



**The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World,**  
Mark Lewis Taylor, Fortress Press, 2011 (ISBN 978-0-8006-9789-1),  
ix + 236 pp., hb \$29

The introduction to Mark Lewis Taylor's *The Theological and the Political* begs a question that situates the entirety of the text's enterprise: in a 'post-' crazed age, does the term 'theological' carry any currency? Taylor himself suggests that the theological, as conceived within the Western guild, with its preoccupation with defending the transcendent (a form of theology Taylor terms 'Theology'), is bankrupt, as Theology's logics of divine sovereignty are complicit in imperial oppression. Simultaneously, however, religion remains a constituent part of public life, a reality that denies the usefulness of pure secularity. So how does one 'do' theology in an age wherein Theology and strict secularism both fail?

In a dialectical move, Taylor proposes that practitioners of theology must move beyond Theology and secularism into the realm of the 'theological', which he describes as 'a discourse that discerns and critically reflects upon the motions of power' in agonistic negotiations within the political, i.e. the mode of 'organizing human practices that structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history' (p. 5). 'More particularly, [the theological] traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate . . . by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems.' (p. 9). Furthermore, the theological is fundamentally a trans-disciplinary, discursive, anti-imperial practice and meditation upon the marginalized. The remainder of Taylor's text parses out this proposed program.

Following an introduction, the first chapter, 'Thinking the Theological: A Haunting', broadly sets out the theoretical foundations for the theological. Two concepts are explicated and then integrated. First, adopting Foucault's theories of power, Taylor provides a political ontology for the theological – one that states that structural oppression wields both repressive (governmental) and productive (biopolitical)

forms of power. Second, Taylor introduces the idea of 'haunting', i.e. the 'seething presences' of those who have, throughout history, been the victims of 'epistemic and political violence by the West' (p. 31). These specters of the oppressed reify in theory, art, testimony, et al., and demand a hearing. In integrating these two ideas, Jean-Luc Nancy's spatial concept of 'weight' in the 'world' is employed. Nancy states that bodies pressing up, under, and against each other constitute the world as 'weight' or weighted. This interplay of bodily pressures and distance can result in either extension or concentration. While extension involves 'mutual intimacy and distancing' (p. 41), concentration is a deprivation of space; it is a mashing of the oppressed that renders them indistinct. A concentrated world, which represses and engenders oppression, according to Nancy, is an 'unworld'. Yet in an unworld, bodies constituting the weighted mass have the capacity to 'weigh-in' and haunt the structures that enable injustice. As the chapter concludes, Taylor proposes that the theological, in reflecting upon the condition of the concentrated masses, haunts the legacy of guild Theology.

Chapter Two, 'The Agonistic Political', proceeds to expand upon Foucault and Nancy's ontologies of power, describing how the world's weight experiences shifts between concentration and expansion. To do this, Taylor first highlights Theodore Schatzki's social site theory, stating that human beings exist in contexts that envelop them – what he terms 'contextures'. These 'social sites' are organized preeminently by practices (i.e. organized human interactions) which are conditioned preeminently by an ends-oriented affect and communal and/or religious convictions. In Schatzki's view, human being is fundamentally a matter of practice. Building upon Schatzki, Taylor secondly introduces Pierre Bourdieu's dispositional theory of practice. According to Bourdieu, human action is determined neither by individual will nor by exterior determinative agents, but rather by a field of embodied dispositions that are positioned around an agent, determining the *telos* of his or her actions.

From here, Taylor explicates how agonistic weight shifts within such a social ontology. Invoking Bourdieu's psychoanalytic thought, Taylor claims all humans operate under a need to be recognized and they attain recognition through accumulating symbolic capital, i.e. social and cultural influence. As the accrual of symbolic capital occurs, the dominant configure the systems of social practice to suit their own dispositions, so that the dominated are coerced – consciously and subconsciously – into recognizing the dominant. Further, the dominant seek to secure their positions through manipulating symbols – extant in the social sites of family, church, and state – in their favor, thus nurturing a concentrated unworld. Ultimately, this theory-heavy chapter seeks to reinforce the singular idea that political agonism occurs within the matrices of social practice.

Chapter Three, 'Transimmanence', with ontological groundwork laid, proceeds to explicate the force of transimmanence, a neologism coined by Nancy. Understood broadly, transimmanence emerges within the space of the potential social death of the oppressed, wherein the downtrodden can reflect upon their condition and, in response, bring to life an overcoming reversal of circumstance by appealing to historical seething presences. This activity is neither immanent nor transcendent, but is properly transimmanent – not above the world, but located in the 'transcendent' precipices of the immanent. Further, it must be stressed that transimmanence finds its primary manifestation in art forms which, when posited against the condition of the unworld, allow the specters of history to weigh-in. Art, Taylor states, possesses a catalyzing force ('art-force') that can bring truth into being, extending the world rather than concentrating it. It is within this field of transimmanence, and its art forms that weigh-in against the unworld, that the theological finds its object of study.

In Chapter Four, 'The Weight of Transimminence', Taylor connects art-force with the earlier discussions of social ontology, asserting that art-force, in its influence, can affect practice and form networks of activism and symbolic enterprises capable of working against negative symbolic capital. Taylor uses the case study of US torture at Guantanamo Bay to demonstrate his point. While torture – fundamentally a method of foreclosure in which tortured subjects are rendered inhuman by sovereign logics of imperialistic regimes – ran and continues to run unchecked at Guantanamo post-9/11, survivors of Guantanamo nevertheless manage to create symbols of resilient protest through their compiled poetry. Their work haunts the sordidness of US imperialism. Ultimately, Taylor notes, it is the onus of the theological to reflect upon art's content, setting it into the grid of social practice and allowing it to manifest itself spectrally.

In the final chapter, 'Transimmanence and Radical Practices', Taylor studies the testimony of Guatemalan torture victim, Dianna Ortiz, performing a close reading of her testimony, *The Blindfold's Eyes*, revealing her book to be 'spectral imagery in practice . . . a poetic and narrative art form, a text that is itself a case of spectral imaging in practice' (p. 198). A brief summative epilogue closes the text.

Taylor thoughtfully, and with profound socio-ethical sensitivity, lays out a newfound task for theological practice that is intrepid in scope. As already demonstrated in this brief review, Taylor relies heavily upon an array of theory to construct his project. This may cause some theological practitioners unfamiliar with the works of Nancy, Schatzki, and Bordieu to hesitate at the prospect of breaching its pages. However, making one's way through *The Theological and the Political* is not only rewarding but also necessary for future thinkers and activists who

desire a shift in the weight of the world – from one of deathly concentration to life-giving extension.

Matthew Wong  
Princeton Theological Seminary

