

The slow collapse of neoliberalism

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Abstract

With the massive mobilization, at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, of all public service, health and education in particular, against the reforms of the Philippe government, there was an unprecedented popular uprising which, after the *Gilets Jaunes*, then took on new forms and new colors. At issue is the demand to adapt our lifestyles in the face of a supposed delay.

Translator's note. This article was originally published on February 28 2020 by the French website *Analyse Opinion Critique* (AOC). It was adapted from Barbara Stiegler's talk, "Être vivant" given at the "Nuit des Idées" festival in New York on January 30 2019. Stiegler is a philosopher at the University of Bordeaux-Montaigne who specializes in the philosophy and history of biology. Her first two books focused on Nietzsche and biology. Her most recent work, whose main ideas are sketched below, is *"Il faut s'adapter": Sur un nouvel impératif politique* (Gallimard, 2019).

Readers familiar with the extensive historical literature on neoliberalism may be struck by Stiegler's relative lack of emphasis on economic ideas. Instead, she focuses on a different and perhaps less obvious genealogical thread: the biological and evolutionary themes that underpin neoliberalism's political project. Recent events in French politics bear this out. Stiegler sees the social mobilizations —partially drawing from the *Gilets Jaunes* movement that started in October 2018— against Emmanuel Macron's proposed reforms to the French pension system as new modes of resistance to neoliberalism's biological imperatives—the ways it seeks to govern our lives. The strikes against the retirement reforms, which began in December 2019, are a particularly important example for Stiegler. These reforms were legitimated with an evolutionary language of adaptation to the change in living conditions and life expectancy, with the welfare state denigrated as archaic. Her attention to biology both enriches our understanding of neoliberalism's history and points to new forms of critique and resistance in a moment of ecological crisis.
(Alexander Campolo)

One of neoliberalism's greatest strengths is the way it speaks of life, the way it addresses us as living beings. Over the past half century we have been told again and again that evolution requires mutations, allowing us to survive by adapting to volatile new environments. The language of neoliberalism is the language of biology and the life sciences: evolution, selection, mutation, adaption, competition...

Living in a neoliberal world means being flexible and adaptable, open to permanent

acceleration and transformation. It means living in a world without enclosures, without borders, one which never stops and where no social position is guaranteed. In this world globalization is the endpoint of our evolutionary journey, its *telos*. The history of life itself ends in the utopia imagined by the liberal Herbert Spencer: the consummation of a global division of labor and exchange—a world characterized *both* by cooperation and by competition of all against all.

However, there is an important distinction here. Neoliberalism is not simply a hyper-liberal unregulated capitalism. It makes *positive* ethical promises, namely to inaugurate a “just” globalization in the spirit of “fair play.” It is a vision of globalization governed by rules intended to produce an open space of unbiased competition, in which not the strongest but “the best,” the most meritorious will be rewarded—with the rest eliminated.

This neoliberal logic governs a wide range of institutions. For instance, in a speech marking the eightieth anniversary the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* (CRNS), its president Antoine Petit described a “Darwinian law,” that pitted French universities in a space of global competition. The French state would enact laws to select the best researchers—those who deserved to win in global competitions—while the worst researchers could be eliminated.

If neoliberalism’s great strength is the way it addresses us as living beings in a narrative of the history of life, its greatest weakness is that the ongoing ecological crisis forces us to acknowledge that life itself has conditions. Moreover, these conditions are incompatible with globalization’s explosion of mobility (including its academic guises), which fly in the face of neoliberalism’s grand narrative. As neoliberalism runs into the limits of natural resources, as it confronts the necessary conditions of life and living beings—from cells to ecosystems to our own life forces in relation to work, education, or health—it seems to have begun a slow process of collapse.

This explains why neoliberalism is being challenged everywhere. Not only by the working classes who elected Trump or voted for Brexit, but also by professionals and intellectuals, who, after decades of passive consent, have begun to doubt, if not directly reject the neoliberal project.

However, when faced with this prospect of radical transformation, a number of new questions arise. Does this collapse signal the end of our democratic states? Without a clear alternative program might it be better, in the interim, to hang on to the current order instead of accelerating its fall and by this risking chaos? Alternatively, we might ask if this process of collapse imposes the duty, even the historical opportunity to reinvent our democracies from their roots by rethinking our own ways of living in the here and now. Contemporary social movements, like the *gilets jaunes* and mobilizations against Emmanuel Macron’s proposed pension reforms, are doing just this.

