
Laura Bazzicalupo is a former Professor of Political Philosophy at the Department of Political Science of the Università degli Studi di Salerno. Her many publications include *Il governo delle vite. Biopolitica ed economia* (2006), *Superbia. La passione dell'essere* (2008), *Biopolitica. Una mappa concettuale* (2010), *Eroi della libertà* (2011), and *Politica. Rappresentazioni e tecniche di governo* (2013). She has edited and introduced the volume by J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek, *Dialoghi sulla sinistra. Contingenza, egemonia, universalità* (2010). For Mimesis she has edited *Impersonale. In dialogo con Roberto Esposito* (2008) and *Il grande crollo. è possibile un governo della crisi economica?* (2010).

Contact: bazzicalupolaura3@gmail.com

THE IRONIC TURN OF LIBERALISM: THE FACE OF AUTHORITARIAN FREEDOM*

The irony of this device: it makes us believe it's about our liberation.

M. Foucault

Laura Bazzicalupo

Università degli Studi di Salerno

LA VUELTA IRÓNICA DEL LIBERALISMO: EL ROSTRO DE LA LIBERTAD AUTORITARIA

Abstract

A large number of scholars have underlined the current turbulent character of the liberal and global order, which, for a long time, represented itself and was perceived as a stable and inevitable order. Despite the reluctance of some areas of the planet to accept the liberal-democratic model made in the USA, a fairy tale told us that the global free market, the World Wide Web, and technological development would surely lead everyone to choose human rights and liberal democracy. Yet, we are now dealing with a shocking sequence of 'crises': terrorism, environmental damage, unstable economy, migrations, a healthcare crisis, and even open military aggression. The essay hypothesizes that liberalism's firmness in preserving its global position entails not only the divorce from the contingent alliance with representative democracy but also the activation of its inherent security liberticidal logic.

* Reception date: 11th March, 2024; acceptance date: 11th April, 2024. The essay is the result of research carried out within the Department of Political Science, Università degli Studi di Salerno.

Keywords

authoritarian liberalism; crises; liberal democracy; securitization

Resumen

Un gran número de estudiosos subraya el carácter turbulento actual del orden liberal y global, el cual, durante mucho tiempo, se autorrepresentó y se percibió como un orden estable e inevitable. A pesar de las reticencias de algunas partes del planeta a aceptar el modelo liberal-democrático *made in USA*, un cuento de hadas nos decía que el libre mercado global, la *World Wide Web* y el desarrollo tecnológico con seguridad nos llevaría a todos a la elección de los derechos humanos y la liberal-democracia. Sin embargo, ahora nos enfrentamos a una espeluznante secuencia de “crisis”: el terrorismo, el deterioro ambiental, una economía inestable, las migraciones, la crisis sanitaria e incluso una agresión militar abierta. La hipótesis del ensayo es que la firmeza del liberalismo para preservar su posición global implica no solo el divorcio de la alianza contingente con la democracia representativa, sino también la activación de una lógica liberticida inherente a la seguridad.

Palabras clave

liberalismo autoritario; crisis; segurización; democracia liberal

1. Once Upon a Time, There Was a Liberal Order...

A large number of scholars (political scientists, constitutionalists, sociologists) has underlined the alarming current turbulent character of the liberal and global order, which for a long time—in the past twenty years—represented itself and was perceived as a stable order, with no alternative and, thanks to free market globalization, oriented towards a peaceful, increasingly integrated universe (Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 7–23; Kagan, 2018). It is true that there were some areas of the planet reluctant to take on the model of liberal-democratic order guarded and guaranteed by US hegemony. However, a fairy tale told us that the global free market, the worldwide web (at the time experienced as a means of democratization), and technological development would surely lead everyone (voluntarily or having been persuaded or induced) to choose human rights and liberal democracy, which only enhances the anguish for the shocking sequence of ‘crises’ and global emergencies (which are immediately considered to be global due to interdependence): terrorism, environmental damage, unstable economy, migrations, healthcare crisis, and finally open military aggression.

We use the word ‘open’ because since the fall of the Berlin Wall—triumphantly seen as the second definitive victory of liberal democracy—wars, disguised as ‘special police operations,’ have actually been continuous. Now, however, the decline of the liberal order and the worsening of conflicts—not only but above all international conflicts—are all too evident. This impression might also have to do with the exceptional sense of security of the nineties, which, by contrast, created a widespread feeling in the West of being under siege (Colombo, 2022): The emphasis on how Western civilization improved the rest of the world, with a universalism that applied both to the market and human rights, has turned into fear.

The long-removed problem is that the siege of rampant trade and military competitors, which increasingly and explicitly challenge Western hegemony and its failed interventions to maintain security and order, add to the glaring internal crisis of liberal democratic states, or rather, of democracy as such (Brown, 2015).

This, however, is not a crisis of liberalism. And this is the point. The crisis of democracy that dramatically affects the liberal-democratic couple—the unchallenged *Grundnorm* of the present and future world—does not involve liberalism (and only partially involves its neoliberal version). By liberalism we mean domestic and global political strategies that impose standards of behavior and productivity aimed at their own goals, a free and boundless capitalist market of goods, workforce, and capital that forces politics, culture, and processes of subjectivation to cater to its needs.

As is clear, with the word liberalism, we are not referring to the theories of liberal deregulation: These can alternate, as has historically been the case, with forms of

protectionism and state capitalism, which means that the strategic goal is always the same, despite the variety of contingent means adopted.

