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Authoritarian developmentalism: The latest stage of neoliberalism?

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ABSTRACT

We are amidst what can be termed an ongoing authoritarian turn in global politics. While Trump, one of its important examples, is no longer in office in the United States, there remain many countries under the sway of authoritarian leaders, such as Turkey, Egypt, Brazil, Hungary and the Philippines. The policies of Trump, Sisi, Bolsonaro, Orban and Duterte can be characterized as authoritarian developmentalism. Although they have come to power through democratic elections, these leaders are undermining some of the key tenets of democratic societies. While their policies are couched in nationalist terms and call for the strengthening of the state, they can also be seen as a continuation of the prevailing neoliberal global order. This introduction to a special issue ends by reflecting on the conditions necessary launch effective resistance movements against authoritarian developmentalism and the broader challenge of building vibrant political democracies in post-neoliberal times.

We are amidst what can be termed an authoritarian turn in global politics. From Donald Trump to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Narendra Modi, key nodes within the global economy have fallen under the sway of authoritarian and populist leaders who came to, or consolidated their hold on, power by promising national resurgence through (re)industrialization, infrastructure construction and insulation of local communities from global economic forces (e.g. Adaman et al., 2017; Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine, 2019; Bruff and Tansel, 2019; McCarthy, 2019; Vanaik, 2017). This was surprising not least because these promises seem to contradict the central edicts of neoliberal globalization – interconnectedness of markets, free movement of goods if not peoples, and teleological optimism in the ability of capitalism to self-regulate. The sway of authoritarian neoliberalism also (continues to) reveal(s) important limitations of its critics to construct a coherent alternative political project. For instance, despite growing acceptance of a planetary ecological crisis (Steffen et al., 2015) and intensifying calls for de-/post-growth (D'Alisa et al., 2014), developmentalism (*qua* neo-extractivism) has become a dominant force in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and beyond (Svampa, 2015; Arsel et al., 2016). Similarly, while the defence of indigenous identities and local structures through such initiatives as food sovereignty had been gaining steam (Schiavoni, 2009), ethno-nationalism and a backlash against minorities and their cultures have also made a resurgence, as evidenced not only by Brexit (Ingram, 2017) but, also, the furore over the consumption of beef in India (Nair, 2015), not to speak of the demands for a Wall to keep out (in Trump's words) Mexican “criminals, drug-dealers and rapists” (Scott, 2019).

Unquestionably, these dynamics are united by their connections to the global crisis of neoliberalism and its regional manifestations (e.g. Bruff, 2014; Patnaik, 2017; Scoones et al., 2017). At the global level, it can be seen in crises in financial (Saad-Filho, 2019) or environmental systems (Parr, 2015), and at local and regional levels through a variety of social conflicts against infrastructural developments in Turkey (Arsel et al., 2016), IMF-imposed labour market ‘reforms’ in Ecuador (Alarcon and Peters, 2020), or changes to India's agricultural markets (Aga, 2021).

What remains less well analysed is the political economy vision championed by these leaders or, in other words, the developmentalist policies which are so central to their fictionalized nostalgia and (consequently) vacuous promises to revive national greatness (Bachmann and Sidaway, 2016). Engaging with the global conceptualization of the idea of development (Horner and Hulme, 2019), the papers in this special issue address this gap in the literature as part of an attempt to help contribute to “a clear understanding of the shifting landscape of capitalism, flows of people and ideas, and political projects that shape our lives now” (Geoforum, 2017). They do so through case studies focusing on some of the countries emblematic of the confluence of neoliberalism with authoritarian developmentalism: Brazil, Egypt, Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary, India, and the USA. By bringing together countries at various income levels from both the ‘North’ and the ‘South’, this special issue draws lessons about what – we claim – is the latest stage of neoliberalism.

