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Political Theology Radicalized, and
Radical Politics Theologized in the
Work of Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey
Robbins

Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*

REVIEW ARTICLES

**The Rebirth of the Death of God:
Radical Theology Politicized, Political Theology Radicalized, and
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Jeffrey Robbins**

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

Wesleyan University

mrubenstein@wesleyan.edu

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical reflection on the mutually resonant recent works of Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins, both of whom expose “radical theology” as insufficiently political, “political theology” as insufficiently radical, and “radical politics” as insufficiently attuned to theology. In light of these shortcomings, they offer a radical political theology as a “necessary supplement” to the project of radical democracy—which is to say a politics of, by, and for “the multitude.” This article tracks the shifting and occasionally conflicting contours of this radically democratic theology.

Keywords

Crockett, Robbins, death of God, multitude, political theology, radical democracy, plasticity

If you have spent a fair amount of time in the proximity of continental philosophers of religion, then you can't have missed Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins. They are the ones, invariably, who stand up at the front or the back of the off-sized conference room with its bad acoustics and excruciating carpet to remind us that, in our ruminations about the end of metaphysics, the return of

the religious, or the affective turn, we have once again managed to forget about capitalism. Tirelessly, they insist that we cannot think “fundamentalisms” without neoliberalism, secularisms without war, war without oil, or any of it without the increasing convulsions of the earth and crises of global finance. In their two most recent books, both published through the “Insurrections” series of Columbia University Press, Crockett and Robbins perform a characteristically relentless interweaving of politics, economics, and theology—not only in order to expose the historical and structural interdependence of these fields, but, more pressingly, in service of a shared commitment to radical democracy (Crockett 2011, Robbins 2011).

Crockett and Robbins are both students of the late Charles Winquist, and so fall into the lineage of “radical theologians” stretching from Bonhoeffer and Tillich through Altizer, Hamilton, and Vahanian; Taylor, Raschke, and Wyschogrod; and Westphal, Kearney, and Caputo. Alongside these thinkers, Crockett and Robbins proclaim the death of the God of metaphysics and orthodoxy, setting forth the theological project as irreducibly this-worldly and attentive to the unexpected. Departing respectfully from their teachers, however, both scholars charge radical theology with being insufficiently radical, which is to say insufficiently political. At best, they worry, radical theology *forgets* the political, neglecting the links between the death of God and the rise of democracies and free-market capitalism. At worst, radical theology inadvertently upholds a political conservatism by extolling the freedom of the post-godly individual (who, however errant and undone, remains singular, Euro-American, and male) and by affirming uncritically the post-godly world (Crockett 2011, 10; Robbins 2011, 6–9).

And yet despite these shortcomings, neither Crockett nor Robbins is willing to abandon this mode of analysis in favor of one of the more explicitly political options in contemporary theology. In particular, they are (gently) critical of liberation theologies’ retention of a “prefabricated” transcendent God and of Radical Orthodoxy’s nostalgia for Christian empire (Crockett 2011, 10–11, 47; Robbins 2011, 11). Above all, Crockett and Robbins are seeking to dismantle the Schmittian notion, espoused by thinkers on the right *and* the left, that the only remedy for the ills of neoliberalism is a political theology centered around the figure of the sovereign. Rather, following Negri and Hardt in particular, they insist that liberalism is not coextensive with democracy, and that the remedy for the failures of liberal democracy is not less democracy but more—in particular, a politics of, by, and for “the multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004). In short, then, Crockett and Robbins expose radically theology as insufficiently political and political theology as insufficiently radical, combin-

ing the best of each strand of thinking into a *radical political theology*, which they offer as a “necessary supplement” to radical political philosophy (Crockett 2011, 100, 107; Robbins 2011, 6, 15, 120).

Given Crockett’s and Robbins’ shared commitment to the world (*saeculum*) we inhabit, and given their shared conviction that the God of orthodoxy is unresurrectably dead, one might wonder why they call their projects “theological” at all. What is “secular theology,” and why would a secular political philosophy need it? At the end of the day, does it really mean anything to “think God without God” (Crockett 2011, 12)? For his part, Crockett answers this question in two ways. The first is that “by jettisoning theology, [secular] thinking lacks a discourse in which to think or discuss ultimacy” (Crockett 2011, 15). The role of secular theology, then, would be to offer radical democracy such a discourse. While the term “ultimacy” is not explicated, it is clear that Crockett is channeling Paul Tillich’s famous definition of religion, which Charles Long articulates as “orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world” (cited in Crockett 2011, 15).

