

Review of: "Neoliberalism, Strong State and Democracy"

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Review of H. Gabrisch "Neoliberalism, Strong State and Democracy"

With neoliberalism being such a buzzword in the social sciences it is useful to have an article add to the literature on the history of neoliberalism and specifically how neoliberals conceptualised the role of the state. If neoliberalism were a contemporary return to the principles of classical laissez-faire liberalism the state would be just an umpire or referee, providing a framework for competition, to protect private property and prevent harm, but instead the author shows how for neoliberalism the state is necessarily an active agent in socio-economic affairs. Furthermore, the author clearly demonstrates that neoliberalism is in tension with liberal democracy given its authoritarian tendency to prefer technocratic management of the economy to best enable sustained profit-accumulation for corporate capital. As the author makes clear in his argument, while neoliberalism is often glossed as market fundamentalism and a minimal / non-interventionist state, neoliberalism actually differs from these commitments as they are usually understood. This is because neoliberals started with a theory of the state and specifically an argument for a strong state to reduce social influences on politics and to construct a market conducive to large economic actors. The outcome is not the minimal state but minimal democracy. As the author puts it:

from a neoliberal perspective, state and quasi-state institutions independent of societal interests can best ensure the efficiency and stability of the capitalist system globally, regionally and nationally as "well-meaning dictators".

And: "Neoliberalism is characterised by non-minimal state and quasi-state rule penetrating almost all subsystems of society, including the economy".

Given that this article makes an important contribution to the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism it would be beneficial to say more about that literature and what the author is adding to it. There is an allusion to this when the author discusses the EU but I think more could be said about this at the start. Indeed, given that neoliberalism, on this view, is argued to be in tension with democratic control, it may be that the term authoritarian neoliberalism entails some redundancy, given that neoliberalism is intrinsically authoritarian, because of its antipathy to democratic governance.

When discussing some of the applications of neoliberalism, it would have been useful to go into a bit more detail as when, for example, discussing the European Union. Indeed, given the argument about neoliberalism preferring technocratic governance above the level of the nation-state, more detail on the EU and possibly trans-national trade agreements would have been helpful. The World Economic Forum is also mentioned and again given the importance of this it would be useful to say more about it. Indeed, given that the WEF's activities are quite opaque, it would seem like the perfect

example of plutocratic governance removed from democratic accountability. The author mentions how the rise of religion and populism may be threats to neoliberalism and democracy, but I wonder if at least the latter can be incorporated. The campaign for Brexit in the UK relied on populism with the slogan 'take back control' but at least some politicians used this as a means to the sought after end of creating a low tax and low regulation haven for international corporations. Perhaps political processes and transactions, like market transactions, cannot be known, although the rise of big data and algorithms that can not just monitor actions in real-time but potentially manipulate them too suggest a way for neoliberals to contain populism or use it to their advantage.