



NEOLIBERALISM'S  
DEMONS

ON THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY  
OF LATE CAPITAL

ADAM KOTSKO

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## THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF LATE CAPITAL

Neoliberalism loves to hide. On the increasingly frequent but still rare occasions when the term appears in the mainstream media, it is always in the context of an introductory treatment.<sup>1</sup> Strangely, one can never assume that the educated public is already acquainted with the force that has deeply shaped public policy and economic outcomes for a generation or more in the major Western countries and much of the developing world. For its advocates, as for those shaped by the “common sense” of mainstream political discussion, it is not a particular ideology nor even an ideology at all. It is simply the way things are, the set of “realistic” policies that “work.” This very invisibility is a measure of its power, and the fact that the word can now be uttered in public is a sign that its planetary sway is growing less secure.

The term itself is slippery. It is first of all a periodizing concept that names the political-economic model that grew out of the crisis of the post-war settlement known as Fordism; hence it is in principle purely descriptive. At the same time it is a conceptual weapon for left-wing critics who take aim at all that is oppressive and alienating in our present world. So on the one hand, one might observe, seemingly neutrally, that whereas Fordism favored high taxation to limit inequality, energetic regulation of industry to make sure it serves social goals, strong labor unions that help workers claim

their fair share, and careful control of international trade to protect domestic industry, neoliberalism has tended to pursue the reverse in all these areas: reducing taxes to increase the capital available for investment, deregulation to subject firms to market discipline rather than bureaucratic control, flexible labor markets that maximize efficiency and profitability, and free trade that breaks down arbitrary national boundaries to prosperity. Yet even though I have attempted to present it in positive terms that neoliberals themselves would accept, the very designation of the latter agenda as “neoliberal” implies a negative judgment of those developments.

This halo of negativity results partly from the fact that *neoliberal* is almost never used as a term of self-designation—though here, as with seemingly every generalization about neoliberalism, there are exceptions. Most notably, one of the movement’s greatest theorists and propagandists, Milton Friedman, used the term in something like its contemporary sense in his 1951 essay “Neo-Liberalism and Its Prospects.”<sup>2</sup> In this short text Friedman laments that in his time “legislation is still largely dominated by the trend of opinion toward collectivism” (3) and that even where the right manages an electoral victory, its leaders are still “infected by the intellectual air they breathe” (4). Yet the collectivist faith has encountered undeniable obstacles, and Friedman is confident that a new trend in public opinion is beginning to develop, one that makes room for a return to the tenets of classical nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* liberalism but without that movement’s naive antistatism. What Friedman describes in this lecture is identifiable as the contemporary neoliberal agenda, in which the state actively cultivates and maintains the conditions necessary for vigorous market competition, trusting in the price mechanism to deliver more efficient outcomes than direct state planning ever could. Hence his use of the term *neo-liberalism*: it is not a question of simply “returning” to traditional *laissez-faire* by getting the state out of the way, but of using state policy as a means to actively create a *new* version of classical liberalism.

Much in Friedman’s text appears prophetic in retrospect, but one detail in particular is simply uncanny. In an offhand remark, he notes that “some twenty years or more may elapse between a change in the underlying current of opinion and the resultant alteration in public policy” (3). Right on schedule, one of the signal events in the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism

happened twenty years after Friedman wrote his article: Nixon's decision in 1971 to go off the gold standard, which broke with the Bretton Woods settlement that had governed international finance throughout the postwar era and inadvertently cleared the space for the fluctuating exchange rates that proved so central to the rise of contemporary finance capitalism. Only two years later, the oil crisis ushered in the period of "stagflation," a combination of slow economic growth and high inflation that should not have been possible in terms of the regnant Keynesian economics of the time and that proved unresponsive to the standard mix of policies Keynesianism prescribed.

The moment for a new economic model had arrived, and the theorists and propagandists of neoliberalism—the group that Philip Mirowski calls the Neoliberal Thought Collective—were ready to seize the opportunity.<sup>3</sup> And once they gained ascendancy, they set up a self-reinforcing system that not only persisted but expanded for decades. Even the Global Financial Crisis, far from toppling the neoliberal order, strengthened its stranglehold on the terms of debate, despite the fact that no major economist had predicted it and most neoliberal policy prescriptions actually worsened the economic slump they were meant to solve. Admittedly, this amazing prescience and persistence is difficult to square with the tenets of neoliberal theory, which in popular presentations appears to amount to a simplistic libertarianism that would seem more at home in a college dorm room than in the most prestigious economics departments in the world. But in another turn of the screw, the neoliberal order has given rise to financial engineering of mind-boggling complexity, deploying the expertise of PhD physicists and massive computing power to gain a competitive edge in the market.

Thus neoliberalism is both a descriptive and a polemical term to describe an ideology whose adherents mostly refuse to admit that it exists, which is at once stunningly foresighted and vulnerable to unpredictable crises and which was masterfully implemented by Machiavellian geniuses who often appear to be as intellectually sophisticated as a teenager who has just discovered Ayn Rand. Clearly, we are dealing with a strange phenomenon, and the academic literature surrounding neoliberalism reflects the contradictions in its elusive object. While the basic content of neoliberalism—both its ideological agenda and the results that follow from it—is not subject to serious dispute, no settled agreement exists on how to articulate those features into a

coherent whole. To illustrate my point, I will briefly present a few of the most influential approaches to this question.

David Harvey's strategy, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, is to put forward the concrete results as the key to interpreting neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> From Harvey's Marxist perspective, neoliberalism is the latest front in the class struggle, undoing the postwar gains of the working class through the formation and enrichment of a new capitalist class and the immiseration of workers. Although Harvey does draw attention to the fact that neoliberalism has "become hegemonic as a mode of discourse" and has been thoroughly "incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world,"<sup>5</sup> he ultimately dismisses the policy agenda as incoherent and the ideology as essentially irrelevant. Indeed, it is only the class element that is definitive of neoliberalism for Harvey, so that China—which is far from embracing the Washington Consensus on an ideological or policy level, as shown by the fact that it still promulgates communist-style five-year plans that imply a level of direct state planning completely incompatible with neoliberalism—can appear as an exemplar of neoliberalism due solely to the emergence of a new capitalist class in recent decades.<sup>6</sup> Yet if neoliberalism is simply the bourgeoisie's revenge, then how can Harvey account for the fact that it is precisely a new capitalist class that is created?<sup>7</sup> And how can he find a place for neoliberal thinkers like Friedman, those strange "organic intellectuals" who preexisted, and contributed to the creation of, the very class that their ideas came to serve?

It is this group that Mirowski highlights with his notion of the Neoliberal Thought Collective. One could walk away from Harvey's account viewing the major figures of neoliberalism as dispensable figureheads for impersonal political and economic forces. By contrast, the most compact possible summary of Mirowski's book would be: "It's people! Neoliberalism is made out of people!" In this reading there was nothing inevitable about neoliberalism's rise, which depended on the vision and organization of particular nameable individuals. For Mirowski, the apparent incoherence in neoliberal ideology and policy making is the product of the political strategy of the Neoliberal Thought Collective, which feeds the general public a simplified version of neoliberal dogma, providing its agenda with a veneer of popular legitimacy, while a more flexible and realistic esoteric doctrine guides the actual policy

implementation. In other words, the discursive elements that Harvey tends to dismiss are an integral part of neoliberalism's initial political success and its ongoing self-reproduction.

For Wendy Brown, by contrast, the results that Harvey and Mirowski attribute to a political struggle are precisely the death of politics.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Hannah Arendt's articulation of Aristotle's distinction between the political and the economic realms, Brown portrays neoliberalism as an attempt to extinguish the political—here represented by the liberal democratic tradition of popular sovereignty and self-rule—and consign humanity to a purely economic existence. In the end Brown calls us to take up a strange kind of metapolitical struggle against the economic enemy, in defense of politics as such. Meanwhile, Jodi Dean, who agrees that neoliberalism has a depoliticizing tendency, argues that this depoliticization actually depends on the notion of democracy and that appeals to democracy against neoliberalism are therefore doomed in advance.<sup>9</sup>

As ever, the Protean slipperiness of neoliberalism seems to defy analysis. Is neoliberal ideology a smokescreen for a political agenda, or is it integral to the whole? Is neoliberalism actually properly political at all, or does it instead spell the death of politics? Does neoliberalism undermine democracy, or does it rely on it for its own legitimation? What exactly are we dealing with here?

This situation is very strange. As I have already noted, for academic commentators, in stark contrast to the sometimes willful ignorance found in mainstream debate, the attributes and effects of neoliberalism appear more or less self-evident; that is to say, there should seemingly be no dispute about what neoliberalism is. Yet in what almost amounts to a parody of the atomistic individualism of our contemporary order, there sometimes seem to be as many concepts of neoliberalism as there are commentators. There is, however, a broad consensus on which theoretical tools are most helpful in this regard, insofar as the dominant perspectives for dealing with neoliberalism are Marxism (an obvious fit for a critique of contemporary capitalism) and Foucauldianism (equally obvious in light of Foucault's shockingly prescient account of the formative stages of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*).<sup>10</sup> Other approaches, such as psychoanalysis,<sup>11</sup> have made themselves felt in this debate, but Marxism and Foucauldianism remain the key points of reference in essentially every major treatment of neoliberalism.<sup>12</sup>

The present study is on one level no exception to this trend, insofar as I draw extensively on works from both traditions. Yet I will largely sidestep the Marx-Foucault debate by using a different interpretive framework as my starting point: namely, political theology. This move is admittedly counter-intuitive on two levels. First, the meaning of political theology is arguably as contested as that of neoliberalism, if not more so; thus, I risk attempting to use the unknown to clarify the unknown. Second, within the literature itself, engagement with neoliberalism has often been taken to entail a rejection or subordination of the concerns most often associated with political theology.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, I will not be arbitrarily asserting my own vision of political theology and then applying it to neoliberalism, nor will I be castigating previous analysts of neoliberalism for the supposed mistake of neglecting political theology. In point of fact, the meaning of political theology is unclear. This is not because people are unaccountably failing to grasp it but because from its very inception, the concept of political theology is entangled with a political agenda that is presented in an indirect and partially concealed manner—neoliberalism is not the only thing that loves to hide. This intentionally misleading rhetorical strategy has led to durable blind spots and deadlocks within the field of political theology itself, which have in turn created a situation in which diagnosticians of neoliberalism understandably do not see political theology as a suitable tool for their endeavors.

My goal in staging this largely missed encounter, then, is not only to demonstrate what political theology has to offer to the study of neoliberalism. I am equally concerned to develop a new and more capacious concept of political theology. My wager is that the encounter between political theology and neoliberalism—precisely because it is counterintuitive and seemingly unnatural—will provide a uniquely productive path toward a renewed political theology. To put it differently, if I want to use political theology as a tool to get at neoliberalism, I will need to rebuild and rearticulate the concept of political theology as I go. It is less a question of applying a method to an object than of taking up a particular object in order to force changes in the method.

