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Political Theologies at the End of the World

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Abstract: This article engages critically with one of the more original and thought-provoking efforts of recent years to respond philosophically to the current predicament of the world: Thomas Lynch's 2019 study *Apocalyptic Political Theology.* While agreeing with Lynch that the urgency of our times calls for more radical approaches than cautious dialogue or reformist adaptation, it nonetheless argues that apocalyptic political theologies eventually fall short precisely in their lack of radicality. To respond philosophically to a "world in crisis," we need instead to explore alternative traditions of radical thinking, including alternative conceptions of revolutionary temporality. Drawing on the Jewish Trotskyist thinker Daniel Bensaïd, the concluding part offers an endeavor in this direction. Given the urgency of the moment, it suggests, we need to shift focus away from the idea of radicality as negativity and disinvestment towards an idea of radicality as tenacity, persistence, and hope against all odds.

Keywords: apocalypticism, Daniel Bensaïd, political theology, radicality, Thomas Lynch

The idea that the world is coming to an end has never been far away in cultures rooted in the biblical tradition.[1] In a *longue durée* perspective, the sense that the end is drawing near seems to have been the rule rather than the exception. Yet, it is difficult to deny that the past decades have been particularly ripe with events that seem to herald the end. This heightened sense of urgency is reflected in the notion of "polycrisis," which is regularly invoked today to describe how the world's most pressing challenges—wealth discrepancies, armed conflicts, climate extremes,

1. I am grateful to Thomas Lynch for his generous feedback to a lecture version of this essay, delivered at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies in Heidelberg in 2023.

pandemics, forced migration, rising authoritarianism, global webs of exploitation, and so on—are intersecting and overlapping in ways that mutually aggravate each other's effects.[2]

More broadly, the sense of urgency is also reflected in how apocalyptic tropes and images have become a staple of popular culture as well as in the media. Although the theological sources of these tropes and images are rarely made explicit, their ubiquity, again, is a reminder of how age-old ideas of the end times have never gone away from cultures steeped in the biblical imaginary. To point this out is not to suggest that there is nothing essentially new with what is happening today. While there are critics who are keen to argue that the frequent references to apocalyptic themes merely recycle old alarmist tropes, there is no getting around the fact that we are currently experiencing an array of phenomena that exceed earlier trends and patterns at an accelerating rate.[3]

If it is true that our times are facing challenges of apocalyptic proportions, what should be the proper philosophical response to the situation? This is the question I would like to engage with as a contribution to the overall theme of this year: "The World in Crisis: What Is the Possibility of Philosophical and Eco-ethical Renewal?" More specifically, I will engage with one of the more creative and thought-provoking efforts of recent years to respond to the current predicament of the world: Thomas Lynch's 2019 study *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*.[4] To anticipate what will be detailed further on, Lynch discerns two basic ways of responding to the present economic and social order of the world. One possibility is to agree that the challenges of the world seem intractable, but to worry about the implications of calling for or desiring its end. Such an approach would focus on transforming or reforming the world, for example by developing more sustainable ways of living or struggling to overcome social injustices. However, ranging from liberal incrementalism to decolonial practices of resistance against the dominant world order, such efforts still continue to draw on the resources of the world and thereby, ultimately, to cement its structures.

2. See Christine Helmer, "From Polycrisis to Christology."
3. To pick the most obvious example, total human energy consumption has increased sixfold since the 1950s, a factor which is immediately linked to the earth's changed energy balance, causing record temperatures and revving up the hydrologic system of the planet. The list could go on, of course, to include all the knock-on effects that these changes in the planet's physical properties are having on human and non-human life, as indicated above by the concept of polycrisis.
4. Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*. In addition to this monograph, I will also engage with a couple of more recent articles in which Lynch elaborates his argument, especially in relation to the concept of "the world." These articles include "How I Learned to Stop Hoping and Hate the World" and "A Political Theology of the World That Ends."

The other way of responding would be to recognize that the world cannot be put right or fixed. It means recognizing that the injustices and violence of the world are not merely incidental but part of its very constitution. The only proper approach for anyone who shares these premises is to stop investing in the world and start wishing for its end. This is what Lynch, with inspiration from Taubes, Malabou, and a certain reading of Hegel, describes as an *apocalyptic* response to the world, albeit with the qualifier "plastic" or "immanent." In other words, to respond apocalyptically to the apocalyptic challenges of the world should not be conflated with traditional theological ideas of rejecting this world in favor of another world. An immanent apocalyptic approach contents itself with rejecting the world *tout court*: "the plastic apocalypticism developed here distills apocalypticism to its negative essence. It is an anarchic unleashing more than a planned imposition. Nothing is imposed because there is not yet the position from which to think new beginnings. For now, the end is enough."[5]

The reason I wish to engage with Lynch's apocalyptic political theology is not only because it offers one of the more original efforts to reflect philosophically on the challenges of our time. More importantly, I share Lynch's concern about the state of the world as well as his diagnosis: that violence and tragedy is inherent to the world and not anything that will be overcome if we only trust in democratic processes and new forms of technology.[6] Yet, there is a major difference in our approaches, which is made clear in Lynch's critique of my own effort to respond to the current state of the world in my 2016 book *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*.[7] To tease out our differences and hopefully advance our conversation, I shall proceed dialectically. First, I will offer a brief recapitulation of my argument in *Divining History*, including my critique of what I referred to as apocalyptic tendencies within contemporary political philosophies. To give context to my critique, I will also spend a moment describing the emergence of these tendencies by the turn of the millennium. Second, I will present and engage with Lynch's perceptive critique of my position, which admittedly captures several weak spots in my argument. However, I will also argue that he misrepresents central parts of it and thereby misses the most important element of my critique of apocalyptic approaches. In the third and final part, I will attempt to raise our ongoing debate on political theology to a new level. While agreeing with Lynch that the urgency of our times calls for more radical approaches than cautious dialogue or reformist adaptation, I will also argue that apocalyptic political theologies eventually fall short precisely in their lack of radicality. To respond philosophically to a "world in crisis," we need instead to explore alternative traditions of radical thinking, including alternative conceptions of revolutionary temporality.

5. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 139.
6. See Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 1.
7. Jayne Svenungsson, *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*.

On the Revitalization of Political Theology in the 2000s

The project that eventually resulted in *Divining History* was in many ways prompted by the political and intellectual climate of the 2000s.[8] Marked by the aftermath of 9/11, these years saw a fundamental shift in tone within academic political philosophy. Perhaps most aptly captured by Slavoj Žižek's provocative formulation, "democracy is not to come, but to go"—pointedly directed at Jacques Derrida's notion of "a democracy to come"—the shift in tone indicated a growing frustration with the traditional academic left's inability to confront the repressive structures of the liberal world order.[9] In a time when basic democratic rules were being violated and the double standards of Western governments became all the more apparent, rosy talk of "democracy as a universalizable model"[10] not only rang hollow but manifested the self-defeating arrogance of the West.

It is against this background that thinkers like Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben called for a more far-reaching critical discussion of the very premises of political liberalism. This also explains the renaissance of Carl Schmitt around this time—and thereby the revitalization of political theology. Drawing on Schmitt's theory of the state of exception, Agamben, in particular, pointed to how liberal politics routinely relies on exceptional measures and thereby operates within a framework it cannot justify. However, while Schmitt was ultimately interested in defending an extralegal authority—represented by the sovereign—his theory was now being invoked as a distorting mirror to the subtle absolutism that was undermining Western democracies. This is not to say that any of the thinkers referred to here opted for a restoration or ongoing critical maintenance of democracy, as suggested by Derrida's "democracy to come." On the contrary, if "the state of exception," in Agamben's words, increasingly tended to "appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics,"[11] then the only way forward would be to push the existing order to its limits.

After this brief detour into the political-philosophical landscape of the early 2000s, let me return now to *Divining History*. Although a significant inspiration for the book was these recent trends in political philosophy, it was ultimately motivated

8. As is often the case with monographs, *Divining History* had a long prehistory. The idea of the book was conceived already in 2005, when I received a post-doctoral grant for preparing an application for a larger research project. The research project ran until 2010 and resulted in the original Swedish version of the book, *Den gudomliga historien*, published in 2014. Finally, in 2016, the slightly revised English translation was published.
9. See Slavoj Žižek, "Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox," 255. Derrida's notion of a "democracy to come" was a recurring theme in his writings during his final years.
10. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," 8.
11. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2.

by a more far-reaching interest in the theology of history. More specifically, I was interested in the ways in which the longing for *redemption* has been construed in relation to *temporality* in the two traditions that spring from the ancient Hebrew biblical texts. Judaism and Christianity are both profoundly messianic in the sense that they carry a hope for a coming redemption. Yet, there are differences between as well as within the two traditions precisely with regard to temporality.

A fruitful way to capture these differences, which I adopt throughout *Divining History*, is the distinction made by Gershom Scholem between "restorative" and "apocalyptic" tendencies within messianic thinking.[12] While the restorative tendency emphasizes continuity, connecting messianic redemption to an ongoing transformation of creation through the work of justice, the apocalyptic tendency conceives of redemption as a cataclysmic event that causes a rapture in the temporal continuity of history. Especially during times of oppression and hardship, the apocalyptic proclamation of an end to evil has offered consolation and hope to those struggling to make sense of a world in which injustice prevails. For this reason, Scholem writes, we must never underestimate the political and social value of apocalypticism.[13] Nonetheless, it is also true that apocalyptic enthusiasm throughout history has bred turmoil and sometimes even greater despair, as proclaimed promises of redemption have failed to materialize. It is against this background that we should understand the restorative attempts among both Jewish and Christian thinkers—Maimonides and Augustine being the paradigmatic examples—to temper the anarchic and antinomian tendencies of apocalyptic messianism.[14]

While Scholem's distinction between restorative and apocalyptic forms of messianism is useful for historical analyses of both Jewish and Christian theologies of history, it can also be used as a tool for interpreting discourses on temporality and redemption more widely, beyond traditional theological settings. This is how I applied it in the final parts of *Divining History*, where I engaged with different tendencies in recent political philosophy. More specifically, I focused on the shift in tone—described a moment ago—from the dominant left-liberal tendency of the final decades of the twentieth century to the call for more radical approaches during the 2000s. To exemplify the former tendency, I engaged in a close reading of the conversations on

12. See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, 1–36. As indicated by the title, the focus of Scholem's classical essay is entirely on the Jewish tradition, which Scholem tends to play out against the Christian tradition (defined by its alleged focus on the individual's inner life in contrast to Judaism's focus on history and communal life). However, as I demonstrate throughout *Divining History*, Scholem's typology of restorative versus apocalyptic tendencies is equally applicable to the Christian tradition, which, like Judaism, displays a great variety of approaches to the expected redemption.
13. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 19.
14. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 24–33. See also Paula Fredriksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo."

religion (and politics) that took place in Capri in 1994, involving, among others, Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, and Eugenio Trías.[15] To exemplify the latter tendency, I turned in the final chapter to the then-ongoing debate on Paul, represented by Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek.[16] In keeping with Scholem's typology, I characterized the former discourse as restorative and the latter as apocalyptic—and I ended the book by defending the restorative option against the apocalyptic.

