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The coronavirus crisis and the legitimation crisis of neoliberalism

This paper considers the societal consequences of the coronavirus crisis through the lens of critical social theory, advancing a social-theoretical perspective as its main contribution. The central argument is that the question of post-pandemic societal transformation be examined in terms of the pre-existing legitimation crisis of neoliberalism. This is developed through three steps. First, a theoretical framework is outlined for considering social transformation in terms of discursively mediated collective learning processes. Then, two loci of the legitimation crisis of neoliberalism are explored, the political crisis and the climate crisis, to delineate a series of antagonistic fronts shaping the contestation of this model. From this, two broad social movements contending for control of societal development emerge: radical-pluralism and reactionary-populism. Finally, the coronavirus crisis is briefly considered in terms of its interaction with this cleavage.

Keywords: coronavirus, neoliberalism, legitimation crisis, climate crisis

Introduction

That the lived experience of the coronavirus crisis invites contemplation of its long-term consequences is apparent from contemporary public discourses. All around one finds discussion of economic, political, social, and cultural effects. These everyday reflections generally conceive of a pre-existing normality that was only suddenly ruptured with the onset of the pandemic. Social change is then considered in a narrow sense, with regard to some aspect of contemporary life, and as a result of the direct consequences of the coronavirus crisis itself. Absent is a broader concern for the development of society as a whole and the wider societal dynamics that are implicated in the current crisis. Sociology can enhance this debate.

This paper puts forward a consideration of the consequences of the coronavirus crisis through the lens of critical social theory. Conceiving the question of social change in terms of societal transformation, it centres the analysis on general trends in the Euro-

Atlantic world that have world-historical significance. In these societies, the coronavirus crisis did not emerge in an otherwise equilibrated context, but instead imposed itself upon an institutional order already in crisis and a public already mobilized towards transformation. The central argument here, therefore, is that the question of post-pandemic societal transformation be examined in terms of the pre-existing legitimation crisis of the neoliberal social model. From this, two social movements have emerged in contention for control of societal development: radical-pluralism and reactionary-populism. Considering the coronavirus crisis from this perspective, the question of post-pandemic transformation concerns how the crisis is affecting the contestation between these movements and which will be furthered toward realization.

Owing to limitations of space, the principal contribution of the paper is in presenting a social-theoretical framework and accompanying historical-contextual perspective through which to think about the broader political dimensions of the crisis as it unfolds. It seeks to illustrate how a broadly Habermasian framework allows the consideration of societal transformation in terms of discursively mobilized forms of understanding and the novel forms of social relations that may potentially follow from these. The first section presents a communication-theoretical framework for the consideration of the question of social change. The second outlines the pre-coronavirus situation in term of two loci of legitimation crisis of neoliberalism. The third very briefly considers the coronavirus crisis with regard to its effect on the contemporary social struggle.

Theoretical Framework

I present here an abridged theoretical framework drawing from sociological learning theory within a paradigm of cognitive social theory, both of which follow the broad

contours of Jürgen Habermas's theory of society. The central merits of this approach for the question of societal transformation are threefold.

First, it is based on an interactive communication-theoretical paradigm of social theory in which modern society is conceived as constituted by heightened and increasingly reflexive societal communication. From this perspective, public communication in the democratic public sphere is understood as central to the self-development of society. This links the historical development of society with its constitutive processes of communication.

Second, it conceives societal development accordingly, in terms of collective learning processes occurring within societal communication. The implications of this are that a degree of agency is involved in social transformation and that social discourse is the medium of collective learning. Through discourse, new knowledge is produced and stored in culture with society as the beneficiary. A further implication, therefore, is that it is society itself that learns (Eder 1999).

Finally, following the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory, this approach is animated by the normative concern for a society free from domination. This provides a moral standard for normative evaluation, the latter of which is conducted through the diagnosis of communication pathologies. These are understood as mechanisms and modalities of communication that block processes of collective learning. Critique is therefore concerned with mobilized potentials whose realization is inhibited (O'Mahony 2013: 292).

