

Why is there a growing authoritarianism in 21th century?

An analysis of neoliberal making of new authoritarian leaders,
Frankfurt School revisited

Author: Mert Ozdal

Edited by: Niki Hoveida

INTRODUCTION

In our neoliberal world, we are experiencing the rise of authoritarian regimes on a global scale. The USA elected Donald Trump, Turkey elected Erdogan, and the list goes on. According to the mainstream approach, this is caused by the growing inequality and eradication of the middle class due to neoliberal policies. This approach treats neoliberalism in a very reductionist way and assesses it solely as a new economic relationship in the world. These accounts, however, cannot provide insight on how neoliberalism sparks the tendency to chant for authoritarianism in “ordinary” people. The reductionist approaches cannot answer questions such as what the reasons are behind new authoritarianism other than inequality, and is the new authoritarianism an unlucky anomaly of 21th century or a phenomenon that is caused by the conditions of 21th century. In this paper, I will first discuss the accounts of Lowenthal and Guterman in order to explain what causes people to obey and chant for authoritarian leaders. Unlike the mainstream approach of today and – the approach of their times, Lowenthal and Guterman did not perceive the fascism of their times as an anomaly of society. Instead, they tried to understand how the daily relationships in a society produce fascist and authoritarian tendencies as such an understanding can help us understand authoritarian leaders independent of time and space. In their famous “Prophets of Deceits” Lowenthal and Guterman state five reasons that cause people to obey authoritarian leaders, namely: “Eternal Dupes”, “Conspiracy”, “Forbidden Fruit”, “Disaffection”, and “Charade of doom” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). In the second part of this paper I will show how the same tactics described by Lowenthal and Guterman are used by the new authoritarian leaders. In the third part of this paper I will assess neoliberalism, the dominant

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

superstructure of today, in terms of the ways it recreated and fueled the underlying reasons behind the authoritarian tendencies that Lowenthal and Guterman argued. Unlike the mainstream approach, I will argue that neoliberalism cannot be analyzed solely in terms of the economic relationship as it is a specific governing rationale that includes phenomena such as discipline through debt, depoliticization of social problems, and individualization of economic security. I posit this governing rationale fuels and reproduces the reasons for authoritarian tendencies described by Lowenthal and Guterman.

PROPHETS OF DECEIT

Lowenthal and Guterman wrote their influential book *Prophets of Deceit* during the era of European fascism. The pair analyze the tactics of agitators and the psychology of listeners. They argue agitators tried to create an image wherein they are genuine about solving social problems. What they really tried to do, however, is manipulate and increase the audience's feelings of discomfort in order to take advantage of these feelings. Lowenthal and Guterman argue for the existence of five themes (eternal dupes, conspiracy, forbidden fruit, disaffection, charade of doom) in order to understand how the aforementioned agitators exploit feelings and distort reality (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949).

Lowenthal and Guterman argue agitators attempt to persuade ordinary people to the fact that they are duped by enemies of society constantly. In order to persuade a person, there has to be an intellectual or emotional distance between the speaker and listener; the audience should accept their inadequacy to deal with their problem (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). The agitator cannot persuade an individual without showing, often through means of humiliation, that said individual is inferior and needs the agitator more than the agitator needs the individual. The agitator insists that he possesses superior knowledge through his virtuous and special character. He asserts that his followers will be enlightened, understand the world, and become brave members of society (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). He instills fear in his listeners by convincing them that the problems they face are permanent and cannot be solved by their self-endeavor. He increases

THE ORACLE

the audience's insecurity by insisting that they are constantly cheated. Starting from childhood, a man suppresses instinctual actions due to social pressure presented through values of civilization (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). To live in accordance with these values, he makes sacrifices because of his belief that ultimately, he will be rewarded. Unfortunately, at one point in his life, the man discovers an ugly truth; he shall never fulfill his dreams, he shall never be rewarded. For nothing, he sacrificed his life because of the assumption that pursuit of moral values is superior that pursuit of material gain. (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). He has been manipulated by the people who praise the values that he embraced. He starts to think the whole world is against him in an almost paranoid state of mind. This creates a huge desire in dupes to have facile explanations and they become individuals who are more than happy to give control of their fate to someone who understands their helplessness (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949).