In which sense could the debate on Paul be characterized as apocalyptic? The question is warranted, especially since none of the thinkers I discussed uses the term as a designation for their intellectual endeavors.[17] Relying on Scholem's characterization, I nonetheless argued that the political theologies of Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek are apocalyptic in their central features. Despite significant differences, all three emphasize the disruptive and antinomian nature of the messianic event. Discarding any form of incrementalism, they also share the assumption that the present world order must be rejected in its entirety for redemption to be achieved. This is what is implied in Žižek's rhetorical twist that "democracy is not to come, but to go," or, more soberly, in Agamben's statement (alluding to Benjamin's retort to Schmitt) that "[f]rom the real state of exception in which we live, it is not possible to return to the state of law [*stato di diritto*], for at issue now are the very concepts of 'state' and 'law.'"[18]

Although the radicalized tone in political philosophy was both warranted and desirable in a time of growing democratic deficit, I nonetheless found the approaches of Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek deeply problematic. To summarize my critique in a few points: it related, firstly, to the absence of plausible alternatives to the parliamentary democracy that was being rejected. "If the vital critique of democracy is to have any higher purpose than social overthrow for the sake of overthrow," I argued, "it must quite simply have an idea, however open and provisional, of what it is seeking to achieve."[19] At a deeper level, my concern was about authority and legitimacy. Which institutions and practices should provide the basis for justice in a post-judicial society? And what, in the first place, justifies the emancipation of political power from existing legal and political organs? The lack of reflection on these questions com-

15. See Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion*.
16. See, e.g., Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*; and Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*.
17. Indeed, Agamben explicitly defines his reading of Paul as non-apocalyptic (see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 62–65). However, as I argued (see *Divining History*, 165–179), Agamben's strongly antinomian rendering of Paul is apocalyptic precisely in its proximity to all the characteristics Scholem ascribes to the term. It is also a bit of an irony that Agamben insists not only that his own approach is non-apocalyptic, but also that Paul in no way should be considered an apocalyptic figure—a claim that stands in sharp contrast to the established historical scholarship on Paul.
18. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 87.
19. Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 198.

bined with an open flirtation with Schmittian decisionism seemed to offer little to prevent radical egalitarianism from tipping over into anti-democratic elitism.[20]

Having levelled my critique of these tendencies, I concluded *Divining History* by arguing that restorative forms of political messianism are better suited to respond to the complex and conflictual political reality of today. In particular, I relied on Derrida's elaboration of the messianic in several of his late key texts, notably *Specters of Marx* and "Force of Law." To be sure, Derrida too was concerned with the rights violations taking place in the name of democracy. It is even fair to say that this was his main preoccupation during the last years of his life. However, in keeping with the idea of deconstruction as it was originally conceived, Derrida maintained the impossibility of placing oneself beyond the system that was being criticized without acquiring the problem of authority and legitimacy. For this reason, he also had little patience with a resistance that positions itself in advance beyond the rule of law:

> [The] excess of justice over law and calculation, this overflowing of the unrepresentable over the determinable, cannot and should not [*ne peut pas et ne doit pas*] serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles, within an institution or a state, between institutions or states. Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving [*donatrice*] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation.[21]

The main distinction between a thinker like Derrida and a thinker like Agamben, I contended, was not about their discontent with the dominant economic and social structures of the world. Rather, it was about how to respond philosophically to this situation. While the decisionist rhetoric deployed by Agamben and others at this time tended to end up in a quasi-theological fixation on the present and the moment, amounting in the end to little more than preserving the status quo, the restorative messianism of Derrida seemed to avoid this *cul-de-sac*. Being no less radical, it simply insisted that real change takes time and requires continuity.

Apocalyptic Political Theology

In the decade that has passed since the publication of *Divining History*, the complexity and conflicts of our global social and political reality have by no means diminished. As indicated by my earlier reference to the notion of polycrisis, we rather see how various catastrophes aggravate one another at a distressing rate, creating seemingly insurmountable challenges. If these developments shed light on the strong presence of apocalyptic motifs in contemporary journalism and popular culture, they are also mirrored in the growing academic interest in apocalypticism both as an object of critique and as a resource for critical thinking and agency. Within contemporary theology, efforts to engage with apocalyptic traditions range from Catherine Keller's

20. See Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 191–98.
21. Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" 257.

critical confrontation with the destructive potential of apocalyptic texts, to Philip Ziegler's exploration of the apocalyptic strand of biblical theology as an inspiration for Christian discipleship.[22]

Thomas Lynch's apocalyptic political theology should be seen in this light too; that is, as an effort to respond intellectually to the increasingly gloomy predicament of the world. Yet, his effort differs significantly from those of both Keller and Ziegler. Whereas Keller is engaging critically with concrete historical manifestations of apocalyptic motifs (for example, in American right-wing Christianity), Lynch's interest lies in exploring apocalyptic concepts as a resource for critiquing the present world order.[23] Rather than doing theology in the established sense of critically elaborating Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) teaching, his project is thus affiliated with the renewed political-theological discourse described in the previous section. This also distinguishes him from Ziegler, whose championing of an "apocalyptic turn" in theology represents a more traditional approach to Christian doctrine, including the idea of a final redemption inaugurated by God's revelation in Christ.[24]

As I indicated earlier in this essay, Lynch rejects ideas of the apocalypse as the intervention of a transcendent divine agent. Such ideas are problematic, not only because they tend to downplay human agency and invite escapism (a concern, incidentally, that he shares with Keller) but also because they rest on the illusory assumption that the antagonisms of this world will one day be resolved. On the contrary, the immanent apocalyptic theology Lynch proposes relies on the recognition that violent structures are an integral part of this world. This is not to say that evil and violence are necessary in any absolute or ontological sense. They are necessary, but only from the vantage point of the present political and economic ordering of the world.[25] If we are willing to abandon this world, then other possibilities emerge. Unleashing

