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Threats of Neoliberalism to Western Democracies and the Efficacy of Neoliberal Critiques

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Introduction

A neoliberal market-based governance system has engulfed Western democratic societies. Since it surfaced in the 1980s, neoliberalism remained the dominant governing system. The pervasive neoliberal governance logic has become deeply entrenched in our society in ways that make it less democratic. In this essay, I argue that neoliberalism is taking over Western democracy in a way that drifts democratic political discourse, contributes to the erosion of democratic values, and makes society and the market more fragile economically and politically. I also argue that although the effectiveness of neoliberal critiques is unclear, they effectively contribute to challenging neoliberalism. I will elaborate on my argument in four sections. In the first section, I will define neoliberalism and outline its emergence as an economic and socio-political governing strategy. In the second section, I will assess the extent of neoliberalism taking over contemporary governance practices and how that makes them less democratic. In the third section, I will assess the critics' diagnosis of the drift in democratic political discourse. Finally, In the fourth section, I will assess the efficacy of the critiques of neoliberalism in bringing a counter-transformation to the rising tide of neoliberal thinking.

The emergence of Neoliberalism as an Economic and Scio-political Governing Strategy

In this section, I will draw upon relevant sources to define neoliberalism, describe its tenets, and trace the emergence of neoliberalism. I will divide the different approaches to defining neoliberalism into two main schools of thought: A (an individual and entrepreneurial *individualist ontology* of governance) and B (an alternative market and competition-based *structural ontology* of governance). In the first school of thought A, David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as: "Neoliberalism is, in the first instance, a theory of political, economic practices that proposes that liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills can best advance human well-being within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade... for their benefit (as cited in Thorsen, 2010, p.12)." Neoliberalism focuses on individual responsibilities and shapes the market and state structure to foster individual entrepreneurship. This definition explains how social structures reformed under neoliberalism center around entrepreneurialism. Clark (2016) defines neoliberalism as the "retaliatory variant of capitalism, prioritizing marketization, individual responsibilities (p.135)." His definition helps us understand how individual responsibility frames neoliberal approaches in governance practices—these authors' definitions explicate neoliberal governance's individualist ontology.

Among authors who focus on the second aspect, school B, Wilhelm Röpke defines neoliberalism as "a top-down, state-supported discourse, one where competition replaces laissez-faire, and which constitutes the context, or foundation, through which democratic will formation should take root (as cited in Mark Olssen, 2018)." Röpke's definition significantly contributes to understanding the neoliberal rationality of market competition and market logic in societal reform. Bob Jessop interprets neoliberalism as "a distinctive economic, political, and social project that promotes profit-oriented, market-mediated accumulation as the primary axis of societal organization." Jessop contributes to understanding how neoliberalism seeks to promote market ideals in managing socio-political spheres of citizens' lives. However, these authors' definitions largely address the competition-based *structural ontology* of neoliberal governance.

As neoliberalism is an ever-expanding socio-economic and political strategy that cuts across many domains of citizens' public and private life, a comprehensive definition of neoliberalism is helpful to capture the whole gamut of neoliberal governing logic. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, I define neoliberalism as a "state-led market-centric socio-political-economic strategy that seeks to manage the marketplace and governance system through the enforcement of entrepreneurialism and competition in every aspect of public and private sectors." For a comprehensive understanding of neoliberal governance practices, it is imperative to learn about the tenets of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism operationalizes its basic tenets as governing logic by infusing the enterprise model into all behavior, and its basic tenets are entrepreneurialism, free market via privatization and deregulation, and decentralization (Thorsen, 2010, p. 200). Neoliberalism promotes entrepreneurialism and competition and restructures public sectors and markets accordingly. Entrepreneurialism refers to an entrepreneur self, a self-governing, performance-oriented, free-will citizen capable of participating in market competition and emphasizing self-interest rather than mutual interest (Olssen, 2018). Neoliberal governing logic emphasizes developing individual citizens as economically minded, making each citizen a self-reliant entity using their human capital that will be less reliant on the state and, therefore, reduce the burden of responsibility from the state (Olssen, 2018). Individual citizens are viewed as sources of capital, not only as factors of production (Schram, 2018). According to Foucault (2008), neoliberalism seeks to replace an individual of exchange and consumption with an individual of enterprise and production (p.147, as cited in Olssen, 2018). Hayek preached individual responsabilization, a cornerstone of neoliberal governance practice, which means that social institutions must be structured in ways capable of disciplining subordinate populations as economically compliant (Hayek, 1960, as cited in Olssen, 2018).

