

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *Book Review Symposium*

**Philip Mirowski**, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, New York: Verso, 2013. ISBN: 9781781680797 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781683033 (ebook); ISBN: 9781781683026 (paper)

I shall take the liberty of beginning with a detour. One of the most tattered paperbacks on the bookshelf beside my bed is a copy William Manchester's 1992 book, *A World Lit Only by Fire*<sup>1</sup>. I have not done any fact-checking, but I would bet it is the best-selling history of the Middle Ages in English; I have bought it at least twice, and read it three or more times. Aside from a series of bracing stories from European history—many of which, however flawed from a scholarly perspective, are fascinating versions of the standard stuff most 'commonwealth' colonials like myself had to learn in school—the book is also packed full of lewd and salubrious tales of elite excess and hedonism. It sometimes reads like a twisted romance novel, minus the 'love' stuff. One of the institutions that comes out looking the worst, a virtual orgy of corruption, murder, incest and more, is the medieval papacy. If the stories are true, the Holy See of the time (especially under the Borgias) was far from holy.

And yet the influence of the Catholic Church in that moment, while not total, was nonetheless extensive. In Italy in particular, even post-Reformation, the Vatican wielded extraordinary wealth and power, and not just by virtue of its (not inconsiderable) coercive

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<sup>1</sup>William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire: Medieval Mind and the Renaissance*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

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apparatus. Centuries of oppressive public organization, in a context of great poverty and rigid social hierarchy, enabled certain Truths to stand as uncontested. These Truths—that hierarchy was God-given, that the church was infallible, that one's faith determined one's eternal fate—built considerable consensus on the justice of the church's power. That they were clearly irrelevant to many inside the Vatican, and ignored entirely by a whole series of popes, did not necessarily lessen their obviousness to much of the laity. More importantly, for the most part these Truths did the job they were supposed to do: justify an absurdly unfair world, keep the people quiet, and paint all opposition as brainwashing hounds of hell. Of course, the Reformation did eventually arrive (although not in Italy), but even then it was not a rebellion against the Truth itself, but against the inadequacy of the earthly church in its light.

By the final chapter of Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, the medieval church was on my mind again, reborn in what Mirowski calls the Neoliberal Thought Collective (NTC). There is part of me that wants to qualify the metaphor, to say 'Of course, it is not an exact comparison', or 'Certainly the NTC is different in important ways'—both of which are true, I suppose. But another part of me wants to assert a strong version of the metaphor, because there are terrible parallels between the two accounts. Like the NTC, the medieval church had a "Russian doll" structure that protected the "double-truth" (a convenient one for the masses, a real one for the collective insiders) (p.70, 84). Like the NTC, the medieval church "sowed doubt" ('Will I be saved or not?') and "promoted ignorance" (p.83, 92). Like the NTC, the church had a "full-spectrum pharmacopoeia suitable for any malady", individual or collective (p.336). And like the NTC, the church elites and their allies used this strategy to enrich themselves, by means both crooked and 'legitimate'.

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Whether or not the metaphor appears to you far-fetched, it seems to me there are two key questions it illuminates. The first and most important is the question of how close we are willing to let our arguments get to the claim that there are evil puppet-masters who have duped the people of the liberal capitalist world just as the Borgias and their coterie profited from a system in which the truth for the outside was entirely different for those on the inside. Can we navigate Mirowski's argument—that neoliberals survived the crisis via 'agnotology' (the well-funded production and promotion of doubt and ignorance regarding its causes and solutions in a fertile populist public sphere)—as he hopes, *i.e.* between "the Scylla of conspiracy theories" and the Charybdis of suggesting it just worked out this way due to contingent circumstances (p.332)? The second is closely related: whatever our answer to the first, we are then faced with the inevitable 'OK. So what now?'.

In general, I am skeptical of conspiracy theories. The world just seems too complex to imagine that there is some inner cabal which manages, via the Russian doll, to create a world in its image, or at least to sabotage any alternatives to or critique of it. In my own account of capital's power in the current age, I lean much closer to Poulantzas than *Adbusters*. There are several points in the book where Mirowski expresses similar skepticism (e.g. p.89, 296), but it is nonetheless hard not to feel like he is saying that some inner sanctum, occupied at times by something as concrete as the Mont Pèlerin Society, has elaborated a powerful institutional and ideological structure that managed not only the pre-crisis boom, but also the neoliberal response to the crisis, in a multi-faceted, international, and clandestine manner. Having finished the last page, and diligently read this often very entertaining and informative book (including the endnotes, which do not disappoint), I am absolutely certain he has steered me past the Charybdis of

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contingency. But I am much less sure he has not run me aground on the Scylla of conspiracy, and I cannot exactly tell if that is where he wants to leave me or not.