22. See Catherine Keller, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*, and Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology.* Other recent examples of theological engagement with apocalypticism include Micah D. Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future*, and Srećko Horvat, *After the Apocalypse*.
23. For Lynch's positioning in relation to Keller (whose most recent book on apocalypticism, *Facing Apocalypse*, came out only after Lynch's *Apocalyptic Political Theology*), see Lynch, "How I Learned to Stop Hoping," 3, and "A Political Theology," 21.
24. The term "apocalyptic turn" refers to the subtitle of Ziegler's book *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology*. Lynch never explicitly positions himself in relation to Ziegler, nor does he relate to his work. However, juxtaposing their engagements with apocalypticism is helpful for capturing the originality of Lynch's position.
25. While Lynch's concept of the world is rather vaguely defined in *Apocalyptic Political Theology* (see 13–27), he offers a much more elaborate discussion of the concept in "How I Learned to Stop Hoping" and "A Political Theology." I will come back to Lynch's concept of the world in the concluding part of this article.

these possibilities, however, "requires more than updating ideas or shifting social attitudes."[26] It involves nothing less than imaging the end of this world:

> [A]pocalyptic political theology explores the essentially traumatic process of addressing the antagonisms that constitute the world. These material and social relations cannot be resolved within the world, because they *are* the world. This impasse requires imaging the end of the world—a traumatic end that exceeds the legitimizing discourses of ethics and politics (understood in opposition to the political). Such an end is the possibility of other possibilities.[27]

On the basis of this statement, it is not hard to see how and why Lynch ends up being at odds with the position I take in *Divining History*, including my concerns about apocalyptic political thinking. The main thrust of his critique is that the restorative form of messianic thinking that I advocate eventually ends up thwarting genuine political hope, the kind of hope that is needed for radical change to come about. In defining redemption as an ongoing work of justice rather than a decisive break, restorative messianism still draws on the resources of the existing order and thereby continues to feed its oppressive mechanisms. The difference in perspective, Lynch contends, eventually boils down to how we view the present era: "If gradual and intrahistorical progress within the existing order is capable of rendering the world more just, then Svenungsson is right to emphasize slow change and the importance of continuity. If something more intrinsic is wrong with the world, then it is necessary to investigate the resources of apocalypticism."[28]

What would it mean, then, to confront our present challenges apocalyptically? It would mean, as already noted, to give up the illusion that the inherent antagonisms of this world will ever be overcome as a result of, for example, living ecologically conscious lives or engaging in social justice work.[29] Drawing both directly and indirectly on Agamben, the strategy proposed by Lynch is instead that of an "active pessimism" which engages in practices of disinvestment, refusing the hopes of this world without surrendering: "Living negatively in the world requires a constant investigation of what it means to engage in this refusing, of cultivating habits of refusal and of developing the capacity to sustain this refusal as a mode of negatively being in the world. This refusal entails a strange hope rooted in the end rather than an investment in what would come after."[30]

This last sentence captures another significant difference between our positions. As I described in the previous section, one of my main concerns about neo-Schmittian political theologies, apart from their decisionist tendencies, is that they offer little in terms of viable alternatives to the parliamentary democracy that is being

26. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 31.
27. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 31–32.
28. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 13.
29. See Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 28–29; see also "How I Learned to Stop Hoping," 6.
30. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 4.

rejected. Well aware of this kind of critique, Lynch ends *Apocalyptic Political Theology* by explaining why he "refuses this blackmail of affirmation from the outset."[31] Wishing the end of this world is not to insist that nothing good has come out of it. However, the fact that liberal modernity has resulted in greater freedoms and rights for many people does not prove that the liberal world order alone is capable of producing such ideals. In reality, the development of modern freedoms and rights was rarely the result of straightforward judicial and political processes, but rather the fruit of struggle and resistance against existing institutions. Defending liberal modernity with the argument that it has produced good things worth preserving is not only to obscure these struggles but also to affirm the unavoidability of its legal and political orders. To respond to the demand for alternatives, in this light, is only yet another way to become trapped by affirmation; "to reinvest in this world through faith in its possibilities."[32]

Confronted with the challenges we are facing at this moment in history, I can see the limits of incrementalism as well as the problem of defending liberal modernity with reference to the freedoms and rights associated with it. Although I never defended the idea of progress in *Divining History*, I can also see why and how my advocacy of a restorative messianism can be read as an endless deferral of the emancipatory event, with the effect that the exploitive structures of this world are tacitly accepted. However, if it is true that we are confronting challenges that call for more radical responses, this also raises the question of what *radicality* means in terms of a thinking that is able to generate effective change. Are the only options at hand disinvestment versus endless deferral, or is this a dichotomy that precludes other ways of thinking what radical commitment may entail?

Before returning to this question in the third and final part, let me spend a few more moments on the contrast between Lynch's apocalyptic approach and my own restorative approach. In particular, I want to draw attention to the fact Lynch—despite his otherwise sensitive rendering of my position—leaves out the most central element of my critique of apocalyptic approaches. By connecting my work to writers like John Gray and Mark Lilla, he both directly and indirectly indicates that my main concern is the *anti-liberalism* of more radical thinkers. However, as already noted, my concern with the neo-Schmittian political theologies of the 2000s was not about their critique of the liberal world order, which I found entirely warranted. Instead, it was about what I described as their lack of *materiality*, by which I referred to their reluctance to engage in concrete political visions or to consider real political options. Furthermore, my concern was also about authority and legitimacy: if we affirm a radical antinomianism, then we need to provide a reflection on what and who justifies the emancipation of political power from the legal order. How to prevent, otherwise, the elevation of any arbitrary power into absolute power?

31. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 129.
32. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 128.

