Riots and Political Protest

Notes from the post-political present

Simon Winlow, **Steve Hall**, **James Treadwell** and **Daniel Briggs**

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CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

Name your beliefs; identify your enemy

It is now clear that the global financial meltdown of 2008 was an event of truly historical proportions. Initially at least, when the crisis first hit, it seemed to signal the exhaustion of a particular epoch and open up the possibility that something new might take its place. A strutting, self-satisfied neo-liberalism, beholden to the abstract financial markets that had become central to its economic functioning, appeared to have dropped off the edge of a steep cliff, and only the tax revenues of ordinary workers in the real economy could save it. Before the crash, minimally regulated free-market capitalism had defeated all alternative models of economic organisation to become the pure common sense that all mainstream politicians took for granted. In the months that followed the crash, as the scale of the endemic mismanagement and greed that had carried the global economy to the brink of catastrophe became clear, previously bullish free-market ideologues appeared chastened and contrite. The neo-liberal model itself was subject to stinging rebuke. Once again, it became possible to speak publicly of political and economic alternatives to neo-liberalism without being immediately dismissed as an unworldly utopian or an advocate of totalitarianism.

The crisis allowed us to momentarily extricate ourselves from the dominant economic logic of the neo-liberal era and occupy a new space from which we could look back objectively at the ideological dogma that had led our politicians to believe that the market would find a natural equilibrium, regulate itself and gradually improve the lives of all. We could also begin to see the immutable problems of the debt-fuelled growth model and the staggering injustices that had led to the establishment of new, mega-rich, corporate elites at the top of the class system and the significant growth in 'socially excluded' populations at the bottom. Perhaps most importantly, for our purposes at least, the 2008 economic crash appeared to make it possible to at least begin to imagine a world beyond capitalism.

Predictably enough, the human miseries that followed the crash were concentrated among the poorest and least able to influence the trajectory of mainstream politics. However, this time, the extent of the crash was such that many young people from the middle classes were adversely affected, and this is still the case, now in 2014. Youth unemployment was quickly acknowledged as a problem of genuine historical significance (see Crowley and Cominetti, 2014; Eichhorst and Neder, 2014). Many educated young people were locked out of housing markets and reasonably secure forms of employment, and they would not have the expansive welfare systems of the modern era to support them through the hard times. People across the West were angry, and justifiably so. The certainties of the recent past had evaporated.

However, if the 2008 crash genuinely was a historical turning point, it's not yet clear where history's new course might take us. We remain firmly lodged in an intervallic period, from the standpoint of which it is too early to identify with any clarity the political and economic shape of the future. The crash of 2008 appeared to thaw out the frozen topography of postmodern market societies and open up the possibility of genuine historical change, but, as the months and years rolled by, as new protest movements arose and then returned to the background, it became clear that no new ideology would develop capable of imposing its will on the post-crash landscape. Neo-liberalism, therefore, could continue simply by default.

It is against this rather dour background that we will develop an empirical and theoretical analysis of contemporary riots and forms of political protest. We will address key sites of political and social turmoil and those new forms of activism that suggest to some that a return to history may soon be upon us. In particular, we are keen to develop an account of what many on the left believe to be the long-awaited reawakening of a popular political consciousness that has lain dormant since the 1980s. We want to look at the reality of Western political systems and to think about how political opposition develops. In particular, we hope to see if there is any truth in the claim that political opposition these days has a range of limits imposed upon it. If this is so, what are these limits, who or what imposes them, and how are they imposed?

Of course, in order to understand contemporary forms of political protest, it is necessary to address the context in which they occur. We need to think about the contemporary conjuncture in a reasonably objective manner and develop an analysis of the forces that shape popular perceptions of politics, society and the economy, and those that encourage individuals and groups to see the necessity of political intervention. We must also think deeply about the complexities of motivation. What drives men and women to cast aside the routine considerations of everyday life and take up new political commitments? What are the motivations that propel the individual towards forms of political engagement that suggest a desire to relinquish the possessive individualism of our times?

