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Debt: A Political–Theological Device Acting in Favor of the Neoliberal Ethos

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Abstract: This article intends to examine debt as a basilar political–theological device acting in favor of the neoliberal *ethos*. The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si* affirms in paragraph 52 that debt today serves the control over the poor peoples in the world. In this article we demonstrate how debt can be seen as a political–theological device that works as an instrument of this specific *ethos*, aligned with neoliberal principles. We intend to show how these elements are related using three analytical movements. In the first, we present how we understand political theology as a critical reflection about the forms of political power. We observe that power, in its form and in the way it operates, replicates the theological–political power *status* prior to modernity, operating an excluding inclusion machinery. In the second movement, we analyze the political theology machinery that impacts individuals in the operation of an "excluding inclusion". Under the political–theological machinery, individuals, groups, or populations are considered as a part of the machinery; they are included because they are incorporated in the new organism as they are excluded from their original content—language, *ethos*, culture, and their constitution as subjects. Then, in the third, we present the notion of the device, explicitly, a device constituted by a web of odd components and flexible relations that, when isolated as independent elements, act in the subject's formation. In these terms, debt as a device of the political–theological machinery works to form individuals; it is a device that operates the excluding inclusion to make subjects more and more adapted to the market rules and habits. The very sense of debt in the post-productive era is challenged. We present how the possible exits from this machinery involve not only the debate on the forgiveness of foreign debts, but also how they are intrinsically linked to the creation of a new *ethos*, new ways of life created by relations outside the orbit of debt control. The conclusion intends to show how necessary it is to restore to people new forms of control over a way of life that is not regulated and ruled by debt. The methodology employed analyzes arguments that originated from works and articles concerning this theme.

Keywords: debt; device; political theology; political–theological machine; neoliberal *ethos*

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1. Introduction: The Political–Theological Machine

Debt is not usually associated with political theology. In its core meaning, the word is related to an obligation, a bond certificate, a deed, or verbal agreement to be executed, to be paid. A debt is a promise with no full guarantee; it is a binding instrument between debtor and creditor that projects their relationship over an unpredictable scenario, over a term whose extension and end cannot be established a priori.

The Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si* affirms in paragraph 52: "The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned" (Francis 2015). As an instrument of control, in the papal text, debt operates on countries to maintain over them a kind of manipulation, of regulating authority that goes beyond the payment of a debt. In this case, debt is understood as an instrument

of power over States and over politics in a larger sense. In the article, we start from the hypothesis that debt is also an instrument of control of a specific *ethos* in capitalist societies. It operates as a device of the political–theological machine. How can debt be thought of as a political–theological device related, among other aspects, to the neoliberal *ethos*?

This article aims at presenting debt as a device in political theology; it is a device that operates the excluding inclusion to make subjects more and more adapted to the market rules and habits, which ultimately means to make them more and more adapted to neoliberal *ethos*.

First, the definition of political theology in our starting point must be clarified. It is not the case here to reconstruct the genealogical path of the concept's occurrences. Augustine established, with reference to Varran, that theology is divided into the mythical, natural, and civil (Augustine 1984, L.VI, 5, p. 234). Later, politics appeared in Catholic religious texts and other texts identified with Christianity, in general, (a) as a branch of theology; (b) understanding theology as a dominant knowledge that establishes and determines how politics work; (c) as an empirical and historically verifiable complicity between these two domains (Aurélio 2003, p. XLV).

There are many interpretations of the political theology concept (Kirwan 2008). One of the most accepted is that political theology constitutes a field of study that deciphers "how political concepts, discourses and institutions—particularly sovereignty—are influenced, shaped and underpinned by religious categories" (Newman 2019, p. 5). Some scholars classify political theology by functions. Cavanaugh and Scott (2019), for example, propose and explore three: (a) it relates religious beliefs; (b) it is a critical reflection on the political; (c) it establishes that theology and politics are similar activities. Scattola prefers to analyze political theology from three possible relationships between the two terms: (a) the politics of theology; (b) when the two terms have equal force, there is a reflection on the theological core of politics and on the philosophical political sense, implicitly organizing the meaning of all theologies; (c) a theology of politics, a civil.

In this article, political theology is considered as a critical investigative field that draws on philosophy, theology, and aspects of the economy to understand how debt becomes a propelling element of habits, an *ethos* of the entrepreneurial individual perfectly adjusted to neoliberalism. In this scope, its critical investigation (Rasch 2016) suits political theology, for this area of study has both a normative–prescriptive and a genealogic–descriptive dimension to explain the relationship between what is theological and what is political (Wurts 2021).

In the first analytical movement of this article, Roberto Esposito's comprehension of political theology is examined under the light of the excluding inclusion context, and this is the reason why the way it works is seen as a machine with its assembled parts, as in *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (Esposito 2015). In the second movement, we present debt in the common field of political theology and economic theology, as a part in the political–theological machinery. Then, in the third movement, we show how debt as a device, neoliberalism, and political theology are interrelated. We expose debt as a crafty device in speeches, practices, and implicit and explicit rules as controlling systems that produce an *ethos* that is responsible for setting the excluding inclusion. We re-establish the debate started by critical perspectives of political theology's excluding machine and of debt as one of its parts. Finally, in the conclusion, we demonstrate that to overcome debt as a controlling device presupposes the changing not only of financial institutions, but also of the *ethos* that sees debt as a form of control over human life, over governments and over politics, over new ways of economic exchange, and over new forms of life.

