

The Sublime Authority of Ignorance, Neoliberal Nationalism and the Rise of the Demagogue

La sublime autoridad de la ignorancia, el neoliberalismo nacionalista y el auge de la demagogia

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between ignorance, authority and nationalism in neoliberal thought and practice to argue that, far from signalling its end, the recent global rise of the right-wing demagogue is firmly rooted in neoliberalism. Part one mobilises the aesthetic concept of the sublime to explore the central place of, and relationship between, ignorance and authority. Part two argues that neoliberalism has its own form of nationalism which is underpinned by a social Darwinist logic. It is here that we find the basis for the intersection between neoliberalism and the forms of vitriolic and xenophobic nationalism which have helped propel the global ascendancy of the neoliberal demagogue. The concluding section argues that, in the context of growing inequality and insecurity, the demagogue mystifies social relations, projecting blame for the failings of the system on those constructed as “enemies of the people” in the interests of maintaining the status quo.

Key-words: the sublime, neoliberalism, neoliberal nationalism, the neoliberal demagogue, the far-right.

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Resumen

Este artículo explora la relación entre la ignorancia, la autoridad y el nacionalismo en el pensamiento y la práctica neoliberales para argumentar que, lejos de señalar su fin, el reciente surgimiento global del demagogo neoliberal está firmemente arraigado en el neoliberalismo. La primera parte actualiza el concepto estético de lo sublime para explorar el lugar central que ocupa y su papel mediador entre la ignorancia y la autoridad. La segunda parte argumenta que el neoliberalismo tiene su propia forma de nacionalismo que se sustenta en una lógica social darwinista. Es aquí donde encontramos la base para la intersección entre el neoliberalismo y las formas de nacionalismo vitriólico y xenófobo que han ayudado a impulsar el ascenso global del demagogo neoliberal. En la sección final se argumenta que, en un contexto de creciente desigualdad e inseguridad, el demagogo falsea las relaciones sociales en aras de mantener el statu quo y carga a los pretendidos “enemigos del pueblo” con la culpa de los fallos del sistema.

Palabras-clave: lo sublime, neoliberalismo, neoliberalismo nacionalista, demagogo neoliberal, extrema derecha.

Introduction

Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory was heralded as the death knell of neoliberalism. An apparent rejection of the free market orthodoxy of the last four decades, this looked to some like the beginning of a new era of American protectionism accompanied by an avowedly divisive politics of hate which was deemed to be anathema to neoliberalism’s putative indifference to race and gender.² Two years on, the idea that Trump would somehow overturn the neoliberal order has proved to be mistaken. Introducing tax cuts for the rich and showing few signs of the infrastructure investment and job creation programmes he promised in his campaign, Trump has demonstrated that he has no interest in radically transforming American capitalism. Narrowly focused on his protectionist rhetoric on trade, the notion that he would do so misunderstands both the nature of neoliberalism and what Trump represents.³ As Adriano Cozzolini argues, “Trumpism” combines ‘elements of economic nationalism’ – namely protectionist trade policies and revanchist rhetoric

² For example, M. A. Peters, ‘The End of Neoliberal Globalisation and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2018, p. 324.

³ A. Cozzolini, ‘Trumpism as nationalist neoliberalism. A critical enquiry into Donald Trump’s political economy’, *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 47–73; also see, for example, M. R. Rossi, ‘Trump’s New Neoliberalism’, *New Compass*, 7/01/18, accessed 1/08/18: <<http://new-compass.net/articles/trumps-new-neoliberalism>> (unpaginated).

regarding the harm the US has suffered under existing arrangements – with ‘increased neoliberalization’ when it comes to domestic policy: government spending cuts; tax policy; deregulation; anti-labour policies and so on.⁴ While Trump’s election was widely received in the Anglo-American press as a shock to the system, if we look beyond the parochial horizon of the US and Western Europe, he is but one among many right-wing demagogues to ascend to power in the last decade, including Orbán in Hungary (2010), Putin in Russia (2012), Modi in India (2014), Erdogan in Turkey (2014), El-Sisi in Egypt (2014), Duterte in the Philippines (2016) and Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018). This article explores the place of, and relationship between, ignorance, authority and nationalism in neoliberal thought and practice to argue that, far from signalling its end, these demagogues are firmly rooted in neoliberalism. Indeed, their historical mission appears to be that of developing the authoritarian means through which neoliberal capitalism might survive.

Focusing on Friedrich Hayek’s theorisation of the market, in part one I mobilise the aesthetic concept of the sublime as a way of getting to the core of neoliberalism’s epistemological scepticism and insistence upon human ignorance as the corollary of human freedom. Hayek understands the market as the complex mechanism through which the manifold desires and preferences of humanity are processed to ensure that each gets (more or less) what they require and desire. While the market is rational in this sense, its work in performing this task is at the same time figured as sublime: so complex as to be beyond our capacity to grasp and represent it. This contradiction lies at the heart of neoliberalism and, I argue, points to its authoritarian nature as a credo that claims authority through ignorance and demands submission to the unknown. In part two, I argue that, while the recent rise of virulent nationalism has been seen by some as a pathological response to the consequences of neoliberalism, neoliberalism is no stranger to, nor enemy of, nationalism. While the new demagogues are commonly seen as both authoritarian and nationalist – *and therefore* not neoliberal – I contend that neoliberalism, like all the forms of capitalism that have preceded it, *requires* nationalism. Undoubtedly contradictory, neoliberal nationalism remains crucial to the functioning of actually existing neoliberal states. Concerned with the pursuit of national economic self-interest, I argue that neoliberal nationalism is also underpinned by a social darwinist logic and that it is here, in the emphasis on competition and the battle for survival and supremacy, that we find the basis for the intersection between neoliberalism and the forms of vitriolic and xenophobic nationalism which have helped propel the global ascendancy of the neoliberal demagogue. The concluding section reflects on the relationship between nationalism and ignorance in the context of the global ascent of the neoliberal demagogue. I

