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Art, Inactivity, Politics

Over the past three years I have been focusing my attention on what could be defined as a theological genealogy of economics and government. The plan was to demonstrate the way the current domination of economics and government over every sphere of social life had its paradigm in early Christian theology when, in order to reconcile the Trinity with monotheism, the theologians presented it as divine “economy”, the way God organises and governs divine life and the created world.

As often happens when one is completely immersed in research of this kind, just when I believed I had arrived at a conclusion, suddenly a totally new area for study opened up, providing my work with an unexpected new horizon.

I was working on angels as the instruments of divine government in the world. In Christian theology, the angels are first and foremost the ministers of divine government in the world;

divided into nine hierarchies or ministries, they implement the decrees of Providence at all times, in heaven as on earth. In the Christian West, angelology has operated as a paradigm of bureaucracy, and our concept of ministerial hierarchies has been profoundly influenced by this celestial paradigm. Kafka's *The Castle*, in which messengers and officials are surrounded by an inscrutable angelic aura is a good illustration of this.

In medieval treatises on angels there comes a point at which theologians disagree over an intractable problem to which I should like to draw your attention. The divine government of the world is in fact something fundamentally finite. After the Last Judgment, when the history of the world and its creatures is at an end, when the elect have obtained eternal bliss and the damned their eternal retribution, the angels will have nothing more to do. Whereas in Hell the devils are ceaselessly busy punishing the damned, in the Kingdom of Heaven, as in Europe today, the normal condition is inactivity. As one particularly radical theologian writes: "The final consummation admits neither of co-operation by created beings nor of any possible ministry. As God is the immediate origin of every creature, He is also its end, *alpha et omega*. Therefore all administration will cease, all angelic ministry and hierarchical operations, since these were set up to lead Man to his end and once this end is achieved they have to cease".

The problem is particularly pressing because it requires us to think about something that even the minds of theologians can hardly grasp: the cessation of all divine activity, idleness and eternal inactivity. The labours of the theologians were entirely devoted, by contrast, to imagining the modes and forms of divine and angelic activity which, by embracing the entire cosmos, from the stars to the smallest fledgling sparrow, permanently ensured

God's perfect governance of the world. How could they now conceive of a totally idle life, for God as well as for men and angels? How conceive of a Kingdom with no possible Government?

"After the human race has been judged", wondered St Jerome anxiously, "what life could there be? Will there be another earth, another world? We know only the one we inhabit, which was revealed to us by the Scriptures; what exists before the world and after its end is absolutely unknowable".

The reply given by theologians to these questions constitutes the point of departure for the problem I want to discuss with you today. A totally idle god is a god without power, who has given up governing the world; this is the god the theologians find it impossible to accept. To avoid the total disappearance of all power, they separate power from the exercise of power and maintain that power does not disappear but that it is simply no longer exercised, thus it assumes the motionless, resplendent form of glory (*doxa* in Greek). The hierarchy of angels, having abandoned all governmental activity, remains unchanged and now celebrates the glory of God. The ceaseless government ministry of the angels is succeeded now by eternal songs of praise addressed to God both by angels and by blessed spirits. Power is now completely assimilated with the ceremonial and liturgical display which formerly accompanied government like an enigmatic shadow. I have often wondered why power, which primarily denotes strength and effective government, should need glory. From the perspective of Christian theology, in which government is something fundamentally finite, Glory is the form in which power supersedes itself, and inconceivable industry finds it meaning within theological order.

The special relationship linking glory to inactivity is what I want to invite you to consider today. In as much as it designates man's ultimate end and the condition that follows the Last Judgment, glory occupies the post of post-judicial inactivity, in which all works and all words, divine and human, are resolved. Jewish tradition, however, also recognised another emblem of inactivity which found its greatest expression in the Sabbath. The most important Jewish festival, the *shabat*, had its theological foundation in the fact that it was not the work of creation but the cessation of all work on the seventh day that was declared sacred. Inactivity thus defines the state proper to God ("Only to God does inactivity (*anapausis*) really belong" writes Philon, "the Sabbath, which means inactivity, belongs to God" and, at the same time, is the object of eschatological expectations ("they shall not enter into my inactivity" - *eis ten anapausin emou*, Ps. 95, 11)).

It is this identification of God with inactivity which is problematic in Christianity, indeed it becomes the supreme theological problem, the problem of the eternal Sabbath as the final condition of mankind. St Augustine concludes his *City of God* - the work to which he confides his most extreme meditations on theology and politics - with the image of a Sabbath that has no sunset (*sabatus non habens vesperam*). He asks himself what the blessed souls in Paradise will do in their immortal and spiritual bodies, and acknowledges that one cannot properly speak either of activity or of idleness; the problem of the final inactivity of created beings surpasses the intelligence of men as of angels. What is in question here, he writes, is "the peace of God which, as the apostle says, passeth all understanding".