Habermas's (1979) theory of social evolution, itself a reconstruction of historical materialism, sets the paradigmatic boundaries for this theory of collective learning. There are two central prongs to this reconstruction of importance here (Strydom 1987: 266).

First, the development of normative structures, as opposed to productive forces, advances the development of society as a whole. The normative structures of society are culture, the system of institutions, and personality. While developments span all three structures, Habermas's critical theory emphasizes the distinction between available potentials and their implementation in considering social change; while new knowledge is always produced, it is not always utilized. Accordingly, societal transformation is ultimately dependent on developments being deposited in new forms of social integration reshaping the institutional order.

Second, the development of normative structures occurs through moral-practical learning processes, rather than technical, as it is this form of knowledge that has a bearing on structures of interaction in the institutional order. This emphasis on moral learning over other types of learning and indeed other mechanisms of social change is an important distinguishing feature. From this perspective, social movements are understood in terms of forms of understanding that affect such moral learning.

The theory of crisis is framed within this paradigm in terms of the communicative legitimation of the institutional order via its underlying principles. In this regard, crisis occurs when the 'consensual foundations' (Habermas 1976: 3) of the institutional order are ruptured. This triggers social movements by way of heightened societal communication. Driven by the problematization of hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions, social movements thematize new forms of understanding in 'problem-solving discourses' (Miller 2002). Through opposing discourses, social movements advance contending patterns of meaning (Eder 1983) such that an exploration of differences occurs (Miller 2002). In the resulting contestation, the object of dispute is the development of society itself such that the dispute concerns (Eder 1983: 32) 'which direction societal development should take'.

In effort to direct societal development, social movements mobilize patterns of meaning that are antagonistic toward each other as well as contending the existing cultural model. A cultural model can be understood, following O'Mahony (2013), as a cognitive rule system providing a paradigm for understanding the institutional order of society. Such cognitive rules structure how actors make sense of and use norms, as well as innovate (Eder 2007). A cultural model, then, sits behind the institutional order, as a macro frame of underlying principles delineating a spectrum and hierarchy of relevant values for the interpretation of norms. From this perspective, when the institutional order is in crisis, social movements contend the existing cultural model by advancing alternative patterns of meaning, which are themselves emergent cultural models for the direction of future development.

With regard to the question of social change, social movements generate variation, while communication dynamics and classification struggles shape selection. Classification struggles take the form of contestations over meaning, both of norms and of the interpretation of norms. Communication dynamics can be understood in terms of O'Mahony's (2013: 311-316) modalities of communication in the discursive contestation of the institutional order. These are permanent conflict, repressive hegemony, compromise, rational dissensus, and consensus. Two are of relevance here. Repressive hegemony concerns the domination of the ethos and interests of particular group over others, actual or potential, so that overt contestation does not occur. Rational dissensus, informed by Miller (2002), involves the discursive contestation of differences that, through a deepening of the mutual understanding of such, arrives at new rules for managing disagreement. In this sense, rational dissensus enables collective learning processes oriented towards the innovation of novel moral norms and their implementation in social integration.

The Pre-Coronavirus Situation: Two Crises of Neoliberalism

The neoliberal cultural model emphasizes the cognitive principles of efficiency, instrumentality, and negative legal freedom. Society is conceived in terms of markets, which are global, and market-rational individuals; the social is all but negated ("There is no such thing as society."). The role of the state is to enable the operation of markets and politics is conceived as "governance" of an elite-technocratic form. Accordingly, the neoliberal institutional order directs societal integration largely through money as a steering medium enforced by administrative power, with the goal the enhancement of competition as a mechanism of coordination and development. Moral norms are conceived restrictively, following Streeck's (2014: 58-63) categories, in terms of market justice rather than social justice, such that individual responsibility is superordinate to collective. This constellation is bulwarked, somewhat paradoxically, by both ethical norms of more traditional family values (Brown, 2015), as well as those recognizing post-traditional identities. While the former find emphasis in neoconservative variants of neoliberal governance, the latter find space in what Fraser (2017) terms the progressive neoliberalism of liberal and social democratic varieties, which integrates mainstream aspects of new social movements.

