

Ill-neoliberalism

M. Jouke Huijzer

Krisis 41 (1): 157-171.

Abstract

In a recent contribution Hendrikse (2018) has coined the concept of *neo-illiberalism* to capture mainstreaming of illiberal doctrines among neoliberal elites, thereby signifying a “mutation and restoration of transatlantic neoliberalism.” After a critical appraisal of his concept, this essay argues that it is *too early* to claim that neoliberalism is mutated and suggests that the present conjuncture can better be termed *ill-neoliberal* instead. Following several scholars who have argued that we have arrived at an *interregnum*, I argue, by also applying a Gramscian framework, that neoliberalism is increasingly malfunctioning, “ill” or even dying, while something new is yet to be born. Unlike most Gramscian reasoning, however, I do not regard the rise of Trump or the European far right as “morbid symptoms”, but as *attempted remedies* for neoliberalism. In this “restoration perspective” neoliberal elites, somewhat reluctantly, welcome illiberal actors and doctrines in an effort to keep existing hierarchies in place, or to even restore old ones. This transformation in the West towards illiberalism differs, then, from the emerging (and already) illiberal or authoritarian world powers such as China who increasingly rely on an ever-growing private economy and can therefore more rightfully be considered “neo-illiberal” (cf. Aiyar 2016). Whether such powers will be able to install a new (global) order depends foremost on the ability of the atlantic heartlands to overcome neoliberalism.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, Interregnum, Illiberal democracy, Restoration, Gramsci

DOI

[10.21827/krisis.41.1.37169](https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.41.1.37169)

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). © 2021 The author(s).

III-neoliberalism

M. Jouke Huijzer

Introduction

We are living in confusing times. On one side, scholars have proclaimed that the Brexit referendum and the electoral victory of Donald Trump evidences the end of neoliberalism (Jacques 2016; West 2016) or even the end of the transatlantic (neo)liberal order altogether, given its turn away from free-trade and international cooperation (Enthous 2018; Patrick 2017). (Neo)liberalism, then, is likely to be replaced with something more illiberal, reactionary, nationalist, and authoritarian (Boyle 2016). On the other side, authors have pointed out that these illiberal actors – ranging from Trump to Boris Johnson to far-right parties in Europe – cooperate rather well with the neoliberal financial elite and leave most of the (neoliberal) practices of big corporations unchallenged (Dardot and Laval 2019). In the US, this is best made visible by the dominance of former Goldman Sachs managers in the Trump administration. In Europe, political establishments which traditionally upheld the neoliberal order increasingly welcome illiberal doctrines and are occasionally willing to enter in coalitions with illiberal actors – better known as radical right-wing populists (De Lange 2012). But at the same time, none of these increasingly illiberal governments, whether in Italy, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, or the Netherlands, seem to challenge neoliberal doctrines.

Making sense of these developments, thus poses a theoretical challenge to social scientists, for which existing concepts and ideological classifications may fall short. In an attempt to capture the current mainstreaming of illiberal doctrines among neoliberal political establishments, Reijer Hendrikse (2018, 169) recently introduced the concept of *neo-illiberalism* to describe the “next neoliberal wave shaping global capitalism”. The concept, an amalgamation of neoliberalism and illiberalism, mainly denotes a sociopolitical process through which the doctrine of “illiberal democracy” fuses with that of “undemocratic liberalism” (cf. Mounk 2018) – the latter, regarded by Hendrikse (2018, 170) as “a euphemism for neoliberalism”. By articulating the continuation of neoliberalism, neo-illiberalism signifies an “illiberal mutation *and* restoration of transatlantic neoliberalism” (italics in original; *ibid.* p. 169). This conception of a

mutant neoliberalism has recently further been theorized by a number of authors marshalled by Callison and Manfredi (2020).

