

Debt and Desire: Differential Exploitation and Gendered Dimensions of Debt and Austerity

Jule Govrin

Krisis 2023, 43 (1): 25-45.

Abstract

Austerity as management of public debt is at the core of neoliberal policies and proceeds as differential exploitation. To explore its gendered dimensions of debt, the paper inquires how debt is bound to desire and inscribed in bodies. After indulging in David Graeber's, Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's work, the analysis focusses on accumulation through debt and dispossession. Drawing on Verónica Gago, Luci Cavallero and Silvia Federici, it reflects how current economies of debt exploit feminized work in times of authoritarian neoliberalism. The paper sheds light on solidaristic struggles against austerity that manifest a desire for social transformation and economies of care.

Keywords

Austerity, Authoritarianism, Debt, Desire, Dispossession, Neoliberalism

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.43.1.38816>

Licence

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\). © 2023 The author\(s\).](#)

Debt and Desire: Differential Exploitation and Gendered Dimensions of Debt and Austerity

Jule Govrin

Introduction

Debt is present every day, in direct forms, such as when one is in debt, or in indirect forms, when one feels the impacts of austerity. And debt manifests itself in bodily manners. The pandemic unveiled these concrete corporeal effects of economy: the Corona crisis was massively exacerbated because health systems were weakened by decades of austerity; moreover, many people lost their homes due to sudden unemployment, whereas others were confined in their homes, and often, especially mothers, overloaded with care work. Economies are not mere abstractions, economies are embodied. Debt and austerity hint at this corporeal dimension of capitalism - they cannot be conceived only in terms of abstract economic models. To understand the socio-somatic dynamics of debt in the era of austerity, an expanded feminist-philosophical perspective is needed that involves bodies, social bonds, and desire.

There is a long intellectual lineage that examines capitalism not as a rational system of interests, but in its destructive, disruptive tendencies and affective ramifications, deploying desire for this purpose – prominently in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This paper pursues this path and takes the relation between desire and debt as an analytical point of departure: this focus on desire may reveal the moral dimension of debt, as a form of economic subjectivation that disciplines desire. Moreover, desire involves gendered relations, which allows considering the connection between indebtedness and gender politics, for neoliberal austerity is closely linked to conservative family policies and increased exploitation of care work. Debt as analytical departure helps to show how the moralizing and material impacts of debt and austerity affect every body, albeit in different ways. Understood as pre-personal force, desire also hints at social relationality, and this guides us towards conceiving economy as social, embodied practice. Drawing on David Graeber's anthropological study, this paper lays out how debt fundamentally builds on relationality. Concurrently, with reference to Luci Cavallero's and Verónica Gago's studies, it illustrates how austerity, as neoliberal management of public debt, exploits and disrupts this relationality. The analytical focus on desire allows the reconciliation of these two contrasting understandings of debt.

I. Differential Exploitation and Embodied Economies of Debt and Desire Legacies

The history of philosophy already offers hints of how debt is manifested in material manners, and how it disciplines desire. A prominent, pivotal text is Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, published in 1887. It unveils how the exchange ratio is based upon an affective debt economy. Roman law required an equivalent of pain, if a debtor could not pay his debt, which ought to provide a certain degree of sadistic satisfaction to the creditor. And this "enjoyment will be the greater the lower the creditor stands in the social order" (Nietzsche 1967, 64-6). Economic debt is turned into social debt. Nietzsche's narrative of debt discipline and punishment points to aspects that are also important for the analysis of neoliberal austerity: he first emphasizes the bodily effects of debt. Then he highlights how debt aligns with morality; debt morality inscribes itself as discipline in the debtor, who is subjectivized as a morally depraved person (see also Foucault 1995, 136-40). This subjectivation works through desire; in other words, debt disciplines desire.

This leads us to look at embodiments of economy. Such an approach is suggested by many different scholars. Two of them are the medical experts Sanjay Basu and David Stuckler who analyse austerity in the context of public health. Their research reveals that rigid austerity not only reinforced the economic crisis, but also resulted in health crises when many lost their jobs, houses, and, consequently, access to healthcare, for example 2009 in the US, or 2012 in Greece (Stuckler and Basu 2013, 101-5; 77-85). Basu and Stuckler suggest studying economy "as body economic" (Stuckler and Basu 2013, 139) in a very basic, materialist understanding: as an organization of bodies among bodies. This analytical approach carries a normative component as it foregrounds the well-being of every body rather than private profit. Understood as body economic, capitalism relies on the relationality of bodies and exploits dependency and cooperation.

Basu and Stuckler's suggestion resonates with Gago's and Cavallero's "feminist reading of debt" that "proposes concrete bodies and narratives of its operation in opposition to financial abstraction" (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 5). So, debt is much more than an abstract system of financial speculation; rather, it is being inscribed in bodies, and embodied by those who carry its burden. To understand the disruptions of neoliberal debt, we must begin with the bodies most affected by austerity: the bodies of those being pushed into precarious work, left without

healthcare, burdened by the extra effort of care work, and under constant stress to pay the next rent.

