

Trinitarian political theology and radical democracy: Barth, Mouffe and the Populist Moment

Haddorff, David

St. John's University, New York, NY, USA
haddorfd@stjohns.edu

Abstract

This article brings into dialogue Karl Barth and the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. The purpose here is not to provide a detailed comparison, but to explore why Mouffe's thought is relevant to the current political situation, which provides the contemporary context for engaging Barth's political theology. This argument involves: 1) a political analysis of the current political situation offered by Mouffe; 2) a particular interpretation of Barth's political theology emerging from a trinitarian theological framework; 3) a comparison between the political thought of Mouffe and Barth emerging from Barth's trinitarian political theology. This engagement is less concerned with critiquing Mouffe from a theological viewpoint, than positively demonstrating how Mouffe's thought can be seen as a "secular parable" for a political theology in which trinitarian theology provides a framework. Central to this political theology are the ideas of equality, freedom, participation, and promise, which provide a theo-political framework for a radical democracy.

Key words

Radical democracy; Chantal Mouffe; Karl Barth; Trinity/Trinitarian Theology; political theology; political populism

1. Introduction

In this article I bring into dialogue Karl Barth and the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. The task here is not to draw an exact comparison between the two, but to explore why Mouffe's thought provides a helpful analysis of the current political situation, which provides the contemporary context for engaging Barth's political theology. This argument involves three steps. The first step provides a political analysis of the current political situation offered by Mouffe. The second step provides a particular

interpretation of Barth's political theology emerging from a trinitarian theological framework, as developed in the *Church Dogmatics*.¹ The last step draws a comparison between political thought of Mouffe and Barth, demonstrating how various political themes from both relate to the framework of Barth's trinitarian theology. The purpose here is not critique Mouffe from a theological viewpoint, but to show, more positively, how Mouffe's thought can be seen as a "secular parable" within this theological framework.² Stated differently, just as I'm demonstrating how trinitarian theology provides a framework for political theology, I'm also engaging the political philosophy of Mouffe in order to more fully understand our contemporary political situation of the "populist moment." The intersection of these two lines of argument provides a way to think about political witness, rooted in what Barth calls "special ethics," in which one engages in "instructional preparation for hearing God's command," which calls us to act as responsible witnesses here and now.³ This "instructional preparation" occurs in two steps, namely the second part of the article focuses on Barth's trinitarian theology, which provides a framework for political theology that responds to the ideas of radical democracy and "populist moment," which are outlined in the first part. Central to this argument is how trinitarian theology provides a framework for political theology, and more exactly, how God's trinitarian action fosters a political theology of authority, freedom, participation, and promise, which provides a theopolitical framework for a political democracy.

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- 1 Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. Translated and edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77). Hereafter, all citations to the *Church Dogmatics* will be abbreviated as CD, followed by volume and part.
 - 2 Barth says there are nontheological ideas that are "secular parables of the kingdom" that bear witness to the truth and "illuminate, accentuate, or explain the biblical witness in a particular time and situation." Barth, CD IV/3, 115. For my earlier discussion of "secular parables" in relation to postmodernism, globalization, social theory, and ethics see David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness: Barth's Ethics for a World at Risk* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 128–94.
 - 3 Barth writes: "Special ethics may thus serve as an instructional preparation for the ethical event." See CD: III/4, 18.

2. Mouffe and the Populist Moment

To begin, let us turn to Chantal Mouffe's latest book *For A Left Populism*, in which she describes how Western Europe and the USA are currently undergoing a shift toward political populism, both on the right and the left.⁴ Although right populism originated in the 1990's, it has strengthened since the 2008 economic crises, and was given its greatest success in the United States with the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016, who transformed the centre-right Republican Party toward a populist right movement. In shifting American policies toward economic and political nationalism, anti-immigration, and authoritarian attacks on the liberties of free speech and press, there has also emerged a diverse resistance populist left movement by individuals and institutions. This resurgence of a populist left led to an overwhelming victory by leftist Democratic candidates in the mid-term Congressional election in 2018. This resurgence has further raised new questions about socialism and the populist left in relation to the mainstream centre-left Democratic consensus. This leftist development in the USA is similar to other movements in Europe and populist successes in Spain and Greece. The important feature here is that both right and left populist movements have resisted the centre-right/left establishment and rhetorically situated the people against apparent hegemonies that destabilize the social order and undermine particular understandings of citizenship, community, and justice. Although Mouffe does not address the political situation in South Africa, there is no doubt that similar forces may arise as a reaction to frustrations with the current ANC government. Right or left populism can take different forms in different countries and may not depend on the same criteria but offer alternative visions for addressing the frustration and apparent failure with centrist parties.