The idea is not to replace the neoliberal revolution with a new global program whose coordinates can be charted in advance. Instead it is to transform our ways of living within

current institutions—schools, hospitals, cities, and neighborhoods—to make them compatible with the conditions of life as such. What I have recently learned is that this alternative isn't totally novel. In my most recent book *Il faut s'adapter: Sur un nouvel impératif politique*, I unearthed a deep current of this debate in the United States, dating to the 1920s and 1930s. This discussion pitted two major American thinkers against each other: the political theorist Walter Lippmann and the philosopher John Dewey.

Their debate, moving between New York and Chicago, captivated intellectuals in its day. What is more surprising is that it continues to illuminate contemporary events, anticipating present day forms of domination. Lippman argued that there could be no escaping the liberal horizon first envisioned by Adam Smith and his contemporaries: the globalized division of labor and the extension of markets across the world. Dewey on the other hand stressed the necessity of radically transforming our ways of living; this was the only means of liberating ourselves from capitalism's destructive straightjacket by addressing the evolution of life itself.

Curiously, my new genealogy of neoliberalism begins at the same point as much of the extensive scholarly literature on its history: the famous "Colloque Lippman," which took place in Paris in 1938, and which for many scholars marks the birth of neoliberalism itself. However, my point is that these histories have tended to overlook the importance of evolutionary theory in this new form of liberalism. Even Michel Foucault, the first philosopher to analyze neoliberalism, failed to account for this crucial point.

Seen in light of evolution, Lippman's "new liberalism" is the product of a long tradition of political reflection on the new status of the human species. He began by observing a temporal gap between the natural inclinations of human beings, which had been honed over their long evolutionary history, and the demands of a new environment, which had been rapidly reshaped by the industrial revolution.

Lippmann's entire political philosophy follows from this premise. He asked, how could the human species readapt to an unstable, open environment, given that its entire evolutionary history had taken place in stable and relatively closed environments—from the rural village to the Greek city-state? How could human beings' natural need for stability and security be reconciled with globalization's violent acceleration and destruction of all borders? What was the proper *rate* of reform the human species, for reconciling its slow evolutionary history with the temporal demands of the industrial revolution? And how could the political tensions produced by this disparity be navigated? New forms of nationalism and fascism seemed to work against the grain of evolution in order to produce a sense of timelessness and insularity.

This political question motivated Lippmann's neoliberal program. It was also John Dewey's entryway into political thought. Like Lippmann, Dewey was preoccupied with the political consequences of Darwinism in the context of the industrial revolution. But fascinatingly, this shared starting point led him to diametrically opposed conclusions.

Lippmann and the neoliberals theorized a new mode of government that combined

expert knowledge and legal innovations to create the conditions for a market regulated by rules and fair competition. This global system had the power to transform populations, readapting them to new environmental conditions through public policies of education or health.

Dewey, on the other hand, thought that the only legitimately political experiments were those guided by a form of collective intelligence that he termed “publics.” These collectives were temporary and unstable. They came together only in the affective experience of facing a shared problem, which had to be solved through democratic experimentation.

For Lippmann and his neoliberal successors, the idea that social transformation could be driven by the supposed intelligence of publics flew in the face of evolutionary processes. These processes seemed to render the masses’ affects and intelligence rigid, even outdated or maladapted. For Dewey and the pragmatists, thinking affect and intelligence together as functional modes of control constituted a more authentically Darwinian logic.

Lippman and the neoliberals equated collective forms of intelligence with centralized planning, which fatally ignored evolutionary dynamics and could thus lead only to the horrors of collectivism. For Dewey and the pragmatists, collective intelligence was a perfect institution for readjustment. It was the only means of managing the irreducible tension between the flux of the new and the stasis of the old, relaying and amplifying the evolutionary logic of the living.

In the United States, this debate is mainly remembered for its lessons on the nature of modern democracy, pitting a representative democracy, governed by an elite set of experts (Lippmann) against a participatory democracy, which encouraged continuous citizen involvement in collective experimentation (Dewey).

As important as these points are, there were deeper stakes to the Lippmann-Dewey debate: it linked the question of the future of democracy to the future of liberalism in light of the Darwinian revolution. In this new genealogy John Dewey features as the first major philosophical critic of neoliberalism. We urgently need to draw on his critical force in order to radically renew our own democracies. My political hypothesis is that we need *experiment* with Dewey’s thought in our present in order to tests its strengths and measure its weaknesses.

