

Europe's Political Economy: A Discussion of its Economic and Political Theologies^{*}

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Our world of neoliberal capitalism is full of religious overtones and images. Watching a few tv-commercials is enough to become aware of this fact. Karl Marx's critique of commodity fetishism ("Warenfetischismus") is more relevant today than when it was expressed in the second half of the 19th century. By fetishizing trademarks we create today objects of worship, which are at the center of consumer cults. If our kids are members of such cults we at least recognize that these new religions are not for free. The German car company "Volkswagen" is currently building a huge entertainment place, in which little cathedral-like buildings should attract worshipers of our modern cult of the car (Rauterberg). In the first part of this paper I will address the question of the religious roots of capitalism.

1. The Pagan Roots of Liberal Economic Theology

Mephistopheles: "Part of that power which still produceth good,
whilst ever scheming ill." (J. W. Goethe, *Faust I*)

There is an ongoing discussion about the religious roots of capitalism since the beginning of the 20th century. According to Max Weber, it was Calvinism that brought forth capitalism. Friedrich August von Hayek, on the contrary, calls the Jesuits to be its true fathers. From my own perspective, however, the most interesting thesis on the religious roots of capitalism was introduced in 1945 by Alexander Rüstow, who was one of the founding fathers of German order liberalism after World

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War II. In his book *Das Versagen des Wirtschaftsliberalismus als religionsgeschichtliches Problem* [The Failure of Economic Liberalism as a Problem seen from the Perspective of the History of Religions] he claims that laissez-faire-liberalism is rooted in Greek pagan religion by referring especially to Pythagoras, Heraclitus and the Stoics. According to economic liberalism, the free egoism of the individual automatically produces the greatest welfare of all. Bernard de Mandeville's formula "private vices, public benefits" and Adam Smith's image of the "invisible hand" are well known illustrations of this ideology. According to Rüstow, something similar can be found in Heraclitus of Ephesus (500 B.C.): For this pre-Socratic Greek philosopher "it is the divine Logos, the world reason, which pervades and guides everything, from the whole course of the universe down to the actions of men, and which blends everything into the magnificent harmony of one great cycle. ... As a citizen of one of the leading commercial cities of his time, he uses monetary flow in trade, the exchange of goods for gold and of gold for goods, as a means of illustrating the circuit-progress of the macrocosm." (Rüstow, "Causes" 269; cf. Rüstow, *Versagen* 4f)¹

What are the essential theological elements of liberal economic theology ("Wirtschaftstheologie")? It is first of all an optimistic theology which excludes original sin. Traditional moral distinctions between vices and virtues are abolished, too. In the medieval world envy was seen as a cardinal sin and not linked with emulation or competition at all. Economic liberalism, on the contrary, favors envy as an important emotion creating prosperity. Envy and emulation are no longer distinguished but seen as emotions that both result in prosperous competitiveness. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant uses the expression "enviously competitive vanity" (Kant 45) to describe the motivating force that causes common welfare in his essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784).

There is also a pantheistic dimension that is typical of economic liberalism. According to Rüstow, Spinoza's formula "Deus sive natura", God as nature, can be identified with Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (Rüstow, *Versagen* 20, 110f). This pantheistic dimension expresses the fact, that economic liberalism believes in the

¹ Heraclitus, Fragment 90: "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods."

self-regulating forces of the market. According to liberal ideology, the economy must not be curbed by any higher moral principle like social justice and there is no need for a primacy of the political subjecting the economy under its rule.

Rüstow's claim that economic liberalism is rooted in paganism is perfectly articulated by Mephistopheles, the devil in Goethe's tragedy *Faust I*, who explains his own nature as being a part of the power "which still produceth good, whilst ever scheming ill". Goethe's description of the nature of the devil is deeply influenced by the poet's knowledge of the economy. Goethe became minister of finances in Weimar at exactly the same time when Adam Smith published his famous book on the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), a book, which was carefully studied by the German poet.