2. Excluding Inclusion in the Political Theology Machinery

The concept of political theology has been impervious to critical analyses for a rather long while, stated Roberto Esposito (2015). The difficulty in finding a stable and univocal definition may be explained by factors such as the varied contexts in which political–

theological activities take place. Also, even though reactions against such activities have been observed since early modernity, from free thinkers to scholars, we have been immersed in one context or another, contributing to the spreading of the many gray areas in the concept.[1]

Our aim here is not to observe political theology from the religious influence over modern and contemporary political concepts (Kantorowicz 1997), even though this is an important aspect to understand the extension to which debt works on human subjectivity. Our investigation is aligned with Schmitt's thesis (2006), according to which the modern concepts of the State mirror those in medieval theology, to highlight the operatory hub of the political–theological machinery.

Examining Esposito's analysis, it is evident that one of the elements of this hub is the person as a dispositive. Both in the theological formulation and in the juridic Roman law, we see unity and separation being conjugated in the same notion of the person. In theological terminology, the person unifies the Two, regarding that, though they are separated, they cannot have a distinct nature (Esposito 2015, p. 90). In the juridic Roman terminology-spinning dynamics of this machine, separating what divides and unifying what separates is also completed in the unity at a personal level. The notion of the person applied to a body allows the classification of people according to their hierarchy level and, at the same time, it marks their separation in relation to things. Among themselves, people are distinct. Only the servants remain in limbo; they are not people, nor things. The study of the different meanings of this concept across history shows that "the person statute becomes the operator of a depersonalization that can even relegate a certain kind of man to the regime of thing" (Esposito 2015, p. 7). The legal entity according to Gaius—by the *summa divisio*—is a general category that embraces several person levels, distinctions that separate the ones more deserving of this attribute, such as the landowners, who are free—*sui iuris*—and even those in lower levels in this hierarchy with no autonomy—*alieni juris*. Those who have no qualities are at the lowest classification level: the *persona servi*. In fact, it is considered an anomaly to use the two words—*persona* and *servi*—to describe an individual. The servants, the enslaved, belonged to an indefinite zone: neither in the realm of the person, nor in the realm of the thing. Nevertheless, they were closer to things than any other being. Esposito considers the attribution of the qualifying term "person" as a mask that may be applied to different bodies. Such a reflection about the distinction between people and things, starting off from ancient Rome until modern and contemporary times, could provide an exuberant number of semantic particularities. The genealogic exhibit of the matrixes of this distinction allows, nevertheless, for the identification of a political theology operation that perform the movement of what disunites and unites (Esposito 2015).

The political theology machine exposes dualities: it operates different kinds of exclusion on distinct agents seen as enemies, in the Schmittian terminology. The excluding assimilation is the fundamental operation of the "political- theological machine" (Esposito 2015, p. 3).[2] Political theology is, in this sense, the machine producing the exclusion that results from an including act. Among the contemporary philosophers, Schmitt brings a key reading of the violent, conflicting, encounter of the "Two inside the One" (Esposito 2015).

The two as a numerical figure is seen as a rupture factor in the unit. When this distinct element—the different one—is pointed out, the binding strength of the unit increases, with the cancelation of the other, the expelling of the other that is different. The theme of the conflicting relationship between unit and exclusion inside the political body defines the political (Schmitt 2007). The rift reflects this movement through which the sovereign's survival, or the integrity of the State, occurs at the cost of its separation from the element that threatens to break the unit of the body—the enemy. In this clash, the mutual exclusion between the two poles prevails; however, as long as the other excludes himself from his original configuration, he may be included in the sovereign's unit. When the other's existential condition is identified as that of the unit's represented by the sovereign, the

enemy no longer exists. The other excludes himself from his original condition in favor of his own inclusion in the sovereign's unit.

By observing this "antimonic nucleus"—an expression by Esposito (2015)—in modern and contemporary history, the governments' political–theological action describes different conflict neutralization and nullification strategies. Each power reaction to refrain from a circumstantial enemy reveals previous resistance, rebellion, and insurgence, claiming movements against the *status quo*. The neutralization that follows intends to drive the enemy away, to make his combat unviable, and to exclude him from the confrontation orbit against the sovereign, the established power. Esposito observes that, instead of peace, the modern political elites emulated conflicts, stimulated confrontations in relation to the people and the interests that opposed the order in place. Since the 19th century, the prime technique to neutralize rupture movements has been crystalized in the neutral sphere, where fights are placated, and the interests of divergent groups diluted until they reach complete stagnation.

Esposito understands the expulsion movement as an act that is completed also by the sovereign's attempt to include. By capturing the groups and movements that confront the established power, the enemy power is annulated; more than just neutralized, the one captured by the sovereign is included in his circle. The enemy is brought into the friendly zone and loses his identity as the enemy, even though he is still regarded as the one who is different (Esposito 2015, p. 29).[3] The excluding inclusion, as the simple exclusion, reiterates the upfront denial of the universalist idea of the indivisibility of the human gender, of the universalist comprehension of a political order that shelters human beings as an indivisible unit.[4]

In the operativity of a political theology within which the machine performs the excluding inclusion, in the distinction of hierarchical levels, the people identified as threats are excluded. To distinguish people and things is another function of the machine-like operation. Between people and things, in the downgrading of the so-called people into the condition of things, the change of a political theology into an economic theology may be observed; the distinctions that permeate the friend–foe conflict are not limited to the existential political opposition, but incorporate elements of the economy.

3. From Political Theology to the Faith in the Market: The Neoliberal Device

Walter Benjamin's categorical statement—"Capitalism must be seen as a religion" (Benjamin 1996)—is another view that inaugurates a new possibility to understand political theology today.[5] The association between the two phenomena—capitalism and religion—could be explained by the fact that the first serves the fulfilment of the same "worries, afflictions, and restlessness" as the latter. This is not a conclusion drawn from a simple analogy between the two. The innovative aspect of Benjamin's thesis is the defense of a solid argument: capitalism incorporates a religious structure. Regarding Schmitt again, we see that the form of the earthly theological power is replicated in the secular political form of the modern State, originating the secularized political theology. In Benjamin, the advanced economy or capitalism forms incorporate many elements of religion. Thus, capitalism as a religion would make room for an economic theology. However, according to Benjamin's perspective, capitalism is destitute of theology. He states so considering theology in its traditional constitution related to the sacred and the transcendent. Yet, capitalism is a cult religion. The insisting permanence of the cult denotes a singularity of capitalism: religion as form—the exaltation, the furor, the rapture—but without dogmas and theology.

