

Solidarity as Social Reconstruction

Against “Regressive Communities”, beyond the Neoliberal Agenda

Olivier Voirol

University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Institute for Social Research, Frankfurt am Main, Germany

voirol@soz.uni-frankfurt.de

Abstract

The neoliberal agenda is based on the rejection of social objectivism and social reason, in favor of individual preferences and subjective values. Reforms carried out under this agenda destroy institutions and practices of solidarity. While the 2008 financial crisis has confronted neoliberalism with a legitimization crisis, an alternative agenda has yet to emerge. In the past decades, this “void” gave birth to the implementation of “regressive communities”. Instead of challenging the neoliberal agenda these communities function as mere authoritarian extensions. By rejecting social issues and defending cultural values they display contempt for social objectivity and reason. A path beyond the neoliberal “all market” approach as well as the subsequent triggerering of “regressive communities” is nowadays sought by social reconstruction through solidarity.

Keywords

neoliberalism – value – regression – community – fascism – critical theory

For more than a quarter of a century, solidarity is one of the social principles that has been systematically attacked by “neoliberalism”. “Neoliberalism” should be here understood as a political agenda based on the reduction of all social relations to mere market transactions. During the past decades, the neoliberal agenda has been repeatedly applied by means of multiple structural reforms. The outcome has dramatically destroyed forms of existing solidary practices and disrupted laws and social institutions. It is also obvious that this political agenda was directed against collective forms of action or political

organization (unions, civil associations, social movements, etc.) that purported a social agenda, thereby avoiding the re-emergence of new forms of solidarity. Legitimized by the tina-principle (“there is no alternative”), there have been systematic efforts during the past three decades to repress – even with State violence – forms of resistance or political actions that grounded an alternative to the neoliberal agenda in the idea of solidarity and social self-organization.

This article analyses the hypothesis that the neoliberal agenda is the mere “surface” of a deeper conception grounded in a neoliberal anthropological conception of human beings, their relations as well as a “third party” that brings them together, which is subsequently transfigured into an economic theory. As such, the neoliberal agenda stems from a radical perspective concerning the human being as a subject assimilated to the figure of a “free individual”. The latter is understood as a sensory unit equipped with desires and subjective preferences whose links to others are limited by their satisfaction through the market. As a consequence, such a human being is seen as reduced to those market relations of desires developed by consumerism rather than human productive activity (see von Hayek 1952; Bilal 2011).

One sentence became a symbol of this political agenda: “there is no such thing as society”, which has often been used to decipher the very “spirit of neoliberalism”. These words have been said by one of the most effective proponents of the neoliberal agenda in the 1980s, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It was pronounced during an interview she gave in September 1987 to the women’s British weekly magazine *Women’s Own*. Indeed during this interview she gave several arguments that indicate the way her political agenda was radically directed against solidarity. For example, she said: “I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand ‘I have a problem, it is the Government’s job to cope with it!’ or ‘I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!’ ‘I am homeless, the Government must house me!’ and so they are casting their problems on society. And who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbor”.

It is well known that neoliberal agenda found in Ms. Thatcher one of its best proponents. It attacked existing structures of solidarity embodied in the Welfare State as well as in labor rights respectively accusing them of discouraging people to cope with their problems on their own. By qualifying issues such as housing as an “individual” one, she immediately uproots given issues from their social domain and simultaneously places structural dysfunctions on the shoulders of individuals. Society is hence dismissed as a relevant category,

or worse: “there is no such a thing”. Such discourse only admits the relevance of the category of “individual” or “family” whose informal framework remains restricted to care or charity within private property. It seems excluded that a third party like society or the State could intervene in the resolution of those problems. Recent research shows how the neoliberal agenda destroyed social welfare structures at the same time as it resorted to the family to solve those same social problems (education, local help, care for relatives, etc.), thereby considerably burdening family members, especially women (Cooper 2017). Our present situation testifies just how unbearable the burden has become for the individual members of such structures.

There is nothing totally new in this defense of individualism, it is indeed an age-old topic of the *liberal political tradition* for which bonds between individuals only exist through contracts (of the State or the market). One of the fathers of this tradition, Thomas Hobbes, saw the only possibility of making bonds between individuals not in terms of the “internal logic of those bonds” based on the social, but through the intervention of an external “third” symbolized by the Leviathan. Only an external third party is considered able to guarantee a pacified coordination between individuals which are seen as isolated and atomistic in seeking their own satisfaction. According to Hobbes, they would be engaged, without formal contract, in an endless conflict for survival. In early liberalism, this necessary “third party” took the form of the rational absolutist State. In the following centuries, liberal thought replaced the Leviathan by another third party, the *market*, which should guarantee coordination between isolated individuals acting for their own satisfaction in exchange relations. After the first wave of neoliberal thought (the so-called “Geneva school”, cf. Slobodian 2018) the fathers of the “neoliberal agenda” referred to this idea of market exchanges as means of individual satisfaction and guaranty of pacified bonds between individuals. They were taking over these arguments, adapting them to the contemporary situation of their time during the 1940s and 1950s. According to them, these links between individuals are characterized by personal preferences expressed in the market in a way that should not be controlled by external forces. One of the prominent figures of neoliberal thought, Friedrich von Hayek, insisted that spontaneity should be preferred to reflexivity (von Hayek 1937, 1952). As opposed to rational thought, spontaneity is the sensory basis of market relations. Of course, the relations between those philosophical ideas and the real “neoliberal political agenda” of the eighties and nineties, and of the following decades, are not direct, but they provide an overall framework for reforms that have affected institutions of solidarity in modern western societies in recent decades. The very core of

these transformations was directed against *the idea of the social* and the forms of solidarity based on it.