The vision of this inconceivable inactivity is so difficult for St Augustine to grasp that his writing becomes hesitant, he seems almost to babble. He is writing about a state that knows

neither inertia nor need, and whose movements, which it is impossible even to imagine, are nevertheless full of glory and dignity. To describe this blessed inactivity, which is neither doing nor not doing, he can find no better expression than an eternal Sabbath in which God, angels and men seem to mingle and to sink into nothingness. St Augustine defines the final condition as a Sabbath raised to potentiality, a Sabbath made to rest in the Sabbath, in activity resolved in inactivity. "Then God will be idle on the Sabbath and will render idle in itself that same Sabbath that we are and this will be our Sabbath, whose end will know no sunset, like an eternal eighth day... There will we be idle (*vacabimus*) and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love and we shall praise. And this will be in the end without end."

If the final condition merges with the supreme glory, and if glory takes the form of an eternal Sabbath until the end of time, what we have to query now is the meaning of this intimate connection between glory and inactivity. At the beginning and end of supreme power stands - according to Christian theology - a figure connected with inactivity rather than with action and government. The unspeakable mystery which glory, with its blinding light, is supposed to hide is the mystery of divine idleness, of what God did before creating the world and after the providential government of the world had reached its conclusion. If, as I often do, we compare the machinery of power to a machine for producing government, then glory is that which, in politics as in theology, assures the continuous functioning of the machine. Thus it takes the place of the inconceivable void which the inactivity of power represents; however, it is this indescribably, ungovernable vacuity which appears to fuel the machinery

of power; power has such a need for it that it has to capture it and contain it at its centre at all costs in the form of glory.

In the iconography of power, religious and secular alike, the central vacuity of glory, this merging of majesty and idleness, has found its symbolic exemplification in the image of the empty throne.

Early evidence of this in Rome was the *sella curulis* – the seat used by republican magistrates in the exercise of their function – which the senate attributed to Caesar; it was displayed empty at the games, adorned with a golden crown encrusted with precious stones. In the Augustan period, written evidence as well as images on coins indicate that the gilded seat was regularly displayed at games. We know that Caligula had an empty throne placed in the Campidoglio and senators were obliged to prostrate themselves before it.

It is in Christian circles, however, in the majestic eschatological image of the *hetoimasia tou thronou* which adorns the triumphal arches and apses of Early Christian and Byzantine basilicas, that the religious significance of the empty throne reaches its climax. Thus the mosaic in the arch of Sixtus III in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (fifth century) depicts an empty throne encrusted with multicoloured stones on which rest a cushion and a cross; beside the throne can be glimpsed a lion, an eagle, a winged human figure, fragments of wings and a crown. In the Byzantine basilica of the Assumption in Torcello, the *hetoimasia* in the mosaic of the Last Judgment displays the throne with the cross, the crown and the sealed book, surrounded above by seraphim with six wings and, on either side, large figures of angels. At Mistra, in the church of St Demetrius, a thirteenth-century fresco presents the empty throne as if suspended in the sky, covered with purple drapery and surrounded by six applauding

angels; slightly higher, in a translucent, crystalline rhomboid, are a book, an amphora, a white bird and a black bull.

Historians generally interpret the image of the throne as a symbol of royalty, whether sacred or secular. Such an explanation cannot however account for the empty throne in the Christian *hetoimasia*. The term *hetoimasia* is, like the verb *hetoimaso* and the adjective *hetoimos* in the Greek translation of the Bible, a technical term which in the Psalms refers to the throne of Yahweh: “The Lord has prepared his throne in heaven” (Ps. 102, 19); “Ready (*hetoimos*) for ever is his throne” (Ps. 92. 2). *Hetoimasia* does not allude to the act of preparing or arranging anything; it alludes to the preparedness of the throne. The throne has always been ready and has always awaited the glory of the Lord. According to rabbinical Judaism, the throne of glory is one of the seven items Yahweh created before he created the world. Similarly, in Christian theology, the throne is eternally prepared because the glory of God is coeternal with it. *The empty throne is not, therefore, a symbol of royalty but of glory.* Glory precedes the creation of the world and survives unto its end. And the throne is not only empty because glory, although coinciding with the divine essence, is not identified with it; and also because it is, in its heart of hearts, idleness. The supreme image of sovereignty is empty.

In the majesty of the empty throne the device of glory finds its perfect cipher. Its aim is to hold the inconceivable inactivity which constitutes the ultimate mystery of divinity within the machinery of government, in order to make it the machinery’s secret motor. Glory is as much objective glory, which displays divine inactivity, as glorification, in which human inactivity celebrates its eternal Sabbath. The theological device of glory merges with the secular device, and we can thus use it as an epistemo-

logical paradigm which can make it possible for us to penetrate the core mystery of power.