Capitalism in its religious form does not work on strengthening the hierarchical structures of traditionalistic rituals. The structure that shapes it is the cult that engenders and instils guilt, an incurable lack sided by the desire to accumulate. While in traditional religions the expiatory moments are the beginning of purification, precisely because of our flaws, because of what we lack, in capitalism the opposite happens: the adoration ritual nurtures despair through the attribution of guilt. Penitence is reserved for those who do not reach victory; those who do not accumulate are guilty of the incurable lack. For those

who seek redemption through the religious ceremony, the capitalist cult gives them an extra burden tied to the chains of guilt. This network knows no limits: the guilt infusion is prolonged to the brim of human despair, and that is the reason why holy infinitude is lowered to the level of human existence (Benjamin 1996). Benjamin marks an *ethos* that derives from the fall of the absolute into immanence: God loses his omnipotence to an earthly power that drags everything: men, things, nature. It is an *ethos* that, according to the thinker, had a place in Nietzsche's writing, and that springs from the human sensation of despair for the loss of the transcending absolute. In the feeling of loss, we experience an emptiness that is immanent to the experience of a guilt that is never rewarded or satisfied, a flaw that follows us, questioning, attacking us: the "passage of the planet 'Human' through the house of despair in the absolute loneliness of his trajectory. . ." (Benjamin 1996, p. 289).

The premonitory tone of the brief article *Capitalism as Religion* (1921) approximates it to the political–economic dynamics spread across the globe after WW2 and projects it over the scenario of the devastating capitalism post-1980. In fact, the faith in the market (Stimilli 2019a) became synonymous with new global politics, in favor of the complete change of the relationship between work and capital, rendering the State absent from its role as a regulatory agent of social and political dynamics, and gradually less and less the sponsor of citizens' rights. The State in neoliberalism once had the role of a guarantor of the economic activity operated by the capital owners. Launched into the market, the citizens become free individuals to trade their work force as if they had bargain power equivalent to the company owners'. Liberal democracy itself has been at stake. A new semantic universe was built—concepts, terms, and signs—new justice principles, citizenship habits, and, above all, a political imaginariness.[6] According to Brown, this imaginariness would be so specific that we could say it is a special way of thinking. Even if neoliberalism's ideals advocate for the absence of restraining rules of individual freedom, they also have a moral system, they are justified by the production of an *ethos*, and they are a way to produce subjectivities, "a value system" (Brown 2015, pp. 17–8). They seek to involve all spheres of existence. Even in relation to social and political organization, according to Brown, neoliberalism shows itself as a case of entrepreneurship, of management, of administration and control of the chain links that aim for the maximization of processes and the fulfilment of ends bonded to profit and accumulation.

Agamben amplifies this thought over an aspect that differs from Benjamin's thesis—he does not recognize a theology in capitalism. He qualifies the religious form of capitalism as a new type of government: The theological genealogy helps us understand the relationship between God and the government. The economic theology constitutes a device through which divine intervention is verified in the form of a government that articulates itself from the Trinity unit—the father, son, and holy ghost—to the ordination of particularities, with the universality of providence. This unitary link—the Trinity and the ordination of particularities—has as a strategic function "reconciling the sovereignty and generality of the law with the public economy and the effective government of individuals" (Agamben 2011, p. 276). Economic theology mirrors, on the secular plan, the form of the universal sovereign government, which encompasses laws and involves all particulars. Economy and government are, thus, understood as synonyms because they articulate one another in the control over life and its social aspects. Democracy itself—the government shared among varied peoples—does not escape the economic control net. Instead of embracing one economic form among others, the economic theology confers it a specific form.

Looking at Foucault's passage in which a device is a heterogeneous set involving "speeches, institutions, architectural organizations, reglementary decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic propositions" (Foucault 2000, p. 244), what is said and what is unsaid are articulated in the device, including what is apparent and what is subliminal, and the explicit and the implied rules. Several elements are related in the device. A speech in an institution, a way to structure spaces, and the definitions of their use in a specific place, moral propositions that shape conducts, are all elements of the device. The specific relations of these components mask

practices, draw new rationality vectors that alter the positions of individuals, and modify the functions occupied by the hostages of this regulation action of individual practices.

The device's ultimate strategy is adjusted to a "certain historical moment". Foucault stresses the existence of strategic domination imperatives aimed at controlling specific populations in early modernity: "a controlling device to dominate madness, mental illness, neurosis" (Foucault 2000, p. 245). In any historical time, the device acts in terms of manipulating relations of power; it rationally guides the relationships of power to "block them, stabilize them, use them". The device configures a certain game of power and shapes positions inside the relationships of power. Be it discursive, moral, institutional, or even the relationship among all these domains, the device acts to condition, deter, and rule powers.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008), the genealogic reflection of this socio-economic phenomenon is not limited to the investigation of its historical matrixes and the observation of reflexes over political institutions. Among the most painful effects of the neoliberal influence are the changes in our conceptions of justice, values, and morality, and in the understanding of the very individuals as subjects and their relationship with rules and the law. The consequences may be observed in their life, in the way they act, and how they become entangled in the jumbled dimensions of neoliberalism as a device. In the next paragraphs, we highlight three moments in which Foucault refers to this influence in human life.

