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Economic Theology and the Death of God in the Context of the Crisis of Neoliberalism

Abstract

In light of the ongoing political and economic crises in the twenty-first century, this study aims to apply the discourse of political theology, alongside Nietzsche's concept of the death of God to an understanding of neoliberalism and the problems it faces on a global level. However, because of the centrality of sovereignty in political theological discourse and the view of neoliberalism as diffusing sovereignty in favor of an ordered system, I attempt to further develop an offshoot discourse of political theology referred to as economic theology. This discourse allows a theological signature of power to be traced through the history of Western governmentality that is continually rationalized over time. The fact that this rationalization, I argue, culminates in the contemporary neoliberal order which, by exteriorizing and alienating knowledge in the name of rationality, undermines this process of rationalization and leads directly to the crises that are currently being faced, illustrates the after effects of the death of God as Nietzsche announced it in the nineteenth century. As such, the crisis of neoliberalism as a manifestation of the death of God necessitates that we disabuse ourselves of the illusion of neoliberalism as an ordered system and embrace a perspectivist, paralogical mode of knowledge legitimation.

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Economic Theology and the Death of God in the Context of the Crisis of Neoliberalism

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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Master of Arts

by

Jared A. Lacy

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ABSTRACT

In light of the ongoing political and economic crises in the twenty-first century, this study aims to apply the discourse of political theology, alongside Nietzsche's concept of the death of God to an understanding of neoliberalism and the problems it faces on a global level. However, because of the centrality of sovereignty in political theological discourse and the view of neoliberalism as diffusing sovereignty in favor of an ordered system, I attempt to further develop an offshoot discourse of political theology referred to as economic theology. This discourse allows a theological signature of power to be traced through the history of Western governmentality that is continually rationalized over time. The fact that this rationalization, I argue, culminates in the contemporary neoliberal order which, by exteriorizing and alienating knowledge in the name of rationality, undermines this process of rationalization and leads directly to the crises that are currently being faced, illustrates the after effects of the death of God as Nietzsche announced it in the nineteenth century. As such, the crisis of neoliberalism as a manifestation of the death of God necessitates that we disabuse ourselves of the illusion of neoliberalism as an ordered system and embrace a perspectivist, paralogical mode of knowledge legitimation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

From where we stand in the twenty-first century, the world appears weary. The naïve, end-of-history optimism of the late twentieth century has all but vanished, after over twenty years of nearly unrelenting crisis and mounting catastrophe. In the skies overhead we can everywhere see Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, as described by Walter Benjamin, watching “wreckage” piled “upon wreckage” as the “debris before him grows skyward.”¹ From the attacks of September 11th; to the financial crisis of 2008; to the global mounting of nationalist sentiments in the 2010s; to the Covid-19 pandemic; to the Russian invasion of Ukraine; to renewed attacks on gay, trans, and women’s rights in the U.S., a sense of catastrophe as entered the public consciousness. However, public discourse seems tailor-made to heighten the disorienting nature of these crises. This is, I believe—over and above any attempt by the representatives of capital to capitalize on fear, confusion, and rage (and I do believe that such attempts are a factor)—a product of the breakdown of a rationalizing systems-theory of the world that has informed a progress oriented view of history and governance.

The aim of this work, then, is to address these crises of liberalism in the neoliberal era with an eye to the underlying logics of neoliberalism itself, through a discourse that is closely connected to the discourse of political theology as it has been inherited from Carl

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 201.

Schmitt. However, given the central theme of sovereignty in the discourse of political theology, and the fact that, despite a global shift to the right in recent years, these crises are coming to pass under the purview of a far reaching, global neoliberal regime, which complicates the concept of sovereignty and makes it diffuse or phantasmic, along with the fact that, properly speaking, neoliberalism constitutes a move away from the transcendence of the sovereign decider toward an immanent order that is supposed to effectively govern itself by recourse to immutable economic laws, a political theological approach becomes complicated. I aim then to develop an economic theology, or a politico-economic theology, that traces the theological signature of political theology beyond the political into the realm of the *oikos* as the site where necessity is confronted. By taking this approach, I hope to show that, in spite of the fact that the crises that bombard our newsfeeds and scholarship take on the appearance of irrational outbursts in a formerly-sane-world-gone-mad, there is no political (as the term is commonly understood) response to which we have recourse to address the state of liberalism in the twenty-first century. In this way, it is necessary to question the centrality of the political in the genealogical movement of the theological signature that shapes the modes of power and governance that currently hold sway. This corresponds to Agamben's²

² Based on the nature of the topic of this thesis, Agamben's work comes up frequently throughout, and is ultimately unavoidable in an attempt to formulate economic theology in the way that I am. However, I also wish to note that, in recent years, he has used his own theories to advance denials of the Covid pandemic and conspiracy theories about safety measures that have been put in place. While these stances on the pandemic have largely centered around his theory of *homo sacer* and here I am primarily drawing on his genealogy of *oikonomia* in Western systems of power, these two aspects of his work are certainly not neatly delineated. They bleed into each other. Yet, I see this primarily as an instance in which the theorist does not live up to their own theory. I think that there are far better ways that the theory of *homo sacer* could be applied in the context of the pandemic. For instance, one could consider the way in which low paid retail and restaurant employees were forced to work in hazardous conditions, alongside truly essential workers in medical and other vital fields, strictly in the interests of capital. Thus, I have chosen to include

observation at the outset of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, that “power in the West has assumed the form of an *oikonomia*.”³ Thus, I propose to trace a genealogical trail of power, as a theological signature of governance, that moves through and beyond the political in the direction of an ongoing rationalization that is culminating in the self-unraveling that we are witnessing today. This questioning problematizes not only Schmitt’s conception of the political as the friend/enemy distinction, but also the political as an avenue of liberation put forth by thinkers such as Rancière, Žižek, and Wendy Brown. What we are left with, when we see the foreclosure of the political through the lens of the inevitability of its own weakness and derivative status, is the realization of nihilism as a historical movement that has shaped and directed this rationalization in catastrophic directions. In other word, through the lens of an economic theology that traces the immanent order of neoliberalism to the theological concept of providence it becomes clear that God is dead, the idol has rung hollow.

In Chapter Two I will begin by laying out the foundations of political theology as I understand them. The discipline of political theology, in the sense that is of interest to this project, emerged in the 1980s through a renewed interest in the work of the controversial German legal theorist Carl Schmitt. It is Schmitt’s work that has served to define the terms and parameters of what political theology has developed into. In this sense, the questions of sovereignty and secularization lie at the heart of the discourse of political theology. What is important in this foundation is, in particular, the relationship

Agamben’s research in this project because I do not believe that the theory itself is deeply compromised, in spite of a bad instance of its application.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), xi.

that political theology theorizes between the secular and the theological, which I intend to carry over into my discussion of economic theology. Because neoliberalism is conceived of as a move from transcendence to immanence, it is necessary to highlight the fact that to invoke economic theology, or political theology before it, is not to suggest the view that the economic or the political are in fact vehicles of theological belief, that neoclassical economists theorize the way that they do because, deep down, they do believe that there is a Christian God that has arranged the universe in such a way that economy works as they suppose it does. Instead, I suggest that the metaphysical structure of the belief in the universe as an ordered system is related to a previous theological cosmology that has become secularized, in particular, through a process of rationalization that has actively undermined the theological belief that spawned it.

Next, I explain the recent surge in popularity of political theology, in light of the crises that I am discussing, and the view that they constitute an ongoing state of exception, and a desire for a Schmittian strong decider to navigate through stormy weather. Schmitt states that

it is ... the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty ... He decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it. Although he stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety.⁴

In this light, then, law itself is seen as an emanation of this miraculous decision. The relationship between law and the sovereign who gives and suspends—or gives by suspending—the law is one of transcendence. However, I then point to the ways in

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985),7.

which the crises emerge precisely from the neoliberal order, and cannot, then, be seen as merely an aberrant interruption of the order that a decider could simply step in and correct. Rather, neoliberalism, as the culmination of nihilism as a historical movement, must be seen as the ongoing state of exception and not the norm that has receded into the background. Thus, the need for an economic theology to address the theological signature of sovereignty despite the fact that, under neoliberalism, sovereignty is difficult to identify.

In Chapter Three, I then layout the genealogy of economic theology in light of the fact that the distinction between the political and the economic has become—in large part through the development of the social—quite muddled and difficult to delineate. In my view this necessitates a genealogy that revokes the centrality of the political as the carrier of the theological germ, in favor of the economic as the base upon which the political superstructure is built. In other words, throughout the course of the political history of the West, the economic has undergirded the formations of political power, such that the true genealogical trace of theology in power takes place in the economic, in the management of the household, and the means of production. Section 3.2 then traces the genealogy of the rationalization that leads from theological belief to the immanent order of neoliberalism under what Foucault calls the regime of truth. This developmental process illustrates the supplanting of the political that I am addressing on a historical and governmental level. Likewise, it culminates in the development of neoliberalism in which, as demonstrated by Friedrich Hayek’s own descriptions of it, the process of rationalization becomes adequate to its concept by virtue of its own self-destruction.

Chapter Four, then, outlines in more detailed way, the fact that, in this light, neoliberalism signals the development of the postmodern condition, while itself maintaining a modernist orientation, i.e., legitimating itself by recourse to metanarrative. This means that neoliberalism is the culmination of a rationalization that results in an exteriorization and alienation of knowledge, on the basis of a hyper-rationalized knowledge, that is forced to assert this knowledge of the system on the basis of the system's unknowability. This development is aided by parallel developments such as cybernetics and software programming. These developments illustrate the kind of system's theory that underlies neoliberalism, and reaches the point where the Enlightenment thinking that propels rationalization heightens the opacity of the system in question. Behind this opacity, the illusion of the system begins to breakdown in light of the ghostly and unpredictable outcomes that cannot be accounted for by the system. In the world of software these take the form of glitches, and the "ghost in the machine." However, on a societal level the ghostly signals more dire consequences such as the crises we are facing on a global level, and can be equated to the death of God.

Here, nihilism comes into the fore of my discussion, in that the devaluation of values that takes place as the neoliberal system begins to glitch with greater and greater ferocity, signals the possibility for a new dispensation of values, per Nietzsche via Heidegger. Thus, in section 4.2 I look at the way in which Nietzsche's revaluation of all values constitutes a morality that is completely other than the morality that he rejects in his *Genealogy of Morals*. Likewise, since morality and truth, and by extension knowledge, are intimately tied together, I frame this Nietzschean conception of truth/morality—probity, in Jean-Luc Nancy terms—through the lens of perspectivism and

paralogy through Lyotard's report on knowledge in the postmodern condition. This points very tentatively toward the possibility of transnational solidarities as a means of struggle against the global order of neoliberalism.

Finally, I conclude by suggesting that, from a Western positionality, this reformulation of knowledge and morality constitutes a mode of critique that relieves the Western subject of the intergenerational burden of attempting to erase the space between word and action. It opens this subjectivity up to the possibility of listening to and being shaped by other ways of knowing and being in light of an understanding that one's own narratives of knowledge legitimation are local and limited and not universal. I suggest that a possible avenue of future research could include an investigation of the potential for this mode of critique as a way to incorporate decolonizing projects into Western academia without appropriating them through the kinds of terrorist totalization that Lyotard wants to reject.

Chapter Two: Political and Economic Theology

2.1 The Foundations of Political Theology

It is commonplace to assert that religion has, at times, had either direct or indirect influence on politics. That this was the case during medieval history and ancient history at various times and to various degrees is well known. Likewise, this truism was a major concern during the Bush/post-9/11 years in the form of the rise of the religious right, and inflects a certain understanding of the concept of the post-secular; the idea that—in light of Bush’s emphasis on “faith-based initiatives” and the view of the attacks of 9/11 as being religiously motivated—religion was once again, after a period of secularization, a major factor in the world. However, this mundane insight and the conception of the secular/post-secular is not what is invoked by the concept of political theology. Political theology does not connote the basic understanding that politics is or has been influenced by religion. It is not a thesis on the relationship between religion and politics as two distinct arenas of the human world; a view under which secularism and the process of secularization is the legitimate mechanism for separating their inappropriate relationality. Instead, political theology bears a more complex relationship with the concept of secularization and the secular. It is intertwined with the secular in an intimate way. In a famous and frequently quoted passage from Carl Schmitt’s book, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Schmitt states that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts ... because of their

systematic structure.”⁵ Thus, in order to understand the implications of political theology it is necessary to develop a critical understanding of the concept of the secular; an understanding that belies a secularism that brooks an easy division between the secular and the post-secular.

In his book, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Giorgio Agamben says that

it is perfectly well known that this concept [secularization] has performed a strategic function in modern culture—that it is, in this sense, a concept of the “politics of ideas,” something that “in the realm of ideas has always already found an enemy with whom to fight for dominance.”⁶

This is in line with the way that Max Weber understands secularization in “his famous thesis about the secularization of Puritan asceticism in the capitalist ethics of work,” in that “the apparent neutrality of his diagnosis cannot hide its function in the battle he was fighting against fanatics and false prophets for the disenchantment of the world.”⁷ Thus, we can see that “Schmitt’s strategy is, in a certain sense the opposite of Weber’s” to the extent that “for Schmitt it shows ... that, in modernity theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way.”⁸ In this sense, theology works through secularization as what Agamben calls a *signature*, “in the sense of Foucault and Melandri ... that is, something that in a sign or concept marks and exceeds such a sign or concept referring it

⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

⁶ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 3.

⁷ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 3.

⁸ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 3-4.

back to a determinate interpretation or field, without for this reason leaving the semiotic to constitute a new meaning or a new concept.”⁹

In this light, it would not be correct to read Schmitt as saying that politics in the modern world are *actually* religious. Talal Asad is on the right track when he rejects the idea that “if one stripped appearances one would see that some apparently secular institutions were *really* religious,” and, rather, assumes “that there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines ‘sacred language’ or ‘sacred experience.’”¹⁰ In his book, *Formations of the Secular*, Asad attempts to develop an anthropology of the secular, wherein he highlights his understanding of the secular around “changes in the grammar of concepts—that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices.”¹¹ Here, he also employs a semiotic method for understanding the secular in relation to what he calls myth and religion. Likewise, his emphasis on “the differential results” of secularization is not altogether antithetical to Schmitt’s understanding of secularization.¹² As Agamben states, Schmitt’s secularization “does not necessarily imply an identity of substance between theology and modernity, or a perfect identity of meaning between theological and political concepts.”¹³ Yet, Asad insists on understanding Schmitt’s project as an acceptance “that secularized concepts

⁹ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

¹⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

¹¹ Asad, 25.

