International Politics (2023) 60:470–481
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00448-6

Dissecting pandemic-*cum*-wartime authoritarianism

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Published online: 10 March 2023
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Keywords Authoritarianism · Covid-19 · Illiberalism · Neoliberalism · Pandemic · War

Introduction

> [A]uthoritarianism is defined by its attack upon both formal and substantive democracy. Authoritarians seeks to create, or have created, systems based on the monopolization of power by an oligarchic elite – usually combining political and economic interests. This simple relational definition means that where authoritarianism advances, democracy must decline – and vice versa. (Cooper 2021: 10)

Although writing about authoritarianism never is a soothing experience, it proved feverish in a time when mass-mediated attention shifted from a raging pandemic to the outbreak of war in a matter of days. Where coronavirus triggered variegated authoritarian reflexes across the globe—some necessary, some less so—Russia's war in Ukraine has once again laid bare the entanglements of a (nominally) democratic 'West' with autocrats and oligarchs habitually associated with authoritarian 'others'. That said, amidst a newfound 'Western unity' currently being projected on the seemingly reinvigorated institutions of *Pax Americana*, one almost forgets how elite factions in the neoliberal heartlands have fallen prey to authoritarian contagion over the course of the 2010s. Where media portrayed Boris Johnson as being diametrically opposed to Vladimir Putin, one needs to be reminded how 'Brexit Britain' destabilized the neoliberal multilateralism undergirding the European Union (EU). Likewise, one almost forgets that the United States' slide into authoritarian unilateralism has not been halted since the departure of Donald Trump, who left the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for 'brain dead' according to Emmanuel Macron. Amidst prevalent black-and-white narratives of democratic good versus authoritarian evil, the many shades of grey seemingly evaporate.

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Fortunately, academic and popular output on the rise of authoritarianism and its mutant variants—say democratic backsliding (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), electoral autocracy (Higashijima 2022), kleptocracy (Burgis 2020), mutant neoliberalism (Callison and Manfredi 2020), post-neoliberalism (Gerbaudo 2021), or neo-illiberalism (Hendrikse 2018), to name a few—has exploded since the 2016 votes for Brexit and Trump. These and other works, all published around the closing of the 2010s to make sense of the rise of nationalist 'strongmen' worldwide, offer variegated clarity amidst the world-historic events and ideological haze fueling the turbulent 2020s. Indeed, much like coronavirus, authoritarianism has become increasingly transmissible, threatening democracies across the globe. Luke Cooper's *Authoritarian Contagion: The Global Threat to Democracy* (2021) is one of the latest contributions within this genre. Building on Antonio Gramsci's ideas on hegemonic politics, Cooper sketches out how authoritarianism is on the march across variegated neoliberal landscapes, offering nationalist narratives of 'them and us' along the promise of *protection*:

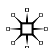
> [T]he book puts forward 'authoritarian protectionism' as a paradigm to understand the contemporary challenge to democratic politics […] It seeks to persuade members of the insider group (usually the ethnically defined nation) that their partisan interest to survive and thrive in this violent world requires the defeat and suppression of 'others'. (Cooper 2021: 15)

Other recent works equally emphasize the nationalist promise of protection in what some consider the eclipse of neoliberalism (e.g. Gerbaudo 2021). Cooper, however, is more careful in declaring neoliberalism dead. Although he sees Trump "[b]reaking totally with the politics of multilateralism" (Cooper 2021: 2) as "the post-neoliberal right" moves "towards a more collectivist discourse" (ibid: 127), he also argues that "we could see it as evolving, not dying" when thinking of neoliberalism in broader terms (ibid: 133). Building on insights by Karl Polanyi and David Harvey, "if neoliberalism is viewed … primarily as a process of restoring power to the financial class by opening up new areas for capitalist predation, then authoritarianism can clearly be its greatest ally" (ibid).

In the remainder of this review, I will unpack Cooper's argument by drawing out some of the key themes and strengths to develop a constructive critique by comparing and contrasting Cooper's insights with others in the field, including my own work. In addition, I will supplement Cooper's analysis of the early political management of coronavirus, with the benefit of more hindsight, and conclude by reflecting on Cooper's suggestions on how to escape the authoritarian doom loop.