The paper next turns a brief discussion of the longer-term political economic dynamics that prepared the ground for the rise of

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authoritarian developmentalism. Before discussing its key features, the paper first argues that authoritarian developmentalism is very much a continuation of the prevailing neoliberal order. The penultimate section provides a brief summary of the contributions to this special issue. We conclude by reflecting on the possibility of transcending this authoritarian moment within the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. From the end of history to ‘America First’

While Fukuyama’s argument that the fall of the Berlin Wall essentially symbolized the ‘end of history’ was commonly accepted as far-fetched, there was widespread optimism that the ensuing decades would unleash another wave of democratization in the developing world (Fukuyama, 1992; Johnston, 1994). This belief was built upon the assumption that economic liberalization cannot advance beyond a certain point without pulling along with it political as well as socio-cultural liberalization. The latter two were assumed to be in a symbiotic relationship with economic liberalization, benefiting from a climate of ‘free enterprise’ as well as creating the conditions for further capital accumulation, especially as developing economies moved from manufacturing and primary exports to higher value added, high-tech or service sectors. It could be argued that – in such diverse settings as Turkey (Tugal, 2016), Thailand (Walker, 2012) and Brazil (Mollo et al., 2006) – this script was playing out in the 1990s and 2000s. The onward march of electoral democratic politics within neoliberal capitalism might have been seen as a universal and universalizing process that would sweep the globe and transform the holdouts, including China. Its progress was always going to be circuitous, but reversals back to authoritarian rule were seen as unlikely.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, a spate of political movements did indeed come to power in many developing countries and implemented policies of economic as well as political liberalization. While they were often not friendly towards labour and frequently built upon previous waves of authoritarian measures against progressive actors, they addressed themselves to hitherto disenfranchised communities and engaged with marginalized issues. In the revealing case of Turkey, for example, the rise of Erdoğan’s government came hand-in-hand not only with strict adherence to the policies recommended by the IMF but also with moves to relax longstanding restrictions on religious practice in the public sphere and to accommodate, to a limited extent, the cultural rights of the country’s Kurdish population (Insel, 2003; Jongerden, 2009). In other contexts, economic liberalization took a less overt form at the national level, though connections between national economies and global markets were strengthened, as was the case in China (Henderson et al., 2013) and Ecuador (Bebbington and Bury, 2013). The latter, for instance, ‘nationalized’ its oil industry while opening itself up for increased foreign investment in order to expand oil extraction and jump-start large-scale mining. Once again, political liberalization was an integral part of this transition: not only were indigenous values integrated into national development goals; the rights of nature were also enshrined in Ecuador’s new Constitution (Arsel, 2012).

More recently, with capitalism experiencing global as well as regional crises, there has been a tendency to limit, if not reverse, earlier moves towards economic and political liberalization. In Hungary and Egypt, political freedoms have been curtailed to a large extent and many previously accepted acts of dissent have been criminalized (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton, 2020; Sowers, 2015). In Turkey and Ecuador, there has also been a degree of regress on press freedom as well as curtailments of the political freedoms of specific groups (Kurds or indigenous communities) (Akbulut, 2017). In India, the revival of Hindu nationalism has resulted in heavily regressive policies, as exemplified by demonetization (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2018). China’s hoped-for transformation into a Western-style democracy turned out to be an illusion, as its crackdown in Xinjiang intensified and Hong Kong was pulled closer to Beijing. In Brazil, the administration led by Jair Bolsonaro has overtly

promoted gun ownership and created incentives not only for the devastation of the Amazon but also for the elimination of environmental activists and indigenous populations. Lest these trends be written off as ailments afflicting only the ‘developing world’, Brexit in the UK and Trump’s ‘America First’ policies targeted minorities at home and badly damaged international institutions, showing that while the economic logic of neoliberalism has intensified, its political form has remained fluid. In other words, neoliberalism has recently dropped its pretense of securing individual freedoms, turning its political outlook decisively towards increasing authoritarianism while using developmentalism as a cover. While this has not taken place uniformly across the world, the papers in this collection highlight this general tendency.

