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Roberto Esposito's The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought

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Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 238 pp.

Reviewed by **Steven Mailloux**, Loyola Marymount University

Throughout the twentieth century, political theology served as a perdurable framework for deep thinking as well as a perennial object of intense debate. Roberto Esposito's *Two* extends the theoretical attention into the present century as he suggests ways of moving beyond its paradigmatic machinery. Effective as he is in demonstrating the historical pervasiveness of political theology as an interpretive framework and object of discussion, Esposito presents himself with quite a challenge in proposing to transcend the rhetorical ecology of tropes, arguments, and narratives that constitute its resilient apparatus.

Esposito provides a detailed account of political theology that describes both its terminological dialectic and its genealogical history. "This process of exclusionary assimilation is the fundamental, defining action of the political-theological machine." In the transhistorical semantic process, "the two poles of the political and the theological enter into relationship with each other in the continuous attempt to overcome the other" (3). Two perpetually tends toward becoming One. This same semantic tendency within political theology is reflected and embodied in the interpretive conflict over political theology as a concept during the last hundred years, with the controversy among Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson, and Jacob Taubes appearing as emblematic. Esposito places the category of "person" at the center of his genealogical history of political theology, demonstrating the derivation of this apparatus of personhood from the intersection of Roman law and Christian religion. The modern concept of person develops out of this legal-theological heritage, a development Esposito represents in three different traditions: Hobbes-Hegel-Schmitt, Locke to Kant, and Mill through Peter Singer and Hugo Engelhardt. Each of these traditions continues the metaphysical project of political theology and its particular privileging of personhood as the container of thought. Thinking is internalized within the apparatus of the person situated at the center of the political-theological machine of the West: "just as the possession of thought qualifies the individual [as a human being], similarly thought is entirely enclosed within the limits of the individual subject" (9).

Esposito describes the transformations of the politico-theological traditions of personhood in what might be called a mathematical dynamic of terms: concepts are multiplied and subtracted, and especially added and divided. The duality of *politics* and *theology* oscillates between unity and separation, Two becoming One and One becoming Two. The historical dispositif of political theology thus generates and performs

consolidations and splittings, duplications and subordinations, external reproductions and internal divisions. Esposito relies upon this mathematical dynamic to describe the lead-up to the much-cited twentieth-century debate over political theology among Schmitt, Peterson, and Taubes, adding Jan Assmann to the mix as a culminating moment purportedly closing the debate (76).

Appropriately enough, Esposito begins his detailed interpretive genealogy with Hegel, “the first, and greatest, political-theological thinker of modernity.” With this thinker, “the category of political theology extends its scope beyond the regional or methodological to the global and ontological” (28). Hegel’s dialectical process enacts an “extraordinary metaphysical device” that represents and performs the connection between universalism and exclusion, “not in the weak sense that something always stays outside the framework, but in the more powerful sense that every universal is the product and, at the same time, the inclusive capture of an excluded part.” Esposito characterizes this process as a “disjunctive connection of the One and the Two,” a simultaneous dynamic of unification and division, typified by the Christian West, “the horizon that is capable of incorporating inside itself—in a subordinate form—the portion of the world from which it has separated itself” (29). Just as Persia was appropriated by Greece and then Greece by Rome, so too was Latin civilization adapted by Germanicism. Originally born in a “radical break” with the profane world, Christianity came to incorporate and dominate that same world during the Western Middle Ages. Politics and theology overlapped and deformed each other. “It is as if the poison of the Two spread through all the arteries of the medieval civilization, with divisive consequences” (32), externally in the violence of the Crusades and then internally much later in the post-Reformation wars of religion.

Presupposing the Hegelian dialectic of politics and theology, Max Weber took it in a different direction, adding the category of the economic in tension with the political and exemplifying the centrality of the *dispositif* of personhood in his influential treatment of charismatic power. “A charismatic leader” he writes, “is perfectly divided in his own body between heaven and earth, between the divine and the mundane, the good and power—in the narrow sense that he draws his power over others from the value that he represents, thereby allowing them to participate in it” (38-39).

Following Hegel and Weber, Schmitt developed the most often-discussed theoretical account of political theology in the twentieth century. With the sovereign defined as “he who decides on the exception” at the beginning of his *Political Theology* and politics itself described in terms of the friend/enemy distinction in his *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt’s account leads to the conclusion that it is the sovereign who ultimately decides who are friends and who are enemies. The sovereign’s decision unites the political body

by “shielding it from the risk of internal division” but only “by separating the unity . . . from what threatens it.” Furthermore, the internal unity is preserved not only by positing an external threat but, more ominously, by identifying an “internal enemy” as well. “It is always one part that aspires to the whole, by squeezing the other one out onto the edge of nothingness” (43). Thus the political theological machine once again enacts its mathematical dynamic as the One is accomplished by a double separation into Two externally and internally, this time through the decision of the sovereign leader.

Esposito’s interpretation of these political-theological transformations might remind Americanists, old and new, of Kenneth Burke’s logological tracking of terminological analogies and orderings across the verbal realms of the sociopolitical and the supernatural, especially in *The Rhetoric of Religion*. In his logology—words about words—Burke emphasized the same secular borrowings from theology and the parallel reversals of the profane back into the sacred that function at the core of Esposito’s account of the political-theological machine. And like the advocates and critics of political theology such as Schmitt and Peterson in post-World War I Germany, Burke likewise applied his rhetorical-hermeneutic analysis to contemporary political events, in his case those of the Cold War. As he put it initially, “[I] propose to replace the present political stress upon men in rival international situations by a ‘logological’ reaffirmation of the foibles and quandaries that all men (in their role as ‘symbol-using animals’) have in common.”

But Esposito attempts to go beyond the political-theological machine within which Schmitt, Peterson, Burke, and others worked throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, he argues that the history of philosophical writing itself contains challenges to this dominant metaphysical tradition. Such work opposes the centrality of personhood with a philosophy of the impersonal and transforms the paradigm of internalized thinking into a model of the exteriority of thought. Esposito constructs a discontinuous lineage that includes Averroes, Bruno, and Spinoza, as well as Schelling Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. “What shuts down the dispositif of the person . . . is the idea put forward by these authors that the relationship between thought and the individual is not essential and permanent, but potential and contingent” (11). In their writings, a human is not the individual personal subject possessing thought but rather “an occasion or vehicle of thought” (11). From this perspective, intelligence is seen “not as a property of the few . . . but as a resource for all, through which one can pass without appropriating it for oneself” and thus it is assigned “a collective power that only the human species as a whole can fully actualize” (12).

With this counter-tradition of the impersonal as inspiration, Esposito attempts in conclusion, first, to update the political theological by explaining how it has become

intertwined with the economic theological; and, second, to use the concept and reality of universal debt to hollow out the dominant economic-political-theological paradigm. He relies one last time on a mathematical dynamic in describing the update: "The point of arrival for economic-political theology is identity, with no remainders, between inside and outside, whole and part, One and Two." And the hollowing out depends on remaining within the paradigmatic machine but changing "the way we interpret it" (208). Esposito's book thus ends on a hopeful yet rather uncertain note: since we have all become (or are about to become) debtors, and "every creditor is a debtor to another, in a chain whose first link has been lost," the current "problem we are facing is to transform this oppressive chain into a circuit of solidarity" (209). The uncertainty of Esposito's proposed solution seems further testimony to the staying power of the political-theological machine that he has so incisively analyzed and helpfully chronicled.