The agitator depicted the dupes as cheated and fooled, however, they are not only cheated and fooled. They are cheated and fooled systematically, consistently, and consciously. The reason behind the failure is caused by a comprehensive and planned conspiracy (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Those who have suffered failure tend to attribute their discomfort to an external, secret enemy; an agitator exploits this feeling. When agitators tell listeners that they are vulnerable because of bankers, "interest lobby" and the "West", the agitator exploits a preexisting feeling (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Even though they are vague and limited in terms of factual qualities, these claims could be a topic of analysis. For example, the reason for underdevelopment in Turkey could really be related to a trading scheme between Turkey and the USA. The agitator, however, facilitates popular conspiracies only to enhance the resentment they create (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Agitator does not believe conspiracy agents have rational motives or can be analyzed within a rational context. Instead, conspiracy agents are against people by default without any rational motivation. The agitator also depicts a blurry picture of the group deemed to be conspirators. The agents which involve uneven power relationships such as economic elites, regional hegemon countries now melted in the same pot and referred

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

as agents of demonic secret international organization. This blurriness of enemies increases the paranoias of people (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949).

Lowenthal and Guterman argue that if the dupes are cheated by the external and evil enemy, agitators would emphasize the presence of forbidden fruit to them. While “Evil” enjoys the lavish life, the audience of the agitators cannot and live like foreigners in their own land (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Evil distorts the moral base of society and live an extraordinarily lavish life. Even though the agitator gives the impression of advocating for redistribution policies, as I have stated, the agitator does not address the issues that he raised; he does not problematize them in a coherent way. Rather than offering a pathway to the redistribution of wealth, the agitator only increases the resentment against the excesses of luxury (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Also, the agitator accuses “outsiders” such as refugees and immigrants by saying they are stealing the jobs and the wealth from the “real” people of that land (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949).

According to Lowenthal and Guterman, creating the disaffection of ideals, values, and institutions are an important part of the agitator’s tactics. To be able to increase disillusion on values, the agitator slanders and praises the values at the same time. On the one hand, he supports the values of civilization; on the other, he fuels the audience's mistrust about those values. When he confuses his audiences with his uncertain rhetoric, he implies he is neither a supporter nor a denier of those values. Even though the discourse of the agitator is a contradiction in and of itself, it is not a problem (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). This is because he already knows his almost caricature-like statements would not be believed by most of the audience. The purpose of the caricature-like statements is not to persuade the audience but to give the impression that the differences between values such as democracy and fascism are not important as many people believe and in turn, values do not matter (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). The agitator constantly seeks to blur the difference between values. He takes advantage of his audience’s sense of disillusion by increasing their doubts about the validity of the

THE ORACLE

justification for social coercion that “enemies” use (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). Since the values are not important and fake, the agitator embraces amoral opportunism and justifies it. Through unseriousness, transformation of meaning, and anti-universality, he achieves the following opportunist doctrine. The agitator approaches values ambiguously through the unseriousness in his statements which try to depict values as lies and hogwash. The agitator alters the meaning of values in a way to exploit them according to his benefit. The agitator explicitly rejects the idea of universality. He argues tolerance is a way to suppress the truth and create coercion. With said three tactics, the agitator tries to show his listeners that values are nothing more than advertising slogans; basic lies for cheating them. (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949).

The agitator scares his audience with the possibility of an unavoidable and inexorable total doom. He states that chaos, murder, rape, and war are everywhere in our world. In order to control and stimulate social thought and action, agitators spread fear. This fear is not the fear used in psychological stimulation to canalize specific danger. Similarly, to conspiracy, agitators create an eternal fear. When people terrified, agitator point a historical or universal event as the source of problem to relieve peoples’ fear. Individual and personal failures are disguised as national, international, or even cosmic failure (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949). The audience of agitators start to understand the causes of their failure; they no longer need to cope with unimportant problems of daily life such as tax laws, and unions. All these problems are explained by a common evil enemy as all problems are part of the corrupt and ruthless world. The inability to address problems no longer makes audiences dread the future as said problems become smaller when one deals with cosmic causes.

LOWENTHAL AND GUTERMAN AFTER 50 YEARS

As I have stated in the introduction, Lowenthal and Guterman did not perceive the authoritarianism of their times as an anomaly. I believe their analysis is helpful to understand the tactics and psychology of new authoritarian leaders and their listeners. In this part, I will analyze the speeches of new authoritarian leaders to show how they facilitate the tactics described by Lowenthal and Guterman.

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

For example, similarly to Lowenthal and Gutermans' depiction of the agitator's eternal dupes, followers of Trump embrace social and economic marginalization and create an identity based on those problems. The "eternal dupes" described by Lowenthal and Guterman are referred to as the silent majority in Trump's America (Clavey, 2020).