In the first part of my text, I will try to sketch out an outline of this agenda against solidarity: its core is the provocative claim that “there is no such thing as society,” meaning that “there is no such thing as the social,” and consequently no solidarity (I). As we have seen recently in many western countries, we are facing a new crisis in the neoliberal agenda of an open global model of market exchanges – the so called “globalization process.” In many countries, we hear demands for a reinforcement of local sovereignty that is supposed to protect the population from global market trends. But the idea of a “national community” that is mobilized in this context is not only directed against neoliberal globalization processes, but also against the principle of solidarity itself. This appeal to the “nation,” or in some cases to the “community,” seems to mark the end of a neoliberal globalization process that had been pushed forward in the eighties. In reality, this “re-localization” process doesn’t mean the end of the neoliberal agenda. The reintroduction of the nation and a kind of protective community is in fact a dramatic consequence of *the contradictions* of the neoliberal agenda itself. It takes the form of a “regressive community,” which is the very opposite of solidarity. (III) In the final section of this text, I will show that the idea of solidarity is still a strong political reference in current societies, despite its critics. But solidarity should be reconstruct as well as re-imagined in the actual political situation, in order to struggle against the pressure of “regressive communities” and to construct another political agenda based on the idea of the social as well as a new practical solidarity principle.

1 Against Solidarity: the Neoliberal Agenda

The last decades of the previous century were dominated by the “neoliberal political agenda.” As several authors have noted (Dardot and Laval 2017; Mirowsky and Plehwe 2009; Bilat 2011; Slobodian 2018; Hartmann 2018), the term “neoliberalism” is a bit confusing – many critics have targeted it – but were not capable of correctly describing changes made in relation to it. One of the reasons of this failure is an insufficient understanding of the “neoliberal agenda.” Many critics analyzed the latter at an institutional level, being interested in the kind of policies that were undertaken by the so-called neoliberal reforms. Such a perspective is important but insufficient if we don’t see the very core of neoliberalism as a practical political agenda. In reality, it refers to a conception of human being, an *anthropology* that is characterized mainly

by its overall *rejection of the social*. Something along the lines of a “solidarity principle” is rejected from the outset. Several aspects of this asocial anthropological conception, which can be considered as “extremely individualistic” from the point of view of the social, have entered into commonsense notions under the pressure of the “neoliberal agenda.” It is not easy to oppose such a political agenda at a mere institutional-political level; it becomes even more difficult when its premises are accepted somehow at a pre-discursive anthropological level. One of the tasks of critical studies of neoliberalism should be to understand what is really at stake with neoliberalism, even at this “pre-political” level. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval noticed in their critical analysis on neoliberalism that, despite huge resistance and socio-political struggles against neoliberalism since the 90s, the move towards the full realization of the neoliberal agenda never stopped (Dardot and Laval 2017). Colin Crouch noted, a few years after the 2008 financial crisis, the “strange non-death of neoliberalism” (Crouch 2011). All those analyses are correct but tend to underestimate the point that the neoliberal agenda consisted not only of institutional and political-economic reforms and policies of systematic privatization, but also of forms of life at a moral and cultural-social level (Jaeggi 2016; Horkheimer 1936).

This anthropological level is apparent when we analyze the neoliberal agenda in parts of social activity other than the political-economical one¹. I would like to outline three aspects of this neoliberal “anthropology.”

1.1 *Three Aspects of Neoliberal “Anthropology”*

1.1.1 Against the Social

The first aspect of the refusal of the social is a basic conception of human beings that rejects the ideas of *relations*. One of the fathers of neoliberal thinking, Ludwig von Mises, strongly criticized the so-called “theory of internal relations” in which every entity is related to other entities (von Mises 1984; Gordon 1996). Von Mises opposed this conception with an individualist approach, starting from individual entities and without referring to trans-individual processes between them. He rejected all approaches based not on individual actions but on the *links* between them (in term of cooperation, social bonds, etc.) in the name of “methodological individualism.” According to this principle, all collective entities, such as the state, social groups, or class, could be

1 For example, when we take a look at popular culture in the cultural industrial process of today, this is striking. In an empirical study I conducted with colleagues at the IfS a few years ago, we could show for example how this neoliberal anthropology is at play in TV Casting Shows today, which are an important part of current popular culture (see Voirol & Schendzielorz 2014).

taken as references that are only viewed from the starting point of the individual. All members of the Austrian school of economics, such as von Hayek or von Mises, explicitly identify themselves with this doctrine of methodological individualism and defend it through reference to the demands of interpretive social science (von Hayek 1942; Udehn 2001).

