

Racism and Far-Right Imaginaries within Neoliberal Political Economy

Abstract

This article focuses on the connections between neoliberalism and the politics of the far-right through the prism of race. Contesting the claims of neoliberal theorists and politicians as to its ‘post-racial’ character it seeks to both historicize the significance of racism within neoliberalism through its connections to liberal political thought and practice over the *longue durée* and examine the relationship between neoliberalism and far-right politics. It does this through: (1) highlighting the political significance of the far-right in securing the electoral-political hegemony of neoliberalism within Britain and the United States since the early 1980s; and (2) the way in which the socio-economic insecurities produced by neoliberalism have helped provoke far-right responses as an alternative form of racialized moral economy. Consequently, whilst the relationship between the far-right and neoliberalism is a contradictory one, racial signifiers and racism have provided an important means through which such contradictions have been eased.

Keywords: neoliberalism, far-right, liberalism, capitalism, race, racism, class, democracy, Britain, the United States

Introduction

This article focuses on the prevalence of racism within the context of neoliberal political economy and, in particular, on how and why the operation of neoliberalism has provided important openings for far-right political currents that have served to reinforce the racialized pathologies within it. Neoliberalism emerged from within a pre-existing or organic racialized political economy associated with the colonial legacies of both liberalism and capitalism and, in some respects, can also be seen as an ideo-political response to racial crises within Britain and the United States. Further, the political difficulty – given the neoliberal antipathy towards democratic politics – of ensuring its political hegemony in said ‘democratic’ contexts has, to a significant extent, been assisted by the articulation and activation of racialized policy signifiers and populist messaging from the far-right that has overlapped with some neoliberal positions as to the marginalization of non-white racial groups in the economy and the supposed failings of the welfare state.

Given the two recent political developments in the United States and Britain – the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump – it should be self-evident that issues around

race and racism continue to frame the politics of liberal democracies and that, further, neoliberalism has pronounced racialized effects. However, and in spite of much of the liberal commentary (Kettle, 2016; Rawnsley, 2016) and hand-wringing over these developments, we should not be surprised by them and, specifically, the role of political identities connected to race and racialized exclusions, as these are deeply embedded within liberal democracies and – the main focus of this article – the US and UK in particular. Whilst not always politically visible, in moments of structural crises concerning the fundamental social and institutional organization of the existing regime of political economy, a racialized politics tends to become more pronounced and determining in shaping the contours of political debate and the direction of political change.

From the perspective of its intellectual progenitors and ideological cheerleaders, neoliberalism is an intellectual position and ideological perspective that is ‘post-racial’ or ‘colour-blind’. Thus, in the writings of Hayek, Friedman, Becker and others, whilst there is little reference to questions of race and/or how racialized practices and hierarchies may condition the operation of neoliberal models of political economy¹ there is also an implicit – and sometimes explicit – see Becker (1971) and Friedman (2002) – suggestion that neoliberalism will erase racism from the economy through the consequences of rational and individualized economic preferences.² Of course, the reality of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ is somewhat removed from the idealized abstractions of its intellectual advocates in that it has come to be operationalized within liberal democratic political contexts that problematize some of the assumptions within its theoretical articulations (see Bonefeld, 2017a; Kiely, 2017).

Neoliberalism has been associated with significant changes in both the institutions and workings of capitalist states and also the ideological imaginaries associated with political discourse, debate and electoral competition (Davidson and Saull, 2017: 707-8). With respect

to the question of race and how it relates to the distinctly racist perspectives of the far-right, neoliberalism has had some marked, though paradoxical effects. This is observable in the racialized consequences of neoliberal policies, most notably with respect to the reconfiguration of the welfare state and crime and penal policies, the significance of immigration as a necessary factor in the reproduction of neoliberal globalization (Robinson, 2006; Sassen, 2005; Theodore, 2007; Yilmaz, 2012), and the distinctly racialized political responses to the permanent insecurities and crises produced by it, as evident in the idea of the so-called 'left behinds' (Frank, 2005; Rydgren, 2014; Gest, 2016).

The main argument outlined here is that the relationship between neoliberalism and race goes beyond its racialized effects in terms of the reproduction and reinforcement of racialized exclusions. The argument I develop is that neoliberalism has also provided an important opening for the revival of far-right political positions (Kitschelt, 1995; Saull, 2015a, 2015b; Worth, 2015) and, in some respects, the mobilization of far-right ideo-political currents have been a *necessary* element in the establishment and reproduction of the neoliberal regime of political economy. This, as will be demonstrated below, can be seen in two ways: (i) through the role of populist and far-right ideological tropes (and movements) that have been heavily centred on race in the electoral politics of neoliberalism; and (ii) how the contortions and permanent socio-economic insecurities fostered by neoliberalism have also helped provide an important opening for the far-right, particularly through popular and racialized narratives of solidarity and belonging of the so-called (white male) 'left-behinds'.

Given the centrality of race to my argument I need to take a moment to specify what I understand by race and racism. With the gradual refutation of the 'science' of (biological) racism based on phenotype after 1945 (see Hall, 2000; MacMaster, 2001:170-2; Roberts, 2011), the social construction of racial distinctions and racism has increasingly been articulated via supposedly *inherited* cultural and behavioural traits associated with particular

historically-defined population groups (Camfield, 2016; Müller-Uri and Opratko, 2013; Seymour, 2010). This ‘racism without race’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) is also evident in the category of ‘whiteness’. In this case, however, this racial category has reflected not only a shifting set of boundaries as to who is considered ‘white’ (compare the treatment of Irish people in the nineteenth century Anglosphere to those of Polish people in contemporary Britain in the context of the Brexit Referendum), but also the mostly undeclared racialized assumptions as to the social and cultural behavioural traits associated with whiteness. In the context of neoliberalism, the category of ‘whiteness’ opens up the discussion of what have become and are the ‘the de-fault’ or naturalized, but mostly hidden, racialized attributes that inform and define the core categories within neoliberal political economy. In a word, the individual subject and agent tends always to be an imagined white (male) figure even though this is rarely made explicit. And the behavioural traits and patterns that inform the assumptions shaping neoliberal public policy also tend to be based on such unspoken expectations.

There are two further elements to the concept of racism that I need to emphasize, and which inform the discussion here. First, I take racism to exist if and when the working out of a particular set of structures (e.g. capitalism) or public policies (e.g. welfare reform etc.) have differential impacts across particular population groups defined by race or culture and, in particular, when such consequences help reinforce historical or pre-existing racialized hierarchies. Racism, then, exists even when the agents associated with a particular social or political process do not deliberately intend it (see Camfield, 2016: 48). We can see this as a process of racialization which, following Omi and Winant (2015: 111) is defined as an ideological process that ‘extends racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group’ creating what is, in effect ‘racial power’.³Such a perspective is particularly relevant to the consideration of racism within a neoliberal context

that rests on an ideological justification based on ‘colour-blindness’. The second element that must be emphasized with respect to our understanding of the social construction of ‘race’ is that whilst this has not solely been a preoccupation of European thinkers and societies, the construction of a modern and globalized form of racial hierarchy obviously originates in the process of European colonialism and the development of a theory of white supremacy that came to inform this process (see Allen, 2012; Camfield, 2016: 36).

