

Religion, Politics, and the Earth

Radical Theologies

Radical Theologies is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have and seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism

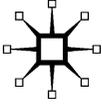
By Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE EARTH

THE NEW MATERIALISM

CLAYTON CROCKETT & JEFFREY W. ROBBINS

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RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE EARTH

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For Creston for the Inception

Contents

<i>Series Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 Digital Culture	1
2 Religion	17
3 Politics	37
4 Art	55
<i>with Michael W. Wilson</i>	
5 Ethics	69
6 Energy	87
<i>with Kevin Mequet</i>	
7 A Radical Proposal for Nuclear Energy	101
<i>with Kevin Mequet</i>	
8 Being (a Brain)	111
9 Logic	127
Conclusion: The Event	145
<i>Notes</i>	155
<i>Index</i>	175

Series Preface

Radical Theologies encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first-century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

Radical Theologies reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach that was being undertaken without a current series to situate itself within. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of God theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.

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Introduction

We should be certainly engaging deconstruction in a new materialism

—Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*¹

The signs are all around us that something is up. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger, “The being of human being is used up.” In his famous posthumous interview “Only a God can Save us Now,” published in *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger expresses his fear at the technological uprooting of humans from the Earth, as represented by pictures of the planet taken from space. He claims that “we only have purely technological conditions left. It is no longer an earth on which human beings live today.”² We do not share Heidegger’s nostalgic fear of technology but view his perspective as an acute symptom of a wider problem.

We are witnessing the exhaustion of contemporary culture, a devotion to consumerism, greed, mindless entertainment, and the corrupt appeal of money and military power. We encounter numerous scenarios of apocalyptic crisis and collapse both in the popular imagination and in the real world. Globally—culturally and economically—our world has become tied together to an unbelievable extent, just to the point where it is fraying and fragmenting apart.

Witness the vapidity of most popular cultural modes: the saturation of consciousness by “reality” shows, recycled commercial jingles and right-wing talk radio, and the bleeding of news into cynical infotainment, the dumbing-down or corporatization of education and other phenomena.³ The most invigorating buzz is usually tied to a sporting event or an advertising campaign. While wealthy and not-so-wealthy Americans watch television and become zombies of consumption, the world’s megacities are engaged in the “mass production of slums.” In

his stunning book *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis details this incredible growth of urban poverty, largely a result of “policies of agricultural deregulation and financial discipline enforced by the IMF and World Bank [that] continued to generate an exodus of surplus labor to urban slums even as cities ceased to be job machines.”⁴ As Jean-Bertrand Aristide, former president of Haiti, explains, “globalization, the integration of world markets, has promised to ‘lift all boats.’”⁵ But what is the result of globalization? Under the pressure of the Washington Consensus, most third-world countries opened up their markets, embraced the austerity prescriptions of the IMF, and took on enormous and debilitating debts. These countries have only become poorer and more desperate, even as the gap between rich and poor in wealthy countries has also grown. Aristide argues that if democracy is to be truly relevant “in the face of global relationships, our concept and practice of democracy must make a giant leap forward. We must democratize democracy.”⁶

Democracy as it currently exists serves the wealthy and powerful corporate elite, not the people, despite the façade of elections, which are themselves corrupted by money and special economic interests. As an example of how sick our economic and social situation is, we refer to the July 2010 *Harper’s Magazine* story on the food bubble that ensued after Goldman Sachs set up a commodity index in 1991 and some company or companies cornered the market on Minneapolis wheat in 2008. According to the article, “Wheat futures traded in Chicago had driven up the price of actual wheat in Minneapolis,” and as a result, “a billion people on the planet could not afford bread.”⁷ For much of 2008, “bankers had taken control of the world’s food, money chased money, and a billion people went hungry.”⁸ In other words, speculation and the pursuit of ever-new ways to make money has taken precedence over feeding people. Although this reality might not be entirely new—certainly wealth for some people has always taken precedence over human flourishing for many others—the reality is that this phenomenon has reached almost unfathomable levels of magnitude. It is no wonder that this desperate material situation spurs the growth of apocalyptic scenarios, both religious and secular. We are more fascinated by and are even oddly attracted to the possibility of *The World Without Us*, to cite the title of a recent book by Alan Weisman.⁹

Corporate capitalism is the most appropriate name for this contemporary condition. And our claim is that we are reaching the limits of global capitalism. In the 1990s, in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the end of the USSR, with the economic boom of the US stock market based largely on IPOs (Initial Public Offering) of computer and internet companies, Western-style democratic capitalism was declared victorious and ubiquitous. Love it or hate it, it was the only game in town. After the turn of the century, however, the wheels quickly began to come off, starting with the stock market crash in 2000, the attacks of 9/11, the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq, and then the blowing up and collapsing of the largest bubble ever created—the world housing bubble—whose crash brought the entire world into recession.