Maurizio Lazzarato elaborates on Nietzsche's thinking in view of neoliberal austerity carving out the transnational realm of deterritorialized debt dynamics. According to Lazzarato, this austerity regime produced the new subjectivity of the "indebted man" (Lazzarato 2011, 162), i.e. the debtor in the face of "Capital as 'Universal Creditor'" (Lazzarato 2011, 162). But as Nietzsche emphasizes the embodiment of debt, it is not sufficient to claim a universal debtor-subject, as Lazzarato does, since this neglects the differential logic of debt discipline. According to Gago and Cavallero no "debtor-creditor relation [...] can be separated from concrete situations and especially from sexual, gender, racial, and locational differences, precisely because debt does not homogenize those differences, but rather exploits them" (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 4). Debt rather operates as "differential of exploitation" (Cavallero and Gago 2021, VIII). Exploitation proceeds through the inscriptions of class, race, and gender. People whose bodies are marked as "other" are economically more exploited, thus differential exploitation works along the axes of the international and gendered division of labour. Differential exploitation both builds on and deepens social differences (Govrin 2022, 139-41). This seems to be the case when it comes to debt. Therefore, the question is not only how debt is inscribed in bodies, but also in which bodies it is inscribed. As Rocio Zambrana states, debt is an "apparatus of capture," which "involves expulsion, dispossession, and precarization through which race/gender/class hierarchies are deepened, intensified, posited anew" (Zambrana 2021, 10). It seems, then, that debt is not just one of many examples of the differential body economic of capitalism; rather, debt seems to play a key role in how people are rendered unequal based on difference. This assumption will be explored in what follows.

To commence with bodies draws attention to desire and needs, as well as dependency and vulnerability. This foregrounds a feminist-materialist approach, as feminist critiques of economics focus on issues of care and common needs. It takes the household – the *oikos*¹ – as the starting point, which is linked to debt and desire in different ways: in times of public debt and austerity, the household can be in debt as in the subprime mortgage crisis in the US, starting in 2007, which resulted in the "loss of home for millions in the United States" and "overwhelmingly affected Black and Latino/a borrowers and communities" (Ferreira da Silva and Chakravartty 2012, 361). On another level, debt reorganizes the household; as Silvia Federici

spells out, austerity comes along with a “financialization of reproduction” (Federici 2019, 18), when care work is re-privatized and turned into precariously paid or unpaid, unrecognized work. This exploitation of gender inequality displays how the household is tied to debt.

Apart from these effects of austerity on housing and households, debt is tied to oikos in quite fundamental ways. In this regard, Graeber’s anthropological study (2011) offers insights. In an anthropological perspective which exceeds contemporary capitalism, debt used to be crucial for communal economies that evolve around the oikos and not around markets. The household is thus closely connected to debt as embodied social practice; in this very broad understanding, debt defines social relations (Graeber 2011, 266). In communal economies, debt reassures social bonds, organizing needs and relations. Reciprocal debt relationships therefore sustain communities that are driven by their dependency.

By ensuring that everyone was always slightly in debt to one another, they actually created human society, if a very fragile sort of society – a delicate web made up of obligations to return three eggs or a bag of okra, ties renewed and recreated, as any one of them could be cancelled out at any time (Graeber 2011, 122).

In communal economies debt relies on relationality and enables egalitarian practices. However, it becomes an instrument of divide and rule when it is institutionalized and hierarchized, as in early forms of credits given by temples, with interest-bearing loans (Graeber 2011, 64). To cut a long story short: Graeber argues that in times of capitalism we see solidifying an institutionalized form of indebtedness which systematically entrenches inequality. Due to its financialization in capitalism, debt reinforces asymmetric power structures (Graeber 2011, 335-49). Whereas communal economies used debt as social bonding that enhanced egalitarian practices, credit debt in capitalism installed structural asymmetries (Graeber 2011, 64-7; 120-4).

Graeber’s description of debt as an organizational principle of the oikos, and of credit as a hierarchizing principle of modern societies, hints at desire in two regards. First, debt in communal economies accounts for dependency and relationality, and thus involves desire, understood as a pre-personal, relational force that produces social bonds, as Deleuze and Guattari note (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 219). Second, credit, and the moralizing discipline of debt, are embedded in modern family formations. Drawing on Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari

argue how social debt – the debt to the king or in secularized times to the father – works in favour of the bourgeois family, the oedipalized desire regulates sexual and gendered orders accordingly. Debt defines the foreclosure of desire in family formations, ascribing fixed positions of obedience, and these subjectivations seek to discipline desire. For “debt is the unit of alliance,” the “alliance-debt” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 185) that regulates free-flowing desire and reterritorializes it in the representation of the bourgeois family. For Deleuze and Guattari debt is linked to heteronormative family structures in terms of social and moral guilt. To stand in debt is a form of subjectivation that upholds authoritarian hierarchies. To them, this is part of a long tradition of patriarchal power; the precapitalist indebtedness to god in the king was transferred in capitalism to the figures of the father and the boss. Whether it indicates how debt is tied to moral discipline and family formations, Deleuze and Guattari’s description remains rather abstract. Even though their term of “alliance-debt” might be fruitful, their analysis reduces debt to the symbolic sphere of the social. The following analysis will show how concrete economic debt reinforces conservative family values.

All in all, the formation of the heteronormative family as an economic unit appears as the economization of desire. According to Deleuze and Guattari, economies are driven by a desire for accumulation. Conversely, desire is economized, the economic order affects people through desire and directs them to their societal positions in terms of social organization and sexual orders (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 25; 239). Capital feeds on this economization of desire, which enables the exploitation of reproductive work which is essential in apparatuses of austerity. Thus, economies of debt may be grasped as economies of desire in a systematic and in a social regard: in a systematic regard, austerity unveils capital’s desire for accumulation, which manifests materially by moving bodies and making them work. In a social regard, it involves specific subjectivations. Neoliberal debt interferes in social relations and disciplines desire. Moreover, it exploits care work in gendered economies.

