

From crisis to catastrophe: The death and viral legacies of austere neoliberalism in Europe?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg**Adam Standing**

Örebro University, Sweden

Jonathan Davies

De Montfort University, UK

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global event, but what became apparent almost immediately was that while the virus seems indiscriminate, vulnerability and the capacity to mitigate its impact are not spread equally, either between or within countries. Years of austere neoliberalism in Europe have exacerbated inequality and precarity, acting as a ‘pre-existing condition’ onto which the virus has now landed. The question we ask is: when the pandemic subsides, can the underlying conditions of contemporary neoliberalism remain? And what may replace it?

Keywords

austerity, COVID-19, interregnum, neoliberalism, necro-socialism

Introduction

The invocation of crisis signifies necessary, urgent action and the moment lends itself particularly well to medical imagery. The word originates from the Greek word *krisis*, which means, amongst other things, a moment of decisive intervention, such as when a patient may swing between death and recovery (Koselleck, 2006). The very immediacy with which socio-political crises are imbued, as with medical emergencies, means that often (morbid) symptoms (Gramsci, [1930] 1996) are confused with underlying pathologies. COVID-19 represents not a single, discrete, crisis to be treated in isolation but arrives on top of what Gramscian scholars define as the organic crisis of neoliberal globalism (Stahl,

2019). In this crisis, as for others, meaning and outcome will depend on political struggles over ownership, construal, and narration (Bayırbağ et al., 2017). In this commentary, we argue, with a particular focus on western European polities, that austerity can be considered a ‘pre-existing condition’ of social systems, which has served to exacerbate the social and spatial inequities through which risk, capacities, and agency are mediated. What develops from this conjuncture remains contingent, and

Corresponding author:

Adam Standing, Department of Sociology, Örebro University,
701 82 Örebro, Sweden.Email: adam.standing@oru.se

ultimately speculative, but one danger we highlight is the emergence of necro-socialism – in which collective state intervention with some emergency redistributive measures, but devoid of emancipatory content, serves to support the moribund status quo.

Austere neoliberalism as pre-existing condition

Not all aspects of neoliberalism are austere (Callinicos, 2012), but insofar as any mechanism serving principles of solidarity and equality (however tenuously) is concerned, austerity is arguably its *raison d'être*. Neoliberalising regimes emerging through the crises of Keynesianism inflicted waves of retrenchment and restructuring of post-war settlements, while sponsoring inter-urban competition and speculative excess (Peck, 2013). Though it is impossible to separate neoliberal governance from austerity as a process of eroding public goods, the European 'age of austerity', in which austerity policies became idealised, is indelibly associated with the decade after the global financial crisis beginning in 2008 (Davies and Blanco, 2017). During this period, European elites openly espoused and radicalised policies previously justified with subtler doctrines of prudence, modernisation, and efficiency. The turn to austerity-as-doctrine, after a brief faux Keynesian interlude (Evans and McBride, 2017), was uneven but widespread and prolonged, and it was presented to European publics as a 'bitter pill' or 'necessary medicine' to produce economic recovery and growth (Borriello, 2017).

Austerity-as-doctrine did not go uncontested, although resistance varied greatly both in content and intensity across European polities. It provoked progressive anti-austerity movements such as Occupy, the Indignados, and the 'new municipalism' as well as a neo-reactionary backlash associated with the rise of figures including Orban, Le Pen, and Farage whose critique of austerity shifted blame both upwards (to international elites) and downwards (to marginalised populations). With beleaguered, atomised populations becoming increasingly embittered and fractious, international elites began to distance themselves from austerity-as-doctrine (Summers, 2019).

As we live and die through the shocking emergency and human catastrophe of this global pandemic, austerity in the sense of retrenchment and restructuring in the state apparatus has become – for the time being – untenable. It is ironic and tragic that just as states began to repudiate austerity-as-doctrine, the cognitive and material legacies of austerity came back to bite even harder. The impoverished, hollowed-out character of our infrastructures has become brutally clear.

Morbid symptoms and viral legacies

In many cases, the very remedies which mitigated the last crisis – such as the casualisation and precarisation of work (Lorey, 2015) – are features that make the current crisis all the more dangerous, leaving European public services (and citizens) with severely reduced capacity to absorb shocks. While many returned to work, after the turbulence of 2008–11, the official statistics that framed a recovery masked the fact that many returned to work on precarious, zero-hour contracts, or in conditions worse than before the crisis, and with institutions of collective solidarity weakened.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly the mandated lockdown imposed across much of Europe, has entailed a reassessment of what is meant when we talk of 'skilled work' and has opened up the space for a broader debate over the value of labour – both outside and inside the house. A new appreciation for the labour of others also highlights how unequally – and unjustly – it is rewarded, how unequal risks are generated, and how we quite literally inhabit different spaces that make these realisations impossible in normal times. Perhaps the starkest example of this comes from one of the most unequal cities on Earth, London, where in the early days of the pandemic, passenger numbers on London's public transport systems fell dramatically, whereas the Tube, by contrast, reported a fall almost twice as great as the buses (BBC, 2020). The clear implication here is that typically wealthier, suburban tube travellers can better afford to take measures to reduce risk and vulnerability than often precariously employed, urban dwelling, bus passengers.