Similar to the role of an agitator in Lowenthal and Guterman's conceptualization, conspiracies are the main source of fear in the discourse of the newly authoritarian leaders. In Turkey, the public dissent rose in the last years due to economic problems. As an example of the humiliation of his listeners, President Erdogan repeatedly said people do not understand that they are in a war; an economic war. As an example of a conspiracy theory in which the conspirator is blurry and unidentified, the "West", never further identified, were said to be trying to sabotage Turkey. He stated "we are giving a new independence war against those who are trying to blockade our country" (Ekonomik Kurtulus Savasi, 2020).

The accusation of "forbidding the fruit" toward both elites and refugees is very prevalent in the discourse of new authoritarian leaders. For example, on 1 January 2021 when President Erdogan undemocratically appointed a rector to Bogazici University, students started to protest against him. The response of the media was to picture the students of Bogazici as the elite Turks that make a lot of money and betray the land which provides them with plentiful opportunities (Kaplan, 2021). They live like foreigners in their land and live lavish life which become possible only through the hard work of "real" people of country. The Bogazici students exploit the hard work of people (an example of the demonization of elites). While Trump was campaigning in 2017, he read a poem called "The Snake" in one of his rallies. The poem is about a woman who feeds a snake and is eventually killed by it. As an example of the demonization of refugees, Trump likens refugees to said snake (Clavey, 2020).

The leaders also create disaffection through what Lowenthal and Guterman called transform of meaning, unseriousness, and anti-universality. To serve as an example of transforming the meaning, when Erdogan was accused of being undemocratic, he repeatedly

THE ORACLE

stated the fact that he received 50 percent of the votes is a clear example of democracy. How dare anyone speak about democracy with the leader who got the support of half of his nation? He distorts the meaning of democracy and equates it solely with an electoral win. He stated that “in other places, you cannot find genuine democracy like Turkey’s” (“Baska Yerde Turkiye gibi Samimi Demokrasi”, 2020). As an example of unseriousness, in the 2011 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, when the French counselor asks Erdogan questions about religious freedom in Turkey, instead of addressing the question properly, Erdogan said that “I assume my friend is French. But French to Turkey too.” (“Bu Fransiz Arkadas”, 2011). President Erdogan also embraces an anti-universal sentiment in his speech. He stated that “Europe cannot teach Turkey humanism, in the name of democracy, we won’t allow terrorism” (“Bati Terore destek”, 2016). Human rights should not camouflage terrorism, he says. He pointed out that tolerance of the universal values is to open space for terrorism.

NEOLIBERALISM

We are experiencing the rise of authoritarian leaders in the late 21st century who embrace the tactics that Lowenthal and Guterman attributed to fascist leaders of their times. So, how does neoliberalism contribute to the emergence of those leaders? Contrary to the common assessment that neoliberalism is merely a new form of an economic system, I argue neoliberalism is governing rationality. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberal rationality is a governance rationale that creates political and social spheres that are dominated by market concerns and organized by market rationality (Brown, 2006). Brown emphasizes this organization of governance is not just a reflection of economics to other areas, it is also the explicit construction of specific market rationality in specific areas. In the construction of this governance, the state actively engages in it. The state embraces policies and spreads a political culture aimed at encouraging citizens to be rational economic actors in every area of life. It creates entrepreneurs and consumer citizens whose value is measured by their capacity to be self-sufficient (Brown, 2006). This

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

general rationale of neoliberalism produces phenomena unique to neoliberalism.

In the neoliberal era, the world has experienced a huge wave of financialization of everyday life. The mainstream argument posits that financialization of everyday life occurs due to the shift from production capitalism to coupon pool capitalism. Paul Langley, however, argues that it is not a shift in paradigm but a conscious and deliberate creation of a new paradigm (Langley, 2017). Langley argues that by changing the role of the investment as a fundamental guarantor of future security and freedom, everyday life is financialized. Similar to Brown, Langley argues that neoliberalism tried to create self-sufficient, self-responsible citizens through entrepreneurship in the market, Langley notes, particularly in the financial market (Langley, 2017) Citizens started to perceive the practices of the financial market as fundamental for their future freedom and security. Investment is completely different from the old phenomenon of security, namely insurance. In insurance, the risk is something that everyone can face such as accidents, poverty, health conditions, and so on (Langley, 2017). The risk is collectively shared. This risk is a negative risk, insurance is a preventive mechanism. In the case of investment, however, risk is a positive risk; the risk is something that you can reap the benefits of through rational decisions in the financial market (Langley, 2007). Langley states that the possibility of the advantageous use of investment makes the individualization of responsibility of security and freedom not something dangerous but even cheered by people (Langley, 2007). Yet, Langley shows that through finance, adequate security generally cannot be achieved. Langley argues that this is mostly due to the uncertain nature of financial markets.