One of their main theoretical “enemies” was the Hegelian Historical School and the ways that school studied economic phenomena. It is difficult to find a methodology more opposed to their presuppositions, because the starting point of the Hegelian school was not individual entities but the *relations between them* – not the action of the subject in relation to his preferences but the action of different collectives across history. Therefore, trans-individual dimensions in history (in terms of spirit, people, groups, communities, etc.) is the starting point of this Hegelian philosophy. The whole sociological tradition also adopted this relational theory, as we can see in Simmel (always insisting on *relations*) and the Durkheimian school, which defended the idea of the “social” as the dynamic between individual actors (that could only be explained in reference to itself – the social must be explained by the social, according to Durkheim). Sociology was a new discipline in the 19th century that sought to ontologically analyze the bonds between individuals; it differed strongly from different forms of psychology, which start their analyses from internal subjective feelings, or economics, which starts with formal exchange relations; it differs also from the law, which starts with formal rules and codes).

1.1.2 Against Social Objectivity

A second aspect of the “neoliberal agenda” is that its conception of cooperation between individual starts with individual preferences expressed spontaneously, and not as rational activities anchored in regulative systems (State, institutions). That’s why the market plays such a central role, because it is seen as the spontaneous process of coordination between different people. Markets should not be submitted to reflexive-ethical interventions because this would distort their efficiency. It denies a relationship between ethics and economics and considers that the economic order must remain “neutral” in order to guarantee market efficiency. The only role of politics is to make room for the invisible hand of the market.

Friedrich von Hayek refused to engage with the very ethical criticisms of economic life – morality and reason are absent in such an agenda. Von Hayek powerfully underlines the rejection of social reason, showing in his approach to economic processes a kind of basic hostility towards rational cooperation between human beings based on the idea of social reason (von Hayek 1948; Petsoulas 2001). For von Hayek, when reason is at play, it necessarily leads to

reflexive dynamics of anticipation and planning; the correct way to act and choose does not proceed from reason but from the senses. We should start from human beings' "spontaneous" preferences, following the idea of a spontaneous "sensory order" (von Hayek 1952). Reason is somehow already planned, a coordination that gives priority to reflexivity. The Hayekian hostility towards a rational ordering of society also points to the idea of an inner *reason of the social*. Hegel stressed this point in his social philosophy, which was then taken up by Emile Durkheim's idea of the social – and later by Jürgen Habermas in his theory of communicative action based on the idea of social reason – or reason anchored in the social (Habermas 1975).

1.1.3 Subjective Values

A third aspect of this agenda concerns not only the idea of the social and of social reason, but also the rejection of the idea of *social objectivity*. By social objectivity we mean the fact that individual preferences are not only based on free individual choices made subjectively but on relations between subjects within objective social situations. Social objectivity implies a "materialist" dimension independent from subjective actions made by individual subjects. In such a construction, subjective choices are based in relations of individual subjects within objective situations (in the sense of the subject/object relation). Ludwig von Mises praxeology focuses on subjective perceptions, preferences, purposes, valuations and expectations of actors (von Mises 1963 [1949]). One of the expressions of the neoliberal refusal of social objectivity can be seen in the approach to *work* (see Bilat 2011).

Work is an action of a subject on the objective world – a subject acting on an object and transforming itself through this activity; it is the fact of being affected by these actions on objects. For neoliberal thinkers, these objective social relations are neglected in favor of consumption and subjective preferences (as opposed to production). One of the first steps in the neoliberal train of thought at the end of the 19th century was to reject the objectivist theory of value defended by the classical political economists and especially by Marx: value is an objective amount of human work incorporated in objects. In such a definition, the value of goods is inevitably linked to human practices, as an objective social dimension. For neoliberal thinkers, value is only subjective; it depends only on individual preferences and desires. It is this conception of subjective value which is at the core of the deregulated financial processes in the "virtualized" capitalism of today.

1.2 *The Consequences of Anti-social Politics*

If we keep these three aspects of the "neoliberal anthropology" in mind, it is impossible to think of solidarity as a kind of collective framework (social

policies, social institutions, etc.) anchored in the social. The rejection of the idea of the social leads to a rejection of all institutions of solidarity. For the neoliberal agenda, they have to be suppressed or deeply transformed (in favor of self-activation, individual responsibility, etc.). Based on these principles, the neoliberal agenda pushed reforms that deeply changed the relations between labor and capital: reduction of labor-costs, flexibility, decline of labor rights, suppression of social guarantees, increased insecurity, subcontracting (generating massive de-unionization), privatization of public goods, financialization, withdrawal of contributions from the Welfare State, promotion of morals and charity. Such policies have destroyed many infrastructures of solidarity that helped give shape to collectives and form a sense of belonging (workers solidarity, class solidarity, and support groups). At several levels, the defense of this agenda promoting market relations and an offensive individualism has affected the sense of belonging and group solidarity.

At the same time, similar political endeavors have encouraged a theory of value based on subjective preferences and not objective work relationships founded on production, labor and social practices. Subjective value has replaced objective value in the economic world. For example, in the subprime crisis of 2008, these tendencies manifested themselves at the highest level: when economic value is defined through subjective preferences on financial markets, it seems out of control, based on financial agreements made without reference to objective values. And the institution of the State – that should be supportive of solidarity – has strongly supported this economic world of value based on the virtual value of the financial markets. Such a process of virtualization gives the impression that we live in an economic world which is beyond the control of any political action, based on spontaneous and volatile agreements that can break at any time. At the end of the day, social maladies are linked to a strong sense of vulnerability, without reference to a collective dynamic that supports isolated individuals. These social processes produce a sense of alienation, anomie, insecurity, and fear of the future.

