

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN SOCIETIES AND  
THEIR IMPACT ON CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY  
IN THE CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC POLICY**

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Western economies function in the framework of the neoliberal economic model which was adopted by EU member states. On the other hand, the support for liberal democracy in the West has always been based on the neofunctionalist-welfarist approach and high standard of living. However, in the course of time, Western economies started to crumble and the standard of living ceased to increase. In such situation, the support for democracy has been weakened and an array of social problems appeared which include: social inequalities, increased nationalism, the rise of right-wing populist movements, anti-immigrant attitudes, violent street protests or low voter turnout. Anti-Covid measures and EU green economic policies exacerbated the existing problems. From the point of view of economic sociology the neoliberal economic theory is flawed as its application brings suboptimal economic results for the majority of the population. In these circumstances, an economic recovery in Western democracies is not probable and as a result, the populations will increasingly question the credentials of Western democracy. The ruling elites will try to exploit different emergencies, e.g. health or climate emergency to save the existing social, economic and political system.

*Key words:* economic neoliberalism, democracy, economic crisis, anti-system politics, emergency.

**Introduction.** One of the pillars of Western democracy is free market and high standard of living it supposedly guarantees. Western societies supported the democratic model as long as the theory was corroborated by facts. Since the 1990s the discrepancy between the official narrative and the level of living has become discernible populations who increasingly questioned the results of the neoliberal economic model and therefore,

were regarded as beneficiaries of the current economic model and political elites were accused of siding with great business against the people.

Practitioners of sociology should be suspicious of any orthodoxy and neoliberal capitalism achieved such status in the 1990s. Hundreds of millions of people have been subjected to the neoliberal experiment which benefited only a fraction of society. In the post-communist countries neoliberalism was presented as the only alternative to and remedy for the communist economy. The neoliberal economic model was applied to integrate ten post-communist states into the European Union. However, from the point of view of economic sociology there are several varieties of capitalism and there is no empirical proof that the neoliberal economic model is superior to other models. Therefore, the very assumption that the only model of integrating the world economy should be based on the Washington consensus and *laissez-faire* capitalism should be called into question by sociologists. Moreover, after the great financial downturn of 2008/2009 a growing number of economists question the validity of at least several basic tenets of *laissez-faire* capitalism corroborating sociological opposition to the neoliberal orthodoxy.

The aim of the paper is to find out in what ways the adoption of the neoliberal economic model and the current economic crisis contribute to the weakening of Western liberal democracy. The criticism of economic neoliberalism is carried out mostly on the basis of economic sociology.

### **Sociology and neoliberal economic theory and policy**

. Sociology allows for a critical reevaluation of the results of the neoliberal economics constructing an alternative body of knowledge related to neoliberal capitalism which is a flawed economic theory and practice<sup>1</sup>. Czubocha and Rejman summarize the status of the neoliberal economic theory in following way:

Sociologists have criticized neoliberal capitalism for a long time, but until 2008 they were branded as ‘leftist leaning’, fact-producing ideologues seeking to undermine the only viable economic and social model based on the neoliberal economic theory which posits that ‘there is no alternative’. After the great financial downturn of 2008 sociologists were proven to be right to a large degree and they were joined by numerous renowned economists. Prior to the current crisis it was assumed that economics was the most objective branch of science among the social sciences and the followers of other economic schools were marginalized [5, p. 92].

The theory of economic field which was advanced by Pierre Bourdieu in 1997 breaks with the dominant economic paradigm pertaining to economic motivations and rules of the game advanced by neoliberal economists (markets as networks)<sup>2</sup>. According to Pierre Bourdieu, every economic field is a field of struggles and the biggest players

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1 This deficiencies of neoliberal economics is underlined by economic sociologists. See edited volume [17]. Nevertheless, even economists offered important insights into market functioning by researching ‘regulatory capture’.

