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## *Taking ideology seriously in the time of plague: insights versus distractions*

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This article argues that insights from ideology theory shed valuable light on the political aspects of COVID-19 and help understand and categorise policy responses to it. Much of the debate on the politics of COVID-19 has been dominated by questions concerning populism, but this article contends that this is not a fruitful direction for understanding current developments. The argument advanced here is that populism is a hollow and incoherent ideological category and so does not provide a suitable departure point to explore the ideological dimension of the pandemic. On the other hand, a critical engagement with the dominant ideology of neoliberalism goes a long way to explain different kinds of political fallout from COVID-19. While neoliberalism is unfit for the challenge posed by the virus, identifying the ideological underpinnings of the neoliberal approach may help to grasp its implications and formulate urgently needed alternatives.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, ideology, populism, neoliberalism

## Introduction

It is a blatant truism that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world in many different ways – socially, economically and politically – though, as the crisis is still unfolding, it is not yet clear just how profound or durable these transformations will be. As of 25 February 2021, there are more than 113 million recorded infections and just over 2.5 million deaths<sup>1</sup>, and the pandemic is far from abating with some countries still experiencing sharp rises in infections. This devastating drama is unfolding amid economic calamity of colossal magnitude caused by the stalling of business activity in entire countries and regions due to lockdowns and travel bans. While a few places have seen some timid recovery, and the roll-out of vaccines is underway in the wealthy countries of the Global North, the world overall is mired in deep social and economic crisis.

The debate on the likely consequences of this immense calamity started almost as soon as the first cases of the new coronavirus were reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in early December 2019. With the benefit of hindsight, some of the early, sanguine but woefully incorrect predictions to the effect that “the coronavirus is unlikely to significantly affect the world economy” (Humphrey-Jenner 2020) sound absurd and surreal. Instead, it is a sense of alarm and urgency that pervades more recent accounts of the pandemic and projections of its future legacy. A wholesale reorganisation of social life is firmly expected by most commentators whether with hope or fear or, most often, both. On a macroscale, questions have been asked concerning the impact of the virus on the patterns of economic globalisation, international distribution of power, especially between the ‘West’ and Asia, global governance and, on the national level, about the prospects for democracy or likeliness of a further entrenchment of authoritarian regimes, and the role of the welfare state. Almost any debate in political science that was ongoing when COVID-19 hit the world is now intertwined with grave predicaments raised by the pandemic.

However, amid so many different issues that have engaged the attention of both academics and pundits writing about the socio-political aspects of the pandemic, there is a striking omission: namely, an underwhelming amount of consideration given to political ideology. While ideological preferences implicitly permeate the aforementioned debates, the role of ideology in the diverse responses to COVID-19 is yet to receive adequate attention in arguments and narratives revolving around the crisis. Thus far, publications that refer to ideology in the context of the pandemic tend to use quantitative methodologies to produce

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1 All figures and statistical data concerning COVID-19 infections and related deaths have been retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>, they were correct as of February 25, 2021.

polarised, and inevitably quite general, macro-accounts of relevant attitudes and preferences – such as, in partisan US terms, of the views of Liberals/Democrats versus Conservatives/Republicans on COVID-19-related policies and measures (e.g. Harvey 2020) – or approach ideological implications of the pandemic in an under-theorised way which leaves some vital questions concerning ideology's place and the use for it without serious consideration (e.g. Ryan 2021).

This relative neglect of the question of ideology in debates about COVID-19 reflects a broader prevailing attitude which tends to underrate the significance of political ideas in political action. Whereas textbook definitions of ideology – as, for example, “a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organised political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power” (Heywood 2017: 10) – seem straightforward enough, ideology's nature and purpose remain contested and it is often deemed irrelevant by the self-styled advocates of pragmatism and ‘common-sense’ (for a critical review of this tendency as well as discussion of some notable exceptions, see Soborski 2012 and 2013). The reader should be reminded that the ‘end of history’, which was eagerly announced at the closing of the Cold War, was supposed to mean “the *endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution*” (Fukuyama 1989: 4) and hence the ultimate conclusion of ideological debates. From that perspective, attempts to contest the dominant *zeitgeist* of the post-Cold War era, encompassing liberal democracy and free market triumphalism, are both futile and foolish while pursuits of other options are dismissed as pointless, akin to searching for an alternative to weather. Such discursive strategies of naturalisation, dissimulation and dehistoricisation have helped entrench the hegemony of global neoliberal capitalism by presenting it not as an option selected out of a range of possibilities, but rather as a reflection of reality itself thus conferring on it a stultifying aura of taken-for-grantedness.

