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Andrea Mura

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Political and economic theology after Carl Schmitt: the confessional logic of deferment

Andrea Mura

Goldsmiths University of London, Politics and International Relations, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Carl Schmitt's critical insights into 'economic-technical thinking' and the dominant role that a 'magical technicity' is said to assume in the social horizon of his times offers an opportunity to reframe contemporary debates on political and economic theology, exposing a theological core behind technocratic administration. Starting from this premise, the article engages with recent inquiries into so-called 'debt economy', assessing the affective function that 'deferment' and 'confession' perform as dominant operators in the social imaginary of neoliberal governance.

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It is a professional preconception that mythic images or mystic terminology represent indistinct oracles, pliable and submissive to any will, while the scientific language of positivism owns the right to any truth (Taubes, 2013:15)

In the convoluted space of contemporary critical reflection, political theology stands as one of the most prolific and yet adaptable areas of analysis. If Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922) serves as a sort of 'ground zero' of political-theological questions, at least in the disciplinary framework of political and legal theory, today's debate has managed to look beyond Schmitt's analysis of political authority, public law and the prerogatives of sovereign power. Political theology has then been able to reconfigure and renew its own theoretical premises, hermeneutic postures and overall scope, addressing, to say with Hent de Vries, the 'urgent questions of daily "politics"' (De Vries, 2006: 25).

One such example of this ductility is the attempt to reconfigure Schmitt's early insights, thus extending an originary link between the 'theological' and the 'political' to include 'the economic'. It is well known that Schmitt's *genealogical* focus on the theological origins of modernity and the transferral of theological concepts to the space of secular modernity – their rekindling in the form of 'secularised theological concepts' – accompanies his *analogical* reflection on the substantive correlation that these same concepts establish with the modern theory of the state at the level of their 'systematic structure'. This combination of analytical spheres provides Giorgio Agamben, for one, with an opportunity to delve directly into what he defines as an 'economic theology' (Agamben, 2007/2011). Schmitt's genealogical and analogical methods have thus been redeployed to trace not only the modern concept of power

CONTACT Andrea Mura  a.mura@gold.ac.uk  Goldsmiths University of London, Politics and International Relations, London, SE14 6NW United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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back to Christian theology between the second and the fifth centuries but to expose a systemic relation between the Trinitarian idea of 'oikonomia' and modern forms of biopolitical governance.

As demanding as it might be, this endeavour has implied the challenging task of retaining a formal adherence to Schmitt's genealogical and analogical lines of inquiry, while questioning the idea that 'economic-technical thinking' remains supposedly external to the logic of the political-theological. Economic-technical thinking stands here as the contemporary horizon of a general deactivation of the Schmittian *decision*, the sovereign's prerogative enacting the *political* separation of order and chaos, norm and exception, friends and enemies, and therein presiding over the formation and suspension of a legal system, the demarcation of political boundaries, the resolution of conflict, and the real possibility to engage war in a *concrete* situation of threat. The coming into prominence of economic rationality is said to bring in this respect an 'onslaught against the political' which lets economic and moral categories and their *orientation* criteria prevail, while it hypothesises the ultimate subjugation of conflict and decision under the liberal yoke of an 'unbiased economic management' (Schmitt, 1922/1985: 65).

Following this line of inquiry, a critical tension appears to mark Schmitt's approach to 'economic-technical thinking' when understood, at first glance at least, from the specific viewpoint of political theology. A hiatus seems to be produced here with alternative perspectives, those for instance, that look at capitalism as not just a formation conditioned by religion but, to say with Benjamin, an 'essentially religious phenomenon', a cult without dogma (Benjamin, 1921/1996: 288). Although most discussions in economic theology tend in fact to assume Benjamin as their terminus a quo, the present article takes a different start if from the same ground, proposing to begin with Carl Schmitt's critical insights into economy. The attempt will be however to uncover an economic-theological motif operating from within Schmitt's negative analysis of 'economic-technical thinking'. This will then offer an opportunity to engage with contemporary debates on debt economy, exposing a theological determination at the heart of economic-technical managerialism. To that end, we will first trace the main features of what in this article will be termed the logic of 'deferment'. Moving from Schmitt to contemporary reflections about the economic theology of debt, we will then look at the affective function that 'confession' performs, alongside deferment, as a complementary theological operator sustaining the social imaginary of neoliberal administration.