2 The original article which introduced the theory was published in 1997. The theory was also adopted by Fligstein [11].

breaks with the dominant economic paradigm pertaining to economic motivations and rules of the game advanced by neoliberal economists (markets as networks)<sup>1</sup>. According to Pierre Bourdieu, every economic field is a field of struggles and the biggest players try to distort the market rules to their advantage. There is constant struggle among market participants to win the upper hand. The most powerful companies and branches of every economy try to influence political elites and create most favorable rules of the game for themselves, e.g. by way of legislation. Therefore, the economic system supports mostly the interests of the biggest market players [3, p. 75, 78-81]. There exists a status hierarchy within every market [10]. The sociological theory of economic field has been corroborated by economists who created the theory of economic regulation coining the term ‘regulatory capture’. Even in Western democracies legal regulation which is supposed to protect market participants against potential abuses is captured by the biggest companies which should be disciplined by the system. Officials (regulators) can be bribed, influenced, offered employment in the future or even selected to achieve the best outcome for the biggest market players within an economic field. Political clout is invaluable to influence the outcome of regulations [7, 26].

Mainstream economics concerns itself with individuals or individual companies underestimating inequalities, power struggles and extralegal activities of market participants neglecting important aspects of market functioning. Therefore, the network approach with reference to creating and functioning of markets is not suitable. Markets are only partially efficient and self-correcting and the trickle-down effect does not work. People are irrational actors. Trust, market panics and herd behavior are not taken into account by neoliberal economists and none of them is able to explain in what way individual selfishness turns into common good or economic growth. In other words, it is unknown how the invisible hand of the market works. The theory assumes that all market participants have equal access to information and are rational which is only partially true. The biggest market players set the rules of the game by way of lobbying or regulatory capture. In consequence, neoliberal economics favors the biggest market players and transnational capital which avoids paying taxes transferring profits to tax havens. This amounts to breaching the rules of free competition as local businesses pay higher taxes [16].

Particularly relevant are critical opinions within the very field of economics. Joseph E. Stiglitz stands out with this respect as one of the mainstream economists pointing out that prior to the great financial downturn of 2008 the rules of economic game favored the most powerful sections of financial capital and the U.S. exported wrong economic policy around the globe which failed to bring the expected results [27, 28]. After leaving office, former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, said that there is a “flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that

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1 The original article which introduced the theory was published in 1997. The theory was also adopted by Fligstein [11].

defines how the world works”<sup>1</sup>.

From the point of view of economic effects, neoliberal capitalism has brought questionable results even in the most advanced economies which is corroborated by subpar economic recovery after 2008, the crisis of indebtedness and falling real income of the majority of consumers. However from the point of view of the top one percent of the population, neoliberal capitalism is an optimal economic system as their share of wealth has substantially increased [8].

The extension of neoliberal capitalism to post-communist economies has also brought questionable results from social point of view as millions of people were left behind and initially those countries lost 15-30 percent of their GDP. EU economic field was extended to post-communist countries before accession by way of association agreements. The candidate states were economically underdeveloped and they did not take part in the creation of EU economic field as they belonged to European periphery since the 16th century [31, p. 66-131]. The field was imposed on them by way of accession criteria. The integration was ‘impositional’ as there were no possibilities of real bargaining while negotiating association agreements which entered into force in the first half of the 1990s. The only negotiable conditions were transitional periods within the subfields of EU economic field. The candidate countries did not benefit from full membership, but they were subjected to the rules of EU economic field. Their economies were severely affected [19, p. 111-140] as state-owned companies were not able to compete with Western ones. The application of EU economic field amounted to ‘structural violence’ against the accession countries [25].

### **Social consequences of neoliberal economics**

Two factors which are most important for support for democracy include upward social mobility and rising real wages. With this respect after several decades of neoliberal economic policy it is clear that wages have been stagnating and upward social mobility had decreased in comparison with the post-war period.

The share of wages in GDP has decreased in spite of growing productivity. Between 1990 and 2008, real wages in the United States increased by only 3.3 percent, while labor productivity increased by 40 percent. The share of wages in GDP fell in the United States from 64 to 54 percent. The same rate for the UK fell from 65 to 57 per cent, for Germany from 79 to 67 per cent and for the Netherlands, the share of wages in GDP fell from 58 to 45 per cent [6, p. 236].