2. Neoliberalism and authoritarian developmentalism

This argument can be developed by using the definition of neoliberalism offered by Madra and Adaman as a form of capitalism that aims for the “*economisation* of the social, materialised either through the naturalisation of economic processes or technocratisation of their governance or both” (2014: 692). This definition not only shifts the concept of neoliberalism away from the dominant understanding that sees it merely as the marketization of all spheres of life but also underscores how it politicizes the problems it claims to address purely ‘technically’. It is important to note that this is not the same as Ferguson’s anti-politics (Ferguson, 1990) in the sense that the change can be seen in *how* questions are politicized, namely as issues in need of economic solutions. As such, neoliberalism continues to be a class project that is predicated upon a shifting power dynamic between labour and (global financial) capital (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017). This combination of economization and a specific form of politicization can account for the shift towards the contemporary political economy of authoritarianism and the ideological tool with which it seeks (electoral) legitimacy: developmentalism (as policy or performance).

There is a remarkable set of similarities across the cases covered in this special issue, centered on the portrayal of national economic development as *the* solution to the societal problems facing these nations. Thus, the roots of the attachment to neoliberalism under Trump, Modi or Erdoğan, to name only a few examples, are not necessarily found in their adherence to market institutions and processes as such (even though in certain sectors this does remain central). Rather, the approach is one of developmentalism, wherein the state seeks to portray all societal problems as being resolvable by economic growth. This is of course not an entirely new development and is closely associated with the rise to dominance of neoliberalism. For instance, Foucault had argued that economic growth was the “only one true and fundamental social policy” (2008: 144). Nevertheless, this approach has not fully penetrated most societies – from Turkey’s ‘father state’ to the UK’s ‘cradle to grave’, welfare states are still in the process of being dismantled – and the authoritarian turn advances it further. In short, by recasting Madra and Adaman’s argument that neoliberalism is hegemonic not (simply) because it privileges markets but because it claims the dominant human motivation to be economic (i.e. individuals respond to economic incentives) at a societal level, a clearer picture of contemporary authoritarianism emerges.

Seen as the primary solution to societal ills, development then comes to be seen as not only urgently needed but also as a goal at whose attainment of other political and social values – rule of law, adherence to commonly accepted ethical and political standards, etc. – can be sacrificed. Thus, it is not surprising that faced with allegations of wrongdoing or undemocratic practices, Erdoğan, Trump and other comparable leaders deflect attention by highlighting their purported developmental achievements, be it the construction of mega projects or the unprecedented levels reached by the stock market. Yet authoritarian developmentalism, even if it secured high growth rates (which it generally fails to do in any sustainable way), cannot address the needs of the segments of society that have been disadvantaged both in the earlier

phases of neoliberalism and even more so by the austerity measures taken in response to its crises – which, paradoxically, the leaders in question claim to prioritize. In fact, the attacks against environmental and indigenous activists in Brazil, the preventable death of hundreds of poorly paid miners in a coal mine in Turkey, the negative impact of demonetization that affected the poorest segments of society in India, and many other examples show that neoliberal developmentalism not only fails to protect the poor and marginalized but further impoverishes them. This is due to two distinct limitations of neoliberalism: it remains a class project that advances the interests of (financial) capital; and its economic view of how societal problems can be tackled is fundamentally unable to address key demands and expectations of the most marginalized groups in society, whether in terms of employment generation, minimum standards of welfare, provision of public services, respect for community dynamics, ecosystem sustainability or territorial autonomy.

