

## **Beneath the Veil of Global Capitalism: What is Left of World Politics?**

### *Sob o Véu do Capitalismo Global: O que Resta da Política Mundial?*

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*“I am a conservative, as long as we preserve the sardine and not the tin”*  
Agostinho da Silva

Beneath the veil of global capitalism, we are living in a crisis of crisis. The crisis of liberalism; the crisis of rising inequality; climate crisis; refugee crisis; the inflation crisis. In our daily lives the speed bestowed upon us was profoundly idealized and embedded in the social and political ethos. In the last three to four decades, globalization, fragmentation, loss of authority and lack of regulation were highly praised — and continues to be.

The crisis of liberalism can be summarized by the ever-going desire of consumerism nowadays. Already in the 1980s, the French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky pointed out that the recipe of hyper-consumerism was gaining a momentum of its own. However, it has also gained a spirit of decay in the last two decades. Happiness became the beacon of our lives. Nowadays, the driving force of societies and politics is happiness; being embedded in the new spirit of capitalism, it became the sole objective of trademarks, organizations, policymakers or educators. The happiness-driving narrative has lifted the spirits for some time; but are we ready to lose this “happiness-quality of life” to protect democracy?

Nowadays, capitalism calls us to participate in its new ethics: the ethics of hard-working both in the public and private sphere. Is there any problem with more working hours? Simply resort to some sort of non-profound therapy where the individual is the main problem. “Just do it” is the new national anthem, where I would add “don’t think”. Thinking has no space and time in the happiness-society where doing is the tool to attain happiness. Doing is the means to attain the

everlasting but repeated catharsis; the televised moment, the stage-moment, the desire for success. “Doing” is a never satisfied entity. So, are we ready to meet the aspirations of happiness?

In parallel, inequality has risen in capitalist societies, besides religious, identity and ethnic conflicts. In 1995, Samuel Huntington defined the state of the world by the clash of civilizations. Nonetheless, this clash of “civilizations” (identities) is occurring in so-called consolidated democracies, whereas the political conflict becomes “outright shamelessness on display”. The rise of extremism is also a response to the lack of attainment, or the pressure of the collective superego — the search for an authoritarian catharsis able to supplant the “rotten” empire.

## The empire strikes back

As pointed out several decades ago by Ortega y Gasset, all revolutions are post-revolutionaries. However, and aligning with Schumpeter, capitalism is an entity that supplants its own institutions and norms. And of course, capitalism does not need democracy to thrive; likewise, it does not need old liberalism besides to quote its spiritual and idealistic academic endeavours. Nowadays, the new ethics of capitalism rests upon the action-driven society we are living in. And it is precisely here that lies the very attack on democracy and liberalism. The problem of everyday speed, frustration, anger — “to get things done” — is the new ethics of capitalism, driving democracy and politics to an insanely institutional pressure. To put it in a rather ironic and blunt way:

“Let us hope that god will help us and we will not have to invent a new type of political system instead of democracy that would need to be introduced for the sake of economic survival (...).” *Viktor Órban, 2012*

The lacks and failures of the checks and balances system are being pointed out by society in the new ethics of capitalism — be fast, work, “just do it”, do not think, just do! Putting an incommensurable pressure on institutions, namely on regulatory institutions to deliver, to “just do it”, or in an extremist way to do justice without the liberal and human rights’ “agenda”.

Besides, politics is becoming more and more violent and polarized. Plus, economic decadence, inequality, loss of regulation, and redistribution are becoming infrastructural blocks of our societies.

## The Welfare (Happiness)

What really separates European democracies from other democracies is the welfare embedded in the state and the ethics of regulation. However, being the last resort of democracy, regulation has been slowly taken out of office since the 1970s. The glorious years of the Welfare State were replaced by the new rules of financial markets and the flow of complexified networks of information and capital. Can the

state meet the aspirations laid down by happiness?

Happiness is embedded in every human activity since the dawn of civilization. However, it is merely a conjunctural state, a momentum, rather than a structure of human condition. Human condition is also met with failure, disgrace, and death; and that is precisely what the happiness-driven society tries to omit and overcome. In today's societies there is always an inhibited and suspended negativity hidden in the shadows. A more hedonistic view has come into play to rid ourselves of suffering and to give us the discovery of self-knowledge.

In this sense, and in order to reconceptualize today's human condition, it is crucial to conceptualize happiness-drive action as a symptom of today's societies. Happiness-driven actions occur as a relating force to markets and capital. Citizen-consumers try to live up to ideal objects, trying to not be excluded from the framework of today's market. In this sense, objectification is driving the core of action-driven individuals in contemporary societies.

Also, democracy and politics are both being reconceptualized to include happiness-driven actions derived from the market. Each policy must be "sold" as a communication apparatus to obtain happiness in a short timeframe; to "get things done", to quickly respond, to give answers, to be effective at all costs, to display numbers. In a sense, politics became trapped in a transparent cage, de-structuralized, losing its meaningful authority.