Liberalism's marriage of convenience with democracy and its rule of law, civil rights, and checks and balances lasted a long time. Indeed, property rights and free trade (between stronger and weaker countries or social groups in private bargaining)—which is what liberalism is interested in—also belong, in the Western tradition, to the set of values of democracy, which came out victorious from the double clash with Nazism and Communism.

If the feeling of a triumphal *end of history*, Fukujama *docet*, has quickly turned into fear and uncertainty, it is surely due to pressing emergencies. However, the mythization of the two victories referred to as liberal democracy emphasized that feeling, thus avoiding a realistic analysis of the contradictions that the victorious model contained (in the double meaning of the word) (Fukuyama, 1989, pp. 3–18). Two events, 1946 and 1989, were turned into the founding myth of liberal democracy, concealing the contingent and self-conflicting nature of this myth. When the democratic element (i.e. the welfare state) entered into crisis in the eighties, the liberal element occupied the whole scene, supporting capitalism's cognitive turn, which left the factories in place while avoiding the workers' conflict. The liberal cultural and economic-social revolution had 'won.'

When we say that history is over, this means we have entered the time of myth, which—according to Benjamin (1971, p. 170, 2000, p. 434)—is a motionless, naturalized, and destinal time: The *semper novum* is an endless repetition of the same. Myth, as naturalized history, is the narrative on which the neoliberal revolution has been based, which means that its claim to impose a social and economic model without alternatives, not only domestically but globally, is itself mythical, an illusion. This myth or ideology, like all ideologies, presented itself as an anti-ideological truth, one that would finally erase all catastrophic utopias and ideologies from the bellicose twentieth century. This myth has been harshly debunked twenty years later.

Collapse is usually thought to result from 'external' attacks on liberal democracy and liberalism itself: sovereignism and populism (internally), autocracies, terrorism, environmental and health crises (externally)... Causes are always exogenous. How can we forget that neoliberalism diagnosed the most recent major financial crisis as being caused by an insufficient implementation of its own model?

Liberalism is our topic, but we have to start from the triumphal union of liberalism and democracy, which for a long time was viewed as being normative and irreversible, something that today is often denied. We will have to analyze both the internal and international 'story' of their connection, as well as their divergent logic. Only a historical, genealogical analysis (history is exactly what the mythical and naturalistic narrative of

liberalism and liberal democracy removes) can grasp the ‘strategic’ workings of liberalism and, therefore, expose *who* chose and used it to master society.

On the other hand, only an analysis of its rationality can show its ironic configuration, exposed to reversals and the heterogeneity of ends. A double point of view is suitable because practices and material power condition and are conditioned by the logical and ideological level (which has a key value here). Effects result from their combination.

Since our focus is on authoritarian liberalism and its anti-democratic turn, a continuous counterpoint is required to understand how democracy has been transformed by this triumphal marriage: The democratic consensus, at first politically organized, filters into fragmented individual opinions, also dissenting ones. The opposition loses its power and conflictual strength, becoming involved in the idea of a neoliberal market. As an opposition, it limits itself to focusing on human rights, which are meta-historical, often devoid of concrete relationships, and implemented in a fragmented way. This is a noteworthy aspect because it is precisely when the opposition empties itself of specific antagonistic content and shares the hegemonic culture that we can truly speak of a neoliberal *order*.

The hypothesis put forward by this essay is that the firmness of liberalism (and capitalism, which supports it, being supported by it) in maintaining the global position it has gained, entails not only the divorce from the contingent, temporarily fitting union with representative democracy, but also the activation, in direct and widespread forms, of the security and liberticidal rationality, already inherent to it.

The neoliberal revolution (revolution and reform, words that once belonged to the left, now belong to neoliberal progressivism), conceptually constructed in the interwar period, broke out in the eighties.

It was aware from the start (like never before) that a key priority was to radically change people’s mentality. This awareness is not obvious for an intellectual and social group, it is elitist by nature, hostile to the masses and the opinion of the majority. But it is the strategic nature of the project that suggests this: It tells a captivating story as a tool to conquer the social power that democracy (totalitarian and/or socialist, or, better, social-democratic) had captured or threatened to capture from the capitalist organization.

Neoliberalism is, therefore, from the beginning, a counter-hegemonic, ‘partisan’ program: It knows that it has to move ahead of the voting process, on subjectivization and on consensus building, not only and not so much in order to influence the democratic vote, but to change people’s attitudes toward the social, long shaped by solidarity and welfarist protection of social rights.¹

¹ See Biebricher (2019, p. 346), who highlights the common matrix of the different forms of neoliberalism in protecting the market from democracy to prevent redistributive conflict.

This clever political strategy was able to capture (it must be said) the libertarian and anti-authoritarian drive of the seventies and reverse the autonomist movements' power into a heteronomous and systemic order (pro-capitalist and pro-market).

Such an analysis—it is obvious—refers to capitalism as a social relationship (as well as an economic organization) that needs a discourse on truth supporting its change, expansion, and adaptation.² It was ready to identify in the anti-authoritarianism of the seventies and eighties the chance for a post-Fordist mode of production, which would expropriate and exploit—with the help of the neoliberal libertarian narrative—the creative social brain and, with the digital economy, its immaterial de-territorialization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). Free enterprise of self-employment is opposed to dependence on value-labor theory; however, each producer will be evaluated and selected *a posteriori* by the market, which is a final, headless, unaccountable judge. It was this kind of capital, one that is mobile, not subjected to territorial control, global by nature, that would drive the *Weltmarkt* and its unprecedented unequal development (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2019). The subsequent immaterial shift towards financialization was decisive, as it does not remove, but confirms the abstract nature of capital, freeing it from the concrete values of labor and material wealth—politically more graspable—to produce self-referential wealth.