¹² Asad, 189.

¹³ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

retain a *religious essence*.”¹⁴ However, this is in part due to the fact that Asad glosses over Schmitt’s use of the term *theology*, focusing instead on the idea of religious essences.

By focusing on the term *religion*, Asad calls to mind the image of a reified essence as part of a mutual system of easy assumptions, *religious* vs. *secular*; a circular, self-referential set of definitions through mutual negations. Something is religious because it is not secular, and vice-versa. From here Asad attempts to move beyond the circular reasoning that he ascribes to Michael Taussig, insisting that, in Taussig’s analysis, “the category of the secular itself remains unexamined.”¹⁵ Asad’s summation of Taussig’s argument is here illuminating: “Once its rational-legal mask is removed, so it is suggested, the modern state will reveal itself to be far from secular.”¹⁶

While not mentioning political theology directly, one can read between the lines of Asad’s investigation of the secular, and his reference to Schmitt, to see a critique of political theology as an undercurrent of his “exploration of epistemological assumptions of the secular.”¹⁷ Where Asad sees in political theology a focus on “corresponding forms,” he misses the fact that, instead, the function of the signature of theology in political theology is exactly a means for identifying results, differential or otherwise.

Thus, while Asad criticizes Taussig for

complain[ing] that the Weberian notion of the rational legal state’s monopoly of violence fails to address ‘the intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting,

¹⁴ Asad, 189.

¹⁵ Asad, 23.

¹⁶ Asad, 22.

¹⁷ Asad, 25.

plain scary, mythical, and arcane cultural properties and power of violence to the point where violence is very much an end in itself—a sign, as Benjamin put it, “of the existence of the gods,”¹⁸

he misses the fact that, in identifying the signature of violence at play “as what defined [for Weber] the modern State,”¹⁹ the point is precisely results that obtain far more so than essences. Essences, religious or otherwise, are indeed, as Asad insists mutable and subject to change in different cultural and historical circumstances. Such is the very premise of the function of the signature and its related “pseudoconcepts” as Agamben calls them, such as “Foucault’s archaeology and Nietzsche’s genealogy,” which have come to underpin the logic of political theology.²⁰ Deleuze outlines this aspect of Nietzsche’s genealogy in his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in terms of the will to knowledge and of Nietzsche’s “active science” as “capable of discovering active forces and also of recognizing reactive forces for what they are—forces.”²¹ According to Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche this active science is broken down into three forms, which include

a *symptomatology*, since it interprets phenomena, treating them as symptoms whose sense must be sought in the forces that produce them. A *typology*, since it interprets forces from the standpoint of their quality, be it active or reactive. A *genealogy*, since it evaluates the origin of forces from the point of view of their nobility or baseness, since it discovers their ancestry in the will to power and the quality of this will.²²

¹⁸ Asad, 22.

¹⁹ Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 116.

²⁰ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 4.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 75.

²² Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 75.

What is important for this discussion is that at the heart of political theology, as informed by the genealogical method, is an understanding of forces that belies the very tendency to essentialize religion that Asad attempts to denounce. As Nietzsche says, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed.”²³

The problem with Asad’s analysis is that, after correctly identifying a problem in certain discourse around the concepts of the secular and the religious, he 1) misattributes this problem to political theology (largely by failing to recognize political theology altogether) and 2) begins to analyze and address this problem through what might be called, in contrast to Nietzsche’s active science, a reactive science that operates by “replacing real relations between forces by an abstract relation.”²⁴ Attending to the second of Asad’s two missteps will both correct the first and effectively demonstrate what political theology is and does. Reactive science is characterized by Deleuze as an “ignorance of origins and of the genealogy of forces.”²⁵ Thus, Asad’s critique of a focus on corresponding forms, contra the genealogical method, fails to do away with the fiction of the doer in favor of a lineage of active forces, and instead relies on “a blind and chance mechanistic hooking-together of ideas, or ... something purely passive, automatic, reflexive, molecular.”²⁶ This manifests most vividly in the emphasis on differential

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45.

²⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 74.

²⁵ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 73.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 24.

results, which orients Asad to the secular in a distinctly utilitarian mode. This can be seen in the fact that Asad “assume[s] that there were breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones.”²⁷ Likewise, Asad makes an admission by saying, “I point to the violence intrinsic to [liberalism] but caution that liberalism’s secular myth should not be confused with the redemptive myth of Christianity, despite a resemblance between them.”²⁸

In both of these quotes Asad emphasizes a sense of arbitrariness in the relation of the secular to the religious. Thus, Asad delves into an account of liberalism inundated by the utilitarianism of Nietzsche’s “will to truth” while falling short of the point where it “becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*.”²⁹ In other words, his focus on differential results places him in the position of asking whether an action is “useful or harmful.”³⁰ While, in response to his interpretation of Taussig’s criticism of the secular State, he moves beyond the mythology of the secular that is defined by a rationality/irrationality binary, he maintains a position of one “who considers the action that he does not perform ... as something to evaluate from the standpoint of the advantage which he draws or can draw from it.”³¹ Granted, Asad is not postulating the benefits of the secular from the standpoint of individual avarice as in something that he can profit from over and above

²⁷ Asad, 25.

²⁸ Asad, 26.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 161.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 74.

³¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 74.

any other member of the secularized world. However, Asad describes as “striking” an “image” that Margaret Canovan “employs to present and defend liberalism”³² which calls for one to embrace the myth of reason despite the fact that reason itself has made the foundation of the myth untenable, which is that “liberal thinking [is] attached to a distinctive conception of nature as deep reality.”³³ Instead, says Asad

Canovan believes that liberalism can be defended only by recognizing and drawing openly on its great myth. “For liberalism never has been an account of the world ... but a project to be realized. The ‘nature’ of early liberalism, the ‘humanity’ of our own day, may be talked about as if they already exist but the point of talking about them is that they are still to be created.”³⁴

In this we see the process that Deleuze describes, step by step, in illuminating what the will to truth wants. “The concept of truth,” says Deleuze, “describes a ‘truthful’ world ... But a truthful world presupposes a truthful man as its centre.”³⁵ This, then, raises the question of “who is this truthful man” and “what does he want?” Deleuze gives two hypotheses to answer this question: “First hypothesis: he wants not to be deceived” and “another hypothesis: *I want the truth means I do not want to deceive.*”³⁶ Because the first hypothesis “presupposes the truthfulness of the world itself” the will to truth cannot be in any way “dangerous and harmful.”³⁷ However, Nietzsche asserts that “the will to

³² Asad, 59.

³³ Asad, 57.

³⁴ Asad, 58-59.

³⁵ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 95.

³⁶ Deleuze, 95.

³⁷ Deleuze, 95.

truth ... is still going to tempt us to many a hazardous enterprise,”³⁸ an assertion that seems to be borne out by our contemporary, ongoing state of exception. Thus, “the will to truth had to be formed ‘in spite of the danger and the uselessness of the truth at any price.’”³⁹ Under the second hypothesis, then, “if someone wills the truth it is not in the name of what the world is but in the name of what the world is *not*.”⁴⁰ The will to truth then posits a false world, a world of appearance. It “therefore opposes knowledge to life and to the world [it] opposes another world, a world-beyond, the truthful world.”⁴¹

Let us, then, look back on Canovan’s defense of liberalism in this light:

The frightening truth concealed by the liberal myth is, therefore, that liberal principles go against the grain of human and social nature. Liberalism is not a matter of clearing away a few accidental obstacles and allowing humanity to unfold its natural essence. It is more like *making a garden in a jungle that is continually encroaching* ... But it is precisely the element of truth in the gloomy pictures of society and politics drawn by critics of liberalism that makes the project of realizing liberal principles all the more urgent. *The world is a dark place, which needs redemption by the light of a myth.*⁴²

There are some key inversions that take place in this passage, namely “truth” is ascribed to the state of the world while “myth” is the ideal to be strived for. Nonetheless, the configuration remains the same, Deleuze’s description of the will to truth is simply covered over by the veneer of the secular myth. Thus, the false world of appearances

³⁸ Deleuze, 95.

³⁹ Deleuze, 95.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, 96.

⁴¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 96.

⁴² Asad, 59.

becomes the dangerous and dark world. Life remains an “error.”⁴³ In fact, this configuration only serves to more fully illustrate the outcome of Nietzsche’s genealogy of the will to truth, and with it the very tenets of political theology that Asad would deny. In other words, the liberal myth opposes what for Canovan is the true/evil world with the ideal/mythical world in “a distinction of moral origin, an *opposition of moral origin*.”⁴⁴ The liberal thus becomes Nietzsche’s ascetic priest. Not only does this understanding of liberalism allow liberals “to see themselves as ‘too good’ for this world,” but it also provides them with “the ‘supreme’ license for power.”⁴⁵ In the formulation that Asad gives via Canovan, one moves “*from the speculative position to the moral opposition, from the moral opposition to the ascetic contradiction*.” In a genealogical reading of this scenario the myth of secularism follows this process of ascetic contradiction which “is, in turn, a symptom which must be interpreted.”⁴⁶ However, for Asad what is decisive is the apparent differential results of this secular myth versus previous, premodern mythologies, wherein “the former is to be seen as an expression of law, the latter of transgression.”⁴⁷ In other words, in Asad’s view, the “violence required by the cultivation of enlightenment is therefore distinguished from the violence of the dark jungle.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 96.

⁴⁴ Deleuze, 96.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 97.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 96.

⁴⁷ Asad, 60.

⁴⁸ Asad, 60.

Asad, here, maintains an orientation toward “blind and chance” and the “mechanistic hooking-together of ideas,” favoring the “doer” over “becoming,” in that, of liberal violence, he says, “there is no fatality in this—as Adorno and Horkheimer claimed—no necessary unfolding of an Enlightenment essence. It is just a way some liberals have argued and acted.”⁴⁹ However, later he states that “we should not accept the mechanical idea of causality always and without question.”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, it is precisely political theology, with its reliance on the genealogical method and biopolitical discourse (and its variations) that attends to the “older sense of cause” that Asad wants to suggest: “cause is that which answers to the question ‘Why?’”⁵¹ A prime, recent, example of this can be found in Arthur Bradley’s book *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure*, which defines sovereignty on the basis of its power to decide on what constitutes life to begin with. In this direction, Bradley “focus[es] on a series of crucial ... moments in the canon of western political theology where a sovereign decision is taken that certain forms or modalities of life simply do not, could not, or will never exist.”⁵² Thus, while Asad wants to point to flimsy examples of the differential outcomes that result from his understanding of the secular, it is political theology that addresses *why* state violence persists with such strikingly parallel forms and justifications as it did in pre- and early modern times. In this light, to say that *all significant concepts of the*

⁴⁹ Asad, 60.

⁵⁰ Asad, 194.

⁵¹ Asad, 194.

⁵² Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 8-9.

modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, is not to posit some *actually* religious essence underlying ostensibly secular political institutions. Instead, the political institutions are, in fact, secular despite being forms that are occupied by the same forces that once occupied the theological concepts with which they are actively related.

2.2 Neoliberalism and the Problem of Sovereignty

At the heart of these secularized theological concepts is the concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty is, by Schmitt's definition, eminently miraculous, it is, analogically, the handiwork of God, in that, as Schmitt says, "sovereign is he who decides on the exception,"⁵³ and "the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology."⁵⁴ For Schmitt, sovereignty serves as the linchpin of his critique of constitutional liberalism, wherein he asserts that under the state of exception, law, or the norm, is completely dissolved, while, when the norm is in place, "the exception remains, nevertheless, accessible to jurisprudence because both elements, the norm as well as the decision, remain within the framework of the juristic."⁵⁵ Therefore, for Schmitt, and Bodin before him, sovereignty constitutes the fundamental basis of state power, and underlies whatever state power can be said to exist even in the most fully developed constitutional system of checks and balances. It is, thus, not quite incorrectly, most

⁵³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

⁵⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

⁵⁵ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

closely with associated with nationalist state power and political leaders that can be described as Schmittian strong deciders.

Following Schmitt, as well, since this can be seen to always underlie liberal democracy, liberal apologists in the neoliberal era see sovereignty as an ever present threat to the stability of the liberal order. In the introduction to his book, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction*, Saul Newman expresses this view, saying that:

the resurgence of authoritarian, nationalist and anti-immigrant populism in Europe, the United States and elsewhere represents a major challenge to liberal values of openness, toleration and human rights ... Indeed, it would seem that a major rift has opened between liberalism and democracy itself, as significant parts of the demos, animated by a desire for a return of “sovereignty,” turn their backs on globalization and multiculturalism and demand closed borders and a strong state.⁵⁶

To be sure, in the last decade we have, indeed, seen what could be described as a global shift to the right with the election of strong deciders and a desire for national sovereignty as a reaction to global neoliberalism. However, Newman’s comment that “in the era of globalisation, the problem of sovereignty becomes more acute,”⁵⁷ points to the problem of political theology under neoliberalism that I wish to address.

Extrapolating from Schmitt’s assertion that when the liberal norm obtains “the decision recedes to a minimum,”⁵⁸ under the global neoliberal order sovereignty is seen as a “phantasm.”⁵⁹ The result of this view has been that, since the outset of the twenty-first century, political theology, as a discourse, has seen a surge of popularity in academic

⁵⁶ Saul Newman, *Political Theology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 1.

⁵⁷ Newman, 1.

⁵⁸ Schmitt, 12.

⁵⁹ Newman, 1.

circles in light of the rise of populist authoritarian leaders and movements, as well as crises that challenge the stability of the neoliberal utopian vision. In other words, since the tenuous grasp that the liberal norm, via neoliberalism, held is now under serious threat of irrevocably breaking up, political theology is once again considered relevant. As I have briefly mentioned, the twenty-first century could be defined by an ongoing state of exception. In the United States, the century began with the catastrophe of the attacks of 9/11, an event which Slavoj Žižek has called a return to history, in reference to Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the end of history at the fall of the Soviet Union. In other words, it was a moment which signaled that, in fact, the democratic capitalism exemplified in neoliberalism had not finally and ultimately won out on the world stage. This return to history implicitly involved an interface between Western neoliberalism and a political theology other than the Christian political theology that Schmitt described, namely an Islamicist political theology. In many ways, this sparked a sense of reactionary, Islamophobic, and nationalistic political theology in the U.S. that can be seen as an opposite and equivalent phenomenon to Islamicist movements in the Middle East. It is a political relation in the strictest Schmittian terms, in that "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."⁶⁰ It was a vision of the world that rejected the cosmopolitan, multicultural globalization that fancied itself as the end of the friend/enemy distinction. Furthermore, while the neoliberal view of Islamicist movements has always been that of a backward primitivism in need of guidance in the ways of enlightened modernism, the political

⁶⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

theological—in the absolutely Schmittian sense—response to 9/11 was much more in line with Samuel Huntington’s view of a clash of civilizations that, no matter how modernized the other becomes they will always fundamentally be other.