⁴ Cozzolini, ‘Trumpism’, p. 50.

argue that nationalism has always been, and remains, a dangerous resource, to be ramped up and mobilised in times of crisis. In the context of growing inequality, precarity and insecurity, and amid a sense of lost hope and political and historical agency, the demagogue mystifies the real causes of suffering and projects the blame on those constructed as “enemies of the people”.

Part 1: The Sublime Authority of Ignorance

*The case for individual freedom rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all concerning the great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends.*⁵

Forged in response to a crisis of capitalism and of liberalism in the late 1930s, and against the rise of the welfare state, socialism and fascism, Hayek’s neoliberal theory has ignorance at its core.⁶ Determined to revitalise liberalism in the face of the threat posed by ‘collectivist politics’ (fascism, communism, socialism and the social democratic welfare state) Hayek advocated the free market on the anti-rationalist basis that we are inevitably ignorant of the numerous complex factors which shape our lives.⁷ The centrally controlled state and top-down economic planning both assume that we can know how best to distribute wealth, goods and services; and for Hayek this belief is both mistaken and dangerous. Mistaken, because it assumes knowledge we do not and cannot possess; dangerous because, on the basis of this flawed knowledge and the notion of common purpose, collectivist politics reduces the individual merely to the means through which the collective interest (mandated from above) is pursued. For Hayek ‘collectivism’ and top-down planning lead *necessarily*, therefore, to ‘totalitarianism’. In contrast, a “free society” is one which is pluralistic and free from any common hierarchy of particular ends and where social order emerges spontaneously as a result of individual human actions.⁸ Hayek thus distinguishes between the spontaneous rule of the market which is governed by the rule of law (*nomocracy*) and the collectivist social

⁵ F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976, p. 29.

⁶ The history of neoliberalism has been the subject of a number of excellent studies and won’t be dealt with in detail here. See for example: M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, M. Senellart (ed.), trans. G. Burchell, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; and P. Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, London, Verso, 2013.

⁷ On collectivist thought and the collectivist state see F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom with The Intellectuals and Socialism*, London, The Institute of Economic Affairs/Profile Books, 2001, pp. 51–57.

⁸ F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1982, p. 109.

order based on the pursuit of a common purpose (*telocracy*).⁹ Insisting that the term “economy” (which has its origins in the functioning of the household) is misleading because it suggests that we act in pursuit of shared aims and according to shared principles, Hayek argues that the liberal social order is instead formed of a ‘catallaxy’:

the order brought about by the mutual adjustment of many individual economies in a market. A catallaxy is thus a special kind of spontaneous order produced by the market through people acting within the rules of the law of property, tort and contract.¹⁰

Based on consensual and mutually beneficial exchange, the order that arises from this catallaxy enables peaceful collaboration without any common purpose which is, he argues, antithetical to individual freedom and the possibility of peaceful relations.¹¹

In summary, in Hayek’s utopian neoliberal imaginary, the market – protected by the rule of law – generates a spontaneous social order, creating wealth and promoting innovation; likewise it acts as the guarantor of peaceful collaboration and individual freedom. And yet the functioning of this complex catallaxy must remain opaque: for ‘All man’s mind can effectively comprehend are the facts of the narrow circle of which he is the center.’¹² As quoted in the epigraph above, for Hayek, the freedom of the individual relies upon the recognition of our ignorance of the manifold factors that shape our ability to achieve our goals.¹³ We live in a world of such complexity that we cannot know what all the factors pertaining to a particular situation are and our hubris in assuming such knowledge inevitably results not only in failure, but in a creeping – if not outright – totalitarianism as we seek to forge the world in line with our vision. Evoking Adam Smith’s sublime metaphor of ‘the invisible hand’ of the market, Hayek argues that, while the human mind is limited, the market is capable of acting as a mechanism through which the complex actions and desires of vast numbers of people can be processed, delivering the best possible results for all concerned. So, however well intended, government planning assumes forms of knowledge that we simply do not have. It is incapable of taking account of and processing the information required to ensure that each individual gets what they want, when they want it, at the right price: for this we need the market.

⁹ R. Kiely, ‘From Authoritarian Liberalism to Economic Technocracy: Neoliberalism, Politics and “De-democratisation”’, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 45, no. 4-5, p. 733.

¹⁰ Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 108–109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹² Quoted in N. O’Gorman, *The Iconoclastic Imagination: Image Catastrophe, and Economy in America from the Kennedy Assassination to September 11*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 205, from F. A., Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 14.

¹³ Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, p. 29.

In this sense then, as Ned O’Gorman argues, for neoliberals, freedom ‘entails a form of submission, submission to the unknown’.¹⁴ The market is at once rational and beyond reason: operating behind our backs, the workings of the market are inscrutable; and yet (so the argument goes) it produces the best possible outcome for all.

