of the national community is one without a state and consequently without borders, and, thus, thoroughly opposed to all forms of nationalism, which Landauer held in contempt: ‘The state with its boundaries and the nations with their conflicts are substitutes for a non-existent spirit of the people and of community.’³⁷

Spirit

Spirit (*Geist*) is the central referent in Landauer’s anarcho-mystical thought. As we have seen, communities of spirit, based on voluntary associations and natural affinities, are counterposed to artificial communities without spirit, such as the nation state. Spirit is what binds community together in non-coercive ways, and what allows humanity’s redemption from the depleted and impoverished form that it finds itself in today. Moreover, as we have seen, spirit is radically different from theology, which entails obedience to divine revelation and which, in Schmitt’s terms, translates directly into political obedience. How then should we understand spirit? While the way that Landauer deploys the term is sometimes unclear, he intends it to refer to that a kind of non-coercive force that, at certain times and under certain conditions, enlivens people and cultures. It is something that endows life with meaning and sacredness, and imbues the present with joy, strength and vitality.³⁸ He associates spirit variously with cultural refinement, with an inner vitality that unifies a people or community, with a disposition towards liberty, or with love

³⁶ Landauer, *Call to Socialism*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁸ Landauer, *Call to Socialism*, 12.

and solidarity; as well as with, as we have seen, Christian mystical theology in which the soul achieves a unity with God. Landauer talks about great times of spirit, moments in human history and culture in which this vitality was evident – such as the Christian Middle Ages.³⁹ While today, under the exploitative and oppressive conditions of capitalism and the state, spirit is in a state of dissipation and decline, to the extent that it is latent in people, almost as a sort of evolutionary principle, as a biological inheritance from previous generations, it can be reawakened.

Socialism, for Landauer, offers the opportunity for spiritual renewal. Indeed, in a later work, ‘Call to Socialism’ [1911] he argues that socialism must be seen as a spiritual disposition, a new way of living in the present. In this sense, anarchism, as a prefigurative politics, and socialism are very closely related. Indeed, Landauer describes socialism as ‘anarchy and federation.’⁴⁰ Socialism and anarchism are not two distinct social systems, but refer to a way of living autonomously, freely and cooperatively. Landauer’s socialism is decidedly non-Marxist. For Landauer, Marxism is authoritarian, centralist and inimical to the true spirit of socialism. It is unspiritual because it attempts to turn socialism into a science and a party politics, ending up as a narrow and doctrinaire ideology that has nothing to do with genuine socialism.⁴¹ The anarchists of the nineteenth century, particularly Bakunin, also rejected the scientific pretensions of Marxism, claiming that it would lead to new forms of authoritarianism.⁴² Science was incapable of grasping life’s forces in their spontaneity and vitality or, to put it in Landauer’s terms, their spirit. The problem with Marxism, in Landauer’s eyes, was its doctrine of historical materialism which claimed to be able to predict revolutions by a scientific observation of the laws of historical

³⁹ See the discussion of the spirit of Christendom in his essay ‘Revolution’ [1907], *Revolution*, 110-185.

⁴⁰ Landauer, *Call to Socialism*, 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁴² Bakunin, ‘On Science and Authority’, *Selected Writings*, 155-165.

development and the economic mode of production.⁴³ To take a materialist account of history and to turn the whole of human existence into a series of corporeal processes was to end up in a certain idealism: indeed, for Landauer, idealism is only the flipside of materialism.⁴⁴ Landauer's notion of spirit is an alternative to both materialism and idealism. Spirit resists the tendency of materialism to reduce everything to corporeality; while, in its celebration of the spontaneity and richness of life, it cannot be contained within the metaphysical abstractions and rigidifying tendencies of idealist philosophy either. While socialism is of course associated with certain ethical ideals, the problem is that to see socialism *only* as an ideal, as a state of perfection to be achieved, means that it is endlessly deferred into the future, whereas Landauer is interested in what can be done in the 'now and anytime.'⁴⁵ Here the *spirit* of socialism, as opposed to the *ideal* of socialism, is something that is ever-present, a potentiality that can be realized in everyday relations, in the here and now.