This chapter will lay the groundwork for this mutual illumination of political theology and neoliberalism. After giving an overview of political theology as it is generally understood in contemporary academic debates, I

will provide a basic account of how this relatively narrow vision of political theology (and the themes taken to be most directly related to it) have fared in discussions of neoliberalism. I will then give a counterreading of Schmitt's foundational work *Political Theology*, demonstrating that the very text that gives rise to that constricted view also plants the seeds for a more flexible approach to political theology. Finally, I will sketch out an initial reading of neoliberalism not only as a possible object for political theology, but as an exemplary one.

### *Staging a Missed Encounter*

Hearing the term political theology for the first time, one would likely be drawn to two possible hypotheses about its meaning. On the one hand, one might assume that political theology means politically engaged theology. Depending on one's perspective, sympathetic examples may spring to mind, such as the theology of Martin Luther King Jr., or Latin American liberation theology, or perhaps more reactionary options like the theology of the US religious right. In either case it would be a question of carrying theologically based normative claims into the political realm. On the other hand, political theology may evoke phenomena of quasi-religious fervor directed at political figures and movements, such as a "personality cult" around a charismatic leader. Thus, political theology could refer either to religiously informed political action or to practices that seem to treat politics as a religion.

Both of these definitions are attested in the literature. For instance, Jacob Taubes's lecture course *The Political Theology of Paul* presents the Apostle as a theologically motivated rebel against Roman hegemony. Taubes claims that "the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a *political* declaration of war on the Caesar," and that "Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the emperor."<sup>14</sup> The latter cult would in turn represent a political theology of the inverse variety.

With these two possible meanings in mind, we could say that political theology, as an academic discipline, is concerned with all crossings between the political and the theological realms, in either direction. The guiding assumption of political theology as a research program is that such crossings are not rare or remarkable, but in fact happen all the time—including in the ostensibly secular modern world. The central methodological credo is encap-

sulated in this frequently quoted passage from Schmitt's *Political Theology*: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts."<sup>15</sup>

Though more recent studies have broadened their purview, most investigations in the realm of political theology have centered on the key examples given here by Schmitt: the parallel between God and the earthly ruler and the Christian lineage of modern political institutions. Both are at work, for instance, in Kantorowicz's classic *The King's Two Bodies*. Most of Kantorowicz's study is taken up with the ways in which medieval political theorists borrowed concepts from Christology to begin thinking of monarchy as an institution that exceeds the individual who happens to be king at any given time. Just as Christ has a divine nature that exists apart from the particular human form he took up in the Incarnation, the medieval theorists reasoned, so too does the king have a royal body that survives the death of his mortal human body. But the ultimate goal of the argument is to point out how these hybrid political-theological concepts unexpectedly informed the concept of "fictitious personhood," which is central to modern legal theory and practice.

In the context of modern secularism, premised as it is on the separation of the political and religious realms, the claims of political theology can appear scandalous. Though Schmitt and Kantorowicz were both decidedly right-wing thinkers, this element of scandal has proven durably appealing to those on the left—particularly Marxists, for whom the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique. Walter Benjamin was a pioneer here, citing Schmitt's *Political Theology* early on and going on to plan a (sadly unrealized) research project called "Capitalism as Religion."<sup>16</sup> By contrast, when liberal commentators attend to the claims of political theology, they tend to view the persistence of theological elements in modernity as a problem to be diagnosed and solved. The later work of Jacques Derrida, which aimed to defend the "perfectible" heritage of the Enlightenment, is a case in point. In response to John Caputo's *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, which depicted Derrida as a quasi Christian, scholars such as Michael Naas and Martin Hägglund

have argued that Derrida's investigations of theology always aim at continuing the work of secularization.<sup>17</sup> In this Derrida is typical of the so-called religious turn in continental philosophy, which represented an attempt to articulate a distinctive yet inclusive cultural heritage for the European Union.

Political theology rarely seemed more relevant than in the early 2000s, when the Bush administration claimed sovereign emergency powers that seemed to come straight out of Schmitt. *Political Theology* begins with the lapidary claim, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,"<sup>18</sup> which George W. Bush (presumably unwittingly) paraphrased in his inimitable style when he proclaimed, "I'm the decider." The state of exception inaugurated by 9/11 served as justification for a range of increasingly destructive decisions—to declare people enemies without due process, to torture and kill with impunity, to start an unrelated war in Iraq, even to reshape the fates of entire countries and regions. When combined with the officially denied and yet unmistakable atmosphere of a religious war between Islam and the Christian West, the conventional program of political theology appeared to be exactly the right theoretical tool for that historical moment. This was above all the case for the work of Giorgio Agamben, whose theory of the constitutive relationship between sovereign power and the production of readily victimizable "bare life" seemed prophetic of the worst excesses of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.<sup>19</sup>

Early in Bush's second term, however, the aura of invincibility had begun to fade. Even as Bush proved unable or unwilling to cope with the domestic emergency of Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq War descended into the familiar quagmire from which the United States still has yet to disentangle itself. No longer could Bush claim to be the sovereign "decider" reshaping the world according to his will, and hence the tools of political theology came to seem, at the very least, less central to grasping our contemporary predicament. Neoliberalism gradually came to take the place of the sovereign exception in the politically engaged humanities, most urgently in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis.

Different thinkers characterized this shift in attention in different ways. Most strident and radical were Hardt and Negri, who took the failure of the Bush project as a vindication of their theory of the emerging global order they called Empire. In *Commonwealth*, the concluding volume of their influ-

ential trilogy, they devote a substantial section to a “Brief History of a Failed Coup d’État.”<sup>20</sup> From their perspective, the Bush Doctrine represented not a permanent shift in global relations but an illegitimate attempt to seize power from the emergent configuration of Empire. While acknowledging Bush’s destructiveness, they nonetheless chide those who bought into the neoconservative fantasy that the United States could impose its will on the world through military force. This attempted “coup” against the global order could not but fail, and in short order it did: “It took only a few years . . . for these ghostly figures to collapse in a lifeless heap. The financial and economic crisis of the early twenty-first century delivered the final blow to U.S. imperialist glory. By the end of the decade there was general recognition of the military, political, and economic failures of unilateralism.”<sup>21</sup> This discussion of the Bush Doctrine could be taken as a culmination of the critique of political theology with which *Commonwealth* begins. Targeting Agamben specifically, Hardt and Negri suggest that exponents of political theology essentially buy into the state’s own fantasy of itself, causing them to ignore the true operations of power. When political theory operates at this level, “what is eclipsed or mortified . . . is the daily functioning of constitutional, legal processes and the constant pressure of profit and prosperity. In effect, the bright flashes of extreme events and cases blind many to the quotidian and enduring structures of power.”<sup>22</sup> In short, they claim, “We need to stop confusing politics with theology.”<sup>23</sup>

In this context, Agamben’s next major work was an ambiguous intervention. Originally published in 2007, *The Kingdom and the Glory* represented a decisive turn toward economic concerns.<sup>24</sup> If Hardt and Negri were to accuse him of “confusing politics with theology,” this massive tome could be read as a preemptive rejoinder to the effect that we not only need to confuse politics with theology, but we need to confuse economics with theology as well. Although he never explicitly mentions neoliberalism in this text (or in any other published work to my knowledge), Agamben is clearly concerned to document the lineage of the indirect governance via economic means that is characteristic of our neoliberal era.<sup>25</sup> What is less clear is the relationship between the political theology he had advanced in earlier works and the economic theology he is laying out here. Indeed, he simply juxtaposes them as two distinct paradigms of governance without elaborating their relationship

(is one a subset of the other? do they share a common root?), and in a move that I will discuss at length in the next chapter, he ultimately turns away from economic theology altogether in favor of an investigation of the role of “glory” in political theology.

Other commentators show a similar ambivalence. Though David Harvey does not refer explicitly to political theology, his treatment of the themes conventionally associated with it—both the state in general and the Bush-style neoconservative vision of the state in particular—is illustrative. On the one hand, he views the role of the state under neoliberalism as fundamentally incoherent and unsustainable, insofar as it must both guarantee the existence of markets and avoid illegitimately intervening in them. In some cases the way he characterizes this dilemma seems to echo a one-sided libertarianism more than a distinctively neoliberal position, above all in occasional passing remarks where he treats financial bailouts as an obvious contradiction to neoliberal theory.<sup>26</sup> Under a hypothetically pure *laissez-faire* regime, bailouts would indeed be off-limits, but as Friedman had pointed out already in 1951, a simple return to that model is neither possible nor desirable. In reality, a generalized bailout of all major players—one that neither picks winners nor asserts direct government control over any of the individual firms—is the only possible response to a failure in the all-important financial sector, which serves as the market of markets under neoliberalism. Far from a contradiction, a financial sector bailout is precisely the duty of the neoliberal state as ultimate guarantor of market structures, which helps to explain the fact that every neoliberal regime has resorted to such tactics in the face of financial crises. (And in a nice neoliberal twist, the US Treasury actually turned a modest profit on its bailout funds.)

On the other hand, Harvey presents neoconservatism—by which he means any kind of assertive nationalism, not only Bush’s variation on the theme—as a kind of necessary supplement to neoliberalism. While neoliberalism requires a strong state, its thoroughgoing individualism undercuts any traditional rationale for why the state deserves our loyalty and obedience. Nationalism, though distasteful from the cosmopolitan neoliberal perspective, stands in the gap by providing a point of identification for citizens that would otherwise be lacking, and therefore Harvey can claim that “the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive.”<sup>27</sup> Here we gain

greater clarity about how the two logics (here termed neoconservatism and neoliberalism rather than political theology and economic theology) are related in practice, but on the conceptual level they are still juxtaposed as two distinct entities.

Coming at the relationship between the two paradigms from a different angle, several commentators have followed Agamben in linking neoliberalism to theology in general. Both Joshua Ramey and Joseph Vogl, for example, characterize neoliberal theory as a kind of contemporary theodicy, justifying the ways of the economy to man.<sup>28</sup> This connection has firm historical grounding: Agamben provides some evidence for an explicit genealogical link between traditional concepts of theodicy or divine providence and modern economics in the appendix to *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and Mark C. Taylor had already elaborated a much more detailed and rigorous genealogy in his 2004 work *Confidence Games*.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, some connections between neoliberalism and theology are more metaphorical or impressionistic, as when Wendy Brown claims that neoliberalism demands “sacrifice”: “As we are enjoined to sacrifice to the economy as the supreme power and to sacrifice for ‘recovery’ or balanced budgets, neoliberal austerity politics draws on both the religious and secular, political meanings of the term.”<sup>30</sup> Yet if this is a theology, for Brown it cannot be a *political* theology, because even here the economic (austerity measures) has fully displaced the political (warfare): “as economic metrics have saturated the state and the national purpose, the neoliberal citizen need not stoically risk death on the battlefield, only bear up uncomplainingly in the face of unemployment, underemployment, or employment unto death.”<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, this theological element, just like the neoconservative reaction in Harvey’s account, cannot be regarded as an intrinsic part of neoliberalism. Rather, it is “a supplement, something outside of its terms, yet essential to its operation.”<sup>32</sup>

Again and again, the themes that clearly fall within the ambit of political theology—the state, its sovereign authority, the quasi-religious fervor excited by nationalistic identification, the demand for sacrifice—keep appearing, but always as a subordinate element, an unaccountable yet somehow necessary holdover, even as a surprise. It is somehow shocking, for example, that the neoliberal state continues to exercise emergency powers in an era when the

state is supposedly receding, and the endurance of neoconservative nationalism is also a puzzle that must be explained (or explained away as a purely contingent fit of reactionary willfulness, as in Hardt and Negri).<sup>33</sup>

