

NEOLIBERAL INDOCTRINATION

Interview with Prof. Rainer Mausfeld (2016)

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[This interview was published on January 18, 2016 and has been translated from the German. Rainer Mausfeld is a psychology professor and perception- and cognition researcher.]

NEOLIBERALISM IS A PHENOMENON AS A SOCIAL IDEOLOGY

Neoliberalism tells the poor and weak that they are responsible for their misery. It does its utmost so the true extent of social poverty barely reaches the public, that the public health system despite ever greater spending becomes more inhuman, that social work erodes and hardly anyone does anything against this, that a “re-feudalization bomb” rages in the country and investors seek privatizing the public education system. Jens Wernicke spoke with the perception- and cognition-researcher Rainer Mausfeld on the question how people are atomized and obscured by means of psycho-techniques that make resistance against this inhuman ideology impossible.

Mr. Mausfeld, you recently and unexpectedly gained a little fame as a perception- and cognition researcher when your lecture “Why are the Lambs Silent?” suddenly registered an enormous demand on YouTube. Nearly 200,000 persons have seen it and even more will follow. How do you explain the tremendous demand?

The resonance surprised me. In its form, the lecture is rather dry and sometimes academic. I tried to bring some facts from a certain perspective into an inner intellectual order. Maybe this is helpful since contexts are lost more and more in the flood of fragmented information confronting us in the social-political realm and the possibility for an independent opinion is

made difficult or even taken away.

What motivated this lecture?

The lecture that takes up several themes in psychology study was only intended for a small circle of students and friends.

Thematically the lecture is not part of the scope of my work, perception- and cognition research. The common interests and the social-political themes of the address are more on a methodological than on a substantive plane. In basic research and in the social-political realm, we can only keep a bit of autonomy over against the respective spirit of the times if we first ask with every theme from what history of ideas and social-historical background it developed and what silent premises and hidden prejudices are already contained in the formulation of a theme or question.

We are all empowered to such “questioning” by nature. One only has to decide to make use of this ability. That was the central theme of the Enlightenment. This is often difficult and requires practice. Still we usually have a feeling of satisfaction when we better understand the context of things.

Practice also requires time. This is why there are great social disparities as to abilities for penetrating lies and manipulations...

Exactly. Scholars have a special social obligation in this regard. They are practiced in procuring information and dealing with information. They mostly understand communicating their knowledge in speaking and writing. They are or should be committed to the professional ethos of truth. A social responsibility results not to be afraid to start an argument if necessary with power and the ideologies serving power.

Unfortunately reality at the universities and in the career mechanisms looks different. Speaking the truth in the social-political realm and natural curiosity and joy in autonomy do not meet with enthusiasm from everyone. When we understand things better, we could pose questions that could endanger the status of the respective establishment.

Therefore the establishment in every society and every area of a society has an interest in limiting the possibilities of educational institutions and the media for recognizing the contexts. Thus fragmentation is an intentional process, a kind of rule instrument, and is in no way an accident.

Did the Bologna reform at the universities aggravate this problem? Several years ago I argued the current reforms should be understood as a rule instrument or as the establishment of new

rule mechanisms in education...

Yes, this problem worsened to an extent and with a method that was unparalleled in the history of education and training. In the wake of the neoliberal “revolution from above,” the whole educational system was subject to economic categories. The task of the university now consists in the market-conforming production of “human capital.”

Correspondingly, students are to become flexible and exploitable and optimize their competence on the labor market. Internalizing this attitude and submission under it are then described as “self-realization.” Such perverting of the idea of developing one’s inclinations and abilities leads inevitably to the intellectual and mental fragmentation of students and to great future anxieties. For obvious reasons, both harm the possibility and readiness to question things and lead to de-politization and political lethargy.

The feeling of political powerlessness often joined with latent despair or even rage seems very widespread and rampant in nearly every milieu, not only among students...

Yes and that is no wonder. The educational system is only one aspect of the much more far-reaching indoctrination systems. Since these are inhuman and serve goals that run counter to the nature of our spirit and thus human nature, they go along almost inevitably with violent mental follow-up costs.