In the era of neoliberal capitalism, opportunities for social mobility in terms of climbing the social ladder have decreased. Mobility between income quintiles has declined significantly in recent decades in the United States. In 1978 23 percent out

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in [17]. The majority of mainstream economists still maintain that the world economy recovered from the crisis initiated in 2008 and the economic liberalism has not lost its value as the underlying economic theory.

of 20 percent of the poorest Americans moved up to the top quintile. Currently, this ratio has decreased to 10 percent. In addition, the richest Americans are more than five times more likely to reach the top quintile than poor Americans. Intragenerational social mobility is therefore quite limited even in the supposedly meritocratic society of the United States [4, p. 235-255]. Moreover, the competition for attractive professional positions is intensifying. Economic neoliberalism does not mean success for the labor force due to wage stagnation. Americans in their 30s and 40s now earn 12 per cent less than their fathers in terms of purchasing power [32, p. 16]. In real, inflation-adjusted terms, the median wage in the U.S. has barely increased between 1979 and 2018. The economic success of the last 30 years has been the privilege of the best-off Americans. The economic recovery after 2008 in the United States is mainly associated with the creation of jobs that do not require higher education (simple work). Widening income inequality is the source of frustration for the majority of Americans [13]. The middle class, which achieved professional success thanks to education finds itself in a difficult situation. In this context, R. Erikson and J.H. Goldthorpe indicate that periods of increased social mobility are episodic [9, p. 37].

In the situation of the growing demand for simple work and the surplus of university graduates in many specialties, the possibilities of achieving financial success based on education are decreasing. The demand in economies is growing at the fastest pace in such occupations as: salesman, cashier, trader, waiter, driver, cook, security worker. Conceptual knowledge workers represent a small proportion of the workforce, although demand for them has increased in recent decades. After 2008, in the United States, jobs are mainly created in low-paid simple work, which poses a threat to young people aspiring to the middle class. In the United Kingdom and the United States, 40 percent of graduates work in positions that do not require higher education, and there are over twenty graduates per one attractive position. Knowledge workers are afraid of losing their jobs and their pay. With the exception of top-level managers, the fate of professionals will not improve due to the surplus of people willing to work [6, p. 229-242].

Neoliberal economics works for the top one per cent of the population. Their share of wealth in the U.S. increased from 30 to 38 per cent of between 1989 and 2016. Another top 5 per cent benefit from the economic system as well and their real income has grown for the last decades. This problem is summarized by Czubochoa and Rejman in the following way:

The support of the rich since the 1970s consisted also in decreasing the tax burden on business. The biggest corporations often moved their operations to poor countries and funneled profits to tax havens. Resulting budget deficits were financed by sovereign debt. After 2008 the debt burden was so high that it has become non payable if one factors in liabilities resulting from medical care and pensions. In spite of this, the rich have been assisted by nation states and international organizations once more in the form of bailouts and quantitative easing or QE [5, p. 92].

### **Political results of the crisis of neoliberal economics**

David Ost made a claim that the reliance on economic liberalism may be dangerous for democracy as it creates millions of dispossessed who would blame liberal democracy for their economic hardships [20].

From political point of view the problem boils down to the legitimacy of the current power structures in Western democracies. The success narrative with reference to the results of neoliberal capitalism is forced on western societies to retain the legitimacy the system. The same remark refers to the new EU member states. Namely, both West and East European elites who benefited from post-communist transformations have to present them as a success to legitimize their hold on power and privileged access to resources. The legitimacy of both Western and Eastern European elites with reference to the transformations can be maintained on condition that the success narrative is not questioned by their societies. People are obedient to authorities on condition that they regard them as legitimate. A social order is regarded as legitimate if empirical facts corroborate ideology on which it is based. If there is incongruity between them the social order is challenged as legitimacy is always confronted with facts [24].

The failed social results of neoliberal economics in the new EU member states resulted in social disorganization creating an army of the 'left behind' who are easily swayed by radical political forces. Initially it was thought that market reforms would result in the creation of durable western-style democracies in the post-communist countries but it has turned out not to be the case. The socioeconomic order which emerged in the new EU member states did not resemble the Western model. In consequence, large swaths of populations do not subscribe to the success narrative. Underpaid workers anger is channeled into destructive political choices. Currently it is the case of Poland and Hungary where liberal political parties lost power to nationalists or populists.

In core Western states the political systems have become fragile due to similar reasons in spite of the fact that the economic background was different in that there was no economic transformation from centrally planned economies to the neoliberal economic model. The rise of anti-system politics reflects the exhaustion of neoliberal democracy. The failure of the political establishment to represent popular demands for protection from the brutal effects of the protracted economic crisis. There was no real choice for voters in that restraining the power of the wealthy elite (the 'one per cent') has always been out of the question. Therefore, voters looked for an alternative which led to the rise of the xenophobic right and the anti-capitalist left as part of a common global trend: anti-system politics.