The problem is fundamental: Western capitalism is based upon assumptions of indefinite if not infinite growth, but the natural resources of the planet are finite. We are running up against real, physical constraints to growth, and the capitalist machine is desperately searching for more resources to fuel ever-shorter periods of apparent productivity or profitability, like a junkie shooting up more often with higher concentrations to get that same high that is diminishing with each hit. Although this understanding is basic and simple to understand, our corporations, politicians, and media apparatuses go to extraordinary lengths to hide, distort, and obscure this fact to perpetuate their own existence. Most people sense that something is up, but comprehension dawns slowly, if at all, because one has to really dig to get the relevant information and fight to fit the pieces together into a coherent picture of reality, not to mention the fear that then threatens to turn into denial.

We will briefly lay out three aspects of our current crisis: the ecological crisis, which is often viewed primarily in terms of global warming; the energy crisis, which involves peak oil and the limits of our ability to extract and exploit the cheap energy of fossil fuels; and finally the financial crisis, which involves the deleveraging and destruction of massive amounts of money and credit. Each of these problems is inter-related, because money is dependent upon energy, and energy is a product of natural physical resources that are finite and diminishing. Rather than give in to despair, or idealistic wishful thinking, we suggest that this crisis could provide an opening for a new kind of orientation to thinking and acting, a new way of being in and of the earth. This

opening is an opening onto a new materialism that is neither a crude consumerist materialism nor a reductive atomic materialism, but a materialism that takes seriously the material and physical world in which we live.¹⁰ The New Materialism is a materialism based on energy transformation. Energy itself is not reductive matter but resonates with “spirit” and “life,” as we will show. This reenvisioned materialism counters idealism in its practical and philosophical forms, which constructs an ideal world that we wish to inhabit and then mistakes that world for the real one. Furthermore, we do not oppose religion, but we do oppose fanaticism and fundamentalism, including the fairy-tale expectations that a God or gods will rescue us from our predicament and punish the evildoers while rewarding the righteous.

The New Materialism is a radical theological vision, even though it stretches what is usually understood by theology almost beyond recognition. What we need is not another reformation of theology or religion; what we need is a deformation of theology and religion. Religion is universal at the level of human being, although most people like to think that only some humans are religious and argue whether that is a good or a bad phenomenon. And theology indicates what Paul Tillich calls “ultimate concern,” the fact of being ultimately concerned about something, whether in terms of form or content. The challenge for all forms of theology and philosophy over the past few centuries has been to take account of how our concerns are implicated in our material reality in an undeniable way without succumbing to a reductionist and deterministic materialism. For us, what we need is a theology that genuinely takes account of the earth without lapsing into wishful thinking about what it means to live in harmony with nature or New Age platitudes about Gaia that produce a false spirituality.

We write out of a social and academic context of North American radical theology that engages seriously with contemporary Continental philosophy, whose roots go back through the postmodern theologies that emerged in the 1980s, to Death of God theologies that emerged in the 1960s, which we understand in many ways as a radicalization of Tillich’s theology of culture. Today, various forms of radical theology are informed by process, liberation, feminist, postcolonial, and post-structuralist ideas, and the most significant strands of these discourses of philosophy and theology are concerned with questions of political theology.¹¹ Political theology grapples with the significance of the

return of religion in contemporary politics, philosophy, and cultural phenomena. It's not enough to simply take a political and/or theological stand; we are trying to understand what is going on and why, to offer better tools for thinking and acting. What returns in the name of religion is not simply a religious or cultural clash of competing values and civilizations but instead a phenomenon that both hides and reveals a deeper and more desperate situation of climate, energy, economy, and ultimately human being in the world.

First, let's consider global warming. Large scale climate change with unpredictable and irreversible effects has been caused by human activity over the past couple of centuries, with the increase of carbon, methane, and other emissions in the earth's atmosphere. Scientists disagree on the extent and the timing but not on the fact of human-caused climate change; however, corporations invested in denying and obscuring these facts have sponsored numerous studies intended to cloud the issue to raise enough doubt in the public mind so that present practices can continue. Climate change is the major focus of this debate, although we are seeing many signs of resource depletion and species extinction that all attest to the indisputable footprint of humanity upon the earth. Basically, humans are overpopulating and overexploiting the resources of the world at an unsustainable rate, and we cannot continue with our present wealthy (if living in the Western or English speaking world and able to read this book) lifestyle for much longer.