Key mechanics

> [Authoritarian protectionism] is a mindset common to the new challenge to democracy that observes a simple maxim, 'the world will end for others, but not for us'. By putting it in this way, I hope to draw attention to the sense of



> existential threat and crisis that is animating the desire for protection among populations across the world. (Cooper 2021: 6)

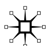
The book is organized along six chapters wherein Cooper systematically unpacks his argument. The overarching conceptual frame is both straightforward and convincing, as it builds on “a basic working conception of democracy and treats authoritarianism as a relational category defined in opposition to it”, whereby the two categories function as *ideal types* “that exist at different poles on a spectrum” (2021: 8). Careful to distill the variegated nuances between the likes of Modi, Orbán, and Trump,[1] the book nonetheless offers a truly global perspective, whereby developments in the Group of Twenty (G20) countries are rightfully presented as having “an outsized impact on the ideological complexion of the wider world” (ibid: 11). The trend over the 2010s has been clear, and Cooper anticipates “a long- term and polarized struggle between progressive democrats and authoritarian nationalists” (ibid:12). Besides states like Brazil or India experiencing democratic backsliding, Cooper rightfully adds Xi Jinping’s China to the “coterie of ‘strongmen’ leaders” having emerged on the world stage, and pays “close attention to the contrast between Trump and Xi” (ibid: 5).

Zooming in on political developments in the neoliberal heartlands and the wider West, Cooper identifies “[t]he return of meaningful political strife” since the financial crisis of 2008—indeed a watershed moment for consensual centrist rule guiding neoliberal capitalism. Since then, “authoritarian protectionism has filled the void” (ibid: 7). Building on Stuart Hall, this political formula is not a wholesale return to authoritarian populism of Thatcher era, although it certainly reverberates with it. Instead, authoritarian protectionism moves away from liberal individualism, and is “animated by a collectivist agenda, but in a deeply nationalist form” (ibid: 8). In so doing, it presents itself as staunchly anti-elitist, above all embodied by Trump embracing “the American working class against the liberal elite” (ibid: 29), whereby the working class is defined in ethnic, nativist or racial terms:

> A politics of distribution based on ethnicity serves to disguise how these are class-divided populations with very varied levels of economic status and opportunity. Authoritarian protectionism is careful not to draw attention to these inequalities. (Cooper 2021: 31)

Disguising material inequalities through cultural ‘othering’ lies at the core of authoritarian protectionism, as it legitimizes the demolition of liberal democracy—of checks, balances, freedoms, and rights. As Cooper argues, “once members of the insider group are persuaded that their partisan interests are more important than democratic functioning, then they may be willing to sacrifice institutions” (ibid: 15). That many ‘strongmen’ are themselves part of the global billionaire class does not seem to bother many voters. In this sense, Trump is presented as an “astute

[1] For example, to his credit Cooper clearly anticipated the reactionary turn of the US Supreme Court: “US authoritarianism does not necessarily cast itself majoritarian. Unlike Orbán and Modi it often adopts an ultra-conservative jurisprudence […] Whereas Orbán rejects liberalism in the name of democracy, US ultra-conservatives reject democracy in the name of liberty” (2021: 37).



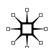
practitioner of hegemonic politics" (ibid: 4), capable of drawing in many voters despite his antics.

> [Trump's] message to moderate Republicans was simple: whatever they felt about him, the alternative, a Democratic Party that was supposedly in hock to the radical left and China, was worse. (Cooper 2021: 5)

As in my own work (Hendrikse and Fernandez 2019), Cooper points to the financial offshore world, where the neoliberal race to the bottom ends up in unilaterally-created sovereign spaces exempt from taxes and oversight, and whose protection is perfectly compatible with nationalist or 'sovereignist' politics, offering "a clear potential for an alliance between highly globalist individuals—who enjoy the 'flat Earth' culture created by financial globalization—and the new forces of the radical right" (Cooper 2021: 117). Putin's war in Ukraine has once again laid bare the profound entanglements of Russian capital with western financial enclaves like Amsterdam (Fernandez et al. 2022) and 'Londongrad' (e.g. Burgis 2020), long suggesting an organic harmony between western and non-western elite factions alike. More generally, Cooper rightly stresses the careful public downplaying of "the extreme free market agenda" by the likes of Trump (ibid: 65), who is equally linked to Russian money (Kendzior 2020), enacting tax cuts whereby billionaires "for the first time in a hundred years … were paying a lower tax rate than every other income group" (Cooper 2021: 22), *not upending but deepening* neoliberalism's drive to restore class power, seeing oligarchic billionaire-class rule eat into the neoliberal heartlands.

