

## American Politics in the Era of Zombie Neoliberalism

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The Trump presidency was a fluke. While many wish to assign some deeper meaning to it, the primary message we should take away from the defiance of the popular will that his inauguration represents is that American electoral institutions are antidemocratic and easily gamed. Yet the fact that such a fluke could occur is itself revealing—not only of the well-known flaws in the US Constitutional system, but of the fragility of the neoliberal order as a whole. For a generation, American politicians of both major parties have operated within the governing paradigm that the Reagan administration established amid the breakdown of the postwar Fordist era. This order has managed to maintain its hold on power, despite largely failing to deliver on its promises of social mobility and rapid economic growth and even despite a series of ever more severe financial crises. Indeed, even the 2008 global financial crisis, far from dislodging the neoliberal order, initially appeared to entrench it more irrevocably than ever. To understand our current political conjuncture, however, we need to recognize that, even if neoliberalism still manages to cling to power, its fundamental legitimacy—worldwide, but especially in the United States—was shattered by the global financial crisis. Even the unprecedented events surrounding the coronavirus crisis need to be placed within the historical context of a neoliberal order that has somehow survived its own death and lives on as a zombielike shell of itself.

And to understand the sources of and threats to its legitimacy, I contend, we need to grasp neoliberalism not only as an economic order but as a political-theological one. As with all discussions of political theology, this one will require the preliminary step of determining exactly what political theology *is*—a task that is surprisingly neglected among practitioners in the field. Starting from a position of ignorance, one would likely guess one of two meanings for the term *political theology*. A political theology might be taken first of all as a politically engaged

theology, a religious practice with political implications or even outright political goals. This category could include examples both positive (the civil rights movement, Latin American liberation theology) and negative (the religious Right). Or the term could be taken in the opposite direction, referring to cases where politics itself inspires the kind of blind faith conventionally associated with theology or religion. Here we could think of the “cults of personality” surrounding charismatic leaders.

Both of these possible meanings seem relevant to our contemporary moment, as Trump enjoys seemingly unconditional support from the leaders of the evangelical Christian religious Right, often on explicit theological grounds, and Trump has fomented a personality cult, most notably through his bizarre practice of holding campaign-style rallies continuously throughout his time in office. I have written about Trump’s religious supporters from my perspective as a former evangelical Christian elsewhere (Kotsko 2018a), and I have followed with alarm the many journalistic accounts of Trump’s rallies and the hatred and bigotry they encourage. Nevertheless, I do not view either phenomenon as central to grasping our political predicament. Our problems run deeper than the political loyalties of a declining sect of Christianity or the current president’s quest for nonstop adulation.

Getting at these problems requires a more fundamental version of political theology, which steps back from either the politicization of theology or the theologization of politics, and asks what makes such “transfers” possible in the first place. This, too, is a question that many practitioners in the field tend to neglect, preferring to get right to work studying the structural homologies between political and theological fields (above all, the sovereign authority shared by both God and the authoritarian ruler, a focus that fueled the boom in political theology during the George W. Bush years) or proposing genealogical accounts of the origin of modern political concepts in theological sources. The roots of both projects can be traced back to Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, a text that—in its haste to advance a political theology in the second sense described above, which proposes that only a benevolent dictator can save us—lays the foundations for the field without explicitly examining the field’s foundations. The question Schmitt, like so many political theologians in his wake, fails to ask is: *Why* should there be such striking parallels between the political and the theological realms, to the point where conceptual transfers are not only possible but, as subsequent research has shown, commonplace?

The answer, I propose, is that the political order (understood broadly as any order of governance) and the theological order (also understood broadly, as any system of unconditional ultimate values, whether explicitly theistic or not) both share the

goal of ordering the whole of life. More than that, both assert the *right* to order all of life. In other words, the political and the theological (again, both broadly conceived) are both orders of legitimacy, and when their totalizing ambition proves impossible to actualize (as it inevitably does), their legitimacy is called into question.

Here it is perhaps clearest if we start with a theological example. In monotheistic religions, a persistent difficulty arises. These faiths assert that God is both all-good and all-powerful—a totalizing claim if ever there was one. And yet evil and suffering continue to occur, despite the fact that nothing but good things should result from God’s limitless power and benevolence. The task of traditional theology thus becomes that of explaining away our unambiguous experience by claiming that the pain and injustice we suffer is somehow not evil, but a justified punishment, a moral test, a temporary circumstance that will contribute to the greater good, and so forth.

