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God Save the Sleeping King: Translatio Imperii from Waterloo to Brexit

The Royal Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III has marked a pivotal moment of transition from one sovereign person to the next. This transition recalls the Medieval notion of the Translatio Imperii (the transfer of rule), which designates the transfer of imperium or hegemony from the particular site of one government to the next under a higher universal. Such transfers have often been the site of contested claims: whether, for example, in the Napoleonic Wars of rival emperors; or in the Brexit renunciation of European federalism. In each case, these contests raise the original question of political theology: how should we reflect from the particular institution of power to the universal source of supra-political authority? More than power, authority is the numinous finality of the form of objective right that commands obedience by the simple form of its incontestable Goodness and Truth. Yet if, in contrast to Carl Schmitt, this recognition of sovereign authority cannot simply be secured by the rhetorical sublimation of discursive violence under the palliative of deliberative reason, it can perhaps only be symbolically re-awoken through a ritual performance of a sacred myth. Reminiscent of Joseph de Maistre, belief in the Translatio Imperii can be credibly defended from Liberal and Republican critics alike by recentring this passing totem of authority in the concrete person of the sovereign, who, at their coronation, swears an oath to embody the divine ideal of a sacerdotal king and virtuous statesman. Drawing inspiration from Ernst Kantorowicz's Neo-Medieval alternative, and contemporary Post-Liberal voices on both the Left and the Right, this paper will seek to critique of the acephalous politics of Giorgio Abamben, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, recover a Royalist vision of a uniquely British Translatio Imperii, and relive the dreams of our long slumbering Lord.

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