This return to history, likewise, did not begin and end with the attacks of 9/11 and the reaction against them. In as much as neoliberalism was, is, and sees itself as global, the return-to-history reaction against it has likewise occurred on a global scale. In India a Hindu political theology, known as *Hindutva* (Hinduness), while existing as a movement since the days of British Colonial occupation, represents, largely, a parallel Hindu Islamophobia that has gained in force and political power especially over the course of the twenty-first century, culminating in the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India. Moreover, Achille Mbembe describes the contemporary global climate as a “Society of Enmity.”⁶¹ He points to “the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories ... as a laboratory for a number of techniques of control, surveillance, and separation that are today proliferating in other places on the planet.”⁶² In other words, the “we are the world” fantasy of the 80s and 90s has been shattered on a global scale. Furthermore, in the U.S. the state of exception continued with another crisis less than a decade after 9/11 with the 2008 financial crisis, which struck the heart of neoliberalism in a different but parallel way as did 9/11 in that, if Neoliberalism is seen as a global/cosmopolitan, economic order, 9/11 was a strike against the global/cosmopolitan fantasy, while 2008 was a strike against the economic fantasy. Subsequently, the second (and into the third)

⁶¹ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 42.

⁶² Mbembe, 44.

decade of the twenty-first century continued to see the development of the ongoing state of exception in the form of crises, war, and reactionary politics, an incomplete list of which includes, the “War on Terror,” anti-Islamic immigration policies in Europe and the U.S., the election of Trump in 2016, the humanitarian crisis on the southern border of the U.S., Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With all of this in mind it is not difficult to see the relevance of political theology in the Schmittian vein in the twenty-first century. Nor is it difficult to imagine why the neoliberal utopian fantasy might present itself as somewhat distantly plausible, if only to the extent that it remains the only imaginable way out of today’s never-ending state of exception. However, the frenzy of the current ongoing state of exception must be understood as resulting directly from the utopian fantasy of neoliberalism.

Nancy Fraser uses Antonio Gramsci’s concept of *hegemony* and “its organizational counterpart ... the *hegemonic bloc*: a coalition of disparate social forces that the ruling class assembles and through which it asserts its leadership”⁶³ to characterize and further define, via important cultural and political signifiers, the hegemonic bloc of neoliberal governance. This is what she calls “progressive neoliberalism.” For Fraser, neoliberalism is dividable into two distinct camps, progressive neoliberalism and reactionary neoliberalism. According to Fraser, “the progressive-neoliberal bloc combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition.”⁶⁴ Meanwhile, reactionary

⁶³ Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, (Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2019), 10.

⁶⁴ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 11-12.

neoliberalism, “housed mainly in the Republican Party and less coherent than its dominant rival ... offered a different nexus of distribution and recognition. It combined a similar neoliberal politics of distribution with a different reactionary politics of recognition.”⁶⁵ As Fraser points out, neoliberalism in general was, in many ways, the brainchild of the right.⁶⁶ However, progressive neoliberalism eventually rose to ascendancy because “the right-wing ‘fundamentalist’ version of neoliberalism could not become hegemonic in a country whose common sense was still shaped by New Deal thinking, the ‘rights revolution,’ and a slew of social movements descended from the New Left.”⁶⁷ Fraser goes on, “for the neoliberal project to triumph, it had to be repackaged, given a broader appeal, and linked to other, noneconomic aspirations for emancipation.”⁶⁸ Put another way, progressive neoliberalism makes for a more convincing utopianism.

Nonetheless, the failures of neoliberalism to live up to its promises, and the fact that as a “political universe” it is “highly restrictive,” in that, the fact that “one was stuck ... with financialization and deindustrialization,”⁶⁹ resulted in a hegemonic gap that came fully to fruition in the late 2010s. I am referring, of course, to the “2015-16 election season, ... [wherein] long-simmering discontent suddenly shapeshifted into a full-bore

⁶⁵ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 16.

⁶⁶ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 12.

⁶⁷ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 12-13.

⁶⁸ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 13.

⁶⁹ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 18.

crisis of political authority.”⁷⁰ Ultimately, Donald Trump won out in the 2016 presidential election, running on a platform of reactionary populism, as opposed to Bernie Sanders’s progressive populism and Hilary Clinton’s run-of-the-mill progressive neoliberalism. As Fraser points out, however, once in office Trump “activated the old bait and switch, abandoning the populist distributive policies his campaign had promised.”⁷¹ Instead, Trump “failed to lift a finger to rein in Wall Street,”⁷² while ushering in what “is no mere garden-variety Republican conservatism but a hyperreactionary politics of recognition”⁷³ which Fraser terms “hyperreactionary neoliberalism.”⁷⁴ The fact that this “does not constitute a new hegemonic bloc, however,”⁷⁵ has been confirmed by the fact that the 2020 U.S. Presidential election signaled a, not altogether smooth or peaceful, regression to a renewed progressive neoliberalism. As such, I would argue that it is not sufficient to engage in political theological discourse on the basis of something like a twenty-first century return to sovereignty and the friend/enemy distinction. Instead, the ongoing state of exception cannot be rightly said to have begun at the start of the twenty-first century. I maintain that, in fact, the neoliberal era itself is, to echo Walter Benjamin, the state of exception that has become the norm.

⁷⁰ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 21.

⁷¹ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 24.

⁷² Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 24.

⁷³ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 25.

⁷⁴ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 26.

⁷⁵ Fraser, *The Old is Dying*, 26.

However, the general consensus is that to do political theology under and about neoliberalism one requires a kind of workaround because sovereignty, in the strictly Schmittian sense, applies only to national sovereignty, which is somewhat deemphasized under neoliberalism. Thus, some few scholars have actively sought to apply political theology directly to neoliberalism. This has taken on various forms. For instance, Adam Kotsko's *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital*, viewing it as a primarily right-wing phenomenon, attempts to situate the resurgence of national sovereignty and right-wing political leaders as "legible as an integral feature"⁷⁶ of neoliberalism by viewing the notions of political theology and sovereignty reevoked by these resurgences as a smaller subset of a larger theory of political theology. Meanwhile, Carl Raschke has made the compelling argument that neoliberalism constitutes more a system of moral values than a set of economic policies by formulating it as "an international system of previously well-functioning ideals and values that are as much cultural and political as they are economic."⁷⁷ Raschke does this by linking neoliberalism to the Foucauldian notion of the "pastorate" as a

peculiar "revaluation" of values, which ... elevates confession over innocent vitality, abnegation over self-affirmation, systemic social distributions of Hegel's "unhappy consciousness," with its irremediable guilt psychology that is endlessly absolved and administered by way of spiritual triage by the pastorate itself.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2.

⁷⁷ Carl Raschke, *Neoliberalism and Political Theology: From Kant to Identity Politics* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 14.

⁷⁸ Raschke, 18-19.

Others have proposed, as a discourse that descends from political theology, what they have termed economic theology. Notably, Philip Goodchild, in his book *Economic Theology: Credit and Faith II*, defines economic theology on the assertion that where religion had once primarily served to order systems of social trust, the economic systems of credit and debt have now stepped into that role. Goodchild identifies cooperation as that upon which “human prosperity and wellbeing” are largely dependent.⁷⁹ In other words, “mutual trust is the principal source of wealth.”⁸⁰ While, the two distinct sources of religion and economic globalization are identified as apparatuses of this mutual trust, the twentieth century has seen the expanding prominence of economic globalization as “a cumulatively more momentous and yet increasingly fragile apparatus of trust,” defined by the fact that “distant people may be trusted to the extent that they are incorporated into a framework for guiding conduct based on contract and exchange.”⁸¹ Furthermore, in the introduction to his book *Credit and Faith*, the first of a trilogy of which *Economic Theology* is the second installment, Goodchild claims that “problems of economic credit and religious faith meet and are indeed two side of the same human experience,” and that “while such a hypothesis is not entirely new, it does challenge the sharp distinction between the secular and the religious that has developed in the modern world.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Philip Goodchild, *Economic Theology: Credit and Faith II* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 2.

⁸⁰ Goodchild, *Economic Theology*, 2.

⁸¹ Goodchild, *Economic Theology*, 2.

⁸² Philip Goodchild, *Credit and Faith* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 1

Meanwhile, in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben sets out to “glimpse something like the ultimate structure of the governmental machine of the West in the relation between *oikonomia* and Glory.”⁸³ In Agamben’s usage Glory means the “Kingdom” as opposed to “Government,” “*auctoritas*” versus “*potestas*,” or “power as government and effective management” versus “power as ceremonial and liturgical regality.”⁸⁴ In this way he seeks to answer the question of “why power in the West has assumed the form of an *oikonomia*, that is, a government of men.”⁸⁵ This inquiry moves in the direction of economic theology, in that, he says

Two broadly speaking political paradigms, antinomical but functionally related to one another, derive from Christian theology: political theology, which founds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering—domestic and not political in a strict sense—of both divine and human life. Political philosophy and the modern theory of sovereignty derive from the first paradigm; modern biopolitics up to the current triumph of economy and government over every other aspect of social life derive from the second paradigm.⁸⁶

For Agamben, then, the economic ordering of government is, at least on the surface, a move toward immanence as opposed to the transcendence of the sovereign. Which means that the “symbol of Glory” is the “empty throne” of sovereignty. This invokes a phrase that, as Agamben repeatedly reminds us, was a favorite of Schmitt’s, “*le roi règne, mais il ne gouverne pas*” (the king reigns, but does not govern). In this context Agamben analyses “one of the most memorable figures of the prose cycle of the Grail

⁸³ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, xii.

⁸⁴ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, xi-xii.

⁸⁵ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, xi.

⁸⁶ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 1.

Legend ... that of the *roi mehaignié*, the wounded or mutilated king.”⁸⁷ As Agamben notes, the story of the wounded king, or the “Fisher King” as he is most commonly known, who “reigns over a *terre gaste*, a devastated land, ‘were crops do not grow and trees do not bear fruits’ ... also contains a genuinely political mythologem, which can be read ... as the paradigm of a divided and impotent sovereignty.”⁸⁸ The Fisher King, because of his wounds, is unable to perform kingly activities so “his ministers (the falconers, archers, and hunters) govern in his name and place.”⁸⁹ Likewise, in his afterword to the Yale University Press edition of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, Joseph J. Duggan states that “the Fisher King has been wounded between the haunches, and lives in a land that is in a state of profound decline, a wasteland. Wounded between the legs is ... a medieval circumlocution for castration: the king is sterile and his infirmity renders the land barren.”⁹⁰ On one level, what is evoked by this legend is an impotent sovereignty that, in the context of twenty-first century crises, recalls the affect of the shift to the right and the revitalization of a genuine Schmittian political theology that I have discussed, the desire for a strong decider, a healed king to step in and set things right. However, as I will explore in Chapter Three, the innerworkings of transcendence and immanence in the economic theology that I am attempting to work out, following in part Agamben’s larger point, comingle such that the

⁸⁷ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 68.

⁸⁸ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 68-9.

⁸⁹ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 69.

⁹⁰ Joseph J. Duggan, “Afterword” in *Perceval, the Story of the Grail* by Chrétien de Troyes (New Haven: Yale University Press 1999), 299.

immanence of governance and economic order and the transcendence of sovereignty are not mutually exclusive but mutually implicated.

Chapter Three: Economic Theology and the Regime of Truth

3.1 Economic Theology

In order to layout economic theology, as I understand it, it is necessary to attempt to delineate as closely as possible, and genealogically, the economic from the political. Outside of biopolitical discourse it is easy to see “the economy” as strictly the disembodied market system that operates independently from other “systems” or “lifeworlds,” to use Habermas’s terms,⁹¹ namely government and family. This becomes all the more convoluted in light of the development of the social realm which, as Hannah Arendt discusses in *The Human Condition*, “is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, [and] is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state.”⁹² The social realm effects this confusion by virtue of the fact that the “scientific thought that corresponds to this development is no longer political science but ‘national economy’ or ‘social economy’ or *Volkswirtschaft*, all of which indicate a kind of ‘collective housekeeping’; the collective families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call ‘society,’ and its political form of organization is

⁹¹ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso Books, 2020), 39.

⁹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 28.

called ‘nation.’”⁹³ As such, the social converts the nation-state into something that more closely resembles Aristotle’s description of the pre-political village than it does the *polis*.

Thus, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault lays out the way in which the disembedded economy, beyond simply acting autonomously, establishes the logic of the truth regime that comes to determine that which constitutes good government. In a way, it could be said that instead of a strictly disarticulated, disembedded economy, governmentality, and with it all other lifeworlds on the basis of the way that biopolitics functions, becomes re-embedded in the economic in the form of political economy. This, as I will argue, speaks to underlying features that define the political/economic systems of the West, however confused these terms may have become throughout the complex genealogy of their birth. That this argument necessitates the problematization of the category of the political, as an autonomous area of human activity, but more importantly as an area of possible liberatory activity, is both a necessary outcome and a tangential aim of this study. In *The Ticklish Subject*, for instance, Žižek makes the claim that

political conflict designates the tension between the structured social body in which each part has its place, and “the part of no part” which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality—of what Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality of all men qua speaking beings.⁹⁴

It is not that a struggle that does what Žižek describes lacks any value, it is just the naming of this struggle “politics” that is called into question at the same time that

⁹³ Arendt, 28-29.

⁹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, England: Verso, 2008), 221.

Schmitt's designation of politics as the friend/enemy distinction, the "ever present possibility" of war as "the leading presupposition" of the political, is also in question.⁹⁵

Both Schmitt and Žižek, here, situate the political as a limit concept for any legal order. For Žižek, following Rancière, the political happens when the order of the social body is challenged by those whom it excludes, who then "present themselves as the representatives, the stand-ins, for the Whole Society, for the true Universality."⁹⁶ In other words, "politics proper thus always involves a kind of short circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a *singulier universel*."⁹⁷ This short circuit constitutes something akin to the exception, in that it bears the same relationship to the legal order, "insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept."⁹⁸ Not only do the excluded challenge the existing order to then assert their own order, but both the first and second (sequentially) orders operate on a logic of exclusion, in that it is the previously excluded who stand-in for society: "we—the 'nothing,' not counted in the order—are the people, we are ALL against Others who stand only for their particular privileged interest."⁹⁹ Thus, Žižek and Rancière's politics proper is, in a way, the friend/enemy distinction seen from the other side. It relates to the

⁹⁵ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 34.

