

Review of Elettra Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living: Ascesis and Capitalism*. Trans. Arianna Bove. Foreword by Roberto Esposito (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017)

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In recent years, debt has become the focus of important investigations orbiting around one central question: is debt the principal structuring condition of the contemporary era? Elettra Stimilli's *Debt of the Living*, now available in English for the first time since its initial publication in Italian in 2011, productively contributes to this rich ongoing debate.

The chief diagnosis of Stimilli's conceptual framework is that today it is not only that concrete services are invested with value but also, and more importantly, human beings and life itself have been turned into capital. Self-entrepreneurship structures both individual lives and social relations, compelling human subjects relentlessly to perform continual acts of self-investment, which ultimately serves as the mechanism by which we become arrested in the mire of capitalist logic: 'each person enters the process of exploitation at the foundation of the capitalist economy through an investment in their own life' (xii).

The underlying assumption of *The Debt of the Living* is that 'power has taken on the form of an economy in the era of globalisation' (1). The book's aim is therefore to analyse the mechanisms that have produced and continue to sustain this form of power. Stimilli draws effectively on the works of Max Weber and Michel Foucault to further explore the link between Christianity and economy. In so doing, the conceptual figure of an indebted ascetic emerges, which helps us to understand the fundamental condition of our current existence. The author takes up Weber's 'implicit auto-finality of the search for profit' (4), that is, that profit in capitalism is an end in itself rather than a means to an end. However, her claim is that accumulation and profit can no longer be linked to renunciation as part of inner-worldly asceticism, *pace* Weber, but instead are 'traceable to the compulsive drive to enjoy and consume' (1-2). Therefore, indebtedness today 'has become an extreme form of compulsion to enjoy' (3).

The first part of the book offers a genealogical investigation into Christian asceticism with a particular focus on *how* asceticism became a form of life with Christ. Stimilli demonstrates that during early Christianity, 'a properly "economic" mode of life' developed in which humans 'could invest not in their "works" and their effects, but in a practice that fundamentally appeared to have no purpose' (49). Only later, with *oikonomía* as 'an abstract plane of salvation' involving a set of specific practices, could asceticism evolve to become a Christian problem treated in Christian literature (49). By carefully reconstructing the 'economic experience

of life expressed [...] radically in early Christianity' (50) and 'the Christian development of the concept of *oikonomía*' (101), Stimilli elucidates the mechanisms that underpin our current economic system. Asceticism emerges as a form of investment 'in what can be enjoyed, gained, and used from its practice' rather than 'what can be permanently acquired' (101). This helps the author demonstrate how 'Western economic discourse did not begin with reflections on property and ownership, but rather the development of the possibility to invest in that which, while impossible to fully own, is associated with the inherent calling of human activity' (101), the self-finality of human action in ascetic practice.

In the second part of the monograph, Stimilli turns her attention to the question of capitalism as religion, arguing that 'the experience of Christian life becomes one of "debt" and the onerous condition is not, in itself, a mere void to fill, but the epicentre of its existence' (129). Debt becomes 'the presupposition of a constant enslavement', where reproducing constant lack is a tool for subjugation (129). The author proposes that 'thinking of capitalism as the ultimate form of religion may [...] help us understand the explosive return of the religious that we have witnessed in recent years' (124).

In both religion and capitalism, power is at its most effective in constraining human action when it is an end in itself – inherent to human praxis but, at the same time, separated from humans (177). To hone her analyses, Stimilli turns to Foucault in order to underline the productive aspect of ascetic techniques for creating and disciplining subjects. The author fleshes out Foucault's ideas on the Christian origin of liberal governmentality and closely investigates the practices through which this process occurred. Where 'the maximum level of self-control [is] an expression of freedom, the liberal technique of governmentality is a form of domination without constraints that guarantees power and absolute efficiency' (181). Within this framework, 'techniques of power and the free ability to give form to life intersect to almost completely merge' (181).