Something similar happens in political orders when faced with challenges to their legitimacy, whether external (war or disaster) or internal (corruption or other social upheaval). In order to survive, they must somehow convert the apparent counterevidence to their right to rule into a positive justification for their power and authority. Perhaps the most dramatic recent example of this feat happened after 9/11, when George W. Bush converted a major disaster—which easily could have served as the ultimate proof of his incompetence and unworthiness to hold an office he had taken without a popular mandate—into an occasion to demand unquestioning public loyalty and expansive new powers. It is a measure of his success that so few Americans, even among Bush’s most virulent opponents, ever consider the possibility that the aftermath of 9/11 could have gone any other way.

In the event, even “the decider” ultimately ran aground, after his criminally negligent handling of Hurricane Katrina, the descent of the Iraq War into a quagmire, and above all the global financial crisis. Yet this last failure called into question more than the political fortunes of one individual president. From the perspective of neoliberal insiders, it was potentially the end of the world. Asked what would happen if Congress failed to pass the bailout package proposed by the Bush administration, Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke reportedly said, “If we don’t do this today we won’t have an economy on Monday.” That diagnosis was seemingly confirmed when Congress initially voted down the proposal, sending stock markets plummeting.

Ultimately, of course, the bailouts were approved and were administered seamlessly amid the transition between the Republican and Democratic administrations—the best possible evidence of neoliberalism as an underlying bipartisan consensus.

And while many commentators (including even the most astute, such as Wendy Brown and David Harvey) have eagerly pointed out the apparent contradiction between the libertarian rhetoric of many neoliberal politicians and the massive state intervention the crisis prompted, in reality the bailouts proceeded according to neoliberal chapter and verse. The goal of the neoliberal order has never been to keep the state out of markets, but to keep it hard at work creating, sustaining, and redeeming markets, above all the “market of markets” represented by the financial sector. Even the apparent shift into Keynesianism in the stimulus package fit into neoliberal “best practices,” emphasizing tax cuts and otherwise largely accelerating funding for preexisting projects. And from the neoliberal perspective, the results speak for themselves: a decade of slow and steady economic growth and robust stock market gains.

That apparent success blinded the elites to the ways that the global financial crisis undercut the neoliberal order’s deeper sources of legitimacy, which are fundamentally about individual merit and individual reward. Aggregate benefits like overall economic growth mean very little in a political order whose stated highest value is individual free choice—the ultimate concern in neoliberalism’s secularized theology. As I discuss in *Neoliberalism’s Demons* (2018b), this promise of unlimited free choice is ultimately illusory for most neoliberal subjects, as we are granted just enough freedom to feel responsible for our own failures but not enough to materially affect our circumstances. Even if we know that there is no all-seeing judge called “the market” that rewards us according to our hard work and intrinsic worth, even if we know that success and failure are largely the result of family wealth and other forms of blind luck, most of us have nonetheless internalized the ideology of individual responsibility to the extent that our failures do *feel* very much like our own individual failures. This gut-level response is what keeps us trapped within the terms of the neoliberal order, constantly redirecting our attention from the systems that shape our range of choices and leading us to double down on our own agency and responsibility, a gesture that sets us up for yet another failure even as it prepares us to blame ourselves for it once again.

This inculpatory dynamic, in which freedom functions as a mechanism for generating blameworthiness, is the theological element in the political theology of neoliberalism. It is at once the axiomatic presupposition that cannot be questioned and the affective hook that causes us to identify with a system that mostly victimizes and exploits us. And the global financial crisis called that moral narrative deeply into question by creating an economic shock that permanently ratcheted down the standard of living and life chances for nearly the entire US population. Even after a decade of uninterrupted economic growth, wage levels have barely

recovered to their precrisis levels, and the quality of newly created jobs has tended to be very low. Such a pervasive, system-wide effect, from which essentially no one outside the upper echelons of the financial sector emerged unscathed, surely could not be the result of *everyone* making the wrong choices. The fact that those choices were so closely tied to homeownership, which has been the central aspiration of American family life for generations, added insult to injury. An epidemic of foreclosures left millions in financial ruin. Many more found themselves “underwater,” as their mortgage debt far outweighed the current value of their home—discrediting the longtime ideological truism that homeownership was the best possible investment for a middle-class household.

In short, people who had done everything right were being punished for no apparent reason. This is the moment when a political-theological paradigm is vulnerable to overthrow, as the old methods for explaining away suffering and injustice cease to function. As I document in *The Prince of This World* (2016), using examples from the biblical tradition, it is a moment that calls for creativity and transformation—and both were in short supply among US governing elites at the time. Democrats settled on the message that everything was fine. The crisis had been resolved, the bailouts had done their job (and even turned a slight profit for the Treasury), and economic growth and employment were up. To the extent that any further fine-tuning was necessary, it would take the form of “nudges” toward desired behaviors and support for individual opportunity (such as support for education and job training).