⁹⁶ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 221.

⁹⁷ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 221.

⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

⁹⁹ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 221.

Benjamin side of the—as much conceptual as it was actual—debate between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt which Agamben describes in *State of Exception*.¹⁰⁰

For Schmitt, the state of exception that the friend/enemy distinction implies is the political that gestures *toward* the law as its limit concept. For Benjamin, however, divine violence is a gesture toward the *destruction* of all law, in that “law, Benjamin writes, ‘acknowledges in the “decision” determined by place and time a metaphysical category;’ but this acknowledgement is, in reality, only a counterpart to the ‘curious and at first discouraging experience of the ultimate undecidability of all legal problems.’”¹⁰¹ Divine violence, in opposition to mythic violence (law making and law preserving violence), in its law destroying capacity, should be the limit concept of law that leads to its ultimate dissolution. However, seen as the gesture of politics proper, what Žižek points to remains bound to the gravity well of the political. This can be seen clearly in his discussion of divine violence in his book, *Violence*, wherein he points to “the revolutionary Terror of 1792-94” in order to “fearlessly identify divine violence with positively existing historical phenomena, thus avoiding any obscurantist mystification.”¹⁰² Žižek embraces the parallel between “the state annihilation of *Homini sacer*, for example the Nazi killing of the Jews, and the revolutionary terror, where one can also kill without committing a crime and without sacrifice” because, to the extent that “Benjamin writes that the prohibition on killing is ‘a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take

¹⁰⁰ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 52.

¹⁰¹ Agamben, 53.

¹⁰² Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 196-97.

upon themselves the responsibility of ignoring it,” divine violence constitutes “the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision.”¹⁰³ I would maintain that in Žižek’s reading of divine violence we see enacted the Schmittian response to Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” in that “the state of exception is the space in which [Schmitt] tries to capture Benjamin’s idea of a pure violence and to inscribe anomie within the very body of the *nomos*.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, it is precisely the desire to tie divine violence to “positively existing historical phenomena” that consigns it to “obscurantist mystification.” Bound to the political what we get, instead of divine violence, is more mythic, law creating violence, or as Žižek has quoted Robespierre, “just a noisy crime that destroys another crime.”¹⁰⁵

Part of the problem, I would argue, comes from accepting the Schmittian view that the exception is inscribed *into* the juridical. We might instead invert this relationship and say that the juridical emerges out of the exception, the *extremus necessitatis casus*, through the decision. Thus, prior to looking at the birth of biopolitics, we must look at the birth of politics, the formation of the political. The former view obscures the teleological assumption of the political which nonetheless remains decisive. Schmitt may downplay the liberatory concept of the political as it is understood by thinkers including Žižek and Wendy Brown going back to Aristotle, however even he acknowledges something like Benjamin’s anomic redemptive violence when, in *The Nomos of the Earth*, he indicates the Middle Ages view that the Christian Empire acted as the *katechon*,

¹⁰³ Žižek, *Violence*, 199-202.

¹⁰⁴ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Žižek, *Violence*, 203.

or the “restrainer ... of the Antichrist.”¹⁰⁶ What is important here is that in a world that appears to have grown old, such as Europe in the Middle Ages or the globalized neoliberal order in the twenty-first century, it is the law—it’s making and preserving—that restrains the destructive chaos that is the prerequisite of the Earth’s redemption through the second coming of Christ. Furthermore, in the modern world, the teleological concept of the political, which we receive through Aristotle, is, as I have tried to show, grafted onto the disruptive divine violence that Benjamin attempted to think.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle puts forward a definition of the political that is, on the surface, at odds with Schmitt’s. The difference being that for Aristotle it is association, not the friend/enemy distinction, that defines the political, in that it is the “most sovereign and inclusive association.”¹⁰⁷ However, the political-as-telos reaffirms the view that the anomic is inscribed into the nomos. Aristotle calls the *polis* “the final and perfect association, formed from a number of villages” and “the end or consummation to which those associations move, and the ‘nature’ of things consists in their end or consummation.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, from Aristotle’s view “the city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual,” for the reason that, based on his understanding of the causes, “the whole is necessarily prior to the part.”¹⁰⁹ However, the structure of his formulation of the city, read from a more materialist point of view, illuminates an

¹⁰⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003), 87.

¹⁰⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 7.

¹⁰⁸ Aristotle, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Aristotle, 11.

inverse, non-teleological conception of the political. It is clear that, conceptually, Aristotle is obliged to move temporally and developmentally from the household to the city. He recognizes that “in this, as in other fields, we shall be able to study our subject best if we begin at the beginning and consider things in the process of their growth.”¹¹⁰ However, the subject is confused by the divorce of his epistemological method from his ontological presuppositions. Focusing on the former, we see the development from household to city, *oikos* to *polis*, more clearly in something like a Marxian base/superstructure relation wherein

in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.¹¹¹

The *oikos* is, from the start, the realm of material production. Aristotle begins by discussing the “union or pairing of those who cannot exist without one another,” saying that “male and female must unite for the reproduction of the species,” a state of affairs that does not distinguish the Greek from the barbarian, or even from the animal.¹¹² However, next comes the distinction between “the natural ruling element” and “the element which is naturally ruled.”¹¹³ In the individual this means the distinction between the mind and the body, but on the larger scale it distinguishes between the Greek head of

¹¹⁰ Aristotle, 8.

¹¹¹ Karl Marx, “Marx on the History of His Opinions” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, Second Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 4.

¹¹² Aristotle, 8.

¹¹³ Aristotle, 8.

the household, who “is able, by virtue of ... intelligence, to exercise forethought,” and the slave, who “is able, by virtue of ... bodily power, to do the physical work.”¹¹⁴ Modes of material production progress in stages in Aristotle’s description, wherein the household emerges once a distinction has been made between women and slaves, which is, likewise, the point at which a distinction is made between Greek and slave. It is the mastery of the Greek over the slave that designates the Greek and this mastery remains in the realm of the household. It is in the household where the Greek is sovereign. This sovereignty, then, qualifies the Greek to enter into the separate realm of the city, which is formed by multiple households that enter into non-familial, non-sovereign relations of law.

From here, Aristotle’s analysis takes on new meaning without the emphasis on what is supposed to be the “natural” telos of these developments. The emphasis on the master/slave relationship becomes important, here, on the basis of the divergent views on primitive accumulation that Marx indicates in *Capital Volume I*. As Aristotle presents it, the Greek system is superior to the barbarian system in that it coincides more closely to the *natural purpose* of free men, women, and slaves. Aristotle’s contention that “the soul has naturally two elements, a ruling and a ruled; and each has its different goodness, one belonging to the rational and ruling element, and the other to the irrational and ruled,”¹¹⁵—i.e., the question of whether slaves have their own kind of morality—corresponds to the view that Marx discusses wherein “primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology.”¹¹⁶ In

¹¹⁴ Aristotle, 8.

¹¹⁵ Aristotle, 35.

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans, Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 873.

other words, the social relations of slavery are portrayed as teleological and natural, while at the same time resonating with Marx's correction of the "insipid childishness [that] is every day preached to us in the defence of property;"¹¹⁷ the idea that the "frugal élite" were able to accumulate wealth while, "the other, lazy rascals ... finally had nothing to sell except their own skins."¹¹⁸ The fact that Aristotle "not only did not problematize slavery but seemed to accept it as obvious and natural"¹¹⁹ unselfconsciously reveals that "in actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part" in the foundations of the economic lineage which, according to Polanyi, Aristotle discovered and that we have inherited.

Thus, in Marx's conception of primitive accumulation we see a situation that is akin to Schmitt's definition of the political, the possibility of actual combat, a state of necessity. Necessity, then, is the base line, the defining scenario of the *oikonomia*, the household. In Aristotle, politics is a rising above necessity on the basis of merit by the freemen as the heads of households. It is here that freedom is obtained, but freedom from necessity, i.e., not freedom without strictures. In the *oikonomia* the head of the household has the latter kind of freedom, in that, to manage the household is to confront necessity wherein one can and must do whatever is *necessary*. Consider that Schmitt declares that "what characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the

¹¹⁷ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 873-4.

¹¹⁸ Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 873.

¹¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) 7.

suspension of the entire existing order.”¹²⁰ In a sense, the political, in Aristotle’s meaning—despite his continual insistence that it is the true nature of Greek men as political animals—is always something of a precarious, artificial state. It is always undergirded by the household that successfully confronts necessity. This insight is what is magnified throughout the work of Schmitt, though in a way that confuses more than it clarifies. For, Schmitt is unable to see that it is the *artifice* that defines the political in opposition to the economic in its etymological sense. When Schmitt says that the political is defined by the friend/enemy distinction, or that the sovereign decision deals with necessity and defines and constitutes the limit case of law, he is moving beyond the political, vis a vis Aristotle, into the economic, the *oikonomia*, the household. Schmitt asserts that the enemy is “the adversary that intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.”¹²¹ However, through Marx’s insight into the base/superstructure formation it can be understood that one’s “way of life” or “form of existence” is determined by nothing other than “the mode of production of material life [which] conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.”¹²² Schmitt is thus correct to identify the real possibility of killing underlying the metaphorical sense of confrontation and conflict of mundane everyday political life,¹²³ however, what he does not see is the way in which

¹²⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

¹²¹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

¹²² Marx, “Marx on the History of His Opinions,” 5.

¹²³ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 30.

the political itself, the superstructure, is the metaphorization that attempts to keep the reality of killing as necessity at bay.

3.2 Neoliberalism and Truth

One of the most deceptive selling points of neoliberalism has been its ability to play on the affect which Foucault names “state-phobia” which, he says in his 1978-1979 lectures at the Collège de France “runs through many contemporary themes and has undoubtedly been sustained by many sources for a long time: the Soviet experience of the 1920s, the German experience of Nazism, English post-war planning and so on.”¹²⁴ Foucault advances the concept of state-phobia explicitly without a theory of the state, which, he says, rather than canceling “the presence and the effect of state mechanisms,” does “exactly the opposite of this,” in that “the problem of bringing under state control, of ‘statification’ (*étatisation*) is at the heart of the questions” he is attempting to address.¹²⁵ Likewise, in the opening of *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt declines to provide a definition of the state, saying that “since we are concerned here with the nature of the political, such a definition is unwarranted.”¹²⁶ Instead he chooses to leave “open what the state is in its essence,” providing a list of possible examples—“a machine or an organism, a person or an institution, a society or a community, an enterprise or a beehive, or perhaps even a basic procedural order”— which he says “anticipate too much

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 76.

¹²⁵ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 77.

¹²⁶ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19.

meaning, interpretation, illustration, and construction, and therefore cannot constitute any appropriate point of departure for a simple and elementary statement.”¹²⁷ Following both Foucault and Schmitt, I will thus allow a definitive definition of the state to hover just out of sight in the interest of leaving clear my analysis of the interplay between the concepts of the political and the economic. I do however question Schmitt’s opening sentence, which says that “the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political.”¹²⁸

State-phobia, according to Foucault, signals a “crisis of governmentality,” which in the context of the advent of neoliberalism stems from the trauma of World War II and the attempt to intricately engineer and organize society seen in the first half of the twentieth century. Friedrich Hayek, as Raschke observes, “was convinced that *laissez-faire* economics was but the handmaiden to the centuries-old commitment among the Anglo-Saxon peoples, in particular, to personal liberty” and that “Nazism was but the nightmare liberal democracies might expect if they took the principle of state intervention to its logical conclusion.”¹²⁹ Thus, “the ‘high modernist’ enterprise of rationalizing society as far as possible ... can be considered the real impetus for the kind of massive social engineering that attained its grim apotheosis in totalitarian experiments.”¹³⁰ This rational behind neoliberalism, in Foucault’s discussion of German neoliberalism, serves as the third of three requirements that Foucault identifies as having directed the course of rebuilding a German state after the war. The problem, as Foucault identifies it, is that of

¹²⁷ Schmitt, 19.

¹²⁸ Schmitt, 19.

¹²⁹ Raschke, 101.

¹³⁰ Raschke, 102-3

building a state out of, essentially, nothing. After the war the legitimacy of the German state was decimated, leaving no possibility of a German state to claim a historical basis for any such legitimacy.¹³¹ However, Ludwig Erhard's statement, at the Council at Frankfurt, that "'we must avoid ... both anarchy and the termite state,' because 'only a state that establishes both the freedom and responsibility of the citizens can legitimately speak in the name of the people,'"¹³² should be read, according to Foucault, on an implicit level as supposing "an institutional framework" whose function "is not, of course, to exercise sovereignty, since, precisely, there is nothing in the current situation that can found a juridical power of coercion, but is simply to guarantee freedom."¹³³ Thus, the post-war, West German state was instituted on an economic basis through what Foucault describes as "a somewhat artificial symmetry" with Fichte's concept of a closed commercial state, that of "a state-forming commercial opening."¹³⁴ The decisive interpretation of this is that, in a situation wherein there is no possibility of sovereignty on the basis of historical legitimacy, sovereignty could only have been formed on the basis of an economic order. This situation exemplifies economics as the limit case for political sovereignty.

The governmental rationality that went into creating a post-war German state via commercial opening, despite the innovation involved in creating a state from scratch, was not entirely an invention of the twentieth century Austrian economists that inspired this

¹³¹ Foucault, 82.

¹³² Foucault, 81.

¹³³ Foucault, 82.

¹³⁴ Foucault, 86.

method. Instead Foucault shows in previous chapters of *The Birth of Biopolitics* a transformation of the art of governing, or “the reasoned way of governing ... reflection on the best possible way of governing”¹³⁵ that moved from *raison d’Etat* toward a regime of truth that determines good government on the basis of what is correct, rather than sovereign rights or justice. That sovereignty designates the point of transcendence “beyond an otherwise immanent social order”¹³⁶ has previously been addresses. Likewise, Agamben has suggested that economic theology constitutes a immanent ordering, and as such could be seen as, again, a diffusion or disembodying of sovereignty. In Schmitt’s language, the sovereign is only beholden to “laws” and “natural principles” when not facing “conditions of urgent necessity.”¹³⁷ In these terms, the miraculous investiture of sovereignty is obvious. However, when Schmitt reaches back to Bodin to discuss sovereignty in relation to laws and natural principles, he is referring back to a *raison d’Etat* that had already become all but obsolete, grounded as it is in “the theory of natural law and the assertion of imprescriptible natural rights that a sovereign may not transgress,” unless, of course, through recourse to the miracle of the exception, or what Malebranche would call particular (as opposed to general) wills. The transcendence of the sovereign decision (miracle), then, becomes supplanted by the immanent economic order (providence), through the ongoing rationalization of governmentality.