As is in the nature of hegemonic ideas, the discourses of self-professedly non-ideological common-sense permeated the spaces of contestation and some leading dissident voices reinforced the idea of the end of ideology (Hardt and Negri 2012). Elsewhere, I discussed the implications of this sceptical, if not disparaging, attitude to ideology by the progressive left in the Global North following the 2008 global financial crisis (Soborski 2018, 2019). The crisis opened a window of great opportunity for the progressives but, due in some part at least to their neglect of ideology, it was not seized. While ideology is an intrinsic part of politics – political ideas inevitably inform political action – ideologies of the left have recently tended to operate in a camouflaged and subconscious manner rather than being openly debated, refined and put to explicit use. That a period of consolidation of the power of the capitalist class followed capitalism's gravest crisis for almost a century is a bitter lesson for the progressives from which they should learn, especially

now, in the context of another massive crisis. As I will argue, understanding the connections between political ideas and actions, and a clear identification of the available policy options, may save challengers of neoliberal capitalism a lot of bother both during the pandemic and in the long term.

Keeping the constraints of space in mind, I will limit myself here to just two issues that reveal the importance of placing ideology in the centre of analysis of ongoing developments. The first is populism, the subject matter of the next section. My contention is that the widespread tendency among commentators to claim for populism a causative role in the context of COVID-19 – which involves the presupposition that a populist nature of a given regime or leader has specifiable, predictable outcomes as far as their (mis)management of the pandemic is concerned – is based on a misconception of populism. In other words, the fallacy arises when ill-advised attempts to confer a set of cohesive motivations and characteristics upon populism lead to an assumption that populist politics has broadly similar implications across time and space. Conversely, I use insights from theory of ideology and examples from the current pandemic to show that populism has little explanatory power. Instead, and this is the second core claim of the article, I posit that to understand the politics of COVID-19, it is essential to ponder the impact of the real *spiritus movens* – or, on the contrary, the main limiting factor, depending on the perspective adopted – namely, the ideology and praxis of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a global hegemonic doctrine but its penetration of different societies varies depending on a range of contextual elements. As I will argue, the extent of neoliberalism's influence over social and economic priorities in any given country goes a long way toward explaining the performance of respective governments in response to the pandemic. The article concludes by making some tentative suggestions as to what both the crisis itself and the abysmal record of neoliberalism in trying to address it may mean for the progressive anti-neoliberal left.

## Populism: a misplaced concern

The 'populism' buzzword has been trending in public discussions for some time now, particularly after 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election as US President. It is not surprising, then, that the debate about the socio-political aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic has, from the outset, merged with commentaries on and analyses of populism. Popular press of a broad range of political persuasions became saturated with editorials and commentaries on the topic and asking questions about the way how "populist leaders exploit pandemics" (Cliffe 2020) and whether they will be adversely affected by it (Linsker 2020). The *Wall Street Journal* asked "Will Coronavirus Kill

Populism?” (Mead 2020), a question that was also posed by Cas Mudde (2020) in *The Guardian*. Output published by scholars in popular academic blogs has been swelling too, often with broad-brushed claims asserted in fairly unequivocal terms, such as: “The COVID-19 crisis shows the failure of populist leadership in the face of real threats” (Aron and Holland 2020).