I am sympathetic towards the line of reasoning that Hendrikse (2018) attempts to capture in his concept. He certainly was one of the first theorists who emphasized the often-overlooked continuity in economic governance despite the ascendance of far-right actors and the Trump administration. One can hardly overestimate the importance of the general observation that “despite all the spectacle, thus far the economic rupture foremost constitutes a change in style rather than substance” (ibid., 170). Hence, the appeal of the concept of neo-illiberalism mostly lies in the way the concept captures the blend of *persistent* neoliberal doctrines with *emergent* illiberal attacks on constitutional checks and balances and rule-based governance, resulting in a single entity portrayed as a “two-headed monster that needs to be tamed” (ibid., 171).

The representation of Trump and his illiberal European counterparts as a sort of monster is not uncommon among radical political theorists, even if their views differ from Hendrikse (e.g. Brown 2019, 17). In particular, scholars who apply a Gramscian perspective champion the idea that far-right forces represent something like “monsters” (Žižek 2012) or “morbid symptoms” (Coates 2017; Kowalski 2019). What distinguishes their argument from that of Hendrikse is that for these authors the upsurge of illiberal or far-right actors does *not* represent a new phase in global capitalism or neoliberalism. Rather, they argue that the post-2008 economic recession can best be regarded as an *interregnum* (Babic 2020; Fraser 2019; Møller Stahl 2019), famously described by Gramsci (1971, 276) as a period in which “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (embodied by Trump and the European far-right) which illustrate that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” Following these perspectives, neoliberalism is neither dead, nor mutated, but rather in its “zombie phase” (Peck 2010b), thereby still informing contemporary policy in the absence of a genuinely new alternative.

The attempt in this contribution is to nuance both perspectives. I agree with those working from the Gramscian perspective that we should indeed understand the present time as an *interregnum* since it is *too early* to speak of a mutation of neoliberalism into something inherently new or *neo-illiberal*. As will be discussed in the next section, the term neo-illiberalism not only suffers from a number of conceptual deficiencies, it is also empirically inaccurate to claim that we are entering a new phase that deserves a new label. By contrast, I argue in the

subsequent section that the present time can, metaphorically speaking, best be characterized as *ill-neoliberal*. Neoliberal elites and political establishments welcome illiberal doctrines and actors to uphold an increasingly malfunctioning transatlantic neoliberal order. In this light, I will argue *in line with* Hendrikse that we should not regard Trump and the European far-right as “morbid symptoms”, but rather as an *attempted remedy* for neoliberalism. As will be reflected upon in the final sections, this significantly changes the way to understand the witnessed shifts in power – both globally and within the national political arenas of Atlantic powers – as much as the outlooks for renewal and contestation. Importantly, the purpose of this article is not so much to establish a new concept as to make a *Zeitdiagnose*, thereby highlighting some of the dominant forces at work today.

Neo-illiberalism: An Ill-chosen Concept?

Similar to the term neoliberalism, Hendrikse (2018, 170) introduces neo-illiberalism as a “rascal concept” that is “promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2009). Indeed, it is not difficult to spell out some of its conceptual hitches. When judged at face-value, for instance, it is unclear what the “neo” in “neo-illiberalism” stands for. *Neo*-illiberalism implies that there used to be an “old” illiberalism that today expresses itself in an, at least slightly, modified form. Yet, the “rise of illiberal democracy”, as observed in the late 1990s (Zakaria 1997) emerged under the very same (and persisting) neoliberal order as “the rise of neo-illiberalism” (Hendrikse 2021). The main difference today being only that already existing illiberal doctrines get mainstreamed by the establishments of the transatlantic economic heartlands. But the doctrines themselves did not modify. After all, Hendrikse (2018) agrees that there is little difference with earlier illiberalism(s) since not much of an economic rupture has taken place.

This conceptual tangle becomes more clear when one takes a closer look at the constitutive parts of Hendrikse’s (2018) account of neo-illiberalism: “illiberal democracy” and “undemocratic liberalism” and how they translate into “neo-illiberalism”. Both concepts refer exclusively to a *political* (il)liberalism – i.e. constitutionalism, rule of law, checks and balances, central bank independence etc. – while Hendrikse (2018, 170) only arrives at his concept by regarding undemocratic liberalism as “a euphemism for neoliberalism”. Naturally, one could also argue that neoliberalism is rather a euphemism for “undemocratic liberalism”. But, again,

the real difference is that undemocratic liberalism refers to political liberalism, while, as Wendy Brown (2006, 694) has reminded us, “the ‘liberalism’ in neoliberalism refers to economic liberalism”. The result of this conceptual imprecision makes it difficult to grasp whether neo-illiberalism refers to *political* (il)liberalism, *economic* liberalism or some (which?) hybrid form.