Here we are faced with the operation of the sublime at the heart of neoliberal theory. Evoking awe, wonderment and respect, but also fear and even terror, unsettling and threatening to overwhelm, the sublime is notoriously difficult to pin down. Jerome Carroll, for example, has written of the sublime that it ‘has had almost as many interpretations as it has appearances in the philosophical literature’.¹⁵ Used by different philosophers for quite divergent ends, since the 18th Century the concept has served as a battleground wherein the question of the limits of the human imagination/powers of representation and (in some cases) reason and the consequences of these limits are fought out in defence of competing philosophical frameworks.¹⁶ What is clear, however, is that the sublime is that enigmatic concept which is called upon to try to make sense of that which overwhelms the senses, to talk about that which is ineffable, and to represent that which eludes representation. The sublime operates at the boundaries, designating the limits of human comprehension. It is perhaps no coincidence that the modern discourse of the sublime emerges in the same period as the rise of the modern capitalist economy. Whether it is being developed or criticised (or both) Kant’s aesthetic theory remains the most influential in contemporary debates about the sublime.¹⁷ Of particular interest here is the relationship between rationality and obscurity in Kant’s philosophy. In his sympathetic critique of Kant, Max Horkheimer argues that this relationship is symptomatic of the contradictions of capitalism:

The bourgeois type economy... is not governed by any plan; it is not consciously directed to a general goal; the life of society as a whole proceeds from this economy only at the cost of excessive friction, in a stunted form, and almost, as it were, accidentally. The internal difficulties in the supreme concepts of Kantian philosophy, especially the ego of transcendental subjectivity, pure or original apperception, and consciousness-in-itself, show the depth and honesty of his thinking. The two-sidedness of these Kantian concepts, that is, their supreme unity and purposefulness, on the one hand, and their obscurity, unknowness, and impenetrability, on the other, reflects exactly the contradiction-filled form of human activity in the modern period.¹⁸

¹⁴ O’Gorman, *Iconoclastic Imagination*, p. 205.

¹⁵ J. Carroll, ‘The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 66, no. 2, Spring 2008, p. 171.

¹⁶ Ibid. Also see C. Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007; and P. Shaw, *The Sublime*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006.

¹⁷ See for example: G. Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005; and Battersby, *The Sublime*.

¹⁸ M. Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’, in M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected*

The idea that there is something enigmatic, mysterious and unknowable about the functioning of the capitalist economy is of course a recurring theme in analyses of capitalism: from Smith's 'invisible hand' to Marx's 'hidden abode', through Hayek's advocacy of ignorance to Jameson's 'postmodern sublime', many have pointed to the manner in which it challenges our powers of comprehension and representation. As Jameson writes,

No one has ever seen that totality, nor is capitalism ever visible as such but only in its symptoms. This means that every attempt to construct a model of capitalism – for this is now what representation means in this context – will be a mixture of success and failure... Every representation is partial.¹⁹

Here and elsewhere Jameson points to the aesthetic problem – which is also a political problem – of how we understand and situate ourselves in relation to capitalism. As a complex totality which is difficult to grasp, it demands

ways of representing the complex and dynamic relations intervening between the domains of production, consumption and distribution, and their strategic political mediations, ways of making the invisible visible.²⁰

Rendering capitalism *visible* must be one of the central aims of any political project that aims to see an end to its reign. But this task is a fiendishly difficult one. As Postone argues in his reading of Marx's account of commodity fetishism, the commodity form itself 'both expresses and veils social relations' so that they appear 'not to be social at all, but natural'.²¹ This gap between the essence and the appearance of capitalism – expressed in the distinction between value and use-value or the abstract and the concrete – opens up the space for the mystification of social relations and the development a foreshortened critique which takes aim at its abstract and destructive power – personified as the Jew, the banker, the immigrant – rather than capitalism itself.²² In their own ways, both Jameson and Postone point to the problem of representation as essential to that of both understanding and transforming the world. In contrast, neoliberal ideology seeks to persuade us that "another world is *not* possible". Revelling in the sublime and asserting its authority, it insists that we are and must remain

Essays, trans. M. O'Connell, New York, Continuum, 2002, pp. 188–243, p. 203–204.

¹⁹ F. Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*, London, Verso, 2011, p. 6.

²⁰ A. Toscano, and J. Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2015, pp. 24–25.

²¹ M. Postone, 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism', in A. Rabinbach and J. Zipes (eds.), *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust*, New York, Holmes & Meier, 1986, p. 307.

²² *Ibid.* Postone's analysis is specific to the development of modern anti-Semitism and Nazism's foreshortened critique of capitalism. That said, and although it is beyond the scope of this article, a more thoroughgoing engagement with Postone's work may be productive in informing analyses of the rise and popularity of the far-right in the current conjuncture.

ignorant – for the pretence that we can know and therefore change the world is not only mistaken but dangerous.

Responding to the political threat posed to liberalism and to capitalism by ‘collectivist politics’, Hayek’s attempt to revitalise liberalism has at its core an authoritarian argument for the protection of the market. As we have already seen in outline, *The Constitution of Liberty* develops what Ray Kiely refers to as an ‘openly authoritarian liberalism’ which ‘protects the liberal individual and the free market from collectivism’.²³ Underpinned by epistemological scepticism, then, neoliberal theory rejects both political deliberation and planning in favour of the market as the mechanism through which human ends are best served: “the market” becomes the unquestionable authority to which all other considerations must submit. While parsed in the language of (individual) freedom, neoliberalism is in a profound sense necessarily authoritarian not only in practice (since it must impose its vision on the majority against their interests) but in principle.²⁴ Why? Because it must protect the market at all costs from the pernicious threat posed by demands to know, to make visible, to take control of and to transform the processes which govern our lives. Hayek was very clear on this, insisting that his concept of freedom has nothing to do with ‘what is commonly called “political freedom”, the participation of men in the choice of their government, in the process of legislation, and in the control of administration’.²⁵ From Pinochet’s Chile, through to Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s and on to the imposition of structural adjustments by the IMF, the World Bank and the EU, neoliberalism has a long history of authoritarianism; a history of market mechanisms, international institutions and the power of the state – including its monopoly on violence – being mobilised to institute and, where necessary, impose neoliberal reforms.²⁶