So, the challenge to the ANC has arisen on the left, which may continue to challenge mainstream politics with the inherent economic problems of income inequality and injustice as represented in the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). As political frustrations mount, right populism, as represented perhaps by the African Transformation Movement (ATM), will seek to preserve nationalism and limit foreign intrusions, whether through immigration or migration.

4 Chantal Mouffe, *For A Left Populism* (London/New York: Verso, 2018).

So, let us return to the writings of the Belgian political thinker Chantal Mouffe, who has presented a political theory that corresponds to the actual developments in Western politics. During the last 30 years, Mouffe has consistently argued that radical democratic politics, not unlike political liberalism, should be pluralistic and inclusive, but unlike liberalism it must also be hegemonic, and agonistic. In her initially important 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, co-written with her late husband Ernesto Laclau, she draws upon Antonio Gramsci to argue that hegemony is an inevitable outgrowth of social and cultural beliefs and practices, which makes their conflict inevitable.⁵ Since cultural hegemony is a two-way not a one-way street, it makes it possible to argue, for example, that the social practices shape people's convictions, just as much as convictions or ideas shape their practices. For a radical democracy to emerge it must draw upon all aspects of society to form various social movements to challenge and resist the dominant hegemony. These new social movements form new hegemonies that challenge the dominant hegemony in power. The key point here is that the dominant hegemonic power must be matched or challenged by an alternative form of hegemonic power emerging from reflexive democratic social movements. Negative power must be matched by positive power, or put differently, negative (or dominant) hegemony must be matched by positive hegemony. This is why the hegemonic power behind the "consent" of the people, as a radical democracy, is essential for resisting political authoritarianism and injustice. When social movements are formed and begin resisting the dominant hegemony, there becomes a freeing of moral and political democratic agency. Democracy is revived through the recognition of the destructive power of, and resistance to, the dominant hegemonies within of democratic society.

Another of the central ideas of Mouffe's thought is agonism. This idea of agonism, in turn, is distinguished from "antagonism," which is further rooted in the distinction between the "political" and "politics," which she draws in part from the controversial political thinker Carl Schmitt. In her 2013 book *Agonistics*, she writes:

5 See Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985).

The “political” refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can’t be eradicated. “Politics”, on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of “the political”.⁶

Drawing from Schmitt, she defines the political as inherently “antagonistic” rooted in the “radical negativity” of human nature, but unlike Schmitt, she defines politics as the “agonistic” process of democratic transformation.⁷ That is to say, against Schmitt’s antagonistic “friend/enemy” framework to both the political and politics, Mouffe’s strategy of radical democracy presumes the antagonism of the political, but transforms it into a pluralistic and inclusive form of adversarial and agonistic politics. Moreover, unlike the rather idealistic account of political liberalism of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Mouffe’s approach to democratic agonism does not seek one consensual decision to every political debate but presumes there will always be differences among adversaries that are never fully resolved through consensus.⁸ The goal of radical democracy is to use agonism to enhance an inclusive deepening of plurality and diverse viewpoints within an understanding of political struggle. Said differently, if radical democracy is to succeed it must weaken political antagonism through agonism, which implies an inclusive deepening of plurality within an understanding of an adversarial struggle of hegemonies rooted in social movements.

Another important aspect of radical democracy is its link to the political left and socialist legacy. Radical democracy itself is not socialism as it can take any form in resistance to the dominant hegemony, however, with the emergence of neoliberal capitalism, the movements of radical democracy

6 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 2–3.

7 Her most sustained engagement with the thought of Carl Schmitt in relation to political liberalism can be found in Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 36–59. Also see her edited work, Chantal Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London/New York: Verso, 1999).

8 She discusses the political liberalism of Habermas and Rawls in several books, but the most recent sustained discussion occurs in C. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 54–55; 137–38.

lean in the socialist direction. Mouffe argues that the history of the current struggle of politics is rooted in the triumph of neoliberal globalization, which began in the 1980's when Thatcherism deconstructed the post-war democratic-socialist welfare state. What emerged was a set of political-economic practices aimed at imposing the rule of the market, such as deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, and limiting the role of the state to the protection of private property rights, free markets and free-trade.⁹ This neoliberal hegemony has opened up the tension between political liberalism and democracy leading to a “post-democratic situation”. Mouffe writes:

With the demise of the democratic values of equality and popular sovereignty, the agonistic spaces where different projects of society could confront each other have disappeared and citizens have been deprived of the possibility of exercising their democratic rights. To be sure, “democracy” is still spoken of, but it has been reduced to its liberal component and it only signifies the presence of free elections in the defence of human rights. What has become increasingly central is the economic liberalism with its defence of the free market and many aspects of political liberalism have been relegated to second place, if not simply eliminated. This is what I mean by “post-democracy”.¹⁰