To study how debt operates as differential exploitation, we need corresponding methodological tools. Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective on capitalism as economy of desire resonates with an analysis of austerity and its disruptive tendencies, showing the circles of destruction enhanced by a “debt drive” (Schuster 2016, 172). To understand these disruptive dynamics of debt, their conceptual pair of de- and reterritorialization may be applied (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 181-4). Similar to Marx’s concept of exchange value, deterritorialization describes a

dissolution of boundaries, for instance when land no longer serves subsistence but the extraction of surplus value. Reterritorialization refers to the binding back into state structures. De- and reterritorialization go hand in hand, because in its transnational financial flows capital deterritorializes, while simultaneously, due to economic state policies, it “reterritorializes the deterritorialized flows” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 266). To take another example, the deterritorializing dynamics of financial speculation provoked the economic crisis in 2008; the subsequent state interventions and investments to save banks can be seen as reterritorialization (cf. Tooze 2018).

Next to the molar formation of debt – state debt in particular – its molecular movements lead back to desire: debt discipline proceeds as subjectivation, which organizes social, and hence gendered, relations. In view of this, how does neoliberal debt feed on desire as social force? How does debt reshape social relations? And alternatively, how does desire undermine debt’s discipline?

II. On the Alliance of Austerity and Authoritarianism

Federici writes that debt “has been an instrument of class rule through the ages” (Federici 2019, 60) – a statement that falls short of the social function of debt in communal economies described by Graeber. Despite this, she is right that debt cannot be conceived as “political universal” because it “has undergone significant transformations“ (Federici 2019, 60).

In capitalist history debt undermines the liberal assumption of the “free market” enabling equality. Capitalism was founded on colonialism and the constitutive force of finance. A paradigmatic figure is the indebted king at the end of the seventeenth century depending on the goodwill of his creditors (Vogl 2017, 76-9). Likewise, colonial expeditions were financed by bank loans. In the long run, this debt burden was eventually placed on colonized states. For instance, in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution in 1804 an “independence debt” imposed by France “operated as an apparatus of economic capture and political control” (Zambrana 2021, 83). Colonized states were forced to pay a centuries-long debt as price for their independence. Colonial debt forms a condition of coloniality, which continues into present times (Zambrana 2021, 10), because contemporary austerity perpetuates this colonial condition of unequal indebtedness. Based on the so-called Washington Consensus – the free-market doctrine of privatization and deregulation – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed “Structural Adjustment Programs” (SAP), particularly in the Global South, which increased

global inequalities. Considering this background, austerity programs appear as neocolonial configuration.

1973 may be assigned as neoliberalism's hour of birth, namely the year of the coup against Salvador Allende's government in Chile (Marchart 2013, 110). It was preceded by an alliance of conservative Catholics and new economic experts, the Chicago Boys who rendered Chile the "epicenter of the Chicago experiment" (Klein 2008, 63). To briefly sketch this story: even before the coup, Chile was perceived as a laboratory for testing economic programs (Fischer 2009, 305). In the context of exchange programs "approximately thirty Chilean economists were trained in Chicago between 1956 and 1964" (Fischer 2009, 310) at the famous institute, led by Milton Friedman that was – next to Friedrich von Hayek's Austrian School and the Mont Pèlerin Society – an intellectual centre for neoliberal thought (Edwards und Montes 2020). Back in Chile, the Chicago Boys were partly involved in preparing the military coup. They obtained positions in the junta under Augusto Pinochet, and in 1975 when recession kicked in, "a window of opportunity for a radical neoliberal transformation opened" (Fischer 2009, 309). They implemented the so-called shock treatment: measures of privatizing state infrastructures, destroying syndicate structures, abolishing workers' rights, and dismantling social state structures (cf. Harvey 2007, 8-10; 39). These early neoliberal economists closely collaborated with military regimes that carried out systematic kidnapping, killing, and torturing, which took place in Chile and also in other countries.

These regimes of "bureaucratic authoritarianism" started in the late 1960s – the *Revolución Argentina*, the military regime in Brazil, the Pinochet regime in Chile, and Juan María Bordaberry in Uruguay – in close collaboration with Friedman and Hayek (O'Donnell 1973, 91). For instance, Pinochet's regime adopted Hayek's idea of "authoritarian freedom" that pleads for an absolute freedom of the market, "recombined with traditional patriarchal and authoritarian concepts of the state" (Fischer 2009, 327) for its new constitution.² Austeritarian privatization is deterritorializing – at this point, the territorial metaphor becomes material, as deterritorialization involves land-grabbing and extractivism, exploiting ecological resources for the profit of international investors. At the same time, the regime reterritorialized these changes by means of a rhetoric of renationalization that upheld Catholic ideals of the patriarchal family. It was similar in Argentina, where the junta "legitimated its mission with the rhetoric of Christian and family values" (Taylor 2001, 100), deploying a double figure of femininity:

On the one hand, the junta honored the symbolic image of pure motherhood associated with the Patria, the ‘good’ woman, and made clear to women that their role was also to be ‘pure,’ that is non-political, mothers confined to the private sphere. On the other hand, active women were ‘bad’ women, associated with deviance and subversion. Women who were not content to stay home were often targeted as enemies of the State (Taylor 2001, 99).

During the so-called Dirty War that took place from 1976 to 1983 in Argentina, thousands disappeared in a climate of political repression and violence (Taylor 2001, 100). In the midst of this, the movement of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* arose: “the Mothers went to the Plaza de Mayo, the most public space in Argentina, to protest that it was the military that posed the gravest threat to their children” (Taylor 2001, 100). The fusion of Catholic family values with neoliberal policies indicates how the economic ratio merges with excesses of violence which also articulates itself as gender-based violence.

