

The Mid-Life Crisis of Neo-Liberalism

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Serge Audier has set out to rewrite and rehabilitate the history of neo-liberalism. It is an important task but one which depends, not simply on showing what neo-liberalism was not, but also what made it such a powerful language of politics.

Reviewed: Serge Audier, *Néo-libéralisme(s) – une archéologie intellectuelle*, Paris, Grasset, coll. « Mondes vécus », 2012, 628 pp.

Serge Audier has become one of France's pre-eminent political genealogists. His method is simple: he takes an idea or concept and explores its origins, its diverse meanings and the networks that sustain it. In some cases, the coherence of the concept he chooses is historically defined – as in the case of his work on liberal socialism, French “solidarisme” and republicanism.¹ In other cases, he himself identifies an over-arching theme. This was the approach in *La Pensée anti-68* (2008), where he tried to bring together a wide range of contemporary French political discourses and show the extent to which they all articulated a rejection of 1968.² Whatever the chosen concept, his books usually rely on an extensive use of archival material – and they pay close attention to the multifarious meanings of a concept. The aim is to disentangle myth from reality and rehabilitate ‘lost’ ideas.

This method is much in evidence in Audier's vast new book, the aptly-named *Néolibéralisme(s): une archéologie intellectuelle*. Building on his earlier work on the Colloque Walter Lippmann, he sets out to demolish received ideas about what neo-liberalism

¹ Serge Audier, *La Pensée solidariste. Aux sources du modèle républicain* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010); *Le Socialisme libéral* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006); *Les Théories de la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

² Serge Audier, *La pensée anti-1968. Essai sur les origines d'une restauration intellectuelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008). See also S. Moyn, ‘From Revolution to Restoration?’, *Books & Ideas*, 6 June 2008. [<http://www.booksandideas.net/From-revolution-to-restoration.html>, last accessed 29/5/2012]

is and where it comes from.³ His focus is squarely on the period 1930-60 and the relationships between a number of central figures of mid-century (neo-)liberalism. Of these, the best known are probably Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke, Raymond Aron and Milton Friedman. But Audier also restores to prominence a whole host of lesser-known philosophers, economists, public intellectuals and political theorists who gravitated around the Colloque Walter Lippmann in the 1930s and the Société Mont Pèlerin after the Second World War.

In Search of Neo-Liberalism

It is here that Audier is at his most penetrating. The two lengthy chapters he devotes to the layers of networks that tied together the key actors of mid-twentieth century liberalism can sometimes read like a succession of mini-biographies but they demonstrate clearly the degree to which European and American liberalism lacked unity when faced with the tragedies of the age. While some were tempted by authoritarianism in the form of fascism or, later, military dictatorship, others sought a more thoroughgoing liberal revolution by denouncing Roosevelt's New Deal or post-war Keynesianism. Even as neo-liberalism triumphed in the 1970s, its key protagonists could not always agree on whether the accent should be on conservative restoration or market-driven individualism. Reagan and Thatcher's paeans to the minimal state in the 1980s were welcome rhetoric but, in the end, neither leader was successfully able to "roll back the frontiers of the state", nor were they entirely sure what this meant in practice. The climax of neo-liberalism was just as confused as its tentative beginnings in the 1930s.

Audier's message is clear: for him, it is nonsense to suggest that a well-defined and predatory neo-liberal ideology emerged in the 1930s and was consummated in the 1970s. It is a point the author does not hesitate to state forcefully. The opinions of prominent commentators such as Serge Halimi, Noam Chomsky, François Denord and, in particular, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval are singled out for sharp criticism. They are collectively accused of grossly oversimplifying the realities of 'neo-liberalism', and constructing a schematic teleology that leads from the Colloque Walter Lippmann to American neo-imperialism in Iraq and the financial crash of 2007-8. In Audier's view, the harnessing of the term neo-liberal has led to an array of falsifications, simplifications and distorted

³ Serge Audier, *Le colloque Lippmann: aux origines du néo-libéralisme* (Paris: Editions Le Bord de l'Eau, 2008).

chronologies that do nothing to illuminate the work of some of the key figures discussed in the book. Thus, it makes little sense to see Hayek or Aron as avatars of twenty-first century neo-liberal ideology and it is simplistic to suggest that the Société Mont Pèlerin was the crucible of a global “conspiracy” to restore free market capitalism and a ‘neo-liberal Europe’.

Audier’s evident frustration with these critics of neo-liberalism reflects deeper schisms in contemporary French politics. As numerous historians have pointed out, twentieth-century France has remained unusually hostile to liberalism.⁴ The French neo-liberal revival in the late 1970s and 1980s was severely curtailed by the legacy of Gaullism and the persistence of strong languages of Marxism. The critics to whom Audier is responding fall firmly into the second category. They have continued a critique of liberalism that has long been an important component of both Marxist and contemporary French political thought. Using Bourdieu, Foucault or the anti-globalisation movement as their intellectual alibis, they have gone in search of neo-liberalism’s ‘shameful’ past and have made sure their voices are heard, especially amongst a French public sector notoriously unsympathetic to any hint of encroaching “Anglo-Saxon liberalism”. It is this audience that urgently needs to read Audier’s sophisticated narrative. He shows that the history of “neo-liberalism” was not linear and its ideologues were not all apologists for socio-economic inequality.