Hendrikse’s (2021) contribution to the present volume aims to reflect further on neo-illiberalism’s conceptual puzzles and describes a number of relevant processes. These go beyond the simple notion of emerging coalitions with far-right actors, the radicalization of conservative parties, and the mainstreaming of far-right doctrines among “center”-right parties in neoliberal heartlands (Hendrikse 2018; cf. Mudde 2019). Now neo-illiberalism mainly denotes “processes of political illiberalization to protect and boost profits, wealth, and power” (Hendrikse 2021, 66). More concretely this means that neoliberal capitalism is increasingly characterized by practices of Big Tech firms (cf. Zuboff 2019) who make avail of their technologies not only to financial institutions, but also to illiberal political actors and authoritarian regimes. Those political actors and regimes willingly use the technologies to suppress democratic demands, violate democratic norms, and infringe on liberal rights and freedoms, thereby giving shape to the neo-illiberal order.

Again, what is new here are not the violations of liberal democratic rights as such, but rather that those are increasingly common among (increasingly) powerful illiberal actors in the transatlantic neoliberal heartlands. In this vein, Ian Bruff (2014, 116) already argued in an article entitled “the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism” that neoliberalism was stripped of its “hegemonic aura” in the wake of the post-2007 financial crisis. Neoliberal political and economic elites became “less interested in neutralizing resistance and dissent via concessions and forms of compromise that maintain their hegemony” (Bruff 2014, 116). If “the rise of neo-illiberalism” is the successor of *authoritarian* neoliberalism, resupplying neoliberalism with a hegemonic aura, then the validity of the concept comes down to the question of whether neo-illiberalism is already hegemonic.

Here my view differs from that of Hendrikse (2018; 2020); the fact that neoliberal elites resort to illiberal actors to retain the necessary (nominally) democratic support indicates their weakness rather than their renewed strength. Neoliberalism may not be in ruins *yet*, but parties and

politicians operating from within its “extreme center” (Ali 2018) are more often put on the defense when reluctantly subverting to the dictates of the market. Instead of passionately advocating “market rule”, Jamie Peck and Nick Theodore (2019, 263) have rightly noted “the horizons of even nominally free-market action and imagination seem to be collapsing”. Moreover, it also remains questionable as to whether the “nascent neo-illiberalism” that Hendrikse (2018, 169) observed can really result in a new type of “ideology”, “order”, or “operating system” (ibid. 2018, 169–70) as the introduction of such a concept suggests. Neo-illiberalism describes more of a process, rather than providing much of an alternative guiding principle, ideology, or mode of governance that electorates or political and corporate establishments can full-heartedly support. If “neoliberalism has always sought allies to reproduce itself” (ibid. 2018, 169) and found them before among conservatives and the center left, then the latest “phase” of neoliberalism might just be another attempt of corporate elites to cooperate with now increasingly illiberal governments.

III-neoliberalism: A Diagnosis of our Times

Yet, by showing the limitations of the concept of neo-illiberalism, I do not intend to do away with the full argument. Underlying his concept, Hendrikse demonstrates a strikingly accurate intuition which points out that the recent embrace of illiberal doctrines and the welcoming of illiberal actors by neoliberal establishments serve to *restore* a neoliberalism that is increasingly malfunctioning. Building on this argument, this section argues that, speaking metaphorically, neoliberalism is deeply ill, and most likely terminally, but certainly not dead.¹ Because actors upholding neoliberal doctrines are unable to secure sufficient legitimacy by themselves, they increasingly have to rely on either reactionary forces – as in the US or the UK – or moderately progressive ones – as in France or Canada.