1.3 *A Political-social Reaction*

A political reaction to such social malaise should involve a reactivation of processes of social framework thinking that try to offer a political response: to raise the issues of this social malaise and to objectively resolve the problems that have emerged. In fact, these political trends are important topics – especially in the rise of a global movement seeking to develop new global levels of social justice.

This new framework should not only introduce a new level of political action – at the global level – it also should be able to work against capitalist globalization and support new institutions of solidarity at this new political

level (global justice, solidarity among strangers [cf. Brunkhorst 2005]). What we once called “a movement of movements” opened this door at the end of the last century and inaugurated a new hope for radical democratic movements at the global level. The demonstrations in Prague, Geneva, Genoa, Cancun, etc., the movement in Chiapas, and other movement across the world (India, Africa, etc.) were all important moments in the progressive construction of this political hope. But these movements were somehow defeated, criminalized and repressed, activists were beaten and arrested. As soon as an occasion emerged, its appearance was strangled by the debate on violence, whose consequence has been the total repression of the political claims and topics of these movements: the idea of global social justice and radical democracy at the global scale. This movement has been beaten back.

2 Regressive Communities

In the social void left by the consequences of such an agenda, another conception has progressively dominated the political arena in recent years – especially in Europe and America. It is the longing for “regressive communities,” which grows within the context of a crisis in the neoliberal agenda (open society, globalization, and finance). But “crisis” shouldn’t be understood in the sense that this agenda has come to an end, because it continues through political reforms – and it has even been accentuated since the financial crisis of 2008 (Crouch 2011; Mirowsky 2013). “Crisis” is to be understood in the sense that the legitimation of the neoliberal agenda has lost the little credibility it still had a decade ago (reforms of labor law, suppression of what remains of the “left hand of the State,” etc.). For many people, the weak promises that accompany neoliberal reforms are seen nowadays as mere illusions – or even ideological “lies.” The neoliberal agenda is put forward without legitimation – and even with social brutality (Godin 2019).

2.1 *Measured against the Three Aspects of Neoliberal “Anthropology”*

2.1.1 Against the Social

As we have seen, the ideal of solidarity has been attacked by the “neoliberal agenda” in such a way that it has left many societies in a situation of broken social links. Individuals are “left to themselves,” isolated and alone, deprived of any collective reference to link their individual situation to others. This situation of *malaise* that exists for many people in neoliberal societies is often accompanied by practical difficulties in relation to work and social security, which affects the possibility of working together with others.

Social malaise is based on objective aspects of the social situation: economic conditions, employment status, the volatile value of their activities under current forms of capitalism. It should not be treated as merely the subjective feelings of individuals, because it contains an objective dimension linked to socioeconomic conditions. The scheme of “regressive communities” is a demand that grows under conditions of a *destruction of the social*, in order to give a response to this malaise. But it doesn’t raise the issue of the social – and of solidarity – as a political perspective. If the causes of social malaise are effectively anchored in the objective destruction of the social, solutions will not be found under the perspective of a social and economic framework of a “regressive community.” Those aspects are ignored by this scheme, which replaces the politics of solidarity by promoting merely subjective and cultural belongingness.

In this case, the idea of community is not based on an objective experience but on subjective ideals related to a cultural sense of belonging. The scheme of “regressive community” is not linked to the principle of community as meaningful association, shared life meanings in an open reflexive communication, or a common interest and endeavor. Community is regressive in the sense that is something exclusive and based on a conception of belonging that excludes “others” – it is based on an opposition between “us” and “them,” inside and outside, etc. The universe of belonging is a constant reference in the scheme of “regressive community” but it somehow remains vague and undetermined: the “community” is abstract and fictional. If it were to be defined precisely, it would have to be objectively framed and depicted – in terms of social “classes” for example. This would create problems for such a politics due to the “pure” subjective collective it seeks to construct. As a consequence, such a politics must remain vague and relatively indefinite in order to be effective, but also with some loose signs of practical plausibility – based on “typifications” (Schütz) and, above all, prejudices.

The vagueness of an idealized community of “inner belonging” is a constraint that goes hand in hand with the systematic opposition to external entities (individuals, out-groups, nations, etc.), exaggerated through prejudice. External figures serve as negative references in order to stress positive aspects of the in-group. That’s why the recurrent figure of the “outsider” is necessary for such a subjective construction, which couldn’t function without it. The scheme of “regressive community” constantly needs such an outsider – and different entities can be put into this role and used as targets, depending on the social-historical situation. External figures not only offer an external reference in order to affirm the existence of a “pure” positive community of belonging. It also offers a reference that concentrates possible “explanations”

for actual problems. Being defined as a negative figure deprived of any positive qualities, outsiders are transformed into the main causes of social malaise – which is personified. As targets, they concentrate affects as well as subjectively “symbolizing” actual objective difficulties related to the destruction of social bonds; they are used by such an ideology as “causes” of the present situation of suffering – if I suffer, that’s because of “them,” according to this regressive scheme.