The populism trope has been a rare occasion for writers to consider more closely the role of ideology in the current crisis. This is ironic because populism is unable to provide “satisfying answers to basic political questions” and hence does not qualify as a “holistic ideological contender” (Freeden 2003: 13, 8). Ideology students often choose to approach populism as a ‘thin’ ideological current discernible only in conceptual shells of its various host ideologies. Yet, as a matter of fact, the jury is still out on whether populism can claim even that lesser status, and the verdict of the main scholar behind the concept of ideological thinness is negative (Freeden 2017).

Populism’s ideological hollowness has rendered it useful for the elites in their attempts to demarcate the political mainstream from whatever they deem to be outside it – ‘boundary policing’, as Nederveen Pieterse puts it (2019: 115) – while the fact that they have used it to pigeonhole any politics that they dismiss has reinforced the incoherence of the category. It is most often regressive right-wing positions that are characterised as populist but this does not exhaust the extraordinary variety of leaders, parties or movements that have been swept into the category (Cohen 2018; Nederveen Pieterse 2018). The concept has been used to describe political actors of both the right and the left, reactionary as well as progressive, religious or secular. Historically, the description has been applied to the Russian *Narodniki* movement and the American People’s Party of the 19th century as well as Argentinian Peronism and the French *Poujadists* of the 1950s. More recently, in keeping with the concept’s rising popularity, populism has featured prominently in accounts of both the Tea Party and Occupy movements; of the left-wing Spanish *Podemos* party and the one-issue right-wing Brexit Party in the UK; of South American socialist leaders Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, yet also European far-right nationalists, such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Geert Wilders. In the UK, the media and large swathes of the public take it as a given that both the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the former leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn are definitely populists and so is the case in the US with former far-right President Donald Trump and socialist Bernie Sanders. To this motley crew can be added figures as diverse as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland or Viktor Orbán in Hungary – they all have been described and evaluated as populists first and foremost.

Looking at this list, it is hard to see what these politicians and groups have in common except a very thin common denominator, namely, to use Mudde's (2004) influential phrasing, their claim to represent 'the pure people' against 'the corrupt elite'. Unfortunately, this does not help a great deal; indeed, it is the very vacuity of the two antagonistic categories that leaves populism unable to overcome its skeletal parameters without preying on the ideational repositories and policy agendas of mature political ideologies. The meaning of the people and the elite may be either conservative and traditional or progressive and modern (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). The people may be defined by their nationhood and ethnicity, as in right-wing variants of populism, or by their socio-economic class, as in socialist versions. Scholars who insist on the usefulness of the category have proposed some rudimentary distinctions to make it operationalisable, such as one between exclusionary and inclusionary populisms (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), but the problem of all-inclusivity continues to muddle the topic.

Developments associated with COVID-19 are a case in point. As in broader debates, so also in discussions concerned with the pandemic, populism tends to be presented as a cohesive phenomenon, with distinctive features and hence predictable consequences. But it is nothing of the sort, but rather a catch-all category with no specific content, and so regimes thus classified have yielded very different policy outcomes depending on their broader ideologies and political agendas. As a result, preoccupation with populism has merely obscured the debate: pondering questions such as 'Is coronavirus bad for populism?' or 'How do populist leaders respond to it?' is unlikely to bring significant insights into the distribution and operation of power – neither in the context of the pandemic nor more generally.

Let me put some empirical meat on the bones of this thus far theoretical discussion. A report published by scholars from Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government compares the measures – such as bans on public gatherings, closures of schools, travel bans, etc. – adopted by governments across the world in response to the first global wave of the pandemic (Hale et al. 2020). Michael Beyerlein and Győző Gyöngyösi (2020) analysed the extensive data gathered in the report and drew some preliminary conclusions regarding 'populist' and 'non-populist' approaches. Based on a sample of 14 countries, including six with governments identified at that time as populist (the United States, Britain, Brazil, India, Poland and Hungary), they concluded that "populist and non-populist governments implemented similar policies to contain the pandemic" (Beyerlein and Gyöngyösi 2020: 90). Furthermore, Beyerlein and Gyöngyösi (2020: 91) added that "there is significant heterogeneity in the responses [of populist governments] as the US and UK were lagging behind in the immediate response [...] Other populist-ruled countries like Poland, Hungary, and India implemented