In neoliberal thinking, competition and competitiveness are considered primary and fundamental virtues for society (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Davies, 2018; Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism uses state mechanisms to promote competition and competitive dynamics in social spaces resistant to entrepreneurial values and ethos (Dardot and Laval, 2014, as cited in Davies, 2018). While discussing neoliberalism, Foucault indicates "a shift from exchange to competition in the principle of the market" (Foucault, 2008, p.118, as cited in Olssen, 2018). He also claims that competition can ensure economic rationality and regulation of individual choices through price formation (Foucault, 2008, p.119, as cited in Olssen, 2018). However, it is important to investigate why such a shift became necessary in neoliberalism.

Prior to explaining how neoliberalism is taking over the Western democratic governance system, it is important to examine how neoliberalism surfaced and survived. Neoliberalism surfaced sometime between the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response opposed to welfare states (Foucault 2008 as cited in Olssen, 2018). Clark (2016) also confirms that neoliberalism emerged as a retaliatory variant of capitalism as opposed to a laissez-faire economy. Neoliberalism successfully established an efficient image and gained momentum because of tangible changes and economic gains through neoliberal reforms backed by the state. For instance, pothole hotlines were intended to shift governance from a state-led to a citizen-led response mechanism. People were satisfied when they could call a telephone number for public service issues and see immediate results. More so, neoliberalism through privatization created many new institutions,

added new jobs, and inspired citizens to maximize their human capital. All these apparently attractive merits of neoliberalism appear lucrative to mass people. Neoliberalism as a market-based governing strategy became dominant as strong economic and conservative political forces worked behind the campaign for neoliberalism (Clark, 2016).

Neoliberal Takeover of Democratic Governance System

In this section, I argue that while there is a superficial agreement between neoliberalism and democratic values at a deeper level, the two are in conflict. In contemporary governance practices, we can see the neoliberal takeover in most sectors of the American public and private spheres. The neoliberal takeover of Western democracy adversely impacts our society by weakening accountability and representation, promoting corporate monopoly, constricting individual freedom, and shrinking the space for democratic participation. It also makes the economy and society politically and economically fragile.

Neoliberal Concept of Governance System Reform

Neoliberalism uses the state to create an overarching structure to sustain economic turmoil in the competitive market (Gerber, 1994, as cited in Davies, 2018). The reasons for neoliberal governing logic are primarily political and sociological, which recognizes that market and individual economic liberty require actively instituting and defending (Gane, 2014, as cited in Davies, 2018). Therefore, neoliberalism considers the state the principal instrument for advancing the neoliberal agenda. According to Davies (2018), “neoliberalism buttresses the market using the state’s power and seeks to transform the state using insights from the market.” Neoliberalism preaches economic rationality as fundamental not just for the market but also for civil society and the state. Neoliberal governing logic uses state authority in contemporary governance practices mainly in two ways; first, it creates conditions favorable for transforming the individual citizen into an entrepreneur self and preparing accordingly for ideal positioning in the market competition (Foucault, 2008: 226; Binkley, 2014 as cited in Davies, 2018). Second, public institutions are restructured to support entrepreneurialism by infusing competition in the public sectors to reduce the state monopoly through outsourcing and privatization (Cerny, 1990, as cited in Davies, 2018).

While promoting entrepreneurialism, neoliberalism seeks to discipline organizations to be held accountable for disciplining their clients in a market environment, ensuring that individual citizens act responsibly. Paternalistic policy tools like financial penalties often accompany neoliberal organizational reform to promote entrepreneurship through privatization, deregulation, and performance management to motivate citizens to act rationally (Schram, 2018). According to Schram (2018), neoliberal governmentality is founded on the idea that all societal, public and private, as well as the state and the market, should be viewed as a venue for developing and investing one’s human capital to operate as a social actor conforming with market logic. Accordingly, neoliberal reform restructured societal, economic, and political sectors.