All in all, the shock treatment was driven by the desire for accumulation – for unregulated access to the exploitation of ecological resources and unlimited extraction of surplus value. This economic deterritorialization was accompanied by political reterritorializations of the military regime. On the molar level, the desire for accumulation drives the disruptive dynamics of debt. On the molecular level, desire is disciplined and reterritorialized in family formations. The deterritorialization of flows of finance capital enforces social reterritorialization, so that gendered inequality is perpetuated. The more land and social spaces are dispossessed, deterritorialized, and rendered to mere markets for international investors, the stronger the rhetorical reterritorialization through nationalist, patriarchal discourses.

Despite geopolitical differences, the alliance of austerity and authoritarianism remains essential for understanding the present exigencies of authoritarian neoliberalism. Due to the continuing economic crisis, Chile was dependent on an “external inflow of capital,” and “Pinochet’s decision in favor of shock treatment and monetarism helped to facilitate better relations with the IMF” (Fischer 2009, 320). This path continued, the IMF granted credit while insisting on further reforms, and Chile negotiated three structural adjustment loans in 1985, 1986, and 1987, implementing “tariff reductions and privatizations” (Fischer 2009, 331). Chile “helped pave the way for the technocratic management of the debt crisis in favor of the interests of

international lenders [...]. The ‘plan chileno’ [...] introduced new programs [...] that were later employed in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil” (Fischer 2009, 331). After the transition to democracy, the Hayekian constitution was still in place under the governance of Sébastian Piñera until 2022, brother of Chicago Boy José Piñera. Debt defines life in Chile: in 2018 the private debt per household was as high as 70 percent of income (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 13).

III. From Molar to Molecular Indebtedness

The “Chilean Road to economic recovery” (Federici 2019, 45) served as a global model for the IMF. Subsequently, the shock treatment hit not only states with authoritarian regimes, but also those that had just overcome such regimes, and had newly elected democratic governments, such as South Africa or Poland in the 1990s (Klein 2008, 95-100; 172-80). The IMF pressured such states in crisis to fulfill structural adjustments that involved “dismantling of the welfare state” (Federici 2019, 2018) and “enclosing the commons” (Harvey 2005, 148).

Politics of public debt are driven by the deterritorializing desire for accumulation (cf. Federici 2019, 18). Under the guidance of the US, austerity policies engaged in neocolonial practices of primitive accumulation: David Harvey conceives this development as the project of a new imperialism, because “[o]ne of the prime functions [...] is to orchestrate devaluations in ways that permit accumulation by dispossession to occur without sparking a general collapse” (Harvey 2005, 150-2).³ Capital is continuously in crisis, caused by its inherent contradictions. In case of overaccumulation, it must expand the fields from which it can derive surplus value. Accumulation through dispossession proceeds through practices such as land-grabbing, but also through organizing labour force as a “latent reserve” (Harvey 2005, 141), a subaltern manifestation of Marx’ industrial reserve army. Their labour force is “reduced to [...] pure labor power, with no guarantees, no protections, ready to be moved from place to place and job to job” (Federici 2019, 18). Capitalism “throws workers out of the system at one point [...]to have them to hand for purposes of accumulation” (Harvey 2005, 141), pursuing a logic of differential exploitation.

This is clearly the case when it comes to neoliberal austerity which promotes “levels of debt incumbency that reduce whole populations, even in the advanced capitalist countries, to debt peonage” (Harvey 2005, 147). Austeritarian accumulation through dispossession therefore relies on relationality and cooperation, rendering people as mere masses of an exploitable,

exchangeable work force. As body economic it feeds on their needs and desire for subsistence and forces them to accept the most precarious work conditions. In the phase of increased economic globalization in the 1990s, financial capital deterritorialized, as did production, which shifted to the global south where cheap labour was available. This development of financial deterritorialization becomes reterritorialization in neocolonial configurations, as global inequality perpetuates. Consequently, the path of authoritarian neoliberalism and austerity that began in Latin-America reduces people to surplus populations who provide latent reserves of labour force, if needed, and who are neglected, exposed to hunger, disease, violence, and death, if not needed. Austerity thus translates as neoliberal necropolitics (cf. Mbembe 2003).⁴

The austerity measures enabled “new enclosures” (Federici 2019, 29) of the commons: in the first phase from 1980 to 1984 “country after country defaulted on interest payments, arrangements were made with the IMF for standby loans in exchange for the infamous IMF conditionalities” (Federici 2019, 39). After resistance against the IMF’s privatization persisted, a new strategy was needed. The second phase, from 1984 onwards, “took the form of a World Bank promoted ‘economic recovery’ and ‘development’ plan” (Federici 2019, 39). This shows how deeply diverse apparatuses of austerity are intertwined, the molar indebtedness of state debt and the molecular indebtedness of private debt. Molar indebtedness leads to a “financialization of reproduction” (Federici 2019, 18), which increases molecular indebtedness: those who depend on social state structures must take out loans to pay for the privatized costs of education, health care, and so forth.

Here the reorganization of social reproduction is crucial. Since the 1980s “a whole ideological campaign has been orchestrated that represents borrowing from banks to provide for one’s reproduction as a form of entrepreneurship” (Federici 2019, 64). This campaign turned the most precarious subjects into targets of microcredits offered by the World Bank. Particularly women in the Global South are interpellated as entrepreneurial subjects. Such entrepreneurial interpellations foster the privatization of responsibility and render solidaristic organizing even more difficult. Moreover, they lead to social practices of shame as women are stigmatized for not being able to pay their loans (Federici 2019, 96-8). Economic debt translates into social debt and moral guilt. These debt practices thus reorganize social relations, influence family formations, and de-collectivize care.