measures rather quickly.” The findings of the report were later confirmed by Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde (2020), who showed that claims about right wing populism and COVID-19 have been based on generalisations from two cases, namely Trump and Johnson, who gained notoriety for their denial of the gravity of the virus followed by their shambolic mismanagement of the fallout from the pandemic. Other national populist regimes have had different experiences during the pandemic, and some of them have proved relatively effective in the face of the challenge. In other words, populism did not act as a major determining factor of action or inaction, or of relative success or fiasco in response to COVID-19 – as Daphne Halikiopoulou (2020) writes, “it is difficult to discern a specifically populist pattern”.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that even though populism does not appear to be a factor of fundamental significance as far as different governments’ policy responses to the pandemic are concerned, what the aforementioned regimes have had in common is their attempt to use the crisis to buttress their chauvinist and xenophobic agendas. The most notorious example is Donald Trump who exploited the pandemic to ramp up his assault on the rights of migrants. Trump gave the Department of Homeland Security new powers to return illegal migrants to their countries faster and without normal legal procedures. The former US President himself tweeted that coronavirus meant “we need the wall more than ever!”; it is also well-known that he went out of his way to refer to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ thus reviving the old conspiracy myth of the ‘Yellow Peril’ (Cable 2020). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán was quick to link the virus to immigration and used it as a pretext to shut down Hungary’s asylum system. He also singled out universities as virus-prone – “there are lots of foreigners there” – and used the occasion to double-down on his anti-Semitic rhetoric (Cliffe 2020). In India, the ruling *Bharatiya Janata* party demonised the country’s Muslims as alleged super-spreaders; the allegation incited violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims. However, although these examples display a consistent pattern, they do not vindicate populism as analytic category as the rhetoric can be explained without this inflated concept. The above claims and accusations draw on the protracted tradition of exclusionary nationalism and racism, with their “long-established pattern of linking minorities, racial groups, and specific communities to disease” (Bieber 2020: 6). Thus, it is the nationalism, and *not* the populism, of the aforementioned politicians and parties, that brings them together in their attempt to find a scapegoat other who is to blame for the plague.

Populism thus falls short of providing a reasonable explanation of COVID-19-related discourses or policy designs and the latter’s tangible consequences for societies around the world. Instead, in the second part of this article I contend

that it is neoliberalism, the dominant ideology of today's global capitalism, that has had a major impact. I argue that shifting attention towards neoliberalism generates useful insights that help understand the hitherto track record of different governments on COVID-19, possible future scenarios, and – as I will hypothesise in the final part – what all of this may mean for the challengers of neoliberal hegemony.

## The human cost of neoliberalism

Neoliberalism – “a political economic philosophy... dedicated to the extension of market (and market-like) forms of governance, rule, and control across... all spheres of social life” (Peck and Tickell 2007: 28) – has, from the 1970s onwards, exerted its ever-heavier power over societies worldwide. Neoliberalism has not gone unchallenged – resistance to it has materialised on many occasions both in the Global South and North – but it nonetheless remains the hegemonic ideological doctrine, one whose principles amount to something like *Weltanschauung*, a ‘worldview’ or a mental framework that evades critical scrutiny because it provides the very lens through which the world is interpreted (Mannheim 1952: 33-83). As a matter of fact, its hegemonic status means that neoliberalism is widely perceived as not an ideology – a system of mutually defining political concepts constituting a political vision in competition with other rival visions – but as truthful reflection of human nature and social reality itself. Nevertheless, COVID-19 poses a challenge to neoliberal domination (Cooper 2020; Saad-Filho 2020) – one blatant reason is that countries that have been subjected to especially deep and comprehensive neoliberalisation have responded particularly poorly to the current health crisis.

