



# From neoliberal globalism to neoliberal nationalism: An interview with Quinn Slobodian

Sören Brandes

## Introduction

Quinn Slobodian is an Associate Professor of History at Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Trained as a historian of Germany, Slobodian has published two books about the legacies of race and Third World politics in Cold War West and East Germany. His recent book *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism*, published by Harvard University Press in 2018, explores a different direction, tracing the intellectual history of neoliberalism as a history of thinking about global order – and of attempts to institute a neoliberal globalization with the help of international organizations.

Slobodian follows the emergence of what he calls the ‘Geneva School’ of neoliberalism from Vienna at the end of the Habsburg Empire through the formation of an intellectual network of neoliberal ‘globalists’ in 1920s and 1930s Geneva through to the founding of international organizations like the European Economic Community (EEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). A central argument is that rather than ‘freeing’ or ‘disembedding’ ‘the’ market, neoliberalism attempted an ‘encasement’ of economic structures, isolating them from popular democratic demands. In the current crisis of legitimacy, this isolation is at the core of populist contestation – and often, this contestation has taken the form of a defense of the nation state.

## Interview

### Sören Brandes (SB):

Your book *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism* has been an astonishing success far beyond the narrow confines of academia. This indicates that apart from its unquestioned status as an excellent intellectual history, the book captures something important about the current moment. You have stated that in many ways, the book was a delayed product of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and the alter-globalization movement more generally. How would you position yourself, during and after the time of writing *Globalists*, in the remarkable economic and political developments of the last years?

### Quinn Slobodian (QS):

I think the success of the book in terms of timing comes from the fact that it appeared at a kind of hinge point in the way we are thinking about economic globalization. I completed it, for the most part, before 2016, when the reproduction of the status quo seemed all but assured. The Greeks had been disciplined back into line, no sea changes in global economic governance in the WTO [World Trade Organisation], IMF [International Monetary Fund] or World Bank were afoot. The fact that another Clinton – latest in the dynasty of the 1990s – seemed headed to the White House made it look like some version of the end of history as far as the eye could see, with variable proportions of Bradley Fighting Vehicles versus drone strikes as the ongoing supplement.

By the time the book was between covers, much – if not everything – had changed. Condemnations of globalism had become the transatlantic coin of the realm. Of course, the bearers of the language were not coming from the left but the right. Thus, the conclusion of my book with the anti-WTO protests in 1999 took on a peculiar doubled character: they echoed an earlier moment of discontent with a world economy defined by free trade and private capital rights but from a time when the content of those demands was very different. Rather than that earlier call for a cosmopolitan, solidaristic world attentive to economic inequality, ecological depredation, and worker exploitation, the new alternative globalization of the right felt free to show what my collaborator Dieter Plehwe calls ‘the wolf’s face’: brute competition in a zero-sum world where all that matters is the enrichment of an ethnically defined, territorially bounded national population. Those without documents (i.e. migrants) or the capacity to speak (e.g. our shared earth) were worse than ignored: they were and are the despised outside against which the latest version of the right defines its sense of mission.

In that sense, I think my book can also have a kind of double function. It offers a long-term analysis that helps articulate why the system entered into the crisis it is in while also offering glimmers of an opposition that the Left could call its own. We must resist the current disingenuous critique of globalism offered by the right without ignoring that the previous system was, indeed, untenable and indefensible. I say in the book that I was motivated in part by my failure to attend the 1999 Seattle protests themselves. It's cold comfort that we are still fighting those battles, under even more adverse circumstances. But I'm happy to be more proactive making my own small contribution as a researcher and academic this time around.

**SB:**

Let's dive a bit into the question of a left opposition to what you describe as globalist neoliberalism. Your book has been praised from many sides, including from neoliberals themselves. An author can hardly control where and by whom her work will be picked up. Particularly interesting, though, has been the reaction from economic nationalists on the left: the British economist Grace Blakeley, a prominent proponent of a Lexit position (2019b), has used your book to describe the EU as an enthusiastically neoliberal institution (2019a). And in a recent review, the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck (2019) reads your book essentially as proof for the globalist conspiracy against the nation state he had suspected all along.

It's important to point out that, in fact, your book is much more careful in its appraisals. For example, you point out at length that while German neoliberals did influence the European Economic Community (EEC) at its founding, they encountered heavy opposition from other negotiators and lost some of the most important battles, notably when it came to agricultural policy. There was also opposition to the EEC from other neoliberal groups, who had a much more global outlook. In your analysis, neoliberalism does not appear as monolithic or as uncontestedly successful as it does in Streeck's work.