It is not enough to assume that the political activist is simply a level-headed rationalist who recognises that personal sacrifices are necessary if his living standards are to improve, and we cannot simply reduce the activities of new oppositional

movements to an entirely justifiable righteous indignation at high levels of social inequality and injustice. If we are to understand the reality of new forms of political subjectivity, we must develop a theoretical analysis that encourages us to think critically about the forces that drive the individual beyond disengagement and cynical acceptance to dedicated political commitment. We must also reflect further on ideology and subjectivity, and how oppositional political movements might symbolise and act politically upon the anger and dissatisfaction that appear to exist in abundance across the West.

As the book develops, we will build a preliminary response to the fundamental questions faced by the ideological opponents of liberal capitalism today. First, how can political opposition challenge liberal capitalism and seek to move beyond it? What forms should political opposition take? It is certainly true that liberal capitalism has proven to be remarkably adept at assimilating opposition and using its energy to enhance its own functioning (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Hall *et al.*, 2008). What can new oppositional groups do that will not be immediately seized upon and incorporated by liberal capitalism and its ostensibly 'democratic' parliamentary system? The history of the post-1980s neo-liberal period indicates that traditional forms of opposition and protest can achieve only limited success against an incredibly dynamic ideological system that seeks to integrate and domesticate all political antagonisms (Winlow and Hall, 2013), converting enmity and ideological opposition into a bland, insipid democratic negotiation between rational and pragmatic political actors. It should now be perfectly clear that traditional forms of protest can be appropriated by power and used as evidence to support the argument that contemporary liberal capitalism welcomes political diversity and forthright debate (see Žižek, 2008), and that democracy cordially invites all to take part in the creation of our shared future. This is not simply a process of historical revisionism, a process that turns Martin Luther King into a flag-waving patriot and the events of 1968 into a libertarian fight for new economic freedoms. *Capitalism today is ideologically reliant upon actual attempts to subvert its rule*; it needs manifested forms of cultural insubordination and a vocal but domesticated political opposition to convince us that democracy works and that what exists is the will of the majority. Of course, we are not suggesting that liberal capitalism can no longer be successfully opposed. Rather, we hope to encourage the development of new ways of conceiving of opposition that begin with the cold recognition of the titanic power of liberal capitalism's incisive ideological system and the vast amount of labour required to create an ideological account of reality capable of opposing it.

We fundamentally disagree with the post-war intellectual trend that insists that opposition should be limited to constant iconoclasm, with no inkling of what a future without capitalism might look like (see Jacoby, 2013). Given the lessons learned from previous failures, how will the post-capitalist economic and political system be structured? The apparent inability of the political Left to construct a reasonably clear response to this question is quite significant. As we shall see, many contemporary leftist protest movements are capable of constructing a realistic and

compelling account of the failures of global capitalism. Protestors know this system to be incredibly unjust. They can see that only a tiny percentage of the population benefits from the operational logic of markets. They know that global capitalism refuses to address the gradual degradation of our natural environment, that the young are, with every passing year, increasingly unable to reproduce the relatively stable and affluent lifestyles of their parents. They know that current austerity policies unfairly affect the poorest, while failing to even inconvenience the rich, and that the current economic model simply cannot produce enough well-paid jobs in the West to allow young people to access the benefits of social inclusion. Leftist protest movements can quite easily identify what it is that they oppose, but they have not yet developed a positive programme for change and a world beyond capitalism. These protest movements are against lots of things, but it is not yet clear what it is that they positively endorse. The removal or reduction of those things they are against does not really count as a positive programme. In academic life too, there is an unusual absence of positive utopian thinking, which contrasts sharply with a surfeit of negative iconoclasm. We like knocking things down, but we seem to have no idea, beyond vague abstractions, what we want to build. Too often, speculative accounts appear to rest upon a disavowed belief that capitalism itself cannot be fully dispensed with, and that the best we can hope for is a *capitalism without capitalism*, a capitalism shorn of its most harmful mid-range causes and effects. In this book, as a political and theoretical backdrop to our analysis of riots and protest, we will try to explain why it has become so difficult to construct an image of a future in which we are not inextricably tied to the profit motive.

