

Elettra Stimilli. *Debt and Guilt: A Political Philosophy.* Bloomsbury 2018. 184 pp. \$74.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350063426); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350063433).

At the high point of the economic crisis in Greece, Yanis Varoufakis, then Finance Minister and a leading member of the left-radical Syriza Party, explained that ‘we should limit ourselves to this simple question: how to return to making Greece’s social economy sustainable by reducing the costs of the Greek crisis to a minimum for the average German and European’ (131). Varoufakis frames the problem of debt as a technical and economical question. Stimilli does not want to limit herself to the technical question. She argues that the fiscal crisis of the European Economic Community (EEC) tells us something really important about the paradoxes of a neoliberal economy. Roberto Esposito, in his foreword to Stimilli’s previous work on the same subject, explains her point: ‘what this means is that the figure of *being in debt*, now the very condition of our existence, cannot be seen as a mere contingent outcome of the current crisis, but needs to be rethought as the form that human life takes on thanks to the close intertwining of the economy and politics that for a long time has turned the former into both a presupposition and an outcome of the latter’ (Roberto Esposito, ‘Foreword’, Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living, Asceticism and Capitalism*, SUNY Press, 2017, viii, my emphasis).

Indeed, for Stimilli the accusations of profligacy directed against the more indebted countries of the EEC (Greece, Portugal, and Spain), and the concomitant injunction that they should atone for their sins by submitting to fiscal discipline and adjusting downward their standard of living are not signs of a cultural disconnect between the more easy-going Latin and the stern Germanic members of the EEC. Nor are they the traumatic memories of the hyperinflation that destroyed the Weimar Republic, or a reflection of profound cultural resonances, as suggested by the fact that the nouns ‘debt’ and ‘sin’ are homonyms in German.

Stimilli’s main thesis builds on the idea of ‘guilt as a debt’, which functions ‘in many societies’ as the core of social life (159). As a philosophical principle, this idea functions primarily as an alternative to Marx’s prioritization of production. Stimilli draws from Schmitt’s political theology, Freud’s theory of repression, Girard’s mimetic instinct, and to a lesser extent, from ideas derived from Nietzsche, Foucault, Judith Butler, and Roberto Esposito. The pair ‘debt/guilt’ is supposed to explain neoliberal post-industrial capitalistic societies better than competing theories, be those Marxist or liberal. The pair ‘debt/guilt’ is not a contingent aspect of contemporary societies. Failure to understand this issue has also practical consequences, as it casts a shadow on any attempt to re-launch the economy (2).

Chapter 1 deals with debt as a new form of appropriation, opposed and more fundamental than exchange or gift. Stimilli mentions briefly Marx’s concept of surplus value and the appropriation by the capitalist ‘of a certain amount of unpaid labor’, but quickly turns to Carl Schmitt ‘who clearly illustrated the terms of the problem from an institutional point of view’ (11). Schmitt argues that appropriation, either of ownerless land or of land made ownerless by conquest, is first. While admitting that Schmitt’s ideas are unsavory, she considers that these clarify the political aspects of appropriation. This is further confirmed with a reference to an exchange of letters between Alexandre Kojève and Schmitt. Their discussion seems to turn around the question of whether in the post-World War II era, the role of the political should be limited to the administration of things, a hypothesis that Schmitt only reluctantly accepted. Kojève was an early advocate of globalization, and Stimilli notes, in the concluding remarks of this section, that those early expectations did not pan out.

The next section in the chapter deals with exchange. Stimilli criticizes Adams Smith's account, also endorsed by Marx, because it disregards the social. The market is first an institution in charge of valuation, before being the scene of an exchange (26). Following ideas developed by Foucault in *Security, Territory and Population*, Stimilli concludes that 'it is through the institution of the market that economy becomes a form of political economy' and 'a site of truth' (37).

The chapter proceeds with a discussion of the concept of gift. Gift is a mechanism to create social cohesion, not equivalence. However, Stimilli finds that either in itself, or because of the historic changes in the realm of economics, gift cannot really serve as an adequate critical tool to analyze the present (32). A section on debt follows. What is borrowed is neither taken (appropriation) nor traded (exchange). The debt corresponds to a level at which the distinction between appropriation and trade had not yet arisen. The structure of debt is also internal to that of the gift (32-3). Beyond the question of precedence, what is most important is to acknowledge that what we are dealing with here is 'with the communicative aspects that characterize human action' (34).