My concern regarding Crockett’s adoption of this definition is twofold. First, the language of “ultimacy” attempts not only to assert theology as indispensable (to the academy, to human existence, or to both), but also to reinstate theology as “the queen of the sciences” by giving it the highest object on the cosmic ladder—that is, “the ultimate.” In addition to being a lost cause, such an effort seems to me to detract from Crockett’s “purely immanent theological thinking” (Crockett 2011, 74), identifying theology with something “out there” or “beyond” this *penultimate* world. Second and more importantly, this appeal to ultimacy ends up conflating religion with theology, identifying both of them with a particularly Christian attunement to the mysterious and ineffable. Here, Crockett undermines not only his trenchant critique of secular philosophy’s residual Eurocentrism (Crockett 2011, 147), but also, once more, his focus on immanence. By identifying religion with theology and theology with ultimacy, religion becomes a matter of the extraordinary rather than the ordinary, and of thinking rather than embodiment. In short, then, I find Crockett’s appeal to ultimacy to be a less-than-satisfying answer to the question, “why does political philosophy need theology?”

A far more convincing answer, which both Crockett and Robbins offer throughout their writings, is that political philosophy is *already* a kind of theology, and as such must be subject to theological analysis. Both of them cite Carl Schmitt’s dictum that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” (cited in Crockett 2011, 78, Robbins 2011, 13)—particularly, and most problematically, the concept of

sovereignty. As Robbins explains, human authority is traditionally modeled upon divine authority: “just as a transcendent and omnipotent God operates outside the bounds of natural law, the sovereign is authorized to disregard every social norm and rule” (Robbins 2011, 14). Now this is clearly the case with a monarch, who transcends the very law he secures. But as Robbins makes particularly clear, it is also the case with “the people” of liberal democracy. Insofar as it is formed through enforced conformity on the one hand and the demonization of racial, national, and/or ethnic outsiders on the other, “the people” preserves the violent and exceptional logic of sovereignty. The problem with “secular” political theory, then, is that it is not nearly as secular as it thinks it is. Believing itself to be free of God (for example), most political theory ends up reinscribing God in the purportedly secular sphere. In the case of liberal democracy, the old dominological God reappears as the *demos* itself; as Tocqueville observed, “the people reign over the American political world like God over the universe” (cited in Robbins 2011, 24). The task of a *radical* political theology is therefore, first, to expose the theological underpinnings of purportedly secular political theory, and second, to dismantle the theo-logic of sovereignty in order to imagine it otherwise.

As Robbins emphasizes, however, sovereignty has in a sense already dismantled itself; most political theory simply hasn’t recognized it. Considering the rise of transnational banks and corporations, the circulation of global information technologies, and of course, the operations of an omnipresent market, Robbins proclaims that “the era of the nation-state has come to an end” (Robbins 2011, 43). Clearly, he points out, capitalism has globalized itself beyond the bounds of any allegedly sovereign state. But—and here it becomes crucial for both authors to disentangle democracy from liberalism—*democracy* has not globalized itself, precisely because it remains both practically and conceptually lodged within the model of the nation-state. What is necessary, then, is a reconfiguration of the *demos* beyond the violent and obsolete constraints of national sovereignty. With Hardt and Negri, Crockett and Robbins imagine such a radical democracy as a politics of the multitude itself.

Unlike “the people,” Crockett explains, “the multitude cannot be reduced to a unity” (Crockett 2011, 71). Resistant to univocity and closure at every turn, the multitude remains plural, open, discordant—even at times “unruly” (Robbins 2011, 127). As such, the multitude is the locus of a different sort of power from sovereignty: it is multiple rather than singular, diffuse rather than concentrated, immanent rather than transcendent, everyday rather than exceptional, and perhaps most importantly, to-come rather than actualized. With Derrida, Crockett and Robbins affirm that a democracy of the multitude is always “*a-venir*”

because the work of justice and equality are always unfinished—and, in fact, only possible by virtue of their being unfinished (Derrida, 2005). As such, true democracy only exists insofar as it is attuned to the possibility of something new: a different way of living on and with the earth, an unforeseen interruption of oppression and degradation whose arrival would constitute what Alain Badiou calls an “event” (Crockett 2011, 124).

