



PUBLIC SEMINAR

Debt of Living

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Introduction

Modernity and its forms of power have often been interpreted through the paradigm of sacrifice: the renunciation of individual freedom for the preservation of life is regarded as a foundation stone of the creation of the nation state, a form of compensation exchanged at the price of repression is the hallmark of modern civilization. But now this model no longer seems to work: it cannot describe the present condition. Recent studies claim that the most common psychopathologies and contemporary mal-aïses (such as anorexia, bulimia, new forms of addiction, depression, panic attacks) can no longer be referred to the dissonances originating from the removal of desire or the renunciation of instinctual drives that Sigmund Freud had diagnosed in the last century, nor can they be seen as the effects of sacrifices imposed by civilization; instead, they are deemed to result from an intricate process where seeking opportunities of enjoyment becomes a social imperative. Performance increasingly takes the place of the “reality principle” and desires are made completely adequate to the competitive logic of profit forcibly becoming conditions of self-affirmation. Jacques Lacan speaks of “discourse of capitalism” coining an expression that is particularly effective to confront one of the characteristic phenomena of the essence of our times: that is, that power has taken on the form of an economy in the era of globalization.

The main intention of this book is to carry out an analysis of the mechanisms that have engendered and continue to perpetrate this form of power. One of the most renowned views on this topic is Max Weber’s thesis on the way capitalism originates from inner-worldly asceticism. The investigation carried out in my work starts from the premise that accumulation and profit are no longer retraceable to renunciation, that is, to the ability to delay the gratification of needs and desires for the sake of the accumulation of wealth, contrary to Weber’s analysis, which is in line with the sacrificial paradigm. Instead, I

claim that they are traceable to the compulsive drive to enjoy and consume and that there is no ascetic practice lurking in the background.

Not only will I try to demonstrate the present relevance of the aspects of Weber’s thesis that do not make recourse to the sacrificial model, I will also try to investigate the anthropological foundations of ascetic practice, with a particular focus on Christian asceticism, because I am convinced that it contributes to a reading of the present. My work follows the path traced by Michel Foucault’s studies on “governmental power” and the asceticism of Late Antiquity.

Underlining my investigation of the anthropological foundations of ascetic practice is a philosophical problem concerning human action and the fact that, as Aristotle claimed, while the goal (télös) of production (poïe-sis) is different from production, the goal of practice (prâxis) is not. In the Ethics Aristotle claims that “good action (eupraxía) itself is its end (télös)” (Aristotle, Ethics 6.1140b). Each end or finality outlined by human action presupposes the ability to have a goal that cannot be deduced from the external environment and as such is not necessarily resolved in its extrinsic realization. A finality of this kind is not limited to its teleological value; by its nature, it is “purposiveness without end,” to use an expression coined by Kant that conveys both the obscurity and the intimate complexity of this question. In this framework, identifying the ascetic nature of action only makes sense in so far as the asceticism of praxis does not resolve itself in sacrifice but confronts instead the “purposiveness without end” that appears to be a determining feature of human action. This feature nurtures both the ability of action to be innovative and the possibility of it being subjugated by a mechanism that is its own end.

My thesis then is that in contemporary forms of production, some-thing other than the ability to produce as such or goal-directed action is at stake, and it characterizes human action more intrinsically. This is the fact that human beings are not only given the ability to act in the pursuit of determined goals, but also the possibility to engage in a practice that contains its own end in itself. The question of power in its current economic form refers to the modes of government Foucault has already outlined: the path he traced entails a reflection on the economy where the question of work, production, and



profit concerns planning, costs, and sacrifices, but is also traceable to “ascetic” techniques of the self-production of human life, the aimless productivity that intimately characterizes it and the ability of human action to possess its own end that is equally characteristic of asceticism. This is the “force” that contemporary modes of production were capable of putting to work the most.

Unlike animal behavior, human praxis can be an action without end, or not predetermined by its actualization, and this potentiality of action has been central to Western political and ethical thought since Aristotle. It has been interpreted in various ways, often acquiring a negative connotation as something that is best to neutralize. My working hypothesis is that in our times, indebtedness has reached a global scale and has become an extreme form of compulsion to enjoy: unexpectedly, it has turned into the condition that characterizes the potentiality of action. In its various forms, debt has become the premise of current modes of subjectivation and, as such, needs to be reproduced rather than repaid.