Crucial to her understanding to “post-democracy” is the important distinction between political liberalism and democracy. Political liberalism includes the rule of law, the separation of powers and the defence of individual freedoms and rights, whereas democracy affirms human equality and popular sovereignty. Although these two traditions have matured together in Western societies, they are not contingent, and indeed, democracy always will prove to be a threat to liberalism, as it can redefine and resist the hegemonies of consensus and abstract universalism. In theory this tension remains active, but once the neoliberal capitalist framework is combined with the liberal democratic framework, it creates a “post-democratic situation” in which the democratic values of the equality and popular sovereignty are marginalized. Post-democracy, then,

9 C. Mouffe, *For the Populist Left*, 11.

10 *Ibid.*, 16.

replaces popular sovereignty, including mass participation and decision-making, with a weak political liberalism that fails to address the problem of how democracy is undermined and marginalized through economic neoliberalism.

In her 2005 book *On the Political*, Mouffe further argues that this post-democratic situation leads to a “post-political situation” that blurs the political boundaries between the political right and left. This occurs through the power of the mainstream consensus, which eliminates antagonism and fails to challenge or resist the emergence of the populist right.¹¹ This means the centre right/left consensus of liberalism, while seeking to eliminate the voices of so-called fringe radical movements from the consensus, have given the citizenry no real political alternative to the consensus. Politics becomes management, while popular sovereignty and equality becomes marginalized and even eradicated from the public square. This creates a vacuum filled by the populist right. In fact, since mainstream liberalism is wed to neoliberal globalization it cannot challenge the inevitable outcome of neoliberalism, which leads to radical income inequality or what she calls “oligarchization.” Here the economy is not only deregulated and privatized but transformed by the “financialization of the economy” in which the financial sector takes over all other aspects of the economy and business creating a market society.¹² All these factors have led to the recent rise of the populist moment. Right wing populism was the first to seize on these crises, trying to empower the working class, by directing its anger against immigrants or global markets and institutions, trade imbalances, and corporate relocation to cheaper labour markets. Since the right populists propagate political and economic nationalism, the centre-left liberals have focused on their nationalistic “fascist-like” message, while failing to address the real underlying problem of oligarchic neoliberalism. In so doing, the centrist liberal parties actually unknowingly become anti-democratic.

Considering these factors, Mouffe concludes that if there is to be a challenge to the populist right, centrist parties and neoliberal globalization, it must come from a left populism. In contrast to the simple “sterile” reformism of the centre-left, she calls for a radical reformism that empowers the state

11 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 66–72.

12 C. Mouffe, *For A Left Populism*, 17–18.

to become more radically democratic. Drawing its hegemonies from the diversity of political and civil society it seeks to alter and transform existing institutions towards greater equality and popular sovereignty. Espousing ethical and political principles of liberal democracy, like equality, liberty, freedom, and justice, radical democracy is empowered by its engagement of present and future problems of social injustice and the environmental crisis. In this way radical democracy becomes the “hegemonic transformation” of political liberalism. Regarding this, Mouffe writes:

The strategy of left populism seeks the establishment of a new hegemonic order within the constitutional liberal-democratic framework and it does not aim at a radical break with pluralist liberal democracy and the foundation of a totally new political order. Its objective is the construction of a collective will, a ‘people’ apt to bring about a new hegemonic formation that will re-establish the articulation between liberalism and democracy that has been disavowed by neoliberalism, putting democratic values in the leading role.¹³

What is needed here is a pluralistic and inclusive construction of the people that stands in contrast to the racist and nationalistic view of the populist right. Political adversaries, not enemies, must be articulated and challenged. The adversary here is not the immigrant, but the oligarchs, the economic and political powers that create inequality in society. Unlike a common identity established by race, religion, culture or class, the populist left constructs its understanding of the people within a deeply-rooted framework of diversity and difference that draws on particular practices of culture and religion. Within these differences, there emerges “chains of equivalence,” in which diverse persons establish common beliefs and practices about political courses of action, which are used to distinguish the “we” from the “they.” “Such a move is necessary to draw the political frontier separating the ‘we’ from the ‘they,’ which is decisive in the construction of a ‘people.’”¹⁴ Central to this new inclusive formation of the “people” is a revised understanding of citizenship that breaks free from the individualism of liberalism and tribal identity of right populism. This

13 *Ibid.*, 45.