Yet the intimate connection between the two realms is hiding in plain sight, namely, in the Bush administration's attempt to impose neoliberalism on Iraq. This episode opens Harvey's study, and Brown devotes a lengthy section to it, memorably entitled "Best Practices in Twenty-First-Century Iraqi Agriculture." Here the retrograde avatars of neoconservatism, the hapless advocates of the outmoded vision of state sovereignty, are rushing to implement an extreme vision of the very neoliberalism that is supposedly superseding them. Once we see this connection, countless other details of the Bush administration fall into place: its reliance on private military subcontractors (making the Iraq War arguably the first fully neoliberal war in human history), its market-based Medicare prescription-drug benefit, its thwarted attempt to privatize Social Security. In many respects, then, the Bush era continued the durable alliance between neoliberals and neoconservatives that had been so crucial to the rise of the neoliberal order under Reagan,<sup>34</sup> while his use of sovereign emergency powers to export neoliberalism abroad echoes previous events like Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup, which led to a campaign of torture and "disappearances" in the service of brutally imposing a neoliberal program on Chile. More generally, every neoliberal regime has witnessed the expansion of police powers and surveillance—and in the United States in particular, this has led to a vast intensification of the carceral state, implemented in part through innovations in the private prison industry. Far from being simply juxtaposed, the supposedly separate paradigms—whether we prefer to call them political theology and theological economy or neoconservatism and neoliberalism—are deeply intertwined, in a way that cannot be explained in terms of anachronistic holdovers or extrinsic supplements.

### *Mapping the Blind Spots*

The fact that Harvey and Brown both call attention to the Iraq example without drawing the full consequences is more than a coincidence. If we take them as exemplary of Marxist and Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism, respectively, this correspondence could serve to demonstrate that the same

features that render Marxism and Foucauldianism such obviously appropriate tools for analyzing neoliberalism also produce durable blind spots.

Broadly speaking, both theories, like their neoliberal object, deemphasize the autonomy and agency of the state. In traditional Marxism the state is not an autonomous power but merely a mechanism for intermediating the class struggle, hence part of the epiphenomenal “superstructure.” Foucauldianism is much more concerned to integrate “knowledges” with the concrete practices of power, yet the signature gesture of Foucault’s theory of power is “beheading the king,” which is to say, displacing the pretensions of the sovereign state in favor of the fine-grained mechanisms of biopower. Hence Brown is able to do more than Harvey with the way neoliberal theory shapes the practice of everyday life, but neither provides an account of the state as integral to the neoliberal order. This is not to say that Marxists have not developed more robust accounts of the role of ideology and the state nor that Foucauldians have not challenged the apparently stark divide between sovereignty and biopolitics. When they take up neoliberalism, however, there seems to be little reason to resist the inertia of the antistatist tendencies in their respective theories. Theory and object seem like a perfect fit.

The blind spots of conventional political theology are, if anything, exactly the inverse. Although political theology shares Foucault’s attention to theory or ideology, it strongly emphasizes the necessity and autonomy of the state. More than that, beginning with Schmitt, it has tended to assert the importance of the state over against the economic realm in specific. Even where his critics have rejected the outsized role Schmitt grants to the political, the qualitative distinction between the political and the economic has remained seemingly axiomatic. Thus, while political theology overcomes one of the founding binaries of secular modernity—that between the political and the religious—it relies heavily on the equally central binary of the political and the economic. Indeed, within the field of political theology, the dichotomy between the two realms is arguably more stark than in either Marxism or Foucauldianism.

Taking neoliberalism as an object for political theology will require us to break down that axiomatic binary, which is the task of the following chapter. Here I am concerned with a necessary preliminary step: to demonstrate that such a break with convention can nonetheless be seen as a develop-

ment within the project of political theology. In fact, I believe that the same Schmitt who bequeathed the sharp political/economic dichotomy to political theology also provides us with resources for undermining it.

Above, I distinguish three senses of political theology: theologically informed political action, treating politics in quasi-religious ways, and the general study of such transfers between the political and theological realms. Schmitt's *Political Theology* is in some sense all three at once, particularly when read in conjunction with *The Concept of the Political*. There he defines the political as the realm where decisions are made about who is a friend and who is an enemy, and the state as whatever entity has the recognized authority to make such a decision. While the distinction of friend and enemy is certainly related to other binaries such as good and evil or beautiful and ugly, what distinguishes the political from other realms of life is that it "denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation."<sup>35</sup> The most extreme expression of this intensity of the political is the declaration of war "in order to preserve one's form of existence."<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the political deals with things worth killing and dying for. This alone indicates that the political is the most important realm of human existence. It is also the most universal, because no merely particular pursuit can justify war—least of all economic motivations: "To demand seriously of human beings that they kill others or be prepared to die themselves so that trade and industry may flourish for the survivors or that the purchasing power of grandchildren may grow is sinister and crazy."<sup>37</sup> As the most serious and irreversible action that can be taken, war must stem from "an existential threat to one's way of life" as a whole.<sup>38</sup> Yet there is a sense in which the political is deeply particularistic, insofar as no one but the group in question can decide on the existence of such a threat, and no principle from outside the sphere of the political can justify its decision to go to war: "For as long as a people exists in the political sphere, this people must, even if only in the most extreme case—and whether this point has been reached has to be decided by it—determine by itself the distinction of friend and enemy. . . . The justification of war does not reside in its being fought for ideals or norms of justice, but in its being fought against a real enemy."<sup>39</sup> And in the last analysis, the political authority—commonly called the state, though other entities that we might recognize as religious or class-based could serve in this capacity—is

that person or entity that has the recognized authority to make that determination and demand of members of the community that they kill and die.

It is in this context that we must understand the famous first line of *Political Theology*: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”<sup>40</sup> That is to say, whoever can decide whether a situation demands that the usual legal norms be put aside and exceptional action be taken is the sovereign authority in a particular political community. An exceptional circumstance could include a natural disaster or even an economic crisis, but it is clear that the exemplary sovereign decision is the decision to go to war—and so the sovereign is by definition the head of state. The sovereign need not make declarations of war or emergency in order to remain sovereign, but Schmitt emphasizes those exceptional situations because of his conviction that the exception is particularly revelatory. In *Concept of the Political*, for instance, while speaking of the fact that the existence of a political situation does not necessarily entail war, which is an exceptional last resort, Schmitt claims, “That the extreme case appears to be an exception does not negate its decisive character but confirms it all the more. . . . One can say that the exceptional case has an especially decisive meaning which exposes the core of the matter.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the very fact that political conflict could result in war shows how very serious a matter it is. This may seem a more or less commonsensical observation, but by the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology*, the exception takes on what we might call a more metaphysical flavor:

Precisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case, but must be interested in it to the highest degree. The exception can be more important to it than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox, but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself. The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.<sup>42</sup>

Here the usual relationship between exception and norm is reversed, but more than that, the exception is described in quasi-divine terms. The ex-

ception is more important than the rule; it founds and at the same time transcends the rule; and most strikingly, it grants life to a rule that would otherwise be dead and machinelike. It seems only a small step to use explicit theological language: the exception is the most high, the creator, the sustainer, the redeemer. This quasi-divine reality is for Schmitt the heart of the political realm.

Here we are clearly dealing with one particular sense of political theology: the theologization of the political. There is also a clear element of the converse sense of political theology, namely, the importation of theological norms into the political realm, insofar as Schmitt's political quasi divinity bears striking similarities to the traditional Christian God. For example, the political in Schmitt's sense is, like God, something that must necessarily exist. Though he periodically entertains thought experiments about the possibility of eliminating the political aspect of human life, he concludes by flatly declaring: "State and politics cannot be exterminated."<sup>43</sup> And throughout the text he argues that the liberal attempt to do away with the political and abolish war will necessarily backfire in the form of ever more destructive wars.

More importantly, though, Schmitt's exceptional sovereign, like the God of traditional theism, must be both singular and personal. Insofar as liberal political theory attempts to minimize or even eliminate that form of political authority, it is not a politics at all. From liberalism there is only a short step to the extremes of anarchism, which Schmitt views as a malign form of antipolitics. Indeed, he dedicates the enigmatic final chapter of *Political Theology* to the political demonology of the reactionary Roman Catholic thinker Donoso Cortés, who opposed the demonic anarchism of his time and who clearly serves as a stand-in for Schmitt himself. Just as the attempt to do away with war leads to the worst possible war, so the attempt to do away with Godlike sovereign authority will lead to the sovereignty of the devil.<sup>44</sup>

What begins as a seemingly descriptive and methodological text concludes on a thinly veiled normative note. For Schmitt, the exceptional space of sovereignty is the foundation of the most important sphere of human action, the political, and that space must be occupied by a responsible human agent. While sovereignty is as ineradicable as the political itself, the tendency in liberal democracies is to deny this fact of human existence. This denial is not only delusional but will result in disaster—a nihilistic form of sovereignty

propagating the worst and most inhuman war. From this dire diagnosis of his contemporary predicament, it is only a short distance to the calculation that installing some sovereign, *any* sovereign, is the only way to save the modern world from its own nihilism. And this calculation surely weighed heavily in Schmitt's disastrous decision to lend his formidable intellect to the service of Adolf Hitler. As so often happens, desperation to stave off the worst at any cost turned out to be the path toward the very worst.

*From Restricted to General Political Theology*

Virtually no exponents of political theology have wanted to follow Schmitt down that path. Indeed, just the opposite—as I noted above, Schmitt's theory has arguably enjoyed its greatest success on the political left. The reason such an unlikely affinity is possible is that this founding text of political theology is operating on two levels at once. On the one hand, there is the level on which two opposed senses of political theology—the theologization of the political in the sense of both carrying theological norms into the political realm and treating the political with a quasi-religious reverence—are at play in a mutually reinforcing way that makes them very difficult to untangle. Yet at the root of both, conceptually speaking, is the third sense of political theology: the study of the sheer fact of transfers between the two realms.

To attempt to separate out this more purely descriptive and analytic sense of political theology, I would like to return to the methodological passage I quoted above: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts."<sup>45</sup> In light of our discussion here, it should be clear that Schmitt is "front-loading" his conception of political theology to match his own normative commitments. There is a strong implication that the theology of which modern political theory is a secularized version should remain somehow normative, and this cashes out in the figure of the sovereign lawgiver, who is not only the privileged site of comparison between the political and the theological but is put forward as a virtual god on earth. As I have already discussed, most work

in political theology has followed Schmitt's lead here by focusing on the question of sovereignty and the relationship between medieval Christendom and secular modernity.

Despite Schmitt's efforts to put his thumb on the scale, however, this passage has broader implications. If we break it down, his famous claim that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" rests on two pillars of support. The first is "their historical development"—a point that Schmitt strongly emphasizes with his parenthetical example, which brings the full weight of his preceding chapters to bear. Yet the second reason, "because of their systematic structure," is actually the more foundational claim. It is only because political and theological systems are similarly structured in the same historical moment that concepts can migrate between the two realms across history.