Put in Gramscian terms, we have arrived at an *interregnum*, where various “projects” compete for hegemony (Møller Stahl 2019). Those include, on the one side, a left populism, while on the other side a neoliberal establishment in alliance with different forces (Mouffe 2018; Fraser 2019). But following a Gramscian conceptual framework, the new alliance can better be understood as a case of *Caesarism*, than as a new coalition that deserves to be labelled by the dubious concept of neo-illiberalism. Caesarism emerges in a period of intensified (class) conflict where a “third force” is necessary to “arbitrate” between antagonistic and mutually

destructive political forces that are both unable to secure hegemony (Fontana 2004). In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci (1971, 219) notes that there can be progressive and reactionary forms of Caesarism:

Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph – in this case too with certain compromises and limitations, which have, however, a different value, extent, and significance than in the former.

Coalitions, according to Gramsci (1971, 220), represented “a first stage of Caesarism, which either may or may not develop to more significant stages” and as such, did not always require the emergence of certain “great, “heroic”, representative personalities.” The significance of Trump may in that respect be assessed as an early stage of “reactionary Caesarism” (Heino 2020), as most of his achievements may still be reversed with the ascendance of a new political leadership; at this point, no Rubicon is yet crossed.

In this light it would also be incorrect to regard Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and their illiberal European counterparts as being at the heart of a newly formed establishment, but they are certainly becoming the pillars on which neoliberalism increasingly relies. Unlike others who use Gramsci’s theorization of the interregnum to contend that Trump, Johnson, and the European far-right embody the “morbid symptoms” (Kowalski 2019, 2; cf. Žižek 2012), I would argue – in line with Hendrikse (2018) – that the rise of Trump rather represents an attempt to *restore* what is in such an ill condition: the transatlantic neoliberal order.

Importantly, Trump or the European Far Right are not so much neoliberals themselves, because as genuine reactionaries their efforts go beyond simply “curing” the transatlantic neoliberal order. Rather, their attempt is to restore it in its very original configuration and appearance, including all hierarchies and privileges it affirmed by it when installed (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2019). As such Trump represents some form of an “antibiotics” to the “ill body” of neoliberally governed society. He seeks to identify the “human-microbes” (to stick to the illness-metaphor) he perceives to be perilous for the otherwise wonderful functioning of neoliberal society – in his case, mostly immigrants, Muslims, transgender people, and feminists. Moreover, he

attempts to isolate any contender to the transatlantic neoliberal hegemony from the otherwise perfectly operating global market.²

Trump or the other far-right forces do not challenge the workings of the national or international economic order, but they do yearn for the established hierarchies and (white male) privileges that were in place when the (neo)liberal order was established. Consequently, they do not challenge neoliberalism itself but rather challenge any adaptation to neoliberalism or transformation *within* the neoliberal order, even if those are facilitated by it: the further integration of women and people of color into the (upper echelons of the paid) workforce as much as the rise of new world powers like China. Thus, while the North-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was hardly changed by the Trump administration, economic policies regarding China deviated significantly from Obama's efforts to "integrate China into the global economy and expand trade" (Obama quoted in Johnson 2014). Again, this is better understood as an attempt to haul down any potential challenger to the established hierarchy of powers when transatlantic neoliberalism was installed, and America was allegedly "great".³

Just as Trump and the radical right are not full-heartedly propagating neoliberalism, so also are neoliberal elites no core Trump-supporters. Some capitalist factions may indeed prefer illiberal and nationalist political forces in power, but especially when the political offer is narrowed down to far-right nationalists and center-right cosmopolitans, the better part of the corporate establishment still supports the latter; even if those cosmopolitans make some progressive commitments regarding climate change, sexual minorities, or the further integration of women in the workforce. The European Union and its apologists like Emanuel Macron (in his run-off against Le Pen) enjoyed overwhelming corporate support, and the same holds for the brood of the Obama-administration, most prominently Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. Following the neoliberal rationality, women are "more useful to capitalism" (Eisenstein 2005, 499) when integrated in the paid workforce, and raising barriers to this process of integration is deemed inefficient.