14 *Ibid.*, 63.

form of citizenship, she calls a “grammar of conduct,” that challenges the ideology of the “citizen as a consumer, which is the “linchpin of the post-democratic vision.”¹⁵ This form of citizenship, establishes not so much a “we” as a set of “we’s,” involved in a “plurality of engagements.”¹⁶ This creates, she says, a “multiplicity of agonistic public spaces where one should intervene to radicalize democracy.”¹⁷

Lastly, in contrast to those more revolutionary radical democrats who stress only direct horizontal or bottom-up democratic model, she argues for the possibility of representative and executive top-down leadership roles. As she puts it: “The project of radicalization of democracy that I am proposing envisages a combination of different forms of democratic participation, depending on the spaces and social relations where liberty and equality should be implemented.”¹⁸

What is essential to these models is the leadership’s accountability and responsibility to the people. Everything depends on the kind of relational responsibility that is established between a leadership and the people. In liberalism and the populist right, the leadership claims such accountability, but then acts independently taking power away from the people. In contrast, the populist left acts on behalf of the people in their struggle against the political and economic powers that seek to eliminate popular sovereignty and equality before the law.

3. Barth and Trinitarian Political Theology

Similar to Mouffe, Karl Barth is committed to a radical form of democracy, which is to say an activist, inclusive, form of political action that splits the difference between a stagnant reformism and revolution. Both would also understand the need for social and democratic movements that represent the political and economic interests of everyone and not just the rich and powerful. Hence, both would support some form of democratic socialism, which focuses less on sets of political procedures and more on

15 *Ibid.*, 65–66.

16 *Ibid.*, 67.

17 *Ibid.*, 69.

18 *Ibid.*, 69.

consolidating democratic power to resist the various forms of political, economic, ideological, and technological hegemony. Moreover, both would affirm that democracy is more fundamental than political liberalism. In the 1940's Barth stated that democracy, under the rule of law, is the power that moves a constitutional liberal state toward greater freedom. In an often-repeated phrase, he says "that the Christian line" following from the gospel moves in the direction of the "democratic state."¹⁹ Democracy is preferred because election heals the tension between the individual and the community by making persons *free* within the political community. This takes place through the reconciling action of the triune God to stand for and with us in the election of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, as fully God and fully human, the triune God's self-determination acts in and through the covenant of grace as both the divine elector and the human elected: first, God elects to come to us in human flesh, but second, Jesus as the elected "new man," as the representative of humanity, approaches God as a free human subject. All human history, including political history, is viewed through the lens of history of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God's sovereignty acts with and for others as both master and servant, whose "kingdom is neither a barracks or prison, but the home of those who even, with and by him are free."²⁰

Beginning with the Christological framework, therefore, if we are to link the "freedom" of democracy to political theology, then we need to see how Barth's political thought is shaped by his trinitarian theology.²¹ Therefore, let us begin with CD I/1, where Barth insists that we must always balance

19 Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 181.

20 Barth, *CD II/2*, 312.

21 In my previous writings, the doctrine of the Trinity, although briefly mentioned, was not fully integrated into a discussion of Barth's political theology. In earlier monograph, I provided a survey of Barth's political writings more than the doctrinal framework of this thought. See, David Haddorff, "Karl Barth's Theological Politics," in Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays. With a New Introduction by David Haddorff* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 1–67. In the later article, "Barth and Democracy," I focused mainly on the doctrine of creation in CD III and ecclesiology in CD IV, and in my latest book, I focused mostly the doctrine of God's command, soteriology, and Christological material in CD II and IV. In each of these writings, I do mention the Trinity in relation to Barth's political theology, but do not explore this in any detail. For these later two writings, see: 1) David Haddorff, "Barth and Democracy," in Daniel L. Migliore (ed), *Commanding Grace: Studies in Christian*

God's oneness in threeness and threeness in oneness, where he writes: "we cannot advance beyond these two obviously one-sided and inadequate formulations."²² The dialectical balance between these two ways is expressed in the doctrines of *perichoresis* and appropriation. The doctrine of *perichoresis* explores threeness in oneness in God's being, while the doctrine of appropriation explores oneness in threeness in God's works. For a trinitarian politics of divine action, this distinction is fundamental, since political theology often errs when it prioritizes either one and becomes modalistic. In social trinitarianism, for example, *perichoresis* is prioritized so that God's being becomes a model for human social relations that is projected back onto God as a form of natural theology, which is then used as model for progressive politics.²³ Likewise, when appropriation is prioritized, it links God's particular modes of being with particular kinds of political theory or practice. So, for example, the politics of the Father provides a model for hierarchy or centralization, the politics of the Son provides a model for anarchic pacifism or ecclesiological separateness, and the politics of the Spirit provides a model for versions of political utopianism or nationalism. In each case, God's trinitarian freedom gives way to particular political models reducing God's sovereignty to ideological models of politics. Moreover, both of these positions deny that the immanent trinity is the ontological source of the economic, and instead affirm a model of God's action, which limits unity within difference and difference within unity, and in so doing reject the classic principle demonstrating the undivided nature of God's external works: *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*.