These indoctrination systems could be described as neoliberal indoctrination systems. Neoliberalism aims at producing consumers who only find a social identity as consumers in a socially atomized society. In the perverted freedom concept of neoliberalism, the “freedom” of a person in submitting to the powers of the “free market” is to be “free” from all social bonds. If the “market” fails, it cannot be made responsible for that breakdown. Failure must be ascribed to individual breakdown. Such an attitude can only be spread at the price of psychic disinformation, particular social fears, anxieties and depressions.

Through corresponding indoctrination systems, people can be brought to silence without gags, largely robbed of their “healthy” resistance against malingering conditions.

As dear Bert Brecht once said, “there are many ways of killing. One can stick a knife in a belly, withhold bread, not heal one of a sickness, force a person in a miserable apartment, wage war and so on. Little of that is prohibited in our state”...

In addition, a person can be influenced, alarmed, manipulated and made to submit to influences diametrically opposed to one’s vital interests in different ways. This is not without consequences.

In the past, it was shown that capitalism involves many psychic disturbances. In their book “Equality is Happiness,” Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show this meticulously with an abundance of quantitative data.

In a perverse way, neoliberalism turns socially caused disturbances against the individual who is now subject to the pressure of being more exploited or adaptive through certain measures. This is true for all conduct incompatible with the desired role of consumer.

There is an increasing tendency to use disciplinary instruments with the growing influence of neoliberal thinking, a tendency to the “therapeutic state” and the growth of a private prison industry. In the US, the highest share of the population sits in prison. The US population amounts to 4.4 percent of the world’s population and 22 percent of all prisoners.

For neoliberalism to be effective, disciplining instruments are needed to keep mental and social consequences of this estrangement under control. What do you understand under “neoliberalism”?

Neoliberal thinking comes from many heterogeneous sources. There isn’t “one” neoliberalism as a uniform social-economic conception. However there is a politically organized and effective neoliberalism, real existing neoliberalism.

This ideological conception can be characterized relatively easily as disseminated by the elites in the media, supported by propagandistic think tanks like the Bertelsmann foundation, the Initiative of the New Social Market Economy, the Institute of the German Economy and others – and spread through the economic schools. The code-words are well-known: forcing typical examples for the neoliberal “newspeak,” “liberalization” and “driving further reforms,” “reducing bureaucracy” or “austerity.”

This ideology is given an academic tinge by economic theories offered by economic faculties. These theories based on theoretical absurdities, on creations of an intellectual imagination, are ultimately driven by necessities of redistribution. This is the imagination of a rationally self-regulating “free market” on which the fictional homo oeconomicus acts – the rational benefit-maximizing person who has knowledge of all conceivable decision-making options and can survey all the consequences of his or her conduct.

Since the fundamental unreasonableness of such a conception of the human spirit is immediately clear for everyone whose view is not ideologically clouded, this conception is an idealized mathematical model that has the advantage of accommodating all obvious discrepancies to reality through additional assumptions with the elasticity of scholastic thought-structures.

As an economic theory, neoliberalism has so many internal contradictions and inconsistencies that it should have perished long ago. It is a kind of intellectual pathology. This was shown

again and again by economic experts. Philip Mirowski – in his book “The Undead Live Longer: Why Neoliberalism is Stronger after the Crisis” – and Wendy Brown in: “The Creeping Revolution: How Neoliberalism Destroys Democracy” summarize this from different perspectives. However the effect again is near zero because neoliberalism is completely immune against arguments. It is enough that it is politically effective.

Science has taken over the role that was earlier exercised by the church – at least in this area. Science as a substitute religion – in service of the dominant material power and its ideological legitimation... Can you give a concrete example of these contradictions? What do you mean exactly?

The fundamental contradiction in real existing neoliberalism is between the greatly praised “free market” and the fact that neoliberalism has greater fear of a really free market than anything. The “free market” is only intended for economically weak persons or states while the economically strong, particularly big businesses, are protected from these forces by state interventions. Thus neoliberalism needs a strong state that regulates “market freedom” for its real goals, redistribution and constant accumulation.