It is a significant empirical finding that several countries with governments described as populist adopted measures similar to those that non-populist governments opted to implement, although some of the former, for example Boris Johnson's Tory cabinet, initially delayed action with hugely detrimental consequences (Mason 2020). However, to legislate pandemic measures is one thing, but how a country adapts to them – namely, how effectively, with what implications for other aspects of social life, and at what overall cost – is another. When comparing how countries managed the pandemic so far, it is clear that some of them have paid a much higher price. At the time of writing, the US has one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases per 1 million inhabitants (over 87 000, making it seventh in the world). Aside from city-states and tiny sovereignties, it is only Czechia and Slovenia that occupy higher positions in this sad ranking. Turning to the UK, it has the sixth highest number of COVID-related deaths per 1 million people (1 792). The United States is 10th with 1 567 deaths per 1 million



people. On the other hand, the rate for Germany is less than 29 000 cases and 834 deaths per 1 million inhabitants. At the opposite end of the scale poor socialist countries such as Cuba, Vietnam and Laos have performed substantially better with, respectively 47 566, 2 420 and 45 cases *in total*, and only 312, 35 and, in the case of Laos, no deaths. Venezuela has recorded almost 138 000 cases in total but, in spite of the pre-existing political and economic crisis in the country, only 1 334 deaths. This is in huge contrast to Brazil with almost 10.5 million cases and over 251 000 deaths, i.e., 1 178 per 1 million people.

Looking at the extraordinary differences between these cases, it is clear that it is not wealth or economic development of the country that makes it more resilient to the pandemic. Rather, it is the degree of marketisation – namely, the degree to which both social priorities and mechanisms for meeting them are subject to the market logic – that seems to play a vital role. From very high numbers of cases and deaths in paradigmatic neoliberal economies, such as the US or Britain, through significantly lower numbers of deaths in social-market societies like Germany, to marginal (comparatively speaking) figures in socialist countries of the Global South – a clear pattern is discernible.

To be sure, though neoliberalism helps explain these striking figures, it does not operate as a singular, homogenous causative variable. Neoliberalism is not a uniform doctrine and its effects differ from place to place depending on its local variants, or neoliberalisations, with their individual or even idiosyncratic characteristics (England and Ward 2007). As far as the current pandemic is concerned, several other factors – such as the type and strength of the regime in power and historical and cultural circumstances – exert their impact as well, either by compounding or by alleviating neoliberal dynamics. Sweden is a case in point: it is a social democratic country but with a long tradition of eugenics, which was practiced there until the mid-1970s; it is not an unreasonable assumption that the latter has shaped the Swedish government's response revolving around the concept of herd immunity and, as a result, placed the country in the 20th place as far as the number of COVID infections relative to population size is concerned, namely 64 820 per 1 million people (Laterza and Romer 2020).

Still, other variables notwithstanding, neoliberalism weighs heavily over states' ability to respond to the crisis (Saad-Filho 2020). Regardless of differences between its local variants, neoliberalism is associated with austerity, which contributes to rising inequality and makes it harder to convince the populace that they really are 'all in it together'. As it puts all its eggs in the basket of 'free market' economics, neoliberalism demands privatisation and deregulation and this has meant inadequate planning for events such as pandemics. Economist Richard D. Wolff (2020) writes: "The utter failure of private capitalism to prepare

for the coronavirus should have surprised no one.” He explains that markets want a quick profit, and this is unlikely to come from producing suitable quantities of facemasks or ventilators or other equipment for potential future emergencies. Ensuring that there is a sufficient number of hospital beds for a crisis situation is not profitable either. Of course, governments could be doing this, and they used to have such responsibilities, at least in the Global North, in the era of Keynesian, mixed-economy capitalism, but from the neoliberal perspective the government’s protective function is always the problem, never the solution. Trump followed exactly this logic when in May 2018 he dissolved the pandemic preparedness unit established by Barack Obama in 2014. He fell short of cutting funding for the Centers for Disease **Control and Prevention only because of the defiance of the US Congress (Tooze 2020).**

Turning to the UK as another advanced economy that has fared particularly badly in the current crisis, it is obvious that the protracted assault by a succession of neoliberal administrations on the country’s once robust National Health Service – which consisted of selective privatisation of its potentially lucrative segments and deliberate underfunding of others – has been a major factor in the abysmal fatality figures recorded in the country and overall shambolic response to the crisis. Britain has now endured a decade of particularly aggressive austerity policies and it is not surprising that its underfunded and half-privatised systems of health provision turned out to be completely unprepared for a health crisis like this one. The situation is, of course, even worse in the US where there is no universal provision of public healthcare. On the other hand, social democracies have done much better, as is the case with Norway which has just over 70 000 cases in total and only 114 deaths per 1 million inhabitants (versus 1 567 in the USA and 1 792 in Britain).