For their part, Republicans settled on a strategy that superficially broke with conventional neoliberalism. Most notably, the strategy acknowledged the apparent contradictions to neoliberal orthodoxy that the global financial crisis had exposed—particularly the indiscriminate nature of the economic damage and its connection to the foundational aspiration to homeownership. Yet far from embracing a systemic critique, the avatars of what came to be known as the Tea Party movement opted for scapegoating, blaming individual homebuyers for bringing down the entire system and then for demanding (actually nonexistent) government handouts. If there was any consideration of factors transcending individual choices, they were overwhelmingly racist, as the black subprime borrower came to occupy the same ideological role as the black “welfare queen” in Reagan’s initial installation of the neoliberal paradigm. In the wake of the Tea Party, the Republican program became one of vengeance against the imagined parasites and cheats who were undermining America, above all the black president who, according to the birther conspiracy theory, was an illegitimate usurper.

If American political discourse had more than a four-year trailing window of

historical memory, more people would recognize how seamlessly Trump, who got his political start as a promoter of birtherism, fits into the trajectory that began with the Tea Party—and hence that he is an outgrowth of the legitimization crisis that began with the global financial crisis. An expanded historical memory might also help people recognize that, despite breaking with “best practices” in areas like free trade, Trump’s variation on the Tea Party theme is in deep continuity with neoliberalism. More than perhaps any individual alive, Trump has internalized the neoliberal ideal of modeling all of life on market competition and sorting people into winners and losers. His complaint is not the existence of the system of individualistic market-style striving, but the fact that, in his view, the wrong people (and, on the international level, the wrong countries) are winning the competition. Since his preferred winners, conservative white Americans, are in his view intrinsically superior, this outcome can only be a result of cheating. Far from breaking with the neoliberal paradigm, then, Trump promises to give it to us for the first time in its pure, unmediated form, freed of all the supposed unfair advantages that have accrued to nonwhites and non-Americans.

The increasing incoherence of our politics stems from the fact that neither the Obama-Clinton “everything is fine” approach nor the Tea Party–Trump “vengeance is mine” one commands real popular support. The Tea Party was only able to sweep to power during low-turnout midterm elections (which unfortunately gave them control of congressional redistricting and allowed them to entrench their own power through antidemocratic means), and Trump himself only entered office through the vagaries of the Electoral College. At the same time, in retrospect it is clear that only Barack Obama’s unique charisma allowed the Democrats to hold the White House. Yet even Obama did not enjoy a clear mandate in his second term, as the Republicans won the popular vote in the House of Representatives (though their gerrymandering efforts exaggerated their advantage in terms of seats). This stalemate culminated in the 2016 election, in which *both candidates* lost the popular vote in the sense of failing to reach a clear majority. It is an injustice that the candidate with fewer votes ended up taking office, but both candidates could rightly claim that the majority of Americans who cast ballots voted against their opponent.

On a political level, Trump’s inauguration led to a number of negative changes—an Islamophobic travel ban, greater brutality toward undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers, withdrawal from international agreements, tax cuts that exacerbate inequality, and incompetent and/or corrupt cabinet appointments—but no real paradigm shifts. Arguably any Republican would have pursued many or all of those priorities, with the possible exception of the unique cruelty of the child sepa-

ration policy. On the level of the budget, the basic terms of the compromise hashed out by Obama and his Republican opponents prevailed, at least until the passage of major tax cuts. In other words, on an objective level, Trump has not fundamentally altered the terms of the postcrisis stalemate. But on a political-theological level, Trump has created a major crisis of faith for neoliberal Democrats by shattering the meritocratic ideal that is so important to their own self-concept and sense of the legitimacy of their own power. How could the most qualified candidate in US history be beaten by such a vulgar buffoon?

The painful election result has not led to a critique of the system as such, even of obviously antidemocratic elements like the Electoral College. Nor has it led to an admission that there is something wrong with the neoliberal policy paradigm overall. Neither is possible for a Democratic Party that has staked its entire identity on the legitimacy of the status quo. Deprived of those avenues of critique, liberals have indulged in their own version of the turn to conspiracy, complete with the scapegoating of individuals (primarily Trump, but also the nefarious and ostensibly omnipotent apparatchik Mitch McConnell and the traitor Bernie Sanders) and foreigners (Russian interference). This latter concern—which, unlike the birther conspiracy or the scapegoating of black homebuyers for the global financial crisis, is at least based in fact—dovetails nicely with the ham-fisted nationalism and militarism the Democrats have embraced, to no apparent electoral benefit, since 9/11.

