

Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. ISBN 9781503600202.

*Reviewed by Vincent Le*

In the style of a Foucauldian genealogy, Adam Kotsko analyses a diverse array of philosophical, theological, political and literary Christian texts, from the scriptures and classical apologetics, to demonological treatises and Dante's *Inferno*, so as to trace the historical significations of the concept of the devil. What Kotsko's narrative reveals is that the devil's meaning has changed from originally symbolising the oppressor, to ideologically representing the rebel in the oppressor's eyes.

Kotsko begins *The Prince of This World* with the topical case study of how Darren Wilson, the police officer who, in 2014, shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed African American, called him a "demon" during his testimony (4). In this way, Kotsko introduces the book's central argument: the seemingly theological concept of the devil is not merely of historical interest. On the contrary, it is alive and well in contemporary, "secular" politico-cultural discourse. Before elaborating on its enduring relevance, however, Kotsko proposes a genealogy of the devil's historical significations to show how it underwent a "profound theological reversal" (4). For Wilson's characterisation of Brown reflects the reversal that transpires when the devil switches from signifying the oppressor, to signifying the rebels who resist the oppressor's authority.

The book is divided into two parts, in which the first traces the etymology of the devil, from its earliest Judaeo-Christian conception, to its transformation at the advent of the Christianisation of the Roman state. In the first chapter, Kotsko appropriates the methods and insights of Agamben, Foucault and other critical theorists in his reading of the Old Testament to argue that the devil emerges as the

Abrahamic people's ideological representation of the Pharaoh, the first great propagator of their suffering. To console themselves, the Jews also developed the inverse concept of a "God of justice," who justifies their tribulations as part of his providential plan to wage a battle of good and evil, which will ultimately result in the triumph of his Judaic adherents (21).

In the second chapter, Kotsko traces the profound reversal in the devil's meaning back to the Christians' seizure of state power when Constantine became the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire in 312 CE. At this critical juncture, the Christian religion was transformed from functioning as the theoretical language through which the oppressed could articulate their desires, interests and anxieties, to becoming the ideological apparatus *par excellence* of the ruling class that the devil was initially conceived to represent. With Christianity's institutionalisation into the organs of state power, the devil comes to symbolise its exact opposite: the oppressed revolting against the propagators of their misery, who are now reconceived as God's authoritative temporal representatives.

Kotsko concludes the first part by examining how the early Church fathers solidified the reversal of the devil's referent from oppressor to oppressed. Kotsko pays particular attention to Gregory of Nyssa, who sought to convert gentile Romans to the Church's ranks by emphasising two aspects that Christianity and (Neo-Platonic) paganism share: their spirituality directed towards the next, better life by God's side; and their consequent asceticism, which incites them to spurn the present, fallen world. Gregory thus continues Christian theology's new project of stripping demonic connotations from despots by developing a "critique of the sensual," according to which the devil is not merely a contingent unjust ruler arising within certain historical societies, but rather the inevitable brute fact of the natural world's diseases, famines and death (83). The persecution that was once seen as arising, and hence potentially vanishing, with particular historical tyrants, is now deemed natural and ineluctable. Rather than account for suffering, as the concept was originally intended to do, the devil now condemns the masses to suffer at the hands of the ruling classes by displacing the blame onto the physical world in which we reside unto death.

Kotsko opens the second part of his book by looking at the writings of three influential medieval figures in theology, as well as philosophy and political discourse: Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas. Just as the devil underwent a profound reversal, through the writings of these authors Kotsko finds the inverse transformation of the signification of God. Whereas God once represented the ideal of an end to all political violence, here he begins to signify the very perpetrator of that violence, which is now

waged as the just punishment for the “evil of rebellion and disobedience in the face of legitimate authority” (123). For all three writers, “the decisive factor in establishing the devil’s [here, the rebellious masses’] responsibility” for his own persecution is to emphasise his free will to renounce God and his ruling class representatives in favour of lower and more corrupt self-interests (131).

The fifth chapter analyses Heinrich Kramer’s *Hammer of Witches*, a 1487 demonological treatise on witchcraft. Kotsko argues that Kramer betrays the same assiduous attempt as the previously discussed works to legitimise and fortify the ruling class, as he reasons that God only permits the evil that stems from infidels’ free will to enhance the comparative superiority of his representatives. In the sixth chapter, Kotsko finds in Dante’s *Inferno* the culmination of the reversal of God’s signification from denoting the defender of the persecuted to becoming the chief persecutor himself. This is best articulated through Dante’s notion of hell as being specifically designed so that the blessed in heaven can “contemplate the sufferings of the damned” for their enjoyment (182). Kotsko thus concludes his genealogy at the naissance of modernity with the inversion of the idea of God from being the solution to the problem of evil, to being one and the same with evil itself.

In a concluding chapter, Kotsko draws several parallels between these theological conceptions of good and evil and contemporary politico-cultural discourse. According to Kotsko, just as infidels were seen as freely bringing about their own persecution by rebelling against God’s sovereign representatives, so too are African Americans like Michael Brown held responsible for their own deaths by choosing to appear too rebellious, threatening, and even “demonic” before the police, official agents of law and justice. More generally, masses of people who are without the basic resources of subsistence, and so “freely enter” into loan contracts, become permanently ensnared in a cycle of unrepayable debt and precarity by the creditors’ increasingly harsh and unrealistic demands (201). On a global scale, the War on Terror’s strategies to eliminate extremists and pacify their countries by launching drone strikes that kill innocent civilians only reproduces the extremists’ anger and resentment anew. Furthermore, Kotsko tells us, such hellish warzones are aired on television screens in the comfort of living rooms to make the rich Western world feel ever more blessed about their own prosperity.

Having identified several ways in which the oppressor’s theodical ideology has been secularised so as to still be operative today, Kotsko offers a tentative solution: we must draw upon Gregory of Nyssa’s neglected idea that we can “free the devil of the burden of being the devil” and “deprive him of his despotic power” (206, 204).

Unfortunately, Kotsko's solution is rather vague, creating more questions than answers. Given that Kotsko himself looks for the material, social conditions generative of theological concepts as their theoretical effects, we are ourselves entitled to ask what liberating the devil would concretely look like. Recall that the devil has two senses. If Kotsko is prescribing that we figuratively "free" the devil *qua* the oppressor by stripping him of his power, we are all of course aware that despots ought to be overthrown. Conversely, if the devil is the oppressed, we are also fully aware that the oppressed must be freed from their suffering. In both cases, Kotsko's solution amounts to the common-sense claim that the world is full of atrocities, and that they ought to be eliminated. When restated without Kotsko's metaphorical jargon, the solution is not really a solution at all, but rather a repetition of the problem.

Despite Kotsko's final directive leaving much to be desired, his book is a remarkably sweeping, yet fastidious genealogy of the philosophical, political, theological and literary concept of the devil in the Christian tradition, with Kotsko tracing its transformation from symbolising the oppressor in order to account for evil, to representing the oppressed so as to defend evil by masquerading it as its opposite. Kotsko's *The Prince of This World* will not only be of interest to theologians, philosophers and historians of ideas for its genealogy of a key religious concept, but also to cultural and critical theorists, who will be interested to learn how the devil lives on in contemporary, "secular" politico-cultural discourse.

VINCENT LE is a graduate in Philosophy, English Studies and French Studies from The University of Adelaide and Sciences Po. He is currently pursuing postgraduate research in Philosophy at Deakin University with a thesis on the influence of Augustine's concepts of good and evil throughout the history of philosophy, from Aquinas, Descartes and Rousseau, to Kant, Schelling and Heidegger.