Later developments in the UK – between the first lockdown which began in March 2020 and lasted until early May and the third one which started in January 2021 – corroborate the pernicious impact of neoliberalism. The British state seems increasingly unable of taking any action using its own resources and expertise; instead, it outsources its functions to private global companies. In the case of the COVID-19 Track and Trace app system, Serco and Sitel between them received over £700 million (almost US\$ 1 billion) to develop it, but have remained totally unaccountable for the complete fiasco of what had been touted by Johnson as a ‘world-beating’ system to test, track and trace for coronavirus (Brooks 2020). Interestingly, while the ‘populist’ Johnson has been blamed for the shambolic mismanagement of the pandemic situation, few commentators seem to appreciate the responsibility of the British Chancellor Rishi Sunak. Sunak, an arch-neoliberal plutocrat with a fortune greater than the Queen’s, resisted, until it was too late, any health measures – such as the ‘circuit breaker’ that scientists

recommended in September 2020 – that would have adversely affected the private sector (Jones 2020). Instead, Sunak came up with a preposterous ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ scheme. At the cost of £525 million (over US\$700 million) the UK government paid half the price of restaurant meals (up to £10 per meal) lining the pockets of the likes of McDonalds and Starbucks (that somehow qualified as small businesses in need of support) while helping the virus spread in the population. It is estimated that the scheme is responsible for 17 percent of COVID-19 clusters detected during summer 2020 in the UK (Hern 2020).

It could be counterargued that Britain has been fairly successful in its vaccination programme. However, there are signs that the way how this massive endeavour has been undertaken – with reliance on the private rather than the public sector – will promote further outsourcing accompanied by cronyism (Glover and Maani 2021). Indeed, “privatization of the NHS by stealth” is continuing amid the pandemic (Kollewe 2021). As Bert Olivier (2020) put it in his perceptive commentary on the pandemic and David Harvey’s critique of neoliberal capitalism, “trading upon and profiting from human disasters induced by natural events is far too frequent a feature of capitalism to be taken lightly”. Vaccine roll-out has been relatively fast in the United States as well, but the main obstacle to the country’s ultimate success in the fight against COVID-19 is the prevalence of vaccine hesitancy there and the latter is related to neoliberalism and the individualist, anti-collectivist attitudes that it nurtures (Sanders and Burnett 2019).

There is much work to be done to advance a clear understanding of the ideological and political economy factors that have resulted in the highly unequal toll that the pandemic has taken on different countries. But even a very cursory reflection leads to a fairly unequivocal conclusion that neoliberalism is a key element to consider. If so, then another question arises: is it possible that the elevation of populism to the status of the main problem – in the face of COVID-19 as well as in relation to many other social issues and disfunctions – is a hegemonic construct that operates to naturalise free market fundamentalism as unquestionable? Populism is an empty concept but it should not be ruled out that zeroing in on it has an important role of keeping the main culprit unaccountable. However, as Stuart Hall (1977: 333) wrote, “[h]egemony is not a given and permanent state of affairs, but it has to be actively won and secured; it can also be lost”. To turn the current crisis into an opportunity for a counterhegemonic change, the contestants of neoliberalism need to shift the public’s attention away from the distracting debate on populism, expose neoliberal failures and put forward bold but viable alternatives. The final part of this article considers, briefly and in a tentative way, the importance of an appreciation and understanding

of the role of ideological factors in challenging neoliberalism and identifying alternative options.