How did our extraordinary technological civilization come about? Many explanations trace the origin to the cleverness of the human (or Western European) mind, but it has more to do with the discovery and exploitation of cheap energy in the form of fossil fuels. Coal, natural gas, and above all oil are tremendous sources of energy, and burning them has generated the enormous power and material wealth that we possess in the early twenty-first century. We could not have built the global capitalist civilization that we have, as flawed as it is, without a seemingly limitless amount of cheap energy. Oil fuels our automobiles and planes, it produces electricity, it allows us to construct computers and the internet, and in the form of plastics, these hydrocarbons pervade almost every aspect of our lives. The American century was generated by its discovery and exploitation of oil, and when US oil faltered, we maneuvered to ally ourselves closely with Saudi Arabia, the country

with the largest oil reserves in the world by far. US oil production peaked in 1970, and many people had predicted world oil production to peak during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a decade that is now past. As far as oil production can be measured, world oil production has reached a plateau although it has not yet severely declined.

One reason peak oil has been masked has been the financial meltdown that occurred in September 2008, which began in August 2007 when the credit markets froze up. The world recession that was induced in 2008 initially sparked higher oil prices, which rose to record levels approaching \$150 a barrel in summer 2008, before plummeting along with the weakening economy and recovering somewhat in spring and summer 2009. Although many people predicted a recovery by summer 2009, this recovery is still faltering in 2012 due to lack of employment and extremely modest consumer spending. Furthermore, we assert that there is no way to simply recover from this recession, because we lack the availability of cheap energy that would fuel such a recovery. In fact, it is likely that peak oil touched off the downturn of the housing market that in turn led to the seizing up of credit markets in 2007. Money is based on energy, and money can be created as more and more energy is produced, but when available energy peaks and declines, money declines as well. Actually, money is created as debt, which is why this latest round of growth has led to so much indebtedness in both public and private terms. Once growth is impossible, then debts are called in, and money as credit is destroyed, which means that we are in a deflationary environment. Even though many analysts believe that the worst is past, we suggest that on the contrary, that every time the economy starts to recover, the limits on the supply of oil sends prices of oil and gas back up, which chokes off the nascent recovery. This situation is volatile but relatively stable in comparison with 2008, as the economy has been stabilized in a precarious way, but it cannot last indefinitely because of declining and more expensive sources of energy.

You cannot have infinite or indefinite growth given a finite resource base. Global capitalism has come up against real limits. This is basic, and everything has to change, not because we have the will to do things differently, but because we will no longer grow in material, economic, and financial terms. We will have to make do with less, and the

transition from more to less will in all likelihood not be pleasant, because capitalism does not really work in reverse. Capitalism seems great when you have abundant resources and significant growth, even if this growth is inherently unequal, and tends to accentuate inequalities. But capitalism does not work in an environment of decline; rather, it shreds apart. We do not need to argue for or against capitalism, because capitalism is imploding. We need to think about what comes after, because what naturally occurs when capitalism falters is fascism as Karl Polanyi explains in his important book *The Great Transformation*, which analyzes the political and economic situation in the 1930s when the world was forced to abandon a unified financial gold standard.¹²

We would like to avoid fascism. We would also like to avoid war, brutality, pandemics, famine, and extinction. None of these options is foreclosed. The future is open. We offer here a new way of thinking, a new way of valuing life and the material world. We would like to restore and heal the earth, even if this is not possible in human terms, and with the acknowledgment that our ideas of sickness and health may be very different from the earth's. In writing from the perspective of the earth, we risk sounding idealistic and coming across as new-age thinkers or ecotheologians. This is not the case; in the New Materialism, thinking returns to itself as earth, and this is a Hegelian or quasi-Hegelian synthesis.

For Hegel, the dialectic operates at the level of spirit, and Hegel reads the development of philosophy in terms of spirit coming to awareness of itself as spirit. Hegel is often read as a totalizing thinker, who appropriates every idea and phenomenon and raises it up into an idealistic sublation. At the same time, more recent philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek and Catherine Malabou have shown how a more insightful reading of the Hegelian dialectic is one that emphasizes the failure of this triumphal progression of sublation.¹³ Here the dialectic works by unworking, or by undermining the supposedly glorious achievements of absolute spirit by means of the deepening of the negative. Negativity is not simply a stepping-stone in the progressive uplifting of spirit but is the essential nature of spirit itself. After Žižek and Malabou, we can question whether it is possible to assign the results of the dialectic as negative or positive in simple terms. Our new interpretation of Hegel views the dialectic in more plastic terms, to use one of Malabou's most fundamental concepts. Dialectic is not simply or obviously progressive

in terms of raising something from a lower to a higher level, such as matter to spirit, for example. Here we read Hegel against Hegel, or against more conventional interpretations of Hegel, by asserting that the dialectic more properly functions negatively from what we see idealistically as spirit to a more nuanced version of matter.