While I share Lynch's conviction that the current predicament of the world calls for radical responses, these aspects are also my remaining concerns with the apocalyptic strategy he proposes in *Apocalyptic Political Theology*. Let me exemplify by turning briefly to the core of his argument, the encouragement to engage in an "active pessimism" and to cultivate "habits of refusal." As a possible indication of what such habits may imply more specifically, Lynch alludes throughout his book to terms like "anarchic unleashing," "violent undoing," or "cataclysmic disruption." However, on no occasion does he spell out which form of activities that a commitment to "anarchic unleashing" would actually involve. The closest he comes to addressing "the question of violence" (his own formulation) is in a short paragraph in the last chapter. Reiterating that "plastic apocalypticism" does not involve promulgating alternative visions in the form of a "violent imposition of a new world," he states that "even if it were possible to envision the kind of act that could result in a new world, such an act would lie beyond any ethical or political justification. Such an event would be sufficiently cataclysmic that to even desire such an event is itself problematic."[33] And yet, he continues a few sentences later, "it is also problematic to not desire such an event, for to do so is to will the continuation of the violence of the present."[34]

So, the reader is finally left to herself to figure out the concrete implications of the apocalyptic strategy Lynch is proposing. Here are two attempts. The first heeds Lynch's call to cultivate habits of refusal without resorting to violent or obstructive acts, since such acts would lie beyond "ethical justification" and thus be "problematic." However, one is still left wondering what exactly the habits of refusal consist of. Given his disregard for incrementalism and the slightly condescending tone in which he speaks about habits such as going to the farmer's market, it becomes unclear what, in the end, distinguishes Lynch's active pessimism from the more relentless pessimism of eco-fatalists like Roy Scranton or Jonathan Franzen.

A second attempt to spell out the consequences of Lynch's position would be to commit to violent resistance in line with the logic that it is equally "problematic not to desire" more cataclysmic events, since this is "to will the continuation of the violence of the present." Such resistance would be in line with the thinking of the Swedish climate activist Andreas Malm, who is favorably referred to by Lynch.[35] Although careful to condemn any violence that would (directly) harm other people, Malm has gained a worldwide reputation for advocating "intelligent sabotage" of fossil fuel infrastructure to disrupt the escalation of carbon emissions.[36] However, if an encouragement to strategic sabotage is indeed what is implied in Lynch's "habits of

33. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 137.
34. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 138.
35. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 19–20.
36. See, in particular, Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. It should be emphasized that Lynch is not referring to this book (which was published only in 2021), nor to Malm's advocacy of sabotage (although Malm has been advocating extralegal disruptive action for many years).

refusal," then a series of concomitant questions arise. One relates to the fact that acts of sabotage on a scale that would be effective would most likely take the heaviest toll on those who have the least opportunity to compensate for the damages.[37] An equally concerning question relates to the difficulties of justifying one type of extralegal action without giving legitimacy to any type of disruptive activities.[38]

My intention here is not to initiate a debate about these various positions. Rather, I want to indicate what I find problematic about the assumption that critical philosophical thinking can confine itself to the realm of the political "outside the bounds of politics."[39] Such an assumption not only allows you to evade any reflection on the relation between a particular conception of the political and the consequences this conception will have for the shape of politics. It also allows you to evade the critical considerations and weighing of alternatives that go along with the implementation of any political ideal, including that of an "active pessimism." At this point Lynch will rightly object that I am "blackmailing" him by demanding alternatives and concretization. My response to this would be a very Sartrean one: I simply do not think that it is possible, let alone desirable, to avoid choosing between different alternatives, since even deciding not to choose is a choice that will have concrete political consequences. And if you choose, like Lynch, not to spell out the possible consequences of the ideals you are advocating, then someone else will do it for you.

Let me ponder this last point with reference to my introductory observations about the strong presence of apocalyptic motifs in contemporary political rhetoric, popular culture, mass media and, to be sure, social media. Across all these fields, apocalypticism is today being invoked both as a strategy (a certain way of building up arguments by means of radical contrasts, and so on) and as a specific imaginary (visions of particular threats and imagined solutions to these threats). The problem with Lynch's choice to confine his reflections to the strategic or methodological level—avoiding any affirmative prospect—is that his proposed strategy could be coupled with the most diverse imaginaries, including radical right-wing ideas of "anarchic unleashing" of the sort that played out in the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 or, more recently, during the racist attacks, arson, and looting that took place in the UK in the summer of 2024, following the false claims—circulated by far-right groups—that the perpetrator of a mass stabbing at a dance party in Southport on July 29 was a Muslim and an asylum seeker.

I am not making the vulgar claim that apocalyptic political theologies pave the way for far-right violence. However, I see a danger with philosophical discourses

37. This concern was raised by Malm's mentor and former supervisor Alf Hornborg shortly before *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* was published; see Hornborg, "Andreas Malm har fel—klimatrörelsen bör aldrig ta till våld."

38. This question was raised by Sverker Sörlin, a professor of environmental history and yet another prominent voice in the international ecological debate; see Sörlin, "Andreas Malms militanta ekologism leder fel."

39. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 8.

on radicalism that (with Schmittian inspiration) deliberately cut themselves loose from "legitimizing discourses of ethics and politics."[40] Faced with the mounting challenge of authoritarianism (and the concomitant disregard for climate emergency), we cannot afford to stay out of ethical-political deliberations, because we then deprive ourselves of any criteria for distinguishing resistance from resistance; for claiming, for example, that what unfolded in Washington, D.C., in January 2021 was of a different nature than the uprisings that took place in Minsk during the same winter. This is what Derrida knew when he pointed out that the claim to justice beyond law must never "serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles, within an institution or a state, between institutions or states," for, abandoned to itself, the idea of justice "can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation."[41] It is also against this background that I believe we have come to a point where we need to raise anew the question of what radicality may entail today, beyond the stalemate of disinvestment versus endless deferral.