Alongside this positive and affirmative notion of spirit, we must also consider its 'negative' dimension. By this I mean the way that the emergence of genuine spirit depends first on a clearing of the ground of all false ideas, illusions, metaphysical abstractions; what Landauer refers to, following Stirner, as 'spooks'. We have been beguiled by the spooks of God, the state, capital and the individual: hence, as we have seen, Landauer's insistence that we must withdraw from this world of illusions and engage in a metaphorical self-destruction. Here he credits Stirner's nominalism with the destruction of metaphysical abstractions, which are merely a hangover from

⁴³ Landauer, *Call to Socialism*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

religion.⁴⁶ Both Landauer and Stirner engage in a negative thinking, even a ‘negative theology’,⁴⁷ central to which is the desire to get to a core of nothingness beyond the illusions of the world and the conceptual categories that have deceived us, and out of which a new reality might emerge. Stirner’s maxim, ‘All things are nothing to me’⁴⁸, finds distinct echoes in Landauer’s thought. Furthermore, we see in Landauer’s work on the linguist Fritz Mauthner, a sceptical thinking that calls into question the representative function of language itself.⁴⁹ Language creates a series of concepts and abstractions that obscure and alienate reality. In order to have a more direct and unmediated contact with reality we must first get around this illusion. There is a desire, then, to connect with a mystical experience that lies beyond names and concepts; it is only by grasping the nothingness at the heart of these structures that we can achieve this.

Landauer and the ‘impolitical’ turn

An examination of Landauer’s mystical thinking finds important parallels with some recent approaches in continental political philosophy, particularly with what has termed ‘Italian thought’. According to Roberto Esposito, ‘Italian thought’ – referring to a diverse series of thinkers such as Agamben, Cacciari, Negri, Tronti and others⁵⁰ - is concerned in large part with the problem of political theology, seeking to expand the terms of the analysis beyond the confines of the Schmittian paradigm. Common to these approaches is the attempt to think

⁴⁶ Landauer, *Revolution*, 101.

⁴⁷ Negative theology is a form of Christian mystical thinking in which the meaning of God is approached through a process of negation; saying what God is not rather than what He is.

⁴⁸ Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, 7.

⁴⁹ Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik*. For a good discussion of Landauer’s ‘anarcho-scepticism’ and his critique of the representative function of language, see also Pisano, ‘Anarchic Scepticism’.

⁵⁰ See Esposito, *Living Thought*.

beyond representation and, in particular, to think the political beyond the theological representation of power – that is, beyond sovereignty. We recall that, for Schmitt, the function of the sovereign is to represent society, to give it shape, order and meaning by establishing a transcendent, sacred place of authority in an otherwise secularized world of immanence. The problem with this sort of political theology, for Esposito, is that although it responds to the neutralization of the political that Schmitt saw as the central tendency of modernity, in its attempt to contain the political within a sovereign state order, it ends up as a new form of depoliticization: ‘A *political* theology, but its politics is a politics of *depoliticization*. This unsolvable contradiction, or paradox, “theologizes” depoliticization into a new political form.’⁵¹ We find a similar concern in Massimo Cacciari’s discussion of the *katechon* – the mysterious figure of Pauline theology that delays or restrains the coming of the Antichrist but, in doing so, also delays the event which the Antichrist necessarily precedes - the second coming of Christ. For Cacciari, the katechon, which is central to political theology and which Schmitt associates with sovereignty and with the Christian empire,⁵² is a thoroughly ambiguous figure: while it is intended to hold back or restrain the anomie that the reign of the Antichrist will bring, in its association with the political form of sovereignty and Empire – that is to say, in its representative or politico-theological function – it cannot be avoid embodying the very anomie it is supposed to hold at bay. The problem with political theology, according to Cacciari, is that it is caught up within a conflict between a single, unified point of authority and its function of mediating and representing a multiplicity. Representation always breaks down around this irresolvable contradiction.⁵³ This critique of political theology, following the terms of the Schmitt-Peterson

⁵¹ Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, 6.

⁵² Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*.

⁵³ Cacciari, *The Withholding Power*, 175-176.

debate⁵⁴, has also been pursued by Agamben, who has sought to displace sovereignty through the notion of *oikonomia*, deriving from Trinitarian doctrine, and by showing that it is only one side of a machine of economic government, whose effects are dispersed, whose authority is delegated (from the Father to the Son to Angels) and which lacks a unified sovereign centre.⁵⁵

Yet, what is curious in all these approaches - aimed as they are against the idea of sovereignty and its capacity for representation – is that they disregard, or only skirt around, the question of anarchism, which, as I have argued, is the most radical rejection of sovereignty. Instead, their analyses tend to refer to ‘anarchy’, but this is to signify, for Agamben, the ontologically anarchic or ungrounded foundation of economic government⁵⁶, or, for Cacciari, simply disorder.⁵⁷ While there are vague allusions to an alternative reading of anarchy – so, for Agamben, anarchism is obliquely invoked as the redemptive possibility hidden behind veils of the anarchic governmental machine, the possibility of what he calls an *Ungovernable*⁵⁸ - there is little space for a more positive,

⁵⁴ See Peterson, ‘Monotheism as a Political Problem’.