Carl Schmitt between political and economic theology

In his chapter 'On the Counterrevolutionary Philosophy of the State' in *Political Theology* (1922) Carl Schmitt famously engaged with Donoso Cortes's view of liberalism as a *clasa discutidora*, which, for the latter, existed 'only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question Christ or Barabbas?' with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation' (Schmitt, 1922/1985: 62). As discussed by the German thinker, when transposed to our contemporary age, the image outlined above best captures the effects of a pathological unfolding of economic managerialism. A primary result of the predominance of economic-technical thinking today is in fact

that 'the political vanishes into the economic or technical-organizational' and 'dissolves into the everlasting discussion of cultural and philosophical-historical commonplaces' (Schmitt, 1922/1985: 65).

Schmitt's concern with the adverse consequences of liberal managerialism is further articulated in *The Age of Neutralisations and Depoliticizations* (1929). As is well known, 'technicity' is taken in this text to embody the ultimate stage of the European 'striving for a neutral sphere' which Schmitt describes as the 'elemental impulse' driving major intellectual shifts since the Renaissance, and hence reflecting the attempt to realise a domain in which 'there would be no conflict and they [the Europeans] could reach common agreement through the debates and exchanges of opinion' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 89). What makes technicity appear as the 'ultimate' stage of this process is not only its *chronological* affirmation as the last and newly emerged central domain of Europe following the centuries of theology, metaphysics (rationalism), ethical humanism and economics, respectively. Its ultimate character also stems from a radicality at the level of *intensity*, being that the entire process of neutralisation seems to have 'just concluded', with technology apparently accomplishing the task of a final eradication of decision (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 93). From this perspective technology 'can be revolutionary and reactionary, can serve freedom or oppression, centralisation or decentralisation. Neither a political question nor political answer can be derived from purely technical principles and perspectives' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 92). But the radicality of this ultimate stage is also reflected in the ambivalent character that technology assumes in relation to the process of neutralisation itself, standing as 'something other than the neutrality of all former domains [...] precisely because it serves all, it [technology] is not neutral. No single decision can be derived from the immanence of technology, least of all for neutrality' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 91).

Two offshoots emerge from this characterisation of technology. For Weber and his generation of German intellectuals, says Schmitt, technology would seem to have finally exhausted the very process of neutralisation, producing what they saw as a mechanistic play within the affairs of society: 'the irresistible power of technology appears here as the domination of spiritlessness over spirit or, perhaps, as an ingenious but soulless mechanism' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 93). This is the cause of the anxiety and the 'dark feelings' that sociologists of this generation felt, concerned as they were with the affirmation of an unprecedented 'helpless and powerless' condition and the possibility of a generalised cultural death. On the other hand – but stemming from the same belief that the 'absolute depoliticization sought after four centuries can be found here and universal peace begins here' – the industrialised masses would cling to a 'torpid religion of technicity' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 95). They would essentially turn 'the belief in miracles and an afterlife – a religion without intermediary stages – into a religion of technical miracles, human achievements, and the domination of nature' (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 85). Schmitt's genealogical method is here transposed at the level of his analysis of technology right at the heart of the processes of neutralisation, revealing a theological derivation of technicity. As he further argues, 'a magical religiosity became an equally magical technicity. The twentieth century began as the age not only of technology but of a religious belief in technology'. This transposition is furthermore accompanied by the systemic persistence of a metaphysical core sustaining 'the spirit of technicity', which for Schmitt is 'still spirit;

perhaps an evil and demonic spirit, but not one which can be dismissed as mechanistic [...] It is the belief in an activist metaphysics – the belief in unlimited power and the domination of man over nature, even over human nature’ (Schmitt, 1932/2007: 94).