The rest of the discussion is organized as follows. First, I examine the relationship between liberalism and the politics of the far-right over the course of the development of liberal democracy since the nineteenth century and, in particular, the role of race and racialized hierarchies and exclusions in its evolution. Secondly, I focus on the reproduction of racism within the context of Anglo-American neoliberal political economy and, in doing so, I examine the paradoxical place of far-right racialized ideo-political imaginaries in the reproduction of neoliberalism. I do this by looking at the *necessary* role of racialized imaginaries in securing the electoral-political hegemony of neoliberalism and then through examining the paradoxical socio-economic consequences of neoliberalism and how this has helped revive the far-right who also contest some key elements of it (Davidson and Saull, 2017).

Liberalism, Racism and the Far-Right over the *Longue Durée*

This section of the article focuses on the relationship between liberalism and racism and, in particular, the ambivalent connections between liberal socio-political forces and the far-right⁴ in the reproduction of liberal-capitalist state/society complexes since the mid-nineteenth century. Here it is opportune to qualify some aspects of my argument particularly with respect to the need to distinguish between liberal⁵ (or far-right) political thought and thinkers with those of the social forces and political movements ostensibly connected to each. Thus,

the ideology and policies of such movements do not conform to a precise and singular representation of 'liberal' or 'far-right' traceable to the text of liberal or far-right thinkers. And whilst such discourses and forces do not always align, consistently, with a distinct set of political ideas usually defined as 'liberal' for instance, the weight and credibility of my argument does rest on some approximation to a set of distinct political ideas and positions.⁶

There is also a need to differentiate between a distinct liberal political current or sensibility with that of a broader liberal-democratic *political-institutional* framework that provides the political space and institutional arrangements for electoral competition and political influence. Thus, the politics of liberal democracies involves an amalgam of currents, which means the identification as to who is responsible for and/or what explains why 'x happened' needs to clearly differentiate a particular ideo-political orientation (e.g. far-right) from the broader political-institutional framework that remains 'liberal-democratic' in spite of the momentary significance of a far-right position towards immigration policy for example. Thus, whilst far-right forces may be part of the permanent political fabric of liberal democracies, including sometimes holding political power, such issues only matter for the actual structures of liberal democracies in those extreme cases when the basic and fundamental conditions and institutional processes of liberal democracy have been terminated, as in the cases of fascism. The central point here is that whilst the politics of liberal democracies reveal the interconnections between far-right and liberal socio-political forces over some key areas of public policy, it is also the case that because these two ideo-political positions are in many respects antagonistic towards each other, *these connections are both unstable and contradictory*.⁷ Such connections, as the discussion, below will demonstrate, equally applies to the question of racism within a neoliberal context.

As I have already suggested, the current articulation of a hegemonic mode of liberalism in the form of neoliberal political economy, rests on a set of paradoxical

connections to the far-right. Thus, on the one hand, far-right imaginaries have played an important role in *securing* the political/electoral hegemony of neoliberal political economy whilst, at the same time, they form an important ideological tension and political reference point to challenge aspects of the neoliberal regime, notably with regard to the legal-institutional and governance structures of neoliberalism and its transnational elements with regard to labour markets, capital flows, trade and investment. In many respects this contradiction derives from what conservative critics have labelled neoliberalism's 'cultural nihilism' (Kristol, 1973). This relates to what neoconservative critics see as the ambivalence within neoliberal thought as to the necessity of embedding market exchange within a *collective* moral-cultural framework, as a way to both order *and* legitimize market exchange. It also relates to a critique from the left as to how neoliberalism is premised on a denial of the possibility or desirability of any collectivist forms of social or political solidarity.

This not only means that neoliberalism is unable to realize its political hegemony on its *own* ideological terms but that its policy implementation concerning labour markets, investment rules, trade or institutional governance for example and effects also *actively provokes* a far-right response. In this respect whilst neoliberalism refers to a form of political economy that essentializes individual economic rationality (see Brown, 2015; Dardot and Laval, 2014) and the economic bases of social behaviour, we might see the far-right contestation of aspects of it, as reflecting a racialized form of moral economy. In short, then, the socio-economic and political transformations and insecurities unleashed by neoliberalism have helped unleash a rival form of (capitalist) political economy that rests on a defence of a form of a national market order that specifies a racial group (whites) as citizens who should be privileged and protected that is rooted in distinct moral and cultural justifications.

The ideological positions and political currents of 'liberalism' and the 'far-right' have been a common feature of (emerging) liberal democracies since the nineteenth century. These

positions are distinct, resting on different political and ideological sources and modes of politics as evidenced in their differences over ‘free trade’ and citizenship rights, for instance. Consequently, the far-right has been, and is, an enduring critic of liberalism and the ‘liberal project’ and liberal thinkers (and movements) have consistently articulated political positions in opposition to the far-right.

The most fundamental difference is an ontological one regarding the nature and boundaries of the social and political community. Thus, whilst the liberal position tends to be based on the abstract and universal individual, the far-right one, rests on the idea of an organic national community and associated limits on the rights and freedoms accorded to any individual. From this we can extrapolate a further set of distinctions framing the politics of each. For the far-right, that cultural and racial difference is both organized through separate and organic national communities *qua* states that connect to political arrangements that are both hierarchical and where – for the European far-right – European/white nations are regarded as superior/atop of this hierarchy (for a critical discussion see Balibar, 1991b). This contrasts with a liberal position that subsumes the normative privileging of the historical nation-state according to its institutionalization of a set of liberal-universalist principles founded on individual rights and where political or moral supremacy is derived not from an explicit cultural or racial particularity, but rather, to the degree to which any existing polity conforms to these normative principles that are, *nominally*, acultural and aracial.