The first moment is the analysis of the concept of human capital. Foucault shows that this notion is aligned with the view of human life framed by a company. Human life is seen as an extension of, and inserted in, the economic dynamics, and it is understood according to strictly economic criteria (Foucault 2008). The economic model—the offer and demand law and investments—becomes a reference, the standard in social relationships and even of a person's existence: "a form of relationship of the individual to himself, time, those around him, the group, and the family" (Foucault 2008, p. 242). The extension of this business imprint spreads over all dimensions of human life.

The *Vitalpolitik*, the second moment, proposes that all dimensions of social experience be organized, as well as politics and its institutions—the very social body—according to the market economy rules. In moral terms, the competition spirit is based on parameters and criteria of social recognition attribution. Neoliberalism is not limited to a semantic field; it spreads over a grammar of social and individual ordination.

Thus, we reach the *Homo oeconomicus,* the third moment, the synthesis of the inclusion of all dimensions of human experience in the scope of economy, of business. The self-entrepreneur supposedly understands individual and collective life according to the utility logic. Needs dictate how life must be organized, and efforts are justified according to utilities. Like the self-entrepreneur, the *Homo oeconomicus* is solely responsible for the conservation and expansion of his own life.[7]

The complete depoliticization of relationships among individuals and the consequent reduction in social relationships in the market model and in the company structure have advanced even over eminent political scopes. The expression "debt sovereign", says Esposito, indicates the transfer of the national government sovereignty to global finance (Esposito 2015, p. 204). Even the structuring concept of political power in the modern State is converted into the financial market semantics. The reference to the term "debt sovereign" denotes this reduction in sovereignty to the scope of the economy and, in another way, puts the economy in connection with modern political theology's most fundamental term: debt. Thus, the political theology movement towards the market and an economic theology is completed. It would happen, as Esposito believes, not as a declaration of the end of political theology, but as its transformation into an economic theology: "and they should not be ordered in a chronological sequence but integrated into a single meaningful block" (Esposito 2015, p. 204).

The economic matrix of the political–theological language is found as early as in Schmitt and in Benjamin. Both the biological and the moral life, and surely the world of labor, as well as the social and the political institutions are all involved in, and understood

by, the semantics of the market analytical models. The question about "neoliberalism's profound political theology" (Raschke 2019) leads to the understanding of how the notion of debt escapes the strictly economic boundaries and is seen in an overlapping "theological" zone of the economy and politics as an element of the political device, namely: sovereignty.

4. Debt as a Political–Theological Device Acting in Favor of Neoliberalism

Debt has been considered an indispensable component to understand neoliberalism as a dominant economic phenomenon. More than a part of the neoliberal machine (Raschke 2019), what we defend here is that debt is a component of the economic theology: among other factors, it operates the excluding inclusion of political theology. In the context of societies structured according to the neoliberal order, debt constitutes the base for social life (Lazzarato 2012). In at least two vortexes, it may be observed how debt has been a propelling element—but not the only one—of the neoliberal machinery since the 1970s. In this respect, Balibar denominates the intensive aspect of the "the debt economy", which involves both the individualized experiences and the global dimension of financial operations (Balibar 2013).

In the wider scope of social life, the development of the national debt, or of the State, has backed up the justifications for neoliberal policies, aiming at transforming the Welfare Sate's expenditure-financing structures. Policies such as State shrinking—"Central bank Independence"—are equivalent to making the State and its public policies dependent on the markets. Better than the idea of financing, the *debt economy* would translate what is politically at stake in the context of the economy today. Balibar highlights the fact that at least two different circuits are articulated in the reproduction of money: the bank circuit irrigates the economy with credit and liquidity; the fiscal circuit drains the contributions appropriated by the State.

Debt is present in both circuits as a kind of shadow at the feet of money circulation: on one hand lies the economic debt, finite and measurable; on the other, the "symbolic or anthropologic" debt, in which citizens perceive themselves as owing to the State the benefits that protect them—what used to be their rights in the past. Such circuits involve social and political institutions. Nothing escapes the ordination, the organization of the financial world: it is structured as an economic theology. The traditional and eminently political forms of sovereignty are transformed into a near-sovereignty, into pseudo-sovereignty. The sovereign's supreme political power yields to economic decisions, adaptations, and ordering: "*. . .all States* are, one way or another, dependent on the credit available on the Global Financial Market. . ." (Balibar 2013). In traditional sovereignties, the decision was made by the one sitting in the place of utmost political power; in the contemporary pseudo-sovereignties, the decision makers of the political power are the market operators. In the past, it was clear who held the power, who made the decisions; in the fake sovereignties, authority is impersonal, anonymous, and ambivalent.

In the scope of individual experience, which constitutes the subject, it is worth marking that, as in the economy, citizens are agents. In this condition, commitments, agreements, and obligations are less important than contracts, which bind subjects to a succession of debts. Existence permanently wrapped in debt—to people and to institutions—puts individuals in a permanent situation of dependence and, consequently, inability to pay the acquired debts, be them monetary or otherwise (Agamben 2022).

As absurd as it seems, the mechanisms that make it difficult, or even impossible, to pay a debt are inherent to the dynamics that produce this permanent condition of engagement with the very debt. Lazzarato points out that the permanent debt seeks to instill in individuals the moral condition of one who owes, who is incapable, who is guilty (Lazzarato 2012). The subject becomes vulnerable to the demands of his creditors, who are not interested in the payment. The creditors, in turn, are backed up by credit mechanisms, laws, and institutional and judicial apparatuses that stimulate and promote the prolonging of the indebted condition. Thus, the indebted subjects are forced into a situation in which their consumption pattern, their form of life, and their interests and objectives are controlled.