Far-right and other fringe political parties gained support in Western Europe. These parties achieved great electoral success. For instance, the rebranded Marine Le Pen party won European Parliament elections in France in 2019. The Greek Socialist Party (PASOK), lost power after presiding over a bailout and austerity measures imposed by

the EU to save the Greek economy after the financial crisis of 2009. In 2012 the party was voted out of power by a radical left coalition, SYRIZA. Other examples include the electoral success of the Five Stars Movement in Italy in 2013 or anti-austerity street movement Podemos which turned into a political party. In Scotland in turn, the pro-independence Scottish Nationalist Party had won in a landslide election. In Spain, centrist Catalan nationalists become a secessionist party. The biggest changes were brought, however, by Donald Trump and the referendum on leaving the EU by Great Britain [14].

The current state of Western societies and the economy involves economic stagnation, high inequality and a political system which blocked off any prospect for social improvements for the masses. Across the democratic world, the neoliberal economic policy profited the richest leaving the middle class in a precarious situation. As a result, the main political parties lack votes to remain in the political mainstream. The political establishment infiltrated by business people within the policy of revolving door is unable to introduce a solution to the economic and social *malaise*. This state of affairs has led to a political backlash and the rejection of the political and economic order governing Western democracies after the great financial downturn of 2008/2009 [14].

Anti-system parties and politicians tend to present themselves self-consciously as alternatives to a discredited establishment or elite. They accuse the mainstream politicians of behaving like Adam Smith's tradesmen, banding together in a 'conspiracy against the public' to close the market to new entrants and cheat their customers by offering them a restricted choice. Typically, the mainstream political parties are depicted as being indistinguishable from each other, their leaders a homogeneous collection of careerists devoid of principles [15].

The neoliberal experiment had yielded no positive results for the majority of the populations. The system is crashing down, devastating lives across the world. Saving the system after the great financial downturn of 2000/2009 involved austerity for the masses and state support for the biggest financial institutions which constituted the breach of economic rationale. The banking bailouts and the austerity measures that followed them sparked popular outrage whilst sharpening pre-existing political conflicts and discrediting the established political elites. Therefore the masses have turned against the elite creating deep fractures in society, that could not be healed easily [22, p. 43-55]. Political elites were co-opted by business in the framework of the policy of revolving door. People from politics and business rotated between the two spheres creating the cartel unable to change the system. The *laissez-faire* approach to economic matters was thought to bring economic development by way of the trickle down effect. This inactivity of political elites resulted in a more unequal allocation of resources and inability to match the economic record of the post-war period [8].

As a result, satisfaction with the way democracy works has declined substantially. The deteriorating situation of the national economy as perceived by individual citizens

clashes with the official narrative of economic success [2, p. 423-442]. The success narrative does not attenuate the fury of the 'losers' which is directed against the elite and state apparatus and includes globalist international organizations and multinationals as well.

### **Attempts at saving the system**

The political and economic system has failed from the point of view of the majority of the population. The system has lost its legitimacy and as a result the social protests are difficult to contain. In spite of years of 'austerity' measures directed at the people and growth packages for the business, the neoliberal policy has exhausted its economic growth potential. Market-conforming neoliberal democracies face the problem of saving the system put in jeopardy by growing social discontent. The problem refers to the international level as well in that the economic globalization based on the neoliberal economic model is in danger.

As the system is crumbling the state apparatus and the ruling elites refer to emergency powers to save the existing social, economic and political order from breaking down. The reforms which will be undertaken would not involve changing the system by fazing out the neoliberal economic model. The anti-Covid measures were exploited to extend the authority of political and economic elites and served two purposes: enabling further capital accumulation and stifling social protests. They exacerbated the existing problems connected with unequal distribution of income and the destruction of small businesses and the middle class which benefited multinational companies and their capital accumulation. On the other hand, emergency powers were exploited to retain power in spite of violent street protests and the success of anti-systemic political forces. The system which was based on economic and political freedom is turning increasingly authoritarian enabling further capital accumulation in the hands of transnational capital. The conditions of emergency and digital economy favor multinational corporations. The system which is emerging can be called 'authoritarian neoliberalism' [23, p. 621-648].