As one can see, we want to analyze a complex plot. It has already presented us with historical reversals and revelations that justify the adjective 'ironic' in the title.

2. A Shaky Marriage: Liberalism and Democracy

Let us retrace, albeit briefly, the history of the compromise between liberalism and democracy, a contingent one, like all phenomena.

Despite significant differences, the non-democratic side of liberalism has been, more or less, an unchanging factor of liberal democracy. Its postwar balance—a frail one, as already emphasized—linked different elements: European constitutionalism, international organizations for human rights, global free trade, and integration of European states into the EU, as well as the (decisive, for the liberal side) technicalization of politics. Governance connects these elements: It is a form of power management that claims to be liberal-democratic but severely limits sovereignty and its excesses, defined as totalitarian. It presents itself as a reply to the interwar failures that led to the catastrophe (Hayek, 1976). This means a deep distrust of the politician's autonomy and its possible arbiters. It was a matter of setting limits—liberalism's task from the beginning—both

² See the analyses of the world-system school by Arrighi (2010), Streeck (2016) and the classics Polanyi, Schumpeter, or Keynes, indispensable to provide the material context on which ideology and strategic rationality are grafted.

on the state machine, on the (democratic) power of the masses but also on parliamentarism, rather than on nationalism or racism.

Constitutions formalize this security cordon that binds parliaments and democratic sovereignty to defend it, so the story goes, from itself. But the technicalization of power, strongly advocated by the liberal side, is the main feature of this process. Technocracy is indeed the softest way to empty democracy, without starting revolutions or military coups.

The liberal side, subdued until the seventies/eighties, prevailed and then formed the content of the liberal-democratic union in the post-Cold War era when the alternative of *real* socialism vanished. With the demise of its real antagonist, it asserted itself forcefully with the aim of reducing political power, well beyond the 1946 project of a democracy under surveillance. It was about reacting to the socialism of the welfare state (identified from the start with the totalitarianism that had been defeated in 1989) and dismantling institutions and powers of the social pact. In the name of efficiency and freedom. Sometimes it was possible to do this by saving the democratic form—this would be the technocratic path of the European Union—sometimes by means of a coup d'état, as in Chile—the Chicago boys' first experiment with an un-democratic liberal state. Under the benevolent gaze of US liberal democracy.

Ordo-liberal and technocratic governance is the core business of Europe. It declares itself liberal-democratic but shows an 'authoritarian' soul, shifting the prerogatives of decision-making from political contentment to technical agencies, which are presumed neutral, in order to find *efficient* solutions. Technique means *expertise* and science about what must be governed.

This is the first crucial point of our analysis. Authority is not managed (nor delegated) by citizens but overlaps with techno-scientific competence, which is especially (but not only) economic. As such, it is entrusted to experts. This overturns democratic functioning. We may say that authoritarianism is already present in the governance of the golden years of liberal democracy, the nineties.

The soft power of think tanks, study centers of economics, and strategic organizations claim the right to decide, evaluate, and punish PIGS countries impose austerity and unfair tax regimes on citizens, and moreover, it does not assume any political accountability. The management device, no longer personalized as in the political form, but technicalized in policy making, is based on an incontestable scientific/truthful discourse (Habermas, 2015).³

³ J.P. Morgan's report (Barr & Mackie, p. 12), explicitly suggests that southern European states subordinate superfluous or dangerous democratic politics to financial economics. Stearns and Mortgage of the J.P. Morgan group agreed to a \$13 billion settlement for the subprime scam.

Politics becomes *problem solving*, valued in terms of efficiency and optimization. This is indeed the *modus operandi* of the European Union, which thus prevents state policy from deviating. It is ironic that people complain about the European democratic deficit and hope it will strengthen into a unitary state while, in fact, it was against the risks of democratic and political sovereignty that Europe was born under the *liberal* rather than the democratic aegis. Administrative-managerial rules limit powers from below, imposing directives rather than laws that would be questioned in parliament. Good practices, as long as they are compliant with established technical standards and parameters. This is what Germany, in particular, does, thus reassuring the USA about its loyalty to the market economy and the other European states about its non-totalitarian choices. It was Germany that spread the precepts of the ordoliberal school of the thirties in Europe: The state must limit itself to setting the economy's regulatory framework—in line with the neoclassical economic theory—making sure the market works, but not interfering with it. Among the rules that the state must strictly comply with are reinforcing private property, civil rights (not political and social rights), and the *liberal freedom* of markets.

It is essential to clarify that this is a *political* program about public action and political decisions that are taken/accepted by the state. It would be wrong to believe the latter is ousted because its prerogatives are reduced. On the contrary, ordoliberalism is very much aware that the market is an artificial construct that only the political intervention of the State can protect, ensuring competition and social order, which is functional to it. Thatcher's authoritarian liberalism *within* a liberal democracy proves this. It should be made clear that those who created and applied the neoliberal model were aware of and active in the political class conflict: Here, it is not a matter of depoliticization. Rather, it is a power that, in order to become hegemonic, infiltrates the cultural and anthropological domain, even that of the opposition. It is power masked by natural order—and this too is an old *topos* of liberalism—which has no alternatives—TINA, as economic experts say. It is power insured by public force.