The logic of the permanence in debt aims at promoting the submission of the indebted subjects as well as their aspirations.

> Debt acts as a 'capture', 'predation', and 'extraction' machine on the whole of society, as an instrument for macroeconomic prescription and management, and as a mechanism for income redistribution. It also functions as a mechanism for the production and 'government' of collective and individual subjectivities. (Lazzarato 2012, p. 29)

The production of subjectivity is the second vortex through which debt is understood as an element of the neoliberal device. As in the overview, the device alters power relationships between individuals and social institutions; debt contributes to individuals to change their form of life. Debt is not only a title or promise of payment, but it is imposed as a deceiving factor to control and redirect the form of life of the indebted (Lazzarato 2012, p. 33). The creditor–debtor relationship is not restricted to market negotiation, a deal about the exchange of values. It involves power, because in the terms of neoliberalism, debt is a moral element: it introduces unworthiness in the condition of the debtor. The indebted subject, unworthy of note, has a lower humanity rank in the neoliberal value scale for the classification of individuals. The "effort–reward" pair of the labor world unfolds into "morality of the promise (to honor one's debt) and the fault (of having entered into it)": the debtor's behavior is constrained "to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into" (Lazzarato 2012, p. 33). Debt is a way through which the debtor is forced to adhere to the wills, intentions, and forms of life the creditors want him to have (Graeber 2011).

The analyses that deepened the financial–economic investigation into the bottom of debt's moral level (Graeber 2011; Lazzarato 2012; Raschke 2019) allowed for a complete perception of neoliberalism itself: an economic model, a machine that interferes in the State's priorities, and a platform of moral reversion and neoliberal individualism radicalization. The studies about the moral level of debt and its use as an instrument for value reversion and forms of life in favor of neoliberalism show that we are dealing here with an indispensable element of this device. Thus, debt is an instrument among others—a specific dispositive. It is a relevant factor that influences individuals, and social and political power relationships in a decisive way, as established in Foucault's formulation. However, debt is a deceiving element of neoliberalism as a device that reconfigures such relationships and produces subjectivities and forms of life perfectly adapted to the most inhuman life conditions.

More than an economic problem in a technical sense, debt is, therefore, a political operator of control over subjects. This political–moral dimension of debt surpasses the meaning conferred by modernity: that of a discipline, the repression and the feeling of guilt. Debt as an element of the device operates in liaison with other blaming devices in law and regulating institutional structures "capable of administering the libidinal economy at the foundation of human life. They do so not in repressive ways, but through the continuous reproduction of conditions that create debt" (Stimilli 2019b, p. 157). More than guilt, debt creates in the individuals the conditions for its own reproduction.

The comprehension of debt as a part in a device is, thus, beyond the Foulcalutian analysis of the primitive Christianism, according to which monks regarded themselves as free from the laws but chose to follow the collective norms of the monasteries (Foucault 2009), obeying a much sterner regime. The tension between *oikos* and *nomos* can be observed there. In the case of debt as a neoliberal device, there is no trace of tension or fracture in the general normativity: *oikos* and *nomos* work in harmony. It is in this sense that debt is a power operator, not of the sovereign power politically constituted, as referred to above, but of a sovereignty captured by the markets and its immediate interests. However, debt itself is not a power; not even neoliberalism takes a role in the established political powers. Debt is an operator of the neoliberal device, the latter serving the sovereign power captured by economic theology.

Debt controls, restricts and orients specific subjectivities; it works on the person. At the same time, it operates the separation of people, turning them into competitors, isolated and disputing the best positions in the market. Debt unites them under the same socioeconomic

law. In so doing, it includes everyone individually in a totalizing order. At the same time, as indebted individuals, they are excluded from the benefits and enjoyments of this economic order. Debt is a dispositive that operates the excluding inclusion of the political–theological machine, which unifies by separating. Also, as observed by Esposito:

> we are joined by a debt that separates us even from ourselves, by suspending us from a model of development that produces loss. Since everyone is included in it, we are at the same time also all excluded. The point of arrival for economic-political theology is identity, with no remainders, between inside and outside, whole and part, One and Two. (Esposito 2015, p. 208)

The debt common ground in the global market, which comes from the direct incidence of the political–theological machinery, cannot be easily changed. The destruction of such a machine would imply a shift in the way we interpret life. It is also nearly impossible to deter this machine because of the long tradition of the "conceptual language we have inherited". In the face of this limitation, this author proposes that we focus on converting the meaning of debt. In this sense, he states that it was not the crisis that generated debt, but debt itself has "determine the crisis and its effects". The formula he finds is:

> What we can do, as far as sovereign debt is concerned, is reverse its meaning. Instead of trying to stop what is by now an unstoppable dynamic, we can speed it up, pushing it to its limit point, until it implodes. The fact that we are all debtors, or are becoming ones, means that there are no more real creditors. Every creditor is a debtor to another, in a chain whose first link has been lost. The problem we are facing is to transform this oppressive chain into a circuit of solidarity. This is only possible in two ways: either by making insolvency no longer a declaration of servitude but an option for freedom; or by socializing debt—raising the demand for socially useful goods with a radical change to the current development model. In this case, rather than disappearing, its sign would flip, rejoining the *munus comune*—of each toward the other—which was the original meaning of the term *communitas*. (Esposito 2015, p. 208–9)

Esposito proposes the restoration of the archaic meaning of *munus*, in which debt, gift, and trade are "mutually linked in a collective practice that does not envisage subjugation and enslavement" (Esposito 2015, p. 209). With this proposal, he wishes to transfer the sovereign debt to the common debt and, thus, to overcome the immunitary grip in which the world is suffocating (Esposito 2015, p. 209).