Mark Lilla traces the observable effects of this movement through “the new sciences that began to develop in the late fifteenth century [which] offered a serious

¹³⁵ Foucault, 2.

¹³⁶ Newman, 3.

¹³⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 8.

challenge to Christian natural theology and by implication Christian political theology.”¹³⁸ However, he also recognizes the seed of what he calls “The Great Separation” in the fusing of the Christian and Jewish “patchwork” cosmologies of late antiquity “with the cosmological speculations of the Greek philosophers, for whom cosmology and ethics were linked.”¹³⁹ This linking had the result of providing such “powerful analogies between the cosmological and political orders ... that by the late middle ages the church itself considered natural theology and political theology to be mutually supporting disciplines.”¹⁴⁰ It also, however, linked theological thinking directly to more empirical study and speculation on the nature of the cosmos and natural order exposing theology to the rationalizing process indicative of the emergence of science. And while it is true that this rationalization deeply challenged the Christian worldview and would eventually drive God further and further into the distance to the point of ostensible disappearance, this was a drawn out process in which theological reflection and speculation remained and adapted and, at times, even appeared to thrive. Hence the move from the particular wills of God, indicative of a patchwork cosmology profuse with miracles, to the conception of the general wills of God through the idea of providence wherein “God ‘does all in all things,’ to the extent that he acts only through the general wills and laws” which is, however, “in no way distinguishable from that of modern

¹³⁸ Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 60.

¹³⁹ Lilla, 59.

¹⁴⁰ Lilla, 59.

science.”¹⁴¹ Thus, while Lilla’s “Great Separation” may have encouraged an understanding of the separation of theological and political concerns, it did little to address the underlying economic theology which thrived under this more distant conception of God, a God “conceived more abstractly.”¹⁴²

While Lilla views this abstract notion of God as being “not ... an architect drawing up precise blueprints for individual and social life,”¹⁴³ Agamben illustrates that this is, in fact, only partially true and that the distinction hinges on the question of theodicy. How could the grace of an involved God-as-architect be understood in light of the fact of suffering in the world and the fact that not all are saved and some will presumably end up in hell? This is the central motivating question in the move from particular to general wills. It is a matter of reconciling God’s desire that all should be saved (his goodness) with his reasoned principles upon which he has designed the world (his wisdom). Thus, the theological result of this theodicy is, along the lines of Lilla’s suggestion of a more abstract God, a rationalizing of God such that “theology can resolve itself into atheism, and providentialism into democracy, because *God has made the world just as if it were without God and governs it as though it governed itself.*”¹⁴⁴ Thus, belief withdraws in the face of the immanent ordering that constitutes Foucault’s regime of truth, while—in much the same way that Schmitt’s political concept is a secularization of the systematic structures of theological concepts—the systematic theological structures of

¹⁴¹ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 265.

¹⁴² Lilla, 299.

¹⁴³ Lilla, 299.

¹⁴⁴ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 286.

providentialism become secularized in the contemporary concept of neoliberal political economy through a more base level economic theology. Though neoliberalism constitutes a move away from transcendent sovereignty, toward an immanent ordering of all aspects of life the transcendence/immanence relation remains implicit within it:

Things are ordered insofar as they have a specific relation among themselves, but this relation is nothing other than the expression of their relation to the divine end. And, vice versa, things are ordered insofar as they have a certain relation to God, but this relation expresses itself only by means of the reciprocal relation of things. The only content of the transcendent order is the immanent order, but the meaning of the immanent order is nothing other than the relation to the transcendent end.¹⁴⁵

In the same way, Nietzsche's "truthful man, in the audacious and ultimate sense presupposed by the faith in science, *thereby affirms another world* than that of life, nature, and history."¹⁴⁶

There is a particular moral valence to this, whereby what constrains the philosophers, theologians, and scientists of this early modern era is the "unconditional will to truth, [which] is *faith in the ascetic ideal itself*, even as an unconscious imperative ... it is the faith in a *metaphysical* value, the absolute value of *truth*, sanctioned and guaranteed by this ideal alone."¹⁴⁷ Agamben shows that this formulation of general wills posits that we live in Leibniz's best of all possible worlds and that, as such, "the world as it is does not require justification but saving."¹⁴⁸ On this score, Raschke has shown how neoliberalism is, at its core, a system of moral values. Likewise, in formulating the

¹⁴⁵ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 152.

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 151.

¹⁴⁸ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 271.

making of indebted man, Maurizio Lazzarato has argued that the “creditor-debtor relationship” which serves as the baseline social relation that allows neoliberalism to function—one could say that it is *the* defining feature of neoliberalism—likewise, “is inextricably an economy and an ‘ethics,’ since it presupposes, in order for the debtor to stand as ‘self’-guarantor, an ethico-political process of constructing a subjectivity endowed with a memory, a conscience, and a morality that forces him to be both accountable and guilty.”¹⁴⁹ In this direction, Lazzarato invokes the concept of *mnemotechnics* from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, wherein Nietzsche states that “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, this morality, the same morality that renders the scientific schema of the world through general divine wills a “faith in a *metaphysical* value,” can be seen as related to Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal, in the subjectivation of indebted man through the painful process of memory creation. “In a certain sense,” says Nietzsche, “the whole of asceticism belongs here: a few ideas are to be rendered inextinguishable, ever-present, unforgettable, ‘fixed,’ with the aim of hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system with these ‘fixed ideas.’”¹⁵¹ As such, while this process of rationalization does lead to the death of God, to the point where the death of God can be pronounced, it does not obviate the effects of the ascetic ideal, the force of which has fully appropriated political economy and continues to shape our lives under the

¹⁴⁹ Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 2012), 49.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 61.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 61..

neoliberal regime of truth. In other words, the shadow of the dead God still shows on the cave walls of the world.

Chapter Four: Paralogy After the Death of God

4.1 Postmodernism and the Crisis of Legitimation

Foucault shows that under the regime of truth good governmental practices are determined on the basis of what constitutes correctness in accordance with market principals. He says that

what is discovered at this moment, at once in governmental practice and in reflection on this governmental practice, is that inasmuch as prices are determined in accordance with the natural mechanisms of the market they constitute a standard of truth which enables us to discern which governmental practices are correct and which are erroneous.¹⁵²

In this way, as a managerial mode of organization, neoliberal governance pursues a utopian visions through what Wendy Brown, in her book *Undoing the Demos*, identifies as “best practices.” In the most mundane sense, a best practice is simply the best, most efficient way of going about an undertaking. In the case of best practices instrumental rationality, over and against value rationality, dominates the methodology of governance most clearly. Here, Brown is drawing on Max Weber’s distinction between “instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*)” and “value rational (*wertrational*) ... [which] does not pertain to the rational quality of the value itself, but to the ‘self-conscious formulation of the ultimate values covering action.’”¹⁵³ In other words, neoliberalism

¹⁵² Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 32.

¹⁵³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 118.

leaves up for debate only the efficiency of various methods by which a certain predetermined value is pursued. “It consists of pure calculation”¹⁵⁴ and is, as such the only rationality of the two, the success and failure of which are capable of being factually verified. Consequently, says Wendy Brown quoting Weber, “from the perspective of instrumental rationality, ‘value-rationality is always irrational.’”¹⁵⁵ Thus,

the presumed interchangeability of processes and practices across industries and sectors and the consolidation of best practices out of many different sources have several important implications for neoliberal rationality’s dissemination of economic metrics everywhere, its generation of the basic contours and features of human capital, and its subsumption of public institutions into enterprise.¹⁵⁶

Furthermore, because best practices are testable and provable within the realm of instrumental rationality, they “can be effectively contested only by postulating better practices, not by objecting to what they promulgate.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, best practices purport to build a genuine consensus and cooperation in a nonhierarchical manner. They “are exemplary of many features of neoliberal governance—its emphasis on soft power, antipolitics, buy-ins, consensus, teamwork, market metrics, and rejection of external regulation, command, partisan interest, and ideology.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, in addition to provability and effectiveness, best practices lend neoliberal governance an air of utopianism via their post-ideological pretense. In fact

from the epistemological standpoint of best practices, politics appears as a combination of dicta or commands where there should be expertise, as particular

¹⁵⁴ Brown, 119.

¹⁵⁵ Brown, 119.

¹⁵⁶ Brown, 137.

¹⁵⁷ Brown, 136

¹⁵⁸ Brown, 136.

interest or debates about ends where there should be teamwork for a goal, as partisanship where there should be neutrality and objectivity in both knowledge and practice, as provincialism where there should be the open doors and the lingua franca of the market.¹⁵⁹

Thus, neoliberals are able to respond to proposed alternatives to neoliberalism by pointing to the atrocities of Stalinism, for instance, as evidence that any alternative is simply wrong, as in *incorrect*; which by extension means morally wrong.

Correct governance is, therefore, about being right—rather than having the right—which requires knowledge. The condition of knowledge then becomes important for understanding the direction in which the neoliberal regime of truth has taken a captive world. In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard demonstrates the underlying instability of knowledge by examining the ways in which neoliberalism’s commodification of knowledge disrupts the illusion of its stability. Thus Lyotard points out, “knowledge is not the same as science ... and science, far from successfully obscuring the problem of its legitimacy, cannot avoid raising it with all of its implications, which are no less sociopolitical than epistemological.”¹⁶⁰ There is much to unpack from this statement in regard to the direction of the argument that I am making, which will be taken up later on in this work. For now, though, it should be pointed out that for a continually rationalized governance that views itself as being founded upon scientific rationality, the divide between science and knowledge poses a serious problem.

One of the central aspects of Lyotard’s thesis has to do with the effects of the commodification of knowledge on its legitimation. All knowledge, according to Lyotard,

¹⁵⁹ Brown, 139.

¹⁶⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

is legitimated through language games that contain specific positions and moves that must be filled and made, respectively, in order for knowledge to be legitimate. Prior to what he characterizes as the postmodern condition, scientific knowledge legitimation consisted of an ongoing discourse, in which the participants all fulfilled their specific roles and spoke the same language, so to speak. Metanarratives were thusly produced. In his introduction Lyotard tells us that:

to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.¹⁶¹

In other words, the great immanent ordering of the world, which makes the world knowable, which underlies the possibility of a regime of truth, and upon which neoliberalism is founded and attempts to maintain itself is, in the final analysis, thoroughly modern, in Lyotard's sense of the term. By contrast, the postmodern is, in Lyotard's famous definition, "incredulity toward metanarratives."¹⁶²

Thus, to state the obvious, neoliberalism emerges out of a modernist conception of representational knowledge, through the ever rationalized sense of historical progress. In the wake of the governmental atrocities of the first half of the twentieth century, and in light of the state phobia that these events exacerbated, the regime of truth would demand that good government would be further rationalized in the name of progress. This further

¹⁶¹ Lyotard, xxiii.

¹⁶² Lyotard, xxiv.

rationalization, however, would, counterintuitively, entail an explicit delegitimation of knowledge in the name of the pursuit of knowledge under the regime of truth. Friedrich Hayek, perhaps neoliberalism most important architect, “rejected ... the ‘pretense of knowledge’” such as “the application of the methods of the physical sciences to problems of ‘complex systems’ like society and the economy” in the name of greater fidelity to the strictures of good government under the regime of truth.¹⁶³ While Hayek’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics in 1974 “struck a discordant note in a decade when confidence in a knowable future was at an all-time high” it resonated with a contemporaneous development that would likewise undermine this confidence while presenting itself as its fulfillment: cybernetics.¹⁶⁴ In his book *Cyberfiction: After the Future* Paul Youngquist details the science fiction-esque origins of cybernetics through Norbert Wiener’s attempt to solve the problem of anti-aircraft defense after World War II. Wiener’s aim was to use calculating machines to target enemy aircraft more quickly and efficiently than any gunner could aim, or any pilot could maneuver. Classifying “the much-ballyhooed ‘death of the subject [as] more a military objective than a theoretical effect,”¹⁶⁵ Youngquist asserts that cybernetics is an attempt to remove the variable of human agency from the equation.

This effect, then, carries over into other aspects of human life, not entirely without the mortal implications of its militaristic origins in tow, presenting itself as the fulfillment

¹⁶³ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 224.

¹⁶⁴ Slobodian, 224.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Youngquist, *Cyberfiction: After the Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33.

of our confidence in a knowable future, in that it “promotes a powerful strategy for managing the fungibility of futures toward a maximum predictability.”¹⁶⁶ Yet, for

Youngquist, a predictable future is a static future, and a static future is no future at all.

Hayek attempts to circumvent this foreclosure of the future by asserting that

one could not hope for concrete data about the future to be used for planning, one could only hope for “pattern prediction.” He concluded that this might look like a “second best” use for science in the age of grand designs, but argued that a “lesson of humility” was necessary to fend off “man’s fatal striving to control society.”¹⁶⁷

In this direction, Hayek believed that “reason, if misused, is the enemy of order.”¹⁶⁸

Instead, Hayek’s conception of ordered systems is well described by Quinn Slobodian, through the metaphor of a school of minnows:

One can approach Hayek’s idea of the system by imagining a visit to the seashore. Wading in the shallow water, you may see a school of minnows approaching, traveling in a rough and shifting orb. The school is not regimented into even lines but it does cohere as a basic shape. As you approach, the orb dissipates and then reassembles before moving in another direction. Order for Hayek must be as unplanned and spontaneous as the movement of a school of fish in water.¹⁶⁹

Yet, the approach that Hayek takes to cybernetics, which is to see it as “a humble science, eschewing omniscience to identify rules of action and reaction at the micro level, which one could only extrapolate to the macro,”¹⁷⁰ has not prevented cybernetics from asserting the level of maximized command and control that Wiener envisioned.

¹⁶⁶ Youngquist, 34.

¹⁶⁷ Slobodian, 225.

¹⁶⁸ Slobodian, 232.

¹⁶⁹ Slobodian, 227-28.

¹⁷⁰ Slobodian, 226.