Agricultural subsidies are an example with momentous consequences. The US and the EU subsidize their agriculture with \$1 billion a day. The rural population of developing countries would have \$60 billion more income per year if those subsidies (incursions in the “free market” were removed. This sum is greater than the entire development assistance of the EU...The EU and the US screen their markets against imports from developing countries. The right to organize their economies themselves is taken from poor nations. Poor countries must submit to “market discipline” and open their markets for transnational companies for whom they are a reservoir of cheap workers and raw materials. The rich countries enjoy protectionism. That is what the reality of the “free market” looks like.

In the tradition of neoliberal thought, there are variants that really take seriously the idea of the free market and reject every kind of state intervention like Murray Rothbard, Walter Brock and Hans-Hermann Huppe. According to this neoliberal thinking, children only represent a form of property and consequently may be sold on the free market. The state may not impose any legal obligations on parents to feed their children with food.

If the arbitrariness and absurdity of their premises is ignored, these thought-systems have a certain inner consistency as an intellectual exercise. They are instructed in that they lead the idea of a radically free market not limited by any moral “obstacles” to its logical and deeply inhuman conclusion. Even the rich would not want to live in such a dystopia of a society.

In short, real existing neoliberalism has been intellectually bankrupt since time immemorial. Nevertheless it is extremely politically effective as a kind of “house philosophy” of the rich and big corporations.

There are neoliberalism critics like Jamie Peck who are convinced neoliberalism has lost its mind and moves increasingly erratically across the globe. It must inevitably assume ever more autocratic characteristics.

In the meantime there is rich experiential data that shows neoliberalism misses its declared goals – like producing growth or increasing general prosperity. Its conclusions are blatant particularly in the so-called third world and increasingly in Europe. Jean Ziegler, the former UN special ambassador for the right to food explains: “German fascism needed six war years to kill 56 million people. The neoliberal economic system does this easily in one year.”

Neoliberalism causes one disaster after another worldwide. In a seemingly paradoxical way, it emerges stronger out of every disaster and is immediately recommended as a “therapy.” Obviously neoliberalism not only nourishes crises but is nourished by crises and capitalizes on its inner contradictions and inconsistencies. This raises interesting questions about its real goals.

I think of David Harvey and quote the following blurb from his marvelous “Short History of Neoliberalism”: “Well-known economists like Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank, have long criticized the excesses of neoliberalism and decried growing social inequality as its undesired by-product. That is wrong, David Harvey says. “Why don’t these people recognize that social inequality was the goal of the whole exercise from the start?” The neoliberal turn, Harvey says, was introduced in the 1970s “for the single goal of restoring the class power of a social elite that feared its privileges could be permanently cut.”

This is the crucial point. Only after clarifying this can we understand the political effectiveness of this intellectually bankrupt ideology. Neoliberalism does not actually aim at “free markets.” Rather it aims at a radical redistribution from bottom to top, from public to private hand and from South to North.

To achieve this, it has to leave economically weak individuals or states without any protection to the forces of the “market” and at the same time ensure proper framing conditions are provided the economically strong for increasing their capital. The neoliberalism that is always ready to castigate state interventions in the economy as socialist is in truth a kind of neoliberal socialism, a socialism for the rich, that it seeks to protect from market forces through state regulations.

This is a revolution of the rich against the poor. But such a revolution is full of risks especially in democracies since the poor are the majority. Therefore atomizing the population, fragmenting all social movements and developing a new class consciousness as beneficiaries of redistribution are very helpful.

This happened very successfully in the last years. Warren Buffet’s remark in 2006 – “There is class war but my class, the class of the rich, is waging this war and we are winning – is only understood in the general public and not as a blunder. The revolutionary song in this class

warfare is the fairy tale of the blessings of a “free market” for whose development all state interventions are dismantled. Neoliberalism would obviously deny it is a war of the rich against the poor and can rightly point out it promotes wealth and poverty very impartially.

The largest 500 corporations globally control more than 50% of the world gross domestic product. As Oxfam recently reported, the 85 richest persons of the world possess more than the poorest 50% of the world population, the poorest 3.6 billion persons in this world. This is an effect of the rational natural laws of the “free market” that were intentionally brought about by no one and for which no one is responsible.

Whoever criticizes this testifies to his complete lack of understanding of natural laws because there is no alternative.

Neoliberalism – after European colonialism – is the greatest global redistribution project of history. Hardly surprisingly considerable indoctrination and disciplining efforts were necessary to bring the population to accept and even join in this battle song against their actual experiences and against their own interests.