Microcredits are profitable, because they provide direct access to indebted subjects, and “tap the energies of a population of women who in the wake of ‘structural adjustment’ have been able to create new forms of subsistence outside or at the margins of the money economy” (Federici 2019, 68). Microcredits exploit their communal capacities of turning unwaged labour into money. Once again, we see how debt builds on relationality and at the same time disrupts communal organizing. Federici’s analysis hints at Harvey’s observation that accumulation through dispossession does not aim at integrating exploited populations into a proper wage condition, but at keeping them in precarity (cf. Harvey 2005, 139). The subjects made most vulnerable bear most of the burden of debt, “especially low-income women and women of color” (Federici 2019, 20). Debt thus works as differential exploitation, rendering bodies at risk.

Desire does not only point to the gendered dimension of debt as it is associated with sexual orders, gendered economies, and family formations, but also because desire is tied to relationality: neoliberal debt profits from relationality but operates along the maxim of divide and rule. Economies of debt exploit social differences. Moreover, they rely on the unequal distribution of vulnerability. Indebted bodies are embedded in political ontologies of modern societies which epistemically link individuality to property. Yet those not entitled to property “are reduced to improper and propertyless alterity, to fundamental abjectivity” (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, 159). To intervene in this ontology, Athena Athanasίου and Judith Butler propose the concept of double dispossession. In times of the “debtocracy” economic dispossession manifests materially as “violent appropriation of labor and the wearing out of [...] bodies” (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, 11). Ontological dispossession applies to those who do not even come close to embodying the masculine and Euro-centric norms of the liberal owner-subject. Those who are racialized, feminized, or simply considered being poor, are ontologically dispossessed (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, 159). Hence ontological and economic dispossessions mutually support each other, as those being marginalized due to racialized and gendered orders are subject to differential exploitation. Butler and Athanasίου link dispossession to an ethics of vulnerability, assuming a shared ontological vulnerability. It is bound to bodies that are always already in a “mode of dispossession” (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, 95) by being exposed to each other. As “a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (Butler 2004, 21).

Vulnerability is closely connected to desire. As much as Butler's concept of desire differs from Deleuze and Guattari's, it is also defined as relational and embodied force. Desire creates the constitutive social bond that precedes subjectivation, as it always aims outside the desiring subject, it is *ek-static* (Butler 2012, 39). Subjects are depending on each other and bound to each other. Hence due to desire and embodiment, we are bonded by an ontological vulnerability. Still, in its concrete manifestations, vulnerability is unequally distributed (Athanasiou and Butler 2013, 158). It is thus important to differentiate between vulnerability as a mode of radical, relational equality, and the unequal distribution of vulnerability. My suggestion is to analytically distinguish ontological vulnerability on the one hand, and structural vulnerabilizations on the other (Govrin 2022, 68-72).

Considering the double dimension of dispossession, economies of debt benefit from relationality, exploiting the communal care work of women. Still, in its privatizing effects, debt obscures ontological vulnerability and relationality, as in the case of microcredit entrepreneurship. It exploits structural vulnerabilizations by turning the most vulnerabilized subjects into targets of debt, deepening the unequal distribution of vulnerability. To grasp how gendered differences serve for extracting surplus value, a closer look at current forms of molecular indebtedness is insightful.

IV. Debt as Discipline, Debt as Dispossession

To conceive debt in its gendered dimensions, Gago's and Cavallero's reading is revealing:

[G]ender difference operates differently in regards to debt. [...] (1) a particular form of moralization, directed toward women and feminized bodies; (2) a differential of exploitation due to the corresponding relations of subordination; (3) a specific relation between debt and reproductive tasks; (4) the concrete impact of sexist violence, to which debt is connected, and (5) fundamental variation in possibilities 'for the future' involving financial obligations in the case of feminized bodies (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 4).

Pursuing their proposition to inquire into embodiments of debt economies, the focus lies on the disciplinary effects that debt displays, and its enforcement of gender-based violence. Still, their approach mentions desire only marginally, and it seems useful to shed more light on its role to understand economy as relational body economic. To analyze debt in terms of desire

and differential exploitation, a perspective from below is needed which begins with the bodies that are burdened by debt. Discipline entails the exploitation of bodies by ascribing modes of subjectivations according to capital's need, which leads us to debt discipline and family formations. Broadly speaking, in its ethic-economic effects, the "moral grammar of neoliberal debt management" (Ferreira da Silva and Chakravartty 2012, 363) isolates debtors who are burdened with mortgages, but also shames them, when indebtedness is coded in terms of neoliberal self-responsibility. Due to differential exploitation and the discipline of desire, debt enhances "a differentiated moralization over the lives and desires of women and feminized bodies" (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 20).

Debt discipline reterritorializes desire in heterosexual orders and fixed family formations, which actualizes the debt-alliance. For instance, a new housing project in Buenos Aires rebuilt houses in one of the *villas*, the slums in the city's centre, offering loans for the exposed inhabitants to buy one of the newly built houses – based on the assumption that they will not be able to afford to pay the mortgage (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 28-30; Cavallero 2020). This is quite a common procedure of accumulation through dispossession:

A house in poor condition is bought for next to nothing, given some cosmetic improvements, then sold on at an exorbitant price, with the aid of a mortgage package arranged by the seller, to a low-income family looking to realize its dream of home ownership. If the family has difficulty meeting the payments or dealing with the serious maintenance problems [...], then the house is repossessed (Harvey 2005, 152-4).