It is within this context that authoritarian developmentalism can take on a populist character. Populism, even when distinguished into its left- and right-leaning variants, remains a problematic concept that is often used pejoratively rather than analytically. In addition to engaging with it critically, the papers in this special issue also break the concept down into three closely related dynamics: the rise of so-called ‘post-truth politics’ (Lockie, 2017), the intensification of ‘neo-patrimonial rhetoric’ (Koehler, 2008), and economic and social protection policies that claim to assist the poorest segments of society (Fischer, 2020). While not all three components occur simultaneously in all cases, there is a remarkable rise in these strategies in all of them – as illustrated by Trump’s removal of restrictions on coal mining and oil extraction in Alaska and elsewhere, while dismantling already weak climate change policies; Duterte’s promise of free irrigation; and the ‘winter aid’ (usually fuel and other supplies) offered by Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party. Taken together, these strategies seek to secure consent for the rule of authoritarian leaders and validation of their style of governance, in the face of the mounting neoliberal crises.

However, as populist political practices eventually fail to deliver electoral legitimacy, it is ultimately through authoritarianism that these leaders and their regimes must secure their hold on power. The cleavage between the promises of developmentalism and the performance of neoliberal economies can emerge from either neoliberalism’s shortcomings on its own terms, or from its inability to address values and goals that are fundamentally at odds with national economic growth and statehood in general (e.g. indigenous cosmologies). In the face of challenges to their legitimacy, these leaders ultimately resort to authoritarian tactics, such as the labelling of progressive political actors as ‘urban Naxalites’ in India and Viktor Orbán’s pressures on Central European University. While these regressive policies are primarily aimed at securing the dominance of specific forms of neoliberalism in each country, authoritarian developmentalism can also be deployed to promote the material interests of strong leaders and their immediate supporters (as in Turkey, Egypt, Russia, and elsewhere).

3. Key features of authoritarianism

Often, authoritarian leaders rise to power “with platforms that promised to wipe out corrupt politicians, experiment with participatory forms of democracy, strengthen the role of the state in the economy, and redistribute wealth” (de la Torre 2016: 61). Their election (as opposed to grabbing power through military force or other types of coup) is a key feature of authoritarian neoliberalism. These leaders’ election, and their continuing pursuit of parliamentary majorities and broad institutional support, make theirs a form of competitive authoritarianism, defined as “civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage *vis-à-vis* their opponents” (Levitsky and Way, 2015: 5). This is qualitatively distinct from other forms of authoritarian hegemony construction and

maintenance.

This quality might contribute to the efficacy of the neoliberal form of authoritarianism, because it has emerged at a moment of widespread dissatisfaction with entrenched political structures and conventional actors (political parties, career politicians, the judiciary, and so on). While this dissatisfaction does not inevitably foster authoritarianism, the underlying disillusionment with the establishment can create enabling conditions for the rise of unconventional political agents promising radical transformation, from former businesspeople to assorted ‘celebrities’ and even comedians. In many contexts, the promises of the emerging authoritarian leaders were calibrated to attract the support of marginalized or disenfranchised groups that did not see their interests represented by existing political structures. They did so by not only recognizing the severity of inequality under neoliberalism – whether economic, social or cultural – but also supporting the (generally implicit) perception that these inequalities resulted from the workings of global capitalism. While right-wing authoritarian leaders did not express any willingness to transition away from it, they did offer to address some of its adverse implications through trade restrictions, fiscal spending, transfers or social policy, which has contributed to the ongoing debates about ‘deglobalization’ (van Bergeijk, 2019).

Another significant feature of the current political moment is that authoritarian policies were not necessarily deployed to quash generalized dissent but as populist tools to putatively alleviate the suffering of the political bases of the leaders. Even though many of these were staunchly right-wing, they effectively adapted the language of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles, often to cover up their corruption and mismanagement. Consequently, a whole host of non-state actors – among them, non-governmental organizations, academics, interest groups and labour unions – have found themselves threatened, intimidated or eliminated by authoritarian leaders accusing them of following anti-national policies. This charge is not merely a convenient scapegoating device. The suggestion that the critics are either consciously working for foreign powers or unwittingly being manipulated by them can discredit their views on a variety of seemingly unrelated issues while, simultaneously, varnishing the credentials of the authoritarian leader as the defender of national interests.