Neoliberal governing logic infuses competition through restructuring public sectors. Neoliberalism uses the state as a guarantor and regulator of economic competition via the provision and enforcement of anti-trust laws (Davies, 2018). To implement competitiveness in the market, neoliberalism omitted the distinctions of several sectors that have the potential for converting to the marketplace (Davies, 2018). The first thing neoliberalism blurs is the

distinction between the political and the economic (Olssen, 2018). The same ideology applied to dissolve the boundary between public and private domains. Very systematically, neoliberalism transformed the public service domain so that maximum participants can participate in the public service domain and competition can be infused. Thus, the quality of public service improves.

Neo-liberal advocates criticized traditional public administration and its alleged lack of accountability and responsiveness to citizens. They viewed the state monopoly and bureaucracy in the public sector as impediments to efficient public service delivery and counterproductive for the market. Therefore, they conceptualized neoliberal reform to fix all these problems and manage the unpredictable market in a disciplined and predictable way using state power. While explaining the vision of neoliberal thinkers, Davies (2018) states that “neoliberal thinkers have always argued for a more realistic, state-led market agenda, which is attuned to the dependence of economic liberalism on competition law, property rights, a culture of enterprise, a strong police force, strict monetary policies, and so on.” Neoliberal thinkers also wanted to walk away from large expenditures on welfare sectors and make people more responsible and economically rational. They argued that welfare spending was failing recipients by making them dependent on the state rather than independent.

Neoliberal Takeover Through the Reform of the Governance System

Neoliberalism promotes the ‘responsibilization’ for each entrepreneur self. Neoliberalism approaches welfare policy through the lens of individual responsibility and market logic. Myles (1996) argues that neoliberalism replaces state-operated social benefits with market-based income security and social benefit programs run by private companies. In this regard, Bill Clinton’s Welfare program 1994 can be mentioned. The program was built on the principle of personal responsibility (Carcasson, 2006). This bill ended federal control over the program and changed cash assistance's financing and benefit structure. The funding system was changed from open-ended to federal block grants to the state, along with the requirement for the state to match federal contributions (Carcasson, 2006). This bill also provided space for the participation of private organizations. This program also added work requirements, significantly reducing the number of eligible adults who qualify for the program (Carcasson, 2006). Thus, neoliberalism forces people to act responsibly but does not account for social inequality that hampers individuals’ growth and skills.

Neoliberalism massively overhauled public organizations to create an appropriate market environment to foster competition. It introduced new public management (NPM) to remodel state bureaucracy and achieve greater efficiency and productivity in organizational performance using target setting and audit (Hood, 1995, as cited in Schram, 2018). Osborne (2006) argues that NPM focuses on entrepreneurial leadership within public service organizations, input and output control, evaluation, performance management, and audit. NPM relies on the growth of markets, competition, and contracts for resource allocation and service delivery within public services (Osborne, 2006). Olssen (2018) also argues that to promote competition, neoliberal governing logic reconfigures public institutions by contracting private institutions for public service delivery, infusing enhanced competition among the units within the public sector, assigning all conflicting responsibilities to separate new institutions, delineating commercial and non-commercial functions of the state, separating the advisory, regulatory and delivery functions into different agencies, and introducing various means of oversight and monitoring mechanism to

avert chances of corruption. However, these organizations provide services to citizens but are not accountable to public representatives; they are overseen by private regulators and auditors (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Neoliberalism adopted the “Hollow State” concept to diminish the monopoly of state authority in public services. The “Hollow State” concept is based on increasing reliance on third-party entities that work in the state’s name, and performance is judged by the degree of separation between the government and the services it funds (Milward & Provan, 2000, p. 362). It provides flexibility, but loosely set terms and conditions bind third-party organizations, thus weakening accountability and creating complexity in coordination. The surges of the new institutions in the public sector make it hard for citizens to ascertain whom they should hold accountable for failure (Milward & Provan, 2000). In this hollowing-out process, instead of public agencies, responsibility shifted to private contractors who provide services to citizens, and the state introduced regulators to oversee the performance and compliance of private companies (Milward & Provan, 2000, p. 363). Though transparency and responsiveness are viewed as accountability, citizens have no scope to hold the government accountable. For example, Arizona has 2/3 layers of funding arrangements before service is provided.

