PHILOSOPHY AND THE MACHINE OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY

REVIEW OF *DUE. LA MACCHINA DELLA TEOLOGIA POLITICA E IL POSTO DEL PENSIERO*

MIKOŁAJ RATAJCZAK

Abstract: In his review of the book by Roberto Esposito *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* Ratajczak tries to reconstruct and evaluate Esposito's attempt to reinterpretate the legacy of Western political theology by introducing the concept of the "machine of political theology". He focuses first of all on the use Esposito makes of the notion of person in reconstructing the common matrix of both political and economic theology. In the end the author proposes to expand Esposito's reference to the philosophical tradition of impersonal thought in order to search in philosophy not only a different paradigm of community, but also a different paradigm of the subject of production.

Keywords: political theology, economic theology, dispositive of person, philosophy, Roberto Esposito

In a recently published essay Mario Tronti argues for an actuality of political theology by paraphrasing Carl Schmitt's famous *dictum*: "All significant conducts of the modern political life are secularised religious conducts" (Cacciari, Tronti 2007, 31). Modern democracy, with its institutions, rites and relations between leaders and followers, seems for Tronti to be nothing else than a religious form of contemporary life. And, at the same time, this passage from the secularised concepts of a doctrine of the State to secularised religious rites and practices, from theory to praxis, constitutes according to Tronti the very end of the 20th century – a century marked by a structural and intimate relationship between political theory and political theology, materialized in works by such figures as, among many others, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, György Lukàcs, Ernst Bloch, Alexandre Kojève and Jacob Taubes. The end of the era of political theology means therefore a shift from the theology of the State to a theology of the political practice. But one should simultaneously also add that this also signifies a shift toward the theology of governmental and economical practice.

Tronti receives support on the part of another major political theologian in Italy, Massimo Cacciari, who approaches the discourse of political theology as the effect of an eschatological reserve. This he perceives to be an undertaking meant to postpone the declared end of time, a deeply anti-messianic discourse (Cacciari, Tronti 2007, 46–47), but the only one, according to Cacciari, that can prolong communal life in modern societies. Political theology is thus in its very nature katechontic, conceiving of the modern State as the most important figure of a secular *katechon*. But is political theology still just a doctrine of the State? Both Tronti and Cacciari, although far from locating the sphere of politics beyond (or before) the State, refer to the discourse of political theology not only to revive the philosophy or the theory of the State, but to regain the conceptual wealth of political theology. From the early ages of Christianity to the dawn of the modern age to the post-war reflection on the legitimacy of modern political notions, political theology was able to juxtapose the individual, existential experience of time (which is never linear) and its messianic impulses with the question of power that is always divided (between Rome and Jerusalem, Empire and the Church, *potestas* and *auctoritas* etc.). In his treatise on the political theology of *katechon* Cacciari defines the main problems of (Christian) political theology as follows:

> The values that are to assume the category of the decision – the idea of *novitas* against every
> conservatory strength, the breaking of the link, "ontological" in ancient Rome, between *potestas*

and *acutoritas* – are the cardinal elements of the Christian theological symbol, *determined* for the political dimension of the Eternal, which opens with that symbol (Cacciari 2013, 16).

The idea of *novitas* and the end of the "ontological" link between *potestas* and *auctoritas* are precisely the necessary preconditions for the emergence of a strong subjective experience of time that leads to a political decision *against* the existing order and *for* the future community, not (yet) of this world (Cacciari 2013, 15). Political theology is born together with this fundamental scission between the past and the future, the subjective and the objective, the worldly and the other-worldly, *civitas terrana* and *civitas Dei*. In effect, as a discourse articulating the elements that emerged in result of this fundamental division, political theology is not only a secularised theology of God's power (in relation to the world, the congregation, the chosen people etc.), but a theoretical dispositive articulating politics and life, a sort of metaphysics of community.

