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THE BLASPHEMY OF EUROPE /THE EUROPE OF BLASPHEMY

n this paper, I consider the utterance of Friedrich Nietzsche's madman that "God is dead"¹ as the "first" European blasphemy which transgresses the sacred in an attempt to recapture a meaning of life without any reference to God. The madman, after announcing the death of God, asks the following questions: "What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"² The questioning by the madman points to an apprehension that mortals can utilise the power taken from God to invent new games of power.

This paper focuses on what I see as a deification of the human, and I politicize its blasphemous character. Though today's politics appears to be grounded in the "temporal world, the temporal aspect of reality"³ of our secular age, the metaphor of God is still at work. For secularism implies an "understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place,"⁴ one which still seeks to express the secular in terms of "what was once theologically thought as realization, fulfilment and plenitude."⁵

¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, 181.

² *Ibidem*, 181.

³ R. Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man*, London: Orbis Books, 1973, 10.

⁴ Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007, 3.

⁵ M. Papastephanou, "Ethics after God's Death and the Time of the Angels," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 8, January 2012, 94–130.

Politics is still engaged in God-making operations,⁶ where the metaphor of God appears as a mechanism that works in “analogical relations; in that sense it tends to essentialize the link between the terms of the analogy (in our case, it tends to suture the relation between the empty place of power and the force occupying it).”⁷ To this purpose, I explore whether the political forces of cryopreservation of human embryos and European unification⁸ occupy in an analogical manner God’s empty space of power. Attention is drawn to how the political process of each project can be theogonic in its character, as it brings to the fore the noticeable difference between the “healthy” and the “weaker” species. In the case of cryopreservation of embryos, I look at how the process of eugenic selection generates a preference for the healthier embryos over the weaker ones, and in the case of European unification, I investigate whether such a project still retains in its political process elements of the Auschwitz⁹ selection between the strongest and the weaker species.

To this purpose, Giorgio Agamben’s concept of a politically constituted life and Jacques Derrida’s idea about the capital of sovereignty will be deployed to tease out the contradictory elements that arise out of these projects. The arguments about these projects will be positioned in a wider context, one which measures whether it is valid to claim that in democracy people still have a fair share of political power. In the final section, I utilise Jan Patočka’s arguments about the crisis of European heritage to argue about how European politics can ease the burdensome sense of the blasphemous from the name of Europe, if it reduces its persistent tendency to deify its political power.

⁶ A. Wernick, “From Comte to Baudrillard: Socio-Theology after the End of the Social,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, December 2000, 55–75. My attention to this article was drawn by the paper of M. Papastephanou mentioned in endnote 5.

⁷ E. Laclau, “Democracy and the Question of Power,” *Constellations* 8, March 2001, 3–14.

⁸ É. Balibar, *We the People of Europe – Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. J. Swenson, Princeton University Press, 2004, 3.

⁹ M. Thad Allen, “The Devil in the Details: The Gas Chambers of Birkenau, October 1941,” *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 16, June 2002, 189–216. “Auschwitz has become a metonym for the horror of the Holocaust. Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz [...] was a slave-labor empire, killing center, and human switchyard in one”.

Cryopreservation of human embryos: The fictional future of bodies

In this section, I discuss the technology of reproductive medicine that controls the cryopreservation¹⁰ of human embryos¹¹ in the context of the technocratic model.¹² This paradigm holds that the body is a machine that can be separated into a number of component parts. It was Michel Foucault who in his 1979 lecture on *The Birth of Biopolitics*¹³ pointed out the seminal distinction between a “semantic linking of governing (*gouverner*) and modes of thought (*mentalité*) [one which] indicates that it is not possible to study the technologies of power without an analysis of the political rationality underpinning them.”¹⁴ Rather, what becomes significant at this stage is whether such “political rationality,” the manner it takes charge of the “lives” of embryos, contains theogonic traces.

The pragmatic line of thinking in the technology of the cryopreservation of embryos, to ease the suffering of childless couples by promising a future bountiful with children, is expressed in terms of a redemptive language, one which implies the meaning of the salvation of our species. What becomes more noticeable at this stage is that the eugenic selection of embryos carries the implication that not all species merit the same salvation. The course of actions governing the eugenic selection of embryos by means of Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) distinguishes between: a “negative eugenic selection”, avoiding implanting embryos with genetic diseases or disabilities; and a “positive eugenic

¹⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “cryopreservation” as “the process of storing cells, tissue, etc., at very low temperatures (typically around –200°C) in order to maintain their viability”.

¹¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “embryo” as “the unborn human offspring, esp. during the early stages of development”.

¹² R. Davies-Floyd, “The Technocratic, Humanistic, and Holistic Paradigms of Childbirth,” *International Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics* 75, November 2011, 5–23, <http://davis-floyd.com/uncategorized/the-technocratic-humanistic-and-holistic-paradigms-of-childbirth/> (23 May 2016).