These charges can not only silence the critics of the authoritarian leaders but, also, open the door to controversial policies rolling back environmental protections or safeguarding the rights of indigenous populations. It is not surprising that authoritarian leaders have been actively targeting those campaigning for environmental protection as well as indigenous and cultural rights. This is not simply because regulations protecting the environment or rights of the marginalized – e.g. emission standards aimed at limiting greenhouse gas emissions – can impede accumulation on their own. Perhaps even more importantly, these spheres have proven themselves especially fecund in terms of engendering societal resistance to authoritarian rule. From Gezi Park in Turkey (Arsel et al., 2017) to Dakota Access Pipeline in the United States (Tramel, 2018), they have resulted in some of the most effective challenges to authoritarian developmentalism. In seeking to trample such acts of resistance, authoritarian regimes have dealt with leading members of such dynamics extremely harshly, as demonstrated by the experience of Osman Kavala in Turkey (Turkut, 2020) and Disha Ravi in India (Ellis-Petersen, 2021). Such acts of oppression aim to foreclose resistance against accumulation via extraction and construction projects as well as the development of alternatives to capitalism.

If silencing dissent from the non-state sector is one core dimension of establishing authoritarian power, a more conventional strategy of authoritarian leaders has been the stifling of press as well as academic freedoms. Again, this takes various shapes, from active coercion to the use of state power and the law to intimidate journalists. While suppression of press freedoms is of course a long-established practice of top-down leaders, this does take a unique shape in the contemporary moment as authoritarian leaders actively curate a set of ‘alternative facts’ and spread them through traditional as well as social media

(Swyngedouw, 2017). In challenging the press, they do not only seek to silence critical voices but actively promote their own version of events. Thus, the act of creating a positive image for the authoritarian leader does not require the closing down of newspapers or physically harming journalists. By declaring them again as working against national interests and as purveyors of untruths, authoritarian leaders can achieve the same effect as formal censorship, but perhaps with greater efficiency. Put differently, the more the mainstream media questions authoritarian leaders' claims, the more the latter's supporters become convinced that the leader is telling the truth and the media is both 'fake' and seeking to undermine the leader against the will of the majority. It follows that when authoritarian leaders make outrageous statements whose untruth seems obvious they are not simply trying to peddle lies but, also, to push a wedge between their supporters and critics.

As both civil society and free press suffer from the power of authoritarian leaders, this makes it possible for leaders to elevate themselves as the embodiment of a radical project of social transformation promoting the interests of large strata of the population who feel they have been losing out under neoliberalism. The equation of transformation with the personality of the leader opens up a vast space of political and legal action for the authoritarian leader who can intervene in any and all political debates. This acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy; the more an authoritarian leader interferes with established political procedures, the more these procedures become delegitimized. As such, all major decisions end up requiring the blessing of the authoritarian leader, at least informally, to have any purchase. At the same time, this makes for a highly effective electoral strategy since authoritarian leaders can simultaneously denounce their opponents' criticisms as distractions from the urgent task of transforming the country, while arguing to the electorate that conditions are bound to get even worse if they are denied a stronger mandate in the ballot box.

The cult of personality has its limits, and the power of authoritarian leaders can only be fully realized through the state apparatus. To that end, the rise of authoritarian leaders in the contemporary era is accompanied by the strengthening of the state (though, in certain areas, such as environmental agencies, it might in fact be weakened). This can take two distinct shapes, which can co-exist. The first is the strengthening of national institutions themselves through legal changes, which endow ministries and other similar structures with greater power in economic and social policy, through for instance the establishment and implementation of national development plans and major infrastructural projects. The second is recentralization of power away from decentralized structures, overriding the power and authority of lower levels of governance – be it provincial administrations, regulatory agencies, etc. – to make the national state, and by extension its authoritarian leader, responsible for major policy decisions. It is important to note that this centralization of power is first and foremost a political process, even though it concerns the governance of economic processes.