Thus the *decision* to assume a political-theological perspective is a fundamental one, since it is tantamount to interweaving the discourse of political philosophy with that of metaphysics (which, in its Christian theo-ontological version, was born roughly in the same time as the Trinitarian dogma). And no less fundamental is the decision whether to strengthen the katechontic principle of political theology in order to search for a new possible, modern articulation of *potestas* and *auctoritas*, or to perform a critique of the political-theological dispositive and go beyond the oppositions operating within. Whichever choice one makes, it is a fundamental *metaphysical decision* that determines the general horizon of thinking about the political and politics (this might be a different interpretation of what Schmitt referred to when he was writing about a "metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world", Schmitt 1985, 46).

A recently published book by another Italian philosopher, Roberto Esposito, is one of the most radical attempts to assume the political-theological perspective only in order to finally situate a possible political philosophy beyond its bounds. *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* [*Two. The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*[1]] is at the same time a logical continuation of Esposito's earlier work and an innovative breakthrough, which provides a new perspective both on his thought on community and on political theology itself.Here Esposito focuses on the function and genealogy of the notion of

---

[1] While writing this review I was using the Italian original version. In the meantime the English translation was published, see Esposito 2015.

"person". Person is a dispositve that reveals political theology as a direct opposition to community. Whereas any form of subjectivity arises within the dialectic between *communitas* and *immunitas* as an immunitary reaction to the communal *munus*, political theology imposes a transcendent idea of a "person" on the communal production of subjectivity, just as it imposes a sovereign form of power on social relations.

Esposito's focus on the notion of the person allows him to do two things, both being innovative theoretical gestures in analysing the discourse of political theology. First of all, the notion of person joins the lexicon of Roman law with the language of theology (Esposito 2013, 91–102). *Persona* as the invention of Trinitarian theology appears for the first time in Tertullian's *Adversus Praxeam*. It came to be an indispensable conceptual tool to explicate an ontological relation alien to the ancient world, that between the three "persons" of the Trinity and the divine substance. As the source of the first theological heresies of Christianity which either gave substantial meaning to the persons and risked being deemed polytheistic or, on the contrary, saw person only as a modality of divine being, refusing to accept the theological innovation of Trinitarian *oikonomia* and perceiving God as an undivided unity (labelled by the orthodoxy as "Monarchianism"). The concept of person served to articulate the ontological plane with the economic one, that is the unity of God's being with the internal division between the "persons". The economic plane, the plane of the Trinitarian *oikonomia*, refers to God's action and praxis, to the relation of God's being to the created world and its history. It is no surprise then that the notion of person reappears in Christological discourse as a theological explication of the incarnated being of the second person of the Trinity. Instead of *una substantia, tres personae* that characterised the Trinity, Christ's dual, both divine and historical being, is explicated as *una persona, duae substantiae* (Esposito 2013, 96). In any case, the theological function of the person is to articulate both the unity and the division.

The brunt of Esposito's genealogy and critique of political theology consists of showing the same logic articulating the unity and division present in the secular tradition of the person as a juridical notion, one stemming from Roman law. He focuses on the institution of slavery in ancient Rome, essential to understand the status of the free person which was *sui iuris* only in a negative relation with the slave who was *alieni iuris*. The dispositive of the person functions within the system of law in order to refer these two fundamental social statuses to each other. In this sense the division introduced by the notion

of the free person, "is not what definitely separates diverse classes, but what articulates them in an unity constituted by the two asymmetrical parts, one subjugated under another, tending in this way to coincide with the whole" (Esposito 2013, 99). What interests Esposito is the historical and conceptual junction of the theological and juridical notion of the person. Whereas the theology of Trinity and Incarnation developed a nexus of unity and separation (between *substantia* and *persona*), Roman law elaborated on the division between the individual and his or her social status as a person. The effect of this junction, as analysed by Esposito, was the ongoing division *within* the human being between the instance of reason or soul (that gives the human being the metaphysical, social and political *status*) and the animal substance, what Esposito perceives as the retroactive influence of juridical categories on philosophical reasoning (Esposito 2013, 112).