More deeply, though, through the slippage that identifies contemporary Russia with the long-defunct Soviet Union and its current right-wing authoritarian ruler as a Communist, the Russian interference conspiracy returns to the primal scene of neoliberalism: the confrontation of capitalist freedom and socialist totalitarianism. The end result is to cast an American billionaire who has been a popular media figure for decades as a Soviet infiltrator.

It is at this point that the discussion naturally touches on the broader global trend of right-wing authoritarianism—including figures like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and in some accounts even Xi Jinping in China—of which Trump is taken to be yet another example. The mechanism by which this trend has propagated itself is never specified, unless it is as a reaction to the decline of neoliberalism. Without presuming to comment on such a wide range of countries, I would remark that including Xi in this set is incoherent, since China was relatively unaffected by the global financial crisis and Xi is far from an upstart outsider, having followed the normal paths to power in the Communist Party, which still enjoys considerable popular legitimacy due to the economic

growth it has fostered. Whatever is happening in contemporary China, it does not fit within the template of “right-wing populism.”

As for the other examples, I would suggest that the right-wing reaction results from two related factors. One is the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which discredited the extreme Left for the foreseeable future in its former sphere of influence. Thus when neoliberalism failed to deliver on its promises, only one plausible option remained—right-wing nationalism, as embodied in Putin or Orbán (both of whom are considered among the vanguard of so-called populism globally and within Europe, respectively). In the case of Bolsonaro, we are dealing with a country where the space that a left-wing party could occupy has been monopolized by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s neoliberal approach, meaning that the only option once Lula had been excluded from the election was, once again, right-wing nationalism. Though I am less confident of my assessment of the situation in Turkey and India, I suspect that they have more to do with the failure of a particular model of modernization or catching up to the developed world—and again, the lack of any credible left-wing option leaves the field open for the right. In short, it is not that neoliberalism somehow necessarily calls forth these right-wing authoritarian figures. Instead, by excluding any left-wing option, the neoliberal order produces a political spectrum that is structurally ratcheted to the right—and hence, once neoliberals discredit themselves, the only organized force able to take power is precisely the extreme Right.

In other words, neoliberals have no one but themselves to blame for Trump, insofar as their entire project has been to exclude any possibility of a left-wing alternative. Thus Trump does in a sense belong within the global trend of right-wing populism, but only if we consider the phenomenon to be endogenous to neoliberalism. This is precisely what neoliberal Democrats refuse to do, however, insofar as they regard Trump as a foreign body in our republic—and even as an intruder among the Republicans, who as part of the status quo system of governance *must* be fundamentally legitimate. The same goes for other violators of norms, like the aforementioned McConnell, derided in liberal social media circles as “Moscow Mitch” for his refusal to take action against future Russian election meddling. Even McConnell is not regarded as totally irredeemable, however, as shown by Joe Biden’s claims that he will be able to work with him once the malign external influence of Donald Trump is removed. And indeed, despite a pattern of open criminality and corruption—including, most dramatically, the extralegal assassination of an Iranian government official that could well have led to a major war—Democrats have tended to treat Trump as a “normal” Republican president, voting for many of his cabinet and judicial appointees and hashing out bipartisan compromises that deliver some of Trump’s policy goals. Only when faced with

the prospect of yet more election tampering against their presidential front-runner did they take the radical step of impeaching a president they ostensibly view as a threat to the very ideal of democracy itself.

Both major parties, then, are in thrall to their own conspiracy theories. Despite varying in their targets and their relative basis in fact, these theories are largely homologous, scapegoating individual bad actors (black mortgage applicants and Obama or Trump and McConnell) and foreign interference (“bad deals” brokered by “globalists” or Russian troll campaigns) for perceived systemic failures (the supposed inability of white men to catch a break or the thwarting of Hillary Clinton’s meritocratic ascendancy). And both ultimately serve the same goal: to legitimize the existing neoliberal order, changing as little about it as possible. In other words, an election in which both parties lost has led to a situation where both parties view the current iteration of neoliberalism as illegitimate—and the solution both are proposing is to restore neoliberalism to its former glory. This points to a deeper truth of conspiracy theories. Though they are often viewed as counter-cultural, every conspiracy theory is ultimately an attempt to save the worldview of which it represents a mutated, parodic version. Hence, to use a classic example, the conspiracy theories around the Kennedy assassination are not a critique of the US government, but instead an attempt to reassert its power and authority in the face of an event that called them profoundly into question.