The role of the state in protecting the market from political demands for justice and equality has been crucial in all of this. Often and erroneously associated with the shrinking of the state, neoliberalism is, in fact, concerned not with the diminution of the state but with its transformation. As the

²³ Kiely, ‘Authoritarian Liberalism’, p. 730.

²⁴ There is a growing body of literature which explores the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism in practice. See, for example, S. Hall *et al*, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (1978), 2nd edn., Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London, Penguin Books, 2007; I. Bruff, ‘The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism’, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economic, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014; C. Burak Tansel, ‘Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress’, *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2018, pp. 197–217; and E. Fassin, ‘The neo-fascist moment of neoliberalism’, *Open Democracy*, 10/08/18, accessed 29/11/18, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/ric-fassin/neo-fascist-moment-of-neoliberalism>>.

²⁵ Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, p. 11–20 quote from p. 13.

²⁶ See, for example, Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*; Fassin, ‘The neo-fascist moment of neoliberalism’; and (specifically on the EU) E. Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, trans. D. Broder, London, Verso, 2019, pp. 41.

neoliberal theorist and ideologue, Milton Friedman, makes clear in *Capitalism and Freedom*, the aim of the neoliberal state is precisely that of establishing and maintaining the rules, institutions and social conditions required for the market to flourish unimpeded by calls for justice and equality.²⁷ More than simply fostering the right conditions for the flourishing of the market, however, the neoliberal state takes up the logic of the market as its very own. As Foucault observed in 1978, what is at stake in neoliberalism is ‘whether a market economy can in fact serve as the principle, form, and model for a state’.²⁸ And as Wendy Brown argues, neoliberalism is a constructivist project: rather than assuming that economic rationality pervades all domains of human life, it extends and disseminates market values with the aim of ensuring that ‘all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality’.²⁹ It is important to note, however, as William Davies does, that rather than ceding power and authority to the market, the neoliberal state justifies its actions and policies ‘in terms that are commensurable with the logic of markets’.³⁰ Suspicious of – indeed antithetical to – politics, neoliberalism replaces political judgments with forms of economic evaluation.³¹ What is crucial is that, far from receding, the state becomes the chief instrument through which social and economic practices and institutions are restructured in accordance with the anti-political, market and competition orientated logic of neoliberalism. Increasingly contracting out what were once seen as essential functions of the state and devolving responsibility – through complex webs of full and part privatisations, public-private finance initiatives, corporate sponsorship deals and forms of community and third sector involvement – the state nevertheless retains ultimate authority.³² Thus, as Ian Bruff argues, we are witnessing the rise of an authoritarian neoliberalism which operates not only through force and coercion, but also through ‘the reconfiguring of the state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent’.³³ To be clear, while the authoritarian nature of

²⁷ M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 2nd edn., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

²⁸ Foucault, *Biopolitics*, p. 117.

²⁹ W. Brown, ‘Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy’, in W. Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 40.

³⁰ W. Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*, London, Sage, 2014, p. 6.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

³² On the growth of the privatised military industry, for example, see P.W. Singer, ‘Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry and Its Ramifications for International Security’, *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2001, pp. 186–220; and M. Eichler, ‘Citizenship and the Contracting out of Military Work: from National Conscription to Globalized Recruitment’, *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 18, no. 6–7, 2014, pp. 600–614.

³³ Bruff, ‘Authoritarian Neoliberalism’, p. 115. In a similar vein, also see J.C. Myers, ‘Ideology After the Welfare State’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2002, pp. 171–189. On the threat neoliberalism poses to liberal democracy see W. Brown, ‘American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization’, *Political Theory*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2006, pp. 690–714; and

neoliberalism may be becoming more explicit, what the foregoing analysis shows is that – as Stuart Hall long ago made clear in his analysis of Thatcher’s particular brand of neoliberal authoritarian populism – neoliberalism has *always* been authoritarian both in theory and in practice.³⁴ This has now become so explicit that, reflecting on the recent authoritarian turn in neoliberalism – in particular in the context of the EU – Éric Fassin goes as far as to argue that this is the ‘neo-fascist moment’ of neoliberalism.³⁵

Part 2: Neoliberal Nationalism

[T]he neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive.³⁶

One of the standard responses to the recent rise of the demagogue in a range of different national contexts goes something like this: the intensification of inequality under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism is breeding a range of discontents which it is structurally and ideologically unable to address. In these circumstances, a hegemonic crisis has opened the space for the rise of right-wing populism which, far from addressing the causes of the crisis, is mobilising discontent and resentment by directing hatred toward those constructed as enemies of the people (ethnic minorities, immigrants, political elites, etc.). Consider, for example, Nancy Fraser’s analysis of Trump’s rise to power. Reading contemporary American politics through a series of binary oppositions, Fraser distinguishes ‘progressive neoliberalism’ from its ‘reactionary’ counterpart.³⁷ ‘Progressive neoliberalism’ is ‘superficially emancipatory and egalitarian’, combining regressive economic policies with a ‘progressive politics of recognition’. In contrast to its socially liberal, pro-equal rights other, ‘reactionary neoliberalism’ is ‘ethnonationalist, anti-immigrant, and pro-Christian, if not overtly racist, patriarchal, and homophobic’.³⁸ According to Fraser, the progressive variant has until now been hegemonic in the US, but its hegemony is now in crisis, a symptom of which is Trump’s election. She argues that, as a presidential candidate, Trump was a ‘reactionary populist’ who ‘appeared to combine a hyper-reactionary politics of recognition with a populist politics of distribution’.³⁹ As President he has abandoned the

O’Gorman, *The Iconoclastic Imagination*.

