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Panel: “Hegemony, Gospel, & Empty Signifier: Theological and Philosophical Responses to Populist Reason”

Title: “Gramsci and Schmitt on Roman Catholicism”

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I hope I can be forgiven for approaching the project of *On Populist Reason* obliquely, by way of staging a kind of dialogue between one thinker who is a decisive influence on Laclau, Antonio Gramsci, and another who is ideologically opposed to both Gramsci and Laclau, Carl Schmitt. This conjunction of opposites is appropriate insofar as I understand Laclau, in *Populist Reason* as in other works, to be developing a kind of “science of politics” that would be usable by any political actor whatever, or more properly to be laying down the ontological foundations for any such “science of politics.” I will not be bringing Gramsci and Schmitt’s respective political theories directly into contact as such, however, but rather will start from a perhaps unsuspected link between the two: the political significance of Roman Catholicism.

Since the connection between Gramsci and Roman Catholicism is less obvious, I will start with him. Many such discussions are found in Gramsci’s analysis of the obstacles that Marxists face in convincing the public of the truth of Marxist philosophy, and in his Italian context, the Roman Catholic Church obviously represents the most important intellectual opponent for Marxism. While much of what Gramsci says on this topic is still relevant in the contemporary American context, where traditional religious views have an important place in the

“common sense” of large portions of the population,¹ these discussions are largely peripheral to Gramsci’s broader intellectual project.

The more interesting discussions of Roman Catholicism also stem from Gramsci’s Italian context, but in a different way. Rather than dealing with the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy as a given fact, these discussions account for that very prominence by analyzing the ways that the Church has successfully responded to the Italian situation, specifically in mobilizing the peasantry, which is among Gramsci’s central concerns, both in his activity in the Italian Socialist and Communist parties and in his later theorizations of the direction in which Western Marxist strategy must move. The question of the peasantry, however, is tied directly to that of the “organic intellectual,” to the analysis of Machiavellism and Jacobinism, and so ultimately to the shape of the revolutionary party—in other words, to the most important Gramscian themes—and the analysis of the Roman Catholic Church comes in for discussion in connection to all of them.

The place of the peasantry in Gramsci’s thought must be understood in terms of the relationship between party and class. For Gramsci, a party is the official representative of a given class, including but not limited to political parties in parliamentary systems.² In the ideal situation, that party is made up of intellectuals who have an organic relationship to the class in question, that is, they emerge naturally in order to perform certain tasks necessary to the class’s historical role. For instance, “The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal

¹ Gramsci uses the term “common sense” to refer to the largely unconscious traditional world-picture held in a particular historical period. (“Good sense” refers to practical know-how, the more usual referent of “common sense” in everyday English usage.)

² Other examples would be trade organizations, labor unions, etc.

system, etc.”³—these figures would then ideally be candidates to represent the capitalist class in the form of the party. In practice, however, the situation is not that simple, because the ideal “party” of a given class may fracture along sectarian lines (with the resulting groups still calling themselves “parties”),⁴ and often a given class will be represented by the party belonging to another class. Most notably, Gramsci argues that the industrialists have no unified party but instead make use of the parties of various other classes, primarily the landowners.⁵ The reason this is possible is because groups of intellectuals belonging to a certain class still continue to exist when a new class gains ascendancy and can be, so to speak, “reused” for that class’s purposes, reducing the need for the class to produce organic intellectuals to handle all intellectual tasks.⁶ In short, there is nothing “automatic” about the development of a class’s party nor about the particular form it takes, which explains the significant attention that Gramsci gives to the question of the working-class party.

Gramsci appears to share the presupposition of Marx that the peasants are by definition unorganized and unorganizable and, therefore, as Marx says in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, “they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”⁷ While he doesn’t openly dispute Marx’s contention that the peasantry and all other “leftover” class formations are ultimately doomed,⁸ Gramsci focuses more on the present needs of the revolutionary movement, concluding

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155. The disjunction between party and class, including the claim that many decisions of political parties are motivated by questions of coherence or internal power struggles—a point illustrated, notably, by reference to the split between the Western and Eastern Churches (408-09)—is a crucial aspect of Gramsci’s reworking of the relationship between superstructure and base. Assigning a certain autonomy to the superstructure, Gramsci argues that one must see the relationship between superstructure and base to be dialectical, rather than simply determined by the base (366).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 608.