Schmitt's subsequent argument bears out this priority of the synchronic over the diachronic by focusing on the parallels between the mutually contemporary phenomena of deism and absolutist monarchy. This move not only deemphasizes the locus classicus of the transition from the medieval to the modern. It also shows that the "theology" in question here need not be a doctrinal theology tied to religious practices and institutions but could also embrace what Pascal might call the "god of the philosophers." In other words, the "theology" in political theology could be taken as embracing a whole range of metaphysical systems with no particular relationship to faith or historical revelation. Schmitt has his own reasons for choosing the historical moment he does—for him, it appears to represent the last gasp of the monotheistic model of sovereignty that he takes to be so essential—but for analysts unbound by those normative commitments, he implicitly (if unintentionally) opens the door to seeking homologies between political and metaphysical systems that are not structured along monotheistic lines.

In his elaboration of the curious phrase "sociology of concepts," Schmitt solidifies this priority of the synchronic by explaining why homologies between the two realms exist. In a passage that could almost be read as a preemptive rebuke to some of the more impressionistic versions of political theology, Schmitt says: "It is thus not a sociology of the concept of sovereignty when, for example, the monarchy of the seventeenth century is characterized as the real that is 'mirrored' in the Cartesian concept of God."<sup>46</sup>

The problem with this approach is that it is reductionistic, explaining away the metaphysical by reference to the political. By contrast, Schmitt wants to trace both modes of thought to a common root:

But it is a sociology of the concept of sovereignty when the historical-political status of the monarchy of that epoch is shown to correspond to the general state of consciousness that was characteristic of western Europeans at that time, and when the juristic construction of the historical-political reality can find a concept whose structure is in accord with the structure of metaphysical concepts. . . . The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization.<sup>47</sup>

Both political and metaphysical thought, in other words, express the deep convictions of a particular community at a particular time and place about how the world is and ought to be. More than that, they both share a similar ambition to provide a coherent account for the whole range of human experience, and this shared drive toward systematicity and totality leads to the often uncanny homologies between the two fields that political theology aims to uncover.

In theological terms we could say that political theology deals with what Paul Tillich calls “the ultimate concern,” a phrase that designates the reality that is most meaningful and grants meaning to everything else.<sup>48</sup> From the political side it would be an investigation of the sources of legitimacy, of the right of political authority to demand our obedience and loyalty. And here already, a potential transfer between the two realms immediately presents itself. Does not every political authority claim to be an ultimate concern, which in the last analysis can claim to override every other concern, even our concern for self-preservation? Coming from the other direction, one could characterize the discourse of theodicy as an attempt to vindicate God’s right to be God, to demand our obedience and loyalty, in the face of our experience of suffering and evil. In other words, the theological problem of evil, the enduring existential anxiety over the question of how an omnipotent and benevolent God could allow anything but unalloyed good, is a version of the political problem of legitimacy. And to continue the exchange, this theological discourse often mobilizes techniques that could easily be transferred

to political apologetics: blaming bad outcomes on an external enemy (most famously the devil) or arguing that respecting the freedom of God's subjects to make their own decisions is more important than guaranteeing positive results in every situation.<sup>49</sup>

No solution to the problem of evil or the problem of legitimacy can endure forever. Schmitt admits as much when he documents the transition from the metaphysical monotheism and political absolutism of early modernity toward "the elimination of all theistic and transcendental conceptions and the formation of a new concept of legitimacy" that culminates in the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> For Schmitt, the resulting paradigm is no political theology at all, but there seems to be no intrinsic reason to draw that conclusion. From the perspective of a sociology of concepts, there is a "new concept of legitimacy" emerging, which finds its metaphysical parallel in "a more or less clear immanence-pantheism or a positivist indifference toward any metaphysics," and in this context Hegel presents a compelling synthesis of political and metaphysical thought.<sup>51</sup> The "immanence-pantheism" Schmitt attributes to Hegel does not achieve total hegemony, but that is in keeping with Schmitt's own previous example, insofar as the Cartesian metaphysical theology of the early modern period also had to contend with a more radical empiricism—two trends that are both represented in the work of Hobbes, an exemplary figure for Schmitt.

I propose, then, that Schmitt gives us two visions of political theology in his foundational text. The first is the more restricted political theology grounded in his normative commitments to the political as the "ultimate concern" of human existence and to a singular, personal, omnipotent sovereign as the guarantor of the political. The second, of which the former would be only a narrow subset, is the most general concept of political theology—a nonreductionist analysis of the homologies between political and theological or metaphysical systems, grounded in the recognition that both types of systems are attempts to grapple with the perennial dilemma that is represented theologically as the problem of evil and politically as the problem of legitimacy.

Within this general framework a particular historical moment like the early modern period may serve as an especially clear example of the kinds of parallels political theology seeks to discern, but there are no particu-

lar grounds to view it as normative or superior nor to think that political theology is more suited to study that paradigm than the democratic, non-monotheistic one that succeeds it. Furthermore, a general political theology would recognize that while the political and the theological or metaphysical tend to converge toward the kinds of parallels evinced during those exemplary historical moments, there is no guarantee that a stable parallel will emerge in any given time and place. Finally, it will recognize that no approach to the problem of evil or the problem of legitimacy can claim to be definitive or permanent. Rather, every political-theological paradigm is continually menaced by unforeseen contingencies as well as unacknowledged internal contradictions—the very external enemies and internal crises that the Schmittian sovereign must grapple with.

### *Neoliberalism as a Political Theology*

In terms of Schmitt's restricted version, neoliberalism could never qualify as a political-theological paradigm. In its subordination of the political to the economic, it would appear to be a delusional antipolitics at best and a demonic perversion of the political at worst. I want to emphasize this point: I am not claiming that neoliberalism is somehow a political-theological paradigm in the narrow Schmittian sense. Forging such a connection is neither necessary nor desirable. It is not the continued existence of sovereign state authority that makes neoliberalism a political theology in my view, for instance, nor do I base my claim on the theological roots of economic concepts as traced by Taylor, Agamben, and others.

Neoliberalism really does fall outside the purview of the restricted Schmittian political theology. And that is no accident, because as Foucault points out in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, neoliberalism arose in part as a reaction to the historical experience of totalitarianism. What Foucault characterizes as the "state phobia" of neoliberalism grows from two roots, both of which take the totalitarian state as the logical endpoint of state power: first, "the idea that the state possesses in itself and through its own dynamism a sort of power of expansion, an intrinsic tendency to expand" and, second, the idea that all the various types of states represent "the successive branches of one and the same great tree of state control in its continuous and unified expansion."<sup>52</sup> One can certainly make the case, as Foucault does, that this view of

the state is simplistic and one-sided. Be that as it may, it could not be more clear that the Schmittian quasi deification of the state as the highest principle of human existence is utterly anathema to the neoliberal project. It is precisely what neoliberalism aims to prevent.

Yet despite its diametrical opposition to the narrow version of Schmitt's project, neoliberalism can nonetheless be understood as a political theology in the more general sense. Under neoliberalism, a set of core convictions about how the world is and ought to be—what Friedman calls “the underlying current of opinion”—informs both a theory of governance and a theory of human nature, meaning that neoliberalism represents an account of the sources of legitimacy for our social institutions and of the moral order of the world. From this perspective, the fact that its account is opposed to that of the restricted Schmittian political theology supports rather than detracts from its claim to be a political theology. Competition and rivalry are only possible between peers—in this case, two approaches to the problem of political theology, both operating at the same level of totality.

I assume that for some, however, the root difficulty in viewing neoliberalism as a political theology does not stem from an unwillingness to broaden the latter concept but from a sense that it is inappropriate to view neoliberalism in such grandiose terms. As I have noted before, most popular conceptions of neoliberalism boil down to a libertarian polemic against the state, grounded in an exaggerated confidence in the market to solve all problems (if only we could stop interfering with it). And it is striking how seldom neoliberal policy delivers the promised results. Even the greatest successes are a disappointment.

To choose arguably the most high-profile recent example, Obamacare is so complex that even those who benefit from it often fail to grasp that fact. The net result of its convoluted approach is that the United States continues to spend vastly more per capita on health care than the rest of the developed world while still falling short of universal coverage. Indeed, as the Republicans were moving to dismantle the program in early 2017, Democrats seized on a well-timed success story: as a result of Obamacare, the percentage of uninsured Americans had fallen below 10 percent. I do not wish to downplay the benefits of expanded health care access, which for many individuals is quite literally a matter of life and death. But that very fact only highlights the

absurdity of exulting in the triumph that “only” around one in ten Americans lacks that access.

Within the general context of neoliberal policy making, however, Obamacare does represent something of an outlier: it aims to solve a clear problem (Americans lack reliable access to health care) by a fairly direct route (making it easier to obtain health insurance). Many neoliberal approaches are neither as targeted nor as successful. Broadly speaking, the privatization of government services has not increased their quality or reduced their cost. The promise that greater reliance on market mechanisms would lead to less bureaucracy has proven false, as Mark Fisher has forcefully demonstrated in *Capitalist Realism*. Reducing taxes on the wealthy has not led to more beneficial investment and greater prosperity. Instead, growth rates in the neoliberal era have consistently failed to reach the levels associated with Fordism even as income and wealth inequality have skyrocketed. And free trade has destroyed livelihoods and communities in many former industrial areas while any benefits it provides are indirect and largely invisible.

Overall, increasing inequality appears to be the most consistent outcome of neoliberalism. Tax cuts allow the wealthy to amass greater fortunes, while contributing to inequality in less direct ways as well. For instance, when the top tax rate was 90 percent or more, as it was for most of the postwar era in the United States, there was little benefit to increasing an individual’s pay above that threshold, given that the vast majority of the added salary would go toward taxes—better to reinvest that money in the company and its workers. Similarly, high taxes on capital gains virtually mandate a longer-term perspective on investment, since cashing in too quickly would result in losing a greater portion of the profits to taxation. By contrast, in a low-tax regime both management and shareholders (who are often the same individuals, because of stock-based compensation of executives) are emboldened to extract as much short-term profit out of a company as possible, at the expense of workers as well as the firm’s long-term prospects. Similarly, privatization provides opportunities for individuals and firms to extract profit out of essential public services, while free trade has functioned to increase corporate profitability by allowing firms to seek out the cheapest possible labor force.

In this context David Harvey’s move to treat increasing inequality as the true identifying trait of neoliberalism and to dismiss the ideological trappings

as mere window dressing for a generation-long cash grab by the capitalist class appears quite plausible. And it would certainly be naive not to recognize that this compatibility with the interests of the capitalist class is one major factor in why neoliberalism emerged as the hegemonic “solution” to the breakdown of the Fordist order and has retained that status despite its very evident failures. Even if we concede that income inequality has contributed to the power of the neoliberal order, however, we can hardly regard it as a source of the regime’s legitimacy. After all, it is difficult to imagine anyone voluntarily submitting to a social order that openly promises to enrich the already wealthy at the expense of the rest of the population. And experience bears out this intuition: out-of-control inequality is arguably the single greatest factor in the ongoing decline of neoliberalism’s legitimacy worldwide.