The Debt of the Living opens up for discussion a series of important questions, of which three in particular are, to my mind, critical in terms of considering Stimilli's work and its theoretical utility in scholarly conversations spanning various disciplines. First, Stimilli's framework seemingly privileges neoliberalism as the only authority that retains the capacity to issue imperatives such as 'you must change your life!' (as in Sloterdijk) or 'invest in yourself!' The authority of such admonitions is derived from the brute force of the catastrophe(s) that are today ongoing worldwide. The incidence and effects of global crises are self-evident at this point. Nevertheless, Stimilli appears to devolve power completely to neoliberalism. This forecloses avenues of inquiry as to the possibility of praxes of resistance, embedded within or running counter to the capitalist regime. In this context, several important questions arise: Is it possible to make a distinction between the wish to become the best version of oneself, arguably an affirmative act of self-development, and the constant self-investment that we are encouraged to make in the new spirit of capitalism? Is there a way to uncouple self-

improvement (in a non-capitalist, non-economic way) from self-investment, considering that both operate in terms of auto-finality? Or is this wish to invest in oneself and improve oneself already automatically inscribed in the paradigm of the indebted ascetic?

As Stimilli argues, we are at a point where inner-worldly asceticism has stopped being linked to renunciation, that would lead to the ultimate achievement of an extrinsic goal, and has been transformed into a mechanism through which capital reproduces itself (45). Is there a way within this conceptual framework to derail the ascetic practice, or are we condemned to reproduce capitalist logic and contribute – wittingly or unwittingly – to the problems that it entails? At the very end of the book, Stimilli addresses such issues, albeit briefly. Foucault is presented as a source of hope, offering ‘exercises’ that would ‘activate “counter-conducts”’ and that would allow us to ‘find points of “resistance” to the power by which we are governed’ (182). ‘At stake here’, Stimilli asserts, ‘is the possibility of reactivating, in ever different ways, the same finality without end that is inherent to human action and that, when not incorporated into an empty mechanism that is an end in itself [...] can coincide with its innovative ability to change’ (182). This establishes the challenge of investigating concrete practices that could turn our capitalist-furthering asceticisms into co-operative asceticisms. The question then becomes whether the conceptual framework of debt would be the most productive paradigm with which to achieve such ends.

The second key question that this book raises is about generosity. In her analyses, Stimilli convincingly demonstrates how the political and social potential of Marcel Mauss’s idea of the gift has been unhelpfully negated by Jacques Derrida’s reading of this concept in his book *Donner le temps (Given Time)* (1991). Here, Stimilli follows and mobilises the work of M.A.U.S.S (*Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales*), a group of French scholars who attempt to draw practical consequences from some of Mauss’s ideas and who consider Derrida’s reading ‘too disembodied and spiritualised’ (25). The Derridean deconstructive spirit has contributed to the – perhaps overly hasty – renunciation of the idea of gift as a valid possibility that could be effective at several practical levels, both political and social. Stimilli hints at the gift as a potential counter-manoeuvre by which we may challenge neoliberalist regimes. Yet, an ethics of generosity appears, superficially at least, to be fundamentally incompatible with, even impossible within, the debt-based framework that Stimilli advances. Can this apparent incongruity ever be resolved? Moreover, does this issue reflect broader limitations of the debt framework, which may inhibit the ways in which we think about, and realise, alternative economies and alternative worlds?

Such querying of the suitability of a debt framework when it comes to the theoretical and practical work of re-claiming subjects from neoliberalism is equally reflected in the third significant question posed, albeit implicitly, in Stimilli’s book. Throughout, the author blurs boundaries between, on the one hand, financial(ised) debt (capital, conventionally understood), and, on the other, ontological debt, that

which human subjects always already owe to other human beings and things, levied by the very act of coming into the world. In the context of the latter, is there perhaps a tacit dream of sovereignty or independence in the wish not to be in debt to anything or anybody? To be quits? The highly marginalising aspects of being in financial debt in our society are unquestionable, and Stimilli quite rightly emphasises its harrowing effects. However, it is important to ask: to what extent is it possible to disentangle being ontologically in debt to someone, or in other words, being obliged to others – which constitutes our very being in the world – from the financial aspect of our existence and the oppressiveness of economic debt? Ultimately, to what extent is debt actually the crux of the matter?

The Debt of the Living offers its readers a careful reading of a wide selection of important thinkers, alongside a thorough analysis of what it means to be an indebted human subject. Raising a series of urgent questions, this book makes a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding our current condition.