Such a loan offer for housing feeds on a desire for a future, it is nourished by a "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2010, 94), and directed towards "happy objects" (Ahmed 2010, 38) which offer imaginaries of happiness structured by racialized, gendered, and heterosexual norms. The imaginary of suburban life with a proper house reactivates the ideal of the white, bourgeois family. This appears to be the case in the housing projects in Buenos Aires, as gentrification went along with a heteronormative agenda whereby loans were only offered to heterosexual families so that single mothers, queer people, and *travesti*⁵ were removed from the quarter (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 29). This alliance of neoliberal austerity and neoconservative family values bears a long history (see also Cooper 2017): the family is presented as a safety net that was withdrawn by the demolition of social state structures to privatize the costs of austerity

“under the language of individual responsibility and family indebtedness” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 27).

Their diagnosis affirms Deleuze and Guattari’s thesis on alliance-debt. Credit debt deterritorializes capital. In its social, molecular movements, it reterritorializes desire and binds it back into the heterosexual matrix. Debt deterritorializes the commons, and this dispossession comes along with the reterritorializing reactionary rhetoric of the private home of the patriarchal family. Particularly Catholic and Evangelical organizations praise the nostalgic image of the breadwinner, hence the heteropatriarchal family is displayed as a safe harbour against alienation and precarization caused by globalized austerity. Authoritarian rhetoric itself blames feminism for a rhetorical twist by associating neoliberalism with an alleged “gender ideology,” while pursuing politics of privatization.⁶ For instance, there is a strong call for including “financial education” in the curriculum of schools, while sexual education is defamed as alleged gender ideology (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 29).

Debt discipline exploits reproductive labour in new ways, while deepening structural vulnerabilities. In the era of austerity, women especially are interpellated as debtors, as they hold the reproductive responsibility for their families. Next to microcredit-programs, Gago and Cavallero observe that popular economies offer another source of extraction surplus. In Argentina, loans are not only offered to those receiving a formal wage, but also to those who merely make a living working in popular economies without a fixed wage. Consequently, debt “becomes an apparatus that is increasingly tied to new labor forms, which are largely not waged in the traditional sense” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 9). Simultaneously, since the early 2000s in Argentina, the “financial exploitation of ‘assisted’ populations” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 7) takes place by giving credit with increasing interest rates. Like microcredits, women are addressed as debtors partly because they bear the responsibility for their families. As they play a key role in upholding communal economies, they are targeted because of their capacities of turning unwaged work into money. They are thus exploited as a workforce based on their communal capacities, as consumers as well as debtors. Debt becomes super-exploitation which extracts surplus value from all spheres of reproduction (Gago and Cavallero 2022, 48).

An anti-austerity manifesto of *Ni Una Menos*, the feminist strike movement, states that as “female heads of households, we occupy a central role in the organization and self-

management of networks of cooperation,” yet, “[f]inancial corporations exploit these community economies by charging commissions on benefits and wages and applying exorbitant interest rates on loans, credit cards, and microcredit” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 81-3). This analysis links molar indebtedness to molecular indebtedness, unveiling how state debt sabotages social structures which increases the exploitation of reproductive labour. In this way, the financial sector gains access to areas of reproductive life that were previously excluded from the logic of exploitation; these include infrastructures that were formerly public goods and communal economies that previously only served subsistence purposes (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 10). Hence, gendered dynamics of debt show how reproductive work is used for accumulation though dispossession.

In terms of differential exploitation, it is crucial to consider the concrete bodies that debt is being inscribed in, and how debt deepens their differences by structurally vulnerabilizing them, for instance, the bodies of women skipping their meals to be able to give it to their children, where the monthly mortgage cuts the money for food (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 17); the bodies of those caught in the endless cycles of debt, haunted by the constant stress of paying mortgages, the headache, the rising blood pressure, the insomnia (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 58).

Molar indebtedness multiplies molecular indebtedness and transforms social bonds. The “privatization required by the state’s indebtedness” enhances “forced indebtedness of subaltern sectors,” modifies “the relation between income and debt,” and converts “bonds of mutual aid into means of exploitation and vigilance” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 10). As private and public indebtedness goes along with the demolition of social state structures, this economic violence increases gender-based violence. Austerity policies and its accumulation though debt and dispossession intervene in communal economies and turn them into a battlefield. This economic violence translates into violence against the bodies of those who are perceived as patriarchal possessions of their partners, or that which is perceived as abject and alien, such as the bodies of queer people, trans persons, and *travesti*. *Ni Una Menos* thus names debt as “a form of violence that puts our lives at risk” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 81), affecting, for example, women, being tied to their violent partners due to debt; or *travesti*, queer people and single mothers being excluded from their communities because of gentrification programs.

Rita Segato points out how violence in the form of feminicides literally proceeds as inscription on feminized bodies (Segato 2013), as differential exploitation debt works through powerful inscriptions on bodies that are marked as “other,” while further exploiting their difference. Cavallero and Gago mention the *ollas cocinas*, the collective kitchen that provide alternative economies of care, “where resistance is woven together, where the common body is manufactured as a spell against hunger” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 16). In 2018, Corina de Bonis, a teacher who protested school closures in the periphery of Buenos Aires, was tortured; her torturer carved the words “no more pots” in her skin (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 16). This violent act of enforced inscription exposes the strong reaction against communal feminist organizing. The pots symbolize an alternative to austerity, bringing them to the streets means de-domesticizing care, revolting against the privatizing discipline of debt, and resisting its reactionary reterritorializations.

