Introduction: Authoritarian Contagion

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In "Authoritarian Contagion", Luke Cooper observes that it is the pervasive sense of "civilisation crisis" that is the precondition for the most recent articulation of authoritarianism (Cooper 2021: 2, 4). Cooper's "authoritarian protectionism", which is a form of hegemonic politics, denotes the promise of protection of the electorate by, mainly right wing, politicians. It is a novel idea in so far as "authoritarian protectionism's" collectivist dimension replaces the traditional right's focus on individual liberty, which has been so prominent in the recent decades. Conservatives of the late twentieth century, including the authoritarian ones, vowed to eradicate the state in order to unleash the creativity and energy of individuals hitherto stifled by government. According to Cooper "authoritarian protectionism" is different in so far as it is now the (collective) nation, usually thought of along ethnic lines, that today's authoritarian right-wing vow to protect. This protection comes only to the "true", and hence "deserving", and members of an ethno-national community who are expected to provide political support in return.

Since the book has been published, the ravages of economic dislocation and the toll of a global health emergency have been joined by the horrors of full-blown conventional war on European soil, when it comes to the things people might want to seek protection from. Cooper's main proposition that "authoritarian protectionism" has been filling the democratic void in western societies by promising to defend "the people" against real and imagined threats assumes a new significance when this promise is actualised by "Putin's autocratic state" that is "shameless" in its authoritarianism (2021: 5, 7). It was in the context of Russia's war of imperial aggression against Ukraine that this forum on "Authoritarian Contagion" has been put together. The leading international scholars on authoritarianism responding to Cooper present below a wealth of empirical evidence from different geographic contexts where "authoritarian protectionism" has arguably replicated "in a pathogen-like ways" (2021: 136). The reading of the different modalities of how the politics of "nation-ethnic supremacy" filled with "extreme ideas and values" is developed, established, and normalised bears new urgency in the face of Russia's authoritarianism that few had expected to morph into a bellicose fascist dictatorship (2021: 15, 19).

In this forum, Priya Chacko argues that "authoritarian protectionism" has quintessentially neoliberal roots. She agrees with Cooper that "the uncanny combination of crony capitalism and state intervention (…) have been the hallmarks of contemporary authoritarian regimes" but takes it a step further by arguing that "authoritarian protectionism" is not simply a response to the global neoliberal economics but also its product. In that regard, Putin's regime in Russia is a case in point. It draws on all the autocratic and authoritarian legacies of the Tsarist and Soviet governance, but it is the totality of Putinism as a "conservative moral-political-economic" system, as Chacko puts it, with its "gender and racial oppression, anti-democratic governance" that would have been impossible without the neoliberal economic foundation of the privatisation of Russia's carbohydrates after the decomposition of the USSR.

In similar vein, Richard Saull looks at the origins of "authoritarian protectionism" in Europe by focusing on the "longer-term causal drivers that have provided the opportunities for the emergence of this type of authoritarian politics". He blames neoliberal technocracy with respect to the financial governance within the Eurozone for the rise of "authoritarian protectionism". While the discontents of what he calls the neoliberal political-institutional architecture of the Eurozone have not yet led to "military revanchism" in the EU, the war against Ukraine's European aspirations waged by Russia highlights the civilisation dimension of the EU as a political project, especially for those who aspire to join it (Dunin-Wąsowicz, Fomina: 2019).

Reijer Hendrikse too discusses the "threat of endemic neo-illiberalism" by showing how some of the neoliberal elites, of the "nominally democratic west", have "fallen prey to authoritarian contagion over the course of the 2010s". By discussing the Dutch and British cases in detail he shows the complicity of seemingly liberal elites in using the logic "authoritarian protectionism" for short term political gain. Hendrikse sees nationalism - understood as an exclusionary ideology setting the boundaries around a community along ethnocultural ethnic lines - as the main culprit of this descend into authoritarianism. Nowhere is it more visible these days than in Russia with its project of neo-colonialism under the banner of ethno-national Russian supremacy over all its former dominions.

Finally, Ruth Wodak, in her response, discusses the descent of European political elites into "authoritarian protectionism". She argues that the way in which authoritarian practices "have

become ever more acceptable in the European Union" has made that style of governance more permissible elsewhere. She argues that "illiberal practices have become normalized, employed by conservative parties and their autocratically minded leaders", particularly in Poland, Hungary and in Austria. She analyses how in the latter public and private media capture has allowed for the dissemination of propaganda that sustains and normalises "authoritarian protectionism". Her text is particularly poignant. Even though the EU has seemingly mobilised against Russia's authoritarian regime, some of its leaders (such as Orbán) still employ authoritarian tactics at home and excuse Russia's ethno-nationalist logic behind the war.

In the book, Cooper insists that that "vulgar majoritarianism" of "authoritarian protectionism" would be impossible without nationalism (Cooper 2021: 35). He reminds us that it is particularly the emotive power of nationalist discourses, based on our desire to belong and to be protected, that allows "authoritarian protectionism" to flourish in times of economic instability. While contemporary nationalism is very much a reaction to the post-Cold War project of neoliberal globalization, it is also a vehicle for seemingly democratic elites to maintain a "capital-centric but state-dependent economic model" that feeds those in power at the expense of the people, preferably those in foreign countries (2021: 117). In that regard Cooper underlines that "authoritarian protectionism" serves as a "legitimation of imperial power" (124). Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a painful illustration of this kind of neo-colonialism. Putin's ideology is predicated on a revisionist vision of Russia's history as the victim of world affairs, to justify war and occupation and to gain access Ukraine's natural and human resources in order prop up his project of "authoritarian protectionism" at home. It also has an uncanny impact on Europe's peace project. In result of war the European Union is now arming Ukraine so it can defend itself. Yet, considering that a fifth of EU countries are themselves going through an autocratic turn (Varieties of Democracy Institute 2022), supporting Ukraine must also mean defending democratic values 'at home'.

Bibliography:

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