

# Neoliberalism and Social Movements

Written by Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen

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LAURENCE COX AND ALF GUNVALD NILSEN, JUL 30 2014

### Neoliberalism as a Social Movement from Above

Arguments about social movements and neoliberalism often present the latter in curiously apolitical terms, whether as some kind of natural law of society or as some kind of omnipotent juggernaut. Thinking of neoliberalism in historical and political terms, in contrast, means thinking of it as the outcome of collective human agency; a political project around which some elites were able to converge (while marginalising others) and around which the consent of some social groups could be mobilised (while coercing others), or as we term it, a *social movement from above* – one which (unlike movements from below) draws on a directive role in economic organisation, holds privileged access to state power, and is able to mould everyday social routines and “common sense”.

As is well known (Jones 2012; Peck 2010), neoliberalism did not start out in this privileged position. Rather, it began as a marginal and somewhat eccentric creed of those who objected to the kinds of state involvement in the economy that had emerged across the North-South axis during much of the mid-twentieth century – manifest in Keynesian policy-making and welfare states of various kinds in Euro-America and import-substitution industrialisation and state-led modernisation in the newly independent states of the Third World (see Harvey 2005; Mirowski and Piehwe 2009; Prashad 2012). These forms of capitalism, in which market forces were “embedded” in regulatory frameworks (Polanyi 2001), emerged from the economic and political crises of nineteenth century liberalism and the anti-systemic struggles of working classes and colonised peoples that wrested significant concessions from capitalist elites and colonial overlords (Silver 2003; Halperin 2004).

In 1968, the world erupted in a global revolt that ‘cut across the tripartite division of the world system at the time – the West, the Communist bloc, and the Third World’ (Wallerstein, 2006: 6). These revolts were closely intertwined with the stagnation of state-centred capitalism in the global North, and compelled elite groups to search for new accumulation strategies and to attempt to rebuild popular consent (see Wainwright 1994). In this sense, neoliberalism appeared as a solution from above to a problem provoked from below.

Its success necessarily involved the reversal of key victories and concessions won by labour movements and anti-colonial struggles during the first half of the twentieth century. Concerted assaults on the power of unions were integral to the neoliberal project in Euro-America. This was a fight at the level both of state structures but also in workplaces, and in terms of a broader social attack on the power of organised labour on many fronts. Centre-left parties declined until they remade themselves in neoliberal form; levels of unionisation dropped steadily; strikes and other forms of workplace action fell under the impact of restrictive laws, “capital strikes”, restructuring, and unemployment. In the global South, the Structural Adjustment Programmes administered by the World Bank and the IMF in collaboration with domestic elites rolled-back whatever limited space for national development strategies had existed in the post-war era by pushing privatisation and liberalisation. Cuts in public spending eroded the limited social protection policies that had been extended to popular classes, which in turn provoked widespread IMF riots throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

This process – what Jamie Peck (2010) calls “neoliberalisation” – has worked itself out very differently in different countries. It has been particularly thoroughgoing in the Anglophone world and in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, as well as in Latin America and Africa since the early 1980s. However, the form, depth, and timing of market-

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oriented reforms in China, India, and East Asia, and in Scandinavia, Northwestern Europe, and Southern Europe deviates substantially from this pattern. Indeed, Lash and Urry's (1987) analysis of the process they call "disorganisation" in five different capitalist states highlights just how much *variation* there has been. Again, *contra* the accounts of neoliberalism as an unstoppable thing, its actual implementation has had far more to do with human history and politics than any inherent power it might hold. Sometimes, indeed, the outcomes have been particularly unexpected. Latin Americans, among its first victims when neoliberalism was implemented with death squads and torture chambers, are now among those exerting most effective resistance and most creatively exploring new possibilities beyond neoliberalism.