Kees van der Pijl advances a hypothesis that the ruling elites exploited Covid to avoid the loss of control over the existing social and economic system by framing health and other issues as questions of 'security'. Liberal rights were suspended under the State of Emergency. People were told that there exists a greater good which prevails over human liberties, e.g. saving lives [21]. Probably in the coming years the system will be governed by resorting to electronic control of citizens in the form of an electronic identity and digital currencies in framework of a biomedical state. The system will be of international dimension as under the auspices of World Health Organization (WHO) issues relating to health will be managed on international level. The so called 'pandemic treaty' will authorize WHO to declare states of health emergency in those states which will be the signatories of the treaty. The roll out of vaccines will also be decided by WHO if need be. The climate emergency in turn should speed up the transformation of



the economies into digital ones which is summarized by the slogan 'build back better' promoted in the framework of global governance [1, p. 284-287]. This new order is summarized by Šumonja in the following way:

This includes conditions of emergency, when the state authorises itself to do 'whatever it takes' to save the existing social order from breaking down. In other words, we should remember that the strong hand of state, whose supposed return inaction is cheered and feared today, has actually been the organising force of neoliberal assault on all political obstacles to the profitability of capital accumulation the present pandemic sets the stage for extending the state of emergency [29].

Conclusions. Western societies are still overwhelmingly in favor of democratic rules and liberties. What they question is the management of the economy by corrupted elites unable to bring the necessary changes. However, the initiated reforms are aimed at saving the capitalist system and the political elites and not necessarily protecting democracy or the standard of living of the population. Neoliberal economics undermined the base of the current political system (the middle class). The political elites are in danger of losing power. The introduction of total electronic control is planned which will deprive the population the right to contest the economic and political order. Authorities will exonerate themselves from the blame for human rights violations by invoking the state of emergency or saving human lives. In such circumstances, rising to power by contesting the system will be very difficult. This new authoritarianism will be exploited to save the system supposedly for the good of the people. At the same time, it will amount to supporting the interests of the wealthy elite and their political counterparts. The reformed system will favor multinational companies at the expense of small companies and the labor force. Therefore, the distribution of wealth will further deteriorate. Additionally, the health emergency presented an opportunity to further the political and economic interests of the current international establishment in the framework of a global governance project. Apart from controlling the situation on the level of nation states, it is planned to create a sort of unofficial world government with the aim to manage the system globally. Global governance will consist in granting special powers to international organizations. Therefore, the freedom to take decisions by national governments will be severely restricted. For instance, according to the draft of the 'pandemic treaty', the World Health Organization will be responsible for fighting future pandemics and its competences would involve declaring the state of pandemics and ordering vaccinations. Officially, democracy will still be treated as the bedrock of the system but in reality it will be stifled under the pretence of saving humanity from climate disruptions and the spread of diseases.

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**СОЦІАЛЬНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ СУЧАСНИХ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКИХ СУСПІЛЬСТВ  
ТА ЇХ ВПЛИВ НА КРИЗУ ДЕМОКРАТІЇ  
В КОНТЕКСТІ НЕОЛІБЕРАЛЬНОЇ ЕКОНОМІЧНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ**

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Західні економіки функціонують в рамках неоліберальної економічної моделі, яку прийняли країни-члени ЄС. З іншого боку, підтримка ліберальної демократії на Заході завжди ґрунтувалася на неофункціоналістсько-велферистському підході та високому рівні життя. Однак з часом західні економіки почали руйнуватися, а рівень життя перестав зростати. У такій ситуації підтримка демократії ослабла і з'явився цілий ряд соціальних проблем, серед яких: соціальна нерівність, зростання націоналізму, підйом правих популістських рухів, антиіммігрантські настрої, насильницькі вуличні протести або низька явка виборців. Антиковідні заходи та «зелена» економічна політика ЄС загострили існуючі проблеми. З точки зору економічної соціології, неоліберальна економічна теорія є хибною, оскільки її застосування приносить неоптимальні економічні результати для більшості населення. За цих обставин економічне відновлення в західних демократіях є малоймовірним, і, як наслідок, населення все частіше ставитиме під сумнів авторитет західної демократії. Правлячі еліти намагатимуться використати різні надзвичайні ситуації, наприклад, у сфері охорони здоров'я чи клімату, щоб врятувати існуючу соціальну, економічну та політичну систему.

*Ключові слова:* економічний неолібералізм, демократія, економічна криза, антисистемна політика, надзвичайна ситуація.

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