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The Perils of Radical Subjectivity: A Comment on Antonio's "Ethnoracial Populism"

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Robert Antonio's association of authoritarian ethno-racial nationalism with neoliberal adventure capitalism, and the broader matter of how neoliberal democratization opens the way to rightwing populism and illiberal capitalism (Antonio 2019, 280), seem particularly pertinent. The recourse to Hayek's political theory to explain the neoliberal roots of populism (Antonio 2019, 287-8) allows for a better understanding of the political, philosophical and ideological ideals that encompass the economic nature of neoliberalism.

While I do not wish to contend with Antonio's thesis and argumentative strategy, and while I fully acknowledge the complex relationships between populism, democracy and neoliberalism (some of these analyzed in the article; see e.g. Hayek's eulogy of the 'cultural and spiritual freedom' of certain autocracies (Antonio 2019, 287)), I do wish to suggest that neoliberal radical subjectivity and conservatism provide a basis for new arguments regarding the relationship between authoritarian ethno-racial nationalism and neoliberal adventure capitalism. More specifically, while agreeing that neoliberal democratization opens the way to rightwing populism and illiberal capitalism, I would like to develop the claim that neoliberalism's defense of *radical subjectivity* stirs up populist, racist and nationalistic tendencies in society.

Radical subjectivism stipulates that there are neither genuinely independent goods nor 'an independently existing scalar' (Buchanan and Vanberg 1991, 182) by which to measure the production of goods by individuals. When Buchanan and Vanberg (1991) criticize Kirzner's (1985) understanding of the economic agent as an arbitrageur, for example, they argue that this model nonetheless admits that there is something 'out there', independent of individuals' choices. Against this supposition, they state that "[m]arkets tend to satisfy the preferences of persons, regardless of what preferences might be" (Buchanan and Vanberg 1991, 182) and that except for the potential exchangeable value, "[t]here is no determinate limit to the potential of market value to be created as the process of human interaction proceeds" (Buchanan and Vanberg 1991, 182). There is no limit to people's preferences in human market interactions.

Regarding Economic Agents

Following the neoliberal absolutization of the market and the constriction of politics in the way celebrated by Thatcher (Antonio 2019, 280), radical subjectivism allows for the transformation of *ethnic, racial and nationalistic discrimination* into preferences with a potential exchange value. When transcribing market processes into the political realm, individuals pursue what they value (e.g. political power), subject to the preferences and endowments of others (e.g. racist and nationalistic preferences), in the absence of an "external", independently defined objective against which the results of political market processes can be evaluated (e.g. the right of political equality).

Moreover, despite radical subjectivism and the neoliberal understanding of the economic agent as a separate and selfish person pursuing his or her personal interest beyond national and ethnic borders, neoliberalism is also rooted in the conservative distinction between

groups. Hayek (1960) thus distinguishes between paternalistically regulated persons (the poor, the losers, the dependent, the debtors and the receivers) and successful entrepreneurs (the winners, the “rich”, the creditors, the givers, those who are self-sufficient and independent). Whereas the poor, as receivers, want others to provide them with their wellbeing, and while as state dependents and paternalistically regulated persons they ask the state to use coercive laws to intervene on their behalf, the rich, as “successful winners” who rely exclusively on themselves, freely transfer and spread their wellbeing to society as a whole (Hayek 1960, 28). Regardless of the sphere of life in question (education, health, social security, culture, urbanism), neoliberal political legislation is meant to ensure that “paternalistically regulated” individuals—those who, lacking “an ‘innate’ entrepreneurialism” (Makovicky 2013, 78), demand that the state provide social justice—will never challenge the limitless and creative market society.

In addition to stirring up populist tendencies in society (Armony 2001, 76), this neoliberal grouping overlaps with the nationalist and racist conception of the people in rightwing populism. Although in populism a subgroup of citizens (e.g. “native nationals”) are characterised as the real people (*us*), a group from which the elite (*them*) are excluded, populist exclusionary hostility is both upward (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and downward focused (Brubaker 2017). Even if it is “much less widely discussed than the upward focuses” (Brubaker 2017), not only does a downward-focused exclusionary hostility fall on those who are at the bottom of the social scale, but the justification of this hostility overlaps with the neoliberal distinction between rich and poor. For example, the association of whiteness with richness and entrepreneurship and of blackness with poverty and state-dependent, inward-oriented, downward-focused populism allows for a distinction between poor black people (them) and rich white people (we). In turn, outward-oriented and downward-focused populism distinguishes between rich nationals (we) and poor black (or, given Antonio’s focus, Haitian) immigrants (them). Precisely because they are white and relatively wealthy, white immigrants from Norway are not conceived of as being relevantly different from the former category.

Far from being politically and ethically controversial, exclusionary hostility towards black Haitians is an acceptable, even desirable, preference in the limitless “political market”.

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