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### Samuel Weber, "Singularity: Politics and Poetics"

Kelly C. MacPhail

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**Samuel Weber.** *Singularity: Politics and Poetics*. University of Minnesota Press 2021. 512 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781517910372); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781517910389).

Readers of Samuel Weber's already lengthy list of publications will find much that is familiar in this new collection of nineteen essays that apply the lessons of deconstruction to singularity, which, in Weber's treatment, itself rapidly expands and transforms as an inherently slippery concept that draws in several other thorny questions and problems. Weber is well-known as a writer, translator, journal editor, and professor. Although it might be said that Weber's niche is German and French literatures and media theory, his immense body of work in critical theory makes Weber an essential voice when it comes to European thinkers like de Man, Adorno, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida. *Singularity* continues Weber's trajectory by applying deconstruction across an interdisciplinary landscape including literary theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, theology, language, economics, and militarization.

Weber introduces singularity in a decidedly playful poststructuralist manner by highlighting how the term itself, or, better yet, in the form 'the singular,' inherently resists attempts to conceptualize it and is itself 'a mode of resistance' (viii). He points to the seeming incongruity of the paucity of full-blown academic treatments of singularity against its importance to the constellation of thinkers who have shaped our notion of it: Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Adorno, Benjamin, Freud, and Derrida, all of whom appear frequently in Weber's own treatment. This volume goes beyond other treatments of singularity in two ways. First, Weber seeks to emphasize the aporetic nature of singularity as a concept, a feeling, and as a lived experience. Second, he consciously chooses impressively diverse sites of investigation into singularity to demonstrate further the importance of the concept and how its nature has made us overlook the relation of these areas that, in reality, he argues, are intimately joined by singularity.

In his introduction to the collection, 'Singularity: An Aporetical Concept,' Weber unsurprisingly takes pains to define singularity and indeed also to differentiate it from related and historically associated concepts such as 'individuality'; he does so without sidestepping and, in fact, by emphasizing singularity's inherently aporetic structure, which he argues is revealed through our inability to perceive the singular directly or intellectually. Indeed, it is just this aporia and oddness surrounding that which is singular, that which 'does not *fit in*' (1), that leads to a necessary repetition of the singular without yet attaining restoration or reproduction that makes the singular so compelling. Due to this thwarted process and continued transition, the singular signifies a lack and points to something other than what it itself appears to be, which leaves us with a feeling of its resistance as opposed to a direct experience of it. Within the thought lines of deconstruction, Weber here seems closer to Derrida's earlier concerns with Husserl and emotion that perhaps reflects Weber's longstanding association with and translation of Derrida's thought.

The basis of Weber's treatment of singularity is what he calls the 'mono-theological identity paradigm,' by which he argues that the image in the Western tradition of a '*single, universal, and exclusive Creator-God*' (20) has 'remained the dominant form in which identity, *whether individual*



or collective, personal or institutional, is construed' (6). Importantly, this single creator God (whose self-naming in Exodus Weber identifies as a candidate for the beginning of Individualism on p. 10) stands in for something that cannot be articulated apart from myth and religion, but is nevertheless felt, perhaps as 'a notion that allows Life to be conceived with a capital L' (21) or the anxiety caused by acknowledging the finitude of mortal humans. Importantly, Weber later argues that this identification applies not only to individuals but also to 'collective groupings ... construed as essentially *homogenous, sovereign, and self-contained*,' which is plainly causative when such a population of 'extended "individuals"' employs forms of violence against perceived threats (33) or that, in American culture, are otherwise expressed in business, competitive sports, or militarization (36-7). Weber's argument becomes that these ancient mythological conceptions of a singular deity then move through three main transformative periods in the West: Christianity, the Protestant Reformation, and modern secularism. Christianity begins by attempting to bridge the gap between the immortal, transcendent Divine and the finite human after human sin and guilt come to define the relationship of humans to God, the world, and themselves. The Reformation later refocuses on the inward faith of the heart of individual believers—not coincidentally paralleled at the same time by the outward control represented by European imperialism and colonialism (26-27).