The lens of political theology helps us to see that neoliberalism is precisely a theory of legitimacy. Foucault had already recognized as much in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Summarizing and expanding on the work of the German theorist Ludwig Erhard, he claims that the underlying goal of neoliberalism differs from traditional accounts of law and sovereignty in that it envisions a new form of the state that functions “not to constrain, but simply to create a space of freedom, to guarantee a freedom, and precisely to guarantee it in the economic domain.”<sup>53</sup> Under such a regime, “any number of individuals freely agree to play this game of economic freedom guaranteed by the institutional framework,” and this would be the basis for their “adherence to this framework”: “it would imply that consent has been given to any decision that may be taken to guarantee this economic freedom or to secure that which makes this economic freedom possible. In other words, the institution of economic freedom will have to function, or at any rate will be able to function as a siphon, as it were, as a point of attraction from the formation of a political sovereignty.”<sup>54</sup>

One could claim that Erhard’s approach is a special case, arising as it did in postwar Germany, where a divided nation and a conquered state made it necessary to find a new principle of legitimacy for the political order. Yet Foucault argues that it would be a mistake to view these early beginnings of German neoliberalism as “a pure and simple calculation of political groups or political personnel of Germany after its defeat”:

It is something other than a political calculation, even if it is completely permeated by political calculation. No more is it an ideology, although, of course, there is a whole set of perfectly coherent ideas, analytical principles, and so forth. What is involved in fact is a new programming of liberal governmentality. It is an internal reorganization that, once again, does not ask the state what freedom it will leave to the economy, but asks the economy how its freedom can have a state-creating function and role, in the sense that it will really make possible the foundation of the state's legitimacy.<sup>55</sup>

Making all due allowance for the complex intellectual genealogy Foucault traces here, I would argue that this is the core strategy of all forms of neoliberalism: founding the legitimacy of the political order on the guarantee of economic freedom. And this move is plausible because of an account of human nature wherein freedom is best expressed through economic exchange and competition and is continually menaced by extraeconomic forces such as the state.

To put it in my terms, the political theology of neoliberalism is grounded in freedom as its ultimate concern. On the theological or metaphysical side, it sets up participation in economic competition as the highest expression of human personhood, which leads directly to its account of what is permissible in the political realm. There is of course much to object to in this neoliberal political theology. From the perspective of traditional political theory (including conventional political theology), its economic grounding of politics represents a short circuit, and its vision of freedom is extremely narrow. The next two chapters will discuss both of these issues in turn, but for now, I want to draw attention to how tightly integrated neoliberalism is as a political theology—so much so that it can be difficult to separate out the political and “theological” elements.

The very simplicity of its approach lends it a remarkable coherence that can be seen in all the major policy goals of neoliberalism. Globalization and free trade tame the state, subjecting it to economic discipline on the world stage in a way that helps prevent it from infringing on economic freedom. Privatization expands the economic model into social services, allowing the state to “shop” for the best service providers. Though the state is constrained in some ways (by limiting taxation and regulatory authority), it is in other ways very active in the work of cultivating, supporting, and even creating

markets—as when Obamacare effectively created a market in individual health insurance plans, an area where the market was previously so dysfunctional as to be essentially nonexistent.

The example of Obamacare also highlights the peculiar nature of neoliberal freedom. One of its most controversial provisions was a mandate that all Americans must have health insurance coverage. From a purely libertarian perspective, this is an impermissible infringement on economic freedom—surely if I am free to make my own economic decisions, I am also free to choose not to purchase health insurance. Yet the mandate fits perfectly with the overall ethos of neoliberalism. On a practical level this aspect of the plan was a necessary complement to the rule forbidding insurers from rejecting applicants with a preexisting medical condition, which would allow people to wait until they were sick to purchase insurance, leading to a collapse of the market by either bankrupting insurers or leading to out-of-control premium increases. In this respect the mandate represented the state's attempt to set up and preserve a functioning market in individual health insurance plans. At the same time, it expressed a deeper truth of neoliberalism. Within the market created by Obamacare, I was free to choose whichever health plan I might want, but I was not free to opt out of the market altogether. If I am not inclined to express my economic freedom in that sphere, then I must be forced to be free.

This same logic of constraint appears throughout neoliberalism at every level. At the global scale, if states attempt to “opt out” of the neoliberal order, they will lose out on investment and jobs as companies move to more compliant (or, to use the term of art, “competitive”) countries. On the individual level there is an even harder constraint: the sheer necessity for survival. Though even neoliberals recognize the need for some base-level protection against abject poverty, the social safety net is set up to “incentivize” work as much as possible. Meanwhile, the erosion of job security through deunionization and other measures to maximize “flexibility” in labor markets means that workers are forced into a perpetual competition. Even when they succeed in finding a steady job, they have to fight continually to keep it. And in between, at the level of the individual firm, deregulation on the governmental level does not mean companies can simply do whatever they want. Instead, they are subjected to the more comprehensive and inescapable constraint of

market discipline. If we ask why a particular company cannot choose to treat its workers better and offer them job security (in the hopes of better productivity, for instance), the answer is that the market would never allow it: a shareholder revolt or hostile takeover would lead to the removal of any management team that made such a scandalous proposal.

Overall, then, in neoliberalism an account of human nature where economic competition is the highest value leads to a political theory where the prime duty of the state is to enable, and indeed mandate, such competition, and the result is a world wherein individuals, firms, and states are all continually constrained to express themselves via economic competition. This means that neoliberalism tends to create a world in which neoliberalism is “true.” A more coherent and self-reinforcing political theology can scarcely be imagined—but that, I will argue, is precisely what any attempt to create an alternative to neoliberalism must do.

## CONCLUSION

# AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

My goal in this book has been not only to offer an analysis of neoliberalism, but to think through the ways that political theology would have to change in order to be equal to the task of such an analysis. While conceding that neoliberalism would not count as a paradigm of political theology in strict Schmittian terms, I argued in the first chapter that we can see in Schmitt's own work a broader vision of political theology, of which the standard Schmittian model would be only a narrow subset. This general theory of political theology would be defined not by particular classic themes—such as the homology between divine and human sovereignty and the problem of the transition from medieval Christianity to secular modernity—but as an inquiry into the ways that human communities try to justify their structures of governance (the political problem of legitimacy) and make sense of their experience of suffering and injustice (the theological problem of evil).

With this expanded notion of political theology in mind, I went on to challenge the conventional understanding of its constituent terms. In my second chapter I argued that the “political” in political theology cannot be understood in terms of “Arendt's axiom,” according to which there is (or at least should be) an absolute qualitative distinction between the political and the economic. And in the following chapter I made the case that the most salient theological theme for understanding neoliberalism is not divine sovereignty but creaturely free will—reflecting my view that the “theology”

in political theology cannot be understood solely as a discourse about God. Finally, I characterized neoliberalism's strategy of self-legitimation as an apocalyptic one and interpreted the contemporary right-wing reaction as a heretical variation on neoliberalism rather than a comprehensive break with it, insofar as the right-wing reaction still embraces the neoliberal conception of the sources of legitimacy.

Now, as I turn to the question of what might make for a genuine alternative to neoliberalism, my first step will be to consolidate my general theory of political theology by way of a definition: *Political theology is a holistic, genealogical inquiry into the structures and sources of legitimacy in a particular historical moment.* Political theology in this sense is *political* because it investigates institutions and practices of governance (whether they are defined as state-based or economic, public or private), and it is *theological* because it deals with questions of meaning and value (regardless of the form the answers take). And it is both *simultaneously* because the structures of governance are always necessarily caught up with questions of meaning and value and because the answers we offer to questions of meaning and value always have direct implications for how the world should be governed—in other words, the *structures and sources of legitimacy* tend to correlate conceptually. It is *holistic* in the sense that it tends toward a total account of the structures of legitimacy, both institutional and discursive, in a given time and place, and it is *genealogical* in that it sees those structures not as static givens or abstract doctrines, but as a result of strategy and struggle. That it is both at once means that its holism does not lead to something like a “systematic political theology” but instead serves as a heuristic device for uncovering sites of breakdown and contradiction within any given political theological paradigm. And it is assured of finding such sites because every political theological paradigm represents a contingent strategic outcome within a *particular historical moment*—never a universal or final answer, because both the problem of legitimacy and the problem of evil are ultimately insoluble.

That political theology seeks after sites of breakdown and contradiction does not mean that it is always on the lookout for superficial hypocrisy, such as a difference between ideological proclamations and concrete practice. Take, for example, the frequent observation among critics of neoliberalism that neoliberals *say* they want to let the free market work, but *actually* they

rely on the state—an accusation that appears to be well-nigh irresistible, even for critics who are well aware of the central role of the state in constructing the neoliberal order. This attack is highly suspect from a political theological perspective because it takes for granted the neoliberal distinction between state and market.

Against such an acceptance of the neoliberal terms of debate, I have argued from the beginning that one of the distinctive traits of political theology is its refusal of seemingly commonsense binaries. This commitment is announced in its very name, which breaks down secular modernity's division between the political and the religious, and I argued in the second chapter that it should be just as critical of the dyad of the political and the economic. One benefit of this broad vision of political theology is that it would allow for a broader view of the core texts of the discipline. Indeed, one of the most curious aspects of political theology as presently understood is that Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is not considered a foundational document alongside Schmitt's and Kantorowicz's work.<sup>1</sup> What ultimately motivates this breaking down of the political-economic binary, however, is not simply a desire to expand the purview of political theology, but rather a recognition that political theological paradigms legitimate themselves precisely by means of the core conceptual distinctions they set up.

In the case of neoliberalism, the distinction between state and market—which has functioned in different ways at different moments in the history of modern capitalism—is articulated in such a way as to reinforce neoliberal hegemony by forestalling the emergence of power centers guided by non-neoliberal priorities. Libertarian clichés play into this process by simultaneously naturalizing the market and painting the state as an incompetent blunderer at best and a protototalitarian oppressor at worst. Within this framework, any autonomous action on the part of the state, uninformed by the economic imperatives formulated by neoliberal technocrats, is illegitimate. And the irresistible hypocrisy attack ironically echoes this logic, insofar as it presents state action as something shameful that must be hidden.

Political theology cannot accept any static, normative distinction between the political and the economic because it recognizes that every political theological paradigm represents a transformation and redistribution of authoritative categories. This means that political theology is always necessarily

concerned with change, because each order arises out of the ruins of its predecessors and each order is threatened with dissolution in its turn. We cannot understand neoliberalism except in the context of the decline in Fordism, just as we cannot understand Fordism apart from the world-historical crises that arose from the breakdown of the “hundred years’ peace” of classical liberalism. At the same time, political theology is not a teleological discipline. Political theological paradigms do not emerge from some inner necessity of the historical process but through conflict and creativity.

In our specific context, this means that neoliberalism was not the only possible response to the crisis of Fordism in the early 1970s. As Melinda Cooper reminds us, there were many possibilities in play at that historical moment, many of which seem almost inconceivably radical from our present perspective. The victory of neoliberalism was a contingent outcome that depended in part on the skillful manipulation of the resentments and anxieties that arose out of the contradictions within the Fordist paradigm. Things really could have turned out differently, and we would be living in a very different world if they had—possibly even a world in which neoliberal policy prescriptions, far from being the only “realistic” option, would appear laughably foolish.