Yet, once a socialist threat becomes imminent, corporate elites do not see much trouble in letting illiberal far-right actors come to the fore and eventually providing them with a stage. While the far right is mainly using this to bring some deep-seated notions about "race" and sex to the political surface, they sometimes also allude to the criticisms purveyed by the Left. Thus,

Trump could rise within the Republican Party in a context where Bernie Sanders made an unexpected surge to become the Democratic Presidential candidate. Boris Johnson was only allowed to lead the Tory Party when Jeremy Corbyn came unexpectedly strong out of the polls at the 2017 UK General Election. In such circumstance's alliances between the neoliberal mainstream and the far right can emerge, but importantly those are defensive tactics on behalf of capital to redirect or channel and incite different kinds of public resentment. The political aims and priorities of neoliberals on the one hand, and the far right on the other, may in some instances be complementary or instrumental to one another, but they remain sufficiently different to keep the analytical distinction in place, for their alliances are as easily broken as they are forged.

From Ill-neoliberalism to Neo-illiberalism?

If we were to accept a conceptualization of the term *neo-illiberalism*, its proper understanding should be closer to the one Aiyar (2016, 2011) developed to describe transformations in emerging economies such as India or China. According to Aiyar, neo-illiberalism differs from the “old” illiberalism in that many sectors in the economy have become privatized, but the political order has remained illiberal and corrupt. In *this* account of neo-illiberalism, “neo” thus refers to the “mutation” of the illiberal *political* order as it now relies on a larger private sector. This is essentially the transformation that most emerging economies underwent, most notably China, under whose global leadership an actual neo-illiberal order might possibly emerge (Lin 2013).

Returning to Gramsci, the different conceptions of neo-illiberalism as developed by Hendrikse and Aiyar respectively mirror the Gramscian distinction between the West and the East, or core and periphery (see Hall 1986). Gramsci observed that in the East the state prevails over civil society, while in the West this relation is (rather) reversed (Anderson 1976, 26). Today, we can still witness how in the East privatizations and economic transformations are directed under the firm control of an illiberal political order. This may indeed signify the emergence of a neo-illiberalism or even a potentially neo-illiberal order led by China, if its rise continues (Lin 2013; Jacques 2009).

In the West, by contrast, illiberal civil-society actors, ranging from Steve Bannon and his *Breitbart* platform, and Rupert Murdoch's media empire, to evangelical organizations and

white supremacist militias, are mobilizing and are much welcomed for keeping the neoliberal establishment out of shot. But those actors neither challenge neoliberalism or the establishment, nor seek to mitigate any of its perilous effects. They only assist in further depriving marginalized groups from some of their hard-won rights, thereby prolonging the period of neoliberal capitalist expansion and enabling it to unleash at an even faster pace (cf. Glyn 2006). Marginalized people will only experience increased competition, further misrecognition, and heightening barriers to emancipation, while being increasingly exposed to the perilous logics of neoliberal capitalism.

Thus far, I have mainly discussed the legitimacy crisis of neoliberalism, but underlying the tactics of ruling forces to activate passions sparked by various civil society actors, dramatic economic and social changes are overturning the daily lives of many. Neoliberalism has always been an elite-led project mainly benefitting the upper and middle-classes, but over the past decade it has reached the point where the balance has definitively shifted to the super-rich. At the same time, little effort is made within core neoliberal heartlands to provide the necessary social provisions, such as healthcare and education, needed in order to increase the productivity required by capitalism for its reproduction (Kuttner 2018). Investing elsewhere was simply deemed more profitable, but ultimately, this benefits the rents of asset-holders more than overall growth-rates and thereby accelerates economic inequalities (Piketty 2014).

The current embrace of nationalist and illiberal actors by transatlantic neoliberal elites is also unlikely to bring a cure to neoliberalism, nor to establish a stable (global) neo-illiberal order (in the understanding of Hendrikse, 2018). Relying on illiberal actors prevents Atlantic political and economic establishments from addressing dramatic economic inequalities, ecological deprivation, institutionalized racism, and various forms of oppression of women and sexual minorities. But these problems will not be resolved either. At the same time, capital still freely flows over the borders of emerging economies to enrich the elites at the expense of multitudes all around the globe; continuing along the current path means that the rise of illiberal powers proceeds without any liberal or democratic transformation. Consequently, it no longer seems as fantastic that a state-led neo-illiberalism will take neoliberalism's place. Atlantic (neo)liberal elites are decreasingly able to question the legitimacy of the (neo-)illiberal governments of emerging economies, while they not do not even attempt at resolving any domestic problems

that impair future prosperity. Hence it becomes less of a catchphrase that the “Washington consensus” gets replaced by a “Beijing consensus”, and more of a realistic scenario to be reckoned with.

