

Damn neo-liberalism

by Damien Larrouqué

Is neoliberalism essentially martial in nature? To show that it is, is the aim of a book co-written by four authors on both the historical experience of neo-liberalism and analysis of what are considered to be its founding texts. Though stimulating, the argument is not always convincing.

On: Pierre Dardot, Haud Guéguen, Christian Laval, Pierre Sauvêtre, *Le choix de la guerre civile: une autre histoire du néolibéralisme*, Montréal, Lux, 2021, 328 pages, €20.

Starting in mid-October 2019, Chile was the scene of a political and social upheaval of an intensity unprecedented in the country's history¹. This popular uprising and the violent repression that followed it form the point of departure for the reflections of Pierre Dardot and his colleagues on the martial nature of neoliberalism. The volume's core thesis could be summed up finally by a graffiti at the exit of Santiago's Bellas Artes metro station in October 2019, which read: "Neoliberalism is killing us".

The pernicious nature of the neoliberal model, which Pinochet's Chile pioneered on the international level (chapter 1), does not only lie in the harmful consequences of the policies it justifies. Of course, the privatisation of public services, the commodification of universal goods (health, education, water), the imposition of funded pensions, and the deregulation of the labour market are damaging by

¹ For more information on the "Chilean Awakening", see the dossier I had the pleasure of preparing for *IdeAs: Idées d'Amérique* (n°15, March 2020) [<https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/7372>].

definition, to the extent that they deprive citizens of their most fundamental rights, shatter any idea of solidarity and plunge society as a whole, and in particular the most vulnerable classes, into uncertainty about the future. But, more fundamentally, if “neoliberalism is killing us”, it is because it was conceived for this purpose or, more precisely, because it stems from a will to dominate by way of civil war which is consubstantial with its nature.

Defending a radical thesis, this book-length essay is the fruit of a collective undertaking by the *Groupe d'études sur le néolibéralisme et les alternatives* (GENA), which was created in autumn 2018. Its aim is to grasp, from a transdisciplinary perspective, this new international conjuncture, which is characterised by the electoral victories of candidates who are both pro-market and reactionary, on the one hand, and by the spread of authoritarian and repressive forms of governance, on the other. The volume tries to show the relationship between the coercive practices of the state and a neo-liberal ideology² whose most essential substratum is a belligerent and deadly conception of the world. For the authors, who speak of a “strategy” – and do so, moreover, in the plural (Introduction) – the public authorities have indeed been determined to wage an anti-democratic and anti-social war, for some forty years now and all over the world, in order to bring about a pure market society.

The transmutation of Leviathan

It is to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes that we owe the contractualist theory, according to which individuals chose to put an end to the war of all against all, by accepting to cede part of their freedom to the state in exchange for its protection. Public authority would thus have arisen from consent, as illustrated by the famous frontispiece to *Leviathan* (1651), in which the subjects submit to the authority of the prince and, even better, themselves compose the tunic of his power. On this absolutist vision, it is the responsibility of the state as sovereign authority to ensure institutional order and guarantee civil peace.

² It should be noted that the authors never define what they mean by neoliberalism. In their defence, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval in particular have already devoted a number of volumes to this complex ideology. Neoliberalism is considered here from the point of view of its purpose (to construct a pure market society) and in its broadest variations. The authors mobilize a whole range of theoretical reflections, ranging from authoritarian liberalism and economic constitutionalism, via German *ordo-liberalism*, to American neo-conservatism and Manchester liberalism.

Neoliberal ideology, so to say, turns Hobbesian scripture on its head, making Leviathan the supreme belligerent in a new war of all against all, which now involves excessive individualism, universal competition and predatory exploitation of all resources, whether human (*uberisation*, self-employment, destruction of the wage-earning class), socio-economic (privatisation of profits, but socialisation of losses), legal (circumvention of legislation and tax evasion) or natural (over-exploitation). It was thus under the auspices of this neo-Leviathan that the “neoliberal counter-revolution” (p. 27) got underway on an international scale starting in the late 1970s.

In this sense, despite the common belief that is often attached to it, neoliberal ideology is less an apologia for the free market than a consecration of the figure of the strong state (chapter 3). In the wake of the volume translated and introduced by Grégoire Chamayou³, Pierre Dardot and his colleagues make Carl Schmitt, namely, one of the fathers of authoritarian liberalism and cover the intellectual debt that Hayek, Röpke and also Mises owe him. For the authors, in short, “the general objective of a strong state is above all to prevent politics from having an impact on the operation of the free market” (p. 73). Neoliberalism is thus “necessarily authoritarian in that it attacks precisely any democratic will to regulate the economy” (p. 74). In other words, “the neoliberal state is a *positively* interventionist state” (p. 290). This is what gives rise to the domestication of trade unions, the criminalisation of social protest, and mass incarceration as a modality for replacing the welfare state⁴. In short, neoliberalism is about governing *against the people* (chapter 10), which takes place via a “transformation of opponents and troublemakers into enemies” (p. 232), as illustrated, for example, by the militarisation of police units in Europe or the “militia-isation” of the armed forces (p. 241), like in Brazil. For the authors, these contemporary coercive excesses find their distant justification in the work of the neoliberals: following Ludwig Von Mises, most of the latter have, in effect, pushed the Weberian notion of the monopoly of legitimate physical violence to its convulsive extreme, converting it into a form of “brutalism”, in the sense of “violence consciously used by the state to defend the market order against the democratic demands of society” (p. 96).

³ Carl Schmitt, Hermann Heller, *Du libéralisme autoritaire*, Paris, La Découverte, (translation, introduction and notes by Grégoire Chamayou), 2020.