> As Trump's tax cuts demonstrate, recognition of these nativist impulses can be a powerful hegemonic device. If individuals within a higher status social group – say, White median income males – prioritize their own status-recognition, then they may be prepared to endure sacrifices at the level of distribution. (Cooper 2021: 24)

Cooper identifies how the autocratic wielding of sovereignty becomes "hostile to institutions and the rule of law", opening up "a breach with traditional neoliberalism" (ibid: 131). Foregrounding the politics of Hungary's Viktor Orbán, for example, Cooper argues that "[t]his shift towards crony capitalism … departs significantly from 'technocratic' neoliberal globalism" (ibid: 132). In this regard, I have my doubts, for the case of Hungary equally reveals a *synthesis* between Orbán's autocratic rule and the EU—a prime institution of neoliberal multilateralism, yet (via Orbán and others) equally subject to illiberal corrosion. As exemplified by German carmakers using Hungary as an export platform based on cheap labor and low taxes, Hungary is one of the cases where a continuing rollout of neoliberal economic policies parallels the political rollback of liberal democracy (Scheiring 2020), giving rise to what I have called neo-illiberalism (Hendrikse 2021a). Indeed, the decade-long cultivation and protection of Orbán within the center-right European People's Party (EPP) reflects "strategic interaction" (Cooper 2021: 12) between illiberal Orbán and the neoliberal EU, lubricated by an "ideological and organizational convergence between the far right and



the traditional centre right" (ibid: 16). Where Cooper emphasizes breaches and breaks, in other words, he downplays the ways in which neoliberalism is being reproduced via novel alliances and syntheses.

Sino-America

> China's shift to the aggressive posture of authoritarian protectionism similarly constitutes a mid-range effect of the 2008 economic crisis. But from a different historical perspective: a rising hegemon with confidence, in a decaying American-led world. (Cooper 2021: 105)

Although Cooper habitually stresses continuities and symbioses between 'old' neoliberalism(s) and 'new' authoritarianism(s), there book reveals a tendency to emphasize differences over similarities. Take Cooper's chapter on 'Sino-America', offering "a comparative analysis of the highly distinct, in institutional terms, form of authoritarian protectionism in China and the United States" (ibid: 16). Although drawing from "a comparable pool of ideological images", and "sharing a vision of a strong state aggressively prosecuting the interests of the national people, against their alleged enemies within and without" (ibid: 102), evermore relying on digital communication, manipulation, and control (ibid: 112), Cooper emphasizes the differences between them, speaking of "the distorted mirror image" (ibid: 99) and "competing models" (ibid: 113). Although not necessarily wrong, I argue that the key geopolitical and economic story shaping Sino-America is one of *convergence*.

Without doubt, "Trump thrives on chaos" whereas the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds "a deeply held dislike for instability and disruption" (ibid: 113), yet below the surface it seems abundantly clear that the Republican Party is seeking to transform the US in a one-party state over which it enjoys absolute control. Where this process indeed mirrors political developments in Hungary or Russia, it is Xi's China that constitutes the world's pre-eminent one-party-state template. Likewise, in terms of corporate governance, where US corporations "have proven adept at capturing the state", in contrast to the CCP which "is carrying through a 'capture' of private business" (ibid: 114), the bottom line is that both countries can increasingly be characterized as *corporatist regimes*, "combining political and economic interests" in the service of an "oligarchic elite" (ibid: 10) who are progressively shielded by- and entwined with sovereign state power.