At an international level, however, it is human rights and their protection—and this is the universalistic-juridical contribution of democracy—that provide the constraint against risks of mass democracies drifting. Again, it is human rights that provide the liberal democracies (which establish them for the whole of humanity) with the ideological basis to intervene all over the world. No longer in the name of sovereignty (which is demonized), but in the name of the *free world*, justice, and morals, being their guardians under the leadership of USA hegemonic power (Santos & Rodriguez Garavito, 2005; Toulmin, 1990).

The international liberal order, or international rules-based order, *reigned* until the new millennium without too many difficulties.

This historical premise shows how precarious and unbalanced the compromise between the two souls of liberalism & democracy was, and, from the beginning, restrictive of democracy. Moreover, democracy's logic is entirely political, as well as egalitarian, territorial and community-based, even if it increasingly resorts to a procedural form with constitutional contents and value boundaries, removed from the conflictual logic. The neoliberal rationale, on the other hand, does not recognize equality and solidarity and aims at unequal individualization achieved through socio-economic competition between both individuals and states. Political unpredictability is the worst threat to liberalism (once the sovereign's will, today, the pressure of the most disadvantaged in the order based on competition). Therefore, the government must be fragmented and technical in order to reduce the margins of politics.

A multipolar network—a successful metaphor in those years—codified the relationships between governments and big private networks: The management of *common* problems was outsourced to private arbitrators and control agencies.

In a global uni-polarity, hegemonized by the USA, international law decreased, and the *lex mercatoria* of private contracts, both voluntary, free, and asymmetrical, spread, with the effects of inequality being felt in people's lives. There is no state or group of (politically responsible) states that ensure compliance with the agreements and negotiations, but rather big economic institutions, that view themselves—questionably—as neutral: the IMF, the World Bank, and, in Europe, the ECB. They are technical institutions, obviously non-democratic, endowed with sovereign prerogatives, that drastically limit political action (Dardot et al., 2021).⁴

This clearly translates into class domination. The question is how far democracy's restriction must be extended in order to talk about an authoritarian regime: Can it be defined as such when forms of representation remain in place? And if so, how much pressure on consensus defines it as authoritarian?

There is also the issue of media control—media obviously managed by economic powers—of the stories that organize consent, involving the training of subjects and their subjectivation. Of course, consensus does not ensure that there is no authoritarianism. Indeed, ironically, democracies blame autocracies for unfree consensus.

Because of its internal contradictions, the myth of liberal democracy—the best of regimes—began to crumble. In the last few years, it has collapsed, freeing the

⁴ Civil war or class struggle? In this sense, also see Streeck (2016).

anti-democratic or post-democratic soul of neoliberalism or, at most, the soul that is indifferent to democracy (several options are possible).

This must be stressed: The collapse and the authoritarian turn confirm the strategic nature of liberalism. As historical conjunctures change, an authoritarian organization and alliances with anti-democratic forces become more fitting, if not necessary, in order to remove obstacles to capital operations. The fact that an ever-changing capitalism chooses authoritarian and anti-democratic forms and state protection does not contradict, in itself, its rationality based on profit—this indeed has already happened in the past. New narratives are needed in unfavorable economic and political conditions to transform the liberal-democratic state into a strong state, not only a guardian state but one that—as globalization shatters—also acts as a military aggressive/defensive state towards the rest of the world. It also becomes necessary to renew the idea of security intrinsic to liberalism.

The liberal-democratic hybrid, with its checks and balances and legal control, can be an obstacle to the rapid transformation of capitalist accumulation, which is increasingly less free trade, as opposed to monopoly and finance. New rules, new forms of life. Does liberalism change its skin? Deregulation and free trade will be replaced by an ideology (an ideology based on security) functional to monopolistic and oligarchic impositions in ‘friendly’ allied areas of the world, counteracting or preventing the expansion of those of the enemy. As has already happened during colonial imperialism.

3. *Authoritarian Can Be Said in Many Ways*

Following the end of the Bretton-Wood system, finance capital was the first to break all territorial and, therefore, democratic ties to free itself from the liberal-democratic form of liberalism. Now capital *directly* manages aggressive practical financial *policies*, free from state controls. It can challenge the states and their growing sovereign debts. International financial agencies, in an unregulated game, penetrate the markets of the most exposed countries with loan agreements, threatening their stability and blackmailing governments. Financial capitalism accumulates profits in a self-referential way, as these are completely disconnected from the real economy and, therefore, from class conflict (Gallino, 2011). It channels workers’ savings into pension funds, involving them in its hazards, as a discharge point for possible and probable crises (as happened in 2007-8) (Marazzi, 2008). Financial powers, still led by the dollar but free from territoriality, can force indebted states to kneel, as these are vulnerable to their decisions. This anarchist de-regulation opens up to self-regulation *if and when* financial agreements are fitting.

This is already an *authoritarian* form of government, even though not explicitly political (despite being allowed and often supported by liberal governments): It fulfills the liberal leaning to limit or deny the democratic pressures from below. It is a very insidious authoritarianism because, despite its harsh practical effects, there is no battleground. Its power—overlapping with the neoliberal myth of free and competitive entrepreneurship—goes beyond the consensus problem and bypasses any liberal democratic checks-and-balance system.