Instead, cybernetics and neoliberal theory have been instrumental in ushering in what Gilles Deleuze describes in his essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” Deleuze begins by invoking Foucault’s analysis of *disciplinary societies* which are located in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Disciplinary societies are organized by “vast spaces of enclosure” such as school, home, prison, church, factory, etc.¹⁷¹ These spaces are discontinuous, each operating on their own set of rules, and in each the individual begins again at zero upon entering a new space of enclosure. Likewise, Foucault shows this mode of society to be a part of a transient process, in that disciplinary societies emerge out of *societies of sovereignty*. The internal logic of disciplinary societies is different from that of societies of sovereignty, as Deleuze points out, in that “the goal and function” of societies of sovereignty are “to tax rather than to organize production, to rule on death rather than to administer life.”¹⁷² Just as societies of sovereignty underwent a crisis that transitioned into disciplinary societies through the advent of the industrial revolution and liberalism, so, says Deleuze, “disciplines underwent a crisis to the benefit of new forces that were gradually instituted and which accelerated after World War II.”¹⁷³

Interestingly, for Deleuze this crisis of discipline, which has made way for the institution of what he calls *societies of control*, is, in part, signaled by the fact that “the administrations in charge never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms: to

¹⁷¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* Vol. 59 (Winter 1992): 3.

¹⁷² Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 3.

¹⁷³ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 3.

reform schools, to reform industries, hospitals, the armed forces, prisons.”¹⁷⁴ While these constant calls for reform are often rhetorically presented as progressive moves toward justice and equity, we may surmise that underlying these ostensibly noble goals is the simple fact that institutions designed to operate within disciplinary societies need to be retooled to be compatible with mechanisms of control.

Whereas disciplinary societies operate on a system of enclosures, wherein each space is discontinuous and the existence of a common language among them is “*analogical*,” control societies operate on the openness facilitated by a ubiquitous (rather than merely common) “*numerical*” language.¹⁷⁵ Control is thus seamless rather than discontinuous. In other words, as Deleuze claims, “enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change form one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”¹⁷⁶ A vivid example given by Deleuze is a city, imagined by Félix Guattari

where one would be able to leave one’s apartment, one’s street, one’s neighborhood, thanks to one’s dividual electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person’s position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation.¹⁷⁷

The mode of contemporary Covid safety precautions illustrate these mechanisms of control nicely because they were devised entirely within a society of control. Consider

¹⁷⁴ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 4.

¹⁷⁵ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 4.

¹⁷⁶ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 4.

¹⁷⁷ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 7.

the campus safety protocols on the University of Denver campus, wherein based on a student's compliance with university policies, such as Covid testing or vaccination (information electronically linked to the student's ID card) students are either granted or denied access to campus buildings. Thus, what for certain students, within certain frames of time, is an open door, for others is an impassable barrier. I do not invoke this example as a denial of the deadliness of the virus or the seriousness of the pandemic, nor am I claiming that the university's response is in some way illegitimate. I'm pointing out this example simply to illustrate the way in which the logic of a control society has made possible and has come to fruition in this safety system. While these policies are necessary and beneficial for the preservation of human life, the governing logic is nonetheless that of a society of control, and, as with the constant call for reform, is a significant—even fundamental—change in operation. Consequently, the types of machines that are employed “are easily matched with each type of society”: simple machines, such as pulleys and levers, for societies of sovereignty; “machines involving energy,” those typical of the industrial revolution, for disciplinary societies; and, finally, computers for societies of control.¹⁷⁸ In this sense, the bureaucracy could be seen as a kind of primitive computer that has given way, with the development of more advanced cybernetic communications technologies, to the ever-expanding ubiquity of the algorithm in decision making. This predominance of computer technology in societies of control suggests an attempted removal of the human element from the operation of society at

¹⁷⁸ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 6.

large which is necessary for the kind of city that Guattari imagined, and which Deleuze states “is not necessarily ... science fiction” and is becoming less so all the time.¹⁷⁹

Thus, Lyotard takes as his “point of departure a single feature” of the status of knowledge, which he asserts “is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”¹⁸⁰ This point of departure is that, at the time of his writing (the late 1970s), he says, “for the last forty years the ‘leading’ sciences and technologies have had to do with language.”¹⁸¹ Lyotard then supposes that “the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media).”¹⁸² In other words, Lyotard is describing “the computerization of the most highly developed societies [which] allows us to spotlight ... certain aspects of the transformation of knowledge and its effects on public power and civil institutions.”¹⁸³ In this context, scientific knowledge “undergo[es] an exteriorization with respect to the ‘knower’ and an alienation from its user even greater than has previously been the case.”¹⁸⁴ In her book, *Programmed Visions*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun acknowledges the boon that has been given to new media studies by the push by

¹⁷⁹ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 7.

¹⁸⁰ Lyotard, 3.

¹⁸¹ Lyotard, 3.

¹⁸² Lyotard, 4.

¹⁸³ Lyotard, 7.

¹⁸⁴ Lyotard.

scholars such as Lev Manovich, Geert Lovink, and Alexander Galloway to “banish so-called ‘vapor theory’—theory that fails to distinguish between demo and product, fiction and reality—to the margins.”¹⁸⁵ At the same time, however, countering this move, saying that “this rush away from what is vapory—undefined, set in motion—is also troubling because vaporiness is not accidental but rather essential to new media and, more broadly, to software.”¹⁸⁶ The exteriorization of knowledge and the alienation of its user is likewise reflected in her assertion that the “turn to computer science also threatens to reify knowing software as truth, an experience that is arguably impossible: we all know some software, some programming languages, but does anyone really ‘know’ software?”¹⁸⁷

Meanwhile, Chun’s discussion of code as source illustrates how the regime of truth has culminated in the neoliberal utopian fantasy of immanent order. While dismissing the supposed profundity of the statement “code is law” she says that

what is surprising is the fact that software is code; that code is—has been made to be—executable, and this executability makes code not law, but rather every lawyer’s dream of what law should be: automatically enabling and disabling certain actions, functioning at the level of everyday practice.¹⁸⁸

However, the executability of code, at the same time, is involved in a self-undermining nostalgia for “a simpler and more reassuring map of power, one in which the assumption

¹⁸⁵ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 20.

¹⁸⁶ Chun, 21.

¹⁸⁷ Chun.

¹⁸⁸ Chun, 27.

of sovereignty remains secure.”¹⁸⁹ The fantasy of the power of the programmer would contend that the programmer possesses a kind of Hobbesian sovereignty in a relation where “one is either the person who makes and gives orders (the sovereign), or one follows orders.”¹⁹⁰ This entails a recourse to “Austinian understandings of performative utterances as simply doing what they say [which] posit the speaker as ‘the judge or some other representative of the law.’”¹⁹¹ Yet, with Hayekian resonances there is a “twinning of empowerment with ignorance” in modern computing, which Chun says constantly undoes the conception of the sovereign programmer. In other words, according to “Butler, following Jacques Derrida ... iterability lies behind the effectiveness of performative utterances” which means that “*‘the subject who ‘cites’ the performative is temporarily produced as the belated and fictive origin of the performative itself.’* The programmer/user ... is produced through the act of programming.”¹⁹² Thus, the conception of freedom under neoliberalism means each individual constitutes a player in a game, with winners and losers, in which “a set of rules ... determine[s] the way in which each must play” and “whose outcome is not known by anyone.”¹⁹³ Chun characterizes the situation by saying that “although small-s sovereigns proliferate through neoliberalism’s empowered yet endangered subjects, it still fundamentally denies the

¹⁸⁹ Chun, 28.

¹⁹⁰ Chun, 27.

¹⁹¹ Chun, 28.

¹⁹² Chun, 28.

¹⁹³ Chun, 29.

position of the Sovereign who knows—a position that we nonetheless nostalgically desire ... for ourselves.”¹⁹⁴

Thus, Chun observes that “source code as source means that software functions as an axiom.”¹⁹⁵ In other words, it confirms and is confirmed by “a certain neoliberal logic of cause and effect, based on the erasure of execution and the privileging of programming that bleeds elsewhere and stems from elsewhere as well.”¹⁹⁶ However, following Deleuze and Guattari’s argument, the axiomatic “temporarily limits what can be decoded, put into motion, by setting up an artificial limit—the artificial limit of programmability—that seeks to separate information from entropy, by designating some entropy information and other ‘non-intentional’ entropy noise.”¹⁹⁷ This illustrates what Deleuze states in the interview, “Capitalism: a Very Special Delirium,” namely that

all societies are rational and irrational at the same time. They are perforce rational in their mechanism, their cogs and wheels, their connecting systems, and even by the place they assign to the irrational. Yet all this presupposes codes or axioms which are not the products of chance, but which are not intrinsically rational either.¹⁹⁸

From this point of view, Chun concludes that “source code is a fetish,” a way of visualizing “what is unknown.”¹⁹⁹ Of course, fetishism consists of the assignment of

¹⁹⁴ Chun, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Chun, 49.

¹⁹⁶ Chun, 49.

¹⁹⁷ Chun, 49.

¹⁹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, “Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium,” in “Chaosophy,” ed. Sylvère Lothringer, *Autonome/Semiotexte* (1995), <https://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze7.htm> (accessed 04/16/2022).

¹⁹⁹ Chun, 50.

agency to purely material or social causality and is, thus, an “unenlightened” mode of thought.²⁰⁰ However, Chun also points out that while:

The parallel to source code seems obvious: we “primitive folk” worship source code as a magical entity—as a source of causality—when in truth the power lies elsewhere, most importantly, in social and machinic relation. If code is performative, its effectiveness relies on human and machinic ritual. Interestingly though, in this parallel, Enlightenment thinking—a belief that knowing leads to control, to a release from tutelage—is not the “solution” to the fetish, but, rather, what grounds it, for source code historically has been portrayed as the solution to wizards and other myths of programming: Machine code provokes mystery and submission; source code enables understanding and thus institutes rational thought and freedom.²⁰¹

In other words, referring back to Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion, the ongoing rationalization of the regime of truth—which as Deleuze points out is contingently rational—the movement from its first glimmer to its culmination in the cybernetic, algorithm and software governed behemoth of neoliberalism, exposes the cracks in the governing rationality, the ghost in the machine, as Chun describes it.²⁰²

In much the same way, Lyotard observes that despite the historic and systematic antagonism of scientific language games of knowledge legitimation against narrative language games of knowledge legitimation, the effects of the commodification of knowledge are such that scientific knowledge is forced to make recourse to narrative language games of legitimation. This occurs in the wake of what Fredric Jameson, in his forward to *The Postmodern Condition*, refers to as

the so-called crisis of representation, in which an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it—projects a mirror theory of

²⁰⁰ Chun, 50.

²⁰¹ Chun, 51.

²⁰² Chun, 54.

knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy and Truth itself.²⁰³

Lyotard, then, makes the move to

“save[.]” the coherence of scientific research and experiment by recasting its now seemingly non- or postreferential “epistemology” in terms of linguistics, and in particular of theories of the performative (J.L. Austin), for which the justification of scientific work is not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather to produce *more* work.²⁰⁴

However, in Chun’s discussion of software, “this erasure of the vicissitudes of execution coincides with the conflation of data with information, of information with knowledge.”²⁰⁵ This produces “an intentional authorial subject”²⁰⁶ because of the way in which “narrative is affirmed” by Lyotard, “as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic.”²⁰⁷ Thus, when randomness shows up where the authorial subject has ensured meaning, when the real inevitably impinges upon the imaginary, the reaction is one of paranoia. In the context of game design, Chun says that

all design books warn against coincidence or random mapping, since it can induce paranoia in its users. That is, because an interface is programmed, most users treat coincidence as meaningful. To the user, as with the paranoid schizophrenic, there is always meaning: whether or not the user knows the meaning, s/he knows that it regards him or her.²⁰⁸

²⁰³ Lyotard, viii.

²⁰⁴ Lyotard, ix.

²⁰⁵ Chun, 53.

²⁰⁶ Chun, 53.

²⁰⁷ Lyotard, xi.

²⁰⁸ Chun, 53.

On a macro level, in neoliberal society the crises we are facing can, in part, invoke and be attributed to this paranoid reaction, that to listen to Deleuze and Guattari, is endemic to capitalism itself. This is evident in the proliferation of conspiracy theory that has emerged in the Covid era, from QAnon to Covid denial to anti-vaccination movements. Even Giorgio Agamben's Covid denial contains an element of this kind of fetishistic assumption of agency where, in fact, only material and social conditions are playing themselves out on the world stage. Going further back, we can see, as I have mentioned previously, the way in which the attacks of 9/11 invoked a paranoid reaction in the U.S. of Islamophobia and clash-of-civilizations rhetoric. Likewise, the 2008 financial crisis indicates a level of anxiety in the eruption of the real into our fantasy of a smoothly operating ordered system. The response in the wake of 2008 indicates a willful blindness to this deep state of crisis, both on the part of the economic institutions that facilitated the crisis, but also, to a lesser degree, the general public that made up the bulk of the victims of the crisis. To explicate this mentality, Philip Goodchild, in *Economic Theology* quotes Simone Weil, saying that

it is enough that the productivity of human effort should have increased in an unheard-of manner for the last three centuries for it to be expected that this increase will continue at the same rate. Our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them.²⁰⁹

Furthermore, Goodchild says that "following the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, government borrowing has increased once more, accompanied by massive injections of lending into the economy by the major central banks: financial stability rests purely on

²⁰⁹ Philip Goodchild, *Economic Theology*, 91.

the interventions of these pivotal institutions.”²¹⁰ However, the “extrapolation of growth depends upon the assumption of an infinite power of substitution ... [and] this assumption relates far more to the conditions of an ideal model of a market.”²¹¹

However, rather than condemning these paranoid reactions out right, from a rationalist, enlightened positionality that, as is the case in Chun’s consideration of code, is not the “solution” to the problem, but that which enables the problem in the first place, we ought to be cognizant of the fact that “underneath all reason lies delirium, drift.”²¹² In this sense, reason can function internally, while being irrational externally. The example that Deleuze provides is that of theology: “everything about it is rational if you accept sin, immaculate conception, incarnation.”²¹³ Capitalism is no different, nor is the regime of truth under which it has developed and with which it is nearly synonymous. Thus, “everything is rational in capitalism, except capital or capitalism itself.”²¹⁴ In this way, we should see the regime of truth that underlies and confirms neoliberalism, like “code as fetish,” as an “abstraction that is haunted, a source that is re-source, a source that renders the machinic—with its annoying specificities or ‘bugs’—ghostly.”²¹⁵ That is to say that, while we should certainly oppose the global shift toward authoritarian sovereignty, Covid denial, anti-vaccination sentiments, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, the Russian

²¹⁰ Goodchild, *Economic Theology*, 8.