⁸ “Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms: Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.” Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 474.

early in his career as an organizer—and continuing to hold throughout the prison period—that securing the allegiance of the peasants should be *the* central strategic concern of a revolutionary party. This is the importance of returning to Machiavelli, which for Gramsci means returning to Jacobinism.⁹ Whereas the names of both Machiavelli and Jacobinism have been purged of all their substantive elements and associated with the sheer ruthless exercise of power by ruling-class propagandists¹⁰—and here we might be reminded of Laclau’s survey of dismissive stances toward populism as well—Gramsci argues that the decisive element in both is the question of taking a leading role among the peasantry. Alongside the proto-Jacobin Machiavelli,¹¹ Gramsci can also cite the proto-Jacobin Jesuits, who “contested Machiavelli in theory while remaining in practice his best disciples.”¹²

Gramsci argues that the “ecclesiastics” represent “the category of intellectuals organically bound to the landed aristocracy,”¹³ and so to the extent that the Jesuits (and other Roman Catholic leaders) are the group of intellectuals who manage to take a leading role among the peasantry,¹⁴ they enlist the peasants to the side of reaction. On the basis of the example of the Roman Catholic Church’s success on this front, Gramsci believes that a movement can replace “common sense” by means of the following techniques:

1. Never to tire of repeating its own arguments (though offering literary variation of form): repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality.
2. To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce *élites* of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them....¹⁵

⁹ Gramsci, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹² *Ibid.*, 391.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 74, for a discussion of the relationship between the peasants and the intellectuals generally speaking.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 340.

This last is, of course, precisely what the Roman Catholic Church does by recruiting many of its priests from among the peasantry, though it is unclear exactly what parallel practice Gramsci envisions for the workers' movement. Whatever the case may be, generally speaking, Gramsci holds that "the creation of an élite of intellectuals" is a crucial task for Marxism,¹⁶ which must be able to exercise intellectual leadership if it wishes to establish hegemony over other classes.¹⁷ As for the first point, Gramsci takes far more from Roman Catholic practice than simply the idea of the repetitive "apologetic" style. For instance, Gramsci calls for a kind of encyclopedia of Marxism that would standardize Marxian thought and establish it as a true science. In preparation for putting together such a work,

one would have to study all the material of the same type published by the Catholics, in various countries, in relation to the Bible, the Gospels, the Early Fathers, the Liturgy and Apologetics, great specialized encyclopedias of uneven value which are continually being published and which maintain the ideological unity of hundreds of thousands of priests and other cadres who provide the framework and the strength of the Catholic Church.¹⁸

That is, to assemble the work that would establish Marxism as a true science and allow the proletariat, through its party, to provide the intellectual leadership necessary for establishing hegemony, one should emulate the Roman Catholic Church.

In both broad outlines and detailed questions, then, Gramsci turns to the Roman Catholic Church as a positive model that the workers' movement can—indeed must—emulate on the level of strategy even as it opposes the church on the level of content. One could say, then, paraphrasing Gramsci's characterization of the Jesuits' relationship to Machiavelli quoted above, that the goal should be to contest the Roman Catholic Church in theory, while in practice remaining its best disciples.

¹⁶ Ibid., 334.

¹⁷ Ibid., 53-60 passim.

¹⁸ Ibid., 414-15.

I now turn to Carl Schmitt's *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*. My goal in doing so is not simply to compare and contrast the two in a schematic way, but pointing out some initial similarities is helpful. First, Schmitt notes that Roman Catholicism—just like Laclau's populism or the Machiavellianism/Jacobinism to which Gramsci links Roman Catholicism—is defined negatively in much popular discourse, ultimately as “unlimited opportunism.”¹⁹ Second, Schmitt everywhere emphasizes the enmity between the Catholic church and socialism—though socialism is here understood as simply a subset of capitalist economic logic in general—while at the same time drawing a parallel between the two. Responding to the charge of political opportunism, Schmitt claims that “in accordance with the tactics of political warfare, any party which possesses a definite world outlook is at liberty to form alliances with the most divergent groups. This applies no less to earnest socialism, which is based on a radical, that is ultimate, principle, than to Catholicism.”²⁰ Third, and most importantly, he describes the Catholic church's role as that of *representation*. Schmitt defines the church as the representative of Christ, but concedes that from the perspective of a non-believer, “all [the church] represents is the idea of representation.”²¹

Here we can see a way in which Schmitt is closer to Laclau than to Gramsci. Where Gramsci's thought operates in a field in which politics is restricted to the struggle among class identities and in which there is one particular class that cannot represent itself (the peasantry), Schmitt sees the Catholic church as a strange kind of universally applicable *point de capiton* that can enter into virtually any alliance or ensemble of alliances, even ones that are apparently mutually exclusive—with one important exception: “An alliance between the Catholic Church

¹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Idea of Representation*, trans. E. M. Codd, ed. S. Draghici (Washington, D. C.: Plutarch, 1988) [translation of *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*], 28.

²⁰ Schmitt, 29.