## Hegemony and counter-hegemony in light of the pandemic

This article argues that taking ideology seriously advances our understanding of the motivations behind, as well as implications of, the variety of policies implemented or advocated in response to the virus. Are COVID-19 policies framed as measures to primarily keep the economy going or is public health unequivocally accorded the overriding priority? What role do concerns with individual freedom – especially in its narrow libertarian sense which amounts to being left free from state interference – play in justifications of cases of lax management of the fallout from the virus? Are any of the policies underpinned by genuinely egalitarian instincts, more meaningful than the ‘we are all in it together’ worn-out conservative slogan? Which institution – for example, the state, the market, the civil society, the charitable sector – is used as the main mechanism for addressing COVID-19? What are the blame game scenarios in the politics of the pandemic; are they underpinned by racist and nationalist sentiments, as noted earlier in this article, or is another kind of scapegoating at play, based on social class, for example? To what extent do discourses that are rarely explicitly articulated but nevertheless enduring – such as eugenics or some version of the ‘survival of the fittest’ – feed into policy making? These are some of the many possible pointers to the importance of political concepts and ideologies in the politics of COVID-19. Engaging with such questions and contextualising the answers by reference to the broader priorities and ideological assumptions from which they stem, matters both theoretically and practically.

As for theoretical benefits, useful insights can be drawn from an influential approach to ideology known as the morphological model. According to the leading proponent of this theoretical perspective, Michael Freeden (1996: 67), ideology can be conceived of as a mutable system of political concepts where “each component interacts with all the others and is changed when any one of the other components alters”. Following Freeden’s theorisation, any specific ideology – liberalism or socialism, for example – consists of a ‘core’ cluster, linked with a set of (logically or culturally) ‘adjacent’ concepts, and a configuration of ‘peripheral’ concepts (marginal in terms of importance, or on the perimeter at the intersection of ideological principle with policy for practical application). The morphological approach helps trace and understand the interaction between political concepts within any ideological argument and may help identify its weakest links. In the present instance, the pandemic has thrown new problematics into political

debates and hence forced a readjustment of ideological configurations to take account of the emerging, extremely urgent concerns.

The extent to which the established ideological categories have been able to retain a coherent and recognisable identity under pressure from the pandemic debate is an important question that scholars of ideology should make sure to explore. What seems apparent is that neoliberalism has been more susceptible to the disruption than other ideologies. The British case provides a good example. After a disastrous delay – Prime Minister Johnson’s special adviser, Dominic Cummings, had initially stalled government action and reportedly summed up the British government’s policy as “herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad” (Walker 2020) – and under growing pressure from public opinion, the neoliberal Tory cabinet had to make several major U-turns. The country was placed under (first) lockdown and the government embarked on public spending the scale of which would, before the crisis, have placed it to the left of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party. What is more, the measures were endorsed by laissez-faire think-tanks, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, normally a bastion of free market fundamentalism and austerity economics in the UK (Inman 2020b). At the same time, Johnson himself, who then remained in self-isolation after he had been infected with COVID-19, recorded a video message to the British people in which he pronounced that “there is such thing as society” (Williams 2020) thus contradicting his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher.

The example of the Tory government’s change of heart does not mean that it is time to write about neoliberalism as dead and dusted. Neoliberalism is not incompatible with a strong state, on the contrary (Šumonja 2021), and is a broad-church ideology that has been known to draw on ideas from other ideological clusters, like One Nation conservatism, whenever these prove useful in appeasing or pre-empting social discontent; note, for example, David Cameron’s rhetoric of the ‘Big Society’ rolled out in the wake of the credit crunch in 2008 to legitimise his administration’s ruthless austerity policies by projecting a Victorian vision of the charitable sector taking over responsibility for what is normally expected to be provided by the state. Equally, the unprecedented spending on furlough schemes and grants by the Chancellor Rishi Sunak to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic does not mean in itself that neoliberalism in the UK is in terminal decline – these were emergency measures, less generous, incidentally, than comparable schemes in some other wealthy countries (Inman 2020a). And yet, this shift away, for the time being at least, from the politics of austerity, and allusions, however vague, to a more compassionate tradition on the right indicate that neoliberalism (at least in Britain in this case) is now more vulnerable than before thus suggesting a window of opportunity for its challengers.