Radicality at the End of the World

If it is true that we find ourselves at the end of the world, in the sense that we are today facing challenges of apocalyptic proportions, then what should be the proper philosophical response to this? In the previous sections, I have discussed two basic ways of responding, exemplified through different philosophical debates over the past decades. Each of these debates should be seen in light of their specific geopolitical contexts; that is, as attempts, precisely, to respond philosophically to the challenges of their times. Thus, the left-liberal tendencies that pervaded the conversations in Capri in 1994 mirrored in many ways the intellectual climate of the years post-1989. Although these years certainly had their share of violence, this was by and large a time when walls were torn down and bridges were built. It was, in other words, a time when there were reasons to be hopeful about democratic processes and the potential of international institutions.[42] In the same way, the shift in tone—including the revitalization of Schmittian thinking—that took place during the 2000s echoed, as I have argued, the violation of rights and corrosion of democracies that happened in the wake of 9/11.

Today we find ourselves in yet another historical reality, and it is not for nothing that terms such as "polycrisis" or "perfect storm" are being employed to capture the current predicament. Nor is it just an expression of alarmism to say that we are facing challenges of apocalyptic proportions. The world is currently experiencing the highest number of countries engaged in conflict since World War II, several of

40. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 32.

41. Derrida, "Force of Law," 257.

42. To be more specific, these years saw, among other events, the fall of the Eastern Bloc and the Apartheid regime, as well as the establishment of a permanent international criminal court (the ICC) and the implementation of the Schengen Agreement.

which display clear genocidal tendencies.[43] In Europe (and elsewhere, to be sure), authoritarianism is steadily on the rise—at present seven EU countries have far-right or national conservative parties in governing position, which is, again, unheard of since World War II. Meanwhile, global temperatures continue to hit record highs, even as the World Wildlife Fund recently revealed the unfathomable news that global wildlife populations have shrunk by an average of 73% in the past fifty years.[44] These are facts and not just alarmism or scaremongering. So how, again, to respond to this philosophically? It is not only the urgency of the present state of the world that prompts me to suggest that we raise this question anew, but also the fact that many of the urgencies of our time are of a nature that demands action before it is too late. The question is, therefore, what kind of thinking can muster commitment of the sort needed to face up to the urgency of the moment.

That incrementalism is not enough is today clear to me. Lynch has argued well for this throughout his works and has convinced me about the limitations of the argument I advanced in *Divining History*. However, as I tried to show in the previous section, I also do not think that disinvestment is enough to confront the challenges we are up against today. My fear is that such a posture, in its unwillingness to engage with concrete political options and alternatives, risks playing into the hands of the most dangerous authoritarian forces. In relation to climate emergency, also, I find disinvestment wanting. At a moment in history when there are crucial measures to be taken to prevent the bad from getting worse, we no longer have the luxury of indulging in the rhetoric of disinvestment and refusal that is characteristic of the radical philosophies that set the tone in the wake of 9/11. It is against this background that I think we need to move beyond the dichotomy between incrementalism and disinvestment and start to explore alternative traditions of radical thinking, more effectively suited to respond to the momentous challenges of the present era.

Which are these traditions and what do I mean by radicality? Let me start with *radicality*, which is today often used as a merely formal word, being synonymous with subversive or disruptive tendencies in general. Thus, you would find nihilist and death-dealing practices such as terrorism being described as "radical," such as when it is said that someone has undergone "radicalization" when committing to fascist or politically extreme Islamist movements. What has happened here is that the word has been detached from any content or any value discourse, becoming an empty signifier. But this has not always been the case. Throughout modern history, being a "radical" has *meant* something. It has meant something in terms of specific commitments to distinct values—and it is this something that I think we need to retrieve today. All of which brings me to *tradition*. More precisely, I want to suggest that it is possible to reconstruct traditions of radicality that run through modernity and that would include figures like, for example, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Martin

43. See Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*.

44. See World Wildlife Fund, "Living Planet Report 2024."

Buber, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and many others. Reconstructed in this way, radicality is not just about disruption and revolt in general. Instead, it has a social goal with an inclusive plan and is tightly connected to discourses of justice.[45]

Although a distinctively modern phenomenon, one may also suggest that these traditions of radicality have deeper roots and ultimately draw on theological sources, especially the prophetic strand of the biblical legacy with its commitment to the weak and the vulnerable. Accordingly, there is a whole genre of literature which deals with the family resemblance between Marx (or Marxism) and a certain messianic-prophetic past—a genre that includes writers from Karl Löwith to Michael Löwy and Derrida.[46] Perhaps most vibrantly captured in Löwith's description of Marx as "a Jew of Old Testament stature," these thinkers have all in different ways suggested that modern radicalism can be seen as a secularization of biblical prophetism, in keeping with its central motifs (such as justice and righteousness) but at a distance from its original theological assumptions: "It is the old Jewish messianism and prophetism—unaltered by two-thousand years of economic history from handicraft to large-scale industry—and Jewish insistence on absolute righteousness which explain the idealistic basis of Marx's materialism."[47]

Interestingly, we find here an argument which is reminiscent of Schmitt's famous secularization thesis, which stipulates that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[48] However, there is a crucial difference. When Schmitt elaborated his method of conceptualizing political ideas via theological ones, his interest lay with a given set of theological concepts; more specifically, those concepts (including grace, miracle, and divine sovereignty) that Schmitt himself identified as the theological forerunners of his own key political concepts (including decision, exception, and the political sovereign). By contrast, we find in Löwith, Löwy, and Derrida another application of the secularization thesis based on a different genealogy.

This brings me back to the question of political theology, or rather, of political *theologies*. With the resurgence of interest in Schmitt around the turn of the millennium, "political theology" largely became tantamount to a preoccupation with the

45. In this sense, to be sure, radicalism has always gone hand in hand with socialism (taken in its broadest sense—even a social liberal like John Dewey embraced the term "radical," as he called for a socially committed liberalism); see Richard Bernstein, "Dewey's Encounter with Trotsky," 6–7. See also Paul McLaughlin, *Radicalism: A Philosophical Study*.