In analyzing the rhetoric and public discourses of the political forces activating the scheme of “regressive community,” we actually note permanent efforts to target specific groups and persons (or institutional entities like “Europe”) as the main causes of this malaise. Outsiders are constructed in such a way that they are systematically made into the sources of all problems, in a process of targeting and identification. The main political energy expended by the proponents of regressive communities is directed at doing this work, which also has the consequence of defining *who is responsible* for the social malaise. If the causes are not seen at the socio-economic level, if any material explanation is excluded from the start, then they have to be found elsewhere. A political campaign of “regressive community” strategies consists in concealing all social-structural dimensions in favor of subjectively targeting individual and groups. Once again, the outsider is defined as responsible for the situation as well as the present suffering.

And in establishing this responsibility, the politics of targeting also establishes the *solution*: those responsible must be excluded or suppressed, etc. If the outsider is the cause of the problem, then their disappearance will automatically solve the problem. If Great Britain leaves Europe, the situation will be automatically better; if strangers are excluded from Switzerland or France, the community will automatically be in a better state: this is what the actors behind these targeting policies are constantly doing.

Another aspect of these targeting policies is that there is a strong emotional component to the scheme of regressive communities. The situations of social malaise are often linked to suffering and anger, a negative experience full of negative emotions. One of the typical aspects of a classical liberal attitude is to repress these negative emotions outside the political field in favor of a rationalist attitude of control and “problem solving.” And a typical attitude of a politics based on the idea of the social and of solidarity would be to articulate these emotions, angers, and fears into a social politics that strives to politically resolve social maladies. There are different ways to politically sublimate anger and fear related to social maladies and suffering.

But under the scheme of “regressive community” we face a radically different political attitude, which breaks with this liberal (as well as socialist) political

attitude. It is not by endeavoring to sublimate this anger into a political rationale that one is able to act politically, but by reinforcing and even encouraging those negative emotions. If they are not creating them because they are objectively anchored in social malaise, they are constantly reinforcing them in order to channel and use them for their own interests. In the sense of regressive communities, politics is not an arena of public reason anymore, where emotions are somehow “sublimated” in political action. It becomes a product of negative feelings and a manipulation of fears for strategic ends. Such emotional energies are used politically to constitute a political power used by fascist agitators using the scheme of community – instead the social.

In their famous study on American agitators during the forties, called *Prophets of Deceit*, Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman used the idea of a “psychoanalysis in reverse” to describe similar manipulating efforts of political agitators (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949). A cure seeks to transform unconscious traumas and negative emotions into narratives formulated in symbolic ways, operating with a displacement of traumas onto a symbolic scene. This is the aim of therapy in psychoanalysis. But the fascist agitators analyzed sociologically by Löwenthal during the forties were doing exactly the opposite: they were starting from fears and angers, encouraging them and manipulating them by channeling them to serve political goals of power – instead of symbolizing and sublimating them.

2.1.2 Against Social Objectivity

A regressive community is based on a pathological internal process. The dynamics that make such a collective possible are based on the existence of social malaise and suffering. The causes of those social maladies are social and economic – they have a material dimension and are linked to social objectivity. But the dynamics of the regressive community doesn’t provide any response to those problems; on the contrary, they reinforce them. The politics of targeting others carried out by the agitators of regressive communities are similar to a doctor doing the inverse of what her job should be: rather than healing her patients, reinforcing their diseases.

As Löwenthal and Guterman say: “Malaise can be compared to a skin disease. The patient who suffers from such a disease has an instinctive urge to scratch his skin. If he follows the orders of a competent doctor, he will refrain from scratching and seek a cure for the cause of his itch. But if he succumbs to his unreflective reaction, he will scratch all the more vigorously. This irrational exercise of self-violence will give him a certain kind of relief, but it will at the same time increase his need to scratch and will in no way cure his disease. The agitator says: keep scratching” (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949: 247).

The *consequences* of such a politics are that it never really changes the objective conditions of the social malaise because it systematically target subjective aspects (individual, groups, culture, ethnicity, etc.). This purely subjective (or symbolic) politics is unable to solve the social problems through questioning the origins of social suffering. On the contrary, it reinforces them because these objective conditions continue to act negatively on social subjects, who still suffer from the same conditions. As a result, the scheme of regressive community produces mechanisms that reproduce the objective bases of their prejudices. In other words, the absence of objective socio-economic solutions reproduces the social malaise that these actors are using in their regressive politics. It is the infernal circle of fascism.

2.1.3 Subjective Values

The scheme of the regressive community is a kind of reaction to the crisis of values engendered by the neoliberal agenda – characterized by the rejection of an objective-social value and the promotion of a volatile subjective value specific to finance capitalism. Permanent valuation processes of markets, as well as the rule of market preferences, generate extreme volatility and the virtualization of value (Orléan 2011). This extreme volatility of value of activities and goods generates a quest for security in the face of an ever more inscrutable and uncertain economic order. Without any economic basis, the regressive scheme proceeds from a subjective projection of these objective economic mechanisms onto subjective social figures – persons, groups, or abstract entities like “Europe.”

