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Academic Foresights

Post-Liberalism

How do you analyze the present status of post-liberalism?

Post-liberalism is the currently emergent historical formation that has both grown out of and broken with liberalism and neo-liberalism. Like its antecedents, post-liberalism entails its own forms of truth, of subjectivity, and of power. In the terminology of Michel Foucault, it is a governmentality, that is, a mode of government drawing on its own typical (post-) political rationality, practices, techniques and agents.

We can initially define post-liberalism by distinguishing it from liberalism and neo-liberalism. From liberal governmentality post-liberalism retains the “conduct of conduct” through the manipulation of interests, and from neo-liberal economic theory it adopts the idea that the market as a locus of veridiction, that is, as a mechanism that empirically produces truth through prices, is not natural but rather a fragile social construct. Well beyond neo-liberalism’s reinforcement and redeployment of market mechanisms and privatization of social services, post-liberalism through its multiplication and radicalization of mechanisms for controlling human life more fundamentally, even ontologically, redefines the human experience, replacing the self-interested liberal subject and the neo-liberal entrepreneur of the self with what Michael Dillon and Julian Reid call the “biohuman.” Unlike both classic and neo-liberalism, post-liberalism collapses the distinction between the individual and the collectivity through what we call the therapeutic government of individual bodies understood and understandable as particularly configured and manipulable exemplars of the human species in its diversity, with each susceptible to its particular vulnerabilities. The post-liberal subject is a composite subject, contingently pieced together genetically and socially. Humans, of course, have always been such constructs, but today they are subjected to social scientific discourses and biomedical technologies ranging from “intersectionality” to genetic engineering that empty them of the transcendent qualities of the autonomous, rational (neo-)liberal subject. (Indeed, post-liberalism’s simultaneous government of individuals and populations can most easily be understood through one of the biomedical practices that inspire it, namely “personalized medicine,” or the use of genetic, molecular, and environmental profiling for the optimization of individual patients’ preventive or therapeutic care.)

We can also define post-liberalism more formally by its peculiar political or, rather, a-

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political rationality. Whereas liberalism (and neo-liberalism as well) subscribed to a political reason of order, as did absolutist reason of state, which liberalism criticized and supplanted, post-liberalism adopts what we call the reason of regulated chaos or managed non-order. In contrast to the strategic and totalising ambitions of politics understood as the quest for order, be it hierarchical or reciprocal, planned or spontaneous, this new political logic is tactical and fragmentary, abandoning the coherence of the whole for the efficiency of the part. To be sure, the notion of rational order has always been a chimera; power and knowledge has always been fragmentary and incomplete; but the ideal of a just, true, beautiful, natural, or stable social order worth striving for or debating over is the premise of political action. Under the reason of regulated chaos, however, knowledge and power relations become encapsulated, self-perpetuating, and self-referential as every aspect of life becomes an autonomous domain of expert government responsible only to itself. The result is not technocratic anti-politics, but a non-order in which no politics, let alone democratic determination of a common good, can take place.

Such an a-political non-order of regulated chaos is not a hypothetical dystopia but a historical reality. The contingencies of the past two decades, which we can only evocatively enumerate, have produced it. The end of the bipolar Cold War geopolitical order offered the structural precondition for the acceleration and proliferation of “biopolitical” mechanisms for governing populations and for fragmenting them into ever smaller units (individual bodies and even genes) of therapeutic (self-)control. Whether a cause or a symptom of this radicalization of biopolitics, the recent massive incursion of biological thinking into social thought has encouraged discourses and practices of fostering diversity, celebrating resilience, and orchestrating constant conditions of adversity in a neo-Darwinian contest for the survival of only the meanest, leanest, and fittest. At the level of policy, such survivalism has become evident in the convergence and confusion of security, humanitarianism, and development as evident in such concepts as human security and humanitarian war. Institutionally, the rise of that amorphous, flexible entity known as the non-governmental organization (NGO) has become the vehicle for a highly mobile, politically irresponsible cosmopolitan class of technical, therapeutic experts operating outside of, though often in symbiosis with, the rational hierarchical orders of government and capitalist enterprise. This new, uncoordinated ruling class legitimates its therapeutic authority not only through its claims to expertise and to benevolence but also through the urgency of its actions in a context of self-proclaimed and often self-produced emergency. Key to maintaining both this climate of constant crises and the uncritical acceptance of the experts’ alleged solutions to them has been the rise of the new global, real-time 24/7 communications media that depend on and produce crises while also offering platforms for the proclamation of expert knowledge that acquires its truth value not from its universal validity but from its instantaneous, ubiquitous, and repeated diffusion.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