Now we can begin to understand why ceremonial and liturgy are so essential to power. It is a question of holding them and registering them in a separate sphere of the central inactivity of human life. Power places solidly at its centre, in the form of celebration and glory, what appears to its eyes to be the unviewable inactivity of man and of God. Human life is idle and aimless, but it is precisely this lack of action and aim which makes possible the incomparable busyness of the human race. Man has devoted himself to production and labour because he is in essence deprived of work, because he is above all a sabbatical animal. And the machinery of government functions because it has captured within its empty heart the inactivity of the human essence. This inactivity is the political substance of the West, the glorious nourishment of all power. This is why feasting and idleness resurface continually in the dreams and political utopias of the West, and equally continually come to grief there. They are the enigmatic relics which the economic-theological machine abandons on the shoreline of civilization; mankind returns to them wonderingly, but always uselessly and nostalgically. Nostalgically because they seem to contain something that clings jealously to the human essence; uselessly because in reality they are nothing more than the ashes of the immaterial, glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine during its inexorable, relentless rotation.

The idea that inactivity is a component part of humanity as such is briefly examined by Aristotle in a passage in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b, 22, *passim*). Just as he defines happiness as the ultimate goal of political science, Aristotle asks what the “work of man” (*to ergon tou anthropou*) might be, and suggests that the

idea of inactivity could be man’s possible goal: “As for the flute-player, the sculptor and every craftsman, and, in general, for all those who have work (*ergon*) and an activity (*praxis*), good seems to reside in this work, so it should also be for man as such, given that for him it would be like work. Or should one say that for the carpenter and the cobbler they are a labour and an activity, for a man on the other hand – neither, as he is born without work (*argos*)?” The idea is suddenly dropped, and the work of man identified by Aristotle as that particular “industriousness” (*energeia*) which is life according to the *logos*; but the idea that idleness and *désœuvrement* define the essence – or rather the specific *praxis* – of man is, as you will have gathered, the hypothesis I am about to propose to you here. Not only because it seems to me that only in this perspective is it possible to find a reply to the questions we have been asking so far: “why does power need idleness and glory? What is so essential in these that power has to establish them at all cost in the empty centre of its governmental equipment? What does power feed on?” But also because it seems to me that this hypothesis makes it possible to think of politics and, in a more general way, the sphere of human action in a new way.

Inactivity does not in fact mean simply inertia, non-activity. *It refers rather to an operation which involves inactivating, de-commissioning* (*des-œuvrer*) *all human and divine endeavour.*

At the end of Book IV of the *Ethics*, his treatise on human servitude, Spinoza uses the image of idleness to define the supreme liberty that man can hope for. In his simple, admirable Latin (using a term in which should be heard an echo of the *menuchah*, the Sabbath rest of God) Spinoza talks of an “*acquiescentia in ipso*”, resting or finding peace in oneself, which he defines as “happiness born from this, that man contemplates himself and his own capacity to act”. What does “contemplates his own capacity to act”

mean? How should we envisage idleness that consists of contemplating our own capacity, what we are able or unable to do?

Once again, the contemplation of capacity is not simply idleness and absence of routine, it is something like an internal idleness within its own operation, which consists in rendering inoperative every capacity to act or to do. Life, contemplating its own capacity, makes itself incapable of performing any of its functions. An example will illustrate the way this “inoperative operation” should be understood. What in fact is a poem if not a linguistic operation which renders language inoperative by de-activating its communicative and informative functions in order to open it to a new possible use? Poetry is in other words, in Spinoza’s terms, a contemplation of language, which brings it back to its capacity to speak. Thus Mandelstam’s poetry is a contemplation of the Russian language, Leopardi’s *Canti* a contemplation of the Italian language, Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* a contemplation of the French language, the hymns of Hölderlin and the poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann a contemplation of the German language etc. In any case, we are dealing with an operation which takes place within the language, which acts on the power of speech. And the subject of the poetry is not the individual who has written these poems, it is the subject produced at the point when language has been rendered inoperative and has become, in language and through language, purely speakable.

If this is true, then we need radically to change the manner in which we are accustomed to think about the problem of the relationship between art and politics. Art is not a human activity of an aesthetic type which can, if necessary and in certain circumstances, also acquire a political significance. Art is political in itself, because it is an operation which contemplates and renders non-operational man’s senses and usual actions, thus

opening them to new possible uses. For this reason art comes so close to politics and philosophy as almost to merge with them. What poetry achieves by the power of speech and art by the senses, politics and philosophy have to achieve by the power of action. By rendering biological and economic operations inactive, they show of what the human body is capable, they open the body to new possible uses.