Lippmann’s ideas also merit consideration. His diagnosis of the maladjustment of the human species and the neoliberal rejection of the intelligence of publics, reduced to inept masses who need to be controlled from above, can illuminate our current feeling of perpetual lateness, invoked constantly by our leaders. It is the source of imperatives to adapt, to catch up, to accelerate, to leave behind our old immobility. Lippman’s thought is a powerful but ambivalent source of legitimation for the rejection of all stasis in the name of flux, the valorization of flexibility and adaptability in every area of life.

The strength of both thinkers probably lies in the fact that they are not rooted in an

abstract economic theory of rational choice, the neoclassical economic theory that has been wrongly confused with neoliberalism, but in a certain conception of life, of the living and of evolution. However, in this regard, the political conflict between Lippmann and Dewey also opens a breach in which it seems urgent to be engulfed in order to renew the question of the relationship between flux and stasis.

What is holding the human species back? What is slowing it down? Is it, as Lippmann argued, its innate dispositions, which cause friction with the industrial environment? Or might it be, as Dewey argued, the industrial environment itself, which has become sclerotic and degraded by capitalism's relations of domination, which themselves limit the potentialities of our species? The question is ultimately whether this new liberalism is right in its impulse to liquify all stability in the name of an emerging flux, or whether the tension between flux and stasis, which creates its own tensions, lags, and conflicts is perhaps constitutive of life itself.

This would necessitate a total rethinking of the political as a field characterized not only by the conflict of interests (as theorized by liberals) or even the struggle between classes (as theorized by Marxists) but also the divergence and conflict of evolutionary rhythms, a "heterochrony," which structures all living collectivities.

Such conflict is not possible in a neoliberal world where we must all move in the same direction, following the same rhythm. In this world the negative and even critique are constantly rejected, with a corresponding valorization of good humor and a positive attitude in the face of change. A neoliberal world replaces properly political forms of conflict and democracy with an archaic form of power perhaps best described by Kant in his article *What is Enlightenment?* —that of the shepherd watching over their flock.

When resistance to neoliberalism arises, it is met with a vertical response from on high: condescension and sanction. Instead of acknowledging conflict, neoliberalism institutes a gap between those who know and the ignorant masses who can only resist change. In France, this performance is omnipresent in the media, which purports to "educate us about retirement reforms."

However, this spectacle seems to be disintegrating before our eyes. As more and more knowledge workers—doctors, teachers, researchers, all those who would have once been termed "savants" or "intellectuals"—mobilize against neoliberalism's imperatives, its script seems more and more implausible.

Consider the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, which entered French consciousness on November 17, 2018. I believe that this date marks a new form of popular insurrection against the neoliberal reforms proposed by the Macron administration. It is a movement that has taken on new forms and colors, with massive mobilization in all public sectors, from health to education.

All the projects of the wealthy and powerful are draped in the emblems of neoliberalism, its conception of the future of living beings. For instance, the proposed retirement

reforms in France follow a familiar script for our future lives: a hope for an ever-longer life in which work and competition will continually postpone our deaths. This vision draws on neoliberal conceptions of justice as equality of opportunity in a global game of capitalization, managed by pension funds.

The idea behind the retirement reforms is to *adapt* France's welfare state, presented as archaic, to an environment of global competition. But in the moment of neoliberalism's collapse, this social vision conflicts with reality. In a moment of ecological crisis and degradation of our ways of life, public health organizations have a different story about the ends of our lives: an explosion of chronic diseases, contradicting the utopian neoliberal narratives on health and life.

This alternative diagnosis explains the powerful challenges facing neoliberalism today. Rather than adapting our lives to the demands of an environment that has been degraded by globalization, the neoliberal world itself must adapt to the resources of our ecosystems, our bodies, our psyches, in sum: *our conditions of life*. This new political horizon cannot be identified in advance, even by experts and managers. Only a collective intelligence can address our present conditions of life in order to take control of evolution and invent collective ways of living compatible with life's conditions.

Only then, as Dewey anticipated, will we fully realize Darwin's vision of a great living laboratory, so compellingly described in *The Origin of Species*: an evolution of variation and multiplicity, branching out in ways that no one can predict in advance, with no fixed *telos*. Only then will we once again become *living beings*.