This is not to say that political theology represents a sheer voluntarism, but its emphasis on human agency makes it a valuable counterweight to the determinism and claustrophobia that often characterize the Marxist and Foucauldian approaches that have so far dominated the analysis of neoliberalism. To paraphrase Marx, political theology in the broadest sense teaches that human beings create their structures of meaning and legitimacy, but not in conditions of their own choosing. This emphasis on contingency and human agency is particularly important to keep in mind in our present moment, when so many commentators, both mainstream and academic, are tempted to declare the right-wing reaction to be the inevitable outcome of neoliberalism.

As I tried to show in the previous chapter, the right-wing reaction is indeed legible as one *possible* outcome of the neoliberal frame, one that pushes certain core convictions to their logical extreme. Yet from a political theological perspective, it is neither a genuine alternative to neoliberalism nor a particularly robust variation on the theme. For political theology as

for classical democratic theory, political power relies on the consent of the governed—no structure of legitimacy and meaning can long survive if the people it is supposed to govern do not believe in it. As Bonnie Honig points out, even Carl Schmitt’s “neo-Hobbesian” political theory “has democratic qualities: It postulates popular subscription to sovereign power.”<sup>2</sup> And in contrast to both combative and normative neoliberalism, punitive neoliberalism and the right-wing reaction that evolves out of it are profoundly lacking in popular support and seem to have no interest in democratic legitimacy.

The right-wing reactionaries may yet be able to cling to power through institutional quirks or outright violence. They will do great damage if they succeed in doing so, at great human cost. Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that they are, on the most fundamental level, *weak*. Even leaving aside the implausibility of their political agenda, which is based on a heady mixture of magical thinking and conspiracy theories, their lack of popular legitimacy means that they simply do not represent a viable long-term alternative to the neoliberal paradigm. In fact, as demonstrated by the outcome of the recent French election, they may have given neoliberalism a new lease on life, with the shambles of Trump and Brexit serving as cautionary tales. If there is to be a right-wing alternative to neoliberalism, it will have to take a very different form, led by very different people.

### *Prospects for a Return to Fordism*

The same two countries that have provided the most vivid illustrations of the right-wing reaction have also witnessed the emergence of two leaders who promise to break with the neoliberal consensus from the left: Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom. Though neither has taken power at the time of this writing, both are enjoying surging popularity—particularly among the younger generation—in an environment where their neoliberal centrist colleagues seem utterly incapable of capturing the public imagination. Both are veterans of the political struggles of the 1960s, and hence they represent a kind of pre-neoliberal remnant within their respective parties (treating Sanders as a *de facto* Democrat despite his official status as an Independent). Both are witnesses to an era when any number of policies that are dubbed impossible today (more generous welfare and health provision, for example, or fully state-funded higher education)

were living realities, and though their movements have also attracted more radical elements, both Sanders and Corbyn are essentially promising a return to some version of the Fordist welfare state.

Such an outcome would be far preferable, in my view, to either the normative neoliberal status quo ante or the right-wing reaction's cruel parody of punitive neoliberalism. And I would postulate that such an outcome is possible in principle: the material resources necessary to achieve it clearly exist, and although the political obstacles are considerable, it would be shortsighted to assume that political conditions cannot change, especially at a time when we are witnessing so many unexpected events. That being said, however, here as in the previous chapter, I do not aspire to prognostication or punditry. My task is to assess the prospects for a return to Fordism on the level of political theology. What are its prospects for effecting the profound conceptual and moral changes needed to create a genuine new paradigm to replace neoliberalism? More than that, can we reasonably expect a renewed Fordism to represent a robust and durable alternative to neoliberalism?

On both fronts there are grounds for ambivalence, if not pessimism. First and foremost, the original Fordist settlement arose under vastly different circumstances. All the major Western countries had mobilized for total war, and most had witnessed untold destruction. In the latter countries it made sense for the state to take the lead in repairing the damage, while in the United States, which had escaped virtually unscathed, the shift from the Second World War to the Cold War meant that the state maintained a heavy hand in economic development for military reasons. These circumstances contributed to the legitimacy of the Fordist paradigm, as private industry and the general public not only accepted but expected state support and leadership on economic matters.

Both material conditions and the political consensus are radically different today. For a generation and more, state institutions have essentially "outsourced" industrial policy to the financial sector and the neoliberal technocrats who serve their priorities. A more assertive, autonomous role for the state in directing investment and development has become unthinkable. Even in the emergency circumstances of the Global Financial Crisis, direct state ownership or management of financial firms—where state and capital have been most tightly intertwined throughout the neoliberal era—was

never seriously considered as an option. The bailouts of the US auto industry featured a larger role for the state in brokering the deal, but here again, the goal was to get things “back to normal,” not to assert a greater independent role for the state in guiding industry, much less owning and operating firms.

Similarly, the experience of wartime rationing and mass conscription in the United States made it much easier to justify an aggressive tax policy and great generosity to the working and middle classes—after all, they had sacrificed a great deal. Meanwhile, greater controls over capital movement and a broad consensus in favor of higher taxes among developed nations made it harder for the wealthy to flee taxation. Neoliberalism has broken down the kind of social solidarity enjoyed in the immediate postwar era, and now countries compete to lower their tax rates to attract wealthy investors. Recognition of this latter challenge has led many proponents of a return to Fordism to find unexpected common ground with the right-wing reaction in proposing trade restrictions, with Sanders going so far as to say that he would happily work with Trump on that issue.<sup>3</sup> Yet the act of restricting foreign imports will not in itself cause domestic replacements to arise and could hurt existing domestic producers who rely on global supply chains. Free trade promised that cheap consumer goods would make up for American losses in wages and job security, and trade restrictions could take away the former without restoring the latter. The idea of seizing control of the nation’s economic destiny holds real popular appeal across the political spectrum, but it risks being an empty gesture with adverse economic consequences, undermining the legitimacy of a Fordist-style program going forward.

Even leaving aside the issue of trade, under a neo-Keynesian regime government spending would still be pumped into an economic system wired for neoliberalism. Obama’s stimulus measure was a case in point. Though the stimulus arguably saved the United States from the deeper recession experienced in Europe, it did so at the price of expanding inequality even further relative to precrisis levels. This is because, while it was Keynesian to the extent that it started from the assumption that state spending could boost economic growth, it was operating within a neoliberal economic system—meaning that the very wealthy were in line to receive the lion’s share of the benefits of that growth. One could anticipate perverse outcomes of other Fordist-style policies proposed by Sanders. Universal health care, for instance, could reduce

resistance to the so-called gig economy by ameliorating one of the most serious consequences of unstable employment, namely uncertainty of access to health insurance. Free college tuition could also accelerate the process whereby a college degree, far from being a guaranteed path to class mobility, is increasingly a baseline expectation for any entry-level job. I would still support both policies, but they would not represent the kind of paradigm shift that the anti-neoliberal left is calling for.

I bring up these obstacles not to join the chorus of neoliberals proclaiming any return to Fordism impossible but to suggest the inadequacy of the framework within which such changes are typically advocated. That framework is a broadly Polanyian one in which the state (as representative of society) needs to push back against the excesses of the economy. On a superficial level it could appear to be the most radical possible reversal of neoliberalism's privileging of the economy over the state. Yet it strangely respects the division of labor established by neoliberal ideology, in which the economy maintains its autonomy and the state takes post hoc, indirect actions such as getting foreign competition out of the way, taxing away excessive incomes, or providing funding to give people access to the necessities of life. Again, such an agenda would doubtless be beneficial in many ways, but it would fail to match the ambition of neoliberal practice, which did not simply remove state interference from the economy, but transformed the state in order to enable it to support and cultivate new market forms.

Hence, though there are doubtless many beneficial reforms that could arise from such a framework, simply reversing neoliberalism's privileging of economy over state does not represent a paradigmatic shift. In fact, it risks simply deploying the *neoliberal* state over against a *neoliberal* economy, both of which were designed from the ground up to undo Fordism and render a return to it impossible. One cannot expect to rebuild Fordism using the instruments of its demolition—and among those instruments is the very division of labor between state and economy that shapes our contemporary common sense.

In terms of the question of durability, any attempt to reestablish something like the Fordist model would have to come to terms with that model's demise. In the previous chapter I remarked that neoliberalism appears to be in the process of failing to reproduce itself for the next generation. Essen-

tially the same thing happened with Fordism. In fact, if we define Fordism as beginning at the end of the Second World War, then it proved even less durable, lasting approximately thirty years as compared to neoliberalism's forty or so (and counting). Doubtless, a major factor in its decline was the onset of an economic crisis caused by factors both exogenous (the oil crisis) and endogenous (the need to absorb the baby-boomer generation into the workforce), but neoliberalism has endured multiple crises of comparable magnitude. And though the shift to neoliberalism may appear all but inevitable in retrospect, there were also very plausible proposals to save the Fordist system by expanding the welfare apparatus rather than dismantling it.

There was, again, no historical necessity dictating that Fordism be replaced by neoliberalism. Yet just as the emergence of the right-wing reaction, while equally contingent, nonetheless gives us insight into the weaknesses and internal contradictions of neoliberalism, so too does the emergence of neoliberalism shed light on the vulnerabilities of Fordism. Peter Frase has recently articulated one major weakness of the Fordist system in terms of a Marxist critique of Polanyi.<sup>4</sup> From Polanyi's perspective, "Socialism is, essentially, the tendency inherent in an industrial civilization to transcend the self-regulating market by consciously subordinating it to a democratic society. It is the solution natural to industrial workers who see no reason why production should not be regulated directly and why markets should be more than a useful but subordinate trait in a free society."<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the long run the conflict between state (as representative of society) and market will settle into a steady equilibrium where social needs take the lead over market imperatives. Coming from a Marxist perspective, Frase asks, "Is that a stable equilibrium, acceptable to both capitalists and workers? Or is it an inherently unstable situation, one which must break toward either the expropriation of the capitalist class, or the restoration of ruling-class power?" The answer, he believes, is the latter. Though there is a convincing case to be made that "putting unemployed workers back to work would be good for capitalists too, in the sense that it would lead to faster growth and more profits," such purely economic arguments miss the point that the relationship between boss and worker is not solely economic but political—it is not just about making money, but about power and control.

Here Frase is drawing on the predictions of Michal Kalecki—who pub-

lished his classic essay “Political Aspects of Full Employment” in 1943,<sup>6</sup> the year before *The Great Transformation* and *The Road to Serfdom* appeared—that any reform movement to strengthen the hand of workers within the capitalist system will eventually create a dynamic that, in Frase’s words, “calls into question not just profits, but the underlying property relations of capitalism itself.” That prediction came true throughout the Western world in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which witnessed a proliferation of strike actions and the emergence of demands to vastly expand the welfare state. Perhaps most radical, from a Marxist perspective, was the proposal to institute a universal basic income, which would break with the basic premise of the capitalist system by decoupling income from labor for the entire population rather than for the capitalist class alone. Once this critical moment, which Frase calls the “Kalecki point,” is reached, “employers become willing to take drastic action to get workers back into line, even at the expense of short-term profitability,” including “a ‘capital strike’ in which money is moved overseas or simply left in the bank, as a way of breaking the power of the working class.”