It is a mistake, therefore, to either too closely identify or draw too much of a separation from the doctrine of Trinity from human politics. The Trinity does not so much provide a model for progressive politics as doctrine for human participation in the mystery of God's trinitarian action in history. As Kathryn Tanner writes: "[We] are therefore not called to imitate the

Ethics (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010), 96–121; and 2) David Haddorff, *Christian Ethics as Witness*, 94–124; 369–93.

22 Barth, *CD I/1*, 368.

23 See Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207–46.

trinity by way of the incarnation but brought to participate in it.”²⁴ Barth would agree but would not simply end with the God’s triune mission and human participation within the Trinity, as he further provides theological account of ethics, including God’s command and the human response. God’s command is not an abstract concept or ethical principle, rather it is the imperative of responsible freedom rooted in the indicative of who God is, as the gracious trinitarian commander. Since there is no generic humanity outside the humanity of Jesus Christ but only a humanity that is restored, healed, and allowed to live in free response to God’s gracious command, then says Barth, the divine command, says Barth, is a “*permission – the granting of a very definite freedom,*” as it “orders us to be free.”²⁵ This ‘imperative of freedom’ is a calling into God’s triune mission which makes the command itself trinitarian. In *CD III/4*, Barth, more concretely, distinguishes between *perichoresis* and appropriation demonstrating how God’s command is one and yet three in relation to God’s external works.²⁶ Succinctly put, there are not three commands but one, and yet, the command comes to us in different ways of relating to the one God. Just as theology can distinguish between God’s trinitarian works, so we can speak about the specificity of the divine command as undivided within the three spheres of God’s action as Father, Son, and Spirit in the actions of creator, reconciler, and redeemer.

It is this notion of the specificity of the command, which often leads critics of Barth to say that his command ethics is too abstract and not applicable to politics.²⁷ What is the “concrete specificity” of the command? In *CD II/2* Barth discusses how the “definite event” of the command involves the tasks of listening, testing, and acting, thus opening up space for more listening, testing, and acting. The task of Christian ethics relies extensively upon “instructional preparation for the ethical event.”²⁸ In order to listen, test, and act one needs to prepare for the event. In *CD III/4* and *The Christian Life* he shifts toward the “instructional or pedagogical” task of ethics, and

24 *Ibid.*, 234.

25 Barth, *CD II/2*, 585; 593.

26 See Barth, *CD III/4*, 32–38.

27 For example, see Robin Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 18–43.

28 Barth, *CD III/4*, 18.

how this task of “special ethics” provides the background for task of testing one’s moral judgments and actions. In testing and acting, one invites corresponding human and divine moral judgment that opens up the space between God and us, which is then filled by God’s gracious command of freedom or permission to act as responsible witness. Political witness in our current context, therefore, involves preparing for God’s command through learning, preparing, testing, and acting within this current situation in response to the God’s action in election, creation, reconciliation, and redemption. We now take each of these four divine actions in turn.

4. The God who elects, creates, reconciles, and redeems

In this section, we explore the political themes that emerge from the divine actions of election, creation, reconciliation and redemption. Although grounded in divine action, these political themes, such as equality, responsible freedom, participation and promise, will show significant similarity to Mouffe’s political ideas, which makes the critical engagement possible between Barth and Mouffe. The importance of Mouffe’s ideas for political theology, thus, rests not in her theology but in her analysis of the current situation, which provides a “secular witness” or secular parable of truth for our current circumstances. Yet for the theological underpinnings of political theology we must look to Barth, and more particularly, at the fundamental importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to political theology.

Before we explore God’s external works as Father, Son and Spirit, it is necessary to first begin with *election*, which is the other side of the divine command of grace. If political theology is to begin with God’s trinitarian action, it must first begin with God’s election to be with us and for us in Jesus Christ. At this point, we are looking particularly at CD II/1–2, which explores the doctrine of God, who “loves in freedom,” from the standpoint of God’s threeness in oneness. Central to this divine unity is *perichoresis*, where we see the one decision of the triune God, as Father, Son and Spirit in eternal relation, to elect persons into mutual and egalitarian fellowship. This awareness first takes place within the church, which in turn, gives witness to the civil community that it too is reconciled to God. The Christian community serves as a “model and prototype” of the civil