For example, the first, naïve view is a kind of crude empiricism or positivism, which simply accepts what is there and dismisses what is not apparent to measurement or sense impressions. To get beyond this view is to open oneself up to more ideal, spiritual readings—an understanding of the nonreductive significance of mind, consciousness, and language. Unfortunately, this second perspective is too dualistic, because it leaves the material world as it is and posits an ideal world above it that functions as the source of meaning and value. The third “correct” viewpoint (Hegel always works with series of threes) then realizes that that very complexity and nonreductive significance is always already operative within matter, which is not really matter at all but matter-energy. This is our Hegelian understanding of materialism, which is not a crude, reductive, or atomic rendering of materialism.

We work against philosophical idealism by taking the earth as subject rather than simply asserting and upholding the vantage point of spirit. Into this Hegelian or quasi-Hegelian space, we are also asserting and inserting a Deleuzian emphasis on the earth. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari ask “Who does the earth think it is?” as they posit not a genealogy of morals à la Nietzsche but a *geology* of morals—an earth-based science of right and wrong, good and evil that not only inspires but also helps to define our project with the new materialism. Deleuze’s philosophy is generally considered to be antidialectical and completely incompatible with Hegel’s. But we argue that the new understanding of Hegel offered by Malabou and Žižek is actually compatible with Deleuze, and that a Hegelian *Science of Logic* can be crossed with a materialist Deleuzian *Logic of Sense*.

We posit earth as subject, as coming to self-awareness through thought, and this is a dialectical process not in the stereotypically accumulative Hegelian manner but in a more profoundly dialectical or differentiating process. Earth becomes itself by thinking through its own materiality, energy forces, layered strata, atmosphere and magnetosphere, enfolded forms of life, and so on. This process is a dynamic and

entropic process, but it relies upon a reconceptualization of thermodynamics provided in part by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*. Entropy is not heat death, irrevocable loss of order and life, but rather a reduction of gradient differentials, the intensive force that drives repetition. Deleuze critiques the “transcendental illusion of thermodynamics” and asks us to consider the asymmetrical synthesis as a dynamic process from high to low, which is the reduction of gradients. This insight is the core of the new science of nonequilibrium thermodynamics (NET), which argues that “nature abhors a gradient.” NET as presented by Eric D. Schneider and Dorion Sagan in *Into the Cool* allows us to understand the compatibility of entropy as the second law of thermodynamics with evolution as the progressive increase of ordered entities.¹⁴

We claim that energy is immanent Deleuzo-Hegelian spirit (or Spirit), and energy avoids the traditional dichotomy between spirit and matter, because everything is energy transformation. Furthermore, energy is electromagnetic, and we do not fully appreciate or comprehend the magnetosphere, and how it allows for life, and how it could provide more energy. The earth is the solution to the energy crisis, but we do not know how to think like the earth, what Deleuze and Guattari call the mechanosphere. We need to deterritorialize our thinking to unlink it from preestablished ruts and prescribed territories.

As such, this book is an experiment in thinking, a desedimentation and deformation of our conventional understandings and the effort to create a new earth. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that “the earth, the glacial, is Deterritorialization par excellence: that is why it belongs to the Cosmos, and presents itself as the material through which human beings tap cosmic forces.”¹⁵ We need to channel the earth’s own deterritorializing powers to tap anew into cosmic forces. This is not a new age magical thinking; it is thoroughly materialist and directly engaging with contemporary political, social, philosophical, and scientific realities.

We will survey eight key topics in an attempt to sketch a new materialist vision: digital culture, religion, politics, art, ethics, energy (along with a radical proposal for rethinking nuclear energy), being, and logic. For all of the chapters we have had to rely on the knowledge and expertise of others, because we are stretched well beyond our conventional areas of scholarship, which are Continental philosophy of religion,

postmodern theology, and a critical approach to religion, politics, and contemporary culture. Two of these topics, however, have demanded more extensive engagement and the contributions of two separate individuals—Michael W. Wilson, an artist and documentary filmmaker, for art and Kevin Mequet, an architect and independent researcher, for energy (which is divided into two chapters, one on energy more generally and one that sketches out a radical new way of thinking about nuclear energy based on a proposal written by Kevin Mequet)—and we have called upon their knowledge and insights for these two chapters as well as benefited from discussions and conversations more generally.

At the end, we offer a brief conclusion by way of the Event, which is in many respects the most critical and revolutionary concept in contemporary theoretical discourses. In addition to a survey of some of these concepts of the event, we develop our own particular understanding and suggest that what is occurring right now is an incredible transformation, one whose outcome is uncertain. We invite readers to use their theological imaginations to share in these important discussions and contribute to these ongoing developments—to go under, as Nietzsche says, or to think like the earth, with the earth, beyond and beneath the superficialities and inequalities of what goes by the name of globalization.