Towards a History of Neo-Liberalism?

Yet, if Audier is right to discard the plethora of *marxisant* conspiracy theories about neo-liberalism, must he also discard all of the conceptual issues raised by its critics? It is on this specific point that *Néolibéralisme(s)* is less convincing, in particular for the historian seeking to understand the vast dissemination of so-called neo-liberal ideas from the 1970s onwards. The notion of a neo-liberal ‘rationality’, for instance, is one which Audier rejects on the grounds that it obscures the complex history of twentieth-century neo-liberalism. Fair enough, but such a notion need not suggest a subterranean or Foucauldian hegemony. It can be historically situated. In Europe, its rise coincided with the exhaustion of a Christian Democratic consensus after the Second World War, the social movements of the 1960s and a rising tide of anti-totalitarian thought in Western Europe.⁵ It marked what some historians

⁴ See for instance Tony Judt, *Past imperfect: French intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and J. Hayward, ‘La persistance de l’antilibéralisme : rhétorique et réalité’ in *Pouvoirs* (No. 126, 2008), pp. 115-32.

⁵ Recent interpretations of European postwar history tackle the complex relationship between ‘liberalism’, socio-economic change and the state include Tony Judt, *Postwar* (London: Pimlico, 2005); Mark Mazower, *Dark*

have called the return of a “merchant class”, whose legitimacy had been shattered by the Great Depression in the 1930s but who found a new lease of life as the post-war technocratic state met with renewed opposition in the 1970s.⁶ It was this new generation – an odd conglomerate of post-1968 individualists, talented policy men and business gurus – that enthusiastically embraced neo-liberalism and made it into a global political philosophy.

Like the contemporary prosecutors of neo-liberalism who are the main targets of Audier’s ire, this generation also distorted or misunderstood neo-liberalism. But this does not invalidate their reading. Indeed, I would argue that these misunderstandings are as much a part of the archaeology of neo-liberalism as the doctrinal differences between its founding fathers. By emphasising the latter, Audier underplays the degree to which hostility to a global, state-led “Trente Glorieuses” underpinned the neo-liberal revival across Europe and North America in the 1970s. This helps explain why the intellectuals he identifies – the vast majority of whom shared a marked scepticism towards the state and a profound hostility to Communism – were so keenly read and shared.

Part of the problem is that Audier pays too little attention to some of the key concepts that have come to dominate our vision of neo-liberalism. A good example of this is the idea of the ‘market’, which (for better or worse) has become one of neo-liberalism’s defining characteristics. Audier, quite rightly, stresses how many of those subsequently tarred with the brush of neo-liberalism were extremely reticent about a market that would be little more than a self-regulating “invisible hand”. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this vision of the ‘market’ became the *cause célèbre* of a whole generation of American policymakers, academics and politicians in the 1980s and 90s. In order to understand this, we need to follow a historian like Daniel Rodgers and look to the circulation of ideas beyond the limited circle of a group like the Société Mont Pèlerin.⁷ The neo-liberal ‘market’ is not just an invention of twenty-first century anti-liberal polemic; it provided a way of reconceptualising social and economic relations for a whole generation of European and American elites in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century (London: Penguin, 1999); and Martin Conway, ‘The Rise and Fall of Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945-73’ in *Contemporary European History* (Vol. 13, No. 1, 2004), pp. 67-88.

⁶ D. Priestland, *Merchant, Soldier, Sage: A New History of Power* (London: Penguin, forthcoming 2012).

⁷ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 41-77.

Despite its bold claims, this book is therefore better seen as a meticulous dissection of the life of a small group of mid-twentieth century liberals than as a historical analysis of neo-liberalism. Audier vividly brings to life the impassioned disagreements between some of Europe and America's finest liberal intellectuals. He offers a nuanced examination of the networks that brought them together. He even provides a wide-ranging synthesis of contemporary scholarship on liberalism, with a bibliography in several languages. But, as the narrative approaches the 1970s and the point at which neo-liberalism enters the mainstream, it is overwhelmed by its subject. There are useful attempts to relate neo-liberalism to neo-conservatism and religious theo-conservatism but these give only a fragmentary sense of neo-liberalism's power and potency. We are still left wondering why it coalesced into a coherent ideology and why so many people have been drawn to its principles and assumptions. Ultimately, Audier's stimulating book is more of a 'prehistory' of neo-liberalism than an 'archaeology'. A complete history of neo-liberalism remains to be written.

Article published in Books&ideas.net, 4 July 2012.

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