

## PREFACE



. . . the entire parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell, on the walls of which are written in black letters: “God sees you.”  
—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*<sup>1</sup>

Allow me to introduce the theological. It is not to be confused with Theology, which I render here in capital letters to mark its status as guild discipline, a credentialed profession in especially the Christian West that typically reflects on doctrines of a religious tradition and fosters an ethos of transcendence. The theological is a specter haunting Theology, is already unsettling it, perhaps dissolving it, disseminating it anew among other languages and other disciplinary discourses—on the way to revealing something much more significant than Theology’s doctrinally structured ethos of transcendence. The theological strikes a “neither/nor” approach to the binary of transcendence/immanence, but recasts both of these in a milieu of what Jean-Luc Nancy terms “transimmanence,” a haunting and ghostly realm of seething

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1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 294.

presences.<sup>2</sup> It is a milieu within which we must reckon with a new belonging of the theological and the political to one another.

This book, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*, argues that the theological is this transimmanence as a dimension of agonistic political thought and practice. This theological comes to its fullest expression in the prodigious force of artful signs deployed in spectral practice, and it is born of the struggle of those bearing, resisting, and finding life under “the weight of the world,” particularly that weight as shifted, or concentrated, in structures of imposed social suffering. Unlike the dominant ethos of Theology, the major concern of the theological is not transcendence, and its primary language is not doctrine. Nevertheless, it is a discourse that is alive with force to rival stultifying and repressive sovereignties, what I will treat as the onerous and concentrated weight of the world. The theological is a discourse that is disciplined, not so much by doctrinal formation, but by reflection taking place at multiple sites of the academies and other public thinking. The theological not only identifies and sharpens political differences in the agonism that marks political being, but it also facilitates human organizing to redress the social exclusion and repression that keep imposed social suffering ever bearing heavily upon those in its agony. Notions of “agony” and “agonistic” derive from the concept of *agōn*, meaning struggle, and for political theory have been reworked by nineteenth-century German and, increasingly, U.S. political thought.<sup>3</sup> Agonism, and agonistic politics, are terms used in this book for struggle that entails human pain and suffering (agony), and includes, though cannot be reduced to, the antagonisms and contradictions in social being that often generate such struggle and agony. The theological will be a distinctive discourse, issuing from this agonistic dimension of political and social life.

The theological can be introduced further with the aid of the epigraph above from Foucault. The passage is from his *Discipline and Punish*, a segment in which he writes of imprisonment.<sup>4</sup> In an analysis that is vintage Foucault, the prison is analyzed within a larger political matrix,

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2. On this notion of “seething presence,” see Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17, 21, 195.

3. Andrew Schaap, ed., *Law and Agonistic Politics* (London: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

4. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 294.

an “entire parapenal institution.” This political matrix is an intricate assemblage of power. The matrix has an entirety, a larger parapenal and institutional setting, that reaches into the extensive and complex workings of many social processes. All this even includes a pervasive intention *not* to be a prison. And yet, what is envisioned here is not just a politics of complexity, an ever proliferating, polymorphic matrix. The “entirety” culminates in the cell, a place of agony, a site where someone’s flesh is constrained, bounded by wall and bar, by all the apparatuses of force that create the prison cell. This may be taken not just as reference to the cruelties of incarceration in the France of Foucault’s time,<sup>5</sup> or to the astounding increase in mass incarceration in recent U.S. history.<sup>6</sup> It can refer as well to the confinement and imposed weight borne by those constructed and subordinated as sexual or gendered others, as racialized and colonized others, and also, simultaneously, exploited as the impoverished others of the global South.

What this book foregrounds as “the theological,” then, emerges within and from such agonistic sites of imposed suffering. Such sites are often marked by Theology with some backing of the transcendent. Foucault thus inscribes on the cell wall the words, “God sees you.” The theological is not this phrase; it is the seething discourse and practice that is alternative to that marking and making of the cell’s agony. It envisions a liberatory and different way through the weight of the world. It is the way those who endure imposed social suffering “weigh-in” with an alternative to the world that is often weighted against them and buttressed by the discourses of transcendence. As we will see, these sufferers usually do this by wielding the force of the artful image from their liminally intense sites of suffering.

