

**Review of Dotan Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modelling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault*
New York: Columbia University Press, 2016**

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The Origins of Neoliberalism consists of six chapters prefaced by a substantial introduction and acknowledgements. With *Origins*, Leshem attempts "to bring Foucault's work to completion" (6) and defend him from Agamben's critique, by displacing the crucial point in "the genealogy of the neoliberal marketized economy" from Agamben's focus on early Trinitarian theology in the second century, to the formulation of the Trinity and incarnation in the fourth and fifth centuries (6-7). It also "rectifies Arendt's formation of the human trinity" (i.e. economy, politics, and philosophy) by rethinking "the economic human condition as excess" (9). These bold moves he will use to "help us in the search for new ways to define the economy, to contend with the human condition that appears within it, and to reorganize its relations with politics, philosophical life, and the boundaries set by law" (181).

[The Marxist-Leninists leave the room].

I have an almost spectral insistence on historicising, not only because that is how I best think through and comprehend things, but also because I find that this is the best way of avoiding mystification and one-dimensional presentations of the world. Given this psychological/intellectual and political propensity, you might imagine my thrill, when I saw that "the history of the economy conducted in this book is different from the usual economic histories. It is a philological history that traces the meaning attached to the notion of *oikonomia* since its original use as management and dispensation (*nemein*) of the *oikos* in Archaic Greek until today" (2). Leshem goes on to criticise economic history, histories of ideas and science for projecting the contemporary meaning of the word back into history and then presents his own inquiry as one which thinks "of the economy supposing that universals don't exist" and thus "abstains taking for granted and simply describing the historical transformations of 'economic institutions,' 'economic practices,' such as the market economy, capitalism, etc." (3). The valour of this proposal fades, however, when one reaches the words "*core invariant meaning*" some 20 lines further down. Full-on was the return of the initial apprehension I felt when reading the preface, which ends with the declaration that the most common amendment to translation was that of "translating *oikonomia*, a word for which translators tend to use too many other words [!], to 'economy' instead" (x). I have to say that I found this decision regrettable because I found it difficult to keep in mind when he was talking about what, and when not, and that the use of economy in Ignatius of Antioch is not the same economy to which Alfred Marshall refers. This is a running feature throughout the book, but I give you one example from his analysis of Gregory of Nazianzus:

This homology between micro- and macroeconomics is very much present in economic growth theory, as the equivalent of personal growth (*theosis*) is

growth of the whole ecclesiastical body (soteria [not italicised]) and seems to posit, at first sight, the Church as the macroeconomic counterpart of the growth that is taking place in its members' souls at the microeconomic level etc. (99)

Sentences like this create a smooth economic surface on which to skate from the fourth to the twentieth century without so much as a ripple at which to pause. Or rather, in the fourth and fifth centuries theology is economy, and thus in the twentieth, economy is theology.

I do realise that when undertaking a genealogical analysis, the point is to understand backwards, which is why perhaps a more accurate subtitle would have been "from Foucault to Jesus." This also accounts for the translation of these "too many other words" into economy, to highlight the continuity between fourth and fifth century and our neoliberal market economy and speaking of the economization of "both nongovernmental organizations and governmental ones" in the time of the Roman Empire (17).

Setting aside that disappointment, we can then focus on the development of the argument. In my own words, and without reference to any of the major players, I would characterise the argument as follows: Leshem wants to show how our current neoliberal economy is connected to the theological developments that took place between the First Council of Nicea in 325, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. What happened in these years was the emergence of Christianity as an imperial religion, and the theological adjustment which took place in this shift from sectarian house-religion to imperial ideology. Leshem produces three models through which he churns politics, economy, philosophy (which he takes from Hannah Arendt) and shows through his reading of early Christian texts how the domain of economy is defined as being penetrated by the hypostatic union as developed by the Cappadocian Fathers, and from "the Christian moment," the economy has grown to encompass the two other spheres (politics and philosophy). Consequently, the notions of excess and surplus, which in pre-Christian Greek thought had been outside the sphere of *oikonomia*, are now contained within it, and thus enables unlimited growth. This in turn enables a new human condition, which has a free choice to choose between the old *oikonomia* and this new growth economy, a conception which has continued up until now.

I read Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) several years ago, and, from memory, I found it much easier to read than this; Agamben took the time to build up his argument, while Leshem relies on Agamben's argument to make his own. In fact, I would say that the major weakness of *Origins of Neoliberalism* is that it is exclusively written for an inside audience and the cogency of its argument relies completely on *your* intimate knowledge of Foucault (2004) and Agamben to which this book functions as a kind of idealist gloss.

Bibliography

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