In a study on American workers carried out alongside *Prophets of Deceit*, Löwenthal noted that deep changes in American industry and labor in the forties, through a rapid process of automation, generated a loss of self-esteem among workers, a feeling of helplessness and worthlessness, and doubts about the use value of labor power. In a context of abstract economic mechanisms that are incomprehensible at first glance, such a feeling of worthlessness was accompanied by helplessness. They tended to re-personalize what economic abstraction had depersonalized, bypassing critical analysis operations of economic mediations. By denouncing the “culprits” of these discomforts, easily identified as “foreigners,” it was possible to fill a cognitive void without questioning the basis of the system, leading to a crisis of values. The insistence on essentialized traditions, on “what we are,” specific to the regressive community scheme, provides an equally subjective and fictitious response to this crisis of the volatility of value produced by the neoliberal agenda.

2.2 *Regressive Communities against Solidarity*

So we can say that a “regressive community” is, first of all, a collective in which ties between subjects are based on *strong negative feelings* (anger, fear, aggression) – and not on the idea of the social and the principle of solidarity. Because it fails to think about the objective/materialist dimension that guarantee these bonds, this emotional bond is necessary. Such politics of anger is permanently reinforcing those emotional ties, without trying to overcome them and to be able to cure them through political reason.

Secondly, a “regressive community” can’t constitute itself without an external figure outside of itself and then rejecting it: it needs a *negative outsider* who is the very condition of its own existence. Unlike other in-groups which constitute themselves against others, the regressive community decomposes when this outsider changes or disappears (as is the case of the far right in the UK after Brexit). We can say that, paradoxically, it is intimately bound to its opponent and identified with it.

Third, a regressive community has a strong subjective and projective dimension, in opposition to social and materialist dimensions – regressive communities are imagined, but they are not based on a collective material existence.

For all those reasons, a regressive community is the very opposite of a collectivity based on the social and on the solidarity principle. (a) Solidarity presupposes the existence of a *collective horizon* in which the individual members can act and express themselves in relation to others, without repression. (b) It authorizes a kind of public reason, a reflection created with others concerning the shape and boundaries of solidarity– it is based on discussions and inquiry and not the emotional construction of an external negative figure. Moreover, solidarity is based on a principle of inclusion and not of exclusion and “immunization” of different groups against each other. (c) Solidarity is a normative principle which provides guidance to individual subjects but can never be only an idealized norm: it must have practical consequences and must have a material dimension. It is anchored in social objectivity.

3 Solidarity as Social Reconstruction

The social and political situation we are facing today is somehow new. Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have been confronted by a neoliberal agenda, which is still going on in its reforms of social institutions in order to privatize the remaining parts of the social and to impose market relations. But since the

crisis, the neoliberal agenda has lost its few “progressive” aspects, in terms of cultural globalism and cosmopolitanism (Fraser 2017). The neoliberal agenda is still ongoing, but without the legitimation of an “open global society” coordinated by market relations – something that we could describe as a “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1975). Neoliberal reforms are even stronger than before at the structural level, organizing social relations in an ever more brutal manner. The neoliberal agenda is imposed more directly and even through brutal means against the remaining institutions of the social. As a result, the State tends to lose its democratic dimension and turns towards authoritarianism, far removed from democratic legitimation. Such a dramatic continuation of the “neoliberal agenda” means that it continues to destroy existing forms of solidarity in actual social institutions (labor law, social security, etc.) and social practices.

On the other hand, a politics of regressive communities is developing in several countries, which could appear at first to be a reaction against the destruction of solidarity imposed by the neoliberal agenda. Because the scheme of regressive community refers to “real people,” to social malaise, and has developed a critique against institutions, peoples or groups, it may seem to be opposed to the neoliberal agenda. Its reference to people, and its reference to the “we” of the community rather than the market-subject, could give the impression that it is responding to the destruction of social bonds by neoliberalism. However, the community is not the social: it doesn’t presuppose social bonds to imagine the collective, but a “we” based on mere cultural references. Because its response to the disappearance of the social is subjective and not social, it does not offer a real alternative at all to the neoliberal agenda. On the contrary, it goes hand in hand with its economic goals (markets, privatization, capitalism). It also combines with a merely subjective politics of belonging without an economic basis that concentrates on “outsiders” (strangers, Europe, etc.) more than capitalism. As a result, the regressive community doesn’t manifest as a resistance against the neoliberal agenda, but its mere continuation within a subjective politics of prejudice – a retreat from the progressive side of neoliberalism that could offer a basis for its legitimation.

The growing opposition between the neoliberal agenda and its right-wing populist reaction through the politics of regressive communities seem to produce new coalitions between the two tendencies – an authoritarian neoliberalism. It also gives birth to tendencies that seek to save the last “progressive” elements of liberalism by opting for *social liberalism*. It draws on political liberalism through a thin notion of social justice. Without defending a strong idea of the social, social liberalism claims to preserve a certain idea of social justice within relations mainly seen in terms of the market. For most aspects

of social democracy that have defended the neoliberal agenda², such an approach seemed to offer a weak compromise between the neoliberal agenda a flimsy idea of social justice that was once defended by social democracy. But this social-liberal path reveals its own contradictions by adopting in most the cases an authoritarian attitude as soon as the pursuit of the neoliberal agenda gives rise to resistance and opposition from society – as well as the rise of anti-market rhetoric of regressive communities. Only through violence can this agenda be imposed on an increasingly resistant society. Recent developments in France under the Macron government show how such a social-liberal path has been exhausted in its desperate attempts to re-legitimize a neoliberal agenda in crisis. In the face of this resistance, it seems to have no other means than to succumb to the classic authoritarian gesture of economic liberalism (Godin 2019; Chamayou 2018).