Foucault’s research is one of the most fertile for an assessment of the extent to which this indebtedness, this condition of “lacking,” can constitute the privileged precedent for the pursuit of profit today. In this framework, it is necessary to underline the problematic connection between “Christian pastoral power” and “economic-governmental power” (Foucault, 1983, 2010a).

One of the greatest merits of Foucault’s research is that it has not limited economic analysis to questions of work, ownership, interest, the accumulation of money, or the definition of the instrumental rationality that underlines them. Foucault speaks of economy in terms of “government,” precisely to turn around the classical opposition between Christian charity and commercial rationality, thus identifying a different and meaningful link between Christianity and the economy.

Following the same path, Giorgio Agamben has recently undertaken an investigation on the Christian roots of the economy and modern “governmentality” that is of particular relevance to my work here (Agamben, 2011). At the origin of the current economic government of human beings and the world Agamben sees the theological paradigm of trinity and the Patristic development of an “economy of salvation.” His analysis tries to integrate the shift, which in his view Foucault did

not describe convincingly enough, from ecclesiastical pastorate to political government; however, in the process, in a sort of inversion of Foucault’s work, he tends to abstract the theological dispositif (apparatus) from its practices, whereas Foucault consistently followed the development of both government and techniques of subjectivation simultaneously, because he saw them as constitutively linked.

Foucault’s intention was undoubtedly to present a thorough study of “biopolitics.” In my view, the most relevant aspect of his research is the assertion that the neutralization of politics and its transformation into biopolitics are not only an effect of the politicization of life as it is increasingly deprived of its forms and qualities and reduced to simple biological life. While this is the aspect of it that has received the most attention in recent years, in my view the debate on biopolitics today needs to take into account the mechanisms of subjectivation applied to the capacity of human living beings to shape and value their lives starting from the purposiveness without end that characterizes it. This, I believe, is the most urgent question arising from Foucault’s work, and it is worth pursuing.

In order to recover the problem of the economy at the heart of Foucault’s theory of governmentality while keeping within the confines of an analysis that does not lose sight of the practices through which power constitutes itself in economic terms and produces its own pathologies, this work starts with a return to Max Weber’s seemingly outdated thesis on the origin of capitalism. Despite its limits, an element of Weber’s position that is often left at the margins of its analysis works with one of the main aspects of my investigation. In my view, something that is currently not being discussed can in fact be of great use to our reading of the present. This is the argument that the main driver of the capitalist machine is the auto-finality implicit in the search for profit. What sets the mechanism in motion, for Weber, is not an acquisitive drive or an interest geared toward accumulation, but rather the illogical logic of “profit for profit’s sake.”

This implicit auto-finality of the search for profit as a main driver of capitalist economies that emerges from Weber’s thesis, prior to pointing to the possibility of an internal critique of the developments of Weber’s theory, opens up a wider question concerning the ability of human beings to relate



to themselves in the absence of a predetermined goal. The fact that when separated from the interest in a specific acquisition profit still exists as an end in itself presupposes the experience inherent to human living beings of something beyond the situations they individually respond to, and points to a potential that cannot be exhausted in individual realizations. Every goal achieved, for men and women, exists only on the basis of that intrinsic auto-finality of their action, something Aristotle was the first to reflect on.

An analysis of the uses of Weber's thesis for our reading of the present is called for because the path of self-destruction that contemporary life has embarked on is an end in itself, and the psychopathologies of this malaise of contemporary civilization are only tips of a much larger iceberg. Nurturing psychopathologies is largely part of this course and of its various manifestations, from democratic policies, the precarization of work in the economy, private indebtedness in financialization, migrant forms of production in the global labor market, the image of consumption in the commodified society of the spectacle, as well as the reduction of women's bodies to mere "accompanying" tools of new forms of power. These are not special phenomena: they constitute the ability of human living beings to relate to themselves in an autotelic way. In the path we have just described, this potential is split into different gradations, in the form of a freely produced dependency, and subjected to an exercise that involves singular lives in its realization.