An interesting example of an ancient type of economic theology can be found in the poetical work of Hesiod, a Greek poet and farmer at about 800 B.C. (Cf. Palaver, "Mimesis" 79-87). In his poem *Works and Days* he significantly corrects his former belief that envy and competition are nothing but destructive forces. According to his new and improved view, there is not only a warmongering goddess Eris - the goddess of discord causing the Trojan war - but also a good one that causes prosperity:

"She stirs up even the shiftless to toil; for a man grows eager to work when he considers his neighbor, a rich man who hastens to plough and plant and put his house in good order; and neighbor vies with his neighbor as he hurries after wealth. This Strife is wholesome for men. And potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman, and beggar is jealous of beggar, and minstrel of minstrel." (V. 20-26)

Despite Hesiod's claim that Eris causes prosperity by inciting envy between human beings the Greek poet, however, is not really a representative of a liberal economic theology with its belief in an automatism of the market. Hesiod's world is far away from the world of modern capitalism and even from the polis to which Heraclitus belonged. His world remained rural and focused solely on agriculture, not on trade or even money. Furthermore and even more important, Hesiod's benevolent view of envy depends on the rule of justice, that is enforced by revengeful gods like Dike -

the avenging goddess of justice - or Nemesis - the personification of divine retribution.

The rural background and the dominance of a revengeful religion are part of the religious, sociological and political preconditions of Hesiod's affirmative view of envious competition. This interrelation between a theological-political framework and a rural type of economy represents a specific kind of political economy - using this term in a very broad sense - in the early days of Greek culture. What kind of solidarity belongs to it? According to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, Hesiod's world is characterized by a "mechanical solidarity" that uses a religiously undergirded repressive law against all violators of social order.

Dike and Nemesis are not only an essential theological part of Hesiod's political economy they also represent a special mode of envy: envy of the gods. We can therefore discover a paradoxical logic of envy in Hesiod's poem *Works and Days*. Divine envy—Dike and Nemesis—keeps destructive envy—the bad Eris—in check and enables a prosperous form of envy—the good Eris—to flourish. Hesiod's political economy resembles structurally Heraclitus's paradoxical philosophy, which claims that "strife is the father and king of all" and that antagonistic forces lead to harmony. Heraclitus even explicitly identified *eris* and *dike* or discord and justice.²

René Girard's mimetic theory with its special focus on archaic religions helps us to understand Hesiod's political economy in a very profound way. Hesiod's goddess Eris resembles mimetic desire, by which Girard means a desire according to the other. Human beings desire what other people desire. Mimetic desire as competition, rivalry or emulation stimulates human activity and causes the increase of productivity. Like Eris, mimetic desire is not only a benevolent force but also has its destructive side. Envy or Hesiod's bad Eris is its malevolent form. Mimetic desire is both an emotion causing economic prosperity and an emotion leading to rivalry and violence between human beings. Not only Eris becomes comprehensible, also Hesiod's rule of justice can be explained with the help of mimetic theory. According to Girard, a mimetic crisis of mutual violence at the beginning of human civilization was resolved by a scapegoat mechanism that led to a religiously controlled cultural

² Heraclitus, Fragment 80: "It should be understood that war is the common condition, that strife is justice, and that all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife."

order. The sacrificial transformation of chaos into order through the scapegoat mechanism was driven by the same mimetic force that led into the crisis of envious rivalry. Driven by mimetic contagion archaic societies created order by killing or expelling one of its members. In the scapegoat mechanism we can discover the deeper source of Heraclitus's famous fragment of a war that is the father of all culture (cf. Girard, *Violence* 88).³ It is important to note that the scapegoat mechanism is essentially a religious event. The lynch mob does not know what it is doing but experiences its own action as governed by that monstrous being that is going to be killed. Out of the center of the scapegoat mechanism rises a god that causes both the crisis of envious discord before his murder and the peaceful harmony after his violent expulsion. All violence and resentment between the members of the group are transferred onto this deified victim. He or she becomes the embodiment of violence itself. From now on divine revenge will protect the community from another outbreak of a mimetic crisis.

The disclosure of the scapegoat mechanism helps to decipher Dike, Nemesis and all their allies representing divine vengeance. The envy of the gods represents a transfiguration of the collective violence of the lynch mob against its scapegoat. The social envy of the persecutors is masked by the revengeful and terrifying gods. From the perspective of mimetic theory Hesiod's political economic represents a world in which economic competition flourishes as long as the people remain inside the narrow boundaries of a rural world that is strongly protected by their believe in powerful and revengeful gods who severely punish every transgression.