In the political context, and facing such dead ends, the political idea of solidarity deserves to be revisited today. Solidarity appeared as political principle in the 19th century as a response to the social damage caused by economic liberalism and the industrial revolution. Pierre Leroux was the first to elaborate on the concept of solidarity in a systematic way when he published *De l'humanité* (1845). Leroux saw the concept of solidarity as an alternative both to the idea of the social contract and the charity of the Christian community. He criticized the idea of the social contract (Hobbes, Rousseau) as a foundation for society, because it presupposed an atomized view of the individual. He also criticized Christian charity for being unable to reconcile self-love with the love of others, and for considering the love of others as an obligation and not a genuine social interest in relation to others. Based on equality, the idea of solidarity would be able to be used in the struggle for a justly organized society. Thus, the idea of solidarity was at the center of the “solidarism” of the third republic. Solidarity has been formalized in social and political institutions – especially in France (Hayward 1959, 1961; Blais 2007). One of its most important thinkers was Emile Durkheim, who considered solidarity to be the superior mode of existence of societies – they are totalities, overwhelming the aggregation of individuals who compose them (Durkheim 2007: 31).

Solidarity is able to offer today a different path from the neoliberal agenda and the regressive community. The concept of solidarity challenges the neoliberal agenda because it doesn't start from the individual but from the social. Moreover, unlike market relations, solidarity presupposes a high level of collective reflexivity – social reason – which is strongly lacking in the neoliberal agenda. It doesn't fall into the integrative or exclusive “we” of the regressive

AQ

² Please provide footnote.

community scheme because it still preserves the idea of autonomous social subjects, albeit as parts of social relations. Thinking about solidarity means developing a collective self-understanding that is realized in objective structures of society (rights, economy, institutions, social justice, etc.). Because it is based on reflexivity, and not an unreflective symbolic integration under a fictional “we,” solidarity also differs strongly from the scheme of regressive communities, which constantly reactivate the division between us and them, in and out, the insiders and the outsiders, the national and the foreign, the inhabitants and the migrants, the nation and other nations, etc. Against those divisions used in the politics of “regressive communities,” solidarity offers a conceptual framework where problems can be treated through the lens of these oppositions (“strangers,” migrants, foreign workers, etc.) but only through a transformation of the objective socioeconomic structures of injustice. In this sense, solidarity also means a kind of *public inquiry* in which we show that the sense of social malaise is growing because of socioeconomic (material) conditions of capitalism – and not because of the presence of outsiders (Dewey 1927). As a result, solidarity is thought of as “solidarity among strangers” without a strong definition of the “we” – in terms of culture, language, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Brunkhorst 2005). It even urges us to continue expanding our definition of “we” to include more and more subsets of the human population until no one is excluded as an outsider (Rorty 1989).

Solidarity is not based on subjective elements or cultural references. It is endowed with *social objectivity* and thus offers a material mediation of an objective “we” of the social. The social is a constitutive cooperative reality and is not a projection – unlike the subjective “we” of the cultural community. As we have seen, social objectivity is lacking both in the neoliberal agenda as in the regressive community. Solidarity is not based on subjective values but on an objective background constituted by the social. Solidarity is an objective third party which establishes value; it is not a value based on subjective individual preferences. Unlike the subjective referents specific to both the neoliberal agenda and the scheme of the regressive community, solidarity offers an objective referent in the social cooperation processes. By affirming an objective social value, solidarity thus provides an answer both to the volatility of the value specific to neoliberalism and to the subjective value of the regressive community. It thus makes it possible to supersede the market’s subjective value in favor of another value different from the capitalist relations of financial valuation.

In the situation we are facing today, solidarity may offer another way of thinking that opens up a politics based on the social. However, the solidarity

principle is not facing off against one political “opponent,” but two: the neo-liberal agenda as well as the scheme of regressive communities. The defense of solidarity takes the form of a critique based on the idea of the social, and a critique against the neoliberal agenda. It provides a way to not take up the defense of liberalism in opposition to regressive communities. A defense of solidarity doesn’t mean confusing a critique of the neoliberal agenda with a critique of the core values of liberalism. For example, the socialist tradition criticized the liberal demand for liberty not because the value of liberty was seen as false, but because it was not applied universally and instead to a small privileged group. This normative ideal did not have concrete substance for the main part of the population. This critique from the point of view of the social was not directed against the value of liberty itself but against its lack of social objectivity. It was targeting an internal contradiction of liberalism, not the values of liberty as such: the real freedom of human being should be expressed in *real liberty for all*. Because liberalism started from a preordained liberty and not a real one, it devolved into inconsistencies or mere ideology. In fact, the critique of liberalism made from the point of view of solidarity seeks to supersede liberalism in realizing liberty objectively, in social relations.

This point represents the main difference from the critique of liberalism offered by the scheme of regressive community. Right-wing populism is more fundamentally opposed to the core values of liberalism as such (openness, neutrality, globalism, cosmopolitanism, reason). The proponents of the politics of hatred criticize this liberal tradition in itself – its political openness, its tolerance, its sense of liberty – as well as economic liberalism.