¹³ M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* – Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979, ed. M. Senellart, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

¹⁴ T. Lemke, “‘The Birth of Bio-politics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30, January 2001, 190–207.

selection”, that is, “the selection for traits unrelated to disease or disability.”¹⁵ The saving of the healthier species by the technology of reproductive medicine sounds more glorious, as these future children will possess the highest potential of expected well-being (EWG).

The point whether the technocratic model depoliticizes the “lives” of the embryos is discussed in the context of Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life”. For Agamben, the “originary structure of Western politics [which] consists in an *ex-ceptio*, in an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life”¹⁶ brings about a distinction between politically qualified lives, which are entitled to rights, and bare life, stripped from any political qualification and entitlement to rights. Agamben’s distinction can turn the laboratories of cryopreservation into a “zone of contested and intensified political stakes around the threshold between what some would consider ‘prelife’ and what is to be identified as nascent human life, meaningful human life, and/or rights-bearing life.”¹⁷ The contestation about the exceptionality of the healthier embryos is amplified in the manner the neo-liberal market, as the “organizing and regulative principle underlying the state”¹⁸ appropriates the niche of reproductive medicine.

According to Foucault, the state loses its power to regulate the market, a loss that brings about a permanent change to the paradigm of the economic man (*homo oeconomicus*). Now, the economic man no longer operates as a partner of exchange with a “theory of utility based on a problematic of needs” but as “an entrepreneur of himself.”¹⁹ The technocrats of the cryopreservation position reproductive medicine in the domineering strategies of the market to promote the healthier embryos as a panacea for our endangered species. On the market, the high cost of these technologies, and the resulting limitation on the number of couples who can really access them, ultimately presses us to wonder whether the politics of the entrepreneur evokes again the “theogonic mythology of sovereignty.”²⁰ Both the entrepreneur and the cryopreservation specialist are in a state of exception, and like the sovereign,

¹⁵ M. Walker, “Eugenic Selection Benefits Embryos,” *Bioethics* 28, June 2014, 214–224.

¹⁶ G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. A. Kotsko, Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2016, 263.

¹⁷ P. Deutscher, “The Inversion of Exceptionality: Foucault, Agamben, and ‘Reproductive Rights,’” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 107, Winter 2008, 55–70.

¹⁸ T. Lemke, “The Birth of bio-politics...,” 200.

¹⁹ M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics...*, 225–226.

²⁰ J. Derrida, *Rouges: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas, Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, 17.

have a “power to decide, to be decisive, to prevail, to have reason over or win out over and to give force of law.”²¹

The effect of the market on the technologies of reproductive medicine, that favour the choice of the healthier embryos, can result in the “fetishization of all things ‘bio’.”²² This “fetishization” gradually erases the consistent value about the cryopreservation of human embryos. In this uncertain context, the economic factor considers the material resource of human embryos both as an asset and as a commodity. As an asset, such a resource is perceived as a “tangible or intangible resource to produce value and, at the same time, has value as property [...] [while as] a commodity [the resource] is an object produced for exchange.”²³ The value of reproductive technologies varies according to these contrasting positions, and in this sense,

the political economy of the life sciences depends on the realization of value from financial and knowledge assets through exchange on markets that are not only characterized by social order and social structures, as Aspers (2007, 2009) argues, but also by *social expectations*.²⁴

European unification: Remains of a fictional unity

The cindery foundations of European unification are reflected in Derrida’s poignant claim, “what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration the incense.”²⁵ According to Primo Levi and Leonardo de Benedetti, at the Auschwitz camp, a routine procedure took place, the

“selection of the Muslims” (this picturesque term denoted precisely these extremely emaciated individuals) [...] with the most physically broken down being singled out to be dispatched to the gas chambers.²⁶

²¹ *Ibidem*, 13.

²² K. Birch and D. Tyfield, “Theorizing the Bioeconomy: Biovalue, Biocapital, Bioeconomics or...What?,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 38, May 2013, 299–327.

²³ *Ibidem*, 302.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 322.

²⁵ J. Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. N. Lukacher, intr. C. Wolfe, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 25.

²⁶ P. Levi with L. De Benedetti, *Auschwitz Report*, trans. J. Woolf, New York: Verso, 2006, 71–72.

The Holocaust becomes a symbol of two different “gestures”, one that represents an authoritarian politics privileging the fittest while producing the daily burning of two thousand corpses in the furnaces and the other of political inaction by the British/American governments that had received preliminary information about what was happening at Auschwitz and no steps had been immediately taken.²⁷ Today, we ask whether the process of European unification repeats these two “gestures”, particularly when European politics privileges the “strongest” nations over the “weakest” ones, and when such politics fails to take action in the face of issues where destruction on a large scale happens, as in the case of immigration.