³⁴ Hall, *Policing the Crisis*.

³⁵ Fassin, ‘The neo-fascist moment of neoliberalism’.

³⁶ Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, p. 85.

³⁷ N. Fraser, ‘From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump—and Beyond’, *American Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4, Winter 2017, available online <<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>> (unpaginated).

³⁸ *Ibid* (unpaginated, p. 6 of 18).

³⁹ *Ibid* (unpaginated, p. 10 of 18).

populist distributive rhetoric in favour of hyper-reactionary neoliberalism: a combination of regressive economic policies and a hyper-reactionary politics of recognition.⁴⁰ Fraser argues that this shift is symptomatic of a hegemonic crisis. And yet, she argues, that hyper-reactionary neoliberalism offers no prospect of developing a secure hegemony because it is ‘chaotic, unstable, and fragile’.⁴¹

This may or may not turn out to be the case in the USA. But let us look beyond that particular national context to consider, for example, the recent election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, the authoritarian neoliberalism of Erdogan in Turkey, Modi’s brand of Hindu nationalist neoliberalism in India or Duterte’s apparently fascist regime in the Philippines. The rise of these and other far-right demagogues suggests that the shift toward hyper-reactionary neoliberalism is an international phenomenon.⁴² Looking beyond Trump and the peculiarities of politics in the USA, we need to consider the structural and ideological forces at play in the world-wide rise of neoliberal demagogy and, with that, the crucial role of nationalism in this context. The manifold, complex and contradictory ways in which nationalism functions to unify and divide, to coerce and cajole, within contemporary neoliberal societies requires far more attention than I can give it here and certainly warrants more research. The specific purpose of this discussion is simply to demonstrate that nationalism is not external to neoliberalism, nor merely a pathological response to its failings, but rather a fundamental aspect of the functioning of actually existing neoliberal societies which, far from undermining neoliberalism, reflects its own social darwinist logic.

While the role of the state in protecting and bolstering the market and promoting the extension of its logic to all aspects of human life is now broadly recognised, it is often assumed that, because it is a globalising force, neoliberalism is antithetical to the nation and nationalism. A growing body of research has begun to question this assumption, however, with some even arguing that neoliberalism has developed or is developing its own distinct brand of nationalism.⁴³ Since it rose into being alongside capitalism and the modern nation-state, nationalism has been both a necessary and an adaptable

⁴⁰ Ibid (unpaginated, p. 10 of 18).

⁴¹ Ibid (unpaginated, p. 11 of 18).

⁴² On the relationship between these authoritarian regimes and neoliberalism see, for example, Tansel, ‘Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding’; W. Bello, ‘Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original’, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 6/01/17, accessed 28/09/18, <<https://fpif.org/rodrigo-duterte-fascist-original/>> (unpaginated); and F. Finchelstein, ‘Jair Bolsonaro’s Model Isn’t Berlusconi. It’s Goebbels’, *Foreign Policy*, 5/10/18, accessed 10/12/18: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/05/bolsonaros-model-its-goebbels-fascism-nazism-brazil-latin-america-populism-argentina-venezuela/>>.

⁴³ See, for example, N. Davidson, ‘Nationalism and Neoliberalism’, *Variante*, 32, Summer 2008, pp. 36–38; A. Harmes, ‘The Rise of Neoliberal Nationalism’, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 59–86; and Cozzolini, ‘Trumpism’.

ideology – and so it remains.⁴⁴ While some neoliberals have fantasied about a “flat world” of fair and open competition, the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism has come about through the nation-state structure, not against it.⁴⁵ While capital flows across the globe with ever-greater freedom and speed, the world remains divided into nation states and, even while it may undermine national sovereignty in some respects, the globalisation of capitalism has intensified competition between national capitals.

Adam Harmes directly challenges the equation of neoliberalism and internationalism, charting the rise of what he describes as a distinct neoliberal form of nationalism which ‘advocates fiscal and regulatory sovereignty within the context of international capital mobility’.⁴⁶ While they embrace global markets, he argues, wealthy and powerful nations nevertheless seek to curtail the impact of international rules and regulations in order to ensure their own competitive advantage. And as Neil Davidson argues, because neoliberal capitalism is based on competition, and because capitalists require not only the infrastructure of the nation-state but also its protection, ‘like all forms of capitalism... [it] needs both the territorial nation-state form and the ideology of nationalism’.⁴⁷ Close ties between global corporations and national governments – and indeed individual politicians – and the influence of non-state actors may complicate this picture and call into question the credibility of the national and nationalist framing of state policies.⁴⁸ The argument I am making here, however, is that at the level of culture and ideology, the neoliberal state continues to *require* nationalism because it needs to maintain and reproduce a national citizenry which identifies itself with the interests of “the nation”.