Where the politics of the incumbent-yet-declining hegemon under Trump is described as "the deinstitutionalization of the state, making it a site of rentier claims" (ibid: 123), China "pursues a form of state-controlled capitalism well suited to its status as a giant 'late developer'" (ibid: 116). Yet again, apart from foregrounding their relative positions within the global political economy as explanatory

variable to describe their distinct authoritarian DNA, the picture is more nuanced: much like the US, for example, China governs *through* markets, enmeshing “market development and political consolidation” (Gruin 2019: 27), resembling the ways in which independent central banks—institutional pinnacles of neoliberalism—govern through markets (Braun 2020). The same can be said of Big Tech platforms, which are paramount to geopolitical strife within Sino-America (Hendrikse et al. 2020),[2] enmeshing themselves evermore closely with political communication, state governance and government (Hendrikse 2021b). The rise of western “hyper politics” (Jäger 2021) during 2010s travelled via the smartphone, with tech algorithms having come to amplify “populist ressentiment”, thereby increasingly blurring “fact and fiction … wherein the production of reality itself is at stake” (Vogl 2021: 140). Again, these developments are not diametrically opposed to China’s mass societal digitization, or platformization, albeit (still) unfolding under less authoritarian rule. As argued by Rogier Creemers, “perhaps the most shocking element of the story is not the Chinese government’s agenda, but how similar it is to the path technology is taking elsewhere” (quoted in Zuboff 2019: 393). Without discounting China’s variegated embrace of neoliberalism (Weber 2021), as I argued prior to the advent of the coronavirus pandemic:

> “[W]here China and the wider non-West opened up economically in the image of the US and the wider West with the advent of neoliberalism, the contemporary rise of neo-illiberalism heralds the moment wherein the US and the West are politically closing up in the image of China and the non-West” (Hendrikse 2021b: 84)

The corona booster

If authoritarian rule separates China from the US and the wider West, coronavirus proved to be the next booster in the *longue* convergence of Sino-America. Cooper does a brave job by incorporating the pandemic into his analysis, dedicating a chapter to ‘Pandemic Politics’, revealing a sharp eye for the key fault lines in the early political management of the virus. Emphasizing that all approaches are “equally corrosive to the future of democratic governance” (Cooper 2021: 89), from ‘Zero Covid’ China to ‘Let it rip’ Brazil, all containment and mitigation strategies rolled out worldwide can indeed be plotted on a spectrum that is inherently *illiberal*. Resultantly, economic policies were also impacted: where Trumpism rhetorically disguised neoliberal continuities, the pandemic saw key neoliberal penchants become subject to corrosion, although arguably born out of sheer necessity, and hardly undoing the formidable sway of the billionaire class. In analyzing the

[2] Tensions over Taiwan, with the world’s market leader in advanced chips—the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC)—vital to Sino-America’s competing Big Tech ecosystems, are a case in point.

pandemic-induced policies of the Johnson government, for example, Labour MP Clive Lewis remarked:

> This then is a new phase of Toryism – neo-illiberalism if you will. One which combines large state spending and market intervention with authoritarian and nationalist instincts. The 'same old Tories' playbook simply won't cut it. (Lewis quoted in Savage and Helm 2021)

Where the choice (in) between 'Zero Covid' and 'Let it rip' defined 2020, with vaccines having become available across the rich world this changed into a spectrum of prevention versus adaption, i.e. between those whose consider infections bad, and those who regard it a good thing. The Johnson government belongs to the latter camp, guided by the belief that "countries build up a competitive advantage on the global stage" by building up immunity (Bourgeron 2021: 8). Where Cooper sees the quest for *herd immunity* via infection as an "organic application of the brutalities of neoliberal individualism to the pandemic" (2021: 83), a strategy also embraced by the Netherlands and Sweden in early 2020, the rationale for this strategy was later made explicit in the Great Barrington Declaration—a platform sponsored by a libertarian think tank linked to US oligarch Charles Koch (Greenhalgh et al. 2020). Since the spring of 2022, a growing number of countries have let the mutating virus spread among vaccinated populations, with potentially devastating long-term effects on public health. To some, therefore, Koch's support for herd immunity has little to do with epidemiology, and is better viewed as "far right economics" (Murphy 2020).

Paradoxically, the refusal to guarantee public health by letting the virus spread, which itself is a key failure of the liberal promise (Davies 2020: 5), has typically been sold under a liberal guise. As argued by Cooper, "the continued operation of the market was sacrosanct, whatever the costs to human life" (2021: 83). The actual need for authoritarian protectionism against a neurodegenerative virus was forsaken—we might better speak of authoritarian negligence, or abandonism, as this strategy that has led to many deaths, chronic illness, repeated lockdowns, and new variants, thereby steadily increasing the pressure on those countries trying to keep virus circulation at minimum. To Theo Bourgeron, placing the UK's Covid response in a longer lineage from the 2008 financial crisis and the 2016 Brexit vote, Johnson's 'Let it rip' strategy is considered "an episode of the ongoing replacement of the dominant neoliberal accumulation regime with a new libertarian-authoritarian one", foremost serving "the interests of an emerging group of 'disaster capitalists'" (2021: 1).