Its unlimited expansion, its de-territorialization, require political non-democratic decisions: States that act in an authoritarian way—even if not formally—are needed, states that remove crucial decisions from the control of citizens. The political decision is no longer visible in public discourse—we passively talk about *what the markets want*. If it is true that the end of the Bretton Wood agreements disconnected states and money issuing and put an end to all economic policies of states, the effects were instead political: Under a free-financial rule, the clash is between speculators and those who work, which means class conflict becomes more difficult.

Following the 2008 crisis, politics takes on a clear fascist *facies* not only in South America. A radical neoliberal far-right spreads, with movements and parties not only enhancing a neoconservative political representation but also setting the current agenda of governments. It is a punitive neoliberalism that reacts to crises of accumulation by allying itself with reactionary political forces, useful to direct the violence (inherent to neoliberal inequality) towards racialized, precarious, genderized groups that cannot adjust to the standard of a competitive society.

Liberalism's turning point replaced the unbalanced coexistence with democracy (seldom officially repudiated) with oligarchic and authoritarian forms.⁵

We must go back a few steps to understand what it means to combine liberalism and creeping or explicit authoritarianism. It is no coincidence that the heated debate on authoritarian liberalism took place in the interwar period of the twentieth century, involving great political scientists and jurists. Also then, as today, international law, the *jus publicum europeum*, was failing and also then, a weak democracy (Weimar's democracy) was in crisis, threatened by authoritarian changes. Schmitt, one of the protagonists-antagonists of this debate, addressing the business leaders at the Langnamverein (Dusserdolf, 23 November 1932), opened by saying, "Gentlemen! I shall deal with the issue of a 'Strong State and sound economy' from the point of view of the state" (Cristi, 1998).

⁵ Brown (2019) emphasizes how processes of de-democratization are inherent to neoliberalism, while Cooper (2017) focuses on the convergence between neoliberalism and the neo-conservative project.

He, of course, supported a strong state *separated* from economic affairs, against the Weimarian social constitutionalism. According to German ordoliberalism at the time, indeed, a strong state was the condition of the possibility of a free market. The contradiction is, therefore, only apparent: Force is necessary to *impose* a competitive order against anti-capitalist social claims.⁶ On the other front, there was the Frankfurt Institute of Sociology: Pollock, Horkheimer, Neumann, Marcuse (1934).⁷ Heller, contrasting Schmitt from another point of view, one that was juridical and liberal, used the locution ‘authoritarian liberalism’ to expose the liberal rhetoric that *covered* authoritarian decisions in the last years of the Weimar Republic (Heller, 1933).⁸ Also, then, like today, the debate for or against a strong state is ambiguously linked to the interpretation of the liberal lemma.

From our point of view, authoritarian liberalism is not an oxymoron but an ironic reversal of the word ‘liberty’ within the semantic space of liberalism: it is authoritarian because it is both repressive in a direct manner and in a soft, friendly sense, “as a managerial strategy useful, if not necessary, to the economy” (Applebaum, 2020; Somek, 2015). What emerged from that debate, rich in ideas, was not so much a true model of authoritarian liberalism but rather a *constant feature* of the liberal galaxy, implicit and sometimes evident. Being a *part* of the social conflict, which claims to impose itself also by force, and representing itself as a whole, it avoids contestability.

New monopolies and oligarchies of today’s capitalism willingly coexist with so-called populist (but actually authoritarian) democracies since they channel dissent towards aims that are not dangerous for capitalist operations. Oligarchies, on the one hand, are consonant with unequal—by default—neoliberal institutions and mythologies, which organize society through inequality; on the other hand, they are, in fact, widespread in states that are autocratic but liberal in economics. This transversal line, therefore, makes the emphatic opposition to autocracies (some, not all) by the liberal West, which are ready to take on authoritarian forms, paradoxical and weak.⁹

There has been talk about neo-feudalism, but the word oligarchy better stresses the detachment from territory and community and the absolute disproportion between the financial wealth that controls media, credit, and commerce and a fragmented, dispersed, impoverished mass without the tools to contend and without strategies and

⁶ See the monographic issue of “Political Philosophy” 1/2019 on ordo-liberalism and Schmitt’s influence on it; Ptak (2004) on the active participation of ordoliberalists in Nazi economic management (p. 62 ff.) and Bonefeld (2016, 2017).

⁷ Marcuse denounces the authoritarian “from within” of the liberal state.

⁸ The term authoritarian is used here polemically and in extreme defense of the dying Weimerian republic.

⁹ In some cases, as in Russia, the oligarch class is directly in power; in the USA and Europe, there are professionals closely tied to political power: politically and economically winning elites and lobbies.

aims. Masses feel only the insecurity that grips them, the dark, undefined, and ubiquitous threat not only to well-being but to life itself.

This is the *topos* where the authoritarian option places itself, traditionally emerging from the very fear it can exploit and ride—fear of the siege to our way of life, to our race, to patriarchy, to the *sine cura* enjoyment of our property—fear governed in such a way as not to question economic liberalism, oligarchies and even less the state itself, the guardian of our West and therefore endowed with a growing security apparatus to control any and all social discontent.

It would be an unforgivable mistake to underestimate how much politics there is in the systematic hollowing out of democracy and in stimulating endemic social insecurity.

Populism is not the topic of this essay. It would require a specific analysis of its being more a technique and rhetoric of authoritarian liberalism than a nationalist communitarianism (Bruno, 2020, pp. 147–158). However, we are interested in its ambiguity and its making authoritarianism acceptable by allowing it in common sense: as long as it actually protects people, maintaining well-being or at least survival.

