



Cemal Burak Tansel (ed), *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. ISBN: 9781783486182 (cloth); ISBN: 9781783486199 (paper); ISBN: 9781783486205 (ebook)

Critiques of capitalism have long stressed the nondemocratic impulse of its many constituent practices. In particular, critical scholarship on neoliberalism nearly always underscores its coercive nature—not just in terms of its ideological underpinnings as an anti-egalitarian mode of economic governance, but also in terms the authoritarian practices that it conjures, facilitates, entrenches, and naturalizes. Focusing on contemporary neoliberal projects from around the world, *States of Discipline* builds upon this work by bringing the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism to the fore. Whereas neoliberalism’s authoritarianism may have been implicit in previous writing, this book emphasizes “the question of state power and highlights the preemptive discipline instilled by authoritarian neoliberalism not only as necessary qualifiers to the extant academic literature, but also as a step toward informing radical political practice” (p.5).

An edited volume consisting of 13 chapters, *States of Discipline* covers a wide range of case studies, analytical approaches, and disciplinary styles. The book is part of Rowman & Littlefield’s “Transforming Capitalism” series¹ edited by, among others, Ian Bruff—the scholar most frequently cited in the collection for his framing of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (see Bruff 2014; for a similar argument made earlier, see Brown 2003). The stated aim of the series is to consider “how capitalism is always evolving”, and, in turn, “how we could also transform capitalism through our own actions”. In the introductory chapter, Cemal Burak Tansel clearly positions *States of Discipline* in line with this agenda, stating a purpose of “identifying and exposing the violence of neoliberal governance” (p.13). Noting various re-configurations of

¹ See <https://www.rowmaninternational.com/our-publishing/series/transforming-capitalism/> (last accessed 27 November 2017).

rhetoric and practice surrounding neoliberalism and authoritarianism in recent years, Tansel suggests the need to revisit “two fundamental questions: (1) What makes neoliberalism such a resilient mode of economic and political governance? (2) What are the mechanisms and processes with which the core proponents of neoliberalism effectively reproduce themselves in the face of popular opposition?” (p.2).

As the introduction makes clear, and as many of the contributors are similarly at pains to emphasize, the book’s argument is *not* that authoritarian neoliberalism is new. Rather, if it is conceived of “as a *spectrum* of disciplinary strategies” (p.6), Tansel and the contributors suggest that there seems to be something of a qualitative shift at work in how neoliberalism is being practiced (and contested) in various corners of the world, most notably by shifting “away from consensus-based strategies” (p.11). Different readers will no doubt have conflicting assessments of how convincingly this argument is made in *States of Discipline*—and, indeed, the chapters suggest that many of the contributors themselves are at odds over the extent, scope, and nature of such a shift. Yet if the goal of the collection is to be, as Tansel suggests, an “exploration” of the intersections between neoliberalism and authoritarian state power, rather than a definitive statement (p.18), then these divergent perspectives create an exceptional space for debate about the meaning and utility of the central concept of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Many of the tensions and contradictions that arise from Tansel’s introduction and the subsequent chapters are related to the failure to develop a critical and sophisticated approach to authoritarianism. None of the authors seek to define the term, implicitly accepting “commonsense” understandings of the concept, i.e. as a top-down form of governance that is singularly oppressive. I do not mean to suggest that the book needed a distilled definition of authoritarianism, as such efforts invariably end in problematic exercises in essentialism. Rather, more critical research on authoritarianism emphasizes a far more nuanced approach that treats it as a *set of practices*, and is critical of mainstream political science and IR assumptions about state power operating within uniform blocs of space (see Koch 2016, 2017). From this

perspective, it is obvious that authoritarian or democratic “states” are anything but coherent units, but are always characterized by a mix of liberal and illiberal practices. While I recognize that authoritarian state theory is not a specialty of any of the volume’s contributors (who are primarily focused on political economy), as a political geographer and scholar of authoritarianism myself, I had hoped for a more critical approach to the concept, given its unique and welcome foregrounding in the volume.

The authors of the various chapters in *States of Discipline* are all well versed in critical approaches to neoliberalism and, on the whole, its theoretical framing will be quite familiar and comfortable for regular readers of *Antipode*. Typical of Marxist, neo-Marxist, and related scholarship, the volume places a strong focus on “contentious politics” (Tilly 2008) and obviously exploitative power relations. This makes sense, not just because of the theoretical lenses adopted, but also because most of the chapters focus on more traditionally “liberal” states (i.e. those having elections and a mostly free press), including cases from the United States (Sébastien Rioux) and various countries in Europe (Kendra Briken and Volker Eick; Mònica Clua-Losada and Olatz Ribera-Almandoz; Luca Manunza; Ian Bruff; Panagiotis Sotiris). In these settings, it can be easier to locate and define the ills of neoliberalism by tracking the concerns publicized by activist and advocacy groups, political opposition figures, as well as scholars and intellectual leaders. The chapters using case studies from these contexts do this reliably and touch on many of the well-known concerns about neoliberalism’s troubling effects, especially for society’s most vulnerable populations.

Yet in countries on the more illiberal or “authoritarian” end of the spectrum, many oppositional voices and spaces of expression are silenced, as scholars have long been forced to reckon with various forms of political closure and restrictions of free speech—both practically and theoretically. Leaving aside the practical difficulties of conducting research in such “closed contexts” (Koch 2013; see also Ahram and Goode 2016), this is an important issue theoretically because it has forced many scholars of authoritarianism to turn their attention to questions of

how authoritarian state power works by enlisting and producing subjects through positive mechanisms (such as pleasure, desire, and self-interest), as much as through coercion.

This is point where the authors in *States of Discipline* could have profited from a deeper engagement with critical research on authoritarianism, as Tansel's introduction and several of the other chapters set up a clear binary that sets such "consent-making" practices apart from authoritarian power relations, which are essentialized as negative and coercive. For example, Tansel points out that the volume focuses on the "constitutive role of authoritarian state power and the utilization of state apparatuses in maintaining capital accumulation", but that "consent-making activities ... should still be seen as integral components of the hegemonic status neoliberalism continues to enjoy" (p.19). By setting consent-making in opposition to authoritarian state power, the effect is to default to the mainstream caricature of authoritarianism that prevails in liberal settings (Koch 2017). Other work on authoritarianism, by contrast, negates such a binary and instead recognizes that authoritarian state power cannot exist separately from consent-making. The same can, of course, be said for capitalism, as Upton Sinclair (1927) vividly illustrates through the plight of Bunny, the main character in his classic book, *Oil!*

This is not to say that these insights are missed entirely in *States of Discipline*, as they are in fact touched upon briefly in the volume's richest three chapters, on Turkey (Barış Alp Özden, İsmet Akça and Ahmet Bekmen), Egypt and Morocco (Brecht De Smet and Koenraad Bogaert), and China (Kean Fan Lim). In recognizing some of authoritarianism's ostensibly positive expressions, these chapters get to what Cynthia Enloe forcefully (and rightly) underscores in her postscript: to extend research on the intersections between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, we have to ask how people "who have been brutally victimized might exercise some modicum of agency", and "what has been happening to the values, alliances, ambitions, and fears" of those invested in running the neoliberal show (p.278). While the plight of the poor and the marginalized is to the fore in the volume's critical approach to neoliberalism, aimed at "identifying and exposing" its violence (p.13), future work would certainly find welcome

synergies with critical approaches to authoritarianism that seek to explain how differently-positioned subjects are enlisted in illiberal projects through their consent and desires, just as much as through coercion and oppression.

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