## Velocity

In today's societies there is no speed limit in the way citizen-consumers try to obtain happiness. Being the other symptom, velocity is also the other side of action-driven societies. The "just do it" type of action tries to meet the aspirations of idealized hard work — the object of desire as the first step towards other objects of surplus desire. Being spread through the information society, the agenda of entrepreneurs, the globalized American Dream, the hard-working individual was never as idealized, rendering such an ideological expression in our everyday lives. However, the paradox is that we were never so far from the American Dream as we are today; the gradual loss of worker's rights, the strengthening of financial capital and the growing inequality are real expressions of labour markets and everyday lives.

In parallel, every human action has taken a velocity never witnessed before. In our daily jobs there is a demanding for more hours of work (being it online or not); there is an increasing demand to be public exposed through social media; the growing attempt to consume; and, finally, there is the anxiety posed by the demands of citizen-consumerism and the search for self-knowledge. In this sense, the idealized globalization of the 1990s shattered the dreams of a more equal society, binding citizens through the ranks of civil society and more demanding and qualified workers.

In paradox, politics and citizens became progressively depoliticized and anomic.

Of course, politics played an extraordinary role on this process: the loss of authority and sovereignty in relation to big companies and financial markets, de-regulation, dismantling public services, state inefficiency, corruption, or lack of a strategy-driven discourse. In this sense, the last three decades witnessed the growing reaction-driven force of politics, rendering to “politics as usual”, managing agendas and the emergency state of affairs.

## Transparency

Transparency became the main goal of institutions and power politics since the 1990s, in parallel to the growing information society. News, and flows of information and data were now “exposed” to public and citizen-consumers in a vast and fast pace.

Never such a lexicon entered in our lives so vividly and imposing as transparency. Political and economic agents, newspapers, institutions, and citizen-consumers, all thrive for transparency. Transparency is the means from which we attain happiness by the hedonistic self-knowledge; but it is also the tool to assert what we supposedly know about others — the growing mischief, the distrust on institutions, groups and individuals. While transparency gives us the misrepresentation of a growing social capital, it is also the symptom of a larger depoliticization of societies; we are all well-informed and attain the tools get it, but there is a growing mistrust on the way we perceive the “other”, the “neighbour”, and institutions. Transparency comes all the way to fill that void, although it is not the best narrative device.

## Authoritarian sexiness

The loss of authority by the State, political power and regulatory institutions created a void. Usually, when it comes to power dynamics, it does not take too long for any void to be filled in. The new authority of de-regulatory financial and labour markets over democracy’s sovereignty is imposing the lack of responses from the political power. However, the paradox we are living in is that fast-paced responses became sexier, while there is a growing loss of authority by the political power.

Happiness, velocity, and transparency are becoming ideological allies to the new authoritarian *autorictas*, in the sense that they are being attained by the right-wing discourse. In parallel to the racist and excluded narrative, there is a growing new Right-wing socioeconomic discourse that fills the need for an authoritarian response. Be quick, efficient, transparent and bring back the old days of happiness, “just do it” and take action, can all easily be slogans attained by more or less authoritarian political agents.

## The Lack

Can politics/democracy meet the aspirations of happiness, velocity, and transparency? The French *Gilets Jaunes* movement can be summarized as a resort to

attain happiness, in the sense that its main aspiration was the wish to consume. The wish to consume is the wish to participate in society by obtaining the means to participate in the market. The weight of a growing unequal society drives citizen-consumers to try to meet the means to consume in an uneven larger scale. Politics, being synonymous with democracy, becomes the sole obstacle to facilitate happiness. In other words, democracy is even more fragile today than it was during the Cold War.

Towards velocity, democracy became a complex system able to manage the emergency state of affairs. And what do I mean by emergency state of affairs? It can be summarized by the resort to meet short-term “aspirations”, by quickly responding to “small” crisis, by adapting and adjusting to social narratives and agenda-setting problems or to respond to daily facts exacerbated by the information society. Larger challenges are either responded by the politics as usual recipe — as we are witnessing with today’s inflation crisis -, or by the adjustment of political narratives and discourse.

Being the most complex political system, made of multiple networks, agents and institutional rules and procedures, democracy is also the most fragile of all systems. The ideological process of de-politicization is having its toll on democracy and is proving that capitalism does not need democracy anymore — as shown in the Chinese example.

Furthermore, and most importantly, there is the lack of a general theory to understand and respond to this attack on democracy. As pointed out several times by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, protestors in the movement *Occupy Wall Street* had no “next-day plan”, meaning after the “revolution” they would simply resort to some sort of capitalism or form of transaction. At the same time, liberals will resort to liberalism as usual — becoming shadowed by the new “ethics” of capitalism; while, in paradox, authoritarian responses are becoming sexier.

The unsurmountable pressure on public and political institutions has consequences for world politics. Beneath the veil of global capitalism, we are living in a crisis of crisis, and democracy needs to be safeguarded in order to get the regulatory and sovereignty principles at their best.

Received: 21/05/2024

Accepted: 25/06/2024

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