Our description of post-liberalism draws on our research experience of its experimentation and emergence on the peripheral sites of the global south and east during the 1990s and 2000s. The immediate and long-term future of post-liberalism, however, depends on how it develops in the still-global-center of Europe and North America. Our understanding of post-liberalism is the fruit of research and theoretical reflection that our collaborators and we have conducted on sites of militarized humanitarian intervention in the Balkans, Africa, Haïti and beyond. These sites provided the laboratories for the elaboration and testing of the discourses, practices, and techniques of the governmentality that we have sketched so far. Today, however, the results of these peripheral experiments are most obviously being applied in Europe. The political reason and subjectivity of post-liberalism are not emerging in contemporary Europe alone, but, as the sovereign debt crises and the potential implosion of the common-currency euro-zone calls into question the fiscal, financial, economic, and political viability of a growing number of member states and of the European Union as a whole, Europe faces its moment of truth, in the strong epistemic sense of the word. On the one hand, the systematic dismantling of state capacities and public services removes the final vestiges of liberal representative democratic accountability in favor of markets; on the other, the discursive confusion surrounding this process forecloses effective political understanding and action.

In the public debates surrounding the economic and therefore political crisis of Europe, several superposed layers of governmental discourse erupt to the surface, revealing the competing but at times complementary logics of reason of state and of classic, neo-, and post-liberal governmentalities at work in political thought, practices, and technologies. In the states most targeted by the financial markets and in turn by disciplining measures on the part of EU commission, metaphors of, and direct references to, war and territorial conquest (notably by Nazi Germany) evoke the geopolitical reason of state and feed into right-wing populist fantasies of restoring the glory of the nation-state. At the same time, the liberal truth criterion of the market remains unassailable as the final arbiter in political debates. Market verdicts leave no option but austerity and retrenchment, and protest movements such as Occupy, Attac, or Common Good have articulated no alternative truth regime, except perhaps a return to the abstract universalism of the rational jurisdiction of reason of state as opposed to the empirical veridiction of the market. Finally, the neo-liberal logic of expert technical intervention to correct or prevent market imperfection and failures has become evident in the leading role played in the current European crisis by the cloud of international experts organized around institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. Formally intergovernmental, these agencies through which an enlightened cosmopolitan elite circulates have become an autonomous source of authority formulating if not dictating national government policies on the basis of their

alleged technical competency.

Regardless of the substantive contents and validity of experts' claims to legitimate authority in the current crisis, these claims clearly, and in an exacerbated manner, take the form of what we call therapeutic domination. Defined succinctly as an impersonal and exceptional mode of command, therapeutic domination entails the expert application of an instrumentally rational technical procedure, typically a treatment protocol, to a subordinated individual or population in a situation of emergency, crisis, or disease, always to the supposed benefit of the treated. Implicit in this mode of domination is a historical and cultural de-contextualization of technical action in a temporality of urgency. Therapeutic domination thus forecloses political debate, suspends democratic procedures, and foregoes consequentialist questions of responsibility in the name of immediate efficiency. In the case of contemporary Europe, the sovereign debt crisis, arising from the banking crisis of 2008, morphed over the course of 2011 and 2012, for whatever reason, justified or not, into a permanent emergency with an endless cycle of summits, ultimatums, and last-chance appeals, each of which progressively strips away states' possibilities politically to counter market truths.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

Whatever its outcome, the European crisis augurs a post-liberal world of fully therapeutic government, where there is no future, there are no politics, only an eternal present in which the veridiction of the market, finally freed from the jurisdiction of the state, leaves the post-liberal biohuman at the mercy of all market-true technologies of the self. The trigger for the contemporary crisis lay in the international financial system and in domestic fiscal systems. The crisis was probably self-inflicted, the product, on the one hand, of self-referential financial expertise with little empirical grounding in the "real economy" and, on the other hand, of under-funded, deficit-producing budgets in keeping with the post-liberal notion of generating resilience through adversity by design. Although it might yet be possible to turn away from a post-politics of crisis management to a political economy that subscribes to the old, modern reason of politics understood as the quest for order (after all, most people still believe that politics is about order and not just a simulacrum), the proliferation of human-made catastrophes from global warming to resource exhaustion and overpopulation suggest that the suspension of politics in favor of post-liberal expert regulation of chaos will enjoy a future as long as it is short.

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