V. Debt, Desire, Disobedience: from Austerity to Solidarity

The temporalities of debt and desire are deeply intertwined: debt feeds on the desire for a future, be it a safe home, the possibility of education, or simply having means of subsistence. In the meantime, debt incites a foreclosure of the future, because those being in debt will take any work no matter how precarious it is, deprived of the possibility to navigate their future, caught in daily struggles to repay the rents that rise with every delay (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 9). This plays into the hands of reactionary forces who seek to reterritorialize social dynamics in fixed sexual, gendered, national, and cultural identities: debt provides a linkage “between the neoliberal project that financializes ever more areas of life and fascism that today focuses on disciplining indeterminacy in desires, practices, and modes of life” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 19). In times of authoritarian neoliberalism, austerity and credit debt discipline and debilitate the desire for a potential transformation (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 13). Economies of debt reveal the conflictive dynamics between desire as capital’s drive for accumulation and desire as transformative force.

Since 2019 there have been powerful demonstrations in Chile that protest the neoliberal paradigm, a protester’s sign said: *Neoliberalism was born in Chile, Neoliberalism will die in Chile*. Recently, a new constitution is planned to replace the old one under Hayek’s label of authoritarian freedom; the first version was rejected, the second version is being prepared. Maybe this is indeed an indication that the end of the neoliberal era is upon us. Moreover, as the pandemic

uncovered the global crisis of social reproduction, it exposed the ruins of neoliberalism, and cast doubt on austerity. In the meantime, resistance is relentlessly growing.

As has been seen, debt disrupts social relations. Nevertheless, the discipline of debt relies on the desire for recognition. In the same vein, the surplus gained from debt and austerity is based on labour power, which is always already cooperative. As Isabell Lorey writes: “Connectedness with others is turned into economically exploitable relations of exchange” (Lorey 2019, 157). This is shown by loan offers to precarious women that exploit their communal capacities. All in all, even though austerity discourses stress the figure of self-responsible entrepreneur, public debt policies remain dependent on social relationality. Although austerity seeks to prevent solidarity and communal organizing and disguises shared vulnerability, it also provokes situations in which people are strongly depending on each other, allying in the common desire that articulates disobedience. Etymologically, the term of solidarity defined a collective of debtors who decided to share their debt (cf. Brunkhorst 2002, 10). So, debt as hierarchical division into single debtors may even enhance its communal and collective functions by uniting debtors.

According to Butler and Athanasiou the anti-austerity-protests that occupied 2011 Syntagma Square in Athens enhanced an “alternative economy of bodies” (Athanasiou and Butler 2013, 176) and communal forms of organizing. And in midst of the health crises caused by austerity, a network of solidarity hospitals and pharmacies emerged offering healthcare for every body (Chatzimichali 2020). The answer to austerity lies in body economics of care and solidarity. Since the 1980s the *ollas communes* provide alternative economies of care against the financialization of reproductive labour (cf. Federici 2019, 108). These different ways of doing economy evolve around de-privatized care, providing a body economic that aims at the well-being of every body instead of private profit. In another strand, the issue of the household and housing was addressed by the anti-austerity movement that went against the dispossession of homes, such as *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* in Spain. In the midst of the housing crisis in 2009, the *PAH* movement reappropriated the houses which had been dispossessed by creditors.

In the context of Villa 31 in Buenos Aires, the feminist strike movement *Ni Una Menos* started a neighbourhood assembly, including communal “soup kitchens, political parties, bachilleratos

populares, migrant collectives, collectives of sexual dissidents, feminist organizations, and unions,” thus “weaving alliances” of transversality to share the different experience and build bonds of solidarity (Cavallero 2020, 639). These anti-gentrification struggles are embedded in a larger approach to address the economic violence of austerity on manifold levels, be it housing, care work, or gender-based violence, “the Ni Una Menos Collective, along with other organizations, coordinated an action in June 2017 at the doors of the Central Bank of the Argentine Republic with the call, ‘We Want Ourselves Alive, Free, and Debt Free!’ [...]” (Cavallero 2020, 637).

Another example are debtor collectives of precarious women that create a communal fund, which is used to repay the loans of single members, such as the practice of *pasanukas* (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 56-9). Such a form of disobedience goes against the asymmetrical debtor-creditor-relationship. It retranslates debt into support and solidarity as it is de-privatized in communal funds. This collectivized debt comes close to Graeber’s description of debt as social bond and egalitarian practice in communal economies. In this regard, debt is not the main target, it is capitalist debt management that is at the centre of criticism. Or, to take up the words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney: “Credit is a means of privatization and debt a means of socialisation. [D]ebt is social and credit is asocial. Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way” (Harney and Moten 2013, 61). In this view, debt can point to new directions, away from the exploitative body economic of credit and capital.

Conclusion

If debt exploits extensively precarious women, “it is also within the feminist movement that new forms of disobedience to the power of debt are being articulated” (Saidel 2023, 31). *Ni Una Menos* protests the economic violence that arises out of austerity measures and private indebtedness, and highlights the importance of care work. “By inverting the hierarchy of recognition of unpaid labor, it also inverts the burden of debt. The debt belongs to the state, the bosses, and the patriarchs for having benefitted from this historically free and compulsory labor” (Cavallero and Gago 2021, 47). This reversal of debt describes the gendered dimensions of austerity in a nutshell. Along with this criticism, this movement does not only collectivize debt, it also lays bare how bodies are bound to each other and create communal economies of care. As prefigurative politics they reveal a horizon for future global societies beyond the

burden of neoliberal debt, articulating a transformative desire for an open future. And we need this change, we owe it to us.