No matter how intense the belief in this activist metaphysics is, all central domains for Schmitt inevitably result in new arenas of struggle. The religion of technicity only serves in this respect to mask the unvoiced presence of conflict behind the helpless gears of technology, which a newly born *strong politics*, in association with technology, can in fact reactivate at any time. Far from being fully neutralised, conflict smoulders under the religious veil of technicity revealing, if anything, the endurance of a theological determination behind its mechanistic appearance. Rather than a relation of exteriority, ‘economic-technical thinking’ would thus set in motion the inclusive capture of decision as an excluded part, *withholding* decision as an instance to be at the same time *held back* and *preserved*. Neither eradicated nor operative, decision is defused and yet carried on in the technological lapse of an indefinite suspension.

Returning for a moment to Donoso Cortes’s image of liberalism and the ‘proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation’, what is *decisive* of the liberal moment is not that a decision is made impossible on the vital question of ‘Christ or Barabbas?’ but that decision can only survive if embroiled in the carceral space of perpetual deferral or ‘adjournment’. This impasse is something that Kafka aptly exposed in his masterful analysis of bureaucracy and the age of technology in *The Trial* (Kafka, 1925/1983: 118), revealing the predominance of a model of control that is largely reliant on this logic. Of the three possible outcomes for the accused, the one that allows for a ‘decision’ on the case – *definite or real acquittal* – is, of course, unavailable to the prisoner. It is not that an ultimate judgement is structurally excluded from the normative space of the court; more that it exists only as a repressed memory, bearing the mythical traits of a primitive and foundational act in the labyrinth of bureaucratic-technological space. As the painter character clarifies, appearing in the novel as one of Joseph K.’s advisers, ‘I have never encountered one case of definite acquittal [...] we have only legendary accounts of ancient cases’ (Kafka, 1925/1983: 118). With the second possibility – *ostensible or apparent acquittal* – some form of provisional and conditional pronouncement is reached by the judges of the lowest grade. However, this judgment remains subject to change and reversal at any time, as a higher court can access the case at its discretion and so order a new arrest

the great privilege, then, of absolving from guilt our Judges do not possess, but they do have the right to take the burden of the charge off your shoulders. That is to say, when you are acquitted in this fashion the charge is lifted from your shoulders for the time being, but it continues to hover above you and can, as soon as an order comes from on high, be laid upon you again. (Kafka, 1925/1983: 121)

While best epitomising the condition of precarity that all subjects invariably experience in the closed system of the court, ostensible acquittals are not the norm here. The predominant outcome is in fact represented by the third option, the *indefinite postponement or deferment*, through which the case is prevented ‘from ever getting any further than its first stages’ (Kafka, 1925/1983: 122). Decision is here indefinitely suspended, while the accused is condemned to roam endlessly around in the legal system. He may be protected ‘from the terrors of sudden arrest’ of ostensible acquittals, yet he is forced into a restless

activism taking the form of a series of exchanges with the court, in a process modelled around the confessional logic of a flexible but inexorable interrogation: 'You can even plan your interviews a long time ahead, all that it amounts to is a formal recognition of your status as an accused man by regular appearances before your Judge' (Kafka, 1925/1983: 123). Transposing this logic to the bureaucratic space of 'capitalist realism', Mark Fisher well detected a twofold character of deferment as temporal procrastination and synchronic deferral

the frustration of dealing with bureaucrats often arises because they themselves can make no decisions; rather they are permitted only to refer to decisions that have always-already been made (by the big Other). (Fisher, 2009: 49)

What then is the status of this 'deferment' when understood from the point of view of political theology, and what is its relationship with the confessional logic just outlined? What type of a theological determination can be recovered here following the image of an adjournment motion given above in Schmitt, which the German thinker seems to locate at the heart of technocratic administration? Is such an 'indefinite postponement' simply an effect of the logic of neutralisation and depoliticisation of modern space, and so a mark of the economic-technological exclusion of decision? Or is it the expression of a concealed theological dynamic within contemporary administration that transforms any indefinite *withholding* of decision into its own internal drive?

It is here that political theology demonstrates again its analytical adaptability, allowing contemporary research to move beyond Schmitt's early premises although, as we have seen, it is not necessarily far from them. And it is the question of *debt*, and its position in the normative space of neoliberal economy, which has assumed primary relevance as object of inquiry while standing as the meeting point where all previous questions intersect, and where the logic of 'deferment' is fully operationalised, if from a different angle.