The dynamics mentioned above do not unfold quietly or in secret. In fact, the authoritarian leaders in question openly advertise their intent and boast about their struggle to domesticate civil society, free press and other powers that they claim stand in their way. Furthermore, the achievement of these goals is portrayed not as ends but as means to accomplishing what they purport to be the *raison d'être* of their political project. This aim itself plays out in two different timescales. The longer-term goal of authoritarian leaders is to achieve the complete remaking of society – not only transformation of the national economy and its relationship with global capitalism but also the reorganization of political and cultural relationships. However, given both the length of time required to achieve these changes and the negative costs associated with them, authoritarian leaders have also invested substantial resources into populist measures aimed at shoring up working class support. It is important to recognize that in many cases these material interventions – erection of trade barriers, increasing of minimum wages, expansion of social safety nets, introduction or expansion of conditional cash

transfers, increased investment in infrastructure such as roads, hospitals and schools, and overall amplification of social spending – can create widespread popular support especially from poor and marginalized classes engaged through patronage relationships.

4. Contributions to this special issue

The papers in this collection all highlight various aspects of these qualities and demonstrate the ways in which the emergence of authoritarian developmentalism in diverse settings represents the reconfiguration of neoliberalism. Scheiring (2019) focuses on the case of Hungary, which embodied the promise of post-socialist democratization until very recently. Its authoritarian turn under Orbán has been associated with a reconfiguration of elite consensus around an 'accumulative state' that is content with short-term gains. Adaman and Akbulut (2020) focus on one of the longest running episodes – dating back to 2002 – that concern the rise and eventual authoritarian transformation of Erdoğan's leadership in Turkey, which can be characterized as a treadmill of continuous extraction and construction – requiring continuous injection of populist policies (most recently the reconversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque) and authoritarian measures. While this makes for a precarious political balance, Erdoğan and his AKP have managed to hold on to power through repeated elections. Egypt too has a long history with authoritarianism, though Adly (2020) shows how the most recent manifestation from 2013 onwards takes a particularly pernicious form of neoliberalism, which allowed the country to re-connect with global financial markets and institutions. Increased repression of civil society, labour and other progressive forces were justified as being necessary to create the conditions for this dynamic, which primarily benefit the regime and its foreign investors.

The experience of Brazil with Bolsonaro's authoritarianism is a much more recent phenomenon. Saad-Filho and Boffo show how Brazil has been experiencing major crises since 2013, culminating in "the most extremist and dysfunctional administration in Brazil's republican history" (2020: 1). They argue that widespread grievances with corruption and the Workers' Party's ineffectual response to them combined with fortuitous breaks for Bolsonaro resulted in Brazil's current predicament. Like others in this category, Duterte came to power in the Philippines by promising radical change from past practices, a promise that resonated with an increasingly impatient public dissatisfied with establishment practices and personalities. In her paper, Ramos (2021) problematizes this narrative, arguing that Duterte's populism – not unlike other examples discussed in this collection – is far less ambitious and coherent in practice, as his critics and the scholarly literature have assumed. For Sinha (2021), India is no stranger to 'strong leaders'. However, the model that Modi relies on is paradoxical not just because his electoral wins underwrite his authoritarianism but also in the way this is legitimized by social media and communication technologies. Finally, in arguably the most unexpected and most consequential authoritarian turn, Kiely focuses on the phenomenon of Trump and his agenda to 'Make America Great Again'. Contextualizing his rise within the context of a tension between neoliberal globalization and paleoconservative anti-globalisation, Kiely argues that rather than a decisive break from neoliberalism, Trump has brought a form of right-wing populism that does not solve but merely postpones the US's reckoning with deepening structural problems.