The ‘anti’ or ‘post-racial’ character of liberalism that differentiates it and liberal thinkers from those of the far-right – see the difference between John Stuart Mill and Arthur, comte de Gobineau concerning the understanding of race in the nineteenth century – suggests that liberalism, as a political theory and institutional framework, offers a means of overcoming racialized hierarchies. Thus, within a liberal ideo-political framework, fixed or permanent and biological forms of racism are repudiated and a goal of formal racial equality

is recognized as a possible outcome of ‘modernization’ or ‘civilization’. Yet, this liberal promise is itself imbued with a set of racialized epistemological and ontological assumptions about ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ *qua* citizenship that rests on a pre-conceived and hidden default of whiteness as the quintessential liberal subject. Consequently, the socio-cultural attributes of the ‘Other’ have to be eliminated or reformed to align with those of the political-economic rationality of a liberal subject. Entrance, then, into the realm of liberal equality involves a disavowing of the subjectivity of the Other,⁸ or, at least, a screening out of a socio-cultural sensibility that might challenge liberal assumptions that emerge out of the colonial encounter (e.g. socialism and/or radical nationalism and positions that rest on the defence of the moral economy of indigenous peoples).

This is relevant to our focus on contemporary neoliberalism and the idea of a post-racial or colour-blind society because these contemporary ideas are also based on a set of epistemological and ontological categories that privilege a default of whiteness connected to neoliberal subjectivities that is not too dissimilar from the racial promise of an earlier rendering of liberal civilization and individual subjectivity. To be equal and to be free is to be ‘white’ or, at least, to mimic the practices and behaviour of the white (and male) neoliberal subject.⁹ The failure to do this is not seen as something that might question the assumptions informing what it means to be ‘free’ or ‘civilized’ but rather a *racialized deficit* in those who do not conform (Lentin and Titley, 2011), which necessitates a set of social and political responses; this is what unites John Locke with Margaret Thatcher and Bill Clinton. What this brings us to is the distinct articulation of racism within a neoliberal context because it is precisely here where the racialized effects of neoliberal political economy have offered a re-entry point for the far-right in contemporary European and North American politics, and whilst this is not reducible to the underlying or constitutive racism within (neo)liberalism, the

contradictions and limits of what constitutes freedom and ‘civilized life’ in the liberal universe continues to offer an ontological opening for a far-right imaginary.

In the realm of political-economy liberal materialism contrasts with a far-right suspicion of how a perceived ‘excessive individualism and materialism’ disturbs the natural socio-cultural order and privileges material gain over cultural homogeneity and socio-cultural cohesion.¹⁰ Relatedly, private property rights tended to be regarded as ‘natural’ and sacrosanct by each but where the far-right advocates limits on the exercise of these rights according to nationality. This also relates to the operation of labour markets and the wider limits to the efficient allocation of the factors of production that invoke geopolitics.

However, in spite of these differences the political reality of actually existing liberalism as a political discourse and practice within developing liberal democracies since the nineteenth century has been more complex, reflecting the inter-connections and overlaps between these two ideo-political imaginaries. Thus, in the workings of these states liberal and far-right political forces have, at certain conjunctures, embraced or come together in determining what these states have actually done, serving to, in effect, dissolve some of the differences between them.¹¹ In some respects we can understand or even explain this inter-connection through differentiating the political and economic dimensions of liberal thought and practice and the *organic tensions* within liberalism itself that, arguably, are not resolvable from within the intellectual resources nor political-institutional frameworks associated with it. Thus, with regards to the institution of private property and the centrality of market exchange as a fundamental framework ordering social life, whilst there are clear differences between liberal and far-right positions concerning the spatial and institutional mechanisms regulating market activity, both rest on a defence of the ‘naturalness’ of private property rights and an aversion to collectivist frameworks informed by socialism. Such commonalities played out throughout international history and especially after 1917 and through the Cold

War with respect to Anglo-American policies towards those political forces committed to restrictions on private property rights that resulted in many liberals tolerating and, in some cases, supporting far-right regimes that had dismantled the *political-institutional* edifice of liberalism as a means to uphold the economic basis of liberal order.¹²

This shared orientation as regards the workings of the capitalist economy contrasts with what appears to be a clearer divide between liberalism and the far-right with respect to the understanding of what politics is, and the scope of its operations. Thus, in the case of the former there is a long-standing ambivalence and, in some cases fear, of democratic forms of politics and governance through an aversion to ‘mass politics’. Such sentiments – articulated in the work of Mill, de Tocqueville and more recent neo/liberal thinkers (see the critical discussions offered by Kiely, 2017; Landa, 2012; Mullholland, 2012) – provide the basis for the liberal theory or critique of fascism, which is understood as a form of ‘mob-rule’, premised on the demagogic manipulations of the masses by a charismatic leader leading to dictatorship.¹³

This is an important distinction that separates a liberal from a far-right understanding of politics and the ideal-typical forms or methods of politics that we might associate with each and, in particular, the way in which such far-right-inspired ‘tyrannies’ are seen as impinging on and threatening the rights of individuals and the protections afforded to minorities. However, as the historical development of liberal democratic societies seems to demonstrate, this distinction or, opposition, has, at certain moments, broken down. Further, the actual operation and development of liberal democratic societies has exposed shortcomings in both the intellectual arguments and justifications derived from liberal political thought for liberal political order and the historical and concrete institutional forms that actually existing liberalism has taken. And this is particularly the case in those moments of intense crises that have punctuated the development of capitalism. The most obvious cases

where a crisis has pushed the forces of the far-right and liberalism together are those of inter-war fascism in Italy and Germany where far-right (fascist) forces were invited into government by incumbent political elites that included liberal voices (Eley, 2013).

We might regard this reconfiguration of the political – the (temporary) suspension of liberal-constitutional order as the *requirement in that moment* for ensuring the social order of private property – as exposing the liberal fiction regarding both the separation of powers and the democratic basis of and limits to state power (see Saull, 2015a, 2015b; Tomba, 2013). Such a fiction equally applies to the ‘economic sphere’ in the ideological nostrums of ‘free market’ and the ‘natural tendency of markets towards equilibrium’. As the history of liberal political economy shows, in moments of crises the fiction of market self-adjustment quickly dissolves as the necessity of state intervention to resolve the crisis ensues. The significance of this for our concerns here is that such scenarios expose the core or organic features of liberal political economy to the *necessity of external political salvation*,¹⁴ which provides a permanent structural *possibility* for the far-right and, particularly, in contexts where the threat from the radical left appears strong. In short, liberal forms of political economy or social rule have, in key moments required rescue from without by the forces of the (far-) right.¹⁵

If the evidence for a connection between the far-right and the politics of liberalism and the workings of liberal democracies was limited to the extreme cases of inter-war fascism then my argument would be on rather thin empirical ground. However, the historical record is suggestive of more extensive historical and systematic inter-connections.¹⁶ More recent evidence of the organic inter-connections between the far-right and liberalism with a particular focus on racial hierarchy can be seen in the workings of American liberal democracy from the late nineteenth century through to the early 1960s. Here liberal democracy was heavily imbued with racist ideological tropes resting on the racialized social regime of Jim Crow that equated liberal democracy as a form of racialized democracy that

was the exclusive preserve of whites. In a word, the operation of American liberal democracy through to the early 1960s was strongly imbued with white supremacist ideological underpinnings drawing on distinct far-right ideological sentiments, or, at least, how an explicitly racialized understanding of citizenship defined the operations of actually existing liberal democracy (Rana, 2010).