2. Solidarity by Exclusion: The Pagan Logic of Political Theology

"The political always has to do with conflicts and antagonisms and cannot but be beyond liberal rationalism since it is precisely the case that it indicates the limits of any rational consensus and reveals that any consensus is based on acts of exclusion." (Mouffe 123)

³ Heraclitus, Fragment 53: "War is both father and king of all; some he has shown forth as gods and others as men, some he has made slaves and others free."

Hesiod's archaic type of political economy did not really enable us to understand its political dimension in a way we are used to understand this term. Hesiod's world is much too close to its religious roots in the scapegoat mechanism in order to give us a more profane understanding of the political as a protective cage containing the destructive forces of the economy. For this purpose Aeschylus's tragedy *Eumenides* is better suited (cf. Palaver, "Mimesis" 87-90). Turning to Aeschylus means leaving the countryside and entering the Greek *polis* to discover the functioning of the political order taming internal rivalries of a community. Like Hesiod, Aeschylus mentions a benign *eris* that should flourish in the city. Deadly violence between gods and between human beings has to give way to friendly relations. Athena establishes a new relationship between the revengeful Erinyes hunting Orestes and herself. From now on a benevolent emulation between herself and the Furies who have become good goddesses—Eumenides—should substitute for destructive vengeance. "Our rivalry [*eris*] in doing good is victorious forever." (V. 974-975) This flourishing of good *eris*, however, relies on a political order that is not really detached from revenge. In this tragedy Aeschylus describes the overcoming of a violent system of blood feud by a less violent legal system. The revengeful and violent Erinyes are transformed into the gentle and fruitful Eumenides. It seems that violence has fully disappeared from the city. This, however, is only superficially true. Open violence, in the sense of revenge, has been transformed into a form of structural violence that helps to create peace inside the city, but can be used against foreign enemies and internal trouble-makers at any time. The pacified Eumenides promise that common love *and* unanimous hatred will overcome civil war:

"I pray that discord, greedy for evil, may never clamor in this city, and may the dust not drink the black blood of its people and through passion cause ruinous murder for vengeance to the destruction of the state. But may they return joy for joy in a spirit of common love, and may they hate with one mind; for this is the cure of many an evil in the world." (V. 977-987)

Civil war has to be overcome by enmity to the outside world. Wars with foreign enemies should help to create peace inside the city. Athena recommends political friend-enemy-relations as an antidote to internal bloodshed. According to Girard, Aeschylus's tragedy *Eumenides* represents the political as an offspring of the scapegoat mechanism (Girard, Job 146-153; cf. Palaver, Quellen 38-45). What was originally laid upon the scapegoat is now channeled outside the city. In rituals we can find the necessary link between the political and the scapegoat mechanism. The political builds upon the ritual channeling of internal violence towards the external world. Whereas in the scapegoat mechanism a member of the group itself is killed rituals already tend to sacrifice foreigners. The political prolongs the ritual focus on the foreigner and takes a friend-enemy relationship between two different groups as an always already given starting point.

Aeschylus's political is not a result of human reasoning, but given by the gods, that means it is rooted in pagan religion and represents an archaic form of a political theology. Aeschylus's tragedy illustrates perfectly well what kind of solidarity is produced by the pagan logic of the political. It is a solidarity by exclusion that needs external enemies to create internal peace.

It is important for my task to show that at the dawn of our modern world we still find forms of friend-enemy-politics that are close to Aeschylus's political theology. A good example is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His term covering mimetic desire with its benign and destructive consequences is *amour-propre* (self-love). In the eyes of the French philosopher there is only one way out of the chaos caused by *amour-propre*. According to his essay *Political Economy* (1755), mimetic desire has to be transformed into patriotism: "It is certain that the greatest miracles of virtue have been produced by patriotism: this fine and lively feeling, which gives to the force of self-love [*amour-propre*] all the beauty of virtue, lends it an energy which, without disfiguring it, makes it the most heroic of all passions." (Rousseau 142). A collective form of mimesis—a "common emulation in all to live and die for their country"—must overcome envy that leads to civil war (ibid. 150). According to Rousseau, this common emulation is linked to the nation-state, and excludes cosmopolitanism as a reliable political concept. Because of Rousseau's need for a version of the political that remains close enough to Aeschylus's pagan logic he was

very critical of Christianity concerning its inability to strengthen the body politic and binding "the hearts of the citizens to the State" (ibid. 304). In the chapter on "Civil religion" in his famous book *Social Contract* (1762) he tries to find a third way between the pagan religion of the citizen and the religion of man which is the religion of the Gospel (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 298-308). Though the former is supportive of patriotism it is founded on lies, intolerant and leads to wars with other people. The religion of man is true, but apolitical and destroys patriotic feelings. Rousseau is seeking a type of religion that is not too cruel and prone to war, but remains violent enough to foster the political.