46. See, notably, Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (chap. 2); Michael Löwy, *Utopia and Redemption: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*; and Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. To be sure, there are significant differences in their assessment of the lasting value of Marx, ranging from Löwith's rejection of Marxism to Löwy's and Derrida's affirmative, albeit selective, approach.

47. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 44.

48. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 36.

theological concepts that Schmitt had foregrounded and, consequently, with political structures and strategies mirroring these concepts.[49] What the alternative genealogies referred to above remind us of is that the biblical legacy contains *other* theological motifs that may generate different conceptions of the political as well as of politics. This enables us to pose the question of what a political theology that would draw on alternative theologemes might look like. The question is not hypothetical. During the post–World War II decades, for example, the concept of political theology was recuperated from Schmitt's authoritarian thinking by theologians such as Dorothee Sölle, Johann Baptist Metzt, and Jürgen Moltmann. Drawing on motifs such as compassion, memory, and hope, they all elaborated radical political theologies that instead foregrounded ideals such as solidarity, vulnerability, and contrition in relation to the crimes of the recent past.[50]

Although the works of these theologians are fascinating, I do not think that we can merely go back and repeat what they wrote fifty years ago. As stated above, each time has its own challenges that need to be responded to, and the challenges of our time are not those of the haunted decades after World War II.[51] In my own efforts to elaborate a political theology that responds to the current predicament, I have instead found it productive to turn to the more recent writings of the Jewish Trotskyist thinker Daniel Bensaïd.[52] What makes Bensaïd particularly interesting in this context is that he was part of the political-philosophical debates that took place in the wake of 9/11 (he was a close interlocutor of Badiou in particular). And yet, he was also a fierce critic of the antinomian tendencies of these debates, which he saw as a betrayal of a more consistent materialist position.[53] To get a sense of Bensaïd's unique

49. Hence, the works of Agamben, Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek are replete with concepts like miracle, spirit, grace, and sovereignty (rather than, for example, deeds, compassion, repentance or righteousness—all of which have also been central concepts in both Jewish and Christian theology throughout history).
50. To list a few of their most important works, see Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology*; Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World*; and Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. An even earlier effort to challenge Schmitt's concept of political theology was offered by Martin Buber, although he countered it with his own concept of "theopolitics" rather than making a rivalling claim to the term political theology; see Charles H. T. Lesch, "Theopolitics Contra Political Theology: Martin Buber's Biblical Critique of Carl Schmitt."
51. This is not to say, of course, that the political theologies of Sölle, Metz, or Moltmann could not be used as resources for contemporary theological efforts to cope with the political challenges of our time. To mention but one of several excellent examples of such efforts (with particular regard to Sölle), see Ulrich Schmiedel, *Terror und Theologie: Der religionstheoretische Diskurs der 9/11-Dekade*.
52. See Jayne Svenungsson, "The End of Law and Other Miracles: On the Limitations of Apocalyptic Political Theologies" and "Prophetic Political Theology: Daniel Bensaïd's Alternative Radicalism."
53. See, for example, Daniel Bensaïd's chapter ("Permanent Scandal") in the volume *De-*

position, one should view it in the light both of a long life of ground-level political work (in France and abroad, notably in Brazil, where he played an important role in helping to organize the Workers Party[54]) and a deep commitment to a specific strand of Jewish political messianism and prophetism (including a profound engagement with Heine, Marx, Benjamin and several other figures in the traditions of radicality referred to earlier[55]).

What I find particularly fruitful with Bensaïd's thinking is that it allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of incrementalism versus disinvestment. As a radical, Bensaïd had little patience with reformist adaptation. However, he also saw the limitations of categorical demands for a total overthrow of the existing order. When all emphasis is placed on the revolutionary moment, such radicalism merely tends to breed resignation, as the perfect revolution will always fail to materialize. Drawing instead on a bifurcation of the concept of the permanent revolution (prominent in Trotskyist Marxism) with Benjamin's notion of the redemptive messianic event as incumbent in every second, Bensaïd proposes a different concept of revolutionary temporality. Thereby, he also invites to a different way of thinking of radicality and what radical commitment may entail: rather than succumbing to a rhetoric of pure negation—which again risks feeding into the anti-establishment agenda of the far right—radicality becomes a matter of endurance and perseverance, of persisting in the struggle against the relentless order of things even when immediate results fail to appear. In Bensaïd's own words, it means learning "the necessary revolutionary slowness, the courage of the everyday and the will of each day, which are again a restrained and dominated impatience."[56]

Translated into concrete political terms, such slow revolutionary practice could involve everything from engaging in local political battles to using creative artistic means to raise people's awareness of the pending ecological crisis.[57] It could also involve engaging in political struggles by way of asserting legal rights and using legal strategies, which may in fact prove to be one of the more promising ways of respond-

mocracy in What State? to which he contributed alongside Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and an array of other Marxist thinkers. For his specific critique of Badiou, see Bensaïd, "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event."

54. On the details of Bensaïd's political engagements—from his role in founding the French Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR) in 1966 to his partaking in the launch of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) shortly before his death, see Bensaïd, *An Impatient Life: A Political Memoir*.
55. On the details of how Bensaïd—rather late in his life—came to these Jewish sources (apart from Marx, who was, of course, there from the start), see Bensaïd, *Impatient Life*, 284–92.
56. Bensaïd, *Impatient Life*, 18.
57. For a thought-provoking example of the latter, see Paul Graham Raven and Johannes Stripple, "Touring the Carbon Ruins: Towards an Ethics of Speculative Decarbonisation."

ing to and acting upon some of the most urgent problems of our time.[58] However, my point here is not to provide a manual for radical agency. Rather it is about shifting perspective *philosophically*. Given the urgency of the moment, I think we need to turn away from the idea of radicality as negativity and disinvestment towards an idea of radicality as tenacity, persistence, and hope against all odds—the kind of radicality that is embodied in the people who risk their lives in their fight against brutal regimes around the world, or, in the more tacit fight of the senior Swiss ladies who struggled for years to bring home the first ever major climate case against a state in the European Court of Human Rights in the spring of 2024.[59] These are for me ways of carrying on the tradition of radicality referred to a moment ago, and this is what the enactment of a political theology drawing on prophetic motifs may entail in practice.