1. A reinterpretation of Weber's thesis along these lines is offered at the end of the book. First, my work follows a path that takes into account the opposition to this interpretation of Weber.

At the beginning of the 1980s in France we witnessed the emergence of an anti-utilitarian movement linked to the journal MAUSS (Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales), which has considerable influence on contemporary debates. Suffice it to mention the latest works of Serge Latouche, one of the best known members of MAUSS, much followed recently also by global movements engaged in a critique of unlimited growth. Whether on the course traced by Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi, or following the work of Georges Bataille, the anti-utilitarian movement has often confronted Weber's thesis without ever taking into serious consideration his notion of the profit of capitalist

enterprise as an end in itself. Instead, in Weber's theory, it has regarded utilitarian reason as the single ailment of the mechanisms of the capitalist economy and its power. Given its importance and reach, a preliminary confrontation with this thread of research was deemed appropriate. The principal purpose of my work in this initial phase is to reveal the potential and limits of a framework that, in pursuing a critique of the capitalist economy, tends to separate the dimension of the gift and disinterestedness from that of utility and instrumentality.

In Weber's theory, irrespective of the satisfaction it might procure or of the utility or interest that drives it, in order to coincide with the effective gain of the enterprise, profit must be an end in itself. Auto-finality under-lies, in this sense, any search for the means to achieve the ends identified by interests and geared to realizing the useful: this surplus inheres in it intimately. Consequently, a reconstruction of the political formulation of "interest" between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century is summarily presented, which against the anti-utilitarian reading identifies the mechanisms "interest" adopts, as a vector of utility and freedom, to functionally coincide with the power it is founded upon and with what exceeds personal utility in a convergence toward the "common good." In the political formulation of interest here presented, I find the development of a dis-course aimed at the constant production of a freely construed dependency. What makes it possible is the internal neutralization of the disinterested auto-finality that characterizes human action. Weber regards the autotelic dimension as something exceeding instrumental reason, a main driver of capitalist enterprise. In the political notion of interest, this is translated in the terms of a spontaneous convergence of individual freedoms into a sort of "disinterested interest" that belongs at once to each one and everyone; in this, a new properly economic formulation of power is created. The intrinsic opacity of interest is due to the fact that despite their irreducible multiplicity, the convergence of points of view is guaranteed. Opaque is also the rationality that governs this process: the maximization of the interest of each individual coincides with something that, by exceeding it, is no longer it and only becomes realized through the full satisfaction of goals that are clearly outlined in the abstract



form of consensus and, above all, become a common good with an end in itself.

In a path that is internal to the economy and calls this rationality back into question, the shift carried out by the main exponents of neoliberalism in the twentieth century might appear as a radicalization of the foundations of the classical liberalism that emerged from the political formulation of interest in the seventeenth century. Friedrich August von Hayek offers an indicative example of this: while searching for an economic legitimation of the political institution, Hayek speaks of a “spontaneous order” that produces itself on the basis of a “discipline of freedom.” In his work, he outlines the growth of liberty in modes of discipline as an indirect form of political intervention that manifests itself as a self-managed order coinciding with that of the market. Hence the reduction of various classical figures of homo oeconomicus—the producer who owns the means of production, the wage laborer, the man of exchange, and the consumer—to the entrepreneur, in particular the self-entrepreneur. This implicitly radicalizes Weber’s theory, in a shift from capitalist enterprise to the self-managed order of the market.

Hayek opens up a series of questions that were later developed by some of the most notorious members of the Chicago School, Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, whom I also discuss. Their theories of “human capital” have found huge applications in contemporary forms of production, to the point of giving a new life to the use of the word “capitalism.” Investment in human capital is the primary mode of the current economy and even working activities come to coincide with an entrepreneurial practice that is an end in itself. Thus, Weber’s notion that the real driver of the capitalist enterprise is the ability to capitalize on what has no end but its own self becomes fully realized. The capitalization of the work each makes on oneself entails a form of self-discipline, a discipline of freedom in Hayek’s sense, or, in keeping with my intention to revive Weber’s theory I would speak of a sort of renewed asceticism. This exercise takes on forms that are very different from those Weber was thinking of when he wrote of the forms of life of the entrepreneur at the beginning of the last century. However, the connection between asceticism and the economy is central to his thesis and needs to be rethought, in an analysis where asceticism is

not limited to the practice of renunciation as a means to achieve an extrinsic goal, but as something that is at the heart of human conduct. This is, after all, what emerges from Weber’s own framework.