One question, then, is what would constitute such an event. To channel the perennial protestors chant: *What* is what democracy look like? Crockett does not give many examples apart from the powerful weakness of a workers’ strike (Crockett 2011, 59). Robbins, for his part, offers a remarkably clear analysis of the Iranian Revolution and of the 2009 uprising, calling the latter a return of the multitude that the former summoned and then repressed (Robbins 2011, 99–103). But of course, even the example of Iran is lodged within the bounds of a nation-state. I wonder, then, whether the broader “Arab Spring,” irreducibly plurivocal and mediated by transnational information networks, might constitute something like an eruption of the non-sovereign multitude? Could we also see the stirrings of radical democracy in the “Occupy” movements that arose in complex and contested connection to the Arab Spring—in the sudden communities that have fed, educated, and mobilized their citizens by means of shifting and occasionally unruly experiments in egalitarianism—an event one activist-blogger called “democracy at play” (Rubenstein, 2011)?

Second, how does radical democracy distinguish “the multitude” from other kinds of collective formations? In the wake of the transnational September attacks and protests stoked by the global circulation of an anti-Muslim YouTube film, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that “the people of Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia did not trade the tyranny of a dictator for the tyranny of a mob” (“Secretary” 2012). Is there a way to disentangle the freedom-loving “multitude” of 2011 from the raging “mob” of 2012? Or might this “mob” be thought *together* with the counter-protests throughout the so-called Arab World as multiple expressions of the multitude? And at the end of the day, what sort of violence, and how much, can the “permanent revolt” of radical democracy stand? I cannot pretend to have the answers to these questions, but it seems important to ask them, if only to avoid romanticizing “the multitude” as such.

Finally, what is the theology implicit in Crockett’s and Robbins’ event-ual democracy of the multitude? It is at this point that the two thinkers diverge—both from one another and, at times, from themselves. While John Caputo’s recent work on the weakness of God makes an appearance in both texts (Caputo 2006), it is more fully integrated by Robbins, who calls upon divine weakness as a theological alternative to the orthodox God of power and might (Robbins 2011, 6). For Rob-

bins as for Caputo, the weakness or non-sovereignty of God grounds a fully messianic theology, a “theology of the event, wherein Christ is identified with those who are left behind” (Robbins 2011, 174). In this identification, Robbins maintains, weakness becomes its own kind of power—a “solidarity with the poor and outcast” that orients the multitude toward that “which is already past,” and yet is still to come, to transform the relentlessly oppressive order of things (Robbins 2011, 175).

Robbins’ attraction to this model of divine weakness is understandable: it interrupts the logic of dominion at its theological core *and* it establishes concrete, human communities—in their multiple struggles for justice—as irreducibly bound up with God. That having been said, Robbins’ weak messianic force also raises a number of questions in relation to his broader project. The first is the relationship of divine weakness to divine multiplicity. As we have seen, Robbins calls throughout his work for a political “shift from the people as one to the multitude as many” (Robbins 2011, 6). Frankly, this leads one to expect a similar shift in theology. But rather than a multitudinous divinity (I am thinking here of Laurel Schneider’s “theology of multiplicity,” or of Catherine Keller’s “turbulent swarm of godhood” [Schneider 2008; Keller 2003]), Robbins’ book opts for a weak one, whose relationship to “the many” is not entirely clear. If the power of the multitude is indeed “irresistible” (Robbins 2011, 165), then why would it need or even want the solidarity of a singular, weak God?

A second question concerns this solidarity itself—that is, the (strikingly liberationist) “identification” Robbins proclaims between the weak God and the poor and outcast. Does this identification not draw a distinction between the very terms it identifies? However non-sovereign God may be, is God not figured here, not only as strangely singular, but also as *transcendent* to the very multitude with which God is in solidarity? In short, given Robbins’ concern to circumscribe an “immanent and democratic” theology of the multitude (Robbins 2011, 174), one wonders why he does not follow this line of thinking all the way through and proclaim God to *be* the multitude. Robbins mentions Tocqueville’s shocked realization that democracy fully conceived might amount to “pantheism,” and Tocqueville’s subsequent recoiling from the idea (Robbins 2011, 164). It seems to me that Robbins might recoil similarly from the pantheism he stumbles upon (or at least the anthropo-theism he stumbles upon; a pan-theology would require a fully cosmological scope). But if God is aligned with the multitude, and if the multitude is “analogous to the messianic” (Robbins 2011, 177) then why not proclaim the multitude to *be* the very God we’re waiting for?