community demonstrating to the civil community, how to give *witness* to Christ's rule. God's election affirms that the individual is "no mere delegate, but in his own right a bearer of this people's responsibility. He is no vassal, but a free citizen."²⁹ The democratic community becomes free and responsible through the gracious gift of the responsible "free citizen." For Barth this task leads directly toward democracy, both in the church and the state. Barth writes: "Christian choices and purposes in politics tend on the whole toward the form of State, which, if is not actually realized in the so-called 'democracies,' is at any rate more or less honestly clearly intended and desired."³⁰ Like Mouffe, Barth would say that democracy is preferred because it heals the tension between the individual and the community by making persons *free* within the political community. Unlike, Mouffe, however, Barth would also say that God's election is the source of this healing. Nevertheless, both would argue that democratic socialism and global cooperation is preferred over various forms of political nationalism and free market capitalism. During World War II, Barth writes: "And since it [Christian view of the state] makes the rights of the community and personal responsibility the yardstick of order, *democracy* comes nearer to that ideal state than an aristocratic or monarchical dictatorship, *socialism* than an untrammelled capitalistic order with the social and business system based on it; a *federation of free states* (free also as such as possible from the principle of nationalism) than the rivalry of independent and uncontrollably competing national states."³¹

Just as election rightly understood leads to the proper view of individual dignity, equality, and freedom, a false view of election leads to hegemonic forms of antidemocratic totalitarianism. In *CD II/2*, Barth briefly discusses two "secular imitations" of election in the political realm that emerge from false views of the election of the individual and the community. The first error is when Jesus Christ, the true elected one, is replaced with the election of the political leader as sovereign. The second error equates election with the concept of the "national people" or the "social mass." Although both parodies of election are rooted in Western individualism, the latter concept

29 Barth, *CD II/2*, 312.

30 Barth, *Community, State and Church*, 182.

31 Karl Barth, *The Church and the War* (New York; Macmillan, 1944), 39.

is the inevitable consequence of the first, leading to a “total state.”³² Similar to Mouffe, Barth sees the totalitarian dangers of authoritarianism and collectivism rooted in the legacy of individualism incapable of disciplining itself through a participatory democracy, but unlike Mouffe, Barth also sees these hegemonies rooted in a corrupted view of divine election. When persons deny the fundamental reality of God’s election, their self-awareness changes from freedom and responsibility to isolation and separateness. Both Barth and Mouffe would affirm that the antidote to individualism is not just democracy but *more* democracy, that is, more democratic participation and social engagement, which drives persons from their isolation into public life. A free society depends on an active free citizenry acting for the welfare of the community. Yet Barth’s theological analysis digs deeper into the antidemocratic hegemony of individualistic isolation, as a “shadow reality”, that rejects God’s election, which transforms the individual and the community in the direction of a free democratic society.

Now that we’ve looked at the theme of God’s *perichoretic* threeness in oneness in election, we can now move to God’s oneness in threeness evident in the appropriation of God’s action as Father, Son, and Spirit in creation, reconciliation, and redemption. In so doing, however, we must also continue to maintain the principle *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, namely that in these three specific external works the Father, Son, and Spirit are all acting as one God as creator, reconciler, and redeemer. In each of these divine actions, we will see political themes emerging that provide a framework for a trinitarian political theology, rooted in God’s trinitarian command.

Let us begin with the action of God the *creator*, where we see themes of freedom and responsibility in political theology. In creation the stage is set for the unveiling of God’s elective grace, as the Father who loves in freedom, determines through the Son, to be a covenant God in the power of the Spirit. God’s covenant-partnership empowers persons, says Barth, to live in “openness of the one to the other with the view to and on behalf of the other.”³³ Indeed, it empowers us to see the other face to face in “mutual openness”, further empowering us toward mutual assistance and

32 Barth, *CD*, II/2, 312.

33 Barth, *CD* III/2, 250.

participation in the political process promoting the common good. This mutual seeing and conversing further leads to mutual assistance, which makes full participation in political and social justice possible. Responsible freedom in relation to the creator, furthermore, respects the goodness of life itself, which calls for respect and protection of nature, non-human and human life, and an active life in the world as believer, worker, and citizen. As this pertains to political responsibility, says Barth, the “state cannot relieve the individual of any responsibility. On the contrary, the state is wholly a responsibility of the individual.”³⁴ Just as it is misguided to shift “personal responsibility” to the state, it is also misguided to shift community responsibilities to the individual. Between these extremes is the dialectical movement of individual and communal responsibility for the common good of civil society. The individual as citizen, says Barth, “is asked to consider with the state what the state has to consider.”³⁵ Not unlike Mouffe’s ideas about citizenship, immigration, and global cooperation, Barth affirms openness toward to the outsider and to communal cooperation within nations and among nations. Regardless of one’s nationality, all persons are bound to God in covenant-partnership, made visible in its election in Jesus Christ, which is more ontologically substantive than national differences. God’s command, says Barth, charges nations to open their doors to the outsider and the foreigner, and seek greater cooperation with outside communities. This relationship, writes Barth, “is a kind of circle in which we have constantly to remember the necessary loyalty on the one side and openness on the other.”³⁶

Unlike Mouffe, however, Barth grounds the political actions of responsible freedom, including political agency, in God’s act as creator rather than in the person’s reflexive capacity to form social movements of belief and action. For Barth human togetherness and responsible freedom is not something gained through “self-reflection,” but visibly manifested in the incarnation, where God chooses to be *with* us and *for* us in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who is the real source of human dignity and life’s relational integrity, and who establishes an *analogia relationis* or analogy of relations

34 Barth, *CD* III/4, 364.

35 *Ibid.*, 465.