I will readily admit that the book is filled with disturbing descriptions of the ways in which developments I might previously have argued were primarily shaped by structural and class forces in US and international political economy—the form of the bailouts, for example—were also the callous manipulations of a state and finance-capital power elite. I consider myself pretty well versed in the historical, political, and economic details of the crisis, and I still found myself continually scribbling ‘!’ in the margins - my code to mark a particularly arresting phrase or bit of information. (Take, for example, the revelation that because the bailouts’ rescuers and the rescuees were the same people, “the Fed was printing conflict-of-interest waivers almost as fast as it was printing money” [p.186]. I never knew that.) But the description, throughout, of the NTC as a unified and purposeful agent—as a group that does things, that has a ‘playbook’ and undertakes projects, develops strategies, and formulates objectives—overwhelms the subtle challenges to conspiracy Mirowski occasionally voices. Whether or not neoliberalism and its robust post-crisis health is indeed a product of an international ideological project directed by the few—and I have to admit that right now I am not so certain it is not—I am not sure if Mirowski wants me to think that, if he thinks it himself, or if he even thinks it is a question worth considering. Precisely because the political stakes are so high, I think it needs to be directly confronted.

The ‘political stakes’—what can that mean in the current conjuncture? How can we overturn, or redirect, or at least meaningfully trouble neoliberalism? This is obviously where the book’s trajectory takes us. ‘OK’, we might say to Mirowski—or better, having read his book, to each other—so ‘they won’ (p.356); ‘now what?’. I am guessing I am not

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the only reviewer to remark upon the fact that Mirowski, perhaps quite intentionally, does not give us much of anything with which to tackle this question. He is, however, pretty clear on what we should not do, or at least on what he argues are the failures of some recent oppositional efforts.

He is especially interested in analyzing the shortcomings of the Occupy movement, which has been the darling of certain strands of Left analysis since 2011. I too am somewhat cynical regarding the endless admiration in some circles for Occupy's 'achievements' or 'strategic brilliance'. He is also right to note its strangely nostalgic cast, as if the best ideas it could come up with were pulled straight from 1960s social democracy.

Nevertheless, one needn't be a booster like Slavoj Žižek to read some of Mirowski's criticism as overstated or even glib. Part of the problem lies in the fact that he casts Occupy as an out-and-out flop, a movement that has already had a beginning, middle, and end, leaving little to nothing to show for all its sound and fury. But whether or not we would challenge the movement's strategic choices—interminable consensus-esque decision-making, the refusal to put forward a set of demands, and so on—it seems to me a mistake to declare it a failure. First, because there is no way we can tell what its political legacy is or will be; we are only two years on. Retrospectively, we can find the seeds of every major social movement of which I am aware in preceding struggles and moments of intense or short-lived organization. What Occupy bequeaths to the Left is not yet open to judgment.

Second, it is mistaken to suggest that Zuccotti Park and its variations worldwide were filled with political naïfs, unaware of the “superior insight of the neoliberals”, duped by “bedtime stories” and “marketing ploys” (p.330-331). My concern is not just

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that this is an ungenerous criticism, one that cannot help but seem the curmudgeonly judgment of the jaded elder upon the hopeful youth. There is a troubling echo of many ‘Left’ intellectuals’ abandonment of the 1960s student movement—Jürgen Habermas’ infamous dismissal of the ‘pressure of the street’ comes immediately to mind. And yet in stark contrast to Habermas, Mirowski seems to me a scholar who has over time become not less, but *more* critical, more at home on the Left. I have long read and admired and leaned on his work, but reading this book was the first time I understood him as ‘Left’ in anything more than the US ‘sort of a Democrat’ way.

Which is to say that I am concerned that after laying out the imposing political forces we face, in denouncing “the long-discredited notion that political action could be sustained and effective in the absence of any sort of theoretical guidance and hierarchical organization of short- and long-term goals” (p.327), he chooses—for it must be a choice—not to offer any such guidance himself. The deep knowledge that informs this book, and the comprehensive account he gives of details most never knew were meaningful (he is certainly the first to make dynamic-stochastic general equilibrium compelling, as it sure wasn’t in grad school)—this knowledge and analytical insight are remarkable resources for precisely those people who flocked to Occupy, and are now wondering what to do. I am not asking him to stand as some Martin Luther in the face of the neoliberalism’s clergy—remember, Luther’s point was the church was not True enough—but a little bit of Thomas Müntzer would go a long way. ‘*Omnia sunt communia*’ could really use some sharp economic analysis.

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