This was not just an issue relevant to the denial of political rights of citizenship to African Americans in the states of the former Confederacy, but also related to the distinct political economy of capitalism in the South whereby dominant class interests rested on a racialized labour market organized upon the colour-line. A liberal political economy operated, then, in the 'white world' as reflected in private property rights, equality before the law for capital and labour and a flexible labour market, but this was only able to function *because* of Jim Crow (see Marable, 2000, 2007; Seymour 2016). This case not only brings the legacy of enslavement to our attention in terms of the foundations of liberal political economy, but also suggests that up until the early 1960s what actually characterised the political economy of the American South was an arrangement that paralleled the racialized exclusions and hierarchies of European colonialism.¹⁷

What these cases highlight is that whilst the fascist episode has been an historical exception within the West the role of broader (and non-fascist) far-right currents has also been a permanent and significant element within the political universe of liberal democracy. Further, whilst such ideo-political currents are distinct from those associated with *liberal* democracy, at key moments and within distinct geopolitical-ideological contexts such as the Cold War, the far-right has come to play an important role in upholding existing forms of liberal order, particularly with regards to property rights and determining the precise political character of liberal democracy as concerns those who are regarded as *citizens*. The point here is not to reduce liberalism or the operations of liberal democracy to a minimum threshold

based on private property rights but rather to emphasize the organic or constitutive tension and ambivalence within liberal democratic forms of governance and liberalism itself as a political orientation and sensibility with respect to the far-right that is particularly pronounced in moments of crises. The two recent developments mentioned previously – the ‘Brexit vote’ and the election of Donald Trump – are testimony, then, to the *longue durée* reproduction of both racism and far-right political forces from *within* liberal-democracy. And, in a similar way to previous moments of crises, these two developments signify a racialized crisis over the existing (hegemonic) international political-institutional and spatial configuration of capitalist/neoliberal political economy.

It would seem unarguable, then, to see the *results and impact* of neoliberalism as having racialized effects that, to a significant degree, have provided a fertile context for the far-right (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Worth, 2015). We can see the connections between neoliberalism and race playing out in a number of distinct but inter-connected domains reflecting the continuing far-right dimension to actually existing (neo)liberalism: the role played by far-right tinged populism in the election strategies of political parties committed to implementing a neoliberal agenda; the racialized dimensions of the permanent socio-economic insecurities produced by neoliberalism; and the racialized re-charging of some white working class identities (Gest, 2016). Let me look at these issues in turn and, in doing so, illuminate the paradoxical ways in which neoliberalism and the far-right are inter-connected and how racism is articulated in a neoliberal context.

Race and the Electoral Politics of Neoliberalism

Whilst issues around racial identities and anti-racist struggles were central to the crisis of social democracy across the Anglosphere out of which neoliberalism emerged ascendant, my main concern here is that neoliberalism *required* a populist political strategy associated with

right and far-right political currents to secure its political hegemony as a form of governance. In itself, its intellectual and political nostrums – as evidenced in the absence or success of a ‘neoliberal party’ – have been unable to secure a popular mandate or social coalition for government in liberal democracies based on a widespread popular consciousness. Societies and states may be neoliberal, then, but the individuals within them rarely identify as such. Hence, the politics of neoliberalism has tended to be associated or combined with other political currents as the means through which neoliberalism has managed to govern (Peck, *et al*, 2012). And, in this respect a reference to culture and racialized identities that have drawn on and been associated with far-right imaginaries as sources of solidarity (i.e. moral economy) and political belonging have played an important role as an ideological compensation for the radically individualist political ontology of neoliberalism.

The reconstitution of the ideo-political order across the Anglosphere heralded by the elections of Thatcher and Reagan laid out a new racialized terrain of politics that was not only central in assisting much of the realization of neoliberalism across these two countries, but also conditioned the politics of other, centre-left governments that came to power in the US and UK thereafter. The 2008 financial crisis exposed the deep fault-lines in the political-economic regime inaugurated by Thatcher and Reagan but because it was always so racialized in its fundamentals, the far-right has not only benefited from the impact of the crisis itself, but also because of the way in which its racialized character was so ingrained within its reproduction and political legitimization. Simply put, the realization of neoliberalism, as reflected in the transformations of Anglo-American political economy and welfare state since the early 1980s have been directly connected – if in variegated ways – to a racialized politics that has drawn on far-right political sentiments. We can see this in two key domains of public policy that combine neoliberal and far-right sentiments. First, a rhetoric of ‘anti-statism’ that draws on neoliberal critiques of the post-war social democratic settlement and, in the US

case, the Great Society Reforms of the 1960s in particular and, secondly, in the authoritarian turn in law-and-order and penal policies. Let me look at these two areas focusing on the US context first before considering developments in the UK.

The inter-connections between neoliberal fiscal and social objectives and that of far-right concerning the welfare state are revealed not only on the cutting back of welfare expenditure and funding federal programmes, but also in reconfiguring the welfare state to address a perceived ‘dependency culture’ alongside concerns over the growth of public-sector employment. The racialized coding that characterized these attacks depicted the federal state as having been taken over by ‘liberal elites’ in hoc to ‘special interests’ which was code for African Americans (for critical commentary on this see Bonilla-Silva, 2009; MacLean, 2017; Omi and Winant, 2015: 211; Williams, 2003). Reagan, in particular, became notorious for using terms such as ‘welfare queens’ to refer to irresponsible and promiscuous African-American women and ‘strapping bucks’ for lazy and workshy blacks (Williams, 2003: 185; Omi and Winant, 2015: 215). The significance of this racially charged discourse and demagoguery as noted by Dana-Ain Davis (2007: 348) is that racist attitudes towards African-Americans in particular have been rearticulated and re-embedded in a post-civil rights context in a popular ‘colour-blind’ mindset that has been significant for the legitimization of neoliberal political economy in the US such that ‘although most people associated welfare negatively with Blacks, it [is] not viewed as racist to be against welfare.’

The Great Society welfare state reforms were depicted as indulging a ‘lazy’ and ‘ungrateful’ (see the urban disturbances of the late 1960s) African-American population to the harm of ‘hard-working’ and ‘deserving’ whites and white men in particular. And cuts to welfare expenditure and the closing of (affirmative action) programmes were seen or articulated as ‘race neutral’ because they were regarded as overly advantaging blacks. Though defended, officially, in ‘colour-blind’ terms – this was about ensuring equal access

and benefits for all Americans – the political-electoral *articulation* of these initiatives drew on racist stereotypes – helping to re-animate pre-existing far-right and white supremacist assumptions and imaginaries – through racially-coded political messages and targeted campaigning that developed Nixon’s so-called ‘southern strategy’. Indeed, the campaign to win over white working class voters was explicitly connected to racialized stereotypes and fears and has served to re-racialize American welfare thus returning it to its default setting (Katznelson, 2005; Liebermann, 2001; Poole, 2006; Quadagno, 1994).