The second theoretical outcome of Esposito's focus in his genealogical investigations of political theology on the dispositive of the person lies in his new positioning of the very problem of economic theology. Since the publication of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, where Agamben famously declared the theology of the Trinity to be a theological paradigm of governmentality (Agamben 2011, xi), the problem of economic theology has been more and more widely picked up by various scholars, including many contemporary Italian philosophers (Cacciari's work on *katechon* might also be considered an example of such an investigation). Esposito's contribution to this debate and his proposition to remodel the use that is being made of economic theology lies precisely in showing the economic significance of the dispositive of the person, theological in its roots. The reference to the ancient institution of *nexum*, through which debtors placed their bodies and their lives in the hands of the creditors, can be treated as Esposito's attempt to supplement the famous figure of *homo sacer* as the biopolitical grounding of sovereign power with a notion that shows economic biopower exercised on the living body itself. By placing his own body in the hands of the creditor, the debtor ascribed to this body an economic value. Therefore, while in public law he remained a person, in private law he became a thing, a property of the creditor. The literal economic value given to the body in the institution of the *nexum* is verified by historical accounts of the vengeance of creditors who could not only sell the insolvent debtor as a slave, but even tear his body into pieces if he was in debt to more than one person (Esposito 2013, 151). In the case of the *nexum* Esposito is able to show the complicated logic of the juridical dispositive of the person in Roman law, which operated on the division between

public and private, freemen and slaves, persons and things, but only to the extent that the introduction of one element of the binary relation meant excluding the second element of the relation and its simultaneous subordination to the first one – what also denoted the possibility of moving individuals from one sphere (e.g. "persons") to the other (e.g. "things").

Esposito's closing remarks, in the last passage of the book, on the debt relation in contemporary societies should only be treated as the initial outline of an economic-theological investigations based on the concept of the person. Nevertheless, the significance of Esposito's perspective is clear. In order to show the internal matrix of both political and economic theology, one can refer to the person as both the subject of the decision and as the status one is given through the debt relation. The creditor–debtor relation is truly a metaphysical relation that endures the changes of the subject, its health and mental capacities, its desires and social situation, giving him or her a permanent *status*. For example, Esposito notes that the number one reason for personal bankruptcies in the USA are loans necessary for medical care. Further, also in the USA, it is almost impossible to discharge student debt. To give an example from Europe, the number of mortgage credits in Poland is close to 2 million with far more than half of them taken out for at least 20 (in some cases even 30) years. These facts clearly show that this metaphysical debt relation still has a biopolitical character since we fall into debt to provide the necessary conditions for our lives.

Esposito's answer to this crisis – both in the sense of the persisting economic crisis that started as a subprime mortgage crisis and the general crisis of the modern State-form that has turned from the *welfare State* into the *debtfare State* (Soederberg 2014) – is unfortunately bleakly formulated, although it bears a strong philosophical potential. In the situation of a generalization of the debt relation, Esposito proposes to push this generalization to its limit and acknowledge the communal *munus* precisely as a principle of the community of debt, understood as obligation and duty towards others (Esposito 2013, 228). This philosophical postulate of going beyond an economic-theological notion of debt towards an ontological concept of debt constitutes the most direct reference to his earlier works on the problems of community and immunity. Debt as an ontological relation might be therefore one possible formulation of community beyond the modern immunization paradigm (Esposito 2008, 51).