⁴ See especially the work of Loïc Wacquant and the following article in particular: Loïc, Wacquant “La fabrique de l’État néolibéral: ‘Workfare’, ‘Prisonfare’ and Social Insecurity”, *Civilisations*, vol. 59, n°1, 2010, pp. 151-173.

A fundamentally anti-democratic and reactionary ideology

According to the authors, neoliberalism is characterised by its “demophobia” (chapter 2). This is to say its visceral fear of the masses, the spectre of which Gustave le Bon and especially José Ortega y Gasset were the first to raise. To conjure away the fear they had of democratic logics (uncertain outcome of votes, change in government, replacement of elected representatives), neo-liberals, and Friedrich Hayek in particular, theorised that a certain number of political or macroeconomic issues had to be turned into reserved domains whose management would only be entrusted to experts. Returning to considerations already elaborated upon in a previous study⁵, Pierre Dardot and his colleagues develop the question of market constitutionalism (chapter 4): notably, that on which the European Union is based. In this volume, however, they go further by demonstrating how the state has put law (and in particular private law) at the service of the project of subjecting peoples to the ultra-liberal model (chapter 11).

Moreover, the concept of freedom of neo-liberal thinkers is in fact limited to the economic sphere: i.e., to entrepreneurial freedom and, more generally, to the wide range of economic freedoms offered by the deregulation which they promote and which leads, in legal terms, to the lowest possible wages, tax obligations and environmental standards on offer. It is never about political or social freedom. Not only, as Hayek showed with regard to Pinochet’s Chile, do neoliberals adapt very well to military regimes which brazenly violate human rights, but there is no question of defending individual rights to self-affirmation (feminism, LGBT, etc.). In terms of morals, as demonstrated, notably, by William Röpke’s “sociological hyperconservatism” (pp. 148-154), neoliberals are staunch reactionaries, who are convinced of the superiority of white and patriarchal Western civilisation (chapter 6). Even better, they defend the “war of values” and the division of the people (chapter 8). For the authors, neoliberalism thus produces at the same time both the poison (economic insecurity, social inequality) and “its imaginary antidote” (p. 210) in the form of demagogic, falsely inclusive and resolutely anti-immigrant projects. From this point of view, the “competitive nationalism” (p. 183) of a Trump or a Bolsonaro is only

⁵ Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, *Ce cauchemar qui n'en finit pas: Comment le néolibéralisme défait la démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, pp. 51 ff.

the latest embodiment of an ideology that spawns a profoundly violent conception of politics, law and economics.

Don't aim at the wrong target

Even if its high priests have been incessantly repeating that “there is no alternative” (TINA) since the 1980s, neoliberalism is not inevitable. The authors cite the “Chilean Awakening” as proof. In fact, in the constituent elections of May 2021, Chilean citizens used their votes to designate independent candidates or candidates from civil society as more than half of the 155 members of the future constitutional convention – thus depriving the right-wing coalition of its blocking minority. What is at issue now is laying the constitutional foundations for a new political, social and economic order, which is more horizontal and inclusive in its mode of operation, more progressive in its values, and, above all, displays much more solidarity in its objectives. “The example of Chile makes this clear,” they write, “only popular revolutions, only revolutions led and controlled by citizens, can oppose the civil war strategies of neoliberalism” (p. 313). In the conclusion, the authors thus come out in favour of democratic self-government.

The strength of this study is also the source of its limitations. For if the mastery of the theoretical literature is undeniable, fault can be found with the form of proof. The authors can thus be criticised for proceeding by analogy, since they are not able to demonstrate, apart from a few exceptions⁶, that contemporary political leaders have actually read the texts of the neo-liberal authorities serving as their inspiration. Be that as it may, the authors have the merit, nonetheless, of describing with great rigour a composite mental universe, which tightly frames the horizon of possibilities in macro-economic matters and justifies the use of the entire arsenal of state power (the judicial system, the police, the army) against opponents of this established order.

Apart from this, we can above all regret that the anarcho-Marxist substratum that nourishes their philosophy, making them write:

“Experience should immunise us against any suicidal strategy of trying to turn the adversary's own arms against it. The state is anything but a ‘weapon’ available to

⁶ Margaret Thatcher's bedtime reading was Hayek's *Law, Legislation and Liberty* in three volumes, which Thomas Piketty considers to be “perhaps the clearest statement of triumphant self-conscious proprietorism”, cf. Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 2020, p. 706.

the oppressed. Only a radically non-state politics, understood as a politics of the commons, can help us to escape the empire of the market and the domination of the state” (p. 311).

Now, from our point of view, the state is less an expression of power than an instrument of it. This nuance is of major significance. It means that the state always responds to the purpose assigned to it. If the ontological objective of neo-liberal ideology is war, the state can certainly wage war on its behalf or act materially as its enforcer (police repression). But it can also very well wage a *different* war, against inequalities or tax havens, for example, and thereby fulfil a different role: that of guarantor of social inclusion and justice or of privateer fighting against the multinationals that pillage national wealth and pirate tax legislation by circumventing it⁷.

In many respects, the great victory of the neo-liberals is precisely to have undermined the credibility of public institutions, both de facto (chronic underfunding) and in people’s minds, per the principle according to which the market is necessarily better. Now, we owe it to all those agents (contract workers, civil servants or elected representatives) who cultivate a real sense of public service – and there are some, no matter what their detractors, who all too easily accuse them of corruption or mismanagement, may say – to rehabilitate the state, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries and those of the South, both culturally (starting from civil society) and financially (via taxation), in order to give it the means to fulfil its future ambitions. For the “counter-neoliberal” revolution will undoubtedly be carried out by citizens, but not without the help of public institutions.

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⁷ For more on this topic, see the concluding chapter of Thomas Piketty’s latest book (cf. *Capital and Ideology*, *op. cit.*, chapter 17).