Financial literacy suggests the money for private pensions should be diversified in the portfolio. When the retirement time comes, however, private pensions push individuals to invest in a single financial instrument, for the annual payback until death. Since the annual rates of returns depend on the interest rates and therefore fluctuate vastly, retirement investors are finding themselves in uncertainty as there is no way for a person to calculate and

THE ORACLE

“rationally” act according to general interest rates. It is clear that ensuring secure retirement is not about one’s wisdom or intellect but rather is simply a result of luck and timing. As a result of this uncertainty, people generally cannot invest sufficiently to ensure their security (Langley, 2007). For example, in the United Kingdom, the saving ratio (the amount of savings divided by gross income) stood at 4.8 percent in 2002, the lowest of all time. The pension commission declared that more than 45 percent of the working-class people in the United Kingdom do not have a sufficient level of savings to secure retirement (Langley, 2017).

Another important phenomenon that shapes the citizens is the creation of debt in the neoliberal era. Lazzarato (2012) states that a huge amount of wealth is transferred from the population, business, and the welfare state to creditors by interest mechanism. This huge amount of wealth transfer creates a power mechanism of exploitation between creditor and debtor. Lazzarato argues that in the neoliberal era through monetary policies, wage deflation policies, and fiscal policies, an enormous public and private debt is created (Lazzarato, 2012). He states that the creditor-debtor relationship becomes central to neoliberal governance. The creditor-debtor relationship builds through the integration of people to the monetary banking and financial system. In neoliberalism what is identified as financialization is the representation of the enhanced force of the creditor debtor relationship, he argues. Lazzarato argues this newly created relationship creates subjects who experience debt at every moment of life, everywhere in the world (Lazzarato, 2012). Everyone has debt because even a poor person who does not have access to credit must pay the interest to creditors through the reimbursement of public debt that grows enormously in the neoliberal era. The debt is not only universal but also lifelong. Lazzarato states that every French child is born with a 22,000-euro debt. He argues that people are exposed to creditor-debtor power relations throughout life, from birth to death. This spreading power relationship effectively creates a particular form of homo economicus, the indebted man. Lazzarato argues that debt disciplines its subjects and it produces a new morality (Lazzarato, 2012). In the neoliberal era, paying a debt is a fulfillment of a moral promise, and having entered into debt is perceived as a failure

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

(Lazzarato, 2012). Lazzarato also states that the moral attributions to debt moralize unemployment, social service, and public help. If one does not have a job or relies on social service for a living, he is accused of having low self-discipline, low motivation, and being lazy. The debtor fails in his duty to be self-sufficient.

How Neoliberalism Helps Authoritarian Tactics?

After the discussion of what neoliberalism is and what its effects are, in this section, I will show the ways in which neoliberal rationality fueled and reproduced the tactics that Lowenthal and Guterman posit. Lowenthal argues agitators insist their listeners are in an eternal loop that makes them suckers. The only way to escape from this loop is to follow the superior leader. As I have stated, an agitator shows the listener that the values they obey do not bring prosperity, and at some point in life, the dupe will realize that he ruins his life for the meaningless pursuit of moral values. He could not achieve prosperity. He accepts that he is a sucker for all his life. For addressing an enemy for this failure, an agitator creates conspiracy theories and tells listeners they are constantly manipulated and failed. He claims that while you are suffering, someone is enjoying life to increase resentment and anxiety in the audience. In neoliberal rationality, the notion of “finance as the future security” (Langley) and “creation of indebted man” (Lazzarato) serve as the fueler of such emotions and help agitator to exploit them. As I argued above, Langley suggests the future of individuals who try to secure a pension through financial instruments depends on the macro political environment, no matter how they rationally behave in the financial market. Therefore, statistically, people generally failed to secure their pension money (Langley, 2017). Also, as Lazaarro argues, the neoliberal logic that tries to expand the creditor-debtor relationship to every aspect of life creates individuals who are born in debt (Lazzarato, 2012). This uncertainty of life (people cannot know if they can secure their future or not) and eternal debt (people born into debt and die in debt) makes people more paranoid and devastated. Also, as Lazzarato discusses, the newly created homoeconomicos “indebted man” attributes moral values to debt. It is a moral duty to pay the debt

THE ORACLE

and if a person fails to pay, he should feel morally inferior (Lazzarato, 2012). One will always try to minimize their debt and will likely fail at one point in life and start to feel morally inferior. The increased paranoia, devastation, and moral inferiority in the neoliberal era makes people vulnerable to any explanation of their failure more than ever. Consequently, it helps agitators to claim they are a sucker for life because of an external enemy, and while they are suffering someone having fun of life.

