Destabilizing Orders: Understanding the Consequences of Neoliberalism

Introduction

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Throughout the long postwar period, crisis was a conjectural phenomenon and the exception in a normalcy of growth and social progress. From the 1970s on, crises have increasingly been understood as endemic, and as rooted in contemporary forms of a highly globalized and volatile capitalism. Meanwhile, many key concepts of the social sciences – indeed, our understanding of democracy, embedded markets, enlightened electorates, benevolent political elites, and problem-solving progressive alliances – are still rooted in the postwar era and the reshaping of social science that took place after 1945. Today, many key concepts in social science seem inapt for understanding the current societal upheaval. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, we have witnessed the breakdown of majority alliances, the return of populism on a grand scale both in the Western world and globally, and the eruption into chaotic and sometimes violent protest of new patterns of social mobilization. The forces that underpinned the framework of welfare capitalism seem obsolete in the face of financial and political elites who are paradoxically both disconnected from national territory and sometimes in direct alliance with nationalist and populist movements. Politics of resentment, politics of place, and new politics of class interact in ways that we do not yet understand. Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is that neoliberalism has spawned authoritarianism. At the same time, these processes are not at all new, but must be put in the context of the socioeconomic and cultural cleavages produced by the shift to neoliberalism since the 1970s.

Neoliberalism has become a much debated term in the social sciences, yet the concept is still problematic in many ways. It is hard to define neoliberalism as an "-ism" because it has somehow not undone the other -isms that prevailed as its ascendance began, such as Communism or social democracy; rather, it has often merged with these approaches and created hybrid forms of political theory and political economy. It is also hard to describe neoliberalism as a universal project. While there have been, as recent scholarship points out, similar trends in liberalization across industrialized nations over the last three decades, neoliberal tendencies still seem to be strongly rooted in national political cultures and social contracts. Some scholars describe neoliberalism as a system. Going back to the notion of system is in some ways uncomfortable because it brings to mind the systems theories in the social science of the 1970s that can be associated with totalizing, deterministic or functionalist depictions of anonymous and ruthless

capitalism. Yet, at the same time, theories of system have their advantage. They allow us, for instance, to think about similarities across time and space, and they allow us to think about contradictions as well.

That neoliberalism, whatever it is, is something highly contradictory is clear. The authors in this paper point to neoliberalism's contradictions: forms of hyperliberalization coexist with the return of calls for national protection; many of the policy changes in Western economies that aimed at providing opportunities for greater individualization and social mobility resulted in an explosion of social inequalities and new forms of stratification in a remaking of the social world that we are yet to fully understand. The neoliberal world is a world of new actors – a world in which politicians become economists, and corporations producers of ideology. Corporations such as Google or Facebook have created virtual communities that transcend new social divisions, yet their own social visions have hardly been discussed.