In *Rogues*, Derrida reminds us of Rousseau’s conviction that “if there were a people of gods, it would govern itself democratically.” Rousseau therefore con-

cludes that “So perfect a government, is not suited to men” (Derrida 2005, 75). But could it be suited to the multitude? As Derrida asks, “the democracy to come, will this be a god to come? Or more than one?” (Derrida 2005, 77). Could a truly radical democracy *be* the god(s) that emerge after the death of God? (“*Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?*” [Nietzsche 1974, §125])

This leads to my final concern with Robbins’ appeal to a weak messianic force—a concern that in fact finds elegant articulation throughout Crockett’s own book (although he does not mention Robbins in this regard). However powerless or emptied of content, Crockett is worried that the widespread appeal to the messianic among contemporary theorists “reflects at least in part a strategy to defend Eurocentrism and Western culture” (Crockett 2011, 147). By orienting the messianic community temporally—that is, toward its “own” beginning and end—messianicity denies “any spatial diffusion or contamination of [purportedly] separate cultures” (Crockett 2011, 147). Crockett finds this insularity at work most problematically in certain interpretations of “the deconstruction of Christianity,” which is also to say “the death of God”: as Derrida worried, if it is Christianity’s essence to undo itself, then even the undoing of Christianity “will be a Christian victory” (in Crockett 2011, 150). This, then, is my third concern with the weakness of God; to be sure, one does not have to listen carefully to hear the Christian overtones of a powerless messiah who is identified with, and yet different from, the multitude (*oklos*) that follows and awaits him.

In the face of such stubborn Euro-Christo-centrism, Crockett proposes that a radical political theology might think the event in terms not of messianism, but rather of *plasticity*. Working alongside Catherine Malabou (Malabou 2009), Crockett finds promise in plasticity’s immanence and decentralization: “there is no ghost or god in the [plastic] machine; the machine is not just a machine, however, but an adaptive system of such irreducible complexity that it generates new forms of such complexity, or additional layers of plasticity” (Crockett 2011, 153). What, then, does this have to do with theology? While Crockett does not say a great deal about the relationship between plasticity and divinity, it seems to me that one can draw the following distinctions: if God the Father creates the world once and for all out of nothing, and all by himself, plasticity keeps changing and adapting that which emerges out of a complex set of relations. So unlike the messianic hope that something radically new might break in from above (or beyond), the plastic promise is that newness is constantly emerging from within the multiply-connected “old.” And the source and site of such divine plasticity, as far as this reader can tell, would be the multitude itself: “an already exist-

ing subject awaiting a political project for its realization” (Robbins 2011, 178). So again, along this line of thinking, the irreducibly multiple, shape-shifting, ever-open *demos* of radical democracy would *be* the god(s) of radical democracy. But perhaps this is farther than Crockett or Robbins would be willing to go.

Apart from their tireless commitment to political critique and social change, what strikes one above all about the work of Robbins and Crockett is its *expansiveness*. Not only do they seem to have read everything, but they also manage to orchestrate this everything into a multivocal analytic strategy. To be sure, they have their saints—Hardt and Negri, Nietzsche, Spinoza—but they have very few demons, preferring for the most part to read their sources as generously as possible, and to mobilize whatever is useful in service of radical democracy. To that end, they call upon a veritable slew of thinkers, marking their dissonance from one another but then letting the dissonance be. In Crockett’s work in particular, I confess that it can feel a bit dizzying to encounter all these thinkers piled onto and trudged through one another: “to read Lacan into Agamben and Deleuze,” he writes, “I am also reading Agamben and Deleuze, at least implicitly, in the context of Žižek and Badiou” (Crockett 2011, 118). Robbins, too, marshals authors as discordant as Benjamin Barber, Mark Lilla, and Francis Fukuyama to augment and complicate the works of Sheldon Wolin, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière. But it seems to me that for Crockett and Robbins, this theoretical pile-on is not simply an effort to describe radical political theology; it is an effort to *perform* it. By folding each of these thinkers into one another, Crockett and Robbins are effectively assembling what Bill Connolly might call a counter-resonance machine (Connolly 2005); a sometimes unruly riot of “Derrida *and* Deleuze, Deleuze *and* Agamben *and* Badiou *and* Zizek *and* Negri *and* Malabou *and* Nancy” (Crockett 2011, 158–159), not to mention Asad, De Vries, Connolly, Butler, Bergson, Kant, Caputo, Keller, Taylor, Foucault, Polyani, Altizer, Heidegger, Hegel, Benjamin, Lacan, Stout, Strauss, and even Schmitt. Rather than siding with one or two of these thinkers against the others, Crockett and Robbins summon all of them *through* one another, as if calling forth a divine multitude to shape, receive, and transform the future of democracy. As if to say, the resources are there; the multitude stands ready; this world is already becoming something new.

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