

IS NEO LIBERALISM CATALYSING FUNDAMENTALIST AND RACIST CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has identified “that religious issues have been largely overlooked by political science” While fulfilling this gap and understanding the relationship between liberal democracy, in its current form of neo-liberalism, and the rise of religious fundamentalism, this paper attempts to exemplify the same by (i) studying the rise of radical Islam in the form of ISIS, and (ii) exploring the relationship between religious fundamentalism and cultural xenophobia by studying its role in the culmination of BREXIT, and 2016 US Presidential Elections. The method of research involves analysis of existing scholarly work on the role of neo-liberalism, religion, and the ensuing xenophobia, in the aforementioned current issues. The effort to understand the challenge posed by the violent dynamics between the two conflicting ideologies, liberal democracy and fundamentalism, is balanced by studying possible responses to it.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Liberalism, Fundamentalist, Race, Cold War

INTRODUCTION

After the Cold War, the international political community was posed with two questions: “The End of History” (Fukuyama 1989) and “The Clash of Civilisations” (Huntington 2000). In posing these questions, Francis Fukuyama predicted liberal democracy to be the end point of ideological evolution, while Samuel Huntington predicted conflicts between civilizations at global scale, where each civilization is a group belonging to common religion and culture. The recent events, which include the rise of ISIS in Middle East, Brexit in Europe and Donald Trump’s victorious presidential campaign in US Elections 2016, point towards the fact that the answer to the end of history is indeed creating a new history of clash between civilizations.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN 21ST CENTURY: RISE OF NEO LIBERALISM

In the evolution of liberal democracy, liberalism preceded the concept of democracy. Liberalism centres on the freedom and liberty of an individual by ensuring equality, use of science and reason, separation of religion and state. But its efforts to democratize the entire world, the west has started instituting illiberal democracies throughout the world. These are governments which come to power through democratic processes in many third world countries after a conflict catalysed by the west, which in many cases is represented by United States.

Autocratic leaders exploit the lack of constitutional liberal infrastructures to exploit the citizens (Litonjua). Moreover, whereas Modern Liberalism, in the form of welfare states based on Keynesian economics, worked to use the role of state to increase an individual’s freedom, Neo-Liberalism is a doctrine which lets markets flourish uncontrolled globally leading to rising inequalities within a state. In such a state, democracy becomes a puppet in the hand of the business class which benefits from the free markets. Corporate lobbies start defining the route of policy and legislations, which aggravates the inequalities within an economy.

LIBERALISM AND RELIGION

Due to its grounding in reason and secular nature, liberalism has a difficulty in dealing with religion. The method of dealing with religion in a liberal democracy is to make it a private affair by creating a distinction between state and religious bodies. The state, which regulates the public life of an individual, works in a secular framework. But the modern individual fostered by the neo-liberal framework subverts community and religion, making a liberal democracy almost blind to religion. This modernity has a dark side, as illustrated by Gregory Baum: the new individualism, the eager promotion of self-interest, the maximisation of utility, the priority assigned to competition, the dedication to consumerism, the commodification of sexuality, the indifference to social justice, the absence of a transcendent ethic and the waning

of faith in God. Liberalism has promoted liberty and equality, but betrayed solidarity.

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

The secular fabric of liberal democracies failed to anticipate that the demystification of the world sowed the seeds of re-mystification, and a subsequent resistance to demystification. The groups and movements which work towards re-mystifying the world are commonly referred to as fundamentalists. Bruce states, "Fundamentalism is the rational response of traditionally religious peoples to social, political and economic changes that downgrade and constrain the role of religion in the public world". Such movements can now "be found in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, North America, and Asia, including India" (Emerson and Hartman).

The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have well-defined canonical texts, end-time visions, and dualistic worldviews with a clear distinction between good and evil. These religions have the most wholly-developed fundamentalisms (Almond, Appleby and Sivan 96).