Can you explain this a little? What “indoctrination mechanisms” are you referring to?

In a democracy, it is important to conceal and make invisible the real goal of redistribution from bottom to top through an appropriate indoctrination. This is similar with hegemonial and imperial interests that are hidden from the population through a rhetoric of “humanitarian interventions” or “promoting democracy.”

In democracies, neoliberalism would not survive politically if it did not succeed in conquering heads and forming and controlling public opinion. This can only happen on the basis of indoctrination systems that are very polished psychologically and pervade all the areas of our life.

Since time immemorial, the foundations for such indoctrination systems were supplied by compliant intellectuals who were more committed to the interests of the powerful than to the truth and were promoted and rewarded for that. Foundations, “think-farms” or “think tanks” and NGOs are important. In neoliberalism, foundations and NGOs promoted by them have central significance since economic elites can change tax-linked private wealth into political power that then ennoble with the tinge of non-profits and philanthropy.

How does this run? What are the counter-measures? How are we manipulated?

The breadth and depth of these indoctrination systems are really hard to imagine. The indoctrination systems developed by neoliberalism are the most polished and effective systems

that spread a political ideology. In the meantime they are so deeply anchored in all realms of social and private life that they are hardly noticeable to us. Neoliberalism embodies whole life forms and worldviews that influence US elites and are communicated by the cultural- and entertainment industry as foregone conclusions. The classical propaganda of the first half of the 20th century that was very effective counteracted these neoliberal indoctrination systems simply and naively.

Neoliberalism utilizes the whole arsenal of methods and strategies already developed in classical capitalism in the realm of social manipulation techniques, the possibility of producing false identifications, consumerism, and opinion manipulation by the media etc. However all these techniques have been enormously refined and are mostly hardly recognized as indoctrination techniques. They are deeply anchored in all mechanisms of the production of public opinion – in the educational- and cultural realms and not only in politics, media and political foundations. To the pioneers of propaganda, good propaganda should not be recognizable as such and must appear almost as foregone conclusions or expressions of common sense. That was very clear

Can we give concrete examples of refinements?

That would lead to technical areas of psychology. Irrespective of such concrete findings, a multitude of cognitive, affective and social dispositions are found in our minds and intellects that can be used to control opinions, feelings and behavior.

In a manipulation context, they can be regarded as weak spots that act as “backdoors” to the mechanisms of our minds through which our attention can be steered, our thinking and feeling influenced and our indignation triggered without our noticing.

Manipulation techniques rest parasitically on weak spots of our spirits. They always dodge the spotlight of our consciousness and are practically unnoticed by us so it is hard to be protected against them.

All this is well-known in academia – and to the ruling elites – but hardly in the general public. This far-reaching asymmetry of knowledge about manipulation weak spots must be urgently removed. We only have a chance at resisting these manipulations when we recognize that such manipulations target our weak spots.

Could you give a concrete example of such a weak spot for manipulations?

In the last decades, political elites tried to exploit the insights and findings of psychological research for their political objectives by developing “soft” rule techniques to “push” people in the desired direction.

Let me name a relatively simple example, our natural disposition to distortions of our judgments about given social situations. These distortions are described as “status quo bias” in the academic literature. Well analyzed in psychology, they have great social relevance and can be modified, controlled and manipulated by a series of variables. We are naturally inclined to consider the present state of society in which we live as good, just, morally legitimate and desirable.

We tend to prefer the social status quo to alternatives even when the latter are objectively better. By our nature, we are followers of the status quo. This is a stable phenomenon that can be shown in all societies but is obviously not true for every individual person. As a rule, such a psychic disposition is a desirable quality for the organization of life together – as long as it isn’t manipulated from the outside. As many psychological studies have demonstrated, it goes along with other psychological tendencies that also have great social relevance. For example, we are always ready to play down the disadvantages of the status quo. We have an inclination to blame the social victims of the status quo for their situation. At the same time we tend to judge those rather negatively who want to change the status quo.