We will also look in detail at the dialectical standstill that appears to characterise our times, and our analysis will proceed in full recognition of the huge material problems liberal capitalism faces as it reproduces itself in the twenty-first century. The traditional leftist debate about the end of capitalism should now be more urgent than ever: will capitalism simply collapse under the weight of its own contradictions, or will new ideological projects and forms of political engagement carry us into a new, post-capitalist epoch? Of course, these two positions are not diametrically opposed, and, in order for the debate to move forward in a productive way, it needs to integrate a robust conception of politics and the political 'event' (see Badiou, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). It also needs to confront the real possibility that capitalism will continue to define the foreseeable future. Throughout its history, capitalism has displayed a breath-taking ability to move with the times, respond to crises and disperse and assimilate threatening forms of popular dissatisfaction. The continuing debate about the end of capitalism needs to revolve around the acknowledgement that capitalism itself has most successfully responded to the periodic crises in the market system. Capitalism changes when it is expedient for it to do so. Historically, it has successfully integrated popular critique and appropriated and reformulated many of the Left's traditional concerns. It is now perfectly acceptable for right-wing politicians to pronounce, without irony, their commitment to equality, social justice, fairness and freedom, once the exclusive clarion calls of the broad liberal Left. We should bear this in mind when our politicians

tell us about the actions they have undertaken to end the economic crisis and make our societies stable again. Capitalism, as a genuinely revolutionary socio-economic system, completely transformed what we mean by stability. Capitalism is inherently unstable. It constantly moves and undulates, and, of course, the market system inevitably goes through periods of boom and bust. The political goal of economic stability needs to be placed in this broader context, but it is also incumbent upon all intelligent people to wrestle with the possibility that the economic problems we face now cannot be fully overcome. We are six years into the economic crisis. Austerity and falling living standards are the new normal. This is what stability looks like.

The expansive range of problems associated with the continuation of capitalism, problems that are now known, if not entirely understood, by a significant proportion of the Western population, might well be answered by the development of a new form of capitalism: a capitalism that promises to solve many of the malignant problems that cause such distress today, but capitalism nonetheless. In short, this debate needs to move forward and appraise with honesty the significant ideological successes of global capitalism and its ability to transform itself in order to pacify or sidestep growing antagonism. If it is to draw popular support and mount a significant challenge to the dominance of the market, the political Left must withdraw from the immediacy of ongoing events and, in an entirely dispassionate manner, once again take stock of its opponent. It needs to stop kidding itself that 'the people' are disgusted by inequality and the consumerisation of popular culture and are ready and waiting for an opportune moment to spill out on to the streets to demand a more just and equitable system.

If the Left is to advance from its current position, it might also consider taking a critical glance at its own recent history. With this in mind, we will spend some time in this book taking stock of the basic ideological transformations that have taken place on the left since the 1980s. We hope to interrogate dominant forms of leftist social analysis in order to identify how and why the Left lost so comprehensively, and why it continues to be incapable of developing an analysis of the present that can attract and unify the post-industrial ex-working classes and allow them to understand their frustrations and dissatisfactions in relation to the harms and injustices that are unavoidable outcomes of the normal functioning of today's global capitalist markets. How has the Left changed, and what has happened to its traditional principles of egalitarianism and social justice? Has the Left's traditional utopianism given way to a basic pragmatism that seeks only to mitigate capitalism's worst effects? Why has the Left become uncomfortable with the politics of universality, preferring instead to defend the rights of various cultural interest groups?

Things cannot go on as they are . . .