Stilling Neoliberalism

At this point, however, there is no neo-illiberal order yet. And whether we will ever experience one depends foremost on the ability of the transatlantic heartlands to not only overcome the ill state of neoliberalism, but also neoliberalism itself. This appraisal of Hendrikse’s (2018) concept, and the suggestion of substituting it for “ill-neoliberalism”, may seem like a mere play on words. But describing the present times as ill-neoliberal instead of illiberal or neo-illiberal, does alter the political outlook and directions for contestation. Hendrikse (2018, 169) seems deeply pessimistic about the ability of left-wing movements and political parties to ultimately challenge the neoliberal order: “[c]rucially, Greece’s Syriza did not undo themselves from Eurozone technocrats, as much as Bernie Sanders failed to break the consensus among US Democrats. Each time, resistance was curtailed, leaving resentment in its wake.” Other examples can be invoked to illuminate the obstacles that disable the Left from truly realizing change. Most exemplary would be Corbyn’s (albeit, narrow) loss in the UK 2017 general election and the subsequent electorally disastrous compromise with the Labour establishment over Brexit at the 2019 elections. At the same time, one should not overlook the fact that the growing support for an anti-neoliberal Left would have been virtually unthinkable just over a decade ago. And even if the more radical Left does not succeed in seizing power, the growing support for the more anti-neoliberal Left leaders, their platforms and ideas, may still have a profound effect on the policy positions of their competitors (Sassoon 1996).

One should therefore not be too quick in drawing conclusions on neoliberalism’s successor. Probably Gramsci’s “pessimistic mind” would have judged otherwise, but there is reason to believe the battle is not over, as neoliberalism is dying, although not already dead, and something new is yet to be born. In order to protect neoliberal capitalism ruling forces are much relieved whenever political debate is shifted away from their accumulation practices, even if this happens by launching volleys of insults aimed at women, sexual, religious, and racialized minorities. Such provocations have consequences in themselves and deserve condemnation, although further sensationalizing them may only increase its damage. And yet, for better or

worse, the insults and provocations make clear that steps towards an ever more equal society cannot be taken for granted. This yields a potential for uniting a variety of marginalized groups who, by simply demanding equality, will be considered no less provocative than the far right. As demands for equality by various groups in society may often trigger quite similar reactions from the economic and political establishments, there is likely to be a common basis for uniting those groups in concerted action for realizing a more equitable and inclusive society; therefore more than “taming a two-headed monster” such organization should be the prime task for the Left.

The rise of far-right actors has made clear that there are many social and political struggles still to be fought, but that one of them stands a chance of being won sometime soon as one diagnosis becomes increasingly apparent: neoliberalism is deeply ill. It is unable to sustain economic prosperity and is greatly suffering from a decreasing legitimacy. By pushing this metaphor to its uttermost limits we can observe how neoliberalism, in agony, clings to any political movement that may aid its survival, whether progressive or reactionary, despite its decreasing hope for recovery (Crouch 2017). Because what the neoliberal elites fail to see in welcoming Trump-like so-called challengers to the neoliberal order is that the infection is “viral” rather than “bacterial”. Targeting the “human-microbes” deemed perilous for the current order is unlikely to bring a cure – at best perceived as temporary relief for some. Preventing the neoliberal order from its illness taking on pandemic proportions requires a costly global “vaccination program” of increased social and environmental protection and reform, from which the results would still be highly uncertain. Now that we are getting the diagnostics right, let’s neither search for remedies nor get distracted by reactionary provocations. Instead, we should seize each opportunity for dealing neoliberalism its final blow so that something truly new can be born; it had better not be neo-illiberalism.

