Katechon and Political Theology

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An invitation to a *workshop* is – in my understanding – also an invitation to *speculation*. It's place – and the German idealists understood and theorized this – lies not in the written, but rather in the spoken word, ideally in front of an audience of *speculative co-workers*. I would thus like to seize this unique occasion and speculate about Europe, from the point of view of political theology. The question I would like to raise is the following: How can the concepts of political theology apply to today's European politics? And what does this mean for Europe's self-conception?

I will start with a clarification: political theology should be understood not as a complement to political philosophy, but as being very distinct from it. Unlike political philosophy, political theology grounds "the political" on a unique event in history, namely God's revelation and – in the case of Christian political theology – the incarnation of Christ. Thus, political theology does not begin with man and his essentially political nature, with intersubjectivity or some other particular disposition of his mind, but with *God* as the unquestionable reason and center-point from which political theology derives its concepts and motivation. Different theological conceptions (Christianity, Islam, Gnosticism, etc.) call for different political theologies: theocracy; co-existence of the worldly and the spiritual powers; or sovereignty.

This last form of government is, in the context of political theology, associated with the name of Carl Schmitt, the German jurist and philosopher who played an important role in the legalization of the constitutional system of the Third Reich, but whose writings have nevertheless continued to inspire thinkers after the War. Schmitt's definition of the sovereign as he who decides upon the state of exception, is probably the best-known part of his 1922 work *Political Theology*. Along with its second best-known bit, according to which all key concepts of the modern theories of the state are secularized concepts, it indicates the general outline of his political theology: namely that of a vast critique of enlightenment and modernity, of the autonomy of its political conceptual set, which – and this is its sign of weakness – has to pilfer constantly from theology in order to continue to function and to maintain itself. Political theology reveals the arbitrariness in the use of modern political concepts, the sheer emptiness behind the conceptual construction of modern political philosophy and the degree to which this illegitimate and blind use has estranged it from its original theological founding. Political theology is, at least in its

Schmittian conception, a profoundly anti-modern project. How then could a profoundly modern project like Europe be connected to political theology?

Here, I would like to pick up a thought developed by Etienne Balibar in a 2012 article[1] In his article, Balibar discusses the incessant movement of de-theologization and re-theologization inherent in Hobbes' construction of the Leviathan as a "mortal God", whilst drawing a parallel to our political conjuncture, especially with regards to the problem of laicism, secularization and Islamophobia in today's Europe – the assumption being of course that Hobbes' theory and Schmitt's interpretation can help us to grasp the dialectics of power and to understand Europe's problematic standpoint regarding this question.

One must bear in mind, of course, the profoundly paradoxical structure of Hobbes' Leviathan[2]. In its claim for absolute control (meaning total sovereignty), the State (or the monarch) must alienate every power claim of its people, especially the power claims of organizations and communities – and especially the claims of the clerical institutions. In order to abolish the state of nature – that means the state in which every single set of beliefs has the same claim for authority as the set of beliefs of your neighbor – the personal beliefs must cease to be public and become as private as possible. These beliefs wander into the "box room" of the moral consciousness, and so does the people's power openly to criticize the State/Monarch.[3] In order to guarantee its protection, the State cannot accept any form of authority claim or open form of resistance by the people. Its moral and critical faculties must be "privatized" – the citizen has to become a *subject*.

Considering its famous frontispiece, the biblical reference and the key-role of the anthropological fiction of the "state of nature" (as an anti-Paradise), one can understand how Hobbes' Leviathan takes over the metaphorical and mythical language of religion to turn it against itself. The State – in order to diminish and *depotentiate* the power claims of religion and of popular organizations – adopts theological attributes and replaces the "original" systems of belief by a form of "religion of the State". The more a community is organized around a single belief and the bigger its authority claim is, the more the State has to adopt its characteristics in order to occupy its position. This "metaphorical" strategy results, on the one hand, in a monopole of power by the State that has constantly to assert its authority through the identification of "public enemies". On the other hand, the moral and critical power of the people become sheer polemics, meaning a powerless form of critique unable openly to and thus effectively contest matters of state – and *be*

