

**Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.**

David B. Lott, Washington, DC

Rhetoric around neoliberalism has not been in short supply recently, in academic or political circles, or even in popular and social media. What too often has been lacking, however, is truly insightful and useful discourse about the effects neoliberal values and policies are having on the vast majority of the world's population. Definitions of what neoliberalism entails and where one may witness its powers—or if it even exists!—seem to vary widely among those who invoke it. Clear, common expressions of what precisely the term means are hard to come by. Instead, it becomes a label either to assign scorn or to identify injury. When its opponents brand a supposed proponent with the designation of “neoliberal” (which is hardly ever a self-designation), the term not only functions as a cudgel wielded against that person or their views, but it also serves to intimidate anyone who would challenge the merit of that neoliberal identification. The reasons for this should be self-evident. When applied toward those considered its subjects or victims, neoliberalism often takes on a diagnostic form, but without considering the pitfalls associated with diagnosis. That is, it often misses the particularities of the one being diagnosed, reducing their identity to that diagnosis, thus remanding them to the ever-growing inventory of neoliberal casualties with little, if any, agency to change their condition.

In *Neoliberalism's Demons*, Adam Kotsko acknowledges upfront the contested nature of the rhetoric surrounding neoliberalism. He immediately sets forth his understandings of what neoliberalism entails and from whence it emerged, further developing his definition throughout: “Neoliberalism is a totalizing world order, an integral self-reinforcing system of political theology.” And then, the kicker: “and it has progressively transformed our world into a living hell” (95). But this excoriation is not just another reiteration of the aforementioned insult rhetoric. It only comes nearly three quarters into the book, after he has first traced a genealogy for neoliberalism and then presented an intricate methodology for reading this genealogy through the lens of political theology.

Kotsko's genealogy begins with nineteenth-century “classical liberalism,” following Polanyi's construction, where politics represented the realm of freedom, and economics the sphere of control and necessity. Following World War II, this laissez-faire economic world collapsed into what he and others have called “Fordism,” in which workers were economically empowered to be consumers of the products that they manufactured. Fordism is widely credited with creating the idyllic American middle class, even as that was built on nuclear family ideals which privileged whiteness, heterosexuality, and male authority. The ground for the demise of the Fordist era was laid during the 1970s, first when America left behind the gold standard in 1971, and then accelerated by the energy crisis later in the decade. Reagan's ascendancy to the presidency in 1980 consolidated neoliberalism's coup, as he and other Western leaders repositioned the world economy to privilege free markets and those who were best able to take advantage of them. Classical

liberalism was now effectively reversed: the political became the realm of necessity and economics the realm of freedom.

Kotsko's genealogy here undergirds his larger and more exciting goal, which, as he states, "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" (16). The first half of his book pursues that latter agenda, providing a close analysis of major literature on political theology of the past century, from Agamben to Žižek, especially as it pertains to the eventual rise of neoliberalism. Kotsko identifies two basic ways as to how political theology has been approached: (1) as politically engaged theology, exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. or liberation theology; and (2) as "practices that seem to treat politics as a religion" (17). But Kotsko does not want to relegate political theology simply to theistic discourse, but to imagine larger ideas of how communities confer legitimacy upon their governmental systems and make sense of suffering. Thus, he defines political theology as "a holistic, genealogical inquiry into the structures of and sources of legitimacy in a particular historical moment" (128).

Kotsko's concern to interrogate those structures and sources of legitimacy drives much of his book's argument, especially his resistance to any sort of political theology that professes normativity (as he sees in both Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt). His purpose here, in part, is to overcome the perceived binary between the political and the economic, a dyad that many thinkers have been determined to maintain in one form or another. He attends at length to what he calls "Arendt's axiom," "the view that the political and economic realms are qualitatively distinct in a way that implies a hierarchal relationship between the two" (52), with the political being privileged as the realm of freedom. Here he brings Agamben into conversation with Arendt, showing how the genealogical narrative Agamben presents in *The Kingdom and the Glory* undercuts Arendt's axiom's claims to "a pregiven distinction between the political and the economic" (10). Recent work by Dotan Leshem, Mark C. Taylor, Philip Goodchild, Joshua Ramey, and Eric Santner shows further how Arendt's axiom represents an exception, not the norm. In neoliberalism, the economic, far from being subservient to the political, is considered the realm of freedom.