To put this argument in the political theological terms of the previous chapter, the Fordist welfare state could be conceived as a restrainer or *kat-echon*, holding back the depredations of the market—an analogy that is all the more fitting in that Polanyi so frequently figures the market in demonic terms. The irony, though, is that the very means by which Fordist policy makers believed they were permanently containing the dangers of unrestrained capitalism actually guaranteed that a decisive crisis would emerge, a crisis that the Polanyian framework rendered all but unthinkable.

And here we come to another irony of the emergence of neoliberalism. In the United States, at least, Fordism was dismantled with the enthusiastic complicity of the very population that most benefited from it: white working- and middle-class homeowners, the so-called Reagan Democrats. As we saw in the previous chapter, Cooper has shown how emergent neoliberalism was able to mobilize anxieties and resentments relating to gender relations, sexual practice, and racial hierarchy in order to recruit such privileged populations into the neoliberal tax revolt. The very “household” norms that had once served to shore up the legitimacy of the welfare state were now turned against it, as the populations who had historically been excluded from its protections were perversely identified as its sole beneficiaries. Here

again, we see a weak spot in the Polanyian framework, within which these “household” factors would be grouped on the side of society as opposed to economy. Drawing on Federici, however, my analysis has shown that the gendered division of labor, the disciplining of sexuality, and the enforcement of racial hierarchy have been intrinsic to the capitalist system from the very beginning—meaning that the Fordist project was paradoxically attempting to use the favored tools of capitalism in order to restrain capitalism.

Overall, then, the order that presented itself as restraining and controlling capitalism was actually deeply dependent on it. This is true at the most basic political theological level, since Fordism staked its legitimacy on continuous economic growth. That doubtless seemed a safe bet in the immediate postwar decades, but it took only one protracted economic crisis—one that was, by contemporary standards, relatively mild—to call the legitimacy of the entire system into question. Once the promise of endless prosperity appeared to be broken, conditions were ripe for neoliberals, in alliance with neoconservatives, to portray the welfare state as a parasitic institution that supported social parasites, legitimating their effort to dismantle welfare programs and transform them from a safety net into a disciplinary apparatus.

And the worst part was that these accusations were not entirely false. The social democratic institutions of the Fordist era really were parasitical on capitalist production, in that they used the state’s power of taxation to take a substantial share of capitalist profits and redistribute them. Those redistribution projects themselves depended on capitalist production, because the money they provided was only helpful in that it allowed people to purchase goods and services in the capitalist marketplace. The Fordist system was thus in the awkward position of abrogating capitalist property rights—above all in the punitive tax rates for higher income levels—while still depending on the capitalist system’s continued operation. Though I view such measures as justified and desirable, they were intrinsically vulnerable to attacks on their legitimacy, particularly because gender, sexual, and racial hierarchies opened up the possibility that the bulk of the population could be induced to identify with the property owners whose wealth was being expropriated rather than with the beneficiaries of the system.

The core vulnerability of Fordism was that for all its regulation of and intervention into the economy, it did not take the step of fully transforming

the economy—either in the contemporary sense of the mode of production or in the more ancient sense of the organization of the household. From this perspective, Hardt and Negri have argued that neoliberalism and social democracy share the same defect. The neoliberal regime can do nothing but extract wealth, and social democracy, even with its very different ends, does the same: neither can “fulfill . . . the task of promoting, managing, and regulating production.”<sup>7</sup> Both merely siphon off value, whether for investment capital or social services, but neither takes responsibility for directly producing value.

More than Sanders, Corbyn pushes in this direction when he advocates renationalizing industries (such as the railways) that were privatized under neoliberalism. And in this Corbyn represents an older tradition on the Labour left that called for state ownership and management of firms and even entire industries, a tradition that has its counterparts throughout Western Europe. While neoliberal dogma presents such regimes as inherently inefficient and oppressive, they were in fact compatible with higher sustained economic growth and more broadly shared increases in standards of living than we have seen in the neoliberal era. Even in the Soviet bloc, for all the mounting problems with the central planning model, what brought about the regime’s demise was not an economic collapse but the decision on the part of the country’s own political elites to dissolve the Union and convert to a capitalist system. And when the post-Soviet leadership submitted to the economic “shock therapy” recommended by Western advisers, the result was an immediate, and thus far permanent, decline in living standards for the vast majority of the population, accompanied by an explosion of wealth for a small elite.

In short, the world has already witnessed functional regimes that combined varying degrees of consciously planned economic production, guided by varying levels of democratic accountability. Not all such regimes are equally appealing as models for contemporary economic transformation, but all point toward the possibility of taking back control from the invisible hand. The experience of the neoliberal era shows us, even if only negatively, that this form of control is the most important of all—far more than the illusory goal of taking back control over our national destiny, for example.

*Toward a World Come of Age*

A break with the invisible hand would represent a return to the aspirations of the modern world that are most promising, aspirations that were perhaps best recognized, ironically enough, by a Christian theologian. Writing in 1944 from his jail cell in Tegel—where he was imprisoned for his role in a failed assassination attempt against Hitler and where he would be summarily executed by the Nazis just prior to the Allied victory—Dietrich Bonhoeffer embarked on a series of increasingly radical reflections on the place of Christianity in the modern world.<sup>8</sup> These fragments have proven durably influential and controversial in postwar theological debates, due in part to Bonhoeffer's fate as a kind of modern martyr, but in this context, what is most relevant is his interpretation of modernity. In his letter of June 8, 1944, to his friend and acolyte Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer writes:

The movement that began about the thirteenth century (I'm not going to get involved in any argument about the exact date) towards the autonomy of man (in which I should include the discovery of the laws by which the world lives and deals with itself in science, social and political matters, art, ethics, and religion) has in our time reached an undoubted completion. Man has learned to deal with himself in all questions of importance without recourse to the "working hypothesis" called "God." (325)

Christian polemics against this development have proven fruitless, because they refuse to recognize how much things have changed:

The world that has become conscious of itself and the laws that govern its own existence has grown self-confident in what seems to us to be an uncanny way. False developments and failures do not make the world doubt the necessity of the course that it is taking, or of its development; they are accepted with fortitude and detachment as part of the bargain, and even an event like the present war is no exception. (326)

That such a seemingly optimistic reflection on the modern world should be written in a Nazi prison may seem ironic, but as a Christian theologian (indeed, from many perspectives a very conservative one), Bonhoeffer is well aware that human autonomy does not necessarily produce positive results. His main goal, however, is not to castigate the modern world for its sins—

not even for the sins that drove him to break with his pacifist principles in a desperate attempt to stop them—but to encourage Christians to embrace the new reality of a “world come of age” rather than fighting a losing battle to return to a world that could not live without God.

Against Christians who react with horror to Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “death of God,” then, Bonhoeffer is asking Christians to find a way to live in a world where God really is dead. And had he lived to see it, he would surely view it as deeply ironic that the modern world would construct its own replacement god. For that is ultimately what happened, as neoliberal technocrats set about the hard work of constructing and maintaining the market mechanism, essentially resurrecting an artificial invisible hand that they passed off as an unquestionable, quasi-divine authority.

If Bonhoeffer was right to detect in modern history “one great development that leads to the world’s autonomy” (359), then the victory-by-default of neoliberalism in the early 1990s really did represent the end of history. It was the end of any notion that human beings should or could create their own destiny, the end of any notion of collective deliberation and decision making on ultimate questions. Liberal democracy under neoliberalism represents a forced choice between two fundamentally similar options, betraying its promise to provide a mechanism for rational and self-reflective human agency. The market similarly mobilizes free choice only to subdue and subvert it, “responsibilizing” every individual for the outcomes of the system while radically foreclosing any form of collective responsibility for the shape of society. And any attempt to exercise human judgment and free choice over social institutions and outcomes is rejected as a step down the slippery slope to totalitarianism. To choose in any strong sense is always necessarily to choose wrongly, to fall into sin.

Yet this end of history, this evacuation of freedom, was in the last analysis collectively chosen, if only passively. This means that—contrary to Wendy Brown’s vision of a world in which democratic aspirations would be extinguished for good—the option of rejecting the hollow neoliberal vision of human freedom has always been on the table. Our present political moment is the beginning of a struggle to withdraw consent from the neoliberal order by developing a new and more meaningful conception of freedom. This initial gesture of refusal is an absolutely necessary first step, clearing the space

to imagine something new. More work is needed, however, because at this early stage, the alternative conceptions of freedom can be characterized more by what they reject than by what they promote. Both demand freedom *from* neoliberalism (construed in different ways), but neither is quite clear on what they want freedom *for*.

For the right, freedom means freedom from foreign interference, which ultimately means freedom from the global economic forces that infringe on national sovereignty. Such a conception of freedom clearly holds popular appeal. Yet it is hobbled, not only by its addiction to nostalgia and magical thinking, but even more so by its lack of any positive goal. When these movements do seize power and assert their precious freedom, it is revealed to be an empty gesture of defiance with no program of its own. What is the point of Brexit, for instance, or of Obamacare repeal? There is ultimately no answer aside from the tautology that they must do it because they said they would do it. They have done and will continue to do profound damage, but the right-wing alternative as currently construed is a dead end that does not open out onto any real positive project.

Much more promising are the proposals on the left, where freedom means freedom from exploitation and precarity—which is to say, from the anxiety that has become pandemic in the neoliberal age. At its most ambitious, contemporary social democracy pictures a world in which a universal basic income will free us from the compulsion to sell our labor power on the market. Such a world would be very different from the one we live in now, and in my opinion much more desirable. Yet without a positive conception of collective freedom to match its negative conception of individual freedom, it would remain as vulnerable to overthrow as the Fordist paradigm. This is because neoliberalism, unlike its emerging rivals, actually does have some minimal positive conception of freedom: the freedom to participate in the market. As hollow as it may seem, in a capitalist society market freedom is undeniably a very important freedom, because the market is where all our material needs are met. No matter how many institutions we develop to redirect or correct market forces, no matter how big a cut society takes from market profits, a society that relies on the workings of the invisible hand to supply the most nonnegotiable social goods is still fundamentally a market society. And that means that, even if the state or some other institutional

form can supply a positive alternative, market freedom will remain the tacit foundation of the social order by default, a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode into another neoliberal “end of history.”

This means that any political theological paradigm that desires a real break with neoliberalism must be willing to break with the foundational role of the market. It must be willing to take responsibility for consciously and collectively directing the production and distribution of economic goods. Such a society may have room for a free market in discretionary consumer goods, but it would not allow what it considers to be its nonnegotiable needs and desires to be held hostage to profit-seeking individuals and firms. If some form of production must happen, if some need must be met, if some important cultural touchstone should be preserved, then such a society would mobilize the resources necessary to make it happen. Market mechanisms may be useful in some contexts,<sup>9</sup> but they must be designed to serve social ends directly rather than creating a profit incentive and hoping the social end is served along the way. None of this is to say that total conscious control of the production process is possible or desirable, but the limits to that control must be discovered through experimentation rather than read off of economic models that were designed to naturalize the capitalist system. From that perspective, it does not matter whether the forms of collective action that direct production are conceived as belonging to the “state” or the “economy”—in fact, the practice of collective deliberation about production would represent the most durable possible break with that foundational binary of the modern world.