### "Other Movements" Under Neoliberalism

At the same time – and to the dismay of the defenders of traditional patriarchal, racial, and religious power who were enlisted as neoliberalism's useful idiots in the sorts of coalitions put together by Reagan and Thatcher – other social movements have often achieved significant results within neoliberalism, even where states have loudly proclaimed their allegiance to an imagined past. This is particularly visible for the women's movement and LGBTQ activism in western countries. However, the neoliberal period has also seen massive anti-war movements, from opposition to strategies of "limited nuclear war" in the 1980s to the anti-Iraq war protests of February 15<sup>th</sup> 2003 – perhaps the biggest single global event ever not organised by states, corporations, religions, or sport. Ecological movements, from resistance to nuclear power to the struggle against climate change, have repeatedly managed to change popular common sense (if not always that of politicians).

This has been an ambiguous trend. Michael Biggs (forthcoming) shows that a general rise in popular participation in social movements is offset, at least for Britain, by the decline in strikes. Moreover (as indeed with the labour movement in its day), social movements are not simply an opposition to the way things are, but are powerfully shaped by it. Indeed, significant elements of almost all movements in the neoliberal period have been constrained within logics of identity politics, branding, and the politics of opinion, which fit well with the wider world of neoliberalism. It would be strange if matters had been otherwise; there is no automatic mechanism rescuing movement participants from the wider structures of their society – or rather, it is a long and painful struggle for movements to achieve the easy victories, realise that the most important changes are yet to come, and decisively step outside the space which the powers that be are prepared to see as legitimate.

And yet, as Galileo said, it does move. Every previous social formation in the past quarter-millennium has seen social movements step outside this space. Indeed, most states on the planet are the product of a revolution within living memory – against empire, against fascism, against state socialism – despite their use of violence, their control of the media, and all the other reasons commonly given for despairing of the possibility of social change. There is no good reason for believing that neoliberalism is any different and, indeed, recent decades have seen a sea-change in this respect.

The global "movement of movements", developing in particular since the Zapatistas' twenty-year-old revolution and coming to maturity with summit protests from 1999 on, the birth of Indymedia and the World Social Forum, is built on decades of networking. It shows a much greater capacity for alliance-building across movements and continents, and for challenging the basic premises of neoliberalism, a process which continued in shifting forms through opposition to the Bush regime's Middle Eastern wars and into the present.

### Neoliberalism, Movements, and Crisis

In particular, South America has seen a dramatic challenge both to the USA's once-unchallenged power over the region and to the dominance of neoliberalism as a mode of social organisation. So too, the failure of the wars on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Muslims generally to secure consensus for the New World Order have been followed by an even shakier grasp on events in the "Arab Spring". In China, labour militancy and rural unrest are challenging the onward march of the market, and in India, the corporate takeover of land and other natural resources is contested in multiple ways – from large-scale social movements to guerilla warfare.

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In the European context, neoliberalism and austerity regimes have encountered forms of popular opposition ranging from a mini-revolution in Iceland to the Indignados in Spain. This, in turn, has prompted an increasing suspension of democratic process in the EU with failed or rerun referenda, technical governments, and pressure on elected governments to ignore election commitments in favour of Troika rules. Meanwhile, Occupy in the US has seen the remaking of some of the movement alliances which were ruptured in the wake of 9/11.

Add to this neoliberalism's increasing difficulty in performing its basic task of securing the conditions for continued capital accumulation – not to speak of its manifest inability to hold back the tide – and it becomes clear that this particular movement from above is reaching the limits of its systemic capacity, both in terms of securing popular consent and in terms of its benefits for the wide range of elites whose support is needed for its continued operation.

Another way of putting this is to say that the question of *whether* movements from below can overcome neoliberalism is the wrong way of thinking about things. *All* such strategies of accumulation have their sell-by date; the interesting question is rather what kind of outcome is arrived at *after* neoliberalism, and crucially which actors play the key role in bringing it about.

Around the year 2000, some of the answers which were confidently given included global Chinese domination, “Jihad vs McWorld” (Barber 1995), and the continuation of the “New World Order” and the supposed “end of history”. Today, it would be stretching credibility to present any of these as an obvious successor. However, the temptation to write in these terms falls victim to precisely the same problem as the naturalisation of neoliberalism – the desire to escape history and politics into a clean world where there is an objectively predictable future (preferably one which can be condensed into an airport bestseller) rather than one which emerges from the messy struggle between social movements from above and from below.

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