The central ideological task of nationalism is that of unifying disparate national subjects – often with opposing interests – who are interpellated as members of a single ‘imagined community’.⁴⁹ Often associated with the far-right and separatist political movements, nationalism is in fact a pervasive ideology. Michael Billig coined the term ‘banal nationalism’ to describe the normalised and often unnoticed form of nationalism that underpins the whole nation-state system – an ideology that is so powerful and so taken-for-granted that it often

⁴⁴ On the emergence of nationalism alongside the modern nation state see B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983; and E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁴⁵ T.L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty First Century*, London, Allen Lane, 2005.

⁴⁶ Harmes, ‘Neoliberal Nationalism’, p. 61.

⁴⁷ Davidson, ‘Nationalism and Neoliberalism’, p. 38.

⁴⁸ A recent illustrative example being Trump’s appointment of a former coal industry lobbyist as the new head of the US Environmental Protection Agency. E. Holden, ‘Andrew Wheeler: Trump’s EPA pick says climate change ‘not the greatest crisis’’, *The Guardian*, 16/01/19, accessed 7/03/19, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/16/andrew-wheeler-climate-change-trump-epa-hearings>>

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

goes unnoticed, as if the division of the world into nation-states were somehow entirely natural.⁵⁰ While nationalist language may come to the fore during times of crisis, nation-states are not created by crises but must be reproduced *as nations* on a daily basis.⁵¹ Nations and national subjects are constructed and reproduced through a complex web of practices, beliefs, representations and ideological habits. While everyday nationalism may be banal, Billig stresses, it is neither benign nor innocent. As well as structuring the social and cultural dynamics of exclusion and vilification, it produces forces that can be quickly and effectively mobilised in moments of crisis and times of war.⁵²

Structured around a simple binary “us” and/versus “them” understanding of the world, nationalism relies upon constructing enemies within and without, providing a reservoir of emotion and commitment which can be called upon in a wide variety of circumstances: from the apparently harmless competitive rivalry of international sports tournaments, to the call to bear arms in defence of the nation. Nationalism, in this everyday sense, continues to fulfil a crucial ideological role which is and will remain indispensable so long as the nation-state system persists. Billig’s argument remains persuasive. That said, much has changed since his book was written in 1995; specifically, for the purposes of my argument, the rise of neoliberal nationalism, on the one hand, and the growth of avowed and often vitriolic nationalism in a range of different national contexts across the globe, on the other. In the last decade or so, nationalism has shifted centre stage even as it continues to be underpinned by the normalised and banal assumptions and habits described by Billig.

So, if Davidson, Harmes and Billig are correct to suggest that capitalism and the nation-state system require nationalism, how should we understand the nature of nationalism in the contemporary conjuncture – not least in terms of the intersection between neoliberal nationalism and the virulent, right-wing nationalism currently being deployed by demagogues around the world. Harmes offers an answer, suggesting that neoliberal nationalism is distinct from populist and neoconservative forms of nationalism. In this context, then, neoliberal nationalism appears to be primarily motivated by economic self-interest rather than mythical notions of belonging, ethno-nationalism and national rebirth. But while there maybe good reasons to consider these forms as analytically distinct, the current conjuncture and the rise of the like of Trump and Bolsanaro suggests that these forms of nationalism are increasingly overlapping as economic survival and renewal becomes (at least rhetorically) intertwined with xenophobic arguments for the protection of the “homeland” from those constructed as “outsiders” and “enemies of the people”. How are we to understand this overlapping of apparently distinct ideological formulations?

⁵⁰ M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage, 1995, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6–7.

Wendy Brown argues that the rise of the far-right as a political force in the USA is best understood as an *unintended consequence* of neoliberal economic policies.⁵³ Analysing neoliberalism as a ‘political rationality’, her work explores the logic, direction and momentum of this rationality, as well as the aporias it generates. Within this framework, the recent rise of a virulent form of nationalism in the USA is inexplicable within the logic of neoliberalism even while its consequences – in terms of both the impact of economic policies and the stripping out of the political that she argues is central to its constructivist project – may have laid open the way for it. According to this view, the dark energies of rage and resentment that helped propel Trump into power emanate from the feelings of loss – in particular the sense of a loss of entitlement and supremacy among some white voters – generated by four decades of neoliberal globalisation. In brief, her analysis frames the rise of virulent nationalism in the USA as a product of this (largely imagined, she argues) sense of loss, wounded pride, rage and resentment.⁵⁴ Pathological, nihilistic and monstrous, for Brown the rise of far-right nationalism is primarily a response to the economic consequences of neoliberal policies. In contrast, I want to argue that the rise of virulent, xenophobic nationalism in a range of different contexts stems, in part at least, from, and only makes sense in relation to, neoliberalism’s own social darwinist logic.