The pandemic provides progressives with significant advantages, notably now, at a time when neoliberalism's flaws are so blatantly exposed. Whether the chance to erode the power of neoliberalism is taken by the counterhegemonic forces or whether it is missed, just like a similar opening was missed post the 2008 financial calamity, remains to be seen. But it seems reasonable to assume that familiarity with the conceptual make-up of the neoliberal ideology, and hence appreciation of the nature and degree of realignment caused within it by the pandemic, may help determine neoliberalism's weak spots and contradictions. It follows that challengers of neoliberal hegemony would benefit, both in political debate and action, from insights afforded by theory of ideology.

Contrary to denigrating dismissals of ideology, by the left as well as the right, as a distortion of reality or, at best, an irrelevance, ideology does matter. For one thing, legitimacy and authority are sustained or challenged in the light of ideological claims and, in this sense, ideologies are forces of either continuity or of disruption of power. But operating with an opaque concept of ideology may obscure understanding of cause and effect – in the sense of what kind of ideas tend to lead to what kind of policies – and hence misdirect political action. For example, as I have argued here, populism is not the right target – it is merely a rhetorical style, not an ideology (Moffitt 2016). To single it out as the villain will only divert attention into questioning bad public *savoir-vivre*, political incorrectness, or potentially the charisma of the populist leaders. The fundamental problems – inequality, oppression, racism, to name just a few – take shape elsewhere. Populism, to repeat after Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2018), is a distraction.

As of early 2021, the pandemic is still on an upward curve despite the ongoing roll-out of the vaccines, primarily in the Global North. We already know that its cost will exceed the 2008 financial crisis, and this concerns just the economic implications of COVID-19, without taking into consideration the tragic loss of human life. Global spreads of this or other coronavirus, or of entirely different diseases, may also become recurrent phenomena. It is therefore vital for the left to understand how best to respond to such events now and in the future. Fortunately for the progressives, the pertinent ideological repertoire that they can draw on at present is extensive and readily available. Economic justice for key workers, universal income, free and universal healthcare, (re)nationalisation of public services and, to pay for it all and more, a robust action against corporate tax evasion – these are just some of the goals that should resonate with the public, particularly in the present context, and have been pondered by others (see, for example, Olivier 2020 for a transition proposal that is compatible with what is advocated here). As Albert Einstein is supposed to have said, “in the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity”. This is not to trivialise the personal tragedies of those who lost their loved ones to COVID-19, or whose livelihoods

have been massively disrupted by the economic disaster that has ensued from the pandemic; in fact, it is to take this terrible legacy most seriously into consideration and learn from the bitter lessons that it offers.

## Conclusion

The core premise of this article is that ideology is central and necessary to political action; that it is “the DNA of praxis” (Freeden 2005: 262). The current crisis provides an opportunity to counter the hegemony of neoliberalism but this requires a clear identification of the links between ideology, policy and real-world outcomes. The policies of deregulation, privatisation and marketisation stemming from the core ideological principles of neoliberalism have had acutely negative consequences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and it is neoliberalism that should focus the critical attention of both academic and activist debates. On the other hand, the prevailing concern with populism has merely obscured the analysis. Populism is a discursive and political-behavioural style that can accompany diametrically different political and policy agendas. In ideological terms, it is a phantom concept as it offers no system of beliefs and hence no vision that its potential opponents could counter with a plan for a better world. In short, fighting populism amounts to tilting at windmills. The pandemic confirms the hollow and indeterminate nature of populism while exposing the failures of neoliberalism. By doing so it offers the progressive challengers of the neoliberal hegemony an occasion to take the lead by coming up with a compelling ideological narrative. Progressives need to break free of the spell of neoliberal dogma; it is hoped the current crisis will encourage the left to rediscover the power of ideology.

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