Understanding how things came to this point entails examining the Christian doctrine of free will and the related peculiar thinking in the early church about the fall of the devil. Kotsko states, "The first thing God does is induce some of his creatures to 'rebel' against a meaningless imperious demand, to ensure there will be a reservoir of evil for him to turn toward the greater good" (84). In other words, Christian thought about original sin has to do with the failure of the will. This establishes human blameworthiness before God, even among infants. Kotsko sees neoliberalism as essentially reproducing this dynamic: it sets humans up to fail by granting us limited agency so that our blameworthiness can be established if we should move outside the demands of the market. The "invisible hand" of the market takes up the God role, able to convert our self-interested actions into a greater good. "Free will" thus becomes a trap. Our agency to choose behaviours freely is far more constrained than it appears, shaped by heteronormativity, white supremacy, sexism and misogyny, and aimed toward conformity. Human freedom under neoliberalism becomes a mechanism to generate blameworthiness. Thus, rather than demonizing neoliberalism in the way that he asserts Wendy Brown does in her *Undoing the Demos*, he "shows how neoliberalism demonizes us" (73).

Kotsko's arguments throughout are remarkably economical and efficient. He marshals his sources in such a way that one need not have deep familiarity with the texts and thinkers he cites in order to grasp the pertinent arguments. Biblical studies professors considering this work should note that only in the final chapter does he engage the Bible, comparing two texts from 1 and 2 Thessalonians to underscore earlier points about how different eras may view their political-economic circumstances as either triumphal or apocalyptic. But those who would teach from this text, perhaps in an upper-level undergraduate course, can build off that example for doing further political-economic biblical reading. And, on a few occasions, Kotsko's efficiency fails him slightly, such as when he juxtaposes "neoconservatives" as a right-wing foil or "frenemy" to neoliberals without interrogating that term closely. Still, his larger point that neoliberalism has broad ownership across political positions stands, and he is shrewd in showing how the left and right tend to play "good cop-bad cop" in the blameworthiness game.

For Kotsko, neoliberalism was neither a logical nor inevitable move past Fordism (just as Fordism was not preordained as the successor to classical liberalism). That contingent nature leaves it vulnerable to be undone. But Kotsko sees no viable alternative in the wings, not even a modified form of Fordism for which some, like Brown, seem to wish. The question lurking in the book's background is, Where does the election of Donald Trump fit into this picture? Kotsko figures him not as an anomaly or a sign of neoliberalism's imminent collapse, but as a perverse product of its demonizing tendencies. Recent developments seem to bear out this judgment. As I write, the U.S. House is holding presidential impeachment hearings, while Trump and his allies scramble to shore up his damaged sense of legitimacy, move against his perceived enemies, and further unravel the already badly fraying social safety net ahead of the 2020 elections, anticipating possible defeat. At the same time, the Democrats' presidential nomination process is devolving into internal arguments over the perceived threat of "socialist" (or democratic socialist) policy proposals, such as Medicare-for-All.

Yet Kotsko also sees signs that tolerance for the stresses and discouragements produced by neoliberalism is waning, particularly among younger generations who resist its claims to self-legitimacy. When one amasses huge amounts of student debt that can only be eliminated by entering into constant competition with one's peers for high-paying jobs, rather than pursuing lower-compensation work that speaks more to one's passions, neoliberalism betrays its promise of freedom. Those compelled to work gig-economy jobs with no health, vacation, or pension benefits are at once restrained in their choices but also held responsible for struggles not of their making. Something has to give; people will not long settle for being diagnosed as living under the stresses of neoliberalism without some tangible hope of relief. Kotsko's best hope is that we can move to an economic model in which the necessities of life—food, shelter, health care, education—are guaranteed through the state, and there is a limited free market for consumer goods. But even that hope is muted.



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