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THE POWER AND THE SACRED: THE IMPOSSIBLE GOODBYE?

Between political theology and economic theology

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Abstract

What holds together the social order? This question recurs even in post-traditional conceptions of the social bond and, explicitly or implicitly, leads to the relationship between power and pre-political sources of the legitimacy. Secularization is not liberation from the religious. The fact that politics, with modernity, occupy the space of religion charges politics itself of a supplementary symbolic function. The economic theology is not a paradigm change: neither the obliteration of political theology and its replacement with a different model. The economic theology is a disguised political theology.

Keywords

Political theology, economic theology, secularization, modernity, neoliberalism

Resumen

¿Qué es lo que mantiene el orden social? Esta pregunta está presente también en las concepciones postradicionales del vínculo social y, explícita o implícitamente, lleva a la relación entre poder y fuentes prepolíticas de la legitimidad. La secularización no significa liberarse de lo religioso. El hecho de que la política, con la modernidad,

sustituya a la religión carga a la política misma de una función simbólica suplementaria. La teología económica no es un cambio de paradigma, no es la eliminación de la teología política y su sustitución con un modelo diverso. La teología económica es una teología política disfrazada.

Palabras clave

Teología política, teología económica, secularización, modernidad, neoliberalismo

I will propose here a few considerations that are included in a larger study about the persistent link between the power and the sacred in modern and contemporary political thought. What holds together the social order? This question returns even in post-traditional conceptions of the social obligation and, explicitly or implicitly, leads to power and pre-political sources relationship, which are, for different reasons, covered with a sacred aura of legitimacy (that is the belief in the dutifulness of obedience). It is not surprising, considering that for most of human history that binding function is ensured by the religion. The same political power, in traditional societies, was the guarantor of order to the extent it could legitimize itself with respect to the sacred, from which it got its *auctoritas*. Verticality and obedience, community integration, collective beliefs and expectations, are semantic fields that convey the surplus of political affiliation, its difference from any other particular association: these notions and practices have something in common with the religious experience. From one point of view, while differing –politics has to do with power and conflicts, that is, with the secular order, with religion and with salvation– politics and religion can overlap and occupy –even though with different languages– the same region. In the name of salvation, power and conflicts may also be perceived as religious affairs: hence the constant struggle for hegemony or at least for the preservation of a public sphere of influence, as testified by the long history of the Holy Roman Church. At some point, however, with modernity, thanks to a number of steps that we usually call “secularization”, the political and legal mediation replaces religion as a cohesive secular power. Such a replacement burdens the politics of symbolic functions that used to belong only to religion. Nevertheless, the cohesive and mobilizing forces of religious faiths resurface into the public sphere, especially if the political power is unable to manage that symbolic function. The world we live in takes it upon itself to

show it every day: the end of political religions did not produce a global neutralized space, but the resurgence of devotional identities, not rarely politically aggressive. Clearly, in the modern secularization of power and law, something more complex than liberal neutrality was involved.

I am convinced that the idea of modern secular society emergence would be a liberation from religion, is misleading. The modern secularization was also, somehow, a form of political theology (although “secularized”)¹. The same process of de-theologizing law was achieved replicating residues of the sacred in a secular form, and reproducing them artificially (the monarchical sovereignty represented as a symbol that unify the multitude of people in Hobbes, the myth of the constituent power, the general will of Rousseau, the Gramscian hegemony, to the populism theory of Ernesto Laclau). The symbolic dimension of the social pact, which allows the maintenance, has itself a “mythic-sacral” core. This inevitably leads condition, politics, law and economics spheres. If the reference center of social obligation shifts from politics to depoliticized law, or to the economy as an expression of a supposed rational “human nature”, what does really determine the landslides in the legitimacy of the order? In my view, these tectonic movements, which invest the symbolic level, but also concern the balance of power between capitalism and democracy, are some of the causes that explain the current re-emergence of religion as an important element of public discourse. Obviously this is done by many different points of view: from the last Habermas, reflecting the pre-political resources of the democratic constitutional State and of those mythic-sacral rituals of discursive rationality,² to the conservative critique of modern societies as nihilistic, and underscore obsessive Islamist threat in the key of “clash of civilizations”, to recent theories of economic theology.

Many knowledgeable propose the theory that today; the so-called “West” has to face an existential challenge to its “values” (as it is shown by the Islamist offensive and the alleged weakness in facing it). Hence, we have an unexpected “problem”. Which puts into the foreground again the relationship between politics and religion. Now, if it is true that Western countries have a problem, it seems to me that such problem is related, first

1. On the topic, there is an extensive bibliography. I will just remind: C. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, edited by G. Schwab, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005; C. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, translated by M. Hoelzl and G. Warded, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008; E. Peterson, “Monotheism as a political Problem”, in M. J. Hollerich, (ed.), *Theological Tractates*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City (CA), 2011; K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1949; H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, translated by R. M. Wallace, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1983; E. W. Böckenförde, “Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation”, in E. W. Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 1991.