⁵⁵ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁷ Here Cacciari distinguishes between anarchy, as disorder, and *anomie* as a different kind of order of authority and obedience to the destructive force of the Antichrist. *The Withholding Power*, 181-183.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 65. Elsewhere, Agamben acknowledges some of the differences between anarchy and anarchism, but this point is not substantively explored. See Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power (or Potentiality)?’ This is odd because, as some have suggested, there are clear affiliations between Agamben’s anti-sovereign political orientation and anarchism. See, for instance, Bignall, ‘On Property and the Philosophy of Poverty’; and Kniss, ‘Beyond Revolution, Beyond the Law’.

emancipatory reading of anarchism, and their treatment of this question in general remains wholly ambiguous and inadequate.⁵⁹

If, as I have suggested, an encounter with anarchism is necessary for any genuine critique of sovereign political theology, and yet if it also the case that the revolutionary anarchism of the nineteenth century fell into its own politico-theological trap, then we ought to consider what the alternative, mystical anarchism of Landauer has to offer some of these contemporary critical approaches to political theology. There are two key parallels that I would like to draw on briefly here.

Firstly, I think Landauer's idea of mystical experience can help us to understand the idea of the 'impolitical', which Esposito pits against the sovereign determinations of political theology. Esposito defines the impolitical as the negative horizon of the political: it is that which resists the sovereign function of representation. But, at the same time, the impolitical is not a simple negation of the political, but rather constitutes its limit: "The impolitical *is* the political, as seen from its outermost limit."⁶⁰ The impolitical is not the same as the apolitical or anti-political: it does not refer to some sort of utopian space outside politics, outside relations of power. Rather, by looking at the political from another space that is heterogeneous to it, it attempts to grasp or apprehend within this dimension what is more political than itself, what exceeds its own limits and representational categories; an intensity that cannot be expressed within its existing

⁵⁹ Given the major influence of anarchism on radical left politics in Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – through figures like Errico Malatesta, Renzo Novatore, Alfredo Bonnano, the Ordini Nuovo group and movements like *autonomismo* – this non-engagement with anarchism on the part of Italian radical thinkers today is even more surprising. For a good analysis of the legacy of Italian anarchism, see Levy, *Gramsci and the Anarchists*.

⁶⁰ Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, 13.

categories. Landauer's attempt to arrive at a mystical experience beyond the representational power of language and concepts, as a negative experience of detachment, is a way of capturing exactly this moment of intensity. Moreover, as I have tried to show, this detachment from existing political and social institutions, and even from a socially prescribed view of the self, is not a disengagement from political struggles and genuine community life but, rather, their precondition. In withdrawing from established forms of politics, it opens a space for autonomous forms of engagement, organization and association.

The relevance of Landauer's mystical thinking here becomes even more apparent when we compare it with two other thinkers who are often invoked as key influences on the 'impolitical turn': Simone Weil and Georges Bataille.⁶¹ In Weil, a Christian mystic, who also had some affinity with anarchism, there is an emphasis on the mystical experience, as the soul's 'attention' to God. In a similar way to Landauer, this mystical experience is understood in a negative sense in terms of detachment, the emptying of the soul and thoughts of worldly attachments in order to allow truth to penetrate.⁶² This act of 'de-creation', which Weil likens to death, reminds us of Landauer's notion of the metaphorical self-destruction that becomes the precondition for a greater connectedness with the world and to others. Indeed, both thinkers are concerned, albeit in somewhat different ways, with the individual's connection to community through a form of spiritual communion. Weil's study of the modern condition of 'uprootedness', in which individuals are alienated from meaningful and spiritually fulfilling work, from their past, from culture and, above all, from community life seems to directly reflect Landauer's concern with the contemporary condition of 'unspirit'.⁶³ For both thinkers, there is a concern for spiritual renewal

⁶¹ Ibid., 14-17.

⁶² Weil, *Waiting for God*, 115.

⁶³ Weil, *The Need for Roots*.

through the establishment of a new sense of rootedness in the life of the community, and even with past traditions and cultures that once gave meaning and vitality to people.

A similar emphasis on mystical communion can be found in Bataille. Here mystical experience is understood in terms of an ecstatic transgression of the self through moments of ‘sovereign’ excess, such as eroticism, self-sacrifice and death. While spoken about in somewhat more violent terms than Landauer’s and Weil’s notion of mystical detachment, there is still the same focus on transcending the limits of the individual as a discontinuous, separated figure, towards a greater fusion or continuity with others.⁶⁴ Bataille’s notion of mystical communion has been taken up by more recent continental thinkers, albeit from a more critical perspective. Jean-Luc Nancy argues that community, in the wake of the collapse of Communism, can no longer be a return to some organic or essential idea of community, based on nostalgia for shared traditions, culture and identity. Such communities of immanence always risk new forms of totalitarianism, in which difference is eclipsed by unity, in which individuals are swallowed up into alienating collectives.⁶⁵ Yet, while this critique of communitarianism and organic community might *appear* to jar with Landauer’s interest in local traditions and cultures, I think there is greater resonance here in the attempt to think the individual and community together such that neither is effaced. Here the idea of *singularity* – rather than individuality - might be deployed to better effect.⁶⁶ Indeed, for Nancy, the closed figure of the individual is precisely symmetrical to the closed figure of the community. Community might instead be thought in terms of a relation of openness, which makes closed, sovereign identities impossible. This would be something like Landauer’s idea of the mystical community without borders, and without a sovereign state. **Also, despite certain**