Going back to Butler (1997)'s argument about the relationship between power and psychic life, Stimilli asks how far this articulation can go. It was really surprising to see populations' contrary reactions to debt's moral rhetoric in favor of the imposition of sacrifices by the indebted peoples in creditors' favor. Germany's leadership, in the name of *troika*,[8] on Greece's, Cyprus', Portugal's, and Ireland's *defaults,* between 2007–2008, engendered huge demonstrations of opposition and resistance. The matter that seems intriguing to Stimilli is whether the relationship between debt and guilt may "illuminate an opaque relationship between power and life, which is therefore even more dangerous than the merely punitive relation highlighted in the critique of austerity" (Stimilli 2017; 2019b, p. 132). Could the demonstrations indicate a new existence condition? Would that be an "anthropological mutation" hypothesis?

Stimilli calls attention to possible pacts established between individuals and institutions, aiming at confronting the frustrating indebted condition and the prospect of never getting out of it. Would this be an anthropological change or a resistance reaction that involves the mobilization of psychic defenses? On one hand, we may think that self-criticism in guilty feelings leads to consumption and to debt retro-feedback, rendering null any attempt to get out of debt, of guilt, and away from the creditor. On the other hand, the new forms of human resistance, including the possibility of new forms of life, are not totally interdicted a priori. It is worth asking: What factors could block this transformation and the creation of new forms of life?

5. In Search of Exits

In Francis (2015), paragraph 52, Pope criticizes the character of debt in the present.[9] This cry has a sociological character that seeks to correct the social and environmental distortions that the concentration of wealth and imperialism generate,[10] and his cry resonates with the movements conducted by contemporary political leaders in the international scene.[11] It is an affirmative political process.

In *The Abandoned Being* (Stimilli 2011), the author highlights the debate on the ethical dimension of government over life in order to rethink the meaning of community and the insertion of individuals into it. She anticipates the need to think about the construction of the common and new forms of life in which relations among individuals and among the powers are not mediated, regulated, or stimulated by debt in various forms. She recovers the many perspectives about freedom in Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, and Giorgio Agamben. Stimilli stresses that, Nancy, retrieving Maurice Blanchot's expression, calls the implicit change in the whole community "inoperability" (Stimilli 2011, p. 198), and follows:

> The community, Nancy writes, occurs necessarily in what Blanchot calls inoperability—below or beyond work, what is retracted from work, what is not related to the production or finishing anymore, but finds interruption, fragmentation, suspension. The community is formed by the interruption of singularities or by the suspension of what singular beings *are*. The community is not its work, neither does it belong to itself as its works; likewise, communiation is not a work, it is not even an operation of the singular beings, for it is simply its being—its being suspended over its limit. Communication is the operability of the social, economic, technical, institutional work. (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 198—our translation)

The community, therefore, according to Nancy, "is not a work", it is not "a function nor is it a finality", it itself "assumes and inscribes anyway [. . .] the impossibility of community" (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, pp. 198, 199—our translation).

Stimilli evokes the dialogue between Esposito and Nancy[12], in which the first sheds light on the concept of *munus*, the obligation everyone has in relation to what is common, "a gift you give and do not receive" (Esposito 2010, p. 4), "a loss" (Esposito *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199), to which Stimilli adds: "To Esposito, this 'loss' is exactly what we have in common. It is "the speech, the trauma, the gap where we come from. It is not the Origin, but the absence, its withdrawal"; its abandonment" (Stimilli 2011, p. 199—our translation).

In the association he establishes between the excluding inclusion of the sovereign power's machinery and the sacred, Giorgio Agamben evokes Nancy's reflection. Agamben notes that Nancy revealed the ambiguity of Bataille's thought about the affirmed sacrifice: he "strongly affirmed the concept of an "unsacrificeable existence" against every sacrificial temptation" (Agamben 1998, p. 113), and adds:

> The relation of abandonment is so ambiguous that nothing could be harder than breaking from it. The ban is essentially the power of delivering something over to itself, which is to say, the power of maintaining itself in relation to something presupposed as nonrelational. What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it at once, excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured [. . .]. (Agamben 1998, pp. 109–10)

Also:

> Now it is possible to understand the semantic ambiguity [. . .] in which "banned" in Romance languages originally meant both "at the mercy of" and "out of free will, freely", both "excluded, banned" and "open to all, free". The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign. Because of this alone the ban can signify both the insignia of sovereignty [. . .] and expulsion from the community. (Agamben 1998, pp. 110–11)

Seeking to comprehend sovereignty, community, and abandonment, Nancy, Esposito, and Agamben are connected in some aspects. Stating that "sovereignty is nothing" (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199), Nancy relates it to the inoperable community, "from which the 'being is abandoned'"[13] (Nancy *apud* Stimilli 2011, p. 199). Understanding sovereignty as a divide that separates one from another, creating the excluding inclusion, Esposito seeks in the community the comprehension of a sense of lack, in which abandonment may reveal a libertarian power.[14] Interpreting sovereignty as the ground where power is made sacred and where the excluding inclusion springs from, Agamben identifies the *homo sacer* with the idea of abandonment, which, on one hand, restrains, and on the other, may set free.[15] An outcome of negativity, the inoperability is here understood as a way out of the dominance device and, thus, out of debt. About this, Stimilli says: At the bottom of Nancy's speech—also in Esposito's and Agamben's—lies the need to break up from the sacrificial paradigm with which western culture has asserted the custody of the meaning of community and the assurance of the same freedom (Stimilli 2011, p. 202).