36 *Ibid.*, 318.

between humanity and God.³⁷ The correspondence between the God and humanity is rooted in the God who loves in freedom to be the Father, Son, and Spirit. Just as the triune God is relational, so is humanity relational, which affirms that the ontological reality of humanity is not self-enclosed but “being-in-encounter.” Barth’s understanding of “being-in-encounter” serves as the basis for I-Thou interpersonal relations, mutual perception, conversing, and assisting, which makes responsible freedom possible.³⁸ First, being able to truly perceive the other face-to-face, as *Thou*, implies being open to the needs, desires, and hopes of the other. Truly being in fellowship and “mutual openness” rejects the impersonal relations so often found in hegemonic structures and relations, which serves causes and ideologies rather than human dignity. Second, this “mutual openness,” this “I-thou relation,” allows us to truly hear and speak with others. The stress here is put on active listening and then responding and not just talking; as he puts it, “[T]wo monologues do not constitute a dialogue.”³⁹ Third, our mutual seeing and conversing also leads to mutual assistance and action, which makes political action possible. Unless we can truly see and converse with the other, we will not be able to truly help the other. Barth writes: “If I and Thou really see each other and speak with one another and listen to one another, inevitably they mutually summon each other to action.”⁴⁰ In seeing, speaking, and assisting others, we also allow others to see, speak, and assist us, and in this relational encounter, we learn more fully what it means to be human being in relation to others. It is being in relation to others that makes it possible for us to talk about an inclusive democratic politics.

Third, in addition to the themes of equality, freedom, and responsibility, the command of God the *reconciler* further forces us to consider the themes of participation and representation. Here the reconciling work of Jesus Christ takes centre stage in the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, and the justification and sanctification of the sinner. In *CD IV/1*, we see the downward movement of the Son of God, the great “high priest,” who

37 Barth, *CD III/2*, 220.

38 *Ibid.*, 225–65.

39 *Ibid.*, 259.

40 *Ibid.*, 260–61.

as mediator and judge justifies sinners through his atoning death on the cross. Alternatively, in *CD IV/2*, Barth explores this same event from the opposite direction of the upward movement of the Son of Man, the man of Nazareth, who acts *pro nobis*, as our representative, in faithful obedience toward God as the “royal man” and exalted king,” uniting humanity into “fellowship with God.”⁴¹ In both movements, the triune God accomplishes the divine work of reconciliation through actions of sending, empowering participation and representing. The loving Father sends the Son, whose actions bring salvation to humanity, and are empowered and made realizable through the Holy Spirit. Although the language of representation applies to both movements, the downward action of the Son of God in justification implies more acting on *behalf* of another, whereas the upward action of the Son of Man is acting *along with* another. In short, Christ’s representation empowers humanity to participate as witnesses to God’s reconciliation of both the church and the civil community.

Barth’s placement of the civil community (state) under reconciliation actually occurred many years earlier, in his 1928–32 ethics lectures.⁴² In later political essays, especially the 1946 essay, “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” Barth develops this theme by making two important claims: 1) the law is the “necessary form of the gospel, whose content is grace,” which places both the church and state under the authority of the gospel; and 2) the democratic state is more than just of guardian of the law and common good, but because it stands under the gospel, it becomes, in Barth’s words, a “true order of human affairs – the justice, wisdom and peace, equity and care for human welfare.”⁴³ The first time Barth discusses the state in the *Church Dogmatics* is in relation to divine justification can be found in *CD 2/1–2*, Barth discusses the link between divine justification and the state in the context of God’s attributes, election and divine command. In addressing God’s attributes of mercy and righteousness in *CD II/1*, he claims there is a “straight line” between God’s act of divine justification and a “very definite political program and task.”⁴⁴

41 Barth, *CD IV/2*, 155.

42 Karl Barth, *Ethics* (New York: Seabury, 1981).

43 Barth, *Community, State and Church*, 79; 147–48.

44 Barth, *CD II/1*, 386

Rejecting human rights and political justice in fact is a rejection of God’s act of divine justification.⁴⁵ In *CD II/2* he states the God’s command summons to seek “the welfare of others without surrendering one’s own freedom and responsibility.”⁴⁶ Similar to Mouffe, Barth provides an argument for why a social democracy is the most humane form of government, but unlike Mouffe, Barth sees social democracy as a secular witness to God’s triune sovereignty. While democracy is threatened by destructive hegemonies, the substance of political participation is renewed, empowered, and made visible not only through emerging hegemonic social movements, but more importantly, through the Son’s reconciling action in the power of the Spirit. Popular sovereignty is restored and empowered not only through the power of social movements, but more importantly, through participation in Jesus Christ, as the mediator and representative, who heals the estrangement within the human community, including any form of despotism, which denies the electing God’s self-determination to reconcile the political community.