RADICAL ISLAM

Louis Dupre argues: "Islam never had to go through a prolonged period of critically examining the validity of its spiritual vision, as the West did during the eighteenth century" (xiii). As Europe was the birthplace of enlightenment, Christian beliefs were subject to continuous scrutiny throughout the different phases of modernism and post-modernism. Thus religious views were modified to fit into the code of new life in the midst of liberal democracies. For Jews, the major reason for cultural empathy with other religions was that they resided as minorities in their parent countries and were subject to subjugation themselves, and thus lacked any other choice (Ben-dor and Pedahzur, 78).

The uniqueness about Islam is that it is a complete way of life, where no distinction is made between religion and state. The code of Shariah and glorification of martyrdom as a Jihadist reinforce the utopian goal of an Islamic State. Death in the process of achieving this goal is considered to be a joyous endeavour. With such theoretical backing, and practical problems in facing modernity, leaders like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi call out for eternal wars against modernity.

ISIS –REDICAL ISLAM AS RESPONSE TO NEO-LIBERALISM

America invaded Iraq in 2003, and radically changed the political system and followed it up by economic reforms in line with neo-liberalism. The secular state was replaced by a majority Shi'ite administration, and the socialist economy was opened up to free trade (Chengu,). This caused immense harm to the Sunni community in the country, as they were not only subjected to ethnic discrimination but also joblessness. The rich Sunni's were systematically drained of their wealth. Thus American intrusion to create a puppet democracy with imposed neo-liberal values led to the laying of a fertile ground for Sunni dissent and when this dissent was tapped by Radical Islam, Al-Qaeda in Iraq took birth, which later came to be known as ISIS.

RELIGION AND RACISM

Studies point towards a direct link between religious fundamentalism, right-wing authoritarianism, and racism (Hathcoat and Laura,p82). This derives from beliefs in simple truths, and the unchanging nature of these beliefs common to both fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism. Another study found that individuals who were religious due to reasons of conformity expressed higher tendency of racism when compared to religious agnostics (Hall, Matz and Wood, p,136). Whereas the above mentioned studies hold true for United States, similar results have been found to be true in Britain too (Doebler, p,768).

NEO-LIBERALISM AND RACISM: A THREAD COMMON TO BREXIT AND US ELECTIONS

A thread common to Brexit and US Elections was the popular support for right-wing authoritarianism in both cases. Globalization and free trade have led to widespread discontent in the middle and working classes of Britain and United States. The biggest beneficiaries of global trade have been the Asian middle and upper classes and the top one 1% rich of the west, while the biggest losers have been the American and European middle and working classes (Packer,p 9). The pain due to harms of globalization has been transformed into hatred for outsider groups, anchored in racism. This is most evident in hate crimes which spiked after the results in both the cases.

In a poll in UK, the need to get rid of immigrants was placed higher than economic reform in such a milieu. An analysis of voters brings out the insight that the

Anglicans (the most conservative religious group in Britain) voted for Brexit (McAndrew, p3), and zip-codes which were most culturally isolated in USA voted for Trump (Rothwell and Diego-Rosell, p1).

In fact Trump supporters have been segregated into three groups:

- (i) economically deprived,
- (ii) racial bigots,
- (iii) combination of (i) and (ii).

The anti-black, anti-Muslim and anti-Mexican rhetoric by Trump was able to mobilize the hatred for effects of neo-liberalism and combined it with racism to create a winning agenda.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we studied how neo-liberalism is leading to the rise of religious fundamentalism and racism across the globe. It is important to reflect on two points. One, that liberal democracy needs to look back at its glorious welfare state period of 1930's to 1970's to bring back the spirit of liberalism back into the politics, and second, that the problem of religious fundamentalism does not reside in religion alone. It is stoked by political rhetoric, be it ISIS in Middle East, UKIP in United Kingdom, or the Republicans in United States. There is need to combined religious autonomy with disbursal of religious education and awareness to make communities aware about the diverse and evolving nature of religions (Hasenclever and Juan, p35). Finally it is important for the West to understand that to control Radical Islam, reformist Muslims need to be made a part of the solution, which should be derived from a modified version of Islam, and not forceful imposition of liberal democracies on structures which lack liberal as well as democratic infrastructure.

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