2. Past works on Weber have privileged the paradigm of secularization, underlining how goals shifted from a transcendent to an immanent finality in the debate on the origins of capitalism. For Weber, the secular translation of inner-worldly ascetic conduct carried out by Calvinism allowed for a separation of the rationality of praxis from the extrinsic finality of the transcendental ethical reward of Christian ascendance. Starting from his intuition and moving beyond it, rather than question the “origin” of capitalism my work posits the problem of the meaning of a mechanism that, despite this shift of finality onto a plane of immanence, seems to keep its inner workings unchanged while producing effects that profoundly differ with the conditions of its functioning. Weber’s thesis on asceticism can thus be considered under new light.

It was thus deemed useful to carry out an analysis of Christian asceticism, on which Weber’s thesis is premised, too. But rather than presupposing what asceticism is in Christianity, my work seeks to see how a form of life in Christ was constituted. This investigation claims neither to be exhaustive on this issue nor to outline a general interpretation of Christianity from the origins. Instead, I try to focus on a particular aspect that is extremely relevant to the overall discussion: the fact that in early Christianity a properly “economic” mode of life emerges and precedes the accomplished formation of asceticism in it. Through Weber and beyond Weber, it is possible to see how Christian asceticism and economy have been a fertile ground for the comprehension of Western economic discourse, especially considering that the “economy” is the form of expression of the experience of life in Christ since its origins, even before asceticism became a Christian problem as such. Starting from the link Weber identifies between Christian asceticism and capitalist economy, an economic mode of Christianity is identified that has emerged time and again in the development of economic discourse until it found its own radical actualization. Rather than outline an evolution of the link between the Christian notion of the economy and Western economic discourse, or underline a single root of



economic discourse in the West, my intention is to find the possible and different historical actualizations of a mode that seems to have found its peculiar expression in Christian discourse.

The notion of economy formulated in early Christianity refers to the experience of freedom from the *nómos* of faith. It is the expression of the rule of law in the antinormative form of its accomplishment whereby life and law, *oïkos* and *nómos*, coincide. This is the first time the life of everyone so clearly takes on the semblance of an investment. The experience of sin at the basis of Christian existence becomes the experience of a debt that, thanks to the gift of grace, does not need to be repaid but can, as such, be administered in the form of an investment. Unstinting gratuity and economic administration, disinterest and interest, are not opposed to one another, they are connected at the outset. Making life fruitful in these terms seems an investment for no return. Whoever makes this investment, on the one hand, faces the impossibility of realizing in his “works” the commandments of the *nómos*, on the other hand, in seeking to profit from his actions, becomes separated from the goal it was turned toward in his “works” and can only resort to the auto-finality implicit in human praxis. However, in the Christian perspective, gain resides in this loss. The dimension of the gift and of disinterest in grace acts upon human conduct and allows it to suspend the goal orientation that characterizes it as “deed.” Keeping the tension toward the future alive, however, creates a peculiar mode of investment on what in action has no other end but itself and according to the knowledge (*sophía*) of this world appears to be meaningless. In the perspective outlined in my investigation, this mode of experience finds its peculiar expression in Christian life: the possibility to invest not on deeds and their effects, but on the very praxis whose goals seem fundamentally purposeless.