The neoliberal governance system introduced a performance management accountability scheme to measure the performance of private organizations that were introduced for public service delivery. These performance management schemes pressure organizations to outperform other organizations and thus enter the competition. It encourages goal-seeking behavior but ignores more socio-cultural aspects of public organizations. Neoliberal governance logic predicts that local organizations will participate in the competition through innovation and improvement in public service delivery and thus achieve the desired efficiency and productivity (Osborne, 2006). However, it is hard to determine the desired outcome of performance management in an extensive network of organizations. Neoliberal public sector reform intends to achieve accountability through ideas linked to individual incentives (rewards and punishment) and periodic monitoring and audits (Olssen, 2018).

The patronization of corporate organizations by neoliberalism and its market-based logic caused a problematic effect on Western democracy. As neoliberalism blurs the distinction between the political and economic realms, it allows market capital to dominate the electoral process. Therefore, lobbyists work to enact market-friendly policies for those who dominate the market, not policies that reflect citizens’ preferences (Brown, 2015). Lobbyist influence further promotes corporate monopoly. Hall and Deardorff (2006) also note that corporate lobbyists substantially influence elected officials by providing the resources for their electoral campaigns to influence policy outcomes in their favor. Brown (2015) states that “neoliberalism is more about the state than the market.” Neoliberalism seeks to change politics in line with market ideals so that wealth can dominate the electoral process and lobbyists can draft laws and rewrite public policies in a more market-friendly way (Brown, 2015).

Problematic Drift in Democratic Political Discourse

In this section, I argue that market-based neoliberal dominant economic and political logic has caused a problematic drift in democratic political discourse by turning progressive politics forces less progressive. As neoliberalism emerged as the savior of the economic crisis following the

collapse of laissez-faire and Keynesianism (Clark, 2016), the responses of progressive political groups should be a good starting point to diagnose the drift in democratic political discourse. According to Coates (2018), progressive groups responded in three ways to the neoliberal rise, ultimately shaping the present center-left politics. The three approaches were: (1) reverse the emerging neoliberal political dominance by pursuing its exact opposite – either revitalized Keynesian corporatism or some supply-side socialism, (2) accommodate the political dominance of neoliberal governments by absorbing the central assertions of their paradigm into progressive politics while seeking to soften the edges of the policies associated with it, (3) seek a new and coherent alternative to the austerity politics to which neoliberalism gave rise in the wake of the 2008 financial crash (Coates, 2018). According to Coates (2018), the first two approaches are over, and the third is yet to start. These approaches inform us that in the face of dominant neoliberal movements and the absence of credible alternatives, progressive politicians embraced the strategy of bearing neoliberal costs.

With the failure of the first approach in the 1980s and electoral defeats, progressive political groups took a radically different approach. The new generation of social democratic politicians fully embraced neoliberalism instead of rejecting it. Even they started pursuing and eventually delivering better neoliberal packages than conservatives. The motivation of progressive politicians is consistent with Mayhew's (2004) argument. Mayhew argues that politicians are primarily motivated by getting re-elected; most Congresspeople are single-minded re-election seekers (p.17). The enactment of the Clinton welfare reform bill by Democrats in 1994 bears testimony to a major shift in the center-left progressive political camp (Coates, 2018). The success of this new generation of Democrats significantly shaped the attitude of progressive politicians toward neoliberalism. This attitude change prompted them to deregulate the US finance industry, accept the growing income inequality, and limit their progressive manifesto. This critical shift convinced more new progressive politicians to follow this path of embracing the neoliberal ethos. Some examples of progressive policy agenda after accommodation with neoliberalism are (1) public institutions and policies to strengthen economic competitiveness, (2) lower corporate and personal taxation to encourage innovation, enterprise, and job creation, (3) a thinning of the welfare net to avoid welfare dependency and strengthen the incentive to work (Coates, 2018). However, some segments of progressive politicians continued to make efforts to minimize the curse of neoliberalism.

In 2015, the Commission on Inclusive Prosperity report, chaired by Lawrence Summers and Ed Balls, generated new enthusiasm among progressive politicians (Coates, 2018). They set their goal to create a generation of economic growth and greater international competitiveness through federal spending on modernizing the US economy's physical infrastructure. Some progressive politicians voiced progressive taxation and strategies for lowering income inequality (Coates, 2018). However, many of these agendas still bear neoliberal values and are far from implementation. From the Analysis of the development of progressive political groups, it is evident that neoliberalism has adversely impacted progressive political traditions and ideology. Progressive thoughts are now more occupied with neoliberal ethos than before. The danger of such a phenomenon is the inability to create an alternative political vision or even the urge to create such a vision based on purely progressive ideology.