However, there is a remarkable tendency in your book, never explicitly questioned, I think, to equate the nation state with democracy. This equation – shared by Streeck – is important for your argument, as it enables you to paint the neoliberal opposition to walled-off nations as an implicit critique of democracy. You show successfully that there is a real connection between the two – neoliberals were often remarkably explicit about their skepticism towards popular democracy. But the neoliberal critique of nationalism was also directed against the fascist dictatorships in Europe and their markedly anti-democratic nationalism. In your account of the emergence of 'Geneva School' neoliberalism,

this side of the story, which might help to call into question the equation of nationalism and democracy, is somewhat muted, which makes it easier to read your book as a defense of the nation state against neoliberal globalism. Would you say this is a fair critique?

QS:

I think this is a fair critique, although I think it would land even better if one phrased it differently. That is, I don't see the primary shortcoming of the book in my failure to see the partially (and putatively) anti-fascist origins of the neoliberal critique. In fact, I do nod to the context of the 1930s as a time when nationalisms of both left and right were a threat to normative neoliberal order from the point of view of the Geneva School. Where I think your critique gets more teeth is in whether I am suggesting that *any* form of organization beyond the nation suffers implicitly from a fatal democratic deficit. Can democracy exist beyond the nation at all? To say that nationalism can be a negative force as well as a positive one is banal, but to ask how and under what circumstances supranationalism can be democratically legitimate is much more difficult – and indeed a much more pointed response to the left-nationalist interventions you mention.

I concede that by focusing overwhelmingly on neoliberal visions of supranational governance, I leave the book open for appropriation by nationalists. There are two ways out: that of progressive internationalism, on the one hand, and what one could call left-constitutionalism, on the other. In the case of the first, insightful readings of the book by Ayan Meer (2018) and David Grewal (2019) point to the difference between internationalism – of the kind expressed in the G-77's New International Economic Order by which sovereign states agree to collective demands without constituting a new institutional stratum of enforcement – and globalism or supranationalism which does create such a new domain of enforcement, intentionally insulated from the reach of sovereign democratic states. It is essential to pair the narrative in my book with explorations of progressive forms of internationalism. See recent books by Adom Getachew (2019) and Guy Sinclair Fiti (2017), for example. Here the response to your critique would be simply that cooperating internationally can be entirely democratically legitimate insofar as it's carried out by representative, elected governments. Thus, the principles of sovereignty and self-determination can still have their seat in the nation-state while also working toward broader goals. As Grewal points out, this was the traditional form of 20th century internationalism.

The second option is more provocative to the left-nationalist position. A left-constitutionalism would argue that certain matters should be removed to a space of oversight and enforcement beyond the interference of domestic nation-states.

Here we can think of a hypothetical re-imagined WTO or NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] which locked in nations to promises on environmental and labor protections, for example. A reformed European Union [EU] would no doubt look something like this as well. This is the more typical 'human rights' position of the 1990s which has experienced a rather startling fall from grace due in no small part to its rampant abuse in the rollout of the USA's forever war. The unpopular question to ask on the left right now is whether certain matters, especially related to carbon emissions might have to be locked in away from the reach of popular sovereignty. I am not advocating that myself, but I think the scenarios explored by Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018) in their recent book *Climate Leviathan* are necessary for any clear-eyed look at the future (and thus also at the past).

**SB:**

Yes, I agree that the question of internationalism and democracy is the crucial one. There might be a third option though, which provides a way out of the intergovernmentalism vs. technocracy conundrum you outline here. Why not think of the 'supranational', rather than only the 'international', as of something potentially politicized and democratic? There are two potential roads to such a position: on the one hand, supranational parliaments could be empowered vis-à-vis the technocratic and intergovernmental institutions that have, as you put it, 'encased' the neoliberal international (dis-)order. The European Parliament especially provides important insights in this direction. On the other hand, undoubtedly momentum for global, grassroots social movements is currently building up again – particularly within the climate movements. The School Strikes for Climate are a fascinating case in point.

These potentialities are important in light of another vital, yet somewhat neglected condition of neoliberalism: its weaponization of nationalism. In a recent re-reading of Hayek's prophetic 1939 article on interstate federalism in their book *Citizens of nowhere*, Lorenzo Marsili and Niccolò Milanese (2018) have pointed out that the functioning of Hayek's vision explicitly relied on the absence of international solidarity, i.e. on nationalism: 'Will the Swedish workman', Hayek asks in a passage you also quote (Slobodian, 2018a: 103), 'be ready to pay more for his oranges to assist the Californian grower?' (Hayek, 1939: 139) As Marsili and Milanese comment, '[f]ar from replacing national ideologies, neoliberalism is a parasite on them' (*ibid.*: 88). While neoliberal elites might be organized globally, they remain reliant on the set-up of a national vision, through which any national ruling class can appear as the sole representative of their national people. If we want to know why neoliberalism is now dissolving into this specific nightmare – one of nationalist authoritarianism – this is where we need

to look. From this perspective, it would be vital to base any left alternative to neoliberal globalism precisely on an undermining of Hayek's purely national solidarity.

