

Review of Kevin Musgrave's *Persons of the Market: Conservatism, Corporate Personhood, and Economic Theology*, Michigan State University Press 2022, 291 pp.

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Kevin Musgrave's scholarly work *Persons of the Market* is difficult to summarize, much less categorize. In my own reading, it is best described as social, intellectual, and political history from the pre-Progressive Era to the age of Donald Trump that focuses on the intersection of American capitalism and conservative religion, politics, and culture. The book reminds one of Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne* and Anthea Butler's *White Evangelical Racism*, only instead of looking at the relation of conservative religion and politics to gender and race, it looks at their relation to corporate capitalism.

The project begins with an initial thesis that "if we want to understand the economic theological problem of sovereign power and immanent governance that structures our political economy, we must start with the corporation—an institutional form that stands as a limit figure between the two" (p. xxvi). The first chapter ("Body") uncovers the socio-economic, political, and religious context undergirding the emergence of this unique legal phenomenon—who supported it, rejected it, why, and how the corporation evolved in time. Special attention is paid to the shifting "question of incorporation." For example, the conflict narrative of civilized Europeans vs. native savages shifted to white vs. colored races. "This declamation of inherent racial inferiority caused problems for manifest destiny's political theology," we read. If the nation was civilized, Christian, prosperous, and pure—that is to say, white, in all of its coded language—how could it incorporate a people that was deemed biologically incapable of reaching these statuses? For [John] O'Sullivan and others, the answer came in the crafting of democracy as a personal faith, a secularized theology that largely wrote out peoples of color yet left space for their conversion" (p. 29). To protect the white man's power and the body of the nation became one and the same.

This orientation is particularly important in light of the legal origination of the corporation, which, according to Musgrave, (a) rested on the "personhood" of the 14th amendment (which addressed slavery, naturalization, etc.), and (b) was saturated in narratives about Chinese immigrant laborers. Many people obviously despised corporations for obtaining new legal protections and monopoly power, but also for using that power and protection to hire nonwhite immigrant workers. In 1880, section 19 of the new California

constitution prohibited the employment of “any Chinese or Mongolian,” but Tiburcio Parrott (a silver mine owner) refused to fire such employees, citing the U.S. Constitution, and petitioned a U.S. district court. “Assimilation, for Kearney [an anti-Chinese labor activist from California], was an a priori condition of whiteness and attendant notions of Christian civilization. The corporation, then, for Kearney, was understood as nonwhite, an alien from abroad to be feared and attacked” (p. 37). While the subsequent ruling, entitled *In re Tiburcio Parrott*, cited the 14th amendment to uphold the rights of corporations to hire labor as they saw fit, thereby also providing some rights to the Chinese in California, it left Chinese people as (in Musgrave’s words) “not fully things and not full legal persons” (p. 43); Chinese laborers were a threat to “our civilization.”

But arguments for the corporation changed soon enough, as those with economic power began to sway the masses—including through novel forms of mass advertising. “This aligning of the corporate person with a moral mission of cultural enrichment and material prosperity,” Musgrave writes, “stands in stark contrast to the understandings of the Chinese as barbarous and savage that was utilized to justify their exclusion from the United States. While the Chinese were read outside the bounds of legal whiteness and personhood, the corporation came to represent the civilizing capacities of white society and capitalist production” (p. 49). What emerged from these debates was a new conservatism that was laissez-faire and “a racially essentialized social order premised upon libertarian values” (p. 52).

In the second chapter, readers learn how progressives in the Progressive era delivered two critiques of corporate personhood: “First, there was a moral critique of concentrated wealth and unprecedented political corruption that demanded a spiritual remedy, and second, there was an economic criticism of the decreasing competition and opportunity once seemingly available in a market of diffuse ownership” (p. 56). Corporations, meanwhile, developed methods of advertising that reflected evangelicalism—what Musgrave calls “evangelical capitalism.” This involves the dynamic of Shepherd and flock; “corporate communications professionals figured the corporation as a shepherd capable of guiding a lost, adrift, and bewildered flock to salvation through the saving forces of consumption” (p. 65). The theological overtones of advertising during this period are unmissable. Henry Parsons Crowell (CEO of Quaker Oats and President of Moody Bible Institute) and others created this evangelical capitalism and so “were able to meet the criticisms of Progressive reformers against the material excesses and spiritual deficits of corporate capitalism by crafting a corporate soul capable of solving social problems and redeeming society’s excesses” (p. 68). Crowell ultimately “preserved a rational, utilitarian, Christian ethos in the creation of an evangelical capitalist vision of business and society” (p. 74). Bruce Barton also portrayed a hyper-masculine Jesus (with “muscles so strong,” cited on p. 85) that stood as a powerful business executive and industrial statesman. Most important of all—Jesus was a successful marketing agent that all corporate leaders ought to imitate.