In this respect, some have spoken of disinterested “inoperosity” as what inheres in early Christianity and made it possible to identify the “purity” in its origin that was allegedly betrayed. The singling out of an uncontaminated side of Christian history within the history of its power has always been a difficult task. The Christian community is immediately exposed to the management of gratuity and this consigns it to an unknown dimension of freedom. This freedom,

which consists of the possibility of emancipation from an extrinsic norm and exemption from a relation of obligation aimed at the productive realization of an external command, is at the foundation of the institution of the Christian community but immediately ends up identifying itself with obedience, in the form of an absolute adherence of life to the law, of *oïkos* to *nómos*. Since its beginning, the practice of Christian life measures up with an unknown form of political institution, an autonomous production of subjectivation realized through faith. This experience has had an enormous influence on the modern development of a political and economic discourse fundamentally geared to the production of a freely construed dependence, since Kant, and especially after Hegel. However, it seems reductive to ascribe these moments to a single course of evolution or degeneration of Western rationality, as has been the case until Weber and in some ways also to our days. It seems more useful to reconstruct the different practices where an experience of life has found, historically, its realization and radical expression in Christianity since its origins.

In the history of Christianity, the clear recovery of an extrinsic finality that transcends human action can be traced back to the beginning of a transformation of the economic experience of life. This shift occurs at a time when asceticism was being clearly formulated as a Christian problem. The *oikonomía* becomes developed as an abstract plane of salvation, the divine plan of a history that one needs to conform to. Asceticism is here constituted as a technique functional and subjected to power: theology never ceased to provide the instruments for the survival of asceticism in centuries of its history.

In the Patristic perspective, the “economy of salvation” becomes a veritable economy of divine life and its incarnation in trinity theology and in Christology, and the divine order of the world in theology and history. This development privileged the formulation of a properly economic discourse as attested by recent threads of research on medieval history. This research has been of particular interest to my analysis here because it starts from a movement internal to ascetic literature. These studies demonstrate how the discourse on the economy, in the medieval period, is not only concerned with questions of accumulation, as the debate on usury seems to suggest.



Instead, great attention is given to the texts produced in monastic institutions: these are taken literally as political and economic reflections. The paradigm of the commerce of salvation between God and man is the key to reading this monastic literature. However, when inspected closely, the production of an economic lexicon is evidenced by means of a detailed analysis of the ascetic experience. Asceticism thus becomes separated from the meritorious orientation whose goal is heavenly salvation; it becomes seen as a form of investment in itself, not on what can be securely acquired, but on what can be used on the basis of one's ability to renounce it. The ability of doing without nurtures ascetic life and gives "value" to things: this is the origin of Western economic discourse. What matters is neither the definitive possession of something, nor the capacity to do without it in view of an extrinsic goal. Instead, it is the possibility of investing in some-thing that cannot be definitively owned, and refers to something that has no other end but itself in praxis. The form of "common good" becomes a fundamental device in the political mechanism of inclusion and exclusion for a community made up of those who act in conformity with the modes of profit implicit in renunciation, where renunciation becomes the only precondition for the circulation of wealth within said community.

Beyond possible ideas of a "spirit" of capitalism in Catholicism retrace-able to these studies, and beyond the limits of such suggestion that also pertain to Weber's hypothesis, these two positions, while different, seem to agree on one important point, which is rather implicit in their respective works, and yet crucial to the study presented here. Although it is inscribed in the logic of a finalistic orientation of the commerce of salvation, my work examines asceticism in economic terms not so much as a functional technique of the economy of salvation, but as a fundamentally evaluative aspect of praxis and its intimate ability to invest in something that leads to the auto-finality implicit in it. Similarly, while in Weber inner-worldly asceticism is a praxis that allows for the separation of rationality from the extrinsic finality of a transcendent remuneration, this does not entail that economic action becomes thus exclusively entrusted to a formal rationality singularly geared to the calculation of the means necessary to the achievement of finally predetermined and

solely immanent goals. In Weber, the planned exclusion of transcendent finality and the immanent orientation that result from it, in fact, allow for the emergence of an auto-finality to which human conduct is consigned preventively, and which in capitalism becomes "irrational," the enterprise as an end in itself. In other words, in both cases profit and the ability to invest are connected to something that is its own end, more than relating to an extrinsic finality.