2. J. Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2012.

of all, to the countries themselves. That is, with their uncertain political identity, with the inability to respond politically to doubts about their “status”: is it really ultimately nihilistic, cut off by now from any axiological, ethical and political investment, from any democratic and social planning? Anyone who goes against the West (for understandable reasons of resistance to its arrogance or in the name of an irrational hatred) can only refer to its internal contradiction (as it appears as the “non-place” of the “cult of nothingness,” according to a successful autointerpretation), to which inconsistencies, hypocrisy, cynicism, lack of reciprocity, “humanitarian” violence can be connected. The fall of communism as political religion has left a void that needed to be covered, so Islam has become the reference point of those who were excluded from neoliberal globalization (beyond religion as such).

The question is always about a theological-political background (more or less secular) of every institution of society (Lefort, Gauchet)³. That is, the role played by references to “absolutes” –from the functional point of view, they are revealing because they are believed and felt as such– in the validation of society (Schmitt). If, in view of its deficit and in the absence of other sources of hope, a fundamentalist and uncompromising religious background melds, to an exponential growth of the sense of injustice and to the desperate need to imagine an alternative, the result is an explosive mix of social and identity anger. Moreover, we have to think that the political-symbolic establishment of the social is not only used to legitimize power, but also to keep open the prospect of change and therefore, of hope. The fact that current absolutist capitalism, whose background is denied and the hope of a better life is lost, are the reasons why the West appears disarmed.

If we add the fact that there is not any strategic vision, one that would be able to identify and defuse the deep wells of hatred, the tension centers for identity (such as the Palestinian question, which instead has been removed), and to avoid repeating the tremendous mistakes made in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no reason to be optimistic. The deceptive nature of the thesis about the “clash of civilizations” in no way prevents that it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, if is not rationally countered: with the action on the actual causes of “fundamentalist terrorism” and the shared responsibility of the West. Beyond the bad rhetoric about “Western canon” as a compact identity, a serious reflection on the dead end Western countries, have found themselves after 1989 and consequences on democracy of post-political ideology are absent or clearly inadequate

3. See C. Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1986; M. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.

in the mainstream thinking. The conformism of the elites is one of the most disturbing aspects of the crisis at West.

These calls upon the real guest of stone when it comes to dealing with power and sacred, religion and politics: capitalism and its “spiritual” dimension. Walter Benjamin had sharply caught, in a dense, short fragment, the “religious” character of capitalism⁴: not in the Weberian sense of his dependence on a particular religious ethos (for example, the Protestant spirit), but precisely in its deep structure. Capitalism is a religion without God and without dogma: pure worship. That is, daily and endless repetition of economic practices, as if they were rites (in a capitalist society “weekdays do not exist”). Or, to be more precise: God has lost its characteristic (transcendence, or its irreducible difference from the world with its automatism), but has not disappeared, instead he has been, let us say, metabolized: “Transcendence of God is failed. But he is not dead, he has been included in human destiny”. A weak God, if he could not resist the mechanism he was incorporated by and whose he had been the architect. Benjamin identifies capitalism as the parasite of Christianity (the religion of the incarnation, of a God that lowers himself/becomes worldling). As we know, such an immanence can be found in at least two different outcomes: on one hand, philosophies of history and political religions; on the other, translation of the divine into the daily worship of the reproductive mechanism of capital. But Benjamin tends (probably exaggerating) to overlap them, leaving in the background the other aspect of the “transcendence-immanence” dialectic, the one that deals with the secularization of religious issues in ideology and political action. Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (three notorious “masters of suspicion”) would be perfectly inscribed inside type of religious capitalist thought: socialism, psychoanalysis but also Nietzsche’s active nihilism, would express a strengthening of the human aspect that actualizes itself in the repetition of a cult that does not expiate, does not redeem, but creates guilt/debt (Schuld). Hence, capitalism is a strange religion of despair, that does not allow changes of direction: “the essence of this religious movement, capitalism, involves a persistence up to the end, until the last and complete guilt/debt attributed to God, until it reaches a condition of cosmic despair in which there is still a hope. That is why capitalism is unprecedented: religion is no longer the reform of the being, but its complete ruin. Despair becomes a cosmic religious condition from which salvation is expected”.

4. W. Benjamin, “Kapitalismus als Religion”, in W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 1991, Bd. VI, pp. 100-102.