I wonder how this speaks to your newer research, which investigates the connections between networks of institutionalized neoliberalism and the intellectual origins of today's far-right movements in the 1990s and 2000s, whose main thrust you have summed up in the sentence: '[t]he reported clash of opposites is actually a family feud' (Slobodian, 2018b).

**QS:**

I think you put it just right. I had not quite thought of it the way Marsili and Milanese (2018) did there but, absolutely, the premise is always strong that certain objects will have the right to move while others will not. The sanctification of the 'human right of capital flight' I describe in the book is not joined by the basic right of human mobility. The question of human migration is one that tracks through my book but, because my concerns were different, I didn't zero in on it systematically. It is significant, however, that international trade economist Gottfried Haberler, a central protagonist in my story, concludes already in the 1930s that a national economy can profit fully from free trade and free capital movements while still restricting migration. While his mentor, Ludwig von Mises, began as a principled advocate of free movement of labour, by the 1940s, Mises too conceded that, for reasons of geopolitics and human prejudice, some forms of migration might have to be semi-permanently restricted. By the late 1970s, Hayek himself publicly spoke in favor of Margaret Thatcher's strident immigration restrictionism vis-a-vis the former British colonies of the Global South. He justified this by analogy to his own native Vienna in the 1920s, when an influx of Eastern Jews had been met by an antisemitic backlash. His argument was that such population movements themselves were the 'origins of racialism' (Hayek, 1978). Such displacement of the sources of racism and xenophobia onto migrants themselves is, of course, an opinion as common as it is retrograde – and very far from the putative universalism and cosmopolitanism claimed by neoliberals.

The mutation in a significant strand of neoliberal theory from the pragmatic tolerance of migration restrictions to a principled defense of them is extremely significant. Without observing this development, we cannot understand the right-wing libertarian ideology shared by many so-called 'populist' leaders from the Hayek-Society wing of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) inspired by the xenophobic pseudo-science of Thilo Sarrazin to the blinkered cultural

chauvinism of the former Czech president Vaclav Klaus to the business-friendly anti-immigrant stance of Charles Murray or Peter Brimelow in the US.

The weaponization of nationalism is indeed both an empirical fact and, in some cases, a conscious strategy. One can see this in the case of parties like the AfD or the Austrian Freedom Party which ‘rediscovered’ the virtues of nationalism in the 1990s as well as in the examples of self-described anarcho-capitalist Murray Rothbard, who advised Patrick Buchanan as a Republican Party presidential candidate in the early 1990s according to what he called a ‘strategy of right-wing populism’ (Rothbard, 1992). His diagnosis of a ‘revolution of white Euro-males’ (Rothbard, 1995: 12) anticipated many of the themes of white nationalism we have become much more familiar with since 2016 (see also Slobodian, forthcoming). These are also expressed in the ambiguity of the ‘nationalism’ in the phrase too – is the goal of white nationalism a reclamation of the existing nation-state as a ‘cleansed’ racial space for sharpened white supremacist projects or do they aim to create separatist white nations through the dissolution of existing state arrangements? Tracking the hybridization and alliance-building of right-wing libertarians seems like an essential task of the moment.

As for your comment on the supranational, this is precisely what I was gesturing at in my last answer about reforming the EU or even institutions like the WTO, prototypically supranational entities. Here freedom of movement becomes relevant again. Some defenders of neoliberal constitutionalism, including protagonists from my book like Ernst-Ulrich Petersmann, have pushed back on my thesis with some justification by arguing that my book downplayed the free movement of humans locked into arrangements like the EU. My emphasis on capital and goods may indeed sideline the truly astounding historical phenomenon of guard posts and barriers being dismantled at national borders across the Schengen Area in the last two decades (even, of course, as the outer borders of Fortress Europe remained patrolled more tightly than ever).

The so-called migrant crisis of 2015 showed us how much political potential is still contained in the fact of free human movement. The media narrative – in which the Right is reinforced by tone-deaf 90s centrists like Hillary Clinton and Tony Blair – has focused on opposition to newcomers. Yet a closer look shows a huge engagement of civil society in 2015 itself but also waves of pro-immigrant and pro-asylum mobilization up to the present. That no party has capitalized on this energy shows a failure of political imagination – and hopefully represents a deficit that will be recovered from yet. No proposal for revived internationalism or a reimagined supranationalism can be taken seriously without placing centrally the entangled challenges of economic inequality, human mobility, and the accelerating dynamics of climate change. None of these challenges stop at

national borders. This is where political energy – and scholarly research – has to go to next.

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