Our analysis of contemporary political protest develops from an encounter with the manifold evidence that addresses the serious social consequences awaiting us

in the near future, as climate change and resource depletion gather pace (Heinberg, 2011; Hiscock, 2012; Pearce, 2013). Against such a background, can liberal capitalism maintain its position as history's most successful socio-economic system? Looming resource wars, ecological disasters and social unrest could puncture even liberal capitalism's mass-mediated ideological bubble and very quickly send this dominant perception spinning into reverse. We have already glimpsed the future in the initial growth of liberal authoritarianism in Western democratic nations: governments are now increasingly willing to discard established civil liberties and legal entitlements in order to ensure that a shallow and ideologically tainted version of freedom is maintained (see Agamben, 2005; Žižek, 2009). Will this trend continue, and, if it does, how will politicians seek to justify such things to the population? How will people respond to this trade-off between authoritarianism and an increasingly one-dimensional form of consumer freedom, and to governments' willingness to discard the basic principles of democracy so that capitalism can continue unimpeded? How will liberal capitalism deal with its fetishistic attachment to economic growth as the global economy reaches its material limits and energy resources become increasingly scarce and expensive? How can liberal democracy and liberal capitalism continue to justify themselves as the 'least worst' of all social and political systems when more and more people find themselves excluded from the social and cultural activities that supposedly constitute the good life? How can Western governments address the chronic unemployment and underemployment that have beset so many post-industrial areas across Europe and North America? Ultimately, can capitalism continue to convince a majority that its market mechanisms, domesticated electoral systems, securitisation apparatus and military operations are the answers to the problems created by its own functioning?

As we write these words, it seems that the ongoing economic crisis has made neo-liberalism a good deal stronger. It appeared to have had its wings clipped in the years that immediately followed the crash, but it continues to exist as pure *doxa* for most mainstream politicians, political parties and cultural commentators across the West. In this intervallic period, we continue to see the reckless exploitation of the natural world; indeed, this appears to be picking up pace, as the desire to drive our economies back to growth supersedes any vague commitment to environmental issues our politicians might once have expressed. New commitments to slashing government spending and tackling the structural deficit have further weakened the already half-hearted governmental promise to create sustainable twenty-first-century economies. Relatedly, an obscene land grab is under way across the world, as corporations seek to identify and exploit new energy sources and mineral deposits (see Hiscock, 2012; Pearce, 2013), and there is much evidence to suggest that we simply cannot return to the sustained economic growth of the post-war years, or even the sporadic growth of the early neo-liberal years (see Heinberg, 2011). Here, we are talking about growth in the real economy in which most people earn a living. Abstract financial markets often disguise the worsening reality of the West's economic situation (see Varoufakis, 2011).

Without a radical intervention, it seems entirely likely that we will see the gradual disintegration of the partial achievements of modernity. Liberal capitalism's assumption that incremental historical progress will continue to sustain our flight from barbarism towards the civilisational ideal has now been revealed as mere myth-making. For the time being, it seems inevitable that things will get worse for everyone but the new global bourgeoisie and their hired technocrats and administrators. The great majority of the population will have to get by with less. Given all of these things, and a good deal more besides, isn't it incumbent on leftist intellectuals to once again ask: What hold does neo-liberalism have over us? What is preventing us from fully casting it aside and moving forward towards a more just and inclusive system? The crash of 2008 has allowed more people to recognise their own exploitation amid the fundamental injustices of neo-liberal capitalism, and yet so many people still believe that *any attempt to change things for the better will inevitably change things for the worse.* Despite growing dissatisfaction with neo-liberal capitalism, huge swathes of the population remain unconsciously tied to its continuation. Why is it so difficult to even imagine a positive vision of a world without capitalism?

If we are to develop a realistic account of new forms of political opposition, we need to think carefully about what politics is and what it is not. Too often throughout the academic literature, the word 'politics' is used in troublingly inexact ways. Of course, the adoption of an entirely fluid conception of 'politics' enables the author to identify it in virtually any social context. This, in turn, makes the construction of a clear distinction between 'political action' and 'non-political action' a wholly subjective enterprise. The author can identify a form of politics, or the absence of politics, wherever she chooses and for whatever purpose. For us, the projection of 'politics' on to entirely non-political aspects of everyday social life is a regrettable feature of contemporary leftist social analysis. It suggests a steadfast refusal to countenance the true extent of the Left's failure and the staggering successes of liberal capitalism in reshaping the fields of politics, economics, society, culture and subjectivity. The idea that constantly challenging what are often incautiously deemed to be aspects of cultural hegemony is a political act in itself, insofar as it will clear away ideological obfuscation and allow latent organic politics to flow forth, is now revealing itself to be a fundamental error. In the absence of a coherent and unifying alternative, the endless iconoclastic deconstruction of various bits of liberal capitalism's hegemonic cultural output is not inspiring political thought and action, but furthering the fragmentation, cynicism, pan-scepticism and symbolic inefficiency on which the system thrives (see Winlow and Hall, 2013).