Deferment and the economic theology of debt

In highlighting the relevance of economic theology for an understanding of neoliberal administration and its impact on contemporary scenarios of crisis, the critical analysis of the concept of indebtedness found in Elettra Stimilli's *Debt and Guilt* (2019) provides an opportunity to delineate some of the afore-mentioned reactions.¹ Central to Stimilli's inspiring study is the focus on the self-reproductive and eternally unfulfilled structure of debt which captures life in the inflexible motion of a restless entrepreneurial activism, all devoted to a spectral repayment of debt.

In the book, the nexus between theology and economy is revisited, among others, through the lens of Weber's study of Protestant Christianity and Foucault's inquiry into Christian pastoral power. These investigations provide Stimilli with an opportunity to rethink the genealogy of debt. While pointing to the Christian transformation of Jewish juridical paradigms of guilt into the economic experience of a 'debt' to be administered in the form of an investment, this nexus unveils the origins of a new binding power that no longer rests upon modern mechanisms of repression and coercion, but hinges on the autonomy, initiatives and aspirations of the masses. By endorsing the adoption of norms that are no longer, or not simply imposed from without, but regulate individual lives on

the basis of desires, passions, and choice, 'governmental power' ensures the coming to prominence of economic rationality as a new principle of government. For Stimilli, what is central to the logic of governmentality is the correlation between the self-determining character of human agency and the self-reproductive nature of profit, which manifests itself as an enterprise able to integrate the very practice of life within the capitalist modes of production. Foucault's figure of the 'entrepreneur of the self' discussed in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 1978-79; 2008) reveals here the pervasive subsumption of all aspects of human life to the logic of administrative and entrepreneurial rationality as it becomes 'the prototype to which all the leading figures of classical economy have adapted: the "laborer," the "producer," and the "consumer"' (Stimilli, 2019: 40).

However, the original link between Christianity and economy has also reverberated in the everlasting mobilisation of a constitutive debt at the heart of life, a fault to be constantly reproduced rather than healed and fulfilled, becoming the object of permanent self-investment under new regimes of governmentality. This reproductive dynamic is said by Stimilli to have found its ultimate and fullest realisation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when austerity policies enacted a fundamental shift at the core of the self-enterprise model, reconfiguring the underlying logic of success and inclusion into the form of generalised indebtedness. In an attempt to move beyond the temporal characterisation of this trajectory, Stimilli enquires as to 'whether the economy of debt and the policies aimed at relaunching the economy really correspond to two opposite perspectives, as it would appear at first glance; or whether, instead, there is a more complex mechanism that they share despite their somewhat divergent intentions' (Stimilli, 2019: 2). The overall answer in the book seems to be that while debt is subjected to some linear periodisation – historically moving from the time of production and consumption to the time of debt as the ultimate instantiation of a 'theological-economic-political dispositif' – it essentially displays the constitutive function of capital as a general model of economic management and moral devaluation of life.

Linking Stimilli's critical insights on indebtedness to the aforementioned logic of indefinite postponement, any 'decision' over debt remains here crucially subject to structural uncertainty and procrastination. As with the mythical character of definite acquittal in *The Trial*, no full and final settlement of debt is possible in the face of a constitutive obligation and fault, which makes guilt inextinguishable. Analogous to the unbroken capture of the accused and the everlasting management of the legal case, debt expresses therefore the very dynamic by which an appropriation of life is constantly reproduced in the neoliberal space of technocratic administration taking the form of a lack to be mobilised, addressed, taken care of and partially resolved, but never fulfilled. Moving on from Stimilli's genealogical excavation, I would shed further emphasis on some of the constitutive effects of this condition, which confines life to pure administrative management. At the heart of neoliberal developments in the long wake of the 2008 Banking Crisis and what is perhaps a post-austerity scenario following COVID-19 has been the structural link between the *entrepreneur of the self* and what I would call an *insolvency practitioner or bankruptcy receiver of the self* who is asked to run the everyday management of its own failure. Curiously, the Italian translation of such figure would be *curatore fallimentare di se stesso*, thus emphasising

a semantic link with *cura* (care) which best captures, if by way of a distortion, the rules of conduct and the 'care of the self' – as work on one's body and mind – that failure demands be performed within a neoliberal framework.