Importantly, 'Let it rip' strategies go against the advice of international organizations built under neoliberal hegemony, such as the EU's European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Interestingly, the Netherlands—a founding member of both the EU and WHO, and governed by a nominally center-right government—has closely followed the UK's strategy, pursuing maximum virus circulation whereby the only constraint was the availability of intensive care (IC) units. Silently escaping ECDC and WHO advice, early 2020 the Dutch government embraced a peculiar 'corona nationalism' going against international guidelines and scientific evidence. Three years onwards, the way in which

Covid has been managed has the hallmarks of an authoritarian post-truth regime. In flatly denying what might be called 'a silent Nexit', the Dutch government extensively relied on the 'resistance' posed by the far right (Hendrikse 2021c)—another instance of "strategic interaction" (Cooper 2021: 12)—which not only made the government's pandemic management look relatively prudent, but also enabled them to ridicule perfectly reasonable criticism as conspiracy theory. The preceding and ongoing breakdown of variegated counterpowers, meanwhile, from parliamentary oversight to media scrutiny, all but assured that a range of constitutional rights—to care, education and the protection of life itself—were sidelined.

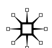
Although the long-term health consequences of coronavirus remain unknown, by zooming out we can identify a remarkable difference in pandemic management between the western Atlantic world and the eastern Asia–Pacific, whereby the latter's variegated strategies to minimize virus circulation long proved superior—not only in terms of deaths and chronic illness, but also with regard to the protection of the economy and daily life—accelerating the longer political and economic shift from west to east.[3] Although the jury is still out, as of writing western variants of authoritarian politics appear to have become more endemic (a term with its own colonial heritage) than the virus itself.

Escaping the doom loop

> Long crises in world history – these extended paroxysms of reordering and breakdown – provide a series of opportunities for anti-democratic politics. The new authoritarian protectionists act as the ultimate multiplier effect in the long crisis of the 21st century. They arise as a result of combined breakdowns found in the human ecology, economic conditions and international relations, and amplify further these tendencies. We seem today to be living through such a spiral effect. (Cooper 2021: 94)

With the arrival of the contagious omicron variant, seeing virus circulation reach an all-time high across western states, numerous governments decided the worst was behind us. It was time to start 'living with the virus', never mind many needed to lock themselves up indefinitely in order to survive. With the pandemic declared over, the Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced, along with spiking energy prices and the threat of nuclear war, seeing many far-right 'freedom fighters' against Covid measures seamlessly adopt the next set of Kremlin-friendly projections, pointing to a 'woke West' threatening a staunchly conservative and nationalist Russia. Where Covid fueled "an underlying cultural sense of supremacy" (Cooper 2021: 77) against East Asia, Putin's war ignited a reawakened 'Western unity'—as if the Anglo-American heartlands did not shake up the pillars of *Pax Americana* by themselves over

[3] Within the Asia-Pacific region, China's containment strategy was most severe. That said, the likes of Japan, South Korea and others have also managed to keep mass death and disease at bay, with fewer disruptions i.e. repeated lockdowns to the economy and daily life than in both China and the 'Let it rip' West.



the preceding decade; as if Dutch pandemic politics does not continue to markedly differ from the basic prevention preached and practiced in neighboring Germany.

What Peter Pomerantsev calls Putin's "war on reality" (2019)—whereby endemic gaslighting makes it ever more difficult to separate fact from fiction—has increasingly become observable across different corners of the West, confirming the highly contagious nature of authoritarian rule. Lying and denial increasingly come with impunity, which allows governments to ignore and evade actually-existing problems, such as climate change. With authoritarian protectionism steadily tying "the elite and mob together" (Cooper 2021: 39), how might we best formulate remedies to escape the authoritarian doom loop? Following Cooper, we must not let it rip like coronavirus, but adopt a strategy of containment, as "the spread [of authoritarianism] is not inevitable and can be stopped by effective political action" (ibid: 134). Amongst others, this requires an ongoing battle against bad-faith actors, by exposing their "political opportunism" and projections. Building on Jacques Derrida, Cooper explains how the fight for democracy can be appropriated by staunch anti-democrats, as exemplified by the American alt-right, "combining philosophical musings on the need to end democracy with rhetorical appeals to championing the democratic collective" (ibid: 66–68).