Contemporary capitalist ideology appears indeed to be an immanentist cult that denies the “transcendence” even in its secular version (i.e., needs of human beings not resign themselves to the system and to have an alternative), demanding to monopolize and to complete its request. There is a paradox reflected here: on one hand, the principle by which we must live is still “religious”, and on the other, it hides itself, and gets even stronger through its own misleading horizontality with no visible control. The true fideistic and intentionally misleading nature (though denied) emerges in the cult empowerment, which asserts itself –and here is the change, the difference– not through a sense of belonging to a “beloved” community but investing on the sense of an alleged “autonomy” of subjectivities assimilated by the neoliberal “cult” and thus, sterilized (from the “capitalization” of the whole expertise of human capacities to the generalized extension of the logic of evaluation, and to the economization of all social life). These mechanisms of indirect power make impossible to find a greater freedom, instead you will find control and passiveness. In our opinion, this is the reason why it is not allowed to harbor illusions on the alleged liberating potentialities of cognitive capitalism and on the possibility of significant changes from within the governance paradigm.

Regardless Benjamin, the huge gap between (modern) political theology and capitalism as a religion is that the “political” issue, taking on the problematic nature of human beings (hostility, vulnerability, fear, desire for power as symbolic recognition) and expressing transcendence in secular forms, left the anthropological question open in history. The post-political immanence of developed capitalism demands to reach a permanent end. Of course, as we know, for Nietzsche the replacement of theological by “political”, accomplished with modern political theology, would open the way to the elimination of the “political” (i.e., the State). But it is highly questionable whether it is a destiny, which in that difficult “replacement” has been already fully decided. More realistically, it is the accumulation of several historical concrete passages –not necessary, but determined by the interaction of forces, and hence subject to change in their turn– that can explain the feeling of at least apparent and at the same time, disarming fulfillment of the prophecies by Nietzsche and Benjamin. After all, on the contrary, both the Communist heresy (not as a system of control, but as one of strength and subjectivity to the organized labour movement), and in many respects the social democracies with their constitutions (thanks mainly to the consequences of the presence of that historical subject) are proof that you can provide, albeit in different forms and with various degrees, legitimacy to the “political” even in the post-traditional mass societies. This is the demonstration of a “difference”: the possibility of an alter-

native (of which in fact the new technocratic global elite would like to erase the traces, even in its social democratic form).

If we assume that the market is a form of general political rationality, immanent to society, escaping from which is illusory, such an assumption can only lead to the ideological enhancement of neoliberal domain devices: step towards the affirmation of “truth” (i.e., effectiveness) of the “discourse of the capitalist” (Lacan) is very short. Above all, it appears inevitable to deny the existence of a policy, which declares a real conflict. But if secularization is fulfilled in the form of economics, is it really purely economic, or rather can it still express a “theological” matrix, even if is it translated into a form of life that reverses the political theology into “anti-politics” theology?

Foucault of course, compares the paradigm of “government”, as widespread management of the lives and “population”, to the one of sovereignty, which is vertically legitimated as representative of “people”⁵. In doing so, it undoubtedly captures important aspects of the work of capillary power, focusing its investigation on its “terminal” (in the lower levels and the margins of society). But it seems to us that the “governmental” paradigm, more than a paradigm that expresses an autonomous and deeper social logic, is instead increasingly interwoven with the “sovereign” paradigm (which retains its validity, even with its metamorphosis and relativization), and in this key is more useful by a heuristic point of view. “Governmentality” would be a kind of long-term “material constitution”, whose roots would be in the “pastoral power”⁶, but later would find its full realization in the modern economic liberalism. Such an interpretation, beyond historical and philosophical stunt jumping, involves questionable consequences: for example, transformations of the modern State, such as those related to social rights and the affirmation of democratic sovereignty, are neutralized, like surface waves that do not change current the background. Not to mention, in the economic field, Keynes’s lesson. In my view, the “government” is not “the” paradigm of power in the West, a sort of its “revelation”, that destroys centuries of modern legal doctrines (which have had a role in the creation of effectiveness) and philosophical theories (such as those of Hobbes or Rousseau, that have shown a good capacity of rational articulation of political order). The problem of legitimacy is not overpassed or replaced by the governmental performance. After all, “gubernaculum” model (as management and composition of the parts) has not historically been a neutral model:

5. M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, A. I. Davidson (ed.), translated by G. Purchell, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008.