It is in fact the issue of security, hypertrophically developed, expressed in a rancorous and defensive-aggressive key, that must now lead us to understand the specificity of the authoritarian turning point, immanent to liberal rationality and activated by current contingencies.

The *free world* feels increasingly less safe. And it overturns the idea of exporting civilization into a gigantic apparatus that defends its hegemony; therefore, in the West it severely restricts the personal freedoms that it once ideologically emphasized.

4. *Live Dangerously. Society Must Be Defended: From Whom?*

In liberal and neoliberal discourse, the word freedom has a privatistic, individualistic, and economic meaning: it stresses authority if understood as an excess of sovereign power over the economy. The connection to a redefined concept of authority is, instead, positive if liberalism is the political rationality that defends the capitalist form of life. Here—as we have seen—authority overlaps with expertise, as removed as possible from sovereign arbitrariness (like science vs mass ignorance, evaluations rather than judgments, standards rather than laws). However, the effects are always political and harshly anti-democratic: they are austerity and, restriction of rights, lack of accountability of decision-makers, whose sovereign authority is accepted if bound to the *science* of capital's objective interests.

Emergency and fear (its subjective side) are behind the acceptance of the authoritarian turn, which is even collaboratively supported. Emergency, reloaded from classical legal-political theory, is the urgent, alarming way in which problems are presented.

Urgency *forces* neoliberal problem-solving governance to authoritative operations that suspend the normal course of rights and silence any alternative. Of course, the relationship can be, and it is, reversed, and the emergency can be urged or emphasized in order to authorize interventions: this is the double bind of the media's narrative of an emergency context, constructed so as to require authoritative technical-political intervention. All of this fully undermines democracy.

At the heart of the authoritarian device, there is fear, insecurity, and hunger for security. "Whoever examines the conscience of the present-day European, will always elicit the same imperative from its thousand moral folds and hidden recesses, [...] 'we wish that some time or other there may be NOTHING MORE TO FEAR!'" (Nietzsche, 1968).

The self-representation of the prewar bourgeois *Sicherheit Zeit* is—then and again in the 1990s—assertive. It removes the fear that always belongs to the unequal liberal order: the fear of losing all that has been won, besieged by the antagonistic class, by the social disorder of the poor, the vagrants, the thieves, and by the contagion of the diseases they transmit and by the wars waged by madmen, terrorists, barbarians and murderers (Wacquant, 2009). The emphasis on security always hides the secret anxiety over the fragility caused by violence perpetrated and forgotten. It is not only expressed by seismographic art but also erased by security apparatus and the deployment of force.

As an economic-social order that dissolves the traditional defenses of the subalterns, so that they are *free* to sell their labor-power, liberalism cannot but require reassurance and security devices. "Liberalism engages in a mechanism in which it will be obliged, at any moment, to arbitrate the freedom and security of individuals on the notion of danger [...] one could say that liberalism's motto is '*live dangerously*'" (Foucault, 2004). Foucault underlines the ambiguous meaning of this dangerous living: on the one hand, it is the entrepreneur's inclination to take risks, the destabilizing dynamism of the capitalist; on the other, the danger of a destabilized, expropriated society, under the cover of an egalitarian form. If everyone is free—in order to be commodity-labor—this freedom can produce disorder, it can threaten property and accumulation. This does not have to happen in order to be afraid. Fear is inherent in the liberal way of life: "'*Live dangerously*' means that individuals are continually put in a state of danger, or rather, are induced to experience their situation, their life, their present, their future, as pregnant with dangers [...] There is no liberalism without a culture of danger" (Foucault, 2004).

Liberalism must, therefore, be conceived of as a demonic (or ironic?) policy of insecurity, a complex process, *framing* all political and social relationships in terms of danger-security. The safety language is, indeed, not a simple tool to describe dangerous

events, but what allows them to be produced, if not from nothing, almost from nothing (Castells, 2009). The security discourse is performative: it modulates and redefines political and social relations. And, of course, it “drips with historicity,” that is, the security discourse is charged with the concreteness of material devices. Therein, knowledge (political, judicial, medical, economic, psychiatric, administrative-police) structures practices of power that are accepted because of the danger and, therefore, for the protection of life (a *topos* of liberal thought), which justifies everything.

The insecurity produced by security techniques not only fuels old and new xenophobes and idiosyncrasies but also excites them through the deployment of security means (cameras, patrols, alarms, check-ins...), with “the formidable extension of control procedures, of constraint and coercion.” Security control becomes “the driving postulate” (Foucault, 2004) and the grid of intelligibility of political and social phenomena.

This is the topical node in the relationship between freedom and security, which is not a simple zero-sum game, as it means the transfer of the idea of freedom—civil, political, and social freedoms—to the framework of security, which involves its translation into techniques for governing *freedom as a dangerous excess*.

Insecurity politics is *the* liberal-authoritarian technique of governing the present. A technique that affects the state, both if understood in a Foucauldian sense, as a set of governance practices, or in its vertical dimension, in terms of sovereignty, constituted power, exclusion/inclusion, exception/law. The state becomes the hub—though it is not the only one—of agencies and actors who compete for security management, obviously avoiding any bottom-up control, *for security reasons*. Indeed, *for security reasons*, it obtains active cooperation in general surveillance of individual daily behaviors, either out of the desire for patrols, or out of partial ignorance, or simply out of disinterest, whereby individuals passively provide data to the algorithms that will profile *possible* enemies, both domestic and foreign (Andreas & Nadelmann, 2006; Huysmans, 2006; Marwick, 2012; Palidda, 2016).