For all the agony within the places we would demarcate as a cell, a realm of confinement, it is also an agony that is woven into the wider public world, its fabric of social and institutional life. It is, after all, a “culmination,” as Foucault puts it, of an “entire parapenal institution.” As I will show below, even the acute agony of the torture cell is woven into the fabric of everyday living, as a subtext of horror at work in the political

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5. David Macey, *Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Random House, 1998), 283ff.

6. Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage, 2007).

in which twenty-first-century U.S. citizenry and “civility” are enmeshed. The weight borne by the tortured in that cell is inscribed in the burden that is the weight of the world, as borne in various ways, too, by the many “outside” the cell.

“God sees you,” here, appears as a sinister symbolic inscription of the divine within a most material and political site. The agony of the confined, suspended in a matrix of power, an entire political configuration, is here overseen by God. It is a case of what Stefanos Geroulanos calls “theoscopy”<sup>7</sup>—being seen, transparent to, and thus surveilled by an omnipotent God, locked into place at a site of agony, in part, by the gaze that is projected as coming from an all-seeing figure. The theological of this book, born of the agonistic political, contests this transcendent discourse of theoscopy, without positing a simple obverse. There is a more liberatory way.

This book’s argument for the theological is not so much a political theology, as it is a political theorization of the theological. This latter is already ongoing, especially in political philosophy, where scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek,<sup>9</sup> Enrique Dussel,<sup>10</sup> Alain

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7. Stefanos Geroulanos, “Theoscopy: Transparency, Omnipotence and Modernity,” in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 633–51.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak admits deep into her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* to having “dreamed of animist liberation theologies” for “an ecologically just world, inspired, in part, by Christian liberation theologies.” In a long footnote she writes in the same text, she more formally muses, when analyzing Kant through the writings about the “Kierkegaard-Levinas-Derrida” line, that “the name of God . . . may be seen as *a* name of the radical alterity that the self is programmed to imagine in an ethics of responsibility.” *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 355 n.59, 382.

9. Slavoj Žižek drops references in his political theory to the “mystery of the incarnation,” to Che Guevara’s “weird Christological aura,” to atonement theory, and to G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, even as he inspires complex monographs in ontology and on transcendental materialist subjectivity that hardly mention a word about these theological components. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 433. See also Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

10. Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation*, trans. Bernard F. McWilliams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978).

Badiou,<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben,<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière,<sup>13</sup> and others find themselves marching upon the theological. These thinkers will enter this book's writing at various points, as will others, such as Abdul R. JanMohamed, Avery Gordon, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe, Theodore Schatzki, Pierre Bourdieu, and especially Jean-Luc Nancy. It remains to anticipate the itinerary of the book along which such thinkers find their place.

The introduction, "The Theological in a Post-Theological World," places my critical presentation of the theological within the context of contemporary discussions of the post-theological and the postsecular. These "post-" markers are signs of crisis and transition in the understanding of Theology and of religious expression in contemporary, especially Western, societies. The distinctive route my examination of the theological takes will be delineated against the backdrop of other routes being forged in this post-theological moment.

Chapter 1, "Thinking the Theological: A Haunting," has three major functions. First, it identifies the creative interplay of Michel Foucault's theory of power with select critical theories of spectrality in order to set the conceptual background for thinking the theological. Second, I follow the interplay of power and specter into a particularly significant part of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's work—that is, his reflections on world and weight—in order to clarify the book's meaning of "the weight of the world." Third, I show how this approach to thinking "the theological"

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11. The prolific philosopher Alain Badiou, author of *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, "cares nothing" for Paul's gospel, and says so, but issues a book-length analysis of Paul's militant subjectivity and about the apostle's respect for "the Event." Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For further examination of the many treatments of Paul by philosophers, see *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others*, ed. Douglas Harink (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2010).

12. Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben also has written his own philosophical commentary on Paul, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). In another text, Agamben also proposes a "theological genealogy of economy" to understand Foucault's notion of political apparatus. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Steefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009 [Italian 2006]), 8–12.

13. Jacques Rancière treats in his political theory certain "theologies of the novel." Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

involves a wandering labor through the “body of sense” that is the world, an approach that haunts with liberatory effect the imperio-colonial sense of Theology as a guild discipline. The theological in relation to Theology exists as a kind of teeming multiple, a Hydra figure through whose many new voices and discourses there is a thinking that haunts Theology’s interpretive procedures.

Chapter 2, “The Agonistic Political,” delineates the kind of being that is carried by practices of the political, from which the theological emerges. This delineation is a political ontology, but less the kind that searches for “fundamental structures” of an “onto-theology,” and more an “historical ontology,” an “ontology of ourselves” articulated by Foucault, and by others after him.<sup>14</sup> The chapter depends heavily on the social-site ontology of Theodore Schatzki and the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of socialized bodies, of *habitus* and symbolic capital. The aim of the chapter is to show how the conjunctures of being with practice, and then of power with symbol, constitute the agonistic political. Again, it is from this agonistic political that the theological rises.

Chapter 3, “Transimmanence,” treats the hallmark trait of the theological, the terrain of transimmanence that opens up within and as provoked by agonistic politics. Transimmanence is shown to be a distinctive way through and beyond the transcendence/immanence binary. Crucial here are the cues I take from artists working from the deep places of human agonistic travail, such as Richard Wright’s poetry written from a lynching site, the poets caged at Guantánamo, and one, Catarina, from a zone of social abandonment. The centerpiece of this chapter is an extended meditation on one passage in Jean-Luc Nancy’s work, which clarifies this notion of transimmanence. The theological as transimmanence emerges in this chapter with a “sacred” power of prodigious images, a force that both sharpens differences in a “singular plural world” (Nancy), but also dramatically engages, to quote Nancy again, the “brutal collision” of creative world-making, on the one hand, with homogenizing globalization projects of the West, on the other. The theological emerges as the emancipatory sign-force that weighs-in from under, but against, the weight of the world.

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14. See, for example, Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Chapter 4, “The Weight of Transimmanence,” deepens the book’s reflection on the powers of those bearing the world’s weight, their presence, and their sign-force for weighing-in with alternatives amid the agonistic political. The theological thus comes still more fully into view. Crucial here is the notion of practice, of movements, that give prodigious art forms a spectral power in history, the weight of transimmanence. Those whom Judith Butler discusses as “spectral humans” wield poetic and other artful images, the force of which can pose through networking practices a challenge to the transcendentalizing sovereignties—of state, religion, and Theology—against vulnerable flesh. Special attention is given here to the practice of torture, where the sovereignty of the torture cell instantiates and serves the aesthetic regime and sovereignty of the state. The practice of spectral imaging, then, engages and marshals new, artful practice against the sovereignty of the torture state. While the symbolic force of spectral practice, and reflection upon it, is not usually the primary concern of guild Theology, it can be a concern for many thinkers who, from whatever disciplinary or public site, trace “the theological” as an emancipatory way of spectral humanity.

Chapter 5, “Transimmanence and Radical Practices,” focuses more concretely the ways “spectral humans” challenge sovereign power and discourse. In a critical and close reading of Sister Dianna Ortiz’s account of torture survival, *The Blindfold’s Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth*, I trace not only her singular practice of survival and spectral imaging, but also distill four key modes of spectral practice amid the agonistic political: somatic performance of the wounded body, anamnestic solidarity, revivifying naturalism, and a grotesque transcendentalism. For all the debates about torture in current U.S. culture, there is a disturbing failure to acknowledge and analyze what survivors of torture have to teach, in the ways their wounds might congeal as practices that enable some survival, and then haunt, with both threat and promise, the states that would wield torture. This final chapter seeks to learn from that survival and haunting, and so limn for our futures a set of radical practices—discursive practices of the theological—to undertake works of liberation amid the weight of the world.