In some aspects such electoral strategies reflect the political barrenness of neoliberalism as an ideology – given its underlying antipathy to an autonomous realm of the ‘political’ and its associated ideas, rationalities and normative commitments – with respect to engaging with and mobilizing existing social and political *collectivities* (as was the case in the United States in the 1980-90s), which is a *requirement* of securing electoral victory and political hegemony. Grounded on a social ontology rooted in a ‘militant’ individualist rationality that struggles to recognize and accept the significance and agency of collectivities based on forms of solidarity, neoliberalism – when it confronts the challenge of democratic and electoral politics – has required *alternative* ideological means or justifications through which it draws on the agency of political collectivities rooted in forms of racialized solidarity to help secure political power. As this (and the other) case demonstrates, the objective of reconfiguring the American welfare state was achieved by racialized political messaging and campaigning. In political terms then, the realization of neoliberal objectives concerning shrinking the size of the federal payroll and increasing the scope of market tools and mechanisms in determining social behaviour required the mobilization of a political coalition that went beyond arguments over economic rationality and amoral self-interest. And racialized tropes drawing on far-right imaginaries provided much of the ideological underpinning for such a strategy.

The second strand to the realization of actually existing neoliberalism was reflected in the authoritarian turn in law and order and penal policy and where far-right currents were more visible. In many respects this far-right sentiment could be seen as a reaction to the perceived break down in social (and moral) order that had characterized the 1960s – the so-called ‘permissive society’ that went beyond racial rights but extended to gender, sexuality and lifestyle and also public protest and challenges to existing forms of private and public authority. The far-right imaginary was promoted, then, by both the perceived disorder in the world and American weakness – as evidenced by the defeat in South-east Asia in 1975, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and the Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis over 1979-81 – and how these international setbacks were seen as having been caused by a fundamental social and moral collapse of political authority at home (Halliday, 1986: 105-33; Saull, 2007: 119-79).

This, populist, appeal to an idealized past is a foundational trope of the far-right that sits, if uncomfortably, as *necessary* for a neoliberal politics. This raises the question as to the racist motives or assumptions of neoliberal thinkers and politicians (including those on the centre-left). At a minimum, the acceptance of racialized political messaging and, to a significant extent, the terms of political debate about race as defined by the far-right indicate a tolerance for racism which should be seen as helping to reproduce racism as an ‘acceptable’ vernacular within liberal democratic politics. Even a more indulgent position towards neoliberal thinkers and politicians can only find them wanting in their attitude and response to racism. Simply put, with the weight of empirical evidence as to its racialized effects all around them and with it mounting in contexts where neoliberal policy prescriptions have been implemented in terms of housing, education or law-and-order, neoliberals appear to either not care about racism or accept it as a something less morally or politically

objectionable than what they regard as the fundamental ontological issue of individual freedom rooted in the defence of private property rights.

With respect to electoral politics this is not only about how a rhetoric focused on ‘law and order’ and being ‘tough on crime’ speaks to the instrumentalization of racialized fears of particular electoral constituencies, but also in terms of the necessary requirement of *constructing* a neoliberal state and in dealing with the casualties of neoliberal restructuring and crises in terms of both political resistance and delinquency. In the case of the former, the ‘anti-statism’ of the neoliberal attack on social democracy (i.e. the welfare and social state) combines with the requirement of strengthening the executive, coercive and administrative over the (social) democratic dimensions of the state, which are seen as beholden to or dominated by a plurality of interests and demands that encroach on and undermine market exchange. Indeed, the attack on the social democratic welfare state of the 1960s and 1970s by neoliberal intellectuals echoes that of the far-right critique – associated with Carl Schmitt and others – on the Weimar Republic (for a critical discussion see Bonefeld, 2017a). Neoliberalism, then, requires a strong and authoritarian state to realize its social and political objectives and especially in terms of its dismantling of the power of organized labour and workers’ rights (Bonefeld, 2017b: 47-67; Gamble, 1994: 65-8, 170-3). And the fact that much of this reconstitution of the state was legitimized through a rhetoric that focused on restoring order and strengthening the political-institutional forces of social control aligned with far-right critiques of the state and, in particular, their concern with legal protections for law-breakers and limits on police powers.¹⁸ So, whilst segregation and Jim Crow were and are not politically feasible, criminalization and incarceration are, and it is this that has provided the means of neoliberal policing in the US and dealing with dissent. And a number of studies on neoliberal-inspired welfare reform since Clinton’s initiatives in the mid-1990s have also demonstrated the coercive and racialized dimensions of such policies –

encapsulated in Bill Clinton's claim of 'ending welfare as we know it' – with sanctions and exclusions falling particularly heavily on African-Americans (Schram *et al*, 2008; Soss, *et al*, 2011: 295; Wacquant, 2010) and the dismantling of the barriers that formerly existed between the social security and law-and-order spheres.

The significance of this racialized and far-right-inflected neoliberalism, however, goes beyond the American Right. Indeed, what is most striking and disturbing about it is how, on the mantle of electoral politics, the Democratic Party has also become defined by campaigns and policies that can only be considered from the perspective of the hegemonic influence of a racialized common sense. In this respect, the short-lived ideological assault on white privilege did not seep into the popular consciousness of white Americans, or enough of them, and this has contributed to a series of Democratic Party election strategies that have also played on race. A turning point in this regard, could be seen as the use of the Willie Horton campaign add in the 1988 Presidential election by the Republican nominee, George Bush, that many commentators see as fatally undermining the campaign of Michael Dukakis. Since then Democratic candidates, notably Bill Clinton, have made sure that they have been able to utilize symbols and positions – in Clinton's case most infamously in his attendance of the execution of the mentally-impaired African-American Ricky Ray Rector during his presidential election campaign in January 1992 in Arkansas – to off-set any claims about them being 'soft' on crime/law and order (Klinkner, 1999) and this has also played out in welfare reform, again as reflected in Clinton's claim to 'end welfare as we know it' as a way of seeing off Republican attacks even though his reform served to massively disadvantage African-American welfare recipients in particular (Klinkner, 1999; Williams, 2003; Winant, 2004).¹⁹

Such developments and particularly with regard to racialized politics of mass imprisonment as evidenced in the staggering number of African-Americans who have been

subject to the US penal regime since the mid-1970s (Gottshalk, 2006; Lamont, 2000; Murakawa, 2014; Wacquant, 2010) is suggestive of the influence of far-right infused racialized imaginaries and solutions to this aspect of public policy. Yet, as Naomi Murakawi (2014) has argued liberal political forces and liberal ideas have been as responsible for the construction of the ‘racialized carceral state’ as the far-right through what she describes as the ‘criminalization of the US racial problem’ that was initiated under the Truman presidency (Murakawa, 2014: 2-3). Simply put, and as revealed in the policies of the Clinton administration in particular, liberal positions on law-and-order from Truman onwards helped create a political consensus over the US penal regime that provided a defining ideological and administrative and proceduralist backdrop which have proved fertile for far-right inspired initiatives.