These patterns of inequality, with respect to the ability to isolate, distance, shield, and quarantine, are by no means limited to the more advanced neo-liberal economies but occur wherever austerity has widened spatial inequalities and de-centred the state. Whereas austerity opened up new practices and spaces of political contestation – with the urban forming a specific setting and rationality for political action (Beveridge and Koch, 2019) – COVID-19 has served to close them down through consensual lockdown and distancing for those who can, and threatening proximities at home and work for those who cannot.

From neoliberalism to necro-socialism?

So what comes next? Already, before COVID-19, coercive state apparatuses had been more readily deployed to re-embed ailing neoliberal logics (Bruff and Tansel, 2019) – a kill or cure strategy that made explicit the necessity of the state to support market logics. It not only highlighted but also necessitated the enlarging of social and spatial inequalities, creating outgroups – immigrants, the unemployed, the disabled – to rally the masses against.

The notion of necro-socialism captures several characteristics of a potentially emergent political economy of COVID-19. The ‘socialist’ part of the proposition comes from the appropriation of ideas from the left: the sudden governmental assertion that ‘money is no object’ and the partial socialisation of risks arising to workers from the economic crisis (as well as the socialisation of corporate losses). ‘Necro’ arises from several interrelated characteristics. First, for the right-wing forces dominating European politics, ‘socialist’ elements of the emergency response to the coronavirus are temporary, a prelude only to re-interment. It arises secondly from the reality that the struggle against the coronavirus entails a grim triage born of now-abandoned austerity doctrines: doctors are forced to decide who gets treatment, and who dies. This is necro-politics in its conventional sense (Mbembe, 2019), where distancing, isolating, shielding, and quarantine might be seen as class luxuries.

‘Necro’ testifies, thirdly, to the impoverished character of the ostensibly ‘socialist characteristics’. While socialism in the Marxist sense of a historical phase after capitalism signifies conditions of plenitude, economic equality, and radicalised democracy, necro-socialism is reduced to the expression of state power, in a context where European civil society is physically atomised. The movement-building fundamental to constructing alternative hegemonies is very hard to achieve if the streets and workplaces cannot be occupied. ‘Necro’ refers fourthly to the exhaustion of traditional European parties of the left, whose acquiescence, if not full-throated support, for neoliberalism and austerity-as-doctrine has, outside of a few notable cases such as Portugal, led to diminished political relevance.

Locally, the hope for a post-neoliberalism worthy of the name is that the crisis has put on the agenda goods long deemed impossible by advocates of austere neoliberalism. The limited socialisation of risk, the new value placed on low paid workers with their sense of duty and bravery, the community solidarities built in response to the virus, could herald a new politics. The struggles of 2008 and after could reignite and intensify, as the question of who pays the gargantuan bill comes to the fore.

One notable feature at this time of emergency is the widespread, though by no means universal, public tolerance for order, instruction, and rules previously dismissed as obsolete by those who saw the world as constituted by open networks and flows. Whether this trait marks a new dawn for the organising principles of bureaucracy and hierarchy remains to be seen. Either way, it seems clear that although many facets of neoliberalism remain, the old hegemony of austere neoliberalism with its globalist imaginaries is, for now, in abeyance.

Conclusion

One of the great dangers in periods of social and political crisis, as with any medical disorder, is the conflation of symptoms with root causes. The global financial crisis of 2007–08 was not a problem of a few rogue banks but rather the crisis of an unsustainable capitalist system of risk and reward. The Euro-zone crisis was not caused by the profligacy of the

periphery but rather a dysfunctional regional financial system. COVID-19 is not a case of Western societies devastated by a ‘foreign’ disease but rather the consequence of underprepared governments, weakened health services, and liberalised labour markets characterised by precarity – all exacerbated by the underlying condition of austerity.

The question of what comes after COVID-19 very much depends on whether governments and publics choose to address the symptoms or the causes. On the one hand, the necessity for collective action and solidarity at all levels of society and the economy has been broadly demonstrated, which creates a discursive space for the left. Conversely, the existing pathologies of ‘the left’ as broadly construed speak to the risks of necro-socialism – in which ostensibly socialist imaginaries of collective action are stripped of their emancipatory content to sustain a decrepit neoliberal capitalism.

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