Postscript

A first draft of this essay was finished well before the coronavirus pandemic and the version at hand was completed just before the 2020 US Presidential elections. The election of Joe Biden to the most powerful office in the world only adds to the general idea that neoliberalism has wrongly been declared dead. At the time of writing, Trump is still denying his electoral defeat and we cannot be sure how and when he will leave the White House. What has already

been significant at least, is that many societal actors are mobilizing against the abuse of democratic processes. Even media outlets such as *Fox News Channel* deny Trump's anti-democratic bluster a stage, thereby showcasing that such an approach to far-right actors is perfectly viable (cf. de Jonge 2019). As in the US, the coronavirus pandemic has in most countries mainly resulted in support for actors that (also rhetorically) mostly aim for maintaining the status quo. But since the coronavirus has (quite literally) vastly expanded the apparent morbid symptoms, the medium- and long-term political effects of the pandemic are still to become manifest. Over the past months, some politicians and many political commentators have stated that the pandemic means another (final) blow to neoliberalism given the return of state-interventionism in the economy and society. This does not automatically hold true because state-intervention, as pointed out in a number of recent intellectual histories (e.g. Slobodian 2018; Peck 2010a), is perfectly compatible with neoliberalism – especially during epidemics (Foucault 2008). At the same time, the pandemic has certainly provided some more arguments against the expansion of market rule that may be put forward once the Left gains new momentum.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Eline Severs for her repeated feedback on earlier drafts of the paper, as well as Milan Babic, Louise Knops, Jiahui Shan, Joke Matthieu and *Krisis*-editors Tivadar Vervoort and Jan Overwijk for their many useful comments.

Notes

1] As Sontag (1978, 86) has convincingly pointed out, “the concept of disease is never innocent”. I have therefore refrained from mentioning any specific disease and only discuss the minimal necessary characteristics of the type of illness relevant to the metaphor. In this light it is perhaps also good to mention that a full draft of this essay was completed well before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

2] Derrida's (1981) notion of the *Pharmakon* is particularly apt to interpret this reversal of the illiberal far right as remedy rather than as poison. If the far right would be “the poison”, as is (metaphorically) the dominant understanding in the literature, a recovery implies a reversion to neoliberalism. This sounds as nonsensical as it is. I am indebted to Jan Overwijk for bringing this to my attention.

3] Gramsci (1971, 276) was rather skeptical about whether in the *interregnum* “a rift between popular masses and ruling ideologies [can] be “cured” by the simple exercise of force”. A few lines after his theorization of the *interregnum* he states that “[g]iven the character of the ideologies, that can be ruled out”. But Gramsci also

predicted that in such cases “highly favourable conditions are being created for an unprecedented expansion of historical materialism [i.e. Marxism].” Similarly, when discussing Caesarism, Gramsci (1971, 219–20) states that even if restoration predominates, “there is never any turning back, and that restorations in toto do not exist.”