Variations across the political spectrum and within national contexts notwithstanding, neoliberalism has been the dominant cultural model shaping the institutional order of the Euro-Atlantic world since the 1980s. A repressive hegemony confined its central principles and key assumptions beyond the realm of discursive problematization. This underwrote a path of development directed by technocratic innovations both entwined with and in reaction to increases in systemic complexity arising as the unintentional consequences of autonomized markets. While the limitations of this model came fully to the fore in the global financial crisis of 2008 as a major system crisis of the neoliberal institutional order, this did not translate into a

legitimation crisis until 2016. Since then, a re-politicization of dissensual societal communication has signalled the emergence of an interregnum.

Two loci of legitimation crisis drew most overt discursive mobilization in the pre-coronavirus situation: the political crisis and the climate crisis.

The political crisis became explicit in the dual shocks of Brexit and the Trump presidential election. Two aspects of these events transcend their nation-specific contexts, finding expression and having implications across the Euro-Atlantic world. First, there is a disruption of the hegemony of neoliberal governance (Mouffe 2018) in the marked political polarization shaping the discursive re-politicization of the public sphere. This takes the form of an antagonism between radical-pluralism and reactionary-populism. Both oppose neoliberal governance leading from ethical resources in the institutional order: the former from post-traditional identities, the latter from traditional values. Second, there is a rejection of neoliberal globalization (Fraser 2017). This can be seen in the parallel polarization and antagonism between internationalist-cosmopolitanism and nativist-nationalism. Both oppose the neoliberal form of globalization leading from aspects of the institutional design: the former from the idea of a global society, the latter from the model of competition.

While the climate crisis has been on the horizon of societal communication throughout the neoliberal consensus, it has attained heightened politicization in recent years, becoming the most salient crisis frame through which the institutional order and cultural model is being problematized. With this there has been a very important shift in the climate crisis discourse. This was previously marred in the antagonism between crisis acknowledgement and crisis denial as movements animated by the issue of crisis recognition. Now, it is shaped by the antagonism between global ethics and "lifeboat ethics" as moral paradigms oriented by the issue of crisis responsibility. Both advance

approaches to the collective problem of climate change leading from the moral paradigms of the neoliberal order: the former from the subordinated value of social justice, the latter from the superordinate value of market justice.

"Lifeboat ethics" is a form of utilitarian reason attached to the societal consequences of global heating as a result of climate change by Lovelock (2009). Observing that the temperate position of the British Isles makes them strategically suited to weather the adverse effects somewhat favourably, they are endowed with the responsibility of acting as 'lifeboats for humanity' (Lovelock 2009: 11). The seemingly inevitable breakdown of the global order outside then raises the question of managing the administration of climate refugees. Lifeboat ethics is then posed to this dilemma, with the imperative of survival akin to that faced by shipwrecked (Lovelock 2009: 160-61). The implication is that some shall, of necessity, have to be sacrificed.

This sketch of two loci of legitimation crisis of neoliberalism highlights the learning process currently underway. From the overlapping antagonisms of the political and climate crises, two broad social movements emerge, which are contending for control of societal development. These movements are mobilized as patterns of meaning in societal communication, generated through discourse, and shaping the public interpretation of reality. They address themselves to an implicit question: How should societal development proceed? This concerns which course is to be followed and according to which principles. What is being generated is a new cultural model for a globalized society facing global challenges. In this regard, the antagonistic movements present contending solutions informed by incompletely realized aspects of the neoliberal design. Radical-pluralism follows its global-cosmopolitan orientations to point towards a more just and responsible alternative. Reactionary-populism follows its model of competition to point towards a more particularistic and irresponsible

alteration, a more authoritarian (Mouffe 2018:24) or hyper-reactionary variation (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018: 196-8). While the former broadens the spectrum of potentials for societal transformation, the latter maintains a good deal of political initiative, particularly in the UK and US as the most neoliberalized societies of the Euro-Atlantic world. From this perspective, the question of the societal consequences of the coronavirus crisis concerns what general movement will be furthered towards realization by the crisis situation.