In the chapters that follow, we attempt to develop a coherent and entirely unsentimental analysis of 'the political'. This, we hope, will allow us to think through quite clearly what politics is today, and to what extent it is active or inactive in the creation of the present and the future. For us, it is clear that the social-scientific 'community' must free itself from the ideological injunction to discover politics everywhere and in every social activity. If politics is everywhere, then it is nowhere. We will argue that the liberal Left has expanded the definition of the political act to such a breadth, atomised it into such a harmless spray of globules and

dematerialised it to such a degree of abstraction that it has been rendered meaningless, incomprehensible and totally ineffective. For us, the Left must rid itself of this immobilising account of politics if it is to move forward. Politics is the field on which we deal with fundamental antagonisms, where we can determine the basic economic and social coordinates of our shared future. If we discover 'politics' in the most trivial and mundane of activities, then we erode our capacity to identify and address the movement of history and our ability to impose our collective will upon social reality. If graffiti is political, if cross-dressing is political, if pop songs are political, if buying fair-trade coffee is political, then what is the name of the field upon which we determine the structure of global political economy? What is the name of the field upon which we determine the Good? What is the name of the field on which we make collective decisions about our future together? Are we to stretch the concept of politics so that it covers both the small and the mundane and the huge and consequential, or do we simply expect the former to aggregate and become the latter? Could it be that, since the arrival of neo-liberalism, the extent of the Left's defeat has been such that key constituencies within it have strategically withdrawn from an analysis of global political economy, preferring instead to focus on micro-resistance and minor acts of cultural insubordination, after which it can declare its own tiny victories against 'oppression'? Of course, these tiny victories of the post-1980s liberal Left are precisely what the market system needs to reassure the population that democratic politics continues. Capitalism welcomes this kind of cultural insubordination, because the real locus of power lies elsewhere.

But why do we need to define politics in a book such as this? Surely the meaning of 'politics' is perfectly clear, and its role in the world obvious to anyone with a modicum of intelligence? We might believe that politics is clearly an active part of our societies because people continue to vote; because there is widespread disgust at the venal practices of corporate banking elites; because people are angry that the gap between rich and poor appears to be widening with each passing year; and because people often appear quite animated about issues of the day. The ultimate problem in adopting such a simplistic notion of politics is that we end up looking exclusively at the superficial foreground of mediatised cultural politics – the surface once posited as the totality by defunct postmodernist thought – while ignoring the background (see Harvey, 1991; Jameson, 1992). We ignore the fundamental issues – for instance, the socialisation of investment banking credit, land, production and mass media and the shift to sustainable energy and participatory economics – that have the capacity to totally transform political economy and the contours of our social world. To find political opposition in minor acts of insubordination, in momentary disturbances of the normal run of things, is to reduce the potency of political struggle to an argument that takes place *within* the restrictive parameters of the current political and ideological constellation.

In the background, of course, nothing much is happening. Indeed, the background has not changed much since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Neo-liberalism remains, and, despite its titanic inequalities and injustices, all mainstream

political parties continue to be shackled to its economic logic and enthralled by its complex and ubiquitous ideological support systems. If we assume that the cultural foreground of politics is its totality, are we then forced to confront the possibility that 'politics' has lost the ability to fundamentally transform the socio-economic order, or should we accept that there is a general consensus that free-market capitalism, coupled with liberal democracy, is the best of all available systems? Is genuine politics really possible in times of such widespread and enduring consensus? Further, might it be worth briefly pausing to reflect on the possibility that the foreground action of contemporary politics, beamed into our living rooms in news broadcasts every night, acts to reassure the general public that politics and democracy are alive and well, while, behind the scenes, oligarchs work to ensure the continuation of an economy that enriches a tiny percentage of the global population at the expense of everyone else?