6. M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, I. Davidson (ed.), translated by G. Purchell, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009.

hierarchical, organismic, communitarian, used to ignore the principle of equality and the individual rights in the name of special immutable statuses and related duties. Is it not deeply ideological to identify the doctrine of sovereignty (relativizing the transition from a monarchic to a popular one) merely as a mask of a “real” story (and thus “truer”, of course), in a sort of paradoxical reiteration, with other categories, of the Marxian plan that opposed the structure to the superstructure? The “governmental” hypothesis is useful to enrich concrete practices of modern and late-modern power, to understand what are the resources (in terms of creation of subjects’ behaviour) from which globalization gleans (which however is not a definitive anthropological event but a process in motion, as all the events of history, and therefore susceptible to political action). But it makes no sense to generalize uncritically that paradigm. Archaeology as counter-history is a brilliant method that, based on a theoretical hypothesis underlying the power, enabled, in its application, irrefutable acquisitions (on insanity, prison, etc.). There is a risk that it could result, especially in certain uses of biopolitics, perhaps in spite of intentions, in a tacit philosophy of history and in a political philosophic camouflage of neoliberalism.

Recently, in the wake of Foucault and Benjamin, also Giorgio Agamben⁷ has attempted to outline an alternative paradigm to the theological-political one, investigating genealogically economic and pastoral function performed by the Christian religion and the Church, in order to understand the structure of the power as a “government of men” in western countries. Such an approach, despite its seemingly antiquarian character, is a philosophical-political stance tuned on the “Zeitgeist”. Of great interest, but also a source of doubt not only on the overall resilience of this interpretation of an historical-conceptual point of view, but also on its partiality despite the claim of being exhaustive: is it really true that the economic theology “incorporates” the political theology, and when exactly? Is it really true that the global economy is the recovery or even the fulfillment of an old, unitary and forgotten tradition (from Aristotle’s *oikonomia* to trinitarian theology)? Is it credible that the “glory” has to do with an essential “economic” power, and not also, and especially, with the autonomous symbolic efficacy of a charismatic leadership with a clear political and military profile (from ancient Rome to the medieval Germanic assemblies to the huge gatherings of the twentieth century)? Is the argument according to which public opinion and *acclamatio* are basically the same thing quite forced, as it states that they obey the same “communicative” logic (as if there were no distinction between critical discourse in a pluralistic society and plebiscitary acclamation), and that both are working as glo-

7. See G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa and M. Mandarini, Stanford University Press, Redwood City (CA), 2011.

rification of the totally inclusive power of the economy? Isn't there any risk of improper overlapping, in this retrospective game of mirrors, which borders ideological narrative? We can ask if the paradigm of economic theology is really able to give an account of a "material constitution" of long duration that cuts out or resize legal modernity: a kind of surface wave that always, secretly, guards, cares, increases the depth of a *bionomics* power. Is economic theology –pastoral, real or imaginary, of the Church, or the one, very different, of capitalism that today demands to govern our lives– able to take up the challenge of making order, the challenge that political theology used to win? Namely, protection of human vulnerability from violence, certainty of security, artificial and not spontaneous allocation of scarce resources to ensure the survival of the associates? Today the impasse of democracy, depoliticized by neoliberalism, arises also because of the tendency to bypass this issue. Neoliberalism is trying to stabilize itself by normalizing the "state of exception", turning it into a daily practice of government, of administrative nature. But it does pay a big price to constitutionalism. And in any case, it fails. A failure that can lead the way to neo-authoritarian escape routes. As it is shown by the crisis of Europe, which is pouring out upon the European nation states, undermining the democratic sovereignty and social integration.

Hence, my opinion is that economic theology is not a difference in the paradigm, the obliteration of political theology and its replacement with a different model. Economic theology is a disguised political theology. We must to be extra careful not taking too seriously the ideological self-narration of horizontality and the diffused and shared power. It is true that new techno-financial power is anonymous, dull and seemingly neutral, but in fact the load of verticality, hierarchy and even violence convey, is unusual. Just think about the logic of the exception and asymmetric wars that characterize it. In addition, this new power is the object of a cult and asks uncritical adherence. It shuns the sacralisation of visible, excess power, looking for joining the immanence of natural liberty. But in this way, it does not cancel the trace of power-violence, and it also leads to the sacralisation of *homo oeconomicus*. The fact that this appropriative and competitive paradigm may be covered and "morally" overloaded by the liberal ideology of internationalism and moral rights, not only confirms the renewed need of sacred, even instrumentally, but that the deficit of democratic sovereignty is offset by a moral surplus that also captures law. This trend causes a short-circuit between a chaotic economic theology and an uncertain legal humanitarian theology, increasingly detached by public law, which rhetorically produces consent but does not create an effective mediation and a real stability. It is not by chance if theological-political ghosts have not disappeared at all, but they keep on showing themselves, not as a legacy but as a real outbreak.