Then came FDR's New Deal, which introduced new layers of confusion for political and religious groups in America, and eventually forged new identities. Those on the political right—the libertarians, traditionalists, and anti-communists—would forge the familiar evangelical conservatism of the 20th and 21st centuries: generally nationalist, Christian, white, pro-capitalist, and anti-progressive. During this period, claims to faith and household worship rates of 40% during the Progressive Era surged to 69% by the end of the 1950s. A series of organizations (FEE, AEI, Von Mises Institute, etc.) along with the work of Billy Graham and Dwight Eisenhower resolidified “west is best” and “Christian America” mythologies. “As embattled conservative intellectuals were trying to forge a middle ground between their more radical libertarian and traditionalist counterparts, Eisenhower offered a fusion of faith and markets for the mainstream” (p. 106). America became a Christian nation with the National Day of Prayer (1952), National Prayer Breakfast (1953), “In God we Trust” on postage stamps (1954) and “under God” added to Pledge of Allegiance (1954), “in God we trust” as the national motto (1956), etc. Racism also helped solidify conservatism; “the tactic was to make the case that it was in fact white southern men and the business community who were being pushed out of the public sphere by the entrance of these ‘radical’ [i.e. nonwhite] voices” (p. 110). The push for civil rights in the 1950s obviously challenged white power.

Musgrave spends considerable time showing how Supreme Court judge Lewis Powell supported this movement. Lewis was against civil disobedience, argued that “too much democracy threatens the promise of freedom and liberty it was meant to provide. Forced to choose, Powell would take liberalism over democracy” (p. 116). He also argued that corporations have political responsibilities—to preserve the “industrial system and the Judeo-Christian values it is built upon” (p. 124). Human rights, appreciation for diversity, and other progressive values were channeled through the prism and framework of the free market and corporate initiatives, eurocentrism, and conservative religion—which undermined their meaning and effectiveness.

The book then looks at the role of Reaganism in permanently binding capitalism to conservatism and Christianity, and then the arrival of Trumpism, where to be anti-republican or anti-conservative is no different than being anti-Christian. (President Trump received more support from white Christians than any other previous President). “Trumpism,” Musgrave writes, “is both a move away from [being nationalist/protectionist] and an extension of neoliberalism, intensifying and purifying its commitment to corporate power and the reconstitution of the state, yet simultaneously wedding the corporation to a virulent xenophobic nationalism while preaching democracy in the service to oligarchic rule” (p. 156). The rest of chapter five looks at the incredibly influential work of charismatic preachers and cult leaders in upholding this “resonance machine” that has hampered meaningful dialogue.

The conclusion of the book contends for “an emancipatory post-liberal democracy that uses liberalism’s language against itself to refashion personhood outside of the grammars of rational self-ownership” (p. 176), for a state without statism (p. 177), and “wide-ranging coalitional movement of many diverse creeds, faiths, class positions; racial, ethnic, and gender

identities; sexual preferences; and political ideologies that, despite their differences and disagreements, share a deep ‘respect for the earth and care for the future’ as crucial to a world premised upon the inherent value of the human person. It entails rethinking the very concept of humanism and its attendant notion of the person and calls our attention to our ethical responsibilities and debts to the earth...” (p. 184). Finally, Musgrave calls us to rethink our political responsibilities:

Rather than perceiving them as emerging from the market-based arrangements of a contractual obligation engaged in by atomistic, sovereign, and self-possessing individuals, we might instead understand obligation as coming from our inherent relational interdependency...our obligations must not only be to ourselves, as neoliberalism might ask us to believe, but to adopt a ‘forward-looking’ perspective that seeks to create a more equitable order from existing circumstances (p. 187).

In other words, obligations are an emergent phenomenon (similar to how some philosophers argue that “rights” are likewise normative social bonds that emerge from other relationship to others; I appreciated this conclusion).

Persons of the Market is marvelously researched, written, and argued. It incorporates historical analysis with prophetic signposts for a society that has lost track of what deities are actually being worshipped. Since Musgrave’s post-evangelical and post-conservative biography is similar to my own, I could also appreciate his approach, concerns, and critiques.

While adequate as is, I was thinking about how the book’s arguments could be enhanced. For example, it may be helpful (and would be helpful for similar books) to bring America’s economic interests and imperial activity to bear on the rise of American anti-communism and American exceptionalism. Anti-communism and the “red-scare” is often baffling for younger scholars (i.e., those born during or after the 1980s) until learning about the endless invasions/interventions the American military carried out on behalf of American corporations from 1900s-1950s (see Katz’s *Gangsters of Capitalism*, Chomsky’s *Central America’s Forgotten History*, Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*, and Prashad’s *Washington Bullets*; see also Bevins’ *The Jakarta Method*)—which also would have bolstered some of the connections Musgrave makes. That the US overthrew/invaded/intervened/occupied Korea (1950), China (1950), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Tibet (1955), Indonesia (1958), Lebanon (1958), Cuba (1961), and Congo (1960) the same decade that “In God we trust” flooded the country’s stamps, currency, and courtrooms isn’t coincidental: empires are always religious. Similarly, the relationship of white supremacy to capitalism would have been greatly enhanced by implementing the insight of Philip Foner’s *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* and Heideman’s *Class Struggle and the Color Line*.

At any rate, I wasn’t sure what to expect when picking up the book, and the introduction felt a somewhat intimidating in terms of what might be coming. But I was pleasantly surprised how clear the prose became and how fascinating and contemporarily

relevant the work is. The book develops an eccentric mix of topics and touches on various fields, but in a coherent enough way that effectively expands the consciousness of readers when it comes to the relationship of corporate capitalism, politics, media and communication, and theological discourse in American history.