Steadfastly refusing to think critically and philosophically about the meaning and constitution of politics means that we remain ensnared in a ruling ideology that shapes the political field and sets firm limits on what can and cannot be understood as legitimate political knowledge and action. Might it not be reasonable to construct an analysis of politics that encourages us to think about the paradoxical *unfreedom* and obvious lack of genuine choice presented to electorates in Western liberal democracies? Might it not be productive to think about who benefits and who loses out when we thoughtlessly apply only the most simplistic, fragmented and superficial definitions of politics and political action to the huge problems we face? Is it conceivable that the urge to identify political motivations in the most banal of everyday activities reduces our capacity to identify that historically – and *despite* the economic crash of 2008 – 'politics' has patently failed to even contain, never mind challenge or replace, current processes of runaway financialisation and the global dominance of free-market ideology?

So, with these issues in mind, we want to investigate the place of politics in contemporary forms of protest and, ultimately, think about the role protest might play in attempts to move beyond capitalism and create a post-capitalist social order free from the gross inequality, avarice, solipsism and competition that characterise contemporary consumer culture. We want to rethink key themes in the analysis of contemporary political activism and, in a clear-headed and entirely unsentimental manner, consider the historical inertia that has accompanied the triumph of neo-liberalism. We also want to consider what a return to politics and history might look like.

Times of cultural inertia

In liberal democratic Europe and North America, we are once again seeing mass unemployment and underemployment. Young people appear to be bearing the brunt of this political and economic failure. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, on the political and economic horizon that might suggest the imminent return of the secure and stable forms of employment that would offer working-class and

marginalised populations a reasonable standard of living and a sense of inclusion and satisfaction. At the other end of our radically changed class system, we have seen the establishment of an incredibly wealthy elite that appears to have transcended what remains of the rules, laws and obligations of Western modernity to attain a position of historically unprecedented *special liberty* (see Hall, 2012a). Skilled at negotiating the permeable and imprecise boundary separating the legal from the illegal, they have retreated behind high walls and are now almost entirely cut off from the real world and its pathologies. For them, there are no historical, cultural or geographic loyalties that override their powerful desire to minimise taxation and increase their personal wealth, and so they traverse the globe free from all the restrictive obligations that might obstruct their disavowed commitment to the endless continuation of capitalism's destructive exchange relation.

Across the West, welfare states are under attack, and the hard-won entitlements of public-sector workers are being gradually stripped away. Even in the relatively affluent social democratic states of Europe, a simple but highly effective libertarian discourse is drawing a new audience and seducing disillusioned social liberals with its good old-fashioned economic pragmatism. It argues that the free market is the only game in town and the only chance post-industrial Western states have of boosting employment opportunities and curtailing poverty, welfare dependency and post-industrial urban degeneration. It returns to the apparently timeless appeal of Berlin's (2002) *negative freedom* to argue that the only way to advance liberty is to free the individual from oppressive taxation systems and outdated state paternalism. Even now, during times of extreme crisis, when in Britain more and more people are forced to rely on food banks to survive (see Butler, 2014), this perverse logic of negative solidarity dominates mainstream political debates about taxation, the sovereign debt crisis, welfare spending and the economic viability of public institutions.

In times past, politicians such as Thatcher and Reagan committed wholeheartedly to this ideology. They were willing to argue that the adoption of such policies was right and just. These policies would, in the long run, prove to be of significant benefit to the vast majority of citizens. Now, at a time when our politicians attempt to convince us that they are entirely divorced from ideological commitments and construct their policies in relation to pure economic pragmatism, the logic of negative freedom and unfettered capitalism appears to have cast off its old-fashioned ideological garb. Politicians might like to help the poor, tax wealth to a greater extent or increase the quality and quantity of public services, but they simply cannot do so. Their accountant's pragmatism prevents them from challenging the dominant economic and political logic of our times. As representatives of the people, they must first of all ensure that the economy grows. The hazy categories of 'security' and growth in consumer lifestyles are regarded as the only unimpeachable political goods, the only things that electorates really want and the only criteria of progressive social improvement. In order to make the economy grow, they must reduce individual and corporate tax to a minimum and allow systemic tax avoidance to continue unchecked.