Turning to developments in Britain, it was not until the late 1970s when race could be seen to take a much more central role in defining the topography of British *electoral* politics.²⁰ In this case it was Margaret Thatcher’s reference to white people ‘feeling swamped’ by coloured immigration that many commentators regard as a deliberate intervention evoking race not only as a tactical means to try and take support away from the neofascist National Front (Eatwell, 1992: 186), but also, and more profoundly, a reference to a white British identity that her government aimed to promote and defend more broadly.

Thatcher’s reference to immigration was also connected – as Stuart Hall and others identified (Hall, 1978; Gilroy, 1987) – to questions of law and order and the widespread myth that black men were a major source of street robbery and violence. The significance of this is that the policing of Britain’s black and especially Afro-Caribbean communities provided a trigger for urban disturbances across a number of cities in the early 1980s. These disturbances were a symptom of a deeper structural racism that confronted Britain’s minority communities even with the declining significance of the white supremacist violence that an earlier

generation had to deal with (Gilroy, 1987; Sivanandan, 2000). However, they – alongside resistance from organized labour and some metropolitan local authorities – reflected not only a far-right alignment with neoliberalism as to the need for social order and robust political authority in realizing a neoliberal transformation, but also an ideological animus concerning the enemies ‘from within’ that extended to sexual minorities, feminists, anti-racists and trade unionists and which was a particularly powerful ideological signifier in a context of increased Cold War tensions (Halliday, 1986).

The ideological topography and common sense established by the Thatcher governments after 1979, in effect, determined the terrain of political debate thereafter and, in consequence, a significant ideological opening for the far-right/neoliberal nexus, not least because Thatcherite ideological hegemony rested on a popular ‘common sense’, whereby the existence of poverty and inequality was regarded as not a consequence of market exchange or a reflection of class hierarchies but rather individual moral deficiencies rooted in culture and race. Further, the mobilizing power of a racialized (post)-imperial white national identity that was cemented by the Falkland’s War not only realized a far-right inflection on the ‘centre ground’ of British politics, but also served to embed far-right sentiments over national identity, citizenship and the nature of the state thereafter in political debates. These have become particularly pronounced since 2001 with respect to anti-Muslim racism and issues around asylum and immigration. In particular, the combination of concerns over immigration and ‘Muslim integration’ that have been framed as a ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ (see Lentin and Titley, 2011) have provided the context for the emergence of the most successful new political party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), to enter British politics for decades resulting in the popularization and mainstreaming of far-right ideological tropes around national identity and citizenship. (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Seymour, 2015).

I will come back to the relationship between immigration, neoliberalism and the far-right, below. The point to highlight here is how far-right anti-immigration/asylum sentiments have become an increasingly important part of the electoral landscape serving to reproduce and evoke attitudes and ideological imaginaries across electoral politics and particularly in England. Indeed, since the influx of relatively large numbers of EU migrants from the new members states of central Europe after 2004 combined with the impact of the government's austerity measures in response to the 2008 global financial crisis this 'neoliberal crisis context' has helped fuel a re-awakening of the (English) far-right. And in a similar fashion to what played out in the United States with regard to the politics of welfare after the 1980s, questions that are fundamentally about class have become articulated and, increasingly, understood as about nationality and race. Such consequences evidence the limits of both the individualist ontology of liberalism – as theory and politics – as well the organic residues of nation, culture and race in the embedded liberal imaginary (Balibar, 1991b).

Indeed, since the 2008 global financial crisis, economic and social concerns about the fairness of the labour market, competition from 'cheap' labour and access to public services and the welfare state have become increasingly framed in nativist terms targeting immigrants. Whilst neoliberal sources may not have caused this, the electoral-political campaigns of both Labour and Conservative parties have played to the racist gallery through indulging the UKIP and far-right-inspired nativist claims about the impact of immigrants that have been propagated in particular by right-wing media outlets (Berry *et al*, 2016; Nagarajan, 2013).

At a material level, evidence (Dustmann and Frattini, 2014; Wadsworth, 2014) suggests that such claims are barely credible, but in terms of political propaganda they have gained voter traction thus indicating the ease with which a racializing default can quickly resurface as a narrative framing socio-economic woes. The point here is that the *electoral-political* limitations of neoliberal justifications for austerity only takes the neoliberal

objective so far. Consequently, the political and ideological space for communicating and justifying policies to an electorate – large sections of which are concerned and angry about the impact of austerity – are severely constricted. As the neoliberal answer is, politically, unfeasible, because it amounts to, in effect, saying ‘we must cut spending and market forces should be left alone to stimulate economic growth,’ politics play out via alternative imaginaries in what could be called a ‘racial transference’ (Williams, 2003: 181) whereby immigrants – the bodily symbols of cosmopolitan globalization – become the scapegoats for the losses and fears of ‘natives’.

Whilst immigration has become the lightning rod for the socio-economic grievances of some white voters in Britain during the latest phase of neoliberalism, a particularly poisonous form of racialized politics across the electoral-sphere has also been evident with regard to anti-Muslim racism. This invokes the neoliberal bogey of *integration* in particular. What distinguishes anti-Muslim racism is the inter-twinning of the securitization of Muslim communities in response to the threat of Islamist-inspired terrorism with that of the social and cultural (non)integration of Muslims as neoliberal subjects. This form of racism has been supercharged through the way in which the attack on Muslim multi-culturalism has registered a clear authoritarian or communalist tendency across significant parts of ‘respectable’ liberal political commentary (see Lentin and Titley, 2011; Triadfilopoulos, 2011; Yilmaz, 2012) in particular that has provided an important cover to far-right nativism.

Whilst we can differentiate the racism of liberals and the far-right with regard to the issue of Muslim integration: the former recognize the possibility of Muslims integrating to become ‘full citizens’ whilst the latter argue that this is not possible because of fundamental cultural differences and antagonisms; the actual practicality or realization of such liberal integration seems to be either impossible or only achievable through the disavowing of any substantial religious-cultural identity on the part of Muslims. Thus, the terms on which

Muslims can be accepted appear almost impossible should Muslims continue to practice their faith in any demonstrable way and should the terrorist violence of a tiny minority of self-proclaimed Islamists continue (Younge, 2009).