But rather than a historical transition from one figure to another, I would take these figures to reflect two distinct modalities of the same reproductive logic of profit at the heart of the neoliberal model of enterprise. Debt does not stand here as the passive, repressive and unproductive outcome of a process formally rooted in the propulsive terrain of credit and inclusion, which was so highly celebrated until the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis. Instead, indebtedness and failure are consubstantial with the logic of credit, functioning as domains coextensive to commodification, consumption and production.

The upshot is that new micro-economies have emerged with the aim of managing current and prospect forms of financial unsustainability or, more simply, the risk of failures in respect to predefined performance targets in specific sectors. Thus, the capitalisation of risk and the ability to generate profit from the management of debt and 'failure' become central drives under such a logic, with austerity providing the language and the public morals for it. Hence the proliferation of new managerial roles, metrics and funds created and invested on the basis of ongoing recovery frameworks, which very often emerge after unrealistic targets have been proposed that inevitably enact subsequent shortfalls.

If debt is the central figure 'after' production and consumption, it is precisely owing to its functioning as the structural point of articulation of production and consumption. As such, debt exposes the productive circularity informing the viral logic of profit within debt economy, where the failure of the system (*consummation*) is what allows the system to work as a *consuming* machine, capitalising upon its own failure while *producing* and *consuming* it too. It follows this dynamic that guilt, similarly, ends up assuming increasing centrality, revealing its structural contiguity with debt as it gets ever more inextinguishable.

Deferment and confession

With such considerations in mind, a figure that helps better expose the affective dynamic mobilised here and the structural logic presiding over deferment is that of *confession*. By sustaining the reproductive dynamic of debt and guilt with essential mechanisms of verbalisation, verification and affective investment, confession provides indebtedness with an underlying *material supplement*. As is well known, while showing how an ever-expanding range of confessional practices migrated from Christianity to fields as different as justice, medicine, education, integrating and expanding those originally devised by the Christian church along theological and sacramental lines, Foucault came to understand confession as 'one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth', one that had transformed Western man into a 'confessing animal' (Foucault, 1976/1990: 59). Polymorphous and mutable as it has been over time – as also reflected in the variety of forms of avowal that Foucault himself scrutinised in his later work – confession points to a technology of the self that is largely organised around a discipline of self-examination. At its core, it pursues 'the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage' (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 59). Integral to confession is 'verbalization' as a tool of mutual recognition, instantiation of truth and self-assessment.

I laid emphasis on the efficacy of the entrepreneur of the self as a mechanism for the extraction of value from every aspect of life. What contributes to its significance is certainly its ability to incite forms of self-valorisation that rest on a complete mobilisation of individual desires. But if this figure has become so pervasive today, this is because it functions simultaneously as a confessional operator, requiring the subjective value thus produced to be objectified and assessed as human capital through a permanent process of enunciation. Hence, the ubiquitous presence of all-encompassing assessment and evaluation forms that have come to populate our times. By converting and translating life into an objective, measurable and mutually recognised value, verbalisation allows confession to reveal its efficacy as an *alethurgic* practice (Foucault, 1979-80/ 2014). As a technique for producing and manifesting truth, it triggers the activation of an inter-subjective and socially binding space – or regime – of verification.

Yet, the truth thus produced is held out 'like a shimmering mirage'. By mobilising a form of productive failure at all similar to that instantiated by debt, the ultimate realisation of the ideal of self-enterprise becomes ever more unattainable. It is out of reach not only because what is assessed and measured – i.e. life – does not lend itself to measurement, but because contemporary neoliberal regimes of evaluation submit, as we have seen, to the perverse logic of intangible goals and deferment. Often unrealistic, volatile and in conflict with one another, the elusiveness of performance targets – voiced as they are largely through indices, metrics and parameters – generates a moral but also a temporal fracture right at the heart of the enterprise model which makes the entrepreneur of the self irremediably out of joint, marked by the signs of lateness and anachronism, constantly unable to keep at pace with ever-changing market conditions. While reflecting the indefinite character of debt in the financial sector – where the correlation between private and sovereign debt produces figures whose immateriality and magnitude remain phantasmatic – this logic is further supported by the disciplinary interventions of the confessional apparatus.