Chapter 2 studies debt in the context of neoliberalism. Stimilli suggests that neoliberalism is not merely what replaces 'Fordism' (industrial capitalism), but an extension of administrative and entrepreneurial rationality to all areas of social life (40). This leads to an ideal of the individual man as an entrepreneur of himself. Who is this individual? Stimilli portrays him as an active subject, who devotes himself 'to the activity in which he is employed, suppressing any kind of alienation, any distance between himself and his enterprise' (41).

Alienation at the neoliberal stage operates then at a different, more radical level than the one that was described by Marx in the early days of industrial capitalism. In neoliberal capitalism, alienation operates as a 'potential element inherent in human life' (43). Another feature of neoliberalism is the transformation of the Nation-State into a 'managerial State' (44). This is shown, among others, by the encroachments into sovereignty by the market and the debt rating agencies, and by the progressive transformation of politics into economy (45). In this context, Stimilli surveys two authors who were among the first to address the question of debt in contemporary society at a theoretical level: Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Melville House, 2012), and Lazzarato and Jordan's *The Making of the Indebted Man* (Semiotext(e), 2012).

Chapter 3 deals with the question of faith, and how it operates as the middle term between individual *qua* entrepreneur and the financial markets. 'As the "entrepreneur of oneself" becomes the central figure of economic power, those who "believe" in themselves and in the strength of the market acquire unprecedented significance' (63). Faith shows here in two somewhat different contexts: the faith that the entrepreneur has of his own abilities and the faith that we bestow on financial instruments. The question, then, is what is this faith? Instead of a psychological, phenomenological or sociological analysis, Stimilli takes us on a detour through an institution for which faith has a constitutive role, i.e., religion. She discusses several contemporary attempts, such as Esposito's, to show the similarities between the theological-political and universal indebtedness. She also discusses the theories of the 'French School of Regulation' that presents a similar position. She summarizes their position as follows: 'a primordial debt, constitutive of human beings and immediately inscribed in the religious sphere of archaic societies, marks economic, political and social relations to this day' (78).

Chapter 4 deals largely with a recently discovered text of Walter Benjamin entitled 'Capitalism as Religion'. Building on her previous *The Debt of the Living*, she argues that in this fragment, Benjamin claims that Capitalism is a cult that instead of offering atonement, creates guilt (90). Guilt is also central to other writings in which Benjamin tries to develop a theory of the political, such a

‘Fate and Character’, and ‘Critique of Violence’. The focus in the chapter, which also deals briefly with Foucault’s exploration of Christian spirituality, is the relationship between guilt and debt.

In the next chapter, Stimilli deals with the psychic life of debt, or the subjective dimensions of debt. The author surveys the Freudian model of psychic identity and the phenomenon of guilt. She concludes that Freud developed his ideas in a different societal and economic context, and it is therefore necessary to re-examine his model of instinctual repression in the light of the different circumstances prevailing today. Stimilli hypothesizes that in the global market dominated contemporary society, rules cannot be established solely through the experience of repression and guilt (135). Contemporary advanced capitalist societies are characterized by a dynamic of individual initiative and by the satisfaction rather than repression of desires (what Marcuse used to call ‘repressive desublimation’). This means, that the forms of discontent that prevailed in the early patriarchal capitalism of the late 19th and 20th century are no longer prevalent. Instead, other symptoms such as depression (136) and shame (137) take their place.

Stimilli seems to think that a neoliberal society produces a different kind of man, one who tends to ‘administer the libidinal economy at the foundation of human life through the multiplication of conditions that continually reproduce a situation of debt’ (138). But it is not clear why this type of society is no longer based on guilt, or if guilt is still produced, how it is still a part of what she calls the ‘anthropogenic machine’. This ambiguity is not resolved in the short summary at the end of the chapter. She writes: ‘the problem of debt turns out to be a powerful political operator that radicalizes a new dimension of power in which the institution of the rule *is not exclusively* based on discipline, repression and guilt ... the political function of guilt ... *has changed* along with the changing of the conditions that produced it’ (157, my emphasis). Guilt has changed, then, not disappeared.

Overall, there seems to be an immanent tension in the attempt to redescribe neoliberal society primarily in terms of debt. If debt is an invariant anthropological dimension, valid for all eons, then how can it describe neoliberal society? Debt, in the shape of credit card debt, student loans, payday loans, second mortgages, etc., is ever-present in our society. But so are other features that Stimilli rightly pinpoints, and some that she overlooks, such as the dematerialization of work, increased automation even in the service industries, the move to new forms of industrial production which have great potential but also many potential dangers, and the general shift from the realm of production to service/caring activities.

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