Neoliberal ideology has conditioned us all to be suspicious of any prospect for deliberate, conscious social change. It is easy to imagine the objections: “Who decides what must be produced? Who decides who gets what?” When people ask questions like that, they normally do not anticipate any possible answer. “Who decides?” is a rhetorical question, meant to end a discussion, not open one up—as though the idea of collective deliberation and action, in and of itself, is an unthinkable horror.

It is worth reflecting on this reflex reaction, which is a result of ideological formation but cannot be reduced to that. I have claimed that the political theological root of neoliberalism is freedom and have characterized its vision of freedom as hollow. Yet paradoxically, part of the appeal of neoliberalism is precisely the limitation it places on freedom. While from a certain point

of view it illegitimately “responsibilizes” us for outcomes that are beyond our control, from another perspective it relieves us of collective responsibility—with all the political conflict and struggle that meaningful collective action brings with it. Even beyond the promise of superior economic outcomes, the invisible hand allows us to imagine that we can outsource our collective responsibility to a machinelike entity that will deliver outcomes that are no one’s fault because they are everyone’s fault. On the political theological level, it is a conflict-avoidance mechanism as much as and perhaps even more than an economic mechanism, but like every *katechon*, it has inevitably generated the very forces of conflict it hoped to stave off indefinitely.

Dismantling the invisible hand is a crucial step toward creating a new political-theological paradigm, but it is not sufficient in itself. We will need to work simultaneously to radically reconceive the economy in the most ancient sense of the household: the order of race, gender, and sexual practice. We must not assume that a reimagining of the economy will automatically achieve this, as some simplistic forms of Marxism claim. As Polanyi documents, the Fascist social order was in many respects a transformation of the market society, but the structures of race, gender, and sexual practice, far from falling away of their own accord, became unimaginably more virulent and destructive. Closer to home, we have also seen how the conservative sexual and racial mores of Fordism ultimately allowed most of its social-democratic gains to be undone, paving the way for a neoliberal state devoted to reinforcing racial hierarchy by consigning racialized populations to the hell of the carceral system. The division between economic and social problems is a dangerous illusion—both must be tackled together, without indulging the illusion that there is any pre-existing standard for how either should be arranged.

Clearly, the task of building a new political-theological paradigm to replace neoliberalism is a massive one, for which there are no ready-made formulas. I promised that this conclusion would provide us with ways to recognize a genuinely new political theological paradigm when it comes, but the only infallible sign I can offer is that we will know that it is a new paradigm when we find ourselves building it. We will know that something genuinely new is in the offing when we recognize ourselves—in the broadest possible sense, with the full participation and leadership from the groups that neoliberalism subordinates and scapegoats—as part of a movement to form a social

order that pursues goals that we have collectively chosen via means that we have collaboratively created. And we will know that we have truly embarked on this path when we can accept what the false idol of the omniscient market promised to eliminate: the irreducibility of political conflict. We must not imagine that agreement will automatically result if ideological blinders (such as categories of race, gender, or sexuality) or other extrinsic obstacles are removed, nor should we think that the people's will, when truly expressed, necessarily carries with it positive results.

Both these fantasies rest on the idea that, underneath it all, the interests of the people and the means to those ends are objectively determinable. Yet the ultimate lesson of political theology is that no such final answer exists. We are always thrown back on our own devices. Human beings *must* create their own structures of meaning and legitimacy because there is no one else who can create them. Even if a structure of meaning and legitimacy did come down from heaven, we would still have to decide whether to accept it, and there would doubtless be considerable conflict and dissent around the question. Meaning and legitimacy are irreducibly human products, and that means that they are inevitably the result of human creativity, struggle, and conflict. Harnessing, taming, and (where possible) resolving that conflict will take more than elections or consumer choices—those centuries-old decision-making technologies that at best represent training wheels for a “world come of age”—and it may well take more than debate and persuasion. We will need to confront the question of “who decides” as a genuine question rather than a rhetorical conversation-stopper.

In the end, though, I cannot claim to know exactly what will be required or what the end result will look like, nor can anyone else. What I do know is that the alternative is to live in a world where we are continually entrapped into endorsing our own exploitation and subordination, a world where we are forced into complicity with oppression and irreversible environmental destruction. It would be more comfortable to believe that the invisible hand will find a way out or that the forces of historical progress will rescue us. Yet surely, at this late date, we can recognize that those Gods are just as dead as their medieval predecessor. And what I want to suggest in closing is that this fact is not to be lamented, but embraced. The political theological paradigm of the future will not seek to resurrect a dead God, but will start from the premise that no one can deliver us from this body of death but us.

## NOTES

### *Introduction*

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2. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon, 2001).

3. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

4. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 189–219.

5. Will Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty, and the Logic of Competition*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), xxii.

6. Davies is a notable exception to this rule, as he makes frequent reference to the necessity of state action to neoliberalism and, in fact, explicitly cites Schmitt's theory of sovereign emergency powers throughout *The Limits of Neoliberalism*.

### *Chapter 1*

1. Perhaps the most widely read recent example is George Monbiot, "Neoliberalism—The Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems," *Guardian*, April 15, 2016, [www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot).

2. Milton Friedman, "Neo-Liberalism and Its Prospects," in *The Indispensable Milton Friedman: Essays on Politics and Economics*, ed. Lanny Ebenstein (Washington, DC:

Regnery, 2012), 3–9; subsequent citations will be given in-text. I owe this reference to Dotan Leshem.

3. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2013).

4. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Harvey, *Brief History*, 3.

6. See Harvey, *Brief History*, chap. 5. For an argument that China has diverged substantially from the neoliberal path, see Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2007), 353–61.

7. See Pierrot Dardot and Christian Laval's critique in *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2013), 9.

8. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: Zone, 2015).

9. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

10. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

11. This holds not only in Jodi Dean's work but also in Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (New York: Zero, 2008), which remains perhaps our best account of how it feels to live under neoliberalism.

12. This is the case also for Maurizio Lazzarato's analysis of neoliberalism in terms of Deleuze and Guattari in *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), insofar as he emphasizes Deleuze and Guattari's continuity with both Marx and Foucault.

13. One of the only major attempts to use political theology as a lens for grasping neoliberalism is Eric Santner, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy*, ed. Kevis Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). It is evocative enough to amply demonstrate the promise of this approach, but it represents only a preliminary presentation of Santner's project in the form of published lectures.

14. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleia Assmann and Jan Assmann, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16.

15. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

16. See Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," trans. Rodney Livingston, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 288–91.

17. See John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Michael Naas, *Derrida from Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Martin Häggglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

18. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

19. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. David Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). The Italian text was originally published in 1995, but Agamben had discussed the figure of the *homo sacer*, or sacred man (who may be killed with impunity but not sacrificed), as early as *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), which originally appeared in 1982.

20. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2009), §4.1.

21. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 203–4.

22. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 4.

23. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 5.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

25. I argue that *The Kingdom and the Glory* and Agamben's subsequent theologically oriented works are concerned with neoliberalism in specific in "The Theology of Neoliberalism," in Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko, *Agamben's Coming Philosophy: Finding a New Use for Theology* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015), 183–200.

26. See Harvey, *Brief History*, 29, 73.

27. Harvey, *Brief History*, 85.

28. See Joshua Ramey, *Politics of Divination: Neoliberal Endgame and the Religion of Contingency* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016); and Joseph Vogl, *Specters of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

29. See Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

30. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 216.

31. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 218.

32. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 210. Ramey expands on Brown's comments to claim that neoliberalism is a political theology (see *Politics of Divination*, 151), but he does so in the more narrow sense that I am attempting to break with here.

33. Will Davies's *Limits of Neoliberalism* is again an exception to this generalization because he defines neoliberalism as "the disenchantment of politics by economics" (6)—in other words, as a transformation of politics, not an abolition or simply shunting aside of politics—and argues that the disturbing thing about the emergency measures taken around the financial crisis was not that they used state power as such, but that they suspended the previously nonnegotiable rules of economic policy (chap. 5).

34. This connection between neoliberalism and neoconservatism on the level of

practical politics in the United States has been masterfully documented in Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone, 2017).

35. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26.

36. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 27.

37. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 48.

38. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 49.

39. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 49.

40. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

41. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 35.

42. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

43. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 78.

44. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63–64.

45. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

46. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 45.

47. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 45–46.

48. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009). My use of this term is inspired by Philip Goodchild's approach in *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

49. I have traced one historical trajectory of the intertwining of the problem of evil and the problem of legitimacy in *The Prince of This World*. There, for the sake of convenience, I chose to designate particular historical approaches to the problem of political theology as “paradigms,” a practice I will continue in the present volume.

50. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 51.

51. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 50.

52. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 187.

53. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 82.

54. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 83.

55. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 94–95.

## Chapter 2

1. Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 7.

2. Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 9.

3. Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 9.

4. Dardot and Laval, *New Way of the World*, 12.

5. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2014).

6. The classic articulation of Žižek's position remains his first major publication, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989). For my account of the development

neoliberalism. The key difference is that I view debt as a symptom of the phenomenon of moral entrapment I call demonization rather than the root problem.

26. Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, 45–46.

27. See Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, 74 and passim.

28. I owe this insight to Vogl, *Specters of Capital*.

29. See Donald McKenzie, “End-of-the-World Trade,” *London Review of Books*, May 8, 2008, 24–26, [www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n09/donald-mackenzie/end-of-the-world-trade](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n09/donald-mackenzie/end-of-the-world-trade). Thank you to Kevin Sanchez for helping me track down this article.

30. Particularly striking is then-Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan’s refusal to acknowledge the possibility that multiple simultaneous local real-estate bubbles added up to a national bubble. See Edmund L. Andrews, “Greenspan Is Concerned About ‘Froth’ in Housing,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/05/21/business/greenspan-is-concerned-about-froth-in-housing.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/21/business/greenspan-is-concerned-about-froth-in-housing.html). I owe this reference to Mike Konczal.

31. Cooper, *Family Values*, 152.

### Conclusion

1. This omission is all the more puzzling given that Schmitt published the initial versions of the essays that would become *Political Theology* in publications dedicated to Max Weber; see Taubes, *To Carl Schmitt*, 4.

2. Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), xv.

3. See Curt Mills, “Sanders Says He’ll Work With Trump on Trade: Credit Earned with Liberals like Sanders Is Met with Hesitation by Some in Trump’s Own Party,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 24, 2017, [www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-01-24/bernie-sanders-says-hell-work-with-trump-on-trade-while-some-gopers-wary](http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-01-24/bernie-sanders-says-hell-work-with-trump-on-trade-while-some-gopers-wary).

4. Peter Frase, “Social Democracy’s Breaking Point,” *Jacobin*, June 30, 2016, unpaginated, [www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/social-democracy-polanyi-great-transformation-welfare-state](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/social-democracy-polanyi-great-transformation-welfare-state).

5. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 242.

6. Michal Kalecki, “Political Aspects of Full Employment,” *Political Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1943): 322–31.

7. Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 273.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, enl. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1997). Subsequent citations will be given in-text.

9. Peter Frase discusses an experiment with market pricing of parking spaces, with the aim of guaranteeing a steady supply of spaces rather than making profit for a private investor, in *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2016), 113–16.