In the face of all political effort and all conceptual endeavor in the search for exits from the excluding inclusion scheme, it is worth asking: What factors prevented this transformation and the creation of new forms of life? Stimilli's diagnosis is not positive. She writes:

> However, maybe it is worth asking whether the critique—legitimate, as it may be—of the sacrificial paradigm could even be adequate in the globalized post-production era, when politics are definitively dissolved in economy, and a deliberately chosen form of coercion adherent to wealth and consumption results in more resources for the power in place. The economic mechanisms that move the "global market" properly deposit trust in non-productive elements of the existence, such as flexibility, creativity, qualities linked to language and communication, in short, in all those aspects that characterize the essential 'inoperability' of human life, its freedom, its modality of being-in-common. Thus, introduced in the economic process, the inoperability of existence does not come much 'sacrificed' or 'imunized', as in Esposito's view; or exclusively reduced to the "naked life" put in a gang and separated from its quality, but, instead, it sometimes results in Agamben's speech; if not, first of all, radically exposed, for example, in the perverse and disquieting form of 'human capital'. It is a control over the same inoperable modality out of which existence is essentially constituted. (Stimilli 2011, p. 202—our translation; 2019a)

6. Conclusions

The political theology machine implements a rather specific type of exclusion. Among the difficulties that have made it impervious to understanding—besides the number of contexts and meanings it carries—is the fact that it has been considered and interpreted from its very core. Esposito (2015) affirms that such factors render it inaccessible for a critique through which we understand that the overlapping of political and economic elements project a type of theological power that involves, ordinates, and structures the world we live in, that governs and affects the singular life of each living creature.

The debt problem—that of the indebted subject and of generalized debt—resides in the fact that it is directly linked to the new forms of political–economic coercion. It deals with sophisticated forms of exploitation that let go of the physical imprisonment, but force individuals to abandon their original form of life and transform what is most singular about them to be adjusted to the aspirations and interests of economic institutions. Involved in a social net that obeys the economic power logic, which involves and ordinates everything the same way it used to govern a sovereign political power, individuals are found in a constant indebted state.[16]

At the service of a political–economic theology, debt acts precisely to counterfeit in the indebted subject the feeling of his inclusion in the machinery dynamics. The excluding inclusion that it operates, to include people in the universe and the perverse logic of debt,

is also to exclude them from everything that they could have autonomously wished for and chosen for themselves. The cost of inclusion in the permanent debt logic is the loss of one's original condition. Debt is the instrument through which individuals are excluded and absorbed into the machinery's dynamics. Esposito affirms: "By appropriating what is initially the other, the latter remains at the same time included and excluded: included because it is incorporated into the new body; but excluded because it is deprived of its content, which is no longer usable as such" (Esposito 2015, p. 29).

The same way debt is an instrument that creates new forms of life adapted to the neoliberal machinery, the interruption of this process shall happen with the invention of new forms of existence. The creation of forms of life outside the state of permanent debt puts us in front of a problem beyond the economic matter. Inside the neoliberal machinery, any movement to mitigate the process ends up somehow feeding debt's offspring as well as other components of the device. The way out may come from some movement that is not illuded by the forgeries of the economic theology machinery: the problem has always been political. The creation of new power relations and of political powers outside the neoliberal orbit are still somehow related to the review and the transformation of the material production and reproduction conditions of every one of us as individuals. There is an ethical dimension to be understood and somehow revised. To oppose the economic political theology machinery is and shall be a political and ethical confrontation. This confrontation demands a new type of exchange and circulation of moral values among individuals, a new ethical horizon needs to be created. What is certain is that this cannot orbit the power structure in which debt is the instrument for capturing, imprisoning, and reproducing government over life.[17] These new ways of life need to create a new relational *ethos* where debt is not a gateway for individuals to participate in a specific kind of community, individualistically experienced as an endless race to pay off the next debt.

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Notes

1 Esposito affirms: "Just as when we are inside an environment to the point of being confused with its elements or when we look at an object from too close, it is impossible to make out its contours. To do so—to grasp the overall meaning of political theology—we need to look at it from the outside, expressing ourselves in a different language from its own. But this is exactly what its excessive proximity stops us from doing, by crushing us up against its interior walls" (Esposito 2015, p. 1).

2 Esposito interprets the political–theological machine under Gestell's notion, in Heidegger's terms, specifically, as a tool for production. The machine's activity comes to effect in a way that makes it incomprehensible for those it submits to. He states: "What human beings do not see, or see in inverted terms, is their own position in relation to Gestell" (Esposito 2015, p. 19). Thus, the individuals' relationship with the dispositive is such that they see themselves in the position of those who "govern, manage, and direct, [the image] is reflected upside down in their eyes: in reality, they are governed, managed, and directed by it according to a logic that eludes their capacity to understand" (Esposito 2015, p. 19). The machine inverts the individuals' actual position through the dispositive (debt). It is a grammar that engenders ordinations, and nothing can break the ordinating chain it begins and keeps on going.

3 It is worth observing that the secularization as a phenomenon of modernity is bound to political theology. Differently from the theses that comprehend secularization as an event that ends the presence of religion in politics, or through which religion is

expelled from State institutions, Esposito points out that they are contrasting phenomena: "as two conflicting powers, trapped within each other in a contradictory fashion. The theological, from this perspective, is neither the origin nor the limit of secularization but rather a fragment, or a splinter, that at a certain moment, when its entropy has grown, wedges itself inside it, tearing its close-knit fabric" (Esposito 2015, p. 36).

4 Carl Schmitt formulates, in his work of 1922, the ultimate phrase: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts. . ." (Schmitt 2006). It is not the case of considering that the contemporary States faithfully reproduce the political form of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages; however, the State substitutes the form of the Church, preserving the structure of the sovereign power, the power above all others, the secularized power.