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[1] BALIBAR, É., "Le Dieu mortel et ses fidèles sujets. Hobbes, Schmitt et les antinomies de la laïcité", in: Gonthier, Th. (dir.), *Ethique, Politique, Religions*, 1 (2012), pp. 27-39.
[2] Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-32.
[3] Cf. KOSELLECK, R., *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973.

contested by the sovereign. To put it simply: the State/Monarch is to blame for nothing, but is responsible for everything. The citizen is responsible for nothing, but to blame for everything. The citizen becomes *hypocritical*; the State becomes *hypertheological*. This gap between public and private is at the root of a permanent *crisis* inherent to this political model and the paradoxical power-strategies that try to overcome it.

In reference to Schmitt's famous characterization of "the Political" as the possibility always to distinguish the enemy from the friend, Balibar emphasizes the importance of the permanent identification of a "public enemy" for the modern State. This search is not only directed towards the outside of the State, but also – and this is important – towards its inside. (This is, in fact, characteristic of *our* political conjecture, in which the "inner" enemy has grown to be more threatening than the "outer" enemy.) To prevent the whole construction from being internally destroyed; to keep the homogeneity of a morally and politically "privatized" individual, the inner enemy has to be defined. According to Balibar, this is precisely the function of the theologization of the enemy.[4] It is only under the theological form that the outer enemy can be projected to the inside of the state, thus giving the threatening impression of a vast "community of believers" infiltrating and endangering the "community of individuals". By projecting this figure on the "alien elements" of the State, it creates the supposedly uncontrollable *public* enemy (as opposed to the controllable *private* individual). And with a new enemy comes concomitantly a new strategy to defeat and *subjugate (*meaning *subjectivy*) it. All this creates the paradoxical situation of a secular state, which through the theologization of the enemy adopts its very characteristics; a state that becomes more and more theological – *divine* – itself.

Doesn't this remind us of recent developments in today's spectrum of right to far-right wing Europe? Isn't one of its dominant tropes the dissociation from Islam (i.e. Turkeys long time wait for membership), not only to the outside but also to the inside? Isn't it striking that in the last few months, thousands of Germans have gathered for weekly protests against the alleged "Islamization of the Occident", under the name of "PEDIGA" (meaning: "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of Occident") – and has been growing into a popular mass-movement with the participation of the far-right wing parties?

It seems to me – and this is the "speculative part" of my talk – that the difficult question of the European identity has become a question of legitimacy more than a question of legality. Furthermore, this legitimacy has been found in the depths of the alleged Judeo-Christian heritage. Europe's – and especially Western Europe's – members seemingly require an *arch-foundation*, namely a new theological-political *Urstiftung*. This need, however, is derived from the nature of the theologized enemy who – according to

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[4] Cf. BALIBAR, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-39.

Balibar[5] – is projected on the cultural, sociological and historical differences in our diversified societies. In other words: Europe has begun to derive its legitimacy from the illegality of its enemy.

It is here that I would like to introduce the very peculiar theological-political concept of the *katechon*.[6] The concept appears in a personal and an impersonal sense in the second letter to the Thessalonians, c. 2, v. 3-9. I would like to quote the entire passage (in its modernized translation):

> "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness („a-nomos") is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back („to katechon"), so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back („ho katechon") will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works."

As we see, the *katechon* is the principle that stands against the apocalypse, meaning here the revealing of the Wicked (the "a-nomos"), who will have the power of Satan. Grippingly, the *a-nomos* is already amongst us, but has not yet begun to function: the nature of the apocalypse is unknown, but the "illegality" is already at work ("amongst us"). The *katechon* can thus be defined as he who "detains", who "slows down" the apocalypse by "holding back" (*Zurückhalten*) the *a-nomos*. According to Carl Schmitt, the belief in a katechontical power is the centerpiece of every truly Christian conception of history. It is the *bridge* between our world and the world after God's judgment. As a worldly power with a heavenly function, it is what dynamizes history and overcomes the "eschatological paralysis"[7]. The *katechon* is thus part of the theological answer to a situation of *crisis* (in the sense of *Ent-zweiung*) – and, in a certain way, "bears the tension" (*die Spannung aushalten*). Schmitt now integrates this figure into history, claiming that this function has been occupied by several powers (or persons) throughout the ages, (for instance the Holy Roman Empire, holding back the ottoman conquerors).