> [A] simple way to think about a radical politics of survival is that it constitutes the opposite of authoritarian protectionism. Rather than homogenize the national community as the property of a single ethnic group, it promotes internationalism and solidarity among peoples and states. The politics of 'them and us' collapse, once we embrace this pluralistic solidarity. (Cooper 2021: 138)

Like others (e.g. Gerbaudo 2021), Cooper engages with the question of nationalism. Borrowing from Eric Hobsbawm, the national community presents itself as "permanent, indestructible, and … certain" (Cooper 2021: 137). Cooper goes as far to say that "[t]radition, identity, culture and belonging are inherited from the past", and that "[t]he sense that this traditional order is somehow being lost or threatened animates nationalism's appeal" (ibid: 60). That contemporary nationalism is in fact a late nineteenth-century invention, not least fabricated to stop emancipatory progress, gets somewhat lost in Cooper's analysis: "while the technological and social structures of work and production have changed enormously over *the past 200 years*, the primacy of nationality to political identity has not. It has been the unbroken thread across this long period" (ibid: 126, emphasis added). Crucially, Hobsbawm saw this nineteenth-century invention as key in undermining universalist demands, seeing social democrats come to accept the primacy of the nation-state over internationalism—itself a rebranding of universalism in nationalist terms. By the time of the First World War, "revolution had been replaced by war as the principal form of collective violence as he had identified beginning in 1848" (Ciaurriz 2020). Where nationalism so often appears to be as natural as the water fish swim in, that does not mean it is actually the case.

> Nationality can often form unthreatening and benign registers of mutual attachment. Decades of multicultural evolution in many states have also demonstrated how nationality can be de-racialized. Meanwhile, even when

> nationality is politicized as nationalism it does not necessarily lead to exclusionary politics. In its civic forms it can be open to immigration and cosmopolitan in its ethos. (Cooper 2021: 138)

Although nationalism could perhaps assume a deracialized and more progressive character, the question is whether we should not try to overcome nationalism altogether, for it is not a natural friend of emancipatory progress. Is nationalism really a crucial ingredient to build a "a progressive hegemonic approach" based on "alternative moral claims that combine a notion of belonging with an inclusive and pluralistic approach" (ibid: 139)? Are there alternative ways to engage with "demands for belonging and recognition", outside or beyond "the core underlying imagination of human association: nationality"? (ibid: 60). With billionaire-class factions going rogue, is now not the perfect time to expose the nationalist right as a cynical elite ploy, bankrolled by billionaires and 'dark money' residing in offshore wonderland (Hendrikse and Fernandez 2019)—the ultimate post-national, extra-territorial global space of all? With war once again showing its ugly face in Europe, can we go beyond flag waving to show our solidarity? Can we articulate a *universal* hegemonic strategy—not only for ordinary Ukrainians and Russians, but for ordinary people around the globe?

> Ultimately, the main weapon we have at our disposal is democracy. (Cooper 2021: 141)

Closing with Hobsbawm, who saw both liberalism and socialism as entwined emancipatory movements, how can we build a broad coalition against a nationalist far right hostile to both? How to convince people that the suppression of 'others' always boils down to less protection for all? To Cooper, besides rejuvenating nationalism *adapting* capitalism seems the only to go, as only "a leftish social liberalism" (ibid: 7) is deemed capable to defeat authoritarian protectionism. This arguably reflects the liberal inclinations of the author, to which I am no stranger. That said, *ceteris paribus*, contemporary capitalism surely implies mutually assured destruction. In that sense, I am convinced that we can only save liberalism as long as it is worthy to be saved—a crumbling or mutating neoliberalism giving way to endemic neo-illiberalism certainly is not. Put differently, behind the prospect of a different capitalism within a rebooted liberalism stands a democratic anti-capitalism outside it. If liberalism cannot be fixed, we have few options but to ditch it.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that he has no conflict of interest.

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