The Racialized Political Economy of Neoliberalism and Far-Right Openings

The workings and crises produced from within the neoliberal political economy reveal the contradictory relationship between neoliberalism – or at least some key elements of it – and the far-right. And it is the articulations of racialized identities, solidarities and exclusions that have, in effect, been mobilized to suture these socio-economic contradictions. As I will demonstrate below, however, the significance of race is such that it has not only helped make neoliberalism possible but, at the same time, it has come to problematize the long-term reproduction and socio-political sustainability of it. And in the absence of a politically developed (working) class-based framework of solidarity – in part because of the complicity of centre-left currents in promoting neoliberalism – a far-right racialized moral economy has come to prominence. Whilst this is not a case of history repeating itself, the revival of the far-right in the Anglosphere does reflect a return to the centring of race as defining of liberal democratic politics. It also means that it is likely that the fundamentals of neoliberalism will be reconstituted and, particularly in the realm of its *international institutional* regulation and management and, possibly, in some of its key material configurations. However, the fundamentals as concerning law-and-order and the broader social disciplining of labour and those who resist subordination to a market-rationality that have defined the neoliberal/far-right nexus will likely remain.

Based on a radical individualist social ontology antagonistic to a politics connected to social collectivities, neoliberal economic restructuring and transformation has served to shatter sources of collective social power and promote a social context defined by market-

dependence and permanent economic insecurity. Such dislocations and the insecurities that they produce (see Gest, 2016; Seymour. 2015) will always provide an opening for far-right demagogues. However, in a context where the political-institutional sources of economic transformation can be, *legitimately*, connected to decisions taken by international bodies and in international institutional contexts – as has been the case in neoliberalism – the opening for a political imagination defined by far-right currents is that much greater and, potentially, more significant. This provides a *structural* political advantage for the far-right over other anti-neoliberal positions on the left – which is most visible in the difficulties of the Corbyn Labour party to effectively position itself after the Brexit vote – as an *antagonist* of neoliberal orthodoxy, when the spatial scope of the democratic imagery of the vast majority of citizens continues to be fixed on a national demos which can (inevitably – see Balibar, 1991a) lend itself to a racialized imaginary as to who are legitimate citizens.

Whilst this internationalist/cosmopolitan dimension of neoliberalism has provided an important source of animus in the relationship between the far-right and neoliberalism, the actual implementation and legitimation of neoliberal policies within Britain and the United States suggest something else. This can be seen in the way in which the far-right and neoliberal positions are seen as reflecting a binary opposition between a ‘globalizing’ or ‘anti-statist’ neoliberalism and that of a ‘nationalist’ and ‘statist’ far-right. Such a view fails to adequately recognize how much of the Anglo-American far-right has embraced much of the neoliberal critique of the social democratic and welfare state, alongside fiscal constraint, labour market reform and business regulation and privatization (see Armev, 2010; Trilling, 2012). Simply put, in these *national* domains – which continue to maintain an important set of policy tools and legal privileges – there is little contradiction between what neoliberal-infused public policy has done in terms of welfare reform, privatization of public assets,

business regulation and the promotion of labour market flexibility with what the far-right has demanded (Harmes, 2012).

Whilst articulated and justified in different ways – neoliberal meritocracy and efficiency on the one hand and welfare nativism and racialized solidarity on the other – the outcome has been largely consistent with a neoliberal agenda. In framing welfare reform as a means to differentiate the ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving poor’ a defence of a racialized form of solidarity has been perfectly at ease with cutting back on provision and making it harder for *all people* to access welfare. This sounds perverse, which it is, as white people – whom the far-right sees as legitimate citizens – also suffer the consequences of these policies. However, up to now this has not stopped the far-right from defending such cut backs and restrictions; in part because they are fixed to a racialized ontology, i.e. all social and political problems come down to racial/cultural difference, and also because of what might be regarded as an embedded petit-bourgeois sensibility within far-right ideology connected to individual self-sufficiency and ‘hard work’ or ‘producerism’ that stands between the solidarities of organized labour and the economic power of big capital (see Somers and Block, 2005). Simply put, such moral imperatives align well with key elements of neoliberal thinking.

The defining aspect of neoliberal political economy as it relates to race and the far-right has been over immigration. In the distorted and myopic world of the far-right, then, the immigrant is the ‘intruder’ (Davidson and Saull, 2017: 711) – a key category that has come to shape the politics of fear and grievance that define the contemporary far-right. And it is here where the far-right, as demonstrated by the propaganda and rhetoric of parties like UKIP, combines its critique of ‘out of touch liberal-cosmopolitan elites’ that are seen as both incompetent and indulgent of criminals and (illegal) migrants. Such views dominated the successful political campaigns associated with Brexit and Trump’s election victory. Yet, such

a politics of fear (and scapegoating²¹) is at odds with the way on which immigration has been central in fuelling the socio-economic transformations wrought by neoliberalism.

Neoliberal labour migration has been driven by two sets of forces. On the one hand, through the way in which resultant socio-economic insecurities from neoliberal structural adjustment programmes (supervised by the IMF and European Commission) have helped propel labour migration to richer zones such as Britain and the United States (Roberts and Mahtani, 2010). On the other hand, neoliberal states have also opened up their labour markets to the skills and competitive wage pressures from migrants. In many respects, then, some migrants have been welcomed, economically, and encouraged as key elements in the neoliberal mantra of the efficient allocation of the factors of production and the promotion of economic efficiency and productivity (McNevin, 2006; Roberts and Mahtani, 2010; Robinson, 2006; Sassen, 1998). However, this has tended to result in an intensification of downward pressure on the social wage and increased levels of exploitation in some employment sectors.

Whilst much of the economic evidence suggests that labour migration has been economically beneficial to countries like the UK and USA (Dustman and Frattini, 2014; Peri, 2013), thus reinforcing a neoliberal embrace of it; nevertheless, the combination of the increasing place of immigrant labour in parts of the economy – particularly low and semi-skilled employment – combined with the generalized economic insecurities and consequences of restructuring (i.e. the loss of previously existing skilled and well-paid and secure jobs) in many locales has, evidently, assisted far-right demagoguery. In particular, immigration has come to challenge and undermine the prevailing sense of (male) whiteness, especially amongst sections of the working class (Gest, 2016; Rydgren, 2014); a socio-cultural sensibility that is not only connected to employment, but also citizenship and access to public services and the welfare state.