It is important to underline the subjective—as well as objective—aspect of the lack of security, which is fear. As we know, contemporary liberalism hinges on subjectivation. The authoritarian fold is successful and effective when the people themselves *freely* ask for policing and domestic and international protection, feeling and being induced to feel that their lives are in danger. The police offer security as a *sine cura*, as worry-free enjoyment of one’s wealth: “harmless happiness,” according to Hobbes (1641), who refers to an *anthropos* split between aggression and fear. Today, it is civilized emotions, though certainly active in a society fit for competition.

If the whole liberal narrative is based on a desire for *sine cura* that delegates its assurance to state authority, this desire becomes obsessive when multiple crises besiege the

fortress of the individual. At this point, it is better for the ruling class to emphasize and *ride* fears to master disorder for its own benefit.

We are back where we started. After the shock of September 11, the apotheosis of security under the aegis of US liberal democracy and global market—individuals, entrepreneurs of their own success then transformed danger into a calculated and fruitful risk, police control was welcomed in the form of surveillance of suburbs and of the poor, who were ‘at risk’ of delinquency—gave way to distressing anxiety over insecurity, which affects the hegemonic state itself, the great guarantor of the liberal global order, the USA. Imaginary and materiality converge in reversing security into insecurity over a danger, one that was even greater due to its being unexpected, due to the distorted image provided of what was happening, due to the blindness regarding the global tensions involving those who had been silenced by neoliberal myth, almost as if all they hoped for was to be able to challenge the financial and cultural Western hegemony!

Instead, growth slows, inequalities mix labor and exploitation with race and gender subalternity, and the middle classes lose their status... when global emergencies (environmental, financial, terrorist, and health crises) explode—beyond national control—the liberal West becomes the land of fear (Baumann, 2006), which justifies more of the infinite growth of the security apparatus, which becomes increasingly militarized and ready for preventive war.

The populist liberal-authoritarian wave in South America and the creeping one in the West are the classic responses to fear: the mechanisms of representation, already hollowed out by technocracy, implode, hyper-developing the executive power in an unbalanced way and centralizing it in a leader, who reassures the masses, by addressing discontent and anxiety. The strong state promises safety: moreover, it does not seem to have the strength to counteract the shattering global hegemony, which breaks down along its own fault lines, driven by contextual and regional specificities. The liberal global order ignored and trampled the latter, intervening on them with its wars disguised as ‘special operations’ to straighten a *wrong* regime, in Iraq, Syria, the Balkans, Libya, Afghanistan... Hybrid wars leave unresolved wounds and never stabilize concrete and historical situations. Rather, they produce discontent, a resentment deprived of any legitimacy and therefore ready to take the extreme form of terrorism. Which cannot be seized. The result is fear of the liberal West, towards which all possible threats seem to be channeled, all possible contagions: health, financial, of cyber piracy, irregular currencies, wrong religions, environmental contamination... The answer of authoritarian liberalism is now the maximization of security, of war, or at least the call to arms, both metaphorical and real, hybrid and mediatic. These are all public or mercenary forces

needed to prevent the attacks. Preventive war means attacking possible foreign, pathogenic bodies first before the enemy becomes an enemy.

What about capitalism's brand? Surveillance and preventive defense are classic, very rich fields of investment and profit that offer a profitable outlet for capital stagnation, with technological innovation both in surveillance and in the military (Zuboff, 2019). In the West, economic investments and militarism have always been linked as state capitalism's response to stagnation.

Artificial intelligence, in turn, is the most recent but basic device linking economy and surveillance/war, as well as data collection for surveillance, in turn connected to the consumer market. The whole of the population is being watched, monitored, and selected in the name of the defense of rights. The mutual slippage of private and public in neoliberal governance authorizes the contracting of public functions of surveillance to private agencies that support or replace police security, in an opaque and illegal exchange of data, functional to diverse (sometimes conflicting) controls. Liberal freedom shows its bleak downside—its *heart of darkness*—in the widespread surveillance of all citizen operations. For their own good, of course. For their safety.

This mixed, opaque system of control not only weakens democratic accountability and overlapping political and economic strategies but also works with a surplus of self-referentiality.

Surveillance studies highlight this specific feature. Technologies automate the security systems avoiding human (political) intervention, thus confirming technocratic and authoritarian management. The security apparatus seems to be a tool (managed by the state power), an automaton, a headless, irresponsible device whose decisions emerge from the data collection itself. This is another ironic effect of a theory that mythologized the self-regulation of the headless market!

Alongside the authoritarian *facies* that liberal regimes claim to ensure, by riding on fear and insecurity, social control functional to capital, another form is emerging (also ironic because it stems from this reversal). It is *involuntary* authoritarianism, which does not refer to a teleological project. If we no longer doubt that political institutions colonize a large part of technological control, the latter (given capital's control over technologies) promotes a self-referential system that cannot be blamed only on the political powers promoting it, or on a resistance to it, perhaps economic or social, or only on the people's concurrence.