References

- Aiyar, Swaminathan S. Anklesaria. 2011. “Neo-Illiberalism Is India’s Bane.” *The Times of India*, July 17, 2011. <https://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Swaminomics/neo-illiberalism-is-india-s-bane/>.
- . 2016. “Twenty-Five Years of Indian Economic Reform: A Story of Private-Sector Success, Government Failure, and Institutional Weakness.” *Policy Analysis*. <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa803.pdf>.
- Ali, Tariq. 2018. *The Extreme Center: A Warning*. London: Verso.
- Anderson, Perry. 1976. “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci.” *New Left Review*, no. 100: 5–78. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i100/articles/perry-anderson-the-antinomies-of-antonio-gramsci>.
- Babic, Milan. 2020. “Let’s Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order.” *International Affairs* 96 (3): 767–86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz254>.
- Boyle, Michael J. 2016. “The Coming Illiberal Order.” *Survival* 58 (2): 35–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1161899>.
- Brenner, Neil, J. Peck, and Nik Theodore. 2009. “Variegated Neoliberalization: Geographies, Modalities, Pathways.” *Global Networks* 2 (10): 182–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00277.x>.
- Brown, Wendy. 2006. “American Nightmare.” *Political Theory* 34 (6): 690–714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591706293016>.
- . 2019. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317x.2019.1659943>.
- Bruff, Ian. 2014. “The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism.” *Rethinking Marxism* 26 (1): 113–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2013.843250>.
- Callison, William, and Zachary Manfredi. 2020. *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*. New York: Fordham University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvq4bz15>.
- Coates, David. 2017. “Donald J. Trump as Morbid Symptom.” Davidcoates.Net. 2017. <https://www.davidcoates.net/2017/08/03/donald-j-trump-as-a-morbid-symptom/>.
- Crouch, Colin. 2017. *Can Neoliberalism Be Saved From Itself?* London: Social Europe Ltd.
- Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. 2019. *Never Ending Nightmare: The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*. London and New York: Verso.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1981. *Dissemination*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Eisenstein, Hester. 2005. “A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization.” *Science & Society* 69 (3): 487–518.
- Enthous, Adam. 2018. “Donald Trump’s New World Order.” *The New Yorker*, June 2018.
- Fontana, Benedetto. 2004. “The Concept of Caesarism in Gramsci.” In *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism and Totalitarianism*, edited by Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, 175–95. Washington and Cambridge: German Historical Institute, Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Edited by Michel Senellart and Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fraser, Nancy. 2019. “The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born.” London and New York: Verso Books.
- Glyn, Andrew. 2006. *Capitalism Unleashed: Finance Globalization and Welfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

- Hall, Stuart. 1986. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (2): 5–27.
- Heino, Brett. 2020. "A Modern Day Caesar? Donald Trump and American Caesarism." *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12280>.
- Hendrikse, Reijer. 2018. "Neo-Illiberalism." *Geoforum* 95 (June): 169–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.002>.
- . 2021. "The Rise of Neo-Illiberalism." *Krisis: Journal of Contemporary Philosophy* 41 (1): 65–93.
- Jacques, Martin. 2009. *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*. London: Alan Lane.
- . 2016. "The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics." *The Guardian*, August 21, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/21/death-of-neoliberalism-crisis-in-western-politics>.
- Johnson, M. Alex. 2014. "Obama, in Interview, Rejects Idea of 'Containing' China." *NBC News*, November 11, 2014. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/obama-interview-rejects-idea-containing-china-n245706>.
- Jonge, Léonie de. 2019. "The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux: Friend or Foe?" *International Journal of Press/Politics* 24 (2): 189–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218821098>.
- Kowalski, Jeremy. 2019. *Reading Donald Trump*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93179-1>.
- Kuttner, Robert. 2018. *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lange, Sarah L. De. 2012. "New Alliances: Why Mainstream Parties Govern with Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties." *Political Studies* 60 (4): 899–918. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00947.x>.
- Lin, Chun. 2013. *China and Global Capitalism: Reflections on Marxism, History and Contemporary Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Møller Stahl, Rune. 2019. "Ruling the Interregnum: Politics and Ideology in Nonhegemonic Times." *Politics and Society* 47 (3): 333–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329219851896>.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2018. "For A Left Populism." London: Verso Books.
- Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Today*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz097>.
- Patrick, Stewart M. 2017. "Trump and World Order." *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2): 52–57.
- Peck, Jamie. 2010a. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2010b. "Zombie Neoliberalism and the Ambidextrous State." *Theoretical Criminology* 14 (1): 104–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480609352784>.
- Peck, Jamie, and Nik Theodore. 2019. "Still Neoliberalism?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 18 (2): 245–65. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7381122>.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Sassoon, Donald. 1996. *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*. Second. London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2012.687590>.
- Slobodian, Quinn. 2018. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Illness as Metaphor*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- West, Cornel. 2016. "Goodbye, American Neoliberalism: A New Era Is Here." *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016.
- Zakaria, Fareed. 1997. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76 (6): 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2012. "Living in the Time of Monsters." *Counterpoints* 422 (CRITICAL PEDAGOGY in the new dark ages: challenges and possibilities): 32–44.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdmp.10.2.229_5.

Biography

Jouke Huijzer is a PhD Candidate at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Department of Political Science. He has an interest in left-wing politics, elites, Gramscian thought and neoliberalism.