Neoliberal nationalism does not simply consist in the “rational” pursuit of national economic self-interest. It is in fact underpinned by a particular understanding of what humans are and how we ought to live. Founded upon competitive individualism, neoliberalism conceives of social life as a battle for survival and supremacy. The neoliberal subject is constructed as a self-creating, self-serving, entrepreneurial and competitive individual who sinks or swims by their own light and bears full responsibility for the consequences of their own actions and choices.⁵⁵ Those who fail to “succeed” are condemned as lazy, feckless, inept or even malevolent. Like all forms of nationalism, neoliberal nationalism constructs both internal and external enemies and it does so along precisely these lines. Positioning the nation as a competitor in a global struggle for survival and supremacy, neoliberal nationalism understands the nation-state as a competitive economic unit. As part of this larger unit, each individual is enjoined to “do their bit”, to make the right choices and sacrifices not only for themselves, but for the greater good. This conception of the nation-as-competitor is directly linked to the manner in which internal enemies are

⁵³ W. Brown, ‘Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century “Democracies”’, *Critical Times*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵⁵ I here draw on the work of Brown, ‘Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy’; M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2009; and H.A. Giroux, ‘Beyond the Biopolitics of Disposability: Rethinking Neoliberalism in the New Gilded Age’, *Social Identities*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2008.

constructed. The ideal neoliberal subject contributes to the health and wealth of the nation by pursuing their own economic interests, which of course marry with those of the nation. In contrast, the poor, immigrants, the disabled, minorities, the unemployed, single parents and the criminalised are abjected as drains on the nation's collective resources and morale and marginalised, disciplined and vilified accordingly.⁵⁶ An essential component of what Henry Giroux describes as the 'winner-take-all survivalist ethic' of neoliberalism, this politics of abjection is demonstrative of the social darwinist "logic" which lies at the core of neoliberalism and underpins its faith in competition.⁵⁷

As well as constructing the nation-as-competitor – within the context of growing inequality, declining living conditions and the stripping out of welfare provision – the nation is also figured as a vulnerable homeland under threat from "invasion" by immigrants who are abjected as non-productive, parasitic and often criminal. As Brown argues, the nation is thus figured as both 'a competitive business needing to make good deals and attract investors' and at the same time as 'an inadequately secured home, besieged by ill-willed or non-belonging outsiders'.⁵⁸ The combination of nation-as-competitor *and* as insecure homeland is not specific to the USA, but appears as a common feature of nationalist discourse in neoliberal societies where the blame for the woes of the nation and the shortcomings of the capitalist system are projected on those constructed as enemies. Here we see the contradictory and yet, I want to argue, necessary intersection of neoliberal nationalism and the vitriolic nationalism of the demagogue. Neoliberalism's social darwinist logic of competition requires the production of "winners" and "losers". Neoliberal subjects are enjoined to work hard and smart to better their lot, while in reality few will "make it" in a system that produces inequality not as an unintended consequence, but as a matter of principle. The resulting forms of discontent and resentment are exploited and channelled by the neoliberal demagogue who projects the blame for the "failings" (in reality, of course, the success) of the system on those constructed as "outsiders" and "enemies of the people". Bolsonaro's particular combination of Pinochet-style authoritarian neoliberalism and virulent racist and xenophobic nationalism – he describes indigenous people as 'parasites' and refugees as 'the scum of humanity' – is an obvious case in point.⁵⁹ Or think

⁵⁶ See for example Giroux, 'Biopolitics of Disposability', in the USA context. Also see Tyler on social abjection in neoliberal Britain: I. Tyler, *Revolted Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London, Zed Books, 2013.

⁵⁷ Giroux, 'Biopolitics of Disposability', p. 591. The specifically national and nationalist framing of this ethic appears to have received little attention. Tyler is a notable exception here, *ibid*.

⁵⁸ Brown, 'Neoliberalism's Frankenstein', p. 67.

⁵⁹ Finchelstein, 'Jair Bolsonaro's Model'; A. Schipani and J. Leahy, 'Brazil's new finance minister eyes 'Pinochet style' fix for economy', *Financial Times*, 2/11/18, accessed 28/01/19, <<https://www.ft.com/content/1a2ba4f4-de4e-11e8-9f04-38d397e6661c>>; and W. Hoenderaal, 'Bolsonaro's Brazil: Chicago Boy-Style Neoliberalism', *CounterPunch*, accessed 28/01/19, <<https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/12/26/bolsonaros-brazil-chicago-boy-style-neoliberalism/>>.

of Duterte's particular, arguably fascist, but nonetheless neoliberal, brand of far-right demagoguery which, alongside taking aim at the norms and institutions of liberal democracy, not only constructs drug users and dealers as the primary enemies of the people, but subjects those alleged to be involved in the trade to extrajudicial killings.⁶⁰ Likewise, in Hungary Orbán has made political capital out of the recent refugee crisis, targeting and branding as a dangerous threat both those fleeing persecution – whom he describes as 'Muslim invaders' – and those (charity workers, activists, lawyers, neighbouring countries and international institutions) attempting to assist them.⁶¹

If neoliberal hegemony is in crisis, as Fraser argues, the structural task of the right-wing neoliberal demagogue appears to be that of maintaining the neoliberal status quo while plastering over some of its many contradictions.⁶² Neoliberal nationalism is essential to this project; but, as I have argued, this reactionary ideological project is not a recent invention. While it may contradict aspects of neoliberal orthodoxy, it has a long history as well as an important ideological role and, crucially, it reflects and reproduces neoliberalism's philosophical commitment to competition as constitutive of the human condition. Against the notion that neoliberalism is antithetical to nationalism, nationalism remains, as it has always been, an essential ideological linchpin of capitalism: as Adorno argued in the wake of World War II, nationalism remains both 'obsolete and up-to-date'.⁶³ Obsolete in so far as the substance of the nation – national sovereignty – has been forfeited and yet

up-to-date in so far as the traditional and psychologically supremely invested idea of nation, which still expresses the community of interests within the international national economy, alone has sufficient force to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for goals they cannot immediately identify as their own.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bello, 'Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original'.