The result of this stalemate, which only deepens as both major parties grow more impotently conspiratorial, is that actually existing neoliberalism continues to run on autopilot, as a default option with no positive legitimacy that persists simply because there appears to be no viable alternative. Even amid the unprecedented economic shutdown and skyrocketing unemployment created by the coronavirus crisis, neither party appears to believe that the basic terms of the political-economic order need to be rethought. While the sums involved in the various bailout bills as of this writing (early April 2020) were astronomically higher than Obama’s stimulus bill, that reflects the objective scale of the crisis more than any attempt at reorganizing the US economy or asserting a different role for the state in the economy. More generous unemployment benefits and other forms of unconditional monetary support, in addition to their clear humanitarian necessity, aim primarily at keeping the economy moving in some way, so that it can go “back to normal” as soon as possible. And a return to normalcy remains Trump’s number one priority, as every few weeks he reiterates his hope that the economy can “reopen” within a few weeks. Meanwhile, Democratic nominee Joe Biden continues to double down on his opposition to Medicare for All even amid a public health crisis that seems almost tailor-made to demonstrate the necessity of such a measure.

In other words, coronavirus has done nothing to shake either major party's faith in the market, and both will view themselves as successful if they manage to get the economy growing again. As with the global financial crisis, both seem blind to the potential for the coronavirus crisis to deliver yet another crushing blow to the legitimacy of the system, creating a wave of immiseration and debt slavery that will effectively punish whole swaths of the US population for doing what was necessary to save lives amid a deadly pandemic. People are surprisingly willing to put up with being punished for what they imagine to be their individual faults, but punishing them for their altruism is another thing entirely. As I argue in *The Prince of This World*, a similar moral short-circuit led Jewish communities to develop the earliest forms of apocalyptic thought. Who knows what apocalypse might await our world in the wake of coronavirus?

Yet even if an apocalypse is once again deferred, going back to the status quo ante of zombie neoliberalism would hardly count as a success in real terms, as its default outcomes are ever-increasing inequality and concentration of wealth, ever-increasing labor exploitation and precarity, ever-increasing carbon emissions and environmental degradation. Even more than the pandemic, the undeniable reality of climate change makes this political stalemate in the largest economy on earth unthinkably dangerous. Surely, many conclude, the climate crisis will finally force political and business leaders to take action! But we already know from the experience of the global financial crisis that serious emergencies do not force elites to do the right thing. Just the opposite, in fact—the anthropogenic financial crisis in whose aftermath we still live seemingly compelled our elites to do nothing more than double down on what they were already doing as the only possible answer to the problems their own policies had created.

Where does this leave us in terms of the upcoming election? On the one hand, a Trump victory would obviously be a bad outcome, not only on the level of substance but also in terms of deepening Republican control over antidemocratic levers within the US Constitutional system—above all the courts, which could in turn entrench gerrymandering and other efforts to disenfranchise nonwhite voters. In other words, four more years of Trump could ratchet us closer to his vision of an openly white-supremacist version of neoliberalism, in which the “right” people consistently win at last. This would continue the delegitimation of the neoliberal order while narrowing the legal means to reform it, much less overturn it. On the other hand, mainstream Democrats like Joe Biden have painted themselves into a corner that may allow them to slow the creeping illegitimacy, but certainly not reverse it. Indeed, so determined are they to legitimize the existing system and to cast their critique of Trump as narrowly as possible that they will leave themselves

very little room to reverse the damage Trump has done. Meanwhile, the Democratic establishment has shown that an unconventional candidate like Sanders or Elizabeth Warren is a step too far for them—and the rapid consolidation of the primary field in the wake of Sanders’s early victories shows how much resistance from within their own party they would have faced had they prevailed at the ballot box.

The possibility of escaping our zombie neoliberalism via existing electoral mechanisms thus appears distant and narrow at best. As a critic of neoliberalism and a close observer of the rolling disaster that it has unleashed over the course of my adult life, I find this situation frustrating to say the least. At the same time, I understand the reluctance of Democratic elites to admit the illegitimacy of the system, whether we are thinking of the US Constitutional system or the neoliberal economic order. I am not referring to the difficulty of shedding one’s deeply engrained worldview, though that is real enough. More fundamentally, a world without legitimacy is a world where persuasion is no longer possible and only raw power rules—a world where laws become weapons, where open hypocrisy becomes the norm, where political debate devolves into little more than mean-spirited trolling. The thought of living in such a world is scary, and I understand the impulse to hope against hope that the apparent breakdown of legitimacy can be reversed and things can go back to normal. But the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of exception in which we now live is the norm. The only solution to the crisis of neoliberalism is to bring about the neoliberal elites’ worst fears, which the bailout did not prevent but agonizingly deferred: the real state of exception, the end of the world—for them, which will be the beginning of a new world for us.

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