5. Covid-19, climate change and future crises

At time of writing, the long-term fortunes of some of the authoritarian developmentalist leaders seem less solid than they did only a year ago. The removal of Trump is certainly the most important example, though Erdoğan's major defeat in the mayoral elections in Istanbul is also notable. It is therefore possible to expect that at least in some of these countries authoritarianism might not prove to be a permanent fixture. Nevertheless, in Brazil, Egypt, India, Hungary and the

Philippines the conditions remain largely unchanged. Just as importantly, Trump's incitement of the attack on the US Capitol and Erdoğan's ongoing attempt to destabilize progressive institutions of higher education such as Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, show that the replacement of these regimes will be difficult and come with heavy social costs.

It is also necessary to look beyond elections and study the underlying conditions that have produced such leaders. Even if they lose elections, opinion polls in many of the countries in question show that the type of views they espouse have surprisingly strong support. In other words, neoliberalism's authoritarian developmental turn is not the 'disease' but a symptom of structural dynamics that need to be addressed. These dynamics – from institutional racism to financialization to unchecked ecological destruction – are intertwined and deeply rooted.

Covid-19 has made an already unpredictable and challenging situation even more complex and fluid (Saad-Filho, 2020). The dismal performance of authoritarian leaders – particularly but not only Trump and Bolsonaro – can be seen as a surprise. Some of the most effective policies in countries where response to the virus can be seen as 'successful' – curfews, closing of borders, etc. – could have been expected to be compatible with the political ideologies of the authoritarian leaders. It is not just the nature of these policies; the manner in which they were articulated and implemented, which short-circuited deliberative processes and required heavy-handed enforcement, also form a 'natural' fit with the authoritarian approach to governance. Furthermore, the 'war' metaphor that became commonplace especially during the early stages of the Covid-19 response around the world is not only a natural ally of an authoritarian approach, given its militarization of security, but also works well with the type of exclusionary nationalism that many of the recent authoritarian leaders have adopted. Yet, with a few exceptions, most of the authoritarian leaders passed up on the opportunity to follow such policies which suited them particularly well.

Some of the key themes advanced in this special issue – especially the post-truth politics of authoritarianism and the primacy of economic growth over all other values – can go a long way in explaining why authoritarian leaders were not willing or able to undertake the type of strict policies that have proven effective in halting the spread of the virus. Especially Trump and Bolsonaro have been particularly vocal in questioning scientific expertise in terms of both the significance of the virus and the means with which it could be contained or treated. In many cases, including Turkey and India, where the legitimacy of their presidents have been tied directly to rising GDP figures, attempts at locking down national economies have been undertaken reluctantly and incompletely. Nevertheless, given that many of these leaders have presented themselves as champions of the poor and marginalized and the fact that social policies can easily have a 'dark side' (Fischer, 2020), it is remarkable that they have by and large passed up the opportunity to shore up their support by implementing policies and measures that can support economically vulnerable communities. This can be read as one of the clearest revelations yet of the hollowness of their populism, which is a barely disguised class war to deepen neoliberalism and further enrich the economic elite.

Nevertheless, simply exposing the true face of authoritarian developmentalism alone cannot be expected to dismantle it. Nor can replacing the leaders in question suffice. The deepening of socio-economic inequalities, demonization of ethnic and religious minorities, and systematic destruction of critical ecosystems require deeper structural changes that go beyond who holds electoral offices or how they govern. While such a large-scale political shift would have to be fought for in various spaces and platforms, it cannot be expected to succeed without a coherent political project from the left that responds to the ideological gap in progressive politics that has allowed the rise of neoliberalism and its authoritarian turn in the first place.

The pathway towards such a progressive project is arguably the key challenge for future research. One of the most important questions that remains unanswered concerns the failure of more effective resistance movements and projects to materialize and gain ground. Whereas

critical social scientists have done excellent work understanding when and how social conflicts arise (and can effect meaningful change), there has been scant work on their absence (for exceptions, see Akbulut et al., 2018 and Uba, 2020). Another set of questions concerns the requisites and processes for the construction of vibrant political democracies in post-neoliberal era. This, we argue, is the key political project for our times.

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