

Authoritarian Neoliberalism, the Occupy Movements, and IPE

Ian Bruff

In the absence of any kind of hegemonic aura, neoliberal practices have proved increasingly unable to garner the consent, or even the reluctant acquiescence, necessary for more 'normal' modes of governance. Of particular importance in the post-2007 crisis has been the growing frequency with which constitutional and legal changes, in the name of economic 'necessity', are seeking to reshape the purpose of the state and associated institutions. This attempted reconfiguration is three-fold: (1) the more immediate appeal to material circumstances as a reason for the state being unable, despite 'the best will in the world', to reverse processes such as greater socioeconomic inequality and dislocation; (2) the deeper and longer-term recalibration of what kind of activity is feasible and appropriate for 'non-market' institutions to engage in, diminishing expectations in the process; and (3) the reconceptualisation of the state as increasingly non-democratic through its subordination to constitutional and legal rules that are 'necessary' for prosperity to be achieved.

This process, of states reconfiguring themselves in increasingly non-democratic ways in response to profound capitalist crisis, is what I view as the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism. Authoritarian neoliberalism does not represent a wholesale 'break' from earlier neoliberal practices, yet it is qualitatively distinctive due to way in which dominant social groups are less interested in neutralising resistance and dissent via concessions and forms of compromise that maintain their hegemony, favouring instead the explicit exclusion and marginalisation of such groups. However, the global crisis has intensified the crisis of legitimisation *already* confronting various capitalist states – for instance, declining voter turnout and party membership, greater electoral volatility, growing mistrust of the political elite – meaning that authoritarian neoliberalism is simultaneously strengthening *and* weakening the state as the latter reconfigures into a less open and therefore more fragile polity. As a result, the attempted 'authoritarian fix' is potentially a sticking plaster rather than anything more epochal.

The question, therefore, is whether the contradictions inherent to authoritarian neoliberalism – especially with regard to the strengthening/weakening of

the state – will create the conditions in which a more progressive and radical politics can begin to reverse the tide of the last three decades. As things stand, the crisis has ambiguous implications for radical/progressive politics of the Left, not least because radical politics is often being practised most successfully by radical Right movements and parties. This is the case if one considers the rise of xenophobia and racism in Europe, the Tea Party in the US, or indeed the more general ‘anti-party’ dominance of charismatic figureheads such as Putin in various countries. However, the occupy movements have proved to be a welcome corrective to the pessimism that the above observations encourage (regarding Putin, too, as we have seen in recent weeks). In particular, they have forced onto the agenda a fundamental challenge to the dominant narratives of the crisis, which – combined with the decline of mass political parties and the imbrication of all main parties with a system in crisis – has made the state an increasingly direct target of a range of popular struggles, demands and discontent.

This is crucial, because the state and its associated institutions have often been viewed as somehow inherently more progressive and democratic than the ‘market’. As a result, ‘Left’ politics has frequently been guilty of taking the law to be somehow neutral, ignoring in the process how ‘non-market’ social forms have been *central* to the rise of neoliberalism and thus the growing inequalities of power which characterise the world in which we live. This was expressed vividly in the clearing of Zuccotti Park in New York, which not only displayed clearly (despite the attempts to herd journalists into one part of the park) the brute coercive capacities of state power, but also the denial of the constitutional right to expressive protest in the name of ‘democracy’. However, it is not an isolated case, with justifications of police violence and the mobilisation of juridical power against the occupy and other movements being a routine part of events across the globe (see for example the rather different response, compared to several months earlier, by the Egyptian security apparatuses to the occupation of Tahrir Square in late 2011). In consequence, the occupy movements have exposed the authoritarian neoliberal state to protest and struggle, and its continued delegitimation, from a radical/progressive perspective that *continues* to affirm the values embodied in notions of solidarity, equality and cooperation. This alerts us in a more expansive way to how inequalities of power are produced and reproduced in capitalist societies, enabling us to consider how other, more emancipatory and progressive, worlds are possible.

So what of IPE? As with many aspects of the broader discipline of Political Science, IPE has been comfortable with dividing our world into distinct spheres, each with their own ‘intrinsic’ properties and norms. Therefore, now would be the time to overcome these artificial dichotomies and reinvigorate the study of the international political economy; even if the scholar in question is not interested in emancipatory issues, then surely the need for more adequate, holistic analyses is now necessary as well as desirable. Apparently not: journals and conferences continue to talk of ‘the market’ *over*

here and 'the state' *over there*, 'interests' *over here* and 'values' *over there*, 'economic crisis' *over here* and 'political responses' *over there*, 'democracy' *over here* and 'authoritarianism' *over there*. I could go on... As things stand, IPE asks interesting questions about the world, but it is increasingly unfit for the purpose of exploring these questions.

Ian Bruff is Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations at Loughborough University. He has been Chair of the Critical Political Economy Research Network of the European Sociological Association since 2009, and a member of the Steering Committee for the Standing Group on International Relations of the European Consortium for Political Research since 2010. He recently joined the editorial team for the Routledge/RIPE Series in Global Political Economy, and from 2012-14 will be the Chair of the Book Prize panel of judges for the International Political Economy working group of the British International Studies Association.