As a result, solidarity still provides a strong normative content in social relations, as well as a material dimension, and it could offer a way to reconstruct social bonds as well as an open, reflexive and practical sense of “we” in modern societies. It is *not an ideal normative principle* turned towards a projected future – imagining a utopian society based on solidarity. Solidarity is anchored in social practices and present in actual situations as well as anchored in existing institutions. Hegel, Durkheim, and the sociological tradition showed us that the principle of solidarity can be reconstructed from *immanent practices* of the social in modern societies (Durkheim 2007; Stjernø 2004). It is present in real social relations as well as developed in social institutions – several existing institutions are based on this normative principle (cf. Honneth 2015). This principle can be supported when referring to actual institutions, and in reactivating and reinvigorating this principle through social and political struggles.

Reconstructing solidarity means developing efforts to see already-existing forms of solidarity in social practices and helping to make them real at an

epistemic level, in order to reinforce them through a theoretical clarification. Against the proponents of neoliberalism and of regressive communities, an epistemic struggle should be conducted to show that solidarity is an alternative to the dead ends of these two paths. It also means developing a theoretical effort to reexamine the possibility of a politics of solidarity for the 21st century, aligned with the challenges and difficulties of our present societies, which can only be thought adequately beyond the scheme of the neoliberal agenda.

References

- Baldwin, P. 1990. *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State, 1875–1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman, Z. 2002. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, U. 2006. *The Cosmopolitan Vision*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bilat, L. 2011. "What's the Self of self-interest?" Communication at the 12th Graduate Conference, Institute of Social Psychology, London School of Economics. 3 March. Draft paper.
- Blais, M.C. 2007. *La solidarité. Histoire d'une idée*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Brunkhorst, H. 2005. *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Caldwell, B. 2006. "Hayek and the Austrian tradition." Pp. 13–33 in *The Cambridge Companion to Hayek* edited by E. Feser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.13–33.
- Cooper, M. 2017. *Family Values. Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.
- Crouch, C. 2011. *The strange non-death of neoliberalism*. London: Polity.
- Dardot, P., and C. Laval. 2017. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.
- Durkheim, E. 2007 [1897]. *De la division du travail social*. Paris: PUF.
- Fraser, N. 2017. "The End of Progressive Neoliberalism." *Dissent*, 2 January.
- Godin, R. 2019. *La guerre sociale en France*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Gordon, D. 1996. "The Philosophical Origins of Austrian Economics". Auburn: Mises Institute.
- Habermas, J. 1975. *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. 2015. *The Lure of Technocracy*. London: Polity Press.
- Hartmann, M. (2018). "Vorsicht, Vorsicht und nochmals Vorsicht? Zur Auseinandersetzung um den Begriff und da Phänomen des Neoliberalismus." *WestEnd. Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 15(1):143–152.
- Hayek, F. A. von. 1937. "Economics and Knowledge." *Economica* Vol. 4, 13: 33–54.

- Hayek, F. A. von. 1942. "Scientism and the Study of Society." *Economica* Vol. 9, 35: 267-291.
- Hayek, F. A. von. 1948. *Individualism and Economic Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayek, F. A. von. 1952. *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry Into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayward, J. E. S. 1959. "Solidarity: The social history of an idea in nineteenth century France." *International Review of Social History* 4(2): 261-284.
- Hayward, J. E. S. 1961. "The official social philosophy of the French Third Republic: Léon Bourgeois and solidarism." *International Review of Social History* 6(1): 19-48.
- Honneth, A. 2015. *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Horkheimer, M. 1936. "Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung. Zur Anthropologie des bürgerlichen Zeitalters." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1: 161-234.
- Jaeggi, R. 2013. *Kritik von Lebensformen*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Löwenthal, L., and N. Guterman. 1949. *Prophets of Deceit. A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Leroux, P. 1845. *De l'humanité, de son principe et de son avenir*. Paris: Perrotin Librairie-Editeur.
- Marcuse, H. 1968 [1934]. "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State. Negations." Pp. 3-42 in *Essays in Critical Theory*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mirowski, Ph. & Plehwe D. (eds.). 2009. *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mirowski, Ph. 2013. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London/New York: Verso.
- Mises, L. von. 1963 [1949]. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, San Francisco, CA: Fox & Wilkes.
- Mises, L. von. 1984. *The Historical Setting of the Austrian School of Economics*. Auburn: Mises Institute.
- Orléan, A. 2011. *L'empire de la valeur*. Paris: Seuil.
- Petsoulas, Ch. 2001. *Hayek's Liberalism and Its Origins: His Idea of Spontaneous Spontaneous Order*. London: Routledge.
- Polanyi, K. 1944. *The Great Transformation*. New York & Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart.
- Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slobodian, Q. 2018. *Globalists. The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stjernø, S. 2004. *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Udehn, L. 2001. *Methodological Individualism*. London: Routledge.

- Voirol O., and Schendzielorz C. 2014. "Gehaltloser Erfolg. Die Bewertungskultur der Ungewissheit in Castingshows: Das Beispiel der Fernsehsendung *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*." *Leviathan – Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, Sonderband 29: 161-175.
- Wilde, L. 2007. "The Concept of Solidarity: Emerging from the Theoretical Shadows?" *BJPIR* 9(1): 171-181.