²¹ Schmitt, 43.

and capitalist industry in its present form is frankly impossible.”²² Where Catholicism is based on a personalistic logic, economic thought—and here Schmitt includes Marxism—is based on a mechanistic logic that denies the possibility of basing politics on ideas, indeed denies the possibility of politics in general. By contrast, for Schmitt, Catholicism is “political in the highest sense of the word.”²³

Schmitt believes that human society in fact *cannot* be based solely on economic logic, and so he proposes that whatever results from the attempt will be something with which the Catholic church can actually enter into alliance. Yet “should the economic order eventually realize its utopian ideal and establish society on an absolutely non-political basis, the Church would then remain the sole bearer of political thought and political form.”²⁴ One can discern in Gramsci as well the notion of Roman Catholicism as a kind of permanent repository of politics, on which both reaction and revolution can draw. I believe, however, that the inner necessity of this judgment only becomes clear if one schematizes Schmitt’s argument here in terms of Laclau’s polarity of equivalence and difference, within which the logic of populism operates. The utopian “pure” economic logic corresponds to a society of pure difference, where each democratic demand would be satisfied individually by the institutional order. Under such circumstance, the Catholic church by definition *cannot* enter into alliance with any social element since all would be thoroughly saturated by economic logic. The church’s persistence thus represents a kind of pure equivalence, but in a perhaps more Agembenian mode—if the quilting point of the equivalential chain is always precisely an empty signifier, then its limit condition would be a kind of pure emptiness, representing only “the idea of representation.”

²² Schmitt, 49.

²³ Schmitt, 40.

²⁴ Schmitt, 50.

While Laclau illustrates this polarity as that between an impossible fully administered society and an impossible pure despotism, I believe that Roman Catholicism would actually be a better candidate for the equivalential pole. A logic similar to that of Roman Catholicism's representation of representation as such can be found in Laclau's account of Peronism. While Perón was in exile, he could serve as a master signifier that, like Roman Catholicism, united even apparent opposites. Once he came back and had to make concrete decisions, he could no longer fulfill that same role. The key here is that the Roman Catholic Church *never* has to settle down and take upon itself the task of administration. Thus it makes the perfect counterpoint to the impossible purely administered society without any "people"—it is nothing but a master signifier without any determinate content.

The reason the Roman Catholic Church can persist this non-role is because the church *has no particular goals* other than its own self-aggrandizement. For Schmitt, this self-aggrandizement goes hand-in-hand with its role as pure representative—because the church is representative, it rightly claims "prestige and honor," while at the same time it is precisely its role as representative that has prompted it ceaselessly to "promote [its] own prestige, glory, and honor."²⁵ Here we might bring Laclau into productive dialogue with Agamben's most recent work, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, where the key polarity is that between government (itself divided between administration and sovereignty) and glory, which can be understood in terms of the spectacle.²⁶ Agamben himself bases this distinction on his critical reappropriation of the work of Roman Catholic convert Erik Peterson, who identifies the irreducibly political significance of the church with its liturgy—in other words, its public display of "glory."²⁷ While Agamben simply

²⁵ Schmitt, 56.

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2007).

²⁷ See Erik Peterson, *Von den Engeln*, in *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Hochland-Bücherei, 1951).

asserts *that* government and glory are necessarily intertwined, that every political power carries with it its own peculiar display, Laclau's account of populist reason can give us a formal reason *why* that would be the case. That is to say, the link between government and glory is parallel with that between difference and equivalence, which need each other in order to operate.

At this point, it should be clear that insofar as Gramsci was attempting to assert the importance of the political in Marxist theory and based his concept of the political on representation, Schmitt's text shows us that there is a definite inner necessity to his frequent references to Roman Catholicism as a model. Schmitt and Gramsci share more than simply the reference to Roman Catholicism, however: both are opposed to "economic logic" or, in Gramsci's terms, to economic determinism. While Gramsci acknowledges that the rhetorical trope of determinism plays a crucial motivational role in the early stages of a revolutionary movement, he believes that the time has long since passed for Marxist parties to take upon themselves the hard work of strategy and decision. In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe are justified in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in seeing Gramsci in specific as a moment of rupture in the Marxist tradition, whose logical consequences include the momentous abandonment of the determinative role of the economy "in the last instance."

Yet I wonder if Gramsci's analysis of the political really leads necessarily to the premise seemingly shared by both Laclau and Schmitt—namely, the assertion of the political as an ineradicable element of human experience, which Laclau even attempts to ground ontologically. After all, Gramsci has some hope for the advent of the "regulated society," which seems to be more than simply the triumph of economic logic. In that perspective, the recourse to the political as such would be something of an emergency measure required to bring about the "regulated society"—perhaps corresponding to the Benjaminian "real state of exception" that does one

better than the supposed “state of exception” that is in fact the norm. Laclau seems to see the difference between left-wing and right-wing populism as a simple matter of content rather than form, but I wonder if one possible formal difference might be precisely this hope for an end of the political—not the spurious “post-political” era of competent regulation that liberalism constantly proclaims, but a real end of the political. Laclau undoubtedly provides the left with political tools it urgently needs—but does he simultaneously deprive the left of the very hope that defines it?