²¹¹ Goodchild, *Economic Theology*, 91

²¹² Deleuze and Guattari.

²¹³ Deleuze and Guattari.

²¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari.

²¹⁵ Chun, 54.

invasion of Ukraine, attacks of women’s reproductive rights, police brutality and acts of murder, and conspiracy theories (to name a few of the manifestations of crisis populating our newsfeeds on a daily basis), we should not be lulled by the idea that these are aberrations external to neoliberalism as source code.

4.2 Economic Theology and the Death of God

In Book III of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche says that

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. — and we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.²¹⁶

In other words, the world is still haunted, not necessarily by God himself, but by his shadow, by his death; an event which happened, arguably, as far back as Lilla’s Great Separation, but which, however, like the death of a distant star, has not fully reached our eyes. From this perspective, when Chun talks about the ghostliness of the algorithm what is being evoked is, in a sense, the death of God. As Nietzsche states in his “Parable of the Madman” though we have killed God ourselves, we, as a neoliberal society under the regime of truth, have not yet become aware of what we have done. Though we have “unchained this earth from its sun”²¹⁷ we still operate under the presumption of an ordered and knowable world system, of the possibility of erasing “the gap between source and execution, an erasure of execution itself.”²¹⁸ In Heideggerian terms, this could be

²¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 167.

²¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

²¹⁸ Chun, 51.

expressed by saying that we operate under the presumption of thinking not just beings “in regard to being,” but of the possibility of thinking “the truth of being.”²¹⁹ This, then, illustrates Heidegger’s assertion that “not only has the truth of being been denied to thinking as a possible experience, but Western thinking itself (precisely in the form of metaphysics) has specifically, though unknowingly, masked the occurrence of this denial.”²²⁰ In other words, Western metaphysical thinking, thinking about God, about providence, about an immanently ordered world, about source code as logos, presumes to have access to the truth of being, however, the very will to this truth of being blinds us to our own inability to access it.

Thus, Heidegger takes up Nietzsche’s word—“God is dead”—in order to consider “whether Nietzsche, if anything, is not rather expressing [*ausspricht*] here the word that has always been implicitly [*unausgesprochen*] spoken within the metaphysically determined history of the West.”²²¹ While, as Heidegger points out, the “God” in reference here, both by Nietzsche and myself, is none other than the Christian God, it is not simply in the dichotomy between faith and apostasy that the effects and principle modes of the death of God are today felt. Namely, “Nietzsche uses the names ‘God’ and ‘Christian God’ to indicate the supersensory world in general. God is the name for the realm of ideas and the ideal.”²²² While the immanent order is conceived of *as* immanent,

²¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word: ‘God is Dead,’” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159.

²²⁰ Heidegger, 159.

²²¹ Heidegger, 160.

²²² Heidegger, 162.

as being the sensory object of science and knowledge, as I have already observed, the meaning of an immanent order implies a transcendent, supersensory source. Likewise, Heidegger asserts that “historical progress has replaced the withdrawal from the world into the supersensory. The goal of eternal bliss in the hereafter has been transformed into the earthly happiness of the greatest number.”²²³ In this context, the fact that “‘God is dead’ means: the supersensory world has no effective power,” indicates that under the logic of neoliberalism and its crises, the regime of truth has come to its contradictory conclusion. Here, the death of God means that the fact of our being denied the ability to think the truth of being is becoming painfully obvious.

This is a situation that sheds light on what Nietzsche means by the term nihilism. Heidegger says that “if the supersensory world of ideas is bereft of its binding and above all its inspiring and constructive power, then there is nothing left which man can rely on and by which he can orient himself.”²²⁴ Yet, neoliberalism appears to persist in spite of its crises. It persists despite the nihilism that shows as it splits at the seams. The death of God means that we are “straying as through an infinite nothing,”²²⁵ and “nothing means here: absence of a supersensory, binding world. Nihilism, ‘the eeriest of all guests,’ is standing at the door.”²²⁶ One would be justified in wondering how, in the face of such crises—such ghostly apparitions, that disrupt not only the smooth functioning of the neoliberal order, but also the plausibility of belief in such an order—we could persist in

²²³ Heidegger, 165.

²²⁴ Heidegger, 163.

²²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

²²⁶ Heidegger, 163.

the “solution” of doubling down on the beliefs and policy actions that have spawned these crises in the first place. How could we have persisted in our faith in a system of credit and debt for ordering public trust in the wake of 2008? How can we maintain our Westphalian fantasy in spite of the Russian invasion of Ukraine? The answer seems to be that nihilism itself is not new to the twenty-first century, that it is only that “after dominating the preceding centuries [it] has determined the current one;” a statement that is every bit as true in our century as it was in Heidegger’s.²²⁷ In other words, our will to truth in Western metaphysical thought has always been a will to nothingness and, even in the face of catastrophe, “the basic fact of the human will,” which Nietzsche observes in *The Genealogy of Morals*, remains true; namely that of “its *horror vacui*. *it needs a goal*—and it will rather will nothingness than *not* will.”²²⁸

Nihilism is, thus, in no way embodied solely by those “irrational” eruptions against the neoliberal order. Rather, “the faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*.”²²⁹ It is this purely fictitious world—a world of the order of ostensibly immutable economic laws, which have replaced the providence of God—that impelled Hayek’s imagination of an “unknown civilization” which would constitute a global civilization in “a world without empires but with rules set by supranational bodies operating beyond the reach of any electorate ... a world where the global economy was

²²⁷ Heidegger, 160.

²²⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 97.

²²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 13.

safely protected from the demands of redistributive equality and social justice”²³⁰

Critically, Pierre Bourdieu refers to a “false universalism” or what he calls “the imperialism of the universal,” which “is no more than a nationalism which invokes the universal (human rights, etc.) in order to impose itself.”²³¹ In this context, he says, the “irrationalisms” of terrorist violence, or even those of North American conspiracy theory, Trump voters, Brexit, or Hindu nationalism “are partly the product of our rationalism, imperialist, invasive and conquering or mediocre, narrow, defensive, regressive and repressive, depending on the place and time.”²³²

Likewise, nihilism is not just a historical movement, “not just one historical phenomenon among others, not just one spiritual-intellectual current that occurs within Western history,” rather, “thought in its essence, [it] is ... the fundamental movement of the history of the West.”²³³ Likewise, nihilism does not affect the West alone, but all “the peoples of the earth who have been drawn into modernity’s arena of power.”²³⁴ This arena of power has likewise been theorized by various anticolonial theorists, such as Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the colonial matrix of power, or Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s conception of the cognitive empire of the global North. Without getting too deeply embroiled in postcolonial or decolonial theory, these theories illustrate how

²³⁰ Slobodian, 264.

²³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, trans. Richard Nice (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), 19.

²³² Bourdieu, 20.

²³³ Heidegger, 163.

²³⁴ Heidegger, 163-64.

nihilism has become “the world-historic movement” that, through European expansion, imperial and colonial, nihilism as historical movement has spread across the globe. Furthermore, although “a keen eye for nihilism awoke and its name became common” in the nineteenth century, “it is not only a phenomenon of the present age.”²³⁵ As the genealogy of the origin of the immanent order of the regime of truth has demonstrated, the nihilism that was born of this movement reaches back at least as far back as the comingling of Christian theology and cosmology with Neoplatonic cosmology and ethics, in that the will to truth, oriented toward an absolute metaphysical truth in a supersensory world, is an aim that, in Nietzsche’s terms, “is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”²³⁶

Thus, nihilism means that “*the highest values devalue themselves.*”²³⁷ By “the highest values” says Heidegger, “one understands ... truth, goodness, and beauty.”²³⁸ In much the same way that Chun observes that Enlightenment thinking is not the solution to the fetishization of code, but that which sustains code as fetish, likewise the rationalization of the world leads to the “real world” becoming a myth, as Nietzsche lays out in *Twilight of the Idols*.²³⁹ Thus, when “*with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world*” we likewise enter what Nietzsche calls “mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; INCIPIT

²³⁵ Heidegger, 164.

²³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 9.

²³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

²³⁸ Heidegger, 166.

²³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 50-51

ZARATHUSTRA.”²⁴⁰ However, it is not that rationalization has led to the heights of truth, knowledge, and understanding promised by the Enlightenment. On the contrary, it is the failure of the regime of truth to deliver good government that has the potential to disabuse the world of the illusion of an idolatrous rationalization. Heidegger raises the question: “what is the purpose of these highest values if they do not also secure the guarantee for, as well as the ways and means of, realizing the goals they set?”²⁴¹

On this score, we see that the devaluation of “the hitherto highest values” sets the world—“the world grown value-less,”—up for “a new dispensation of values.”²⁴² Here, the tenor of Nietzsche’s “Parable of the Madman” becomes relevant. Contra the long debunked move of cheap atheism to read the death of God as a moment of celebration in Nietzsche, his reaction to this historical moment is one of mourning. It is much more along the lines of the way in which the character Karin (Harriet Andersson) reacts in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Through a Glass Darkly* when she encounters the stony-faced spider God—a scene with overt Nietzschean resonances—that Nietzsche frames his announcement. This encounter is the climax of the film, wherein her madness becomes solidified. Perhaps one of Nietzsche’s greatest complaints about Christianity is the way in which it undermines its own claim to meaning via the ascetic contradiction.

Biographically, Nietzsche’s father was a Christian minister and Nietzsche himself, in his early years, studied earnestly to follow in his father’s footsteps. There is, thus, a sense of maddening betrayal in Nietzsche, his madman, and Karin at the realization that the

²⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 51.

²⁴¹ Heidegger, 167.

²⁴² Heidegger, 167.

highest values have devaluated themselves. However, Heidegger also correctly points out that, as “Nietzsche grasps his own thinking ... in the sense of the actual completion of nihilism, he no longer understands nihilism only negatively as the devaluation of the highest values, but rather also positively, as the overcoming of nihilism.”²⁴³ In this light, Nietzsche anti-moralism takes on a meaning which corresponds to a quote from Thomas Mann that Jean-Luc Nancy analyzes in his essay, “‘Our Probity!’ On Truth in the Moral Sense in Nietzsche”: “Whoever considers himself an immoralist is in reality the most finely tuned moralist ever to have existed, a being possessed by moral exigency, a brother of Pascal.”²⁴⁴

In Nancy’s terms, “Nietzsche is the moralist of an *altogether other morality*, one which, whilst having nothing to do with the sensible/non-sensible couple, would nonetheless still be a morality: that is to say it would have the imperative and normative aim of relating to a value.”²⁴⁵ In this sense, then, Heidegger says that Nietzsche’s madman is “de-ranged [*Ver-rückt*]. He is moved out [*ausgerückt*] of the level of erstwhile man on which the ideals, now grown unreal, of the supersensory world are passed off as real while the opposite ideals are being realized.”²⁴⁶ Thus, truth in the moral sense in Nietzsche, for Nancy, “implies thinking the *truth* of metaphysics no longer as adequation to a reality, but as an *evaluation* (a ‘holding-to-be-true,’ *fürwahrhalten*) of

²⁴³ Heidegger, 187.

²⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Our Probity!’ On Truth in the Moral Sense in Nietzsche,” in *Looking After Nietzsche*, ed. Laurence A. Rickels. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 67.

²⁴⁵ Nancy, 68.

²⁴⁶ Heidegger, 199.

what is necessary to life.”²⁴⁷ Nietzsche’s term probity designates the courage “to admit the lie of the concept, the lie of language in general.”²⁴⁸

A central theme of Nancy’s essay is the bringing together of Nietzsche and Kant, which he says “is provocative or paradoxical only at a very superficial level.”²⁴⁹ Critique then becomes the common link between the two thinkers, and gives significance to Nietzsche’s probity. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, despite asserting that “Kant’s genius, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, was to conceive of an immanent critique. Critique must not be a critique of reason by feeling, by experiencing or by any kind of external instance,”²⁵⁰ Deleuze also refers to Kant’s critique as “conciliatory or respectful” in that at each step knowledge, morality, and religion are maintained as unquestioned ideals.²⁵¹ Meanwhile, Nietzsche’s critique constitutes an attack on each of these ideals at their core. The difference being that, in Kant,

we may criticize false pretenders, we may condemn those who trespass on domains, but we regard the domains themselves as sacred. Similarly for knowledge: a critique worthy of the name must not bear on the pseudo-knowledge of the unknowable, but primarily on the true knowledge of what can be known.²⁵²

Thus, because “Kant lacked a method which permitted reason to be judged from the inside without giving it the task of being its own judge,” reason must be “both the

²⁴⁷ Nancy, 68.

²⁴⁸ Nancy, 70.

²⁴⁹ Nancy, 80.

²⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 91.

²⁵¹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 90.

²⁵² Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 90.

tribunal and the accused.”²⁵³ In other word, “transcendental philosophy discovers conditions which still remain external to the conditioned. Transcendental principles are principles of conditioning and not of internal genesis.”²⁵⁴ Thus, Nietzsche formulates a critique that replaces the transcendental with genealogy, asking “what is the will which hides and expresses itself in reason? What stands behind reason, in reason itself?”²⁵⁵

Despite this difference in critique, a difference of degree, it would not be useful to subsequently abandon Kant for Nietzsche, much less so to adopt a Nietzschean polemic against Kant, given Nietzsche’s notoriously bad and superficial readings of Kant’s work. Rather, Nancy views an attempt to “find or read Kant in Nietzsche ... indispensable, and not as a sophisticated (and sophistical) manoeuver, but as the only really adequate way to break through to the interior of *Redlichkeit* [probity].”²⁵⁶ Despite Deleuze’s characterization of Nietzsche’s critique, Nancy’s exposé on Nietzsche’s probity as truth and morality asserts that

Nietzsche’s thought remains subjected to the regime of *value* as such. It is indeed then a morality, but as such it does not transgress in any fundamental way the metaphysical determination of morality, nor the moral determination of metaphysics. Rather, *it brings it to completion.*²⁵⁷

In this vein, Nancy suggests that “one would have to ask if Nietzschean *probity* does not consist precisely in brutally affirming what motivates Kant, something which Kant

²⁵³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 91.

²⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 91.

²⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 91.

²⁵⁶ Nancy, 80.