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[5] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[6] In fact, Balibar's article begins with the mention of the concept of *Katechon*, and his conception of a State that has constantly to hold up the revolution through the identification of the inner enemy is a concrete definition of the concept in the current political situation.

[7] SCHMITT, C., "Drei Möglichkeiten eines christlichen Geschichtsbildes", in: *H. Blumenberg – C Schmitt, Briefwechsel,* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007, p. 164.

This highly problematic historicization of the *katechon* is a sign for the craftiness of political theology: the katechontical function does not, in fact, emerge out of a complex play of power-relations, but has simply to be occupied, to be "seized". The position has its own legitimacy. But in the "secularized" and politicized version of the story, the eschatological fear has definitively lost its potency: what remains are the *katechon* and the *a-nomos*, the legitimacy and the illegality. Not only does the *katechon* lose its defusing intention, but perpetuates and aggravates the original *crisis* that can only be resolved by God's universal judgment, by his *Ent-scheidung* (de-cision).[8] In other words: the *katechon* exists in and through the permanent crisis, meaning the permanent inability to decide – the eternal *indecision*. Deprived from the tension between here and "there" (*Aushalten*), the holding back (*Zurückhalten*) changes into repression and subjugation (*Niederhalten*). Furthermore, the time-conception has changed: the hopeful waiting for the End-times is – in Schmitt's – transformed into an anti-dialectical standstill between enemy and friend.

Since we lack the idea of an eternal and universal salvation, since – in the post-modern political conjuncture – it is not about *all or nothing* anymore, katechontical politics – and this is my point – provides the illusion of decision (and thus dynamism) where there can only be eternal delay. Its *mission*, although "legitimate" from an alleged higher standpoint, is an infinite one *sans* real historical progress. This is why Giorgio Agamben has opted for a re-insertion of the *mysterium iniquitatis* into an eschatological, *historical* context, urging every single actor of the katechontical drama to take his responsibility towards the future, thus freeing the "a-nomos" from the timelessness and amorality of its theological institutionalization.[9] Hans Blumenberg – in his correspondence with Schmitt – understands the *katechon* on the contrary not as a lever for eschatological belief, but as its pure negation, as a strategy to cope with the frustration resulting from the long overdue apocalypse. The Agambian concept of an "incessant drama" (*unablässig abspielendes Drama*), the bearing of an infinite tension, is incompatible with Blumenberg's revalorization of the "humane" dimension of historical and political action.

In conclusion, a last question: Could it be that with the new search for legitimacy amongst European nations, that with the reference to our "original values" and the alleged *Leitkultur* comes the will to take over a new role in history, to "find back" into history – and this in the form of a new understanding of the *katechon*? In order to answer to this, we would have to more clearly define this procedure of "taking over a role" (a conscious or an unconscious process, etc.). Nevertheless, the tendency in Europe's foreign policy to redefine the nature of its borders, the popular mass-movements, kindled by the right wing parties (whose cry for a "stronger", more decisive government might even be understood

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[8] Cf. AGAMBEN, G., *Pilate et Jésus*, Paris : Rivages, 2013, p. 98.
[9] Cf. AGAMBEN, G., *Das Geheimnis des Bösen. Benedikt XVI und das Ende der Zeiten*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2015, pp. 57-59.

as a cry for the final judgment), the tendency to define a common enemy – namely the Islamic belief – and to project it into the inside of Europe, finally the State's inability to handle its "alien elements" on a strictly legal level and to find legitimacy not in the discontinuity of the future – meaning essentially an EU as a community of social justice – but in an undead concept of nationality and "cultural identity" – all these moments can be seen as signs of a certain return of theological concepts into politics.