They must loosen or discard employment legislation that prevents summary dismissal and guarantees the basic rights of workers, so that corporate employers might consider the employment of workers to be a risk worth taking. They must recognise that it does no good whatsoever to challenge or seek to modify this system. Any attempt to increase taxes on wealth or corporate profit simply places wealth-creators in the hands of a competitor state. Even supposedly leftist political parties inevitably adopt this logic. They may take office with a zeal for reform and a hazy desire to tame predatory capitalism, but two quarters of negative economic growth are likely to prompt a regrettable about-turn – 'yes we can' quickly and inevitably becomes 'no we can't'.

Idealism is very hard to maintain in contemporary mainstream politics. Pragmatism, punctuated only by a brief flurry of idealist rhetoric during election time, immediately floods back in from the edges and moves progressively closer to the centre, until it reclaims its place as the entirety of politics. Even reformers know that, when the global economy is structured in relation to the needs of the free market, one has to be pragmatic about what is achievable. Reforms must be small enough to be tolerated by 'the market'. What good does it do, when one only has a few years in office to make one's mark, to take on entrenched power and vested interests? This ideology of pragmatism reduces politics to a half-hearted performance in which nothing really changes and tiny victories must be seized upon in the hope that they indicate the willingness of power to change through negotiation.

Of course, the politics of negative freedom are not at all new. They have played a structural role in our shared political life since the Enlightenment and the birth of the modern state. Even during the golden years of post-war social democracy, a period during which the gap between rich and poor narrowed significantly, and the working classes were able to advance their interests against those of capital, this marginal aspect of political and economic theory patiently bided its time and waited for an opportunity to return to the epicentre of politics. That opportunity came during the economic crises of the 1970s, when the Keynesian approach to economic planning appeared to have reached its end point, unable to assuage confident trade unions and incapable of coping with globalisation, resource depletion and the thorny problem of maintaining the high degree of productivity required by modern consumer lifestyles and the panoramic welfare state.

The late 1970s proved to be the perfect time for economic liberalism to have its basic maxim considered anew. Its key motifs were able to stand as answers to the questions posed by the apparent exhaustion of Keynesian social democracy. Since the 1980s, populist anti-tax and anti-welfare state rhetoric has met with huge success in drawing ordinary citizens away from their commitment to the basic principles of the inclusive post-war social democratic consensus. Of course, the dispiriting pragmatism of politics exists throughout the current neo-liberal order. It sees all personal ties and obligations as fetters placed upon individual freedom. It is obsessed with money, deriding all positive ideals of progress or the Good in order to reassert the unassailable value of economic freedom. It ensures that all

who talk positively of collective ownership or the common good are seen as callow ideologues who have failed to keep pace with the new political and economic imperatives that appear to be making the world anew. To put forward a positive idea of what a better world might look like, or of a better way of organising the socio-economic order, is denounced by the liberal Right (for example, Friedman, 2000) and the liberal Left (for example, Turner, 2010) alike as a dangerous move towards totalitarianism; only a constant stream of negative, iconoclastic critiques from proliferating single-issue social movements is acceptable.

It is important to keep in mind that this neo-liberal narrative, which asserts the benefits of privatisation and warns of the perils of state involvement in the economy, continues, despite the recent spectacular failure of the privately run financial core of the global free market. The austerity measures now under way across most of the West's liberal democratic states are a further indication of the power of this narrative and its ability to adapt to new social conditions. A new assault is being unleashed upon an already weakened welfare state, but this has followed quickly on the heels of previous assaults. What amounts to a continued war against collective ownership and universal social security provision has been going on so long now that social-liberal ideologues have to put huge effort into their attempts simply to keep it in the public's line of vision.