Postscript: The End of the World?

While hoping to have added a few perspectives to the rewarding philosophical exchange I have had with Thomas Lynch over many years now, a couple of questions still linger. In particular, one may wonder whether my retrieval of alternative traditions of radicality—exemplified by Bensaïd—really manages to advance our conversation on political theology. At the end of the day, does not all this talk of endurance and perseverance in the struggle for justice merely amount to *reinvesting* in the world and thereby to confirming Lynch's original concern with the argument I put forth in *Divining History*?

I am afraid it does, and I think we arrive here at the point where there is an irreducible difference in our perspectives, namely in our concepts or ontologies of the "world." As I stated already at the outset, I share Lynch's diagnosis that violence and tragedy is inherent to the world and not anything that will be overcome if we only trust in democratic processes and new forms of technology. What I do not share is the belief that the world may one day end in favor of another world, liberated from violence and tragedy. To be clear, Lynch has little patience with traditional theological ideas of otherworldly redemption, least of all of the sort entertained today within parts of evangelical Christianity, where this world is literally thought to be giving way to a "new heaven and earth" as a result of a cosmic upheaval. The concept of the world at play in Lynch's thinking is of a political nature and refers largely to the modern colonial world order as it is described and defined in Sylvia Wynter's influential essay "1492: A New World View."[60] Also, as I have shown, Lynch rejects any attempt to

58. For an excellent elaboration of this argument, see Leila Brännström, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Use the Legal Argument: A Critique of Giorgio Agamben's Conception of Law."
59. See KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, "Climate Action."
60. Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View." See also Lynch, "A Political Theology," 27–31.

impose or even offer a vision of an alternative world order, since any such vision will inevitably be drawing on the resources of the existing world: "Nothing is imposed because there is not yet the position from which to think new beginnings. For now, the end is enough."[61]

And yet the immanent apocalyptic desire that the world should come to an end still seems to tacitly presume the idea of a time when there will be no more violence and tragedy, even if we cannot yet envision it—just as it seems to presume that there has been a time in history when the world has not been inherently conflictual. In other words, even in its immanent and secular shape, this notion of the world structurally reiterates the apocalyptic imagination of a perfect paradisaic world before the fall to which creation will one day be restored. Without wishing to downplay or relativize the violence of the modern colonial world order, it is this old apocalyptic idea of a world without tears that I do not share. In this sense, my ontology of the world is a profoundly tragic one. As such, it recognizes that human life as well as the natural world is inherently conflictual. Throughout history—and long before 1492—humans have displayed an unfathomable capacity for violence and destructiveness.[62] To deny this would be to fail all those "unknowns to whom we are tied by an irredeemable debt," to speak with Bensaïd in the spirit of Benjamin.[63] In relation to the future, too, my concept of the world is thoroughly tragic. While, as I noted at the outset, people have always been prone to believe that they are living in the end times, there will never be a time when the world will come to an end in the sense that difference, conflict, and moral complexity will go away.[64]

Another way to describe this concept of the world would be to draw on the contrast between prophetic and apocalyptic. As Buber pointed out—and as emphasized later by historians such as John Collins—it was indeed on this precise point that prophetism and apocalypticism parted ways a little more than two thousand years ago: their opposing ontologies of the world.[65] When apocalypticism first emerged as a genre, it carried with it the novel idea that this world is not all there is, that redemption entailed the end of this world and the inbreak of a new perfect world. By contrast, the older prophetic texts know of no such world beyond this one; what is

61. Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 139. See also Lynch, "A Political Theology," 31–34.
62. Indeed, as Bensaïd notes: "The old days were not so merciful, after all, the days of the slaves who built the pyramids, those of the great famines and great plagues, of the Inquisition and the slave trade, of colonial massacres and burning at the stake, of the religious wars of Thirty or Hundred years!" (*Impatient Life*, 322–23).
63. Bensaïd, *Impatient Life*, 17.
64. The difference between an apocalyptic and a tragic conception of history, politics, and society is brought forth in an excellent way by Alison McQueen in *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 192–205. I owe much inspiration to her work.
65. See Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays by Martin Buber*, 192–207, and John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End."

envisaged here is a restored earthly society. Although these visions at times take on paradisaic qualities—such as Isaiah's prophecy of a time when the nations "shall beat their swords into ploughshares" (Isaiah 2:4)—the world envisioned here is still conditional upon choices made continuously by God's people. In this sense, it is a fragile world with no divinely predestined guarantees for peace and prospering.

Committing to a tragic ontology of the world is thus to renounce the idea that there is another world apart from this only one that we know, in all its tragedy and imperfection. But this is not to say that redemption is nowhere to be found, that we are hopelessly doomed to endless immanent violence. There is transcendence and there is redemption, not in a perfect world beyond but as a *possibility* and a *calling* in every moment to make this only world a little less tragic, a little less violent. This is the idea of radicality that resonates in the alternative traditions I have been referring to in this essay, expressed, for example, in Buber's words about the "radically demanding historical hour," in Benjamin's idea of "every second of time [as] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter," or in Bensaïd's call for "the courage of the everyday and the will of each day."[66]

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66. See Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 203; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 255; and Bensaïd, *Impatient Life*, 18.

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