Weber demonstrates that the religious underpinnings of singularity remain vitally important in our contemporary secular period in different forms that affect everything from politics to economics to poetics. He returns several times to the self-destructive war on terror, for example, to establish the manner in which social anxieties are distracted and refocused onto different objects or people against which aggression can be directed (23, 30-1, 42-9, 196). This leads, as discussed in chapter 2: 'On the Militarization of Feeling,' to a consideration of the complexities of a post-9/11 war that is aimed not against another nation-state but against a feeling, specifically the feeling of terror that works itself out in the desire for control revealed in the 'tele-technology' of drone warfare against foreign targets.

In a lengthy treatment of Europe in chapter 9: 'Mind the Cap: A Singular Approach to Europe,' Weber reads Derrida's *L'autre cap* (1991; translated as *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, (Indiana University Press 1992), in which Derrida in turn reads Paul Valéry's 'The Crisis of the Spirit' (in *History and Politics*). In classic poststructuralist fashion, Weber considers the multiple meanings and idioms of 'cap' in French as well as 'cape' and 'heading' in English, including 'capital' both as a city and as money and the lackluster environmental policy of cap and trade. The aim of the chapter is to question the inherent nature and the emerging direction of 'Europe' against the rise of right-wing nationalism and xenophobia following years of financial austerity and troubled democracy. Partially, the chapter seeks the identity of 'Europe,' which Weber suggests might be explored in its self-definition as 'the exemplary embodiment of universal humanity and reason' (214) but also in Derrida's reference to the feelings that Europe evokes for him: 'hope, fear, and trembling' (218-20). Comparing Europe and the US, Weber finds a similar 'inability to link *feeling* with *thinking* in public discourse in a serious, responsible, and above all *responsive* manner' that he fears will again result in 'a destructive, enemy-driven politics of fear' (223). The discussion quickly arrives at the problem of national and personal debts following the

2008 sub-prime mortgage crisis, which Weber convincingly reads as a prime example of the religious ideas of sin and guilt being translated to the contemporary work of secular institutions.

A good example of the interrelation of Weber's examples is how chapter 11, on biblical economics, continues his earlier discussion of debt. His treatment starts with the creation of humans 'in the image of God' in Genesis 3. While Weber's reading of this specific creation narrative is obviously key to his mono-theological identity paradigm, it further traces the beginnings of modern secular conceptions of debt, given that created humans can be said to 'owe' the Creator: first, for being loaned (not gifted) life and, second, for transgressing the Creator's laws, the wages of which are deferred death (271-4). Following Walter Benjamin, Weber notes that Protestantism, specifically Calvinism, arose in the same context as capitalism and both seek to universalize guilt or debt, which are nearly the same word in German. Protestantism and capitalism accept also 'the notion that debts must be repaid with interest' (275-6), a realization that once again brings with it the threat of violence that may be self-destructive or directed at perceived enemies or both.

In each chapter of *Singularity*, readers will find enjoyable presentations of Weber's argument that are at once detailed and convincing. Having laid out the central thesis of the book in detail early on, Weber subsequently offers his essays as examples and proofs that elucidate or problematize the argument. These include subjects as diverse as the relation and difference of singularity to individuality, militarization, arguments about bare life and the concentration camp, global inequality, the Bible and economic theology, the future of Saussure, and the Uncanny, as well as essays dealing with literary texts by Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and Kafka. Certainly, this volume will be of interest to scholars in several fields. While many of these essays are, like the book itself, impressively lengthy, others like the three final chapters on Kafka are shorter and could be productively taught in the college classroom. While each chapter stands on its own as a site of enquiry, the collection's individual essays are also well-linked together as a whole and are united by their chief concern with singularity as well as by Weber's methodology and the reappearances of his key concepts and philosophical influences.

**Kelly C. MacPhail**, University of Minnesota, Duluth