The Coronavirus Crisis

And the Political Crisis

The coronavirus crisis extends beyond the exogenous shock induced by the pathogen itself to the associated crisis of principles of social organization triggered by this event. The latter furthers the shifts in societal self-understanding underway prior. Curbing the spread of the disease requires a reassertion of collective responsibility towards collective outcomes for the good of a population, clashing with the neoliberal model of social reality as composed of only markets and market-rational individuals. This collective re-orientation finds expression in the popular crisis slogan: "We are in this together". This everyday discursive form reveals important aspects of both the nature of the crisis itself and the forms of understanding shaping the contemporary social struggle. Two dimensions of the communicative construction of reality are of importance here: the semantics through which reality is being represented and the discursive strategies of various movements involved in interpreting and re-presenting reality (Strydom 2000: 77-90). "We" denotes a collectivity, "this", a common problem demanding solution, and "together", solidarity as both means and ends. The statement as a whole, furthermore, anticipates a common future towards which the collectivity is

proceeding. Implicit is the idea of history being made by the actions of the addressees, of collective subjects being agents of history, and of history making being the object of responsibility. But, who is the "we" to whom it refers?

The European Union remains the transnational project that carries the torch of internationalist-cosmopolitanism in idea if not yet in actuality, retaining the potential for a just and responsible global society. From this perspective, the European response is a critical moment for cosmopolitanism, a litmus test of whether "we" and "together" can transcend the nation-state. The proposed EU recovery fund is, at time of writing, an important material base in this regard, with the potential to further the cosmopolitan orientations of the neoliberal institutional order toward realization. Yet, while the aspects of collective borrowing and common taxes point towards a deeper economic union (Palmer 2020), the distinction between grants and loans and the attached reform conditions of the fund retain the spectre of elite-technocratic governance. To fall back on hegemonic crisis discourses pre-determined by systemic imperatives of the neoliberal design will not only further problematize neoliberal globalization and present the EU as nothing more than its vehicle, but also deliver this very problematization over to the nativist-nationalism so ready and waiting in the wings. At the contemporary conjuncture, this is a fire that needs no further fuelling.

Since 2016, the Anglo-American response to neoliberal globalization is one of nativist-nationalist withdrawal into bordered states, as a type of macro rendering of the liberal gated community. Accordingly, the coronavirus crisis in these contexts is accompanied by the evocation of a wartime sentiment as a jingoistic strategy of creating a common ethical "we" of the nation as distinct from the moral "we" of humanity. The Trumpian response to the crisis attempts to pit the national in opposition to the global, moving to withdraw from transnational cooperation via the World Health Organization.

This is accompanied by rhetorical strategies projecting the virus as the product of a foreign enemy in a new geopolitical struggle, labelling it with the propagandist neologism "China Virus". Yet here, the dual attempts to enforce a hegemonic discourse around a particularistic vision of the nation further mobilizes radical-pluralism as a dissensual movement. In this regard, the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement amidst the coronavirus crisis and within the Anglo-American contexts wherein reactionary-populism has proved so politically successful is significant. The BLM movement suggests that even within these societies "we" has always been selectively conceived and applied along racial lines, such that in the lived experience of people of colour "we" itself is hegemonic and ideological. Therefore, as well as striving towards and embodying a radical-pluralist alternative to reactionary populism, the BLM movement mobilizes a stronger reflexive and critical form of cosmopolitanism. This opens the horizons of the self-understanding of the political communities of the Euro-Atlantic world to further examine their cosmopolitan self-assumptions.

