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Book Review
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A Brief History of Neoliberalism

David Harvey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 254 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0-19-928327-9

'Neoliberalism', rather like 'Globalization' has become a more-or-less familiar political concept to those engaged with the task of comprehending our present situation, but unlike the wall-to-wall tomes on the meaning of 'Globalization', there have so far been notably few critical explorations of 'neoliberalism'. David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* therefore comes as a much-needed theoretical overview offering as it does a cuttingly succinct introduction to the subject, condensing a vast amount of detail into 200 or so pages.

The book maps impressively the historical development of the neoliberal project over the past 30 or so years, as Harvey traces the origins of neoliberalism as a prescriptive ideological model to neo-classical economics but also thinkers such as Friedrich Von Hayek, before being taken up by Milton Friedman and the 'Chicago School' and propagandized with a near-religious zeal by an army of powerful private think tanks, tenured academics and corporate lobby groups in the U.S. and elsewhere.

As an ideology, neoliberalism sees the market as a supreme good in itself, just as most of its accompanying rhetoric concerning 'freedom' ultimately concerns the freedom to buy and sell and to acquire and maintain property. In effect the essence of 'freedom' becomes 'economic'- the purity of the market: the freedom to work or starve and the freedom to obey laws sanctioning this.

The neoliberal project might best be described as a purer form of capitalism than diluted Keynesianism could offer, in effect: the imposition - as far as possible - of market imperatives at all times and in every area of life or the 'cash nexus' in Marx's phrase. In contrast with the post-war Keynesian social compromise of full employment, a strong welfare safety net, public ownership of key industries, and state intervention to 'pump prime' the economy when needed, neoliberalism successfully all but destroyed such 'consensus' with its own prescriptions of privatization, de-regulation, structural unemployment, corporate tax breaks, and 'welfare reform'.

Led by Reagan in North America and Thatcher in Europe, the neoliberal project has been continued by parties of all shades in both America and the EU, perhaps embodied most successfully in the post-ideological turn of New Labour's 'Third Way', and taken up with admittedly varying degrees of enthusiasm by social democratic parties across Europe. The legacy of Thatcher's vulgarly brazen market populism aimed at creating a 'property owning democracy', is of course widespread in the UK today in everything from the rhetoric of the 'stakeholder society' to the credit and mortgage-disciplined population inhabiting it.

The neoliberal project is a global project though, and nowhere is this more visible than in global politico-economic groupings such as the WTO, OECD, and the G8 all of whom have frequently restated their unswerving commitment to such policies, perhaps matched in their enthusiasm only by

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the IMF and World Bank, who continue to impose such prescriptions on the developing world, specifically that of 'structural adjustment', that is, 'aid' being contingent on the implementation of neo-liberal policies however disastrous the effects might be.

One of the books' great merits is to state, quite boldly, that the neoliberal project was and is, a strategy aimed at restoring and maintaining class power. As a response by capital to the seismic shocks generated by the worker and student revolts of the 1960's and 70's, no less than the ongoing economic crises of the latter decade marked by the 1973 Oil Crisis, neoliberalism can be seen as a determined response to the failure of the Keynesian compromise. Harvey sets out clearly the ideological and class character of the neoliberal project as the concerted effort of capital's attempts to overcome the crisis of accumulation,

It is all too clear why those of wealth and power so avidly support certain conceptions of rights and freedoms while seeking to persuade us of their universality and goodness. Thirty years of neoliberal freedoms, have, after all not only restored power to a narrowly defined capitalist class, they have also produced enormous concentrations of power [...]. (Harvey p.38)

After the past 30 years in which neoliberal hegemony seemingly triumphed, taking in the end of the Cold War and its somewhat belated replacement, The War on Terror, the first decade of this century has already been spectacularly marked by the global revolt against neoliberalism, against what its advocates like to call 'Globalization', but what is quite explicitly - even in its mildest form - an opposition to capitalism's global neoliberal offensive. From the global anti-capitalist summit protests of Seattle Genoa, Cancun, and Rostock, to the successful anti-CPE movement of 2006 in France, to the revolts in Latin America and Asia against the plundering of resources and exploitation of the dispossessed, we are able to at last see an ongoing contestation of the neoliberal project.

As Harvey notes, the only real fear for the capitalist class "are movements which threaten them with expropriation or revolutionary violence," we might argue that such a potential or at least latent threat is always present, however seemingly remote or silent it may appear. As such: "The danger, is that crises might spin out of control and become generalized, or that revolts will arise against the system that creates them." (p.163). The neoliberal turn of the past 30 or so years can be seen as one such response from the capitalist class, to an upsurge in class struggle waged against it from below. In turn, the neoliberal offensive is capital's sustained response - class war waged from above - against those who would challenge both the system and those who gain most from it, what Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession".

Neoliberal policies and their concomitant effects are of course in crude abundance across both the developed and developing world. As jobs are off-shored and outsourced to the super-exploitation of the emerging markets of Asia, and Latin America with their vast reservoirs of cheap, flexible labour, and even cheaper, more flexible adherence to labour and human rights standards, the workforces of the advanced economies face a lifetime competing for temporary or short term contracts, constant insecurity, and overnight redundancy. Meanwhile, those 'officially' outside the labour market face the imposition of 'welfare reform' measures involving cutbacks to social entitlements and ultimately outright compulsion to accept the first job they are offered no matter how unsuitable or poorly paid.

Such a situation is summed up well by a term not readily translatable into English but instantly recognizable: *precarity*.

In spite of its pseudo-scientific pretensions, the *dismal science* embodied in economic reason and indeed the maxim of neoliberalism - echoing the rhetoric of the industrial revolution - is that people must be made to work *harder, longer, for less money*, and be grateful for such a privilege.

Harvey clearly delineates the tactics used to bring about this massive consolidation of corporate power, class power and class interests identifying how the same process has weakened and fragmented the ability to challenge this power as far as possible destroying the capacity for collective action, whilst attempting to eliminate the idea of collective or social needs. Similarly, just as the neoliberal project focuses on countering and offsetting any redistributive or levelling tendencies at work with the upward redistribution of wealth from poor to rich, the primacy of 'wealth creation' and 'growth' where *capital* creates wealth, not *labour*, is continually emphasized.

Harvey's book is undoubtedly an indispensable guide to getting to grips with both neoliberalism and globalization, which may be argued are partially, at least enmeshed processes. The contestation of neoliberalism, and indeed capitalism remains ultimately one of class struggle, but we should not as Harvey rightly notes, "wax nostalgic for some lost golden age, when some fictional category like 'the proletariat' was in motion, [...] nor is there some simple conception of class to which we can appeal," (p.202), but in mapping precisely where we are and how we got here, it remains the great merit of Harvey's book to trace an historical outline to our present era, and the possible paths beyond it.