Bearing the constitutive marks of debt and lack, the speaking subject is a partner in a ritual in which, to say with Foucault, 'the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him' (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 62). Imbued with the logic of guilt, the same speaking subject is irremediably doomed to failure as new signs of corruption, deviance and deficiency will soon re-emerge, making the status of these 'modifications' ephemeral and the promise of an enduring salvation untenable. At this point, the agency of the confessor emerges as a locus of authority whose task is to administer appreciation, consolation and guidance with regard to the subject. But it is also punishment that is delivered, simultaneously re-instantiating unsolvable parameters of efficiency and optimality. By fully operationalising to the unfathomable logic of indefinite postponement at the heart of indebtedness, confession then enacts a circularity between *failure*, *care* and *discipline*, whose effective workings we have seen transposed across any new wave of crisis in the new millennium: from the war on terror to the 2008 Banking Crisis up to the recent global pandemic.

To take an example, by highlighting its function as way of managing alterity, Andrea Teti relates how in the face of a presumed democratic deficit within Islam or Arab culture, neo-orientalist characterisations have long produced a 'polymorphous and deviant causality'. Here an emancipatory/reformatory agenda behind the ideal of democratisation

serves to transform 'any Orientalist discourse into a carceral space, the fundamental function of which is to govern the other by framing its purpose as emancipation on this confessional discourse's own terms, and by disciplining its (inevitable) failures' (Teti, 2014: 207). I would add that it is also by way of the same confessional logic that the post-9/11 constituencies of European Islam have been pressured on a daily basis 'to confess' the truth of their position towards Islamic violence, not long after the phantasm of a constitutive relationship between Islam and violence was mobilised in Europe. Hence, Muslim demonstrations have been ongoing of a 'Not in our names!' character, and yet they are never able to meet the goal of putting to rest the mind of a phantom European public preoccupied with the idea that Islam reflects an unassimilable kernel of alterity and deviance within Europe.

We have seen the articulation of this same confessional activism transposed in the post-crisis enactment of austerity measures. Through the demand of a repayment of the debt and ongoing reformatory/restructuring/recovery plans, this confessional logic has been mobilised across the whole European social body this time and has come to inform the neoliberal model of enterprise itself. The coronavirus pandemic has also used the same technique of administration, verbalisation and verification to mobilise a confessional dynamic, so regulating and disciplining health management on the basis of the semiotics of guilt, accountability, self-examination and inspection policies. This phenomenon has resulted in a major leap forward in the reconfiguration of self-enterprise as the medical administration of one's own health, hygiene and well-being, explaining in addition the recent emphasis placed on medical *self-care* which the World Health Organization defines as,

Your ability to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a health-care provider [...] an increase in self-care interventions is shifting the way health care is perceived, understood and accessed, and adding to the many medicines, diagnostics, and technologies available for people to use themselves. (World Health Organization, 2020)

I have previously claimed that confession works as a material supplement to the logic of debt and guilt. This is not only because confessional practices and their underlying processes of verbalisation and verification provide the material texture – statements, provisions, cyphers – in which to symbolically inscribe debt, so enabling the translation and conversion of life into a mutually recognised currency and value. But it is also because the very process of confession is, to say with Foucault, marked by 'the insinuations of the flesh', which enables confession to convey and inject the necessary cathetic investment to sustain the reproductive logic of debt. If debt has become 'the model of contemporary experience', we should then ask how is it that we have become libidinally implicated within the space of representation of such a pervasive *dispositif*?

As we have seen, the economic theology of debt seems to reactivate Schmitt's remarks on the religious transposition and enticement of technicity by pointing, from a different angle, to the ability of the economic-technical domain to function as an intersubjective system of creed, confidence and trust. It is precisely faith that the entrepreneur of the self draws upon when they mobilise trust and belief in the extraction of value; this being the belief in oneself and one's own capacity as well as trust in the market. For Stimilli as well, sustained by a genealogical and systemic relation with Judeo-Christian theology, it is the

fiduciary nature of economy that seems to explain how it is that individuals come to adhere to a system of global indebtedness. Yet this explanation might only partially account for the way that creed and trust are not simply formed but nourished and sustained over time. In an attempt to account for the effective significance and salience of creed, I think this perspective should be further expanded by looking again at the status of flesh. I take flesh to be a surplus of materiality, or 'the bit of the real that underwrites the circulation of signs and values' (Santner, 2011: xv). Following Santner, flesh stands here as 'the semiotic – and somatic – vibrancy generated by the inscription of bodies into a normative social space in the first place, by this interlacing of entitlement and enjoyment that opens up the possibilities of distinctively human forms of wretchedness and joy, of misery and *jouissance*' (Santner, 2011: 4). A persistent incitement of disquiet and dizziness – inscribed into the texture of flesh, articulated by the mechanisms of confession – is thus elicited in what Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) has fitly portrayed as an unending swaying between semiotics of guilt and innocence, sacrifice and pleasure, success and failure, satisfaction and emptiness right at the heart of the *dispositif* of debt. Moving within the unsettling terrain of unsustainable aspirations and elusive goals, the moral and temporal fault marking the condition of the entrepreneur of the self is manifest here as a real encounter with the uncoded, triggering the pervasive instantiation of what I have described elsewhere as an *economy of anxiety* (Mura, 2015).

As we have seen, this encounter is ever more sparked by the phantasmatic character of numbers, metrics, rates and indices which have increasingly come into use in contexts of crisis. From the private to the public realm, these metrics have functioned reflexively as *barometers of anxiety*. From the ever-changing performance targets that the entrepreneur of the self is called to confront, to the recent use of security and economic indicators in the 'war on terror' and the post-financial crisis – signalling, respectively, the risk of imminent terrorist attacks or sovereign defaults in those contexts – what transpires is a mesmerising daily insistence on the employment of such tools to enable the extraction and permanent replication of a general anxiety. Their ultimate volatility based on traffic-light-style plans – which often changes the level of alert so quickly that the accompanying moral message moves from a promise of salvation to the prospects of catastrophe several times a week – supplements, to say with Latour, their *factish* character, their living up a material suspension between *fact* and *fetish* through which a libidinal circulation is enacted (Latour, 1999). The recent pandemic crisis is no exception, with the macabre daily dispatch tracing the tragic fluctuations of coronavirus death tolls country by country serving much the same purpose. Notwithstanding disputes over the reliability of the instruments for measuring death, the daily profusion of metrics, estimates, statistics and mortality analysis has brought about an equivalent degree of fascination, capturing their subject.

Assuming the form of inscrutable cyphers, these figures keep prospecting a fatal and *insoluble choice* between life and death constituting a chronic wound in the symbolic universe of the entrepreneur of the self. Inscribed as an instantiation of the real in the social imaginary of neoliberal governance and a *fleshy excess*, this wound makes the subject of confession indefinitely hijacked by the religious activism of self-enterprise, allowing the type of capture described here to be indefinitely reproduced, and trust to be for ever nourished and mobilised. From the point of view of *the body in pain*, this constantly reproduced injury is inscribed in the symbolic space of the

speaking subject as a *source of* – to say with Elaine Scarry – *analogical verification and substantiation*. When a belief, creed or discursive system is ‘divested of ordinary forms of substantiation’ or begins to manifest its fictitious character, ‘the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of “realness” and “certainty”’ (Scarry, 1985: 14). At the same time, this constantly reproduced injury functions as an instrument of reinstatement and reproduction of the institutional authority of the confessor. If the neoliberal index becomes more and more the sign of an inscrutable cypher on which to project an insolvable battle between life and death, it is the ‘specialist’ in each crisis – economist, security analyst, statistician, virologist, etc. – who is called upon to decode what by nature cannot be decoded in order for it to function as a libidinal extraction machine.