Due can end with such a general philosophical project of community based on mutual, ontological debt since it presents a concept of political theology that goes far beyond a theory of the State, a secularized version of God's sovereign power, and even beyond a

theory of contemporary religious forms of political life. Just like Tronti, Esposito initially poses a question: What is the reason for the contemporary actuality of political theology? He answers this question by revoking Heidegger and his concept of *Gestell*, translated into English as "positionality" (Heidegger 2012). It is because of our belonging to the paradigm of political theology, which still regulates our understanding of politics and ethics that we have failed to gain enough distance from it and leave it behind us – just as according to Heidegger *Gestell* regulates our understanding of being. Referring Heidegger's *Gestell* to Foucault and Deleuze's notion of dispositive Esposito (2013, 18–19) recalls similar operations performed recently by Giorgio Agamben, but it is not Esposito's use of the notion of *Gestell* or "dispositif" that constitutes his most important contribution in *Due*. Far more important is his reference to Heideggers notion of "machination" (*Machenschaft*) as a proper paradigm to understand the functioning of political theology that makes *Due* an important work on the genealogy of political theology.

Esposito reconstructs Heidegger's "machination" in a manner that allows him to equate the logic of this process with his earlier philosophical reconstruction of the immunization process as the exclusionary inclusion (Esposito 2002, 10). Political theology is thus a "machine" (similar in its internal structure and function to Agamben's anthropological, sovereign or governmental machine), that proceeds by imposing the initial division and then reuniting the divided elements in unity on the basis of the subordination of one element to the other. Esposito reworks this mechanism on the basis of the notion of person. His reconstruction of the 20th century discussions in the field of political theology – from Kantorowicz and Schmitt to Peterson, Bataille, Taubes and Assman – focuses therefore on the role that the dispositive of the person played in these discourses. Although this reconstruction does not provide us with new historical material and, as Adam Kotsko points out (Kotsko 2016), is limited to the canon of western thought, it does serve to cast a light on the internal coherence of 20th century political theology.

But this reconstruction, centred on the dispositive of the person, also allows Esposito to read modern philosophical notions of the person – including the contemporary utilitarian standpoints of Peter Singer and Hugo Tristram Engelhardt (Esposito 2013, 141–148) – as belonging to the same political-theological key. Just as long the social relations of power are based on the logic of ascribing a status to individual living beings in a manner that necessarily excludes other individuals as not deserving the status of the person, we remain,

according to Esposito, on the theological-political grounds. This deeply philosophical genealogy and critique of political theology is at the same time practical and all-too-encompassing, thus risking the objection that Esposito's interest lies not so much in political theology but in philosophy. But this is probably precisely the case: Esposito needs political theology as a field of genealogical investigation into the notion of person, but it is not a field on which he wishes to remain.

The third part of the book confirms this assumption as it is devoted entirely to the alternative philosophical tradition – from Averroes to Bruno, from Spinoza, Schelling and Bergson to Deleuze – which is characterized by a non-personal concept of thinking. Surprisingly enough, Esposito sees in philosophy a paradigm that can present an alternative to the machine of political theology since it is in philosophy, at least in some of its strains, that person vanishes in the process of impersonal or transpersonal thought. While theology is interested mostly, as Agamben shows, in the problem of the subject of action and its effectiveness (Agamben 2013), law focuses on the problems of property and appropriation (Esposito 2002, 25–61). Philosophy, on the other hand, is first of all an image, theory or performance of thought and therefore seems privileged to go beyond the paradigm centred on the dispositive of the person. This part of *Due* presents investigations that build what probably constitutes Esposito's most intriguing philosophical project, namely the philosophy of the impersonal (Esposito 2007). But introducing in *Due* questions of economic theology and of the crisis of contemporary economy allows us to draw even further going conclusions. Philosophy, and especially philosophy based on the notion of impersonal thought, can be perceived as a model for intellectual production in general, the productivity of "general intellect", which is never reducible to the productivity of a single individual. Although philosophy has always been a product of single individuals, it was philosophy's ability to self-understand, as Esposito shows, that could potentially enable it to see itself as the effect of transindividual relations – of a passive, general intellect, a divine intellect that joins individual entities and the totality of the world, the impersonality of the mind, etc. It may be the case that the philosophical tradition which sees thought as the effect of a separate, impersonal intellect can provide a general conceptual framework to grasp the production relations in contemporary cognitive capitalism. Esposito does not elaborate on that concept, but his idea of a community based on the communal *munus* must not only do away with the dispositive of the person as the basis for the debt relations in the contemporary world, but also come up

with a new notion of the subjectivity of communal, creative and cognitive production. Why not look for this notion in philosophy?