This latest assault is, of course, justified in relation to the pragmatism we described above. Despite the fact that the dollar and the pound are only nominal fiat currencies and money is generated by private banks' advance of debt to corporations, businesses and consumers, we are instructed to consider the finances of the state to be like those of any household – which is ludicrous simply because a household cannot generate its own supply of currency. On the back of this false analogy, the public can be persuaded that the state needs to restrict its spending and pay down its debt. For too long, the state has spent recklessly and now it is paying the price. We must pass through a period of regrettable austerity – of course, no one *wants* to cut services – so that we can retake control of our financial destiny (see Watt, 2013). In a wonderfully adept ideological sidestep, the perilous economic position of the state is said to be the result of the tendency of left-of-centre governments to spend beyond their means, rather than the outcome of a global financial meltdown that prompted the state to bail out privately owned banks. Be pragmatic, we are told – accept that taxpayers' money must be used to save the banking industry: it is the only way to keep our economy moving and ensure the continuation of paid employment for workers in the real economy. Be pragmatic: austerity is painful, but it is necessary if we are to regain control and balance the books.

The clearest indication that the key facets of neo-liberal governance are now treated as economic pragmatism and basic common sense must surely be when our politicians tell us that taxing wealth is counter-productive. Not only do high taxes dissuade investment, curtail entrepreneurial zeal and reduce the nation's economic competitiveness on the world stage, they inevitably result in *less money* flowing into the coffers of the Exchequer. High-tax regimes immediately increase tax avoidance and drive innovations in the tax-avoidance industry. The nation's

demand that the rich pay more in tax inevitably results in the rich paying less. Again, our politicians tell us to be pragmatic. All concerns about social justice and the moral responsibility of the rich to contribute more are dismissed as an unwelcome distraction, indulgences that cannot even be considered if our politicians are to deliver economic growth and lead us to a new era of prosperity.

Neo-liberalism by default

Neo-liberalism is now a veteran power. Across the West, little has been done to challenge its rule for more than a quarter of a century. It was only after the destructive crash of 2008 that new anti-capitalist movements began to draw attention and a little support, but, as we will see, the precise political and ideological content of these new protest movements has yet to fully emerge. They have secured no victory, and they have – in America, Britain and the larger economies in Europe – failed to draw the forms of mass support that might suggest a genuine opportunity to transform our political and economic system, with a view to making it more equitable and just, as well as far less socially and ecologically destructive. These new movements arose quickly after the crash, but most have now faded just as quickly into the background. Abstract finance capitalism and the logic of privatisation continue to structure our economic planning, and the ubiquitous pragmatist who seeks to remain socially included and active in post-industrial labour markets believes that the continuation of this approach is the best available means of securing a degree of financial safety. It is not simply that the logic of free-market economics remains in place. Rather, this logic was allowed to gather more strength as it reasserted itself, in the absence of any coherent, positive opposition, as the only possible answer to the new economic problems it had created. It has established quite firm limits on what is possible politically and economically. Neo-liberalism is both the problem and the answer, a totality that appears entirely capable of assimilating all who are willing to subscribe to its pragmatism.

A new, stripped-back version of neo-liberal governance now dominates, in which all the social concerns of 'third-way' social liberalism have been discarded. The positive vision of social democratic welfarism is a dim and distant memory, an old, flickering, sepia-coloured image of a more naïvely optimistic time. Neo-liberalism is now leaner and bolder, ready to take the tough decisions that will secure the continuation of what currently exists. Its long-running ideological supremacy has afforded it plenty of time to win hearts and minds. It long ago discarded the last remnants of utopianism and idealism from the field of economic planning. It has, for the most part, been successful in its ideological attempt to elevate the field of 'economics' to the status of an objective empirical science. Much of this field is now mere accountancy writ large, the wholesale application of rules laid down by ideologues wedded to reductive mathematical conceptions of the forces that drive men and women to act in the world.

Despite the growing recognition of its inherent flaws, neo-liberalism continues to dominate. It provides the only conceivable game plan, the only tools that can