⁶¹ Quote from H. Agerholm, 'Refugees are 'Muslim invaders' not running for their lives, says Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán', *Independent*, 9/01/18, accessed 30/11/18, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugees-muslim-invaders-hungary-viktor-orban-racism-islamophobia-eu-a8149251.html>>; also see S. Walker, 'No entry: Hungary's crackdown on helping refugees', *The Guardian*, 4/06/18, accessed 8/12/18, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/04/no-entry-hungarys-crackdown-on-helping-refugees>>.

⁶² Fraser, 'Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump'.

⁶³ T.W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past' (1959), in T.W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, H.W. Pickford trans., New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 97.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97–98.

Part 3: The Neoliberal Demagogue

*Delusion mania is the substitute for the dream that humanity would organize the world humanely, a dream the actual world of humanity is resolutely eradicating.*⁶⁵

It is essential that we recognise that the recent ascendancy of right-wing demagogy in a range of distinct national contexts cannot be dismissed merely as a monstrous product of imagined loss and nihilistic resentment.⁶⁶ The virulent nationalism which is being stoked and channelled by these contemporary demagogues is not a peculiar pathology of neoliberalism. It has its structural roots in the crisis-prone nature of capitalism and the insecurities it generates and Adorno's warning about the structural causes of fascism and the dangers of nationalism still stands.⁶⁷ The 'delusional mania' referred to in the epigraph above is that of nationalism as a mobilising force which in times of crisis, and when it ceases to be reined in by the liberal guarantee of the rights of the individual, becomes 'sadistic and destructive'.⁶⁸ That said, it is not enough simply to say "It's capitalism, stupid". If the phenomenon of right-wing demagogy – in all its forms, whether populist, proto-fascist or actually fascist – is to be properly understood and defeated, it is essential that we get to grips with how and why it is emerging at this time and in the particular forms it is now taking. Among many other things, it is crucial to note that this political and intellectual project requires cross-disciplinary research into the relationship between contemporary global neoliberal capitalism and the various forms of today's ascending right-wing demagogy and outright fascism.

In a world where people not only feel but know themselves to be insecure, the fear and discomfort generated by growing inequality and precarity under neoliberal capitalism provides a real basis for the kinds of discontent that can be marshalled and mobilised by the demagogue. If capitalism has always required us to put faith in the authority of the workings of market mechanisms and processes which we struggle fully to grasp, under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism this faith in the unknown is exacted at great cost. In conditions of increasing inequality, growing precarity and real suffering, neoliberal capitalism renders us objects of processes over which we have no control and which we cannot fully comprehend. Liberal and modernising discourses of progress, on the one hand, and militant discourses of revolutionary transformation, on the other, may once have provided hope for the future and individual and collective psychic compensation for suffering in the present. Today, the declining

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 98.

⁶⁶ Brown, 'Neoliberalism's Frankenstein'.

⁶⁷ Adorno, 'Working Through the Past'.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 98.

legitimacy and persuasiveness of metanarratives of progress, the end of the Cold War and the growing hegemony of neoliberalism have been taken to mean that “there is no alternative” to global neoliberal capitalism.⁶⁹

The neoliberal demagogue operates on this terrain of lost historical and political agency, a terrain of fear, insecurity and hopelessness. Manifest in different ways in different national contexts, the generation and channelling of nationalist hatred toward those constructed as enemies – internal and external – is the essential core and mobilising force of contemporary right-wing demagogy. But the neoliberal demagogues offer no way out of the declining life prospects of the vast majority of the people they claim to represent. Their structural role is precisely that of holding the neoliberal status quo in place despite, and while plastering over, its manifold contradictions. Capitalising on the fall-out of economic crisis and a crisis of legitimacy, and offering simple answers to complex questions, the ascendant demagogy performs the old trick of projecting blame on those rendered “enemies”. Mobilising hatred, it likewise relies upon ignorance. The demagogue has very little to say about the real causes of human suffering under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism which are mystified and personified as the product of the maleficence of those constructed as “enemies of the people”. At the same time, in line with Hayek’s vision of a spontaneous social order that can be neither planned nor understood, “the market” is treated as though it were a force of nature, rendered sublime: at once incomprehensible and beyond question.

Capitalism has always operated at the limits of our capacity to fully comprehend it. As I argued in Part 1, rendering capitalist social relations visible and comprehensible is a necessary prerequisite to radical social transformation. Jameson proposes the development of an aesthetics of cognitive mapping as the means by which we might begin to understand and orientate ourselves in relation to the perplexing, awe inspiring complexity that is the social totality of contemporary global capitalism and move beyond the impasse of awestruck passivity he named ‘the postmodern sublime’.⁷⁰ The neoliberal demagogue represents an opposing move. Aligned with neoliberalism’s desire to obscure and naturalise social relations in the interests of maintaining the status quo, mystifying rather than revealing, the demagogue champions ignorance as “common sense” and “gut-feeling”.⁷¹ The hard work required to find orientation in an ever-changing world is short-circuited through recourse to nationalist belonging – which remains at once obsolete and up-to-date; and as powerful

⁶⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

⁷⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 44–51.

⁷¹ For an analysis of the long history of the politics of what she describes as “true feeling” in the USA see L. Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics’, in A. Sarat and T.R. Kearns (eds.) *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 49–84.

and dangerous as ever. Reading the recent rise of the demagogue and neoliberal nationalism in relation to the sublime core of neoliberalism's epistemological scepticism suggests that the question of how we understand and act in the world remains a political and an aesthetic one. If we are to move beyond throwing our hands up at the horror of the contemporary moment, we will need collectively to develop both our understanding of the world in which we live and, on the basis of this, our political agency to transform it.

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