5 Brown's study presents not only the faith in the market but, particularly, money as one of the main causes of the degradation of contemporary democracies. Governmental institutions, political powers, and the very political world have been more and more invaded by money and democracy is being transformed into plutocracy—the rule of the rich. The alert against the neoliberal mind averts the extension of this phenomenon. Education, jurisprudence, culture, and health are fields colonized by the neoliberal ideal: the political and essentially democratic elements are reduced exclusively to the economic sphere of comprehension (Brown 2016, p. 17).

6 Dardot and Laval summarize the self-entrepreneur thesis as: "The pure dimension of entrepreneurship – alertness to business opportunities—is a relationship of self to self, which underlies the critique of interference. We are all entrepreneurs, or, rather, we all learn to be; we train ourselves exclusively through the play of the market to govern ourselves as entrepreneurs. This also means that, if the market is regarded as a free space for entrepreneurs, all human relations can be affected by the entrepreneurial dimension, which is constitutive of the human" (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 152).

7 Decision group formed by the European Commission (EC), the EuropeanCentral Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

8 Available at the World Bank (n.d.), https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/10/11/low-income-country-debt-rises-to-record-860-billion-in-2020, accessed on 18 February 2023, and International Debt Statistics 2022, available at https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36289. accessed on 22 December 2022.

9 Pope Francis says: "The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned. In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse. The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development. The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs. We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*." [. . .] (Francis 2015, sct.52).

10 We can see here a kind of mobility that seeks plurality and the creation and/or strengthening of new centers of political, economic, and cultural relations. It attempts to create barriers to the North American and western European hegemonic processes (new forms of the old imperialism?), or maybe even to dismantle one of their most important instruments of power, i.e., debt. In modern and contemporary history, for sure there have been other experiences of resistance and opposition to the indebting model, to which the central countries systematically respond with the economic embargo formula, as a kind of debt and/or war. It may be interesting to check whether Cuba, Venezuela, Iraq, and Libya are examples of targets the devices aim at.

11 In this environment, Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva draws attention to the need of resetting processes in global governance. He emphasizes: "[. . .] what was created after the Second World War, the Bretton Woods institutions no longer work, and no longer serve society's aspirations or interests. Let's be clear that the World Bank (n.d.) leaves much to be desired in terms of what the world wants from the World Bank (n.d.). Let's be clear that the IMF leaves a lot to be desired in what people expect from the IMF. Banks often lend money, and the borrowed money results in state bankruptcy". (Lula da Silva 2023).

12 Cf. Esposito, R. and Nancy, J.-L. 2021. Introduzione. In Nancy, J. L. *Essere singolare plural*. Torino: Einaudi.

13 In Nancy, abandonment and freedom are associated. Stimilli explains: "Thus begins the volume *The experience of freedom* that opens Nancy's reflection in this direction. Freedom is not something you have, first you are free and abandomed in freedom, available for the freedom of being. It is a condition that leads to the possibility of an existence that, not being "produced nor deducted anymore", is "abandoned to its own position" and, eventually, "free because of this abandonment".[. . .] "Abandoned in freedom", existence is subtracted of all the essence that does not coincide with itself. It is not a *telos* that gives it a meaning. The exhaustion of meaning, however, is not understood as a "loss", because it does not occur in an original plenitude. First, it is the same condition of the existence abandoned in the unexpected potentiality that characterizes it. Not something you can do, but something you *are,* something that frees existence for the very possibility of existing. Not being something you can take, freedom can only be "common"—everyone's and each one's, nobody's. It is a statement about freedom, it is an affix, not a subordination, is it not? It cannot be "common"—everyone's and each one's, nobody's. (Stimilli 2011, p. 202)

14 In *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, Esposito affirms: "What we can and must do is look to what Deleuze, using a deliberately theological term, defi ned as a "conversion" of the dispositif into its opposite. Th is is also the fate of

a thought of the impersonal: not to frontally oppose what a long tradition has defi ned as person, or even as subject, but to allow it to rotate on its hinges until its exclusionary power is diff used. Even the concept of "debt," encamped at the heart of economic theology, can be interpreted as what leads in the end to exhaustion. In situations like our current one, in which everyone is indebted, the notion of credit itself begins to lose force. Certainly, this passage, which fl ips the vio lence of debt over into the solidarity of a shared munus (a burden or task but also a kind of gift) is not automatic. It can only result from a confl ict against the political– theological order that unifi es the world in the form of its division. In order for debt to be extinguished, rather than being repaid, it must be shift ed from an economic dimension back into an ontological status—to what each of us always owes everyone else. In this way, only by assuming the common debt will it be remitted at the same time" (Esposito 2015, pp. 14–15).

[15] As seen in *The Coming Community*: "A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State. This is what, in our culture, the hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of human life and the vacuous declarations of human rights are meant to hide. Sacred here can only mean what the term meant in Roman law: Sacer was the one who had been excluded from the human world and who, eve~ though she or he could not be sacrificed, could be killed without committing homicide ("neque fas est eum immolari, sed qui occidit parricidio non damnatur") [. . .] Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State. Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear". (Agamben 2007, pp. 86–87).

[16] Still immersed in the Covid-19 pandemic, massive contingents of poor populations—both in central and peripheric countries—are even more vulnerable and imprisoned in the unpayable maze of debt. Although these same populations have been surviving through the pandemic with scarce protection measures, with little to no governmental aid, their countries' debt has increased to the point of making the World Bank (n.d.) foresee the vulnerability swell of these populations and the bleak aftermath that awaits them in the recessive economic shock that the future stabilization of their countries' debt shall demand. Such an event confirms what Stimilli stated earlier: debt engenders the logic of its own reproduction and growth.

[17] Esposito says: "The biblical figure of liberation from all debts, no longer confined to the sabbatical year, can become the philosophical and poli cal mirror in which po liti cal theology glimpses the unforeseen possibility of its own undoing (Esposito 2015, p. 15).

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