Lastly, regarding the command of the *redeemer*, we affirm that democracy is always in a state of becoming, or stated more theologically, the promise of democracy lies in God’s eschatological consummation. Recognizing that Barth did not complete his fifth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, we see Redemption at work in the promise the Spirit in *CD IV/3* and *IV/4* fragments, *The Christian Life*. God’s eschatological consummation, like creation and reconciliation, emerges from God’s being and action, as the one who eternally is giving and receiving of love, and frees humanity to further hear God’s gracious eschatological promise through the Holy Spirit. “Not only was God glorious in the past,” says Barth, “and not only will he be glorious and final fulfilment of his promise, but is glorious here and now in the promise of his Spirit, he himself being present and active yesterday, today and tomorrow.”⁴⁷ As the “Lord of time,” of past, present, and future, Jesus Christ is not only as the priestly Son of God and the kingly Son of Man, but he is also the prophetic *Christus victor*, who, unites Christ’s “deity and humanity, of God’s humiliation and man’s exaltation,

45 *Ibid.*, 386.

46 Barth, *CD II/2*, 719.

47 Barth, *CD IV/3*, 359.

of the justification and sanctification of man, of faith and love.”⁴⁸ In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ as “true witness” and “victor” unveils the eschatological knowledge of God’s promised consummation of God’s victory over the lordless powers of leviathan, mammon, and ideology or political, economic, or ideological absolutism. With leviathan we see how the “question of the demonic which is visibly at work in all politics” surfaces in all forms of government including democracy, when the state deceives to represent and stand “for” its people, as their “guardian,” and rather seeks its own power while “demonizing” its enemies.⁴⁹

Not unlike Mouffe’s analysis of the hegemonies of centrist liberalism and the populist right, Barth sees leviathan corrupting democracy, when it rejects popular sovereignty and human equality. In the same way, money becomes a demonic “power” when it takes over a person’s attitudes, beliefs, practices, and actions, which keeps them from discovering their true security and freedom in and through the covenant of grace. When the power of the market becomes limitless and extends into every area of life, including political life, it becomes the demonic power of mammon. Likewise, we see Mouffe’s attack on the link between political and economic neoliberalism, leading to oligarchization. Lastly, although ideology binds people together into a kind of pseudo-community, it also drives them away from others creating enemies. Ideologies create “enemies,” says Barth, because they propose to be the “solution not only to the personal problems of his own life but to each and all of the problems of the world.”⁵⁰ As inherently conflictive, narcissistic and potentially violent, ideologies become a demonic power when they cause their followers to become unreflective “disciples” and “functionaries.”⁵¹ Likewise, Mouffe seeks to go beyond Schmitt’s antagonism, defined by the friend/enemy conflict, and propose agonism, which resists destructive hegemonies with social action. For all of their similarities, however, the divergence between Mouffe and Barth occurs theologically. Because of her non-eschatological viewpoint, Mouffe

48 *Ibid.*, 4.

49 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 219.

50 *Ibid.*, 225.

51 *Ibid.*, 226.

cannot envision a particular outcome to the democratic experiment, nor whether the dominant hegemonies that degrades human freedom will ever be eliminated. The future of democratic society is undetermined, uncertain, and entirely open-ended, which makes political struggle here and now the most important feature of radical democracy. Barth would agree in that political witness means not only mutual togetherness and participation, but also one of “political struggle.” For Barth, the “fulfilment of political duty means rather responsible choices of authority, responsible decision about the validity of laws, responsible care for their maintenance, in a word, political action, which may also mean political struggle.”⁵² Although both Mouffe and Barth share the notion of democracy as struggle, Barth’s trinitarian theology provides an eschatological framework for a democratic promise through political struggle grounded in God’s triune action. The triune God has already acted against the powers, defeating them, while at the same time empowering the Christian to lead an eccentric life, one in which empowers persons to live “eccentrically” for others, living their vocation in the world, struggling against the defeated hegemonies of political, economic, and ideological power. In the current context of the populist moment this call to action through eccentric witness for others is needed now more than ever.

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52 Barth, *Community, State, and Church*, 144.

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