Coates (2018) argues that hope for retaliation by progressive groups is bleak because neoliberal dominance has become entrenched so deeply in every sphere of our society, even in the progressive camp, that it will require a huge commitment from a new generation of progressive politicians. As we learned, most political elites are re-election seekers and single-minded (maybe not everyone). They will likely go along the tide of neoliberal dominance instead of resisting it. It is important to identify what motivation or incentive new progressive politicians may have to retaliate against neoliberal dominance and how they will tackle the consequence of a major overhaul of the democratic governance system and the market.

Efficacy of the Critiques of Neoliberalism

In this section, I argue that critiques of neoliberalism are quite helpful in bringing about a counter-transformation capable of stemming the rising tide of neoliberal thinking. I also argue that though not much tangible counter-transformation of neoliberal thinking has taken place, they successfully indicate neoliberalism's fragility and vulnerability and expose the spaces for resistance and changes by creating socio-political nudges. I want to measure their efficacy through the lens of policy change processes.

According to Sunstein (2019), policy change is the culmination of information processing and choice structures. This definition signifies the importance of information availability and structure for making choices or decisions. Public policy changes are therefore bounded by actors' ability to access information and process that information as a decision using a choice structure. Sunstein (2019) also believes that nudges are powerful for social change. The first element that is required for a policy change is information. Critiques of neoliberalism provide valuable information about concerns with neoliberalism through their analysis. This information enables citizens to understand the pervasive neoliberal system and its negative consequences on Western democracy. Critiques help citizens to relate their experiences with neoliberal governing, which can make them aware of neoliberal interference in their democratic citizenship.

Critiques of neoliberalism also expose complex issues of neoliberalism, like accountability, representation, structural inequality, etc. Such exposures help citizens to see the spaces where they can resist or act differently if needed. The nudges of critics enable citizens to identify their position within the larger neoliberal structure and system. In this regard, the approach of critical organization studies is instrumental. Critical Organization studies scholars have been trying to raise consciousness in individuals for their emancipation from exploitation and suppression by capitalist society (Agger, 2013). By naming those concerns of neoliberalism, these scholars point out spaces for intervention and help find spaces for resistance (Acker, 1990; Ray, 2019).

The second component for policy change is that actors need a choice structure. Some critiques of neoliberalism have successfully provided choice structures for citizens to act for changes. Recently, we have seen some tangible effects of neoliberal critiques in the form of proposals for public administration reform. The new public service (NPS) introduced by Denhardt et al. (2018) is a clear counter-transformation from neoliberal thinking. NPS is the opposite of NPM's neoliberal project. NPS is based on the idea that democratic principles and values such as citizenship, community, and participation in decision-making are paramount (Denhardt et al., 2018). The principles of NPS are: (1) serve rather than steer; (2) the public interest is the aim, not the by-product; (3) think strategically and act democratically; (4) serve citizens, not customers,

(5) accountability is not simple, (6) value people, not just productivity, and finally, (7) value citizenship and public service above entrepreneurship. Analyzing these principles, it is encouraging that they constitute a significant shift from neoliberal thinking.

Some complex issues of neoliberalism are hard for most people to understand, which critiques of neoliberalism can explain. For example, Neoliberalism views the state as an agent of reform and the object of critique, which creates profound dilemmas: Which part of the state will make reform, and which part of the state will be the objective of reform? Is it the same state power that will make reform that are viewed inefficient by neoliberalism (Davies, 2018)? or the cost of reverting from neoliberal reforms if neoliberalism collapses. Neoliberal critiques bring these issues to light and make citizens aware, which are primary steps for change.

Conclusion

The advent of artificial intelligence-based governing systems is a new era of algorithmic governance systems, which has expanded rapidly. This is a turning point in deciding whether to keep moving with an economically and politically fragile and vulnerable neoliberal governance system or to carry out major reforms for an efficient and democratically sustainable governing system that can sustain economic upheavals, pandemics, and natural disasters. Neoliberal ideas significantly captured both conservative and progressive political camps. Therefore, reaching a political consensus for minimizing neoliberal dominance will be challenging. However, we are still assessing the success of the neoliberal governing system during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It would be a rich topic for studying the success of neoliberalism in the face of natural disasters, pandemics, and economic crises, which may dictate the future of neoliberalism.

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