The confessional power of the expert is so bestowed with a divinatory mandate within this context. Marked by the signs of a constitutive moral and temporal fault, the speaking subject of confession has no option but to turn on and ‘entrust’ the consolatory prerogatives of the expert whose power cannot be dissociated from what Bowyer calls the ‘ostensive detachment’ of the diviner (Boyer, 2020). While the oracular response of the diviner is presented as a natural and objective statement of which the diviner claims not to be the author, a ritualistic procedure is enacted here functioning as a permanent guarantee of truth. Parallel to the persistent replication of the index as an unfathomable cypher, confession then invests the reproductive logic of debt with the ritualistic form of a divination ceremony. With its supplementary effects of verbalisation, verification and affective investment, confession then reveals the extractive and generative aspects of a condition that could endure despite the discursive shifts that, at once, follow and prepare any scenario of crisis.

Conclusion

Carl Schmitt’s critical insights into the dominant role that a ‘magical technicity’ is said to assume in the social horizon of his times has provided this article with an opportunity to contribute to contemporary debates on political and economic theology, exposing a theological core operating from within Schmitt’s negative analysis of ‘economic-technical thinking’. Starting from this premise, the article engaged with recent inquiries into so-called ‘debt economy’, assessing the affective function that ‘deferment’ and ‘confession’ perform as dominant operators in the social imaginary of neoliberal governance. I first traced the main features of what, from the vantage point of present research, can be defined as a logic of ‘deferment’ within contemporary administration. As with Kafka’s mythical character of definite acquittal in *The Trial*, any Schmittian decision is here inevitably awaiting judgement, enmeshed in the carceral space of a perpetual ‘adjournment’. Although appearing as just an effect of the logic of increasing neutralisation and depoliticisation of modern space, ‘deferment’ reveals, at a closer look, a theological dynamic operating from within technocratic management, which transforms an indefinite ‘withholding’ of decision into its own internal drive. When transposed to the question of debt, reflections in economic theology have long exposed the biopolitical effects of this logic. Not only the prospect of a final settlement of debt conceals, behind an unattainable promise of stabilisation, peace, and totality, the inexorable capture of any ‘decision’ over

debt by the draining drama of deferral and incommensurability. But debt itself expresses in this context the dynamic by which an appropriation of life is endlessly reproduced, taking the form of a fault to be continuously mobilised.

The figure of the 'entrepreneur of the self' has long been used in this context to foreground the subjective introjection of administrative and entrepreneurial rationality under neoliberal governance. But what a context of generalised indebtedness discloses is the indissolubility of this figure from that of *bankruptcy receiver of the self*, who is inexorably seized by the elusive logic of intangible goals and deferment that contemporary regimes of evaluation set in motion, and which makes the very realisation of the ideal of self-enterprise unachievable.

Against this background, I then moved to consider the extractive and generative effects that confession produces as an alethurgic practice. By sustaining the reproductive logic of debt with essential mechanisms of verbalisation, verification and affective investment confession mobilises a form of productive failure that is structurally coterminous to that instantiated by deferment. A structural circularity between *failure*, *care* and *discipline* is enacted here, which condemns the ideal of self-enterprise to a relentless chase in the unfathomable space of indebtedness and culpability, subjecting life to a permanent process of enunciation, self-inspection and self-valorisation.

Note

1. On the question of debt, early contributions in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis include, David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Ascesis and Capitalism* (2011/2016), Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (2012). For recent inputs to the debate on economic theology, see for instance, Dotan Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modelling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault* (2016), Nicholas Heron, *Liturgical Power: Between Economic and Political Theology* (2017), Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (2018), Philip Goodchild's trilogy on *Credit and Faith* (2019, 2020, 2021), Stefan Schwarzkopf, *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology* (2020).

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Notes on contributor

Andrea Mura teaches comparative political philosophy at Goldsmiths, University of London. His work has long addressed key themes in political and economic theology drawing on speculative canons in continental philosophy and Islamic political thought. His recent publications in this area include *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism: A Study in Islamic Political Thought* (2016).

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