⁶⁴ See for instance in the experience of eroticism, Bataille, *L’Erotisme*.

⁶⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.

⁶⁶ For Nancy, singularity is a kind of finitude, a relational space of sharing with others. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*.

reservations that Landauer expressed about Stirner's 'individualism'⁶⁷, a parallel could be drawn between this mystical community without sovereignty and Stirner's paradoxical sounding idea of the 'union of egoists': a loose, amorphous, decentralized, voluntary association – a kind of affinity group – which, unlike established communities such as 'the state' or 'society', imposes no binding obligation on those who participate.⁶⁸ Importantly, for both thinkers, these open communities are not composed of pre-defined identities, such as 'citizens' or even 'individuals', but rather of open forms of subjectivity in a process of flux, becoming and self-constitution⁶⁹ – what we might call 'singularities'.

A similar concern to rethink community beyond sovereignty, in terms of a relations of openness and co-belonging rather than identity and borders, can also be found in Esposito and Agamben. Esposito attempts to think beyond the 'immunitarian' logic of the biopolitical state, where the impetus to protect and secure the life and identity of the social body from that which might contaminate or threaten it, is transcended through alternative understandings of commonality defined by gift (*munus*) and even debt, implying reciprocity, mutuality and obligation.⁷⁰ Agamben, on the other hand, speaks of the 'coming community' formed of 'singularities' – a new kind of post-sovereign political figure who cannot be assimilated within the representative structures of the state and whose appearance in spontaneous gatherings and protests suggests the possibility of an entirely new post-identity form of politics. This is a sort of open, amorphous community without identity and borders, something he associates particularly with refugees and stateless

⁶⁷ See Landauer, *Revolution*, 101.

⁶⁸ See Stirner, *The Ego*, 273.

⁶⁹ As Stirner says about the figure of the unique one – which is often misunderstood as a pre-defined ego or conflated with an ideology of selfish individualism: 'I do not presuppose myself, because I am every moment just positing or creating myself...' Ibid., 135.

⁷⁰ See Esposito, *Immunitas*; and *Communitas*.

people, but which can also apply to other forms of autonomous and stateless, that is, anarchist communities. Insofar as such communities of singularities cannot be represented within the normal categories of politics and identity – such as nation, ethnicity, religion, or even class – they are an unacceptable threat to the state. We can speak, then, of a new politics of ‘disidentification’ or, in Landauer’s terms, ‘separation’, the aim of which is not the recognition of existing identities, but rather the attempt to create new ways of being, new forms of autonomous life and community. A gesture of disidentification can be observed in the wearing of masks and the concealing of identities that is often a feature of protests today, and is especially associated with the anarchist ‘Black Bloc’. This is more than simply a counter-surveillance measure, but rather a symbolic divestment of one’s identity and an affirmation of anonymity as a space of freedom in which to create new forms of affinity and belonging in opposition to the sovereign state.

Agamben predicts, then, that, *‘The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.’*⁷¹

Conclusion

Today this struggle between the state and non-state seems to be playing itself out in the form of the mass protests currently taking place around the world, in which people collectively withdraw from their voluntary servitude and refuse to recognize the symbolic legitimacy not only of their current government but, increasingly, of the entire political and economic system that claims to represent their interests. The question remaining for us is how best to interpret such phenomena. Insofar as they call into question the representative power of sovereignty, and embody instead alternative forms of autonomous organization and political life, they invoke, I would argue, a new kind of political **attitude** that is anarchistic in orientation. And it is here that, as I have

⁷¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 54.4.

claimed, Landauer's 'impolitical' thought, inspired by what I have called anarcho-mysticism and characterized by ideas of mystical withdrawal, negative thought and new forms of community and association, gives us real interpretative insight. Whether or not Landauer's political thought can be considered as a new strand of radical political theology – standing alongside other radical articulations such as liberation theology, Christian atheism, Christian anarchism, ecological theology or any other emancipatory approach to the post-secular, millenarian times that we find ourselves in – at the very least, anarcho-mysticism is a way of thinking politically without sovereignty.

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