Rousseau's type of political economy—the nation state as a shelter against the negative consequences of economic competition—has become the main political concept nearly until today. It has helped to keep competition or envy inside certain boundaries. At the same time, however, it was also prone to war because of its affinity to nationalism and its need for external enemies. Europe has not yet overcome the plague of nationalism or destructive forms of patriotism. Movements of right-wing populism all over Europe—Austria, unfortunately, is one of the most well known examples—still try to create solidarity by enmity against foreigners or immigrants.

On the global level we have to face even more dangerous problems. Despite its leaning towards a one-sided economic view of the world, globalization is also due to attempts to overcome traditional forms of friend-enemy-politics. As soon, however, as people lose their traditional political shelters against internal violence they try to bring them back in an even more dangerous form. One of the main reactions against globalization consists in the revival of nationalistic and/or religious concepts of friend-enemy politics. Benjamin Barber, a political scientist in the US, has coined a formula to understand our current situation. It is "Jihad versus McWorld". Samuel Huntington's book *Clash of Civilization* comes close to this formula and tries to explain the reason why politics always has a close affinity to friend-enemy relations: "People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against." (Huntington 21) In Huntington's eyes, religion is not a counterforce against this tendency of politics but

just another version of it. He can only imagine religion as a form of organized enmity. According to him, all religions—regardless of their universalistic claims—differentiate between believers and unbelievers, between a superior in-group and an inferior out-group (Huntington 97).

Somewhat similar to Huntington, already Sigmund Freud—the founder of psychoanalysis—was claiming that Christianity and especially the Catholic Church had to rely on friend-enemy patterns, too. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud remarked that the apostle Paul's "universal love between all men as the foundation of his Christian community" led in Christianity to "the utmost intolerance towards all who remained outside of it" (Freud 243). This thesis underlines Freud's earlier identification of the Church and the Army in his *Crowd Psychology* (Freud 88-93). Empirically one can find many historical examples supporting Freud's critical view of the Church. But all this evidence does not mean that the Church is by definition bound to friend-enemy-distinctions. Slavoj Žižek, a contemporary psychoanalyst and philosopher, corrects Freud's thesis: "The Church is global: a structured Institution, an encompassing network of hierarchically differentiated positions, basically ecumenical, tolerant, prone to compromise, all-inclusive, dividing its spoils among its subgroups; while in the Army the emphasis is on antagonism, on Us versus Them, on egalitarian universalism (we are all ultimately equal when we are confronted with Them, the Enemy), so that the Army is ultimately exclusionary, prone to annihilate the other." (Žižek 123f) Does Catholic social teaching have to offer an alternative to the realism of Freud and Huntington?

3. The Political Economy of the Eucharist: "Solidarity without Marginalization" (John Paul II.)

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Mt 5:43-44)

As long as we focus primarily on politics it is difficult to avoid Huntington's logic. Political theology is not able to break with it because the logic of the political remains its main focus. We have to change the starting point to come to a different solution. Instead of making theology an ally of politics rooted in paganism, we should try to create political bodies that rely on the Biblical revelation. Political theology has to give way to theological politics.

Catholic social teaching as it has been developed by our current Pope, John Paul II, has moved closer towards such a theological politics. In his most recent social encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991) he claims that, "there can be no genuine solution of the 'social question' apart from the Gospel" (No. 5) and that social teaching has to be seen as a "valid instrument of evangelization" that "proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ" and only from this light concerns itself with questions like war and peace or the economic life (No. 54).

So far we have seen that solidarity was traditionally gained with the help of exclusions. This is the way of paganism. The Bible breaks with this pagan logic. The Judaeo-Christian revelation is not founded on the scapegoat mechanism but reveals its logic of exclusion. Whereas paganism can be characterized by its siding with the lynch mob, the Bible identifies with the perspective of the expelled or killed victim. The Bible therefore challenges pagan concepts of solidarity and political friend-enemy distinctions going along with it. In the *Sermon of the Mounts* we can find a clear alternative to Aeschylus's political theology.

In Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) we can see how the Biblical message is applied to questions concerning political economy and solidarity. Our inquiry has shown how passions like envy are usually tamed by exclusionary concepts of politics. According to Catholic social teaching, such political concepts are justly named "structures of sin", which are typically caused by individual sins like the "all-consuming desire for profit" or "the thirst for power" (No. 37). At this level we can see a clear difference between Catholic social teaching and the ideology of economic liberalism. This encyclical does not recommend private vices to create public welfare, but warns against those vices that are leading towards structures of sin. Let's compare this insight with Kant's political philosophy

who views "social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power" (Kant 45) as a natural way towards human prosperity.

This difference on the anthropological level can also be seen in regard to solidarity. John Paul II. introduces solidarity as a Christian virtue in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. His precise description of it shows convincingly how it differs from a pagan version of solidarity because it does not rely on enmity to the outside but tries to overcome all friend-enemy distinctions:

"In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One's neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren (cf. 1 Jn 3:16).

At that point, awareness of the common fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of all in Christ—'children in the Son'—and of the presence and life—giving action of the Holy Spirit will bring to our vision of the world a new criterion for interpreting it. Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and strong, there is discerned in the light of faith a new model of the unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our solidarity. This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word 'communion.' This specifically Christian communion, jealously preserved, extended and enriched with the Lord's help, is the soul of the Church's vocation to be a 'sacrament,'...

Solidarity therefore must play its part in the realization of this divine plan, both on the level of individuals and on the level of national and international society. The 'evil mechanisms' and 'structures of sin' ... can be overcome only

through the exercise of the human and Christian solidarity to which the Church calls us and which she tirelessly promotes. Only in this way can such positive energies be fully released for the benefit of development and peace. Many of the Church's canonized saints offer a wonderful witness of such solidarity and can serve as examples in the present difficult circumstances. Among them I wish to recall St. Peter Claver and his service to the slaves at Cartagena de Indias, and St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe who offered his life in place of a prisoner unknown to him in the concentration camp at Auschwitz." (No. 40)

This Christian virtue of solidarity is not immediately applicable to politics as such, but is closely connected to the Church, a body politics of its own that is called to serve as a model for the world.

Social ethic is first of all not a message that the Church has to preach to the world but it is the life of the Church itself. Stanley Hauerwas, a protestant social ethicist in the US, has made this point most explicit: "The first social ethical task of the church is to be the church—the servant community. ... As such the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic." (Hauerwas 99) To put the life of the Church at the center of social ethic gives to its sacraments an economic and political meaning. Again, Hauerwas emphasizes the political dimension of liturgy: Rites, like baptism and the Eucharist are "not just 'religious things' that Christian people do. They are the essential rituals of our politics. Through them we learn who we are. Instead of being motives or causes for effective social work on the part of Christian people, these liturgies *are* our effective social work. For if the church *is* rather than has a social ethic, these actions are our most important social witness. It is in baptism and eucharist that we see most clearly the marks of God's kingdom in the world." (Hauerwas 108)

Social ethic roots in the liturgical life of the Church itself. In the concluding part I will focus on the Eucharist as a political economy that transcends ordinary worldly concepts. In it we experience a foretaste of the Kingdom of God which should be taken as a model for all our political and economic concepts. In the Eucharist we experience a new pattern of the political that is not based on exclusion

but is characterized by the overcoming of it (Schwager 223-229; Cavanaugh, *Torture* 203-281; idem, "World"). The Eucharist also helps us to aim our desires primarily towards God instead of being solely directed towards worldly objects easily resulting in envy, destruction and war. To conclude my paper I will again quote Pope John Paul II, who explains in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* the political meaning of the Eucharist:

"The Kingdom of God becomes present above all in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the Lord's Sacrifice. ... The Lord unites us with himself through the Eucharist—Sacrament and Sacrifice—and he unites us with himself and with one another by a bond stronger than any natural union; and thus united, he sends us into the whole world to bear witness, through faith and works, to God's love, preparing the coming of his Kingdom and anticipating it, though in the obscurity of the present time.

All of us who take part in the Eucharist are called to discover, through this sacrament, the profound meaning of our actions in the world in favor of development and peace; and to receive from it the strength to commit ourselves ever more generously, following the example of Christ, who in this sacrament lays down his life for his friends (cf. Jn 15:13). Our personal commitment, like Christ's and in union with his, will-not be in vain but certainly fruitful." (No. 48)

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