Divine Violence

Divine Violence looks at the question of political theology and its connection to sovereignty. It argues that the practice of sovereignty reflects a Christian eschatology, one that proves very hard to overcome even by left thinkers such as Arendt and Derrida, who are very critical of it. These authors fall into a trap described by Carl Schmitt whereby one is given a (false) choice between anarchy and sovereignty, both of which are bound within – and return us to – the same eschatological envelope. In Divine Violence, the author argues that Benjamin supplies the correct political theology to help these thinkers. He shows how to avoid trying to get rid of sovereignty (the ‘anarchist move’ that Schmitt tells us forces us to ‘decide against the decision’) and instead to seek to de-center and dislocate sovereignty so that its mythological function is disturbed. He does this with the aid of divine violence, a messianic force that comes into the world to undo its own mythology, leaving nothing in its wake. Such a move clears the myths of sovereignty away, turning us to our own responsibility in the process. In that way, the author argues, Benjamin succeeds in producing an anarchism that is not bound by Schmitt’s trap but which is sustained even while we remain dazzled by the myths of sovereignty that structure our world.

Divine Violence will be of interest to students of political theory, to those with an interest in political theology, philosophy and deconstruction, and to those who are interested in thinking about some of the dilemmas that the ‘left’ finds itself in today.

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Divine Violence

Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty

James R. Martel
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Introduction

Divine violence and political fetishism

As I am writing this (a moment that no doubt will have been superseded by many other moments by the time this book comes to print) Egypt is being swept by a wave of popular activism; things are happening so quickly that the ‘opposition’ has been scrambling to get ahead of this movement it is supposedly leading. This is one of those rare moments described by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* when politics is not simply an idea about government and command (which, in her view, is not actually political at all) but is a way of life, a collective experience of power. What had once seemed impossible, the overthrow of the decades-long authoritarian rule of Hosni Mubarak, suddenly became a reality (thus conforming to what Alain Badiou would call a ‘singularity’, something whose possibility does not come out of existing conditions, but occurs all on its own, self-actualizing its own possibility in the moment).¹

The act of one person, Muhammad Bouazizi – a poor Tunisian fruit vendor who set himself on fire in public after being humiliated by a local fruit inspector and having his complaints dismissed by government officials — spread a conflagration, first in Tunisia itself and then to Egypt, then to Bahrain and Libya, and much of the rest of the Arab world, and, hopefully, elsewhere.

This moment is filled with endless possibility. The great powers of the world are watching nervously. This could be the end of an era of authoritarianism in the Arab world, the harbinger of a new more accountable form of government (or not — other outcomes are possible too, hence the nervousness of Europe and the US). One thing that is not in question however is that sooner or later this revolutionary moment will end, and things will be ‘righted’. Whether the ensuing regime is Islamist, moderate, good, bad or indifferent, Egypt will return to a ‘normal’ state, that is to say, a state of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is so much a part of the fabric of ordinary political life (or what passes for that life, anyway) that we rarely, if ever, question what it is or what it means for us. Although we speak of ‘failed states’, places like Somalia that exist in a state of ‘anarchy’, in fact there is no place in the world that is innocent of sovereignty. Even Somalia is not in fact ‘lawless’, but is governed by a mixture of the Shabab — the Islamic radicals in the south — a weak,