The strength of this tendency to defend the status quo depends on a multitude of cognitive, affective and social variables. For example, it is increased by fears and the feeling of insecurity and threat. It is also raised when one is systematically diverted from conscious reflection – whether through time pressure or the offer of irrelevant themes – or when plain stereotyped conceptuality is passed off for a cognitive classification of social conditions. This inclination also tends to rise when a situation is felt to be unavoidable. All these variables can be manipulated relatively simply from the outside without our being conscious of these manipulations. These variables offer a very effective gateway for manipulating the status quo inclination of the population in the desired sense.

In this regard, neoliberalism offers a combination of influence variables that are very advantageous for its goals. Cognitively it is based on a very simple conceptuality – “Open markets,” “implementing structural reforms,” “reducing bureaucracy” etc – and uses a nearly overwhelming abundance of possibilities through which persons can be diverted from deeper reflection on social conditions. Most themes in the mass media serve diversion. Affectively it goes along with a high measure of time pressure, stress and social anxieties caused by the living conditions as well as a feeling of inevitability since there can be no alternative to the “natural laws” of the market and its use of elements imagery. The details of individual variables or determinants can be distilled in a much more subtle way and their effects optimized. All this can make the negative consequences of the status quo cognitively “invisible” so the status quo is stabilized and the need for alternatives atrophies.

What role do the media play in the context of this indoctrination?

Obviously they play a very central role. They are the medium of indoctrination in the literal sense. This has been investigated again and again in all breadth and depth. Noam Chomsky has done pioneering work in describing and analyzing indoctrination systems and the role of

the media. The leading media are closely connected ideologically and in personnel with think tanks, foundations and “relevant” political and economic circles
So the neoliberal indoctrination system stabilizes itself through itself.

Neoliberal indoctrination is facilitated in that real existing neoliberalism offers a very radical possibility of complexity reduction. Its mantra can be appropriated quickly and ideologically. No special economic expertise is needed after first commanding the neoliberal jargon – “dismantle bureaucracy,” “force more reforms” etc. This makes real existing neoliberalism so attractive for journalists and others from the opinion-forming trade. In this way, rulers can be served in opportunism and so media participate at least symbolically in power...

If these indoctrination mechanisms are effectively anchored in all opinion-forming institutions, openly authoritarian structures become unnecessary. Why is the warning sounded again and again that neoliberalism threatens to become an openly authoritarian form of rule?

The warning is legitimate because such a danger inevitably arises out of the nature and goals of neoliberalism. The goal of indoctrination can be reached within structures regarded as democratic, that is within a “market-conforming democracy.” Within this framework, there are still possibilities for developing hidden authoritarian structures.

Codification of redistribution mechanisms occurring through undemocratic mechanisms is very effective. Since time immemorial, the law has been a very effective instrument for immunizing social injustice against a criticism by the population. European colonialism codified its genocidal forms of redistribution with a colonial law.

If it wants to maintain a democratic appearance, neoliberalism depends on codifying the redistribution mechanism from bottom to top and from the public to the private hand on all planes – from the EU to the communities. The creation of an adaptive international law is very promising. Therefore a transatlantic nomenclature is sought by developing international legal norms like TTIP, TISA, CETA etc. and their conversion through powerful neoliberal institutions like the IMF.

For obvious reasons, a codification of social injustice occurs under exclusion of the public (even of the parliamentary public) and evades every kind of democratic control. For a codification, neoliberalism creates mechanisms through which the protected market actors, big businesses, can elide existing legal norms. The maxim “too big to fail” has a deeper core. There are crimes whose roots are too deeply interwoven with foundations of our dominant system and are too monstrous to be justifiable within the respective legal system. Therefore the so-called financial crisis is regarded as a “crisis” and not as what is really is in the literal sense, a “capital crime.”

Thus the appearance of autocratic structures can be avoided. The formal husk of a democracy seems intact for the population while the results of the creeping erosion of democratic

structures are codified. Neoliberal thinkers conjure this kind of democratically-legitimated “soft” autocracy as an ideal form of social “conflict resolution.” Thus codification of neoliberal structures represents a kind of handling with kid gloves among rule technicians so openly autocratic forms can be avoided.

ANGELA MERKEL AND MARKET-CONFORMING DEMOCRACY

This does not answer the question why many worry neoliberalism could assume an openly authoritarian form or become an iron fist.