Notes

- 1] In ancient Greece *oikos* defined the household, and the administration of land that works through gendered and sexual roles (cf. Foucault 1990, 150-2).
- 2] On authoritarian freedom see Brown 2018.
- 3] Following Rosa Luxemburg Harvey suggests shifting from Marx' concept of primitive accumulation to accumulation through dispossession, since it describes an ongoing process (Harvey 2005, 144).
- 4] Another reading of authoritarian neoliberalism and its necropolitics is offered by Vladimir Safatle (Safatle 2020). The disruptive force of neoliberal austerity is far from being exceptional, it rather endorses capitalistic cycles of creation and destruction (Lauretis 2010, 93-5).
- 5] The term *travesti* does not translate to transvestite, "in Argentina, travesti continues to be used as a form of self-identification and collective mobilization" (Gago 2020, VII-IX).
- 6] On "gender ideology" see Kuhar and Patternotte 2017.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, 29-52. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Athanasίου, Athena, and Judith Butler. 2013. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2010. "Cruel Optimism." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 93-118. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2018. "Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies'." In *Authoritarianism: three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, edited by Wendy Brown, Peter Gordon and Max Pensky, 7-45. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Brunkhorst, Hauke. 2002. *Solidarität. Von der Bürgerfreundschaft zur globalen Rechtsgenossenschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
- . 2012. *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cavallero, Luci, and Verónica Gago. 2021. *A Feminist Reading of Debt*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cavallero, Lucía. 2020. "From Finance to Bodies: We Want Ourselves Alive, Free, and Debt Free!" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119 (3): 637-46.
- Chatzimichali, Elena. 2020. "'Lasst uns die Solidarität ansteckend machen'. Die griechische Solidaritätsbewegung im Gesundheitswesen." *WSI-Mitteilungen*, 378-81.
- Cooper, Melinda. 2017. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1983. *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Edwards, Sebastian, and Leonidas Montes. 2020. "Milton Friedman in Chile: Shock Therapy, Economic Freedom, and Exchange Rates." *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 42 (1): 105-33.
- Federici, Silvia. 2019. *Re-enchanting the World Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise, and Paula Chakravartty. 2012. "Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial

- Logic of Global Capitalism – An Introduction.” *American Quarterly* 64 (3): 361-85.
- Fischer, Karin. 2009. “The Influence of Neoliberals in Chile before, during, and after Pinochet.” In: *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought* edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, 305-47. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1990. *The Use of Pleasure. History of Sexuality*. Vol. II. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gago, Verónica. 2020. *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*. London: Verso.
- Gago, Verónica, and Luci Cavallero. 2022. *La casa como laboratorio Finanzas, vivienda y trabajo esencial*. Buenos Aires: tinta limón.
- Govrin, Jule. 2022. *Politische Körper. Von Sorge und Solidarität*. Berlin: Matthes und Seitz.
- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York: Melville House Publishing.
- Harney, Stephano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions.
- Harvey, David. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2005. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, Naomi. 2008. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. London: Penguin.
- Kuhar, Roman, and David Patternotte. 2017. “Gender ideology” in movement: Introduction.” In *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Patternotte, 1-23. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. 2010. *Freud’s Drive. Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2011. *The Making of the Indebted Man. An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Amsterdam: Semiotext(e).
- Lorey, Isabell. 2019. “Preserving Precariousness, Queering Debt.” *Recerca. Revista de Pensament i Anàlisi* 24 (1): 155-67.
- Marchart, Oliver. 2013. *Die Prekarisierungsgesellschaft. Prekäre Proteste. Politik und Ökonomie im Zeichen der Prekarisierung*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *On the Genealogy of Morals. Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.
- O’Donnell, Guillermo. 1973. *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism Studies in South American Politics*. Berkeley: Regents of the University of California.
- Safatle, Vladimir. 2020. “Beyond the Necropolitics Principle: Suicidal State and Authoritarian Neoliberalism.” *Crisis and Critique* 7 (3): 362-76.
- Saidel, Matías. 2023. *Neoliberalism Reloaded Authoritarian Governmentality and the Rise of the Radical Right*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.
- Schuster, Aaron. 2016. *The Trouble with Pleasure. Deleuze And Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: MIT.
- Segato, Rita. 2013. *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.
- Sitglitz, Jopseh. 2002. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Stuckler, David, and Sanjay Basu. 2013. *Body Economic. Why Austerity Kills. Recessions. Budget Battles, and the Politics of Life and Death*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taylor, Diana. 2001. “Making a Spectacle: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 3 (2): 97-110.
- Tooze, Adam. 2018. *Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crisis Changed the World*. London: Alan Lane.
- Vogl, Joseph. 2017. *The Ascendancy of Finance*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Zambrana, Rocio. 2021. *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Biography

Jule Govrin is a philosopher, their research is situated at the intersection of political theory, social philosophy, feminist philosophy, aesthetics, and feminist critique of economy. Their current work is on the political dimension of bodies and embodiment, reading economy as body economic and inquiring feminist protests, practices of care and solidarity, and communal economies in light of *radical, relational equality* and a *universalism from below*. They published, among others; *Begehren und Ökonomie. Eine sozialphilosophische Studie* (de Gruyter 2020) on the entanglements of desire and economy, and *Politische Körper. Über Sorge und Solidarität* (Matthes & Seitz 2022) on economy, embodiment, and equality in times of the pandemic.