The rationale of neoliberalism makes the market rational dominate and organizes the political and social arena which allows for the disillusion of values. Brown argues that neoliberal political rationality knows no value or ideology, its concerns are solely dominated by market rationale. She argues that this rationale eradicates the meaning of values. While analyzing how the completely incompatible ideologies of neoconservatism and neoliberalism exist together, she stated “Neoconservatism sewn in the soil prepared by neoliberalism breeds a new political form, a specific modality of governance and citizenship, one whose incompatibly with even formal democratic practices and institutions does not spur a legitimation crisis because of the neoliberal devaluation of these practices and institutions that neoconservatism then consecrates.” (Brown, 2006, p.702) In the neoliberal era, opposite values can exist together, and the meaning of values can be distorted because neoliberalism already deviated the meaning of values. For example, in the case of an agitator, agitators easily claim that human rights are merely a façade since the meaning of rights in neoliberalism reduces to a right to exist in the market. Therefore, the meaning of it is eroded and defined by market terms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in the neoliberal era world, we have witnessed a rise of authoritarian leaders all over the globe. Before neoliberalism 50 years ago during the era of rising fascism, two scholars of the Frankfurt School, Lowenthal and Guterman, analyzed the psychology and tactics of agitators and their audiences. They argue agitators insist to their listeners that their suffering is eternal and cannot be solved by themselves because they are being constantly

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

cheated. They are cheated as a result of a planned conspiracy. Also, while they are sabotaged, agitators say some people are living their beautiful life. Moreover, the agitator says to their listeners that the values you obey for the sake of civilization are a mere façade and illusions for social coercion. They are meaningless. By saying so, agitators create fear and resentment in listeners and exploit them.

Today when we analyze the discourses of new authoritarian leaders such as Erdogan and Trump, we can clearly see they are facilitating the same tactics of the agitators described by Lowenthal and Guterman. In my paper, I have shown that neoliberal rationality helps the new authoritarian leaders facilitate those tactics and exploit the subsequent emotions. This is because, firstly, the neoliberal rationale forms people who tried to secure their future through the financial market. Secondly, the neoliberal rationale forms agents who are constantly in a debtor creditor relationship. As a result, people in debt visualize an unsecure future and become devastated and paranoid about their lives.

As Langley shows, the financial market is uncertain and no action can secure a future return with 100 percent certainty. As Lazzarato shows, expansion of the creditor-debtor relationship in the neoliberal era creates citizens who are born into and die in debt. Therefore, people are more paranoid and are more likely to fail in the neoliberal world. As a result, agitators effectively exploit those feelings. Also, in the neoliberal era, it is easier for the agitator to distort and exploit values because as Brown argues, values are already deviated by the creation of a social and political sphere which is predominantly occupied by market rationality (Brown, 2006). In order to prevent the further increase of the authoritarian trend all around the world, the governing rationalities of neoliberalism that increase anxiety and paranoia in people should be abolished. We should create an inclusive system, not just in terms of the redistribution of wealth but also in terms of power relations.

THE ORACLE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- C.Clavey (20 october 2020). “Donald Trump Our Prophet of Deceit”,
Boston Review
- H.Kaplan (2 february 2021). “Boğaziçi Oligarşisi Yıkılacak;
Dönüşümün Sancılarını Yaşıyoruz”,
Sabah Gazetesi
- Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit*, NY:
Harper & Bros, 1949, Chp. 3:
“A Hostile World”
- Maurizio Lazzarato, “Understanding Debt as the Basis of Social Life”,
*The Making of the
Indebted Man*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2012, p. 13-36
- Paul Langley, “Uncertain Subjects of Anglo-American
Financialization”, *Cultural Critique*, 65, Fall 2007, pp. 67-
91.
- Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare. Neoliberalism,
Neoconservatism and De-Democratization”, *Political
Theory*, Vol. 34(6), 2006, p. 690-714.
- “Bu Fransız arkadaş Türkiye’ye de Fransız kalmıs” (2011, April),
Hurriyet Gazetesi.
<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/avrupaya-rest-cekti-bu-fransiz-arkadas-turkiyeye-de-fransiz-kalmis-17536665>
- “Erdogan:Yeni bir kurtulus savasi veriyoruz”.(2020, October), Sozcu
Gazetesi.
<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/erdogan-yeni-bir-ekonomik-kurtulus-savasi-veriyoruz-6106176/>

WHY IS THERE A GROWING AUTHORITARIANISM IN 21TH CENTURY?

“Bati Terore destek veriyor” (2016, august), Anadolu Ajansi.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/15-temmuz-darbe-girisimi/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-bati-terore-d-estek-veriyor-ve-darbelerin-yaninda-yer-aliyor/620231>