That is true. The history from Chile to Greece shows us that neoliberalism is not afraid of authoritarian measures if all the “soft” indoctrination and disciplining mechanisms are not effective. Chile under Pinochet was its first field experiment.

Given the brutal social consequences of the redistribution process, neoliberalism must expect reactions of the population that could necessitate openly authoritarian measures for ensuring its stability. Thus the pursuit of its goals must be flanked by the development of disciplining instruments up to the building of an authoritarian security state. To that end, neoliberalism makes use of every kind of threat scenario to increase the population’s readiness to abolish the democratic substance.

The legal and technical foundations for an authoritarian security state are already created through the surveillance machine, the preparation for a domestic deployment of the German army, sharpening the strict separation of the tasks of the police, military and secret services and the stubborn preparatory works of constitutional law scholars of an “enemy criminal law” etc.

Renowned constitutional law- and criminal law scholars have long been working on the foundations of a security state and the development of an enemy criminal law. With such an enemy criminal law, citizens regarded as “fly by night” and “actual non persons” could then be “neutralized.” An “emergency torture” should even be allowed in special situations for warding off dangers...

Thus the legal husks are prepared and can easily be used when the ruling elites are convinced existing democratic structures stand in the way of the “necessities” of the market and the international “standardizations” necessary for its safeguarding.

How can we oppose this? What can be done against such a development?

No simple answers are possible apart from some tautologies. These tautologies urge us to remove all blockades hindering us from recognizing and acknowledging simple basic facts. Then we must be ready to articulate our will and determination to change inhuman social

conditions and structures.

While these are foregone conclusions, much would be gained if they were observed. It is my conviction that there are no general answers, methods and goals that go beyond them. In this process, answers must be found from below in the context of the respective social situation. However these answers appear, they don't have a chance of being politically effective if the far-reaching fragmentation of social relations is not overcome and a common basis found for a politically powerful collaboration of social movements.

Not much time remains for this task. The old strategy of burdening later generations with the enormous social and ecological follow-up costs of capitalism, especially of its extreme neoliberal form, strikes its limit. Only two possibilities are left to us. As laborious as it will be, we must free ourselves from the chains of neoliberal indoctrination systems, face the facts and together seek possibilities of changes – that certainly can only be radical given the ecological time pressure. Or we continue as in the past, are silent and leave it to succeeding generations to reflect on the reasons for our non-action and our silence.

What is your last word?

I'd like to address the danger in expressing indignation and uneasiness about social conditions in a politically effective way, the danger of being made largely politically ineffective by only focusing on "those above," on personal aspects and not on structural aspects.

With social and political themes, the perspective of focusing on "those above" and becoming angry about how we have been deceived, tricked and exploited by them is widespread. "Those above" are morally depraved, hypocritical and shamelessly intent on their advantage. They are the culprits and we are only victims.

That is a psychologically understandable and politically justified perspective. We should reflect whether or not the political efficacy of such a perspective is very limited since it is shared by the vast majority of the population in one way or another without this being reflected in election results.

Restricting our perspective to "those above" passes by the nature of the actual problem, namely the structural and institutional causes of a destructive and inhuman form of the economy and society.

From the vantage point of the ruling elites, it is even desirable that the population gets worked up about the greed of bankers, lashes out at the lying and hypocrisy of politicians, the intellectual corruption of journalists or the cruelty or sadism of torture experts – that is, characteristics of persons who are products of deep-seated conditions and qualifications – and lose sight of the structural and institutional causes and consequently the real centers of

power!

Therefore our urgent task is gaining insights in these structural conditions.

The nature and true goals of neoliberalism must be understood. Then we must focus on ourselves and ask why we do not react with proper moral indignation and counter-measures to a totalitarian thought-system with such destructive consequences. As long as the ruling elites have more knowledge about us, our natural needs, inclinations and weak spots for manipulability than we have ourselves, they will be able to exercise a kind of invisible rule over us that we can hardly resist. Focusing on ourselves means recognizing – and this is entirely in the sense of the Enlightenment – that we are responsible for our actions and non-actions and for the society in which we live.

-End



Hieronymus Bosch – “The Conjurer”

Year: c. 1502

Type: Oil on wood

Dimensions: 53 cm × 65 cm (21 in × 26 in)

Location: Musée Municipal, St.-Germain-en-Laye