Ironic structures are subject to the heterogony of ends. Another surprising, unusual, and ironic effect of authoritarian security technologies for the control of lives is, in fact, that data collection builds an incoherent aggregation of de-subjectivized fragments,

which reflects no living being in its concrete context. Each living individual is broken into different users of different services and specific, possibly dangerous, activities. If it is necessary to control men and women, what is actually captured is no stable, real subject. It always changes, reformulating itself in random conditions, it is a mere assemblage of data that does not correspond to any real living being.

Rather than a project—the liberticidal erosion of real freedom by political-economic oligarchies carried out with the management of insecurity—we have an *authoritarian effect*, a hypertrophic type of control that produces insecurity and the loss of freedom of everyone, not only of presumed *possible* enemies.

This control effect, however, is doomed to failure. If only for the inability to intervene normatively on *big data*. But also for the ironic effect that power loses its grip on *vanishing* subjects who lack specific and concrete context.

These lives could find their own power to struggle in the material dimension of oppression: the struggles are immersed in the concreteness of situated relationships, and within them, they require the political subjectification of discontent. On the one hand, technological immateriality exposes control to failure; on the other, it makes the conflictual profile of subjects evanescent. This is a serious anti-democratic effect. It does not mean total absence of power; rather, it requires a differentiated and genealogical analysis of concrete contexts and struggles.

References

- Andreas, P., & Nadelmann E. (Eds.) (2006). *Policing the Globe. Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations*. Oxford University Press.
- Applebaum, A. (2020). *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Kopf Doubleday.
- Arrighi, G. (2010). *Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Time*. Verso.
- Barr, M., & Mackie, D. (2013). *The Euro area adjustment: about halfway there*. J.P. Morgan.
- Bauman, Z. (2006). *Liquid Fear*. Polity.
- Benjamin, W. (1971). *Il Dramma barocco tedesco*. Einaudi.
- Benjamin, W. (2000). *I Passages di Parigi IX*. Einaudi.
- Biebricher, T. (2019). *The political Theory of Neoliberalism*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503607835>
- Boltanski L., & Chiapello E. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Gallimard.
- Bonefeld, W. (2016). Authoritarian Liberalism: from Schmitt via Ordoliberalism to the Euro. *Critical Sociology*, 43(4-5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516662695>
- Bonefeld, W. (2017). *The strong State and the free Economy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17kk9p8>
- Brown, W. (2019). *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/brow19384>
- Bruno, V. (2020). Between Scylla and Charybdis: Technocratic and Populist Fears compressing Liberal Democracy. In M. Feix & M-J. Thiel (Eds.), *Peuple et Populisme, Identité et Nation* (pp. 147–158). Strasbourg U.P.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Colombo, A. (2022). *Il governo mondiale dell'emergenza*. Cortina.
- Cooper, M. (2017). *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. Zone Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1qft0n6>
- Cristi, R. (1998). *Carl Schmitt and authoritarian Liberalism. Strong State, free economy*. Wales University Press.
- Dardot, P., Laval, C., Gueguen, H., & Sauvetre, P. (2021). *La choix de la guerre civile. Une autre histoire du neoliberalisme*. Lux.

- Foucault, M. (2004). *Naissance de la della biopolitique, Course au College de France 1978-79*. Gallimard.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, 16, 3–18.
- Gallino, L. (2011). *Finanzcapitalismo*. Einaudi.
- Habermas, J. (2015). *The Lure of Tachnocracy*. Polity.
- Hayek, F. (1976). *Law, Legislation and Liberty*. Chicago University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226321257.001.0001>
- Heller, H. (1933). Authoritarian Liberalism? *European Law Journal*, 21(3), 295–301. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12125>
- Hobbes, T. (1641). *De cive*.
- Huysmans, J. (2006). International Politics of Insecurity: Normativity Inwardness and the Exception. *Security Dialogue*, 37(1), 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010606064134>
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order. *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>
- Kagan, R. (2018). *The Jungle grows back: America and our Imperiled World*. Knopf.
- Marazzi, C. (2008). Il corpo del valore: bioeconomia e finanziarizzazione del valore. In A. Amendola, L. Bazzicalupo, F. Chicchi, & A. Tucci (Eds.), *Biopolitica, bioeconomia e processi di soggettivazione* (pp. 139 ss.). Quodlibet.
- Marcuse, H. (1939). *The struggle against the liberalism in the totalitarian view of the state*. In H. Marcuse, *Negations*. MayFlyBooks.
- Marwick, A. (2012). The public Domain: Social surveillance in every day life. *Surveillance & Society*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v9i4.4342>
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2019). *The politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478003267>
- Nietzsche, F. (1968). *Jenseits von Gut und Bose*. In G. Colli & M. Montinari (Eds.), *Opere di Nietzsche* (vol. VI, II). Adelphi.
- Palidda, S. (Ed.) (2016). Introduction. In S. Palidda (Ed.), *Governance of Security and Ignored Insecurity in Contemporary Europe*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315585482>
- Ptak, R. (2004). *Vom Ordoliberalismus zur sociales Marktwirtschaft*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-11779-7>
- Santos, B. D. S., & Rodriguez Garavito C. A. (Eds.) (2005). *Law and Globalization from below: towards a Cosmopolitan Legality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Somek, A. (2015). Delegation and Authority: Authoritarian Liberalism today. *European Law Journal*, 21(3), 317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12132>

Streeck, W. (2016). *How will Capitalism end? Essays on a Failing System*. Verso.

Toulmin, S. (1990). *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Free Press.

Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*.
Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392255>

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs.