
Review

The origins of neoliberalism: Modelling the economy from Jesus to Foucault

Dotan Leshem

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At the height of the modes of production debate 40 years ago, historians could write grand narrative accounts of the transition from ancient slave societies of Greece and Rome, through mediaeval feudalism to the absolutist state and modernity without mentioning pagan philosophy or Christian literature. Today, a kind of grand narrative has returned in which this story has been inverted: in Leshem's book, there is barely a mention of modes of production, slave, feudal, or capitalist; the story of the 'economy' is to be found in a philological study of the word *oikonomia* from the ancient philosophers through the New Testament texts and subsequent exegesis. The standard feature of the story of capitalism, the Protestant moment and the birth of the individual held to account directly before God, is here barely worth a few sentences. If taken as an account of a socio-economic series, reading this book requires what might be called the suspension of incredulity.

It is a book not only innocent of sociology, history and political theory, and it makes no concessions to a reader unfamiliar with the literature. The model reader of this text would be someone like Giorgio Agamben. Apparently, the project began by looking at the ancient concepts of the *oikonomia* and modelling its forms, and was then developed in relation to Foucault's studies, before confronting the work of Agamben. Although it began as something else but can be read, Leshem says, indeed as a critique of Agamben's interpretation of this literature.

This critique is done via analytical work to correct and amend the analyses of Arendt and Foucault along the way. The new story is told as an account of the origins of neoliberalism, but it is quite clear that Leshem has nothing new to say about neoliberalism that is not already outlined in Foucault's famous lectures of the late 1970s, and even here Leshem selects only one or two topics from Foucault's overview that was itself highly selective. Leshem selects Gary Becker's concept of human capital as the essence of neoliberal economics, and the book attempts to trace its origins from Foucault to Jesus (and way beyond).



The reader is assumed to know the economic and cultural history of the West since the Greeks and can easily contextualize the Christian writers in the late Roman period through to the 1054 split between Catholic and Orthodox Europe. The reformation and counter-reformation are absent from the account which jumps to the 'Wealth of Nations' as if this was in direct lineage with the *oikonomia* of the Catholic Church. The general thesis is the equivalent of suggesting that the origins of modern English are to be found in ancient Greek, or the tempered scale from Greek modes. The problem would be the decisive moment of modification.

For Leshem this is clear: it is not the Protestant ethic. It is the sequence: incorporation of the ancient *oikos* as model for the ecclesiastical *oikonomia*, and then the moment of its marketization. And the secularization thesis is wrong: the ecclesiastical economy is still there unrecognized, not as fetish but as the divine order ordained by Christ. The neoliberal twist produces a kind of perverse secularization by extending marketization beyond its proper boundaries within Christ's *oikonomia*. This wrong turn needs to be opposed by a different kind of secularization which Leshem derives from Arendt.

The book is thus coherently arranged to show the true nature of the concept of the economy in the philosophy of ancient Greece, its elaboration in the Roman Empire, and then its incorporation into a Christianity which becomes the ruling religion. The fourth-century debates and codifications are thus essential to the story, and Leshem presents a discussion of the literature in detail. Foucault is corrected here and there; Agamben is rejected specifically in relation to his conception of order and providence.

The key point is that Leshem suggests that the key concept is God's concept of growth as revealed in the literature: it is not providence that is important but the unlimited nature of desire, its nature and its objects. Leshem jumps from the early Middle Ages (nothing on Aquinas, important to Agamben) to the political economy literature beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, and he traces the concept of 'economy' from Smith, Mill, Jevons, Marshall, Robbins to Becker (the omissions here are rather striking). Agamben 'misidentifies the original denotation of providential care that appears in Smith's liberal market economy as the secularization of orthodox Christianity rather than of a stoic/Arian concept' (p. 7).

There is an attempt at modelling the economy: there are three. But this is far from something that includes production, exchange and consumption, or slave, serf, free labour, and is specifically premodern. 'In the classical moment men perpetuated themselves by pursuing the ideal mode of life, exceeding the boundaries of the economy; in the imperial moment men did so by being governed in multiple economies; the Christians do so by partaking in the economy of the One who is multiple' (pp. 77–78). In the latter model, the key is that humans are free to choose 'what surplus to generate and in which community'. The theologians are described in this latter form as economists (p. 79).



It is by reconstituting these models that one can, like Foucault but correcting him, ‘reconstitute an art and theory of resistance to prevailing neoliberal governmentality’ (p. 81). Against Foucault and following Arendt then, Leshem offers a new reading of the literature of the care of the self in Plato, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Fundamentally, for Leshem there is a choice ‘whether to partake in a growing economy in which freedom is exercised or to submerge in a circular economy in which anything that grows is destined to decay and perish’ (p. 94). Leshem opts for the former and promises a new ethical economy that will avoid Agamben’s ‘disastrous’ notion of bare life (pp. 6–9).

Leshem, then, wants to incorporate the genealogies outlined by Foucault into a predominantly Christian story secularized by Arendt, and in chapter 5 (entitled ‘Economy and the Legal Framework’) Agamben comes under attack. Here again we are thrown back into the literature of the fourth century, Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Eulogius. What causes Leshem concern is that Agamben has argued that it is necessary to recover the divine meaning of the pastoral economy and has done this by going back to the second-century literature (p. 136). Agamben’s theses on how the state of exception allowed the combination of the pastoral economy can be traced back to antiquity have to be corrected and ‘forward-dated to the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries and seen as an effect of the signature of secularization’ (p. 151). For Leshem this secularization is a mask.

So how does Leshem’s reading help to create a platform for analyses, critique and a basis of resistance to neoliberalism? Quite simply, the Left have got something badly wrong: firstly, the so-called secularization process is in fact ‘not the expulsion of God from economy but rather the indiscriminate ascription of His divine ability to generate insatiable desires, which, in turn, generate an unlimited growth’. Perversely, the world order has become ‘an anarchic pantheism’ (p. 168). Secondly, the Marxists think that the expansion of the market is created by the “market” itself and not the “economy” [for the marketization of Christ’s economy should be conceived as ‘the transposition of the excess found in the economy from Christ to the desiring subject and desired object’ (p. 168)]. Foucault is corrected again, crudely, to suggest that what is marketized in neoliberalism is a ‘split person’ and so ‘his labour is governed in the competitive market and he participates in politics as a Smithian subject of exchange’ (p. 175). As a consequence of this, we witness a rapid decline in liberal civil society now become one dimensional. An appropriate resecularization of the *oikonomia* is required.

Although this book is clearly and coherently organized, and contains several diagrams and figures, it is extremely difficult going. The English is often strange, sometimes a sentence seems to lack a term; the proof-reading has been poor (there are many mistakes, some affecting sense). There is little in the way of contextualization to help the reader grasp complex theological ideas, and no engagement with conduct and counter-conduct. Arendt and Foucault are relatively friendly to the reader, Agamben can be extremely obscure, but here Leshem has



created what seems to be an obscurantist jigsaw puzzle. Or is there an existential alienation from and visceral rejection of neoliberalism underpinning this crushing formalism?

Mike Gane
Loughborough University, Loughborough LE113TU, UK
m.j.gane2@lboro.ac.uk