And the Climate Crisis

While the coronavirus crisis enters society as an exogenous shock, it has endogenous roots in the commodification dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, in the political economy of neoliberal globalization, and in longstanding relations between industrial society and external nature. It is in this sense that the coronavirus crisis is instructive for the world of tomorrow: the present crisis mirrors the form climate crises assume. On the current trajectory, these will increase in frequency and magnitude. The coronavirus crisis provides a type of pre-run for such future scenarios in two ways: as a test of the systemic resilience of the neoliberal institutional order without fundamentally altering its central principles, and as a test of global solidarity, collective responsibility, and crisis ethics in the face of a common problem demanding common solution. How the

coronavirus crisis is tackled is setting the historical path upon which global society embarks towards the climate crisis, as well as informing the institutional order under which climate crises are negotiated. The key question, then, is whether it is global ethics or lifeboat ethics that will be brought further into the fold.

Rather than an abductive anticipation of a future state of affairs, lifeboat ethics is in fact already firmly anchored in the present global order. It can be seen in the Anglo-American nativist-nationalist closure and withdrawal from transnational cooperation, as well as in the hardened exterior that is the flipside of the cosmopolitan interior of the EU: "Fortress Europe". That this moral paradigm extends neoliberal market justice is clear from Brown's (2015: 64-5) observation that with the generalization of the model of competition an acceptance of the idea of winners and losers becomes 'a matter of social and political principle'. The danger here is that radical-pluralism and internationalist-cosmopolitanism will only ever extend to the Euro-Atlantic world. In a crisis-stricken future, this would lead the European and Anglo-American societies to self-conceive as the Dudley and Stephens of humanity. This in mind, the true test of global ethics emerging from the coronavirus crisis will be based on the Euro-Atlantic response as the effects hit the world's poorest nations (Wintour, 2020).

That lifeboat ethics appears as problematic recognizes the alternative perspective of global ethics as having a level of normative import at present. This finds clear expression in the vision for the future of humanity developed in the 2016 UN Human Development Report. Rather than species survivalism, the goal here is the realization of potential for all human life. This vision holds that multiple future trajectories remain open and advocates solidarity between those at different stages of development in the creation of a common future. Global ethics anticipates a future of collective responsibility in the face of growing adversity to the contemporary form of life. The

realization of this vision is threatened by the coronavirus crisis becoming an impediment to radical transformation, however, with hegemonic economic discourses blocking the elaboration of just alternatives. The economic recession may drive an attempt to reinstate the business-as-usual of neoliberal capitalism with a vengeance. At this stage in history, further time spent committed to this model will ensure a descent into climate catastrophe and lifeboat world by fiat. The strength of countermovement against this fate hinges on whether the climate movement can retain the political momentum previously generated, and whether this momentum will prove more compelling than pre-determined economic imperatives.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to present a broader perspective on the coronavirus crisis and social change via critical social theory. One clear conclusion is that public discourses appealing for a return to normality are misconstrued: the hegemonic "normal" of the recent past has been fractured since 2016 and a process of transformation is already underway. The pre-existing legitimation crisis of the neoliberal order is likely to deepen as the coronavirus crisis proceeds, leading the contestation between radical-pluralism and reactionary-populism to become yet more acute. Given the challenges faced, the stakes are high: there is a growing rift between the potentiality of a just and responsible global order and the possibility of a fragmented world of nativistic nation-states. From this perspective, the risk of the coronavirus crisis is in narrowing the spectrum of discourse within a crisis frame that enables a new repressive hegemony based on particularistic interests, rather than a more conscious selection from available potentials. Only via the latter may "We are in this together" exceed its ideological contents in shaping the institutions of the emerging society.

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