According to Rodolphe Gasché, the project of European unification is an infinite task, as it always seeks to strike a balance between the temporal suspension, and momentary invocation, of the name of Europe. While the former gesture allows us to cease thinking that European politics is always authoritarian, the latter presses us to remember European politics as being hospitable and responsible.²⁸ European politics must retain the name of Europe. Without such name citizens would run the risk to live in a “myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable.”²⁹

Zygmunt Bauman claims that European politics must “venture, experiment”³⁰ in the fraught connection between political gestures that lead to no novelty as they keep repeating the “capital of a centralizing authority,”³¹ and other political gestures which create a new “dialectical process and open history.”³² But to bring about this new “dialectical process”, we need

to have the courage (or the madness) to ask in today’s conditions: under what conditions might it become possible again? Where are the potentialities for a different future? How can they be released by assigning responsibility for the past but avoiding

²⁷ M. Fleming, “Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz: A (Further) Challenge to the ‘Elusiveness’ Narrative,” *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 28, April 2014, 31–57.

²⁸ R. Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, 346–347.

²⁹ J. Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. B. Naas, intr. M. B. Naas, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, 39.

³⁰ Z. Bauman, *Europe – An Unfinished Adventure*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004, 2.

³¹ J. Derrida, *The Other Heading...*, 30.

³² J. Derrida, *Cinders...*, 26.

the fruitless exercise of repeating it?³³

Knowing that “sovereignty is round; it is a rounding off”,³⁴ the vicious cycle of authoritarian politics is difficult to break. In this sense, one measures whether the political process of European unification leads again to “actual conformity,”³⁵ as it happened in the Enlightenment. According to Jacques Rancière, in order to bring an interruption in European authoritarian politics, we have to “seek the principle of politics and of its supplementary nature in the conjunction, or disjunction, of the two terms ‘people’ and ‘power’.”³⁶ In this sense, the politics of Europe remains in great debt to its people, as it has to rise to the challenge to explore new political channels on the relation between “power” and “people”. It is at the moment of such decision, that we rise to the impossible task of asking ardently what really our responsibility towards the other is. We may find a partial answer to the above questions in this claim by Derrida:

“Perhaps”, one must always say perhaps for justice. There is an *avenir* for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.³⁷

The Europe of blasphemy: Politics as *bricolage* in a godless warehouse

Throughout this article, I discussed the examples of the projects of cryo-preservation of human embryos and European unification to question whether these games of power in the void of God did really invent new political gestures. In this sense, the technocrats of today look more like *bricoleurs* engaged

³³ É. Balibar, *We, the People of Europe...*, 3.

³⁴ J. Derrida, *Rouges...*, 13.

³⁵ T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York Verso, 1979, 12.

³⁶ J. Rancière, “Should Democracy Come? Ethics and Politics in Derrida,” in: P. Cheah and S. Guerlac (eds.), *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, 274–288.

³⁷ J. Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in: D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld and D. Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, Routledge, 1992, 3–67.

to take whatever task is at hand. Claude Lévi Strauss distinguishes the *bricoleur* from the engineer by telling us that the former “is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of a project.”³⁸ The work of politics, rather than just ending in the programme of the camps at Auschwitz, as Agamben implies, can appear more to be a *bricolage*, a spectacle of an extensive repertoire where the lives of others are entertained. In this sense, politics, rather than appearing as in the process of assembling parts and engineering them in a project with a specific end, appears to be motivated by piecemeal process.

By way of conclusion, we may ask what else can be fleshed out from what Badiou calls the programme of the Godless man, one which is entertained in the oscillation between “radical humanism and radical anti-humanism?”³⁹ Whether politics has arrived to give us a meaning of life outside the reference to God may no longer be significant, as at this stage what matters is that we remember how damaging it is when we forget the heritage of the human soul, a forgetfulness which according to Jan Patočka dates back to the sixteenth century when

another motif comes to the fore, opposing the motif of care of the soul and coming to dominate one area after another, politics, economics, faith, and science, transforming them in a new style. Not a care *for the soul*, the care to *be*, but rather the care to *have*, care for the external world and its conquest, becomes the dominant concern.⁴⁰

It is the conquest of the privileged selection of healthy embryos and the European political strategy that favours only the people of certain nations rather than others that keeps reminding us of this consistent persistence by politics to deify its political power. In our nihilistic world, which looks more like a godless warehouse, the time and place of the intervention by a political gesture which brings justice to the other is always a work in progress, a work that seeks to ease the burdensome sense of the blasphemous from the name of Europe. Perhaps.

³⁸ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. G. Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd., University of Chicago Press, 1966, 17.

³⁹ A. Badiou, “The Joint Disappearance of Man and God,” in: A. Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008, 165–178.

⁴⁰ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. E. Kohák, ed. J. Dodd, Open Court, 1996, 83.

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