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 2011. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa, Matteo Mandarini. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio. 2013. *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Cacciari, Massimo. 2013. *Il potere che frena: Saggio di teologia politica*. Milano: Adelphi.

Cacciari, Massimo and Mario Tronti. 2007. *Teologia e politica al crocevia della storia*, Maris Gaspari (ed.). Milano: Edizioni Albo Versorio.

Esposito, Roberto. 2002. *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*. Torino: Einaudi.

Esposito, Roberto. 2007. *Terza persona. Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*. Torino: Einaudi.

Esposito, Roberto. 2008. *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: Stanford University Press.

Esposito, Roberto. 2013. *Due: La macchina della teologia politicae il posto del pensiero*. Torino: Einaudi.

Esposito, Roberto. 2015. *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*. Trans. Zakiya Hanafi. New York: Fordham University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 2012. "Positionality." In *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures. Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*. Trans. Andrew J. Mitchell. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Kotsko, Adam. (2016). Review of Roberto Esposito's "Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought." *Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World*, file:///C:/Users/Eugeniusz/Downloads/Kotsko-Due-Esosito.pdf

Schmitt, Carl. 1985. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Soederberg, Susanne. 2014. *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population*. New York: Routledge.

Mikołaj Ratajczak – philosopher, editor and translator. PhD researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and a member of the editorial collective of the academic journal *Praktyka Teoretyczna*. In years 2012–2015 the editor of philosophy and social sciences in the Scientific Publishing House PWN. One of the co-translators of the Polish edition of Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth* and the translator of Marx's *Results of the Direct Production Process* into Polish. Co-editor of two volumes on the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. Currently he works on a book on the contemporary Italian political philosophy.

ADDRESS:
Mikołaj Ratajczak
The Graduate School for Social Research
IFiS PAN
Nowy Świat 72
00-330 Warsaw
EMAIL: mikolaj.ratajczak@gmail.com

Mikołaj Ratajczak – filozof, redaktor i tłumacz. Doktorant w Instytucie Filozofii i Socjologii PAN i członek zespołu redakcyjnego czasopisma naukowego *Praktyka Teoretyczna*. W latach 2012–2015 wydawca filozofii i nauk społecznych w Wydawnictwie Naukowym PWN. Jeden z tłumaczy polskiego wydania *Rzecz-pospolitej* Hardta i Negriego i autor przekładu na język polski *Rezultatów bezpośredniego procesu produkcji* Karola Marksa. Współredaktor dwóch tomów poświęconych filozofii Giorgio Agambena. Obecnie pracuje nad książką o współczesnej włoskiej filozofii politycznej.

TYTUŁ: Filozofia i maszyna teologii politycznej. Recenzja *Due. Macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* Roberta Esposito.

ABSTRAKT: W swojej recenzji książki Roberta Esposito *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* Ratajczak stara się zrekonstruować i poddać ewaluacji podjętą przez Esposito probe reinterpretacji dziedzictwa zachodniej teologii politycznej przez wprowadzenie koncepcji „maszyny teologii politycznej". Skupia się przede wszystkim na użytku, jaki Esposito robi z pojęcia osoby w swojej rekonstrukcji wspólnej matrycy teologii politycznej i ekonomicznej. Pod koniec recenzji proponuje rozszerzyć obecne w książce Esposita odwołanie do filozoficznej tradycji bezosobowego myślenia w celu szukania w tej

tradycji nie tylko innego paradygmatu wspólnoty, ale także innego paradygmatu podmiotu produkcji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: teologia polityczna, teologia ekonomiczna, dyspozytyw osoby, filozofia, Roberto Esposito