²⁵⁷ Nancy, 68.

however conceals up to a point (or conceals from himself), namely the general *devaluation* of every morality founded on the representation of an ideal, a value and an end (which is to say in Kantian terms, founded on the regime of the hypothetical imperative).”²⁵⁸

While Nancy’s discussion of Nietzsche’s probity centers on the question of morality in Nietzsche’s philosophy, the question of truth, and by extension knowledge, is, as we have seen, never far out of frame. Toward the end of his essay, Nancy says that

Nietzsche’s probity is to have admitted that he in turn was confronting the truth which Kant had begun to confront—all the while covering it up in “physics,” as Kant indeed had covered it up in “morality”—that truth which can be extracted from the *end* of truth, from the end of the “world-truth” (cf. *Twilight of the Idols*), the incommensurable, unrepresentable truth (Kant’s terms) of that which no longer stems from any *homoiosis*.²⁵⁹

In other words, probity is the truth that can be gleaned from the collapse of the regime of truth, from the death of God. It is the new dispensation of values that corresponds with incipit Zarathustra. However, probity is also an orientation within the subject toward the ultimate unknowability of Truth, at least on a factual basis. Hence Nietzsche’s famous statement in response to “that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only *facts*,’” that “no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only *interpretations*.”²⁶⁰ Under these conditions the status of knowledge is certainly altered from what it was considered to be in the modern era according to Lyotard’s definition.

²⁵⁸ Nancy, 83.

²⁵⁹ Nancy, 84.

²⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 458.

In the final two chapters of *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard discusses what he refers to as postmodern scientific knowledge, in which the legitimation of knowledge has been “recovered by including within scientific discourse the discourse on the validation of statements held to be laws,” an inclusion which “is not a simple operation, but gives rise to ‘paradoxes’ that are taken extremely seriously and to ‘limitations’ on the scope of knowledge that are in fact changes in its nature.”²⁶¹ Essentially, with the discovery of quantum mechanics the ordered-systems understanding of the universe can no longer be taken seriously, the increase of information in a given model does not decrease, but rather increases, the amount of uncertainty in a given prediction. According to Lyotard, the response of postmodern science is that of “theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown.”²⁶² The result of this new definition of the word *knowledge* is that it shifted the legitimation of knowledge away from “maximized performance” and instead “has as its basis difference understood as paralogy.”²⁶³ In other words, rather than constructing models that predict outcomes with maximum efficiency, for Lyotard “*having ideas* is the scientist’s highest accomplishment” in postmodern science.²⁶⁴

Lyotard situates his conception of postmodern science—which in reality remains little more than a conception because the market logics that dominate neoliberal science

²⁶¹ Lyotard, 54-55.

²⁶² Lyotard, 60.

²⁶³ Lyotard.

²⁶⁴ Lyotard.

keep it entrenched in systems theory—against Habermas’s conception of consensus. In his forward to the book, Jameson says that Lyotard rejects “Habermas’s vision of an evolutionary social leap into a new type of rational society, defined in communicational terms ... as the unacceptable remnant of a ‘totalizing’ philosophical tradition and as the valorization of conformist, when not ‘terrorist,’ ideals of consensus.”²⁶⁵ According to Lyotard, this idea of consensus maintains knowledge legitimation through performativity, the “only validity” of which “is as an instrument to be used toward achieving the real goal, which is what legitimates the system—power.”²⁶⁶ Communicative consensus could thus, conceivably, be entirely compatible with neoliberal systems theory, assuming that it could be communicatively legitimated. Optimistically, this would entail a somewhat more equitable outcome for a neoliberal system, in that it would require broad consensus on the performative efficiency of said system; meaning that certain needs would have to be satisfied in order to avoid destabilizing the system. However, Lyotard shows this to be quite impossible on the basis of the totalizing and “terrorist” behavior of the system. In other words, Lyotard says that “within the framework of the power criterion, a request ... gains nothing in legitimacy by virtue of being based on the hardship of an unmet need. Rights do not flow from hardship, but from the fact that the alleviation of hardship improves the system’s performance.”²⁶⁷ This invokes what Lyotard calls “the arrogance of the decision makers.”²⁶⁸ These are the “technocrats” who “declare that they cannot

²⁶⁵ Lyotard, x.

²⁶⁶ Lyotard, 61.

²⁶⁷ Lyotard, 63.

²⁶⁸ Lyotard, 63.

trust what society designates as its needs; they ‘know’ that society cannot know its own needs since they are not variables independent of the new technologies.”²⁶⁹ In other words, because the arrogance of the decider (to shift the terminology slightly in order to highlight the Schmittian resonances) means that the technocrats “identify themselves with the social system conceived as a totality in quest of its most performative unity possible,” consensus is always already assumed on the basis of the instrumental rationality that dictates the functioning of the system.²⁷⁰

This goes back to the absolute foreclosure of the political which includes the *politics proper* of Rancière and Žižek, in that, even at its most inclusive, it entails an attempt to hijack the universal on the part of the particular, which ultimately leads back to a totalizing system. To reiterate a quote from Žižek referenced earlier: “we—the ‘nothing,’ not counted in the order—are the people, we are ALL against Others who stand only for their particular privileged interest.” Ultimately, this would optimistically mean simply a restructuring of the totalizing power structure of the system. However, what most often happens, at least under the logics of neoliberalism, is that the “not counted” simply get sucked up into the neoliberal vortex in order to mitigate the destabilizing effects of their protest. As instrumental and important as the Movement for Black Lives has been in the last few years in American society, we can see the logic of how the system maintains its stability in the metamorphosis of the protest slogan “Black Lives Matter” into a marketing slogan, while very few actually substantial reforms have

²⁶⁹ Lyotard, 63.

²⁷⁰ Lyotard, 63.

been enacted to improve the lives and dignity of Black people in the America. Likewise, this conception of the political presupposes the desire, on the part of the excluded, to be included. The baseline of life and dignity, under this totalizing system, is inclusion in the system. Hence the invisibility of Indigenous populations in North America. Rather than demanding to be included in the political system from which they are excluded, they most often seek liberation from the liminal space of inclusion by exclusion in which they find themselves, via domestic dependent nationhood, through Land Back initiatives that are, under the totalizing system of neoliberalism, effectively unthinkable.

Meanwhile, Lyotard's concept of paralogy can be connected to Nietzsche's perspectivism of which he says:

But precisely because we seek knowledge, let us not be ungrateful to such resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations with which the spirit has, with apparent mischievousness and futility, raged against itself for so long: to see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future "objectivity"—the latter understood not as "contemplation without interest" (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one's Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.²⁷¹

In the context of historical study, Foucault invokes this sense of perspectivism through the concept of "effective history" which affirms "knowledge as perspective."²⁷² This is an acknowledgement that, contra the modernist conception of the world and science, there is no God's-eye-view that one can take, whether in the context of studying history, science, or the ordering of society. Thus, while historians, according to Foucault, "take

²⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 119.

²⁷² Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 90.

pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy—the unavoidable obstacles of their passion,” the perspectivism that informs effective history, first of all, recognizes the impossibility of such an endeavor, but also, by recognizing that “its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering and poisonous traces in order to prescribe the best antidote.”²⁷³ This is based on Nietzsche’s insight that “there is *only* perspective seeing, *only* perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be.”²⁷⁴

In aligning Nietzsche’s perspectivism with Lyotard’s paralogy I propose that these many perspectives be thought of in terms of what Lyotard calls “the little narrative [*petit récit*].”²⁷⁵ In light of his observation that while “consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value ... justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect” Lyotard leverages the concept of the little narrative toward “an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.”²⁷⁶ This is propelled by the understanding that while postmodern science has the “simplicity” of generating ideas for its legitimation, “social pragmatics does not have the ‘simplicity’ of scientific pragmatics,” in that “it is a monster formed by the interweaving of various networks of

²⁷³ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 90.

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 119.

²⁷⁵ Lyotard, 60.

²⁷⁶ Lyotard, 66.

heteromorphous classes of utterances ... [and] there is no reason to think that it would be possible to determine metaprescriptives common to all of these language games.”²⁷⁷

Thus, paralogy suggests an “orientation” that “favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments ... argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time.”²⁷⁸ In other words, these metaprescriptives amount to perspectives which are “local” and “agreed upon by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation.”²⁷⁹

The practical result of this orientation, for Lyotard, would be that “language games would then be games of perfect information at any given moment. But they would also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussion would never risk fixating in a position of minimax because it had exhausted its stakes.” Of course, as Lyotard acknowledges, this would require “free public access” to all “memory and data banks,”²⁸⁰ but the supposition is that with such free circulation of information, combined with the perspectivism of paralogy, new forms of “theoretical thought and forms of practical action” could be invented that would enable the kinds of “transnational struggles” envisioned by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay, “Social Scientists, Economic Science and the Social Movement.”²⁸¹ If perspectivism is indeed the missing link in the creation of such transnational struggles, it would account quite nicely for the fact that, under the systems theory of neoliberalism, digital space has become every bit as balkanized as the physical

²⁷⁷ Lyotard, 65.

²⁷⁸ Lyotard, 66.

²⁷⁹ Lyotard, 66.

²⁸⁰ Lyotard, 67.

²⁸¹ Bourdieu, 59.

globe in analog space before it. Likewise, from the positionality of the West, given the fact that its cognitive empire has persistently encroached upon and attempted to erase the many ways of knowing that Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the epistemologies of the South, it is clear that we are currently starving for perspectives which could enable such a paralogy in the name of transnational solidarity.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

By attending to the theological signature of power through the economic, we are able to retain the insights of Schmitt, though in an antagonistic manner, after the development of neoliberalism. In other words, this method of engaging what I will still broadly refer to as political theological discourse, means that in the face of twenty-first century crises, the core of political theology remains relevant without having to concede to Schmitt the idea that there must always be a sovereign (person) underlying a liberal order. However, because this means that the sovereign miracle of the particular will is replaced by the (sovereign) providence of an ordered world, it entails a much deeper critique of Western thought forms than a simple liberal versus conservative critique of the return to history in favor of the end of history. Counterintuitively, it means that when facing the kinds of irrational eruptions of violence, fundamentalism, and chaos that we currently are, we are not able to hope for a simple return to reason through the liberal order. However, the trap that often snares thinkers addressing this kind of critique, is to forget that we need not reject what is worthwhile in “liberal values,” nor embrace antiliberal values in the name of realism. In his book, *A Transatlantic Political Theology of Psychedelic Aesthetics*, Roger Green refers to the concept of the “political vortex” which obscures the difference between right and left.²⁸² In the same way, the critique

²⁸² Roger Green, *A Transatlantic Political Theology of Psychedelic Aesthetics: Enchanted Citizens*, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 145.

that I am attempting to offer, here, is an attempt to get out of this kind of vortex, which is able to subsume both conservative and progressive sentiments into its own monstrous, totalizing ends.

Likewise, this reading of political theological discourse casts doubt on the “independence” of the political from the economic. By that token, following Lazzarato, I have attempted to avert the “caricature” view of politics and economic that he attributes to thinkers such as Rancière and Badiou,²⁸³ in favor of a view that takes seriously the economic as the base of the political superstructure. In a loosely Marxist vein, then, I question whether political action, per se, could ever prove emancipatory if we do not first address the economic relations and the rationalized modes of thought that make other ways of being simply unthinkable.

Furthermore, this kind of critique hinges on an understanding of the secular that contains the signature of the theological, because it reveals the structures of thought that shape political economic power, through the genealogy of their birth. Thus, while—again—I remain antagonistic to Schmitt, in that my view of emancipation from our current predicaments entails an exit from political and economic theology, I have likewise attempted to defend Schmitt’s reading of the secular with its relation to theological structures because my research shows that a mechanistic hooking together of the secular and the theological makes it impossible to achieve the goals that secularism has ostensibly presented itself as pursuing. Such a hooking together of concepts as only mechanically connected leaves secularism to lead only to the rise of a totalizing version of modern science, as well as the anti-Christianity that to Nietzsche’s dismay rejects

²⁸³ Lazzarato, 53.

Christian belief while maintaining Christian values. It ignores the movement of the rationalization of theological concepts, which is, likewise, a movement of nihilism.

This movement, furthermore, is defined by Nietzsche as the devaluation of the highest values. The rationalization that has led from the ideal of a supersensory world, in which God's goodness and wisdom are united, to the regime of truth in which ostensibly immutable economic laws govern every facet of life, all but destroying our ability to believe in God and the supersensory, is now in the process of destroying our ability to believe in the immanent ordering upon which neoliberalism has attempted to found its utopian vision. Hence, we have killed God. We can see the evidence of this in the housing and homelessness crises we are facing, the Covid pandemic, a global shift toward the right, and the war in Ukraine, but even more fundamentally through the delegitimation of knowledge which renders the regime of truth all but incoherent. Consensus, according to Lyotard contra Habermas, is no longer possible. Instead, knowledge legitimation must be always local and limited. To move forward under these circumstances would require an understanding of the paralogical in our language game moves. While, this movement of nihilism is, I would acknowledge, something to mourn along with Nietzsche's madman—"is not night continually closing in on us?"—it also presents us with an opportunity.²⁸⁴ Not an opportunity in the sense of malign velocities that wish to accelerate the mounting catastrophe, or a willingness to "watch the world burn"—neoliberalism has done a fine job of that on its own. Quite the contrary, it represents the opportunity for other ways of being. Instead of continuing on with a regime of truth, or a will to truth that places comforting idols before our eyes—ideas like

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 181.

getting back to normal after covid, or a return to reason—we need to view our situation with probity, which is for Nietzsche a higher or nobler idea of truth than the will to truth which is, in turn, a will to nothingness.

This is where transnational solidarity comes in. In facing the bleakness of our situation, alongside a history of European global expansion, it becomes apparent that not only must we be very suspicious of suggested solutions that come from the Euro-American philosophical canon, but also that it is likely that this worldview is far too inflected by the historical movement of nihilism to even offer plausible solutions. I propose that probity in this case means facing the fact of not having the answers and the need to turn to others who might have answers that we do not. I am speaking, of course, as a white, cis-male, American scholar deeply embedded in an academic tradition that everywhere embodies a sense of Western superiority and chauvinism, and it is out of an attempt at solidarity that I am speaking from my positionality mainly to my peers who share elements of this identity with me. As such, I have attempting to lay groundwork in this study that could contribute to further study in which this formulation of the death of God in the context of economic theology could contribute to a strategy by which Western academia might embrace a decolonizing project, and by which euro-American scholars could participate with indigenous scholars and scholars from the global south, without the need to assert ourselves as experts on *their* discourse, without the need to speak over and for them on their own projects. In this light, I hope to have shown that adopting an attitude of humility and listening, through perspectivism and probity, is not only “the right thing to do,” but that it is also a necessary and courageous way to face the

impending catastrophe that the movement of nihilism as wrought through the course of Western history.

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