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INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal ideology has irreversibly changed our world. Hardly anybody acquainted with the term *neoliberalism* would try to deny this. But what do we mean *exactly* when we talk about neoliberalism? Or, who are the neoliberals?

Neoliberalism seems to exist like a phantom: everybody fears it, hates it, and talks about it, but nobody is brave enough to identify him- or herself with it. Neoliberalism is considered responsible for nearly everything that is going wrong in economics, politics, and social life—and the actual economic crisis, caused by a ruthless “casino capitalism,”^[1] seems to confirm this objection. But it is nearly impossible to find political parties or even just individual people who declare themselves to be neoliberal. Of course, one will find many of them in the United States, though there they won’t claim to be *neoliberals* but simply *capitalists* or *conservatives*, since in the States the term *liberal* is commonly used for social democrats. In Europe, the term *neoliberalism* is, with very few exceptions, only used in a pejorative way. It is a word to characterize the Other and almost never the self. This raises the question as to whether the discourse of neoliberalism serves as a kind of conspiracy theory for leftist intellectuals, comparable to the role of freemasonry for the petit bourgeois of the far right.

But nothing is more erroneous than that. We know where the ideology of neoliberalism comes from; we know its representatives and executors, beginning with some Austrian and American economists

[1] Susan Strange, *Casino Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986).

like Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich August von Hayek, Gary S. Becker, Theodore W. Schultz, and Milton Friedman, and some politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. But how are we then to explain the unease that befalls us today when we try to confine the meaning of the term neoliberalism and use it in a more precise way than it has been used in the common empty laments?

The difficulty seems to lie in the fact that neoliberalism has meanwhile become the indisputable discourse of our era—something spread all around us and consequently difficult to localize and define. Since the nineteen-nineties, all mainstream media, all political parties, including the Social Democrats and the Green Party, have been doing the neoliberal job. Like a big sponge, neoliberalism has absorbed all leftist emancipatory tendencies toward freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, and all critique of governmental suppression and paternalism formulated in the sixties, fusing them with neoconservative ideas of a *free* (but in fact highly protected) market, low taxes (for companies), and no boundaries (for the free flux of goods, capital, and manpower). In the end, it has diffused into all Western and also into most of the Eastern societies, parties, minds, and economic and political systems. We live in it like a fish does in water. And despite its bad image, we must confess: all of us are neoliberals.

While acknowledging the difficulties of providing an exact definition, what we can do is at least try to sketch some anchor points for approaching neoliberalism. Marxist critics like David Harvey have defined it as a technique of the “restoration of class power” to increase the uneven distribution of capital and power.^[2] Beyond that, neoliberalism should be understood as an all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*. As Michel Foucault^[3] and others^[4] have pointed out, the very essence of neoliberalism (and also its difference to classical liberalism) can be found in its total pretension. Up to the nineteen-fifties, neoliberal thought was limited to the field of economics. But in the sixties, neoliberal economists started to expand their interests and to apply the laws of the free market to all fields of science and to social life. The market became the measure of all things, a natural fact not to be challenged, comparable to the eternal laws of Darwin’s evolution theory. According to neoliberal theory, all kinds of social interaction can be explained by economic reason. The most extreme view in this respect was advanced by the Chicagoan economists Gary S. Becker and Theodore W. Schultz with their theory of *human capital*, which also regards

[2] David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), pp. 7–68.

[3] See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 216–19.

[4] Herbert Schui and Stephanie Blankenburg, *Neoliberalismus: Theorie, Gegner*, Praxis (Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 2002), p. 79.