3. While this is the framework of my outline of the connection between asceticism and the economy, as per Weber's contribution, it is worth reflecting again on the religious experience, which ascetic practice originates from. Among human experiences, the religious one most puts to fruition its being autotelic and this is attested by some of the most important studies in the sciences of religion between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. In this period, the social dimension of religious experience was given predom-inance in the work of Marcel Mauss, Émile Durkheim, and the members of the Collège de Sociologie; while others such as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus Van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade concentrated on its ontological and existential dimension. Religious experience in its various forms is such that the auto-finality implicit in human action reveals itself as a power with an end separate from man, and because of this it is also capable of constraining his conduct.

It is necessary to investigate the sense in which it is possible to claim that an investment in the auto-finality of praxis finds its final historical realization in the capitalist economy. Its separation seems to coincide, here with the practices through which it reproduces itself. One might say that capitalism, today, seems to be the self-referential religion of human life.

At this point, my investigation turns to a fragment written by a young Walter Benjamin on "capitalism as religion." Despite its rhapsodic character, this text opens up new paths for understanding the phenomenon. Karl Marx's work, too, is a privileged element of this confrontation with Benjamin's critique of capitalist society. The question of "real abstractions," so central to Marx's analysis of the processes of capitalist self-reproduction, is further illuminated if one considers the techniques of abstraction of life inherent to religious experience, which in Benjamin's short text takes on the



character of a religious cult.

The parasitical derivation of the capitalist economy from Christian religion is underlined by Marx in several of his works, and taken on by Benjamin, for whom it becomes a permanent cult of man as “being in debt” through a perpetual form of indebtedness that reproduces the ways human life becomes subjected in Christianity. On these premises, in the rest of the work I try to show how, in so far as man is a living being without biologically determined extrinsic goals, and thus an end in itself, he has definitely become, in capitalism, a “being in debt”: his existence is turned into a lack, a void that cannot be filled, and because of this it is constantly reproduced rather than filled. This is the presupposition for the subjectivation that is realized through it.

Alongside Marx, Benjamin names three other figures of modernity in his short text as the high priests of the capitalist cult: Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber. Aside from the criticisms that can be leveled against their work, what is relevant to my study is that they all identify, albeit in different ways, a problematic and constitutive link between asceticism and the economy, and this is the focus of the last part of my investigation. They see the mechanism that regulates ascetic practice as an anthropological device; they all similarly identify it, although they describe it differently: for all of them, ascetic practice involves a technique of abstraction that is not reduced to the mere negation of the living. Human life, without biologically predetermined ends, finds through this practice the forms of its self-sustenance. In Nietzsche this is “resentment,” in Freud it is “removal,” and in Weber the process of “rationalization”: they explore the same mechanism in these different ways. In all their analysis, however, it is possible to detect an excess that is not exhausted in the practice it originates from. The will to nothingness linked to the will to power, in Nietzsche, the economic problem of masochism in Freud, and the meaninglessness of the rational and self-reflexive logic of profit in Weber are the three forms of this excess. On the basis of the Christian frame of reference it is possible to speak of debt and guilt to describe this remainder, this surplus. In any case, it concerns the state of lacking that emerges as a void to fill but above all the lack is a surplus that is constitutive of human beings and as such is reproduced while being

simultaneously neutralized. Not only do these three thinkers see the finality without a predetermined goal, this determining characteristic of human beings, as being incorporated in the need for self-preservation and acquiring definitive goals that men and women are prepared to strive toward for their entire lives. Above all, what becomes clear is the manner in which this finality without goal is tuned into an abstract end in itself that neutralizes the potential that belongs to it and orients the movement it is caught up in toward something that is irreversible.

What seems to be the task today is finding an exercise capable of reconquering, time and again, the reversibility of this motion. The activation of counter-conducts that move in a different direction or the attempt to find points of resistance to the power that governs us as in the frame-work opened up by Foucault’s research can still be insufficient. But one should not call into question, on this issue, the whole deactivation of the governmental dispositif, as Agamben proposes, because this seems more impracticable. The deactivated “inoperosity” within the machine of government comes to be almost limited to a lifeless sphere. Instead, what is at stake is not so much the possibility of deactivating, but rather that of reactivating, in ever changing ways, the finality without end which inheres in human praxis and coincides with its power to innovate and to change. This opportunity is given to men and women, and linked to the difficult task of radically questioning its current separation in the self-destructive form of the global enterprise that is its own end.