This challenge of socio-cultural insecurity is long-standing, as evidenced in the racialized reactions of dominant sections of organized labour to earlier patterns of labour migration (see Omi and Winant, 2014: 161-210; Virdee, 2014: 98-122). Whilst it would be wrong to describe the more recent outbursts of racism as the response of the ‘white working class’ to neoliberalism/immigration – polling and electoral data tends to suggest that larger sections of white workers are not politically engaged and so are not being mobilized by far-right messages and propaganda (Seymour, 2015; Landau, 2016) – it is the case that some white workers in particular geographical regions have been drawn to far-right messages of economic nativism and anti-immigrant stances (Saul, 2015b: 145-50). The migrant is, then, the quintessential bodily representation of neoliberalism: a transitory, ‘free-floating’ factor of labour ready to serve capital where required, stripped of all social and political rights and affiliations (Lentin and Topley, 2011: 205). The migrant is also the bodily appearance of both employment competition, wage pressure and the vanguard of socio-cultural change as habitats are transformed. It is, then, in the local dislocations in socio-economic contexts – where ‘there is not enough’ or ‘we can’t afford it’ is the generalized mantra – that the political economy of crisis neoliberalism facilitates hostility to immigrants. Whilst the roots of this can be located in embedded racialized identities the key political explanation must be located in the political-economic choices made by states and capital – those agents in the neoliberal era that have authored the transformations. And, in particular – as we have seen with regard to the electoral-politics of neoliberalism – where the need for a scapegoat has become a necessity for the continued maintenance of the political articulation of neoliberalism in periods of crises.

It is in these developments where it is possible to take seriously those scholarly interventions (Gest, 2016; Landau, 2016) that emphasize a crisis of socio-political identity for *some* white workers and the way in which this has contributed to a re-orientation in their

political loyalties towards far-right narratives. Such developments are hard-wired into white labour history yet they reflect a new racially-charged dynamic to the class politics of such polities with culturalized and racialized narratives of belonging and solidarity gaining political traction, helping to fuel the insurgent, populist and ‘anti-system’ politics of the far-right. As Jones (2014) has noted this has allowed politicians such as UKIP’s Nigel Farage to take on the mantle of defending British *qua* white workers on the basis that immigration is ‘good for the rich because it’s cheaper nannies and cheaper chauffeurs and cheaper gardeners, but it’s bad news for ordinary Britons... It has left the white working class effectively as an underclass and that, I think, is a disaster’. What this reveals is how the successes of neoliberal transformation – in vanquishing the possibilities of a social democratic, let alone socialist popular imaginary – has left open and encouraged a revival of *pre-existing* and long-standing racialized imaginaries of solidarity, as one of the remaining political-institutional frameworks of solidarity left intact within neoliberal politics.

However, we can also see the politics of race – via far-right political mobilizations – as also, to some extent, challenging neoliberal economic and material imperatives. As Neil Davidson (2015: 145-6) notes in the United States Tea-Party dominated Republican state legislatures have implemented overtly racist laws targeting migrants causing consternation for those businesses – particularly farming and hospitality – that have come to rely on immigrant labour. As he details, in Alabama a law was passed in 2011 making it illegal to be without immigration papers and refusing any undocumented person from receiving any public services or support. The impact of the law saw a mass departure of migrants which not only had a devastating impact on those businesses that depended on these workers but the wider economy of the state as the taxes previously paid by these labourers discontinued to the tune of approximately US\$US 40 million. This kind of anti-immigrant and racist legal intervention by the American far-right has also played out at a national level highlighting the

significance of the way in which a re-articulated far-right racism is interwoven into the social and political fabric of actually existing neoliberalism in a deeply contradictory fashion.

Thus, the Tea-Party inspired decision by House Republicans to cut-off federal funding in the Autumn of 2013, in effect, shutting down the operations of the Federal government provoked a torrent of hostility from the leading lights of US neoliberal capital. Davidson (2015: 146) quotes leading business figures saying,

‘[t]hey [the Tea Party] don’t really care what the N.F.I.B [National Federation of Independent Businesses] thinks, and don’t care what the Chamber [of Commerce] thinks, and probably don’t care what the Business Roundtable thinks.’

Whilst Alabama law makers were quickly forced to back-track on some aspects of the racist legislation targeting immigrants the significance of such developments reflect not only the continuing significance of racialized imaginaries in US politics, but also the way in which far-right politicians are willing to challenge dominant socio-economic interests and, in doing so, not only break with some fractions of neoliberal capital but also problematize the longer-term reproduction of neoliberal political economy. This is potentially significant in race political terms. This is because as dominant sections of capital appear to be ‘post-racial’ or, at least, detached from an ostensibly demagogic racist politics it suggests the possibility of a political alliance with other cosmopolitan-minded social layers in the middle class. Yet, on the other hand, it also opens up a space for how a form of racially-charged and nationalist class politics drawing on some white workers can be re-articulated in American politics (which Trump’s election campaign specifically targeted) through depicting significant sections of American capital as ‘Unamerican’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ because of their support for ‘free trade’ and immigration (see Casselman, 2017; Davis, 2017; McQuarrie, 2016).

Similar developments have played out in the UK. Here, the rise of UKIP can only be understood from within a specifically neoliberal context. Indeed, one can and should see

UKIP as that part of the English far-right that used to be at home in the imperial-minded Conservative party (Seymour, 2015) which, until very recently, was seen as too liberal-cosmopolitan. As Chris Gifford notes the British far-right is defined by not only an anti-cosmopolitan elitism that is articulated through a Europhobia in particular, but also a distinct and racialized rendering of British national identity (Gifford, 2006: 858-65). The hostility to the European Union and integration is fundamentally connected to immigration and it is this where a racialized understanding of British national identity clashes with the ‘flexible’ labour needs of British capital. How this plays out after the ‘Brexit vote’ is too early to say but, no doubt, a significant portion of the right – in and outside of the Conservative Party – will be pushing for the end of the ‘free movement’ of EU labour in the face of neoliberal opposition connected to the leading fractions of British capital based on the likely damage to the British economy (what the far-right have called ‘project fear’) due to immigration restrictions and no longer having access to the Single Market.

Conclusions

This article has tried to convey how the realization of neoliberal political economy across the Anglosphere has rested on, and been politically facilitated through ideological imaginaries connected to a racialized politics and, in consequence, has opened up significant political opportunities for the far-right. Whilst neoliberalism and far-right ideo-political systems are distinguishable and, in some important respects, antagonistic to each other, nevertheless, in part because of the distinct ideological properties of neoliberalism and also because of the crises that it engenders, far-right informed imaginaries have played an important role in helping to consolidate and promote a neoliberal regime of political economy.

In many respects the two recent political developments mentioned in the discussion – the UK referendum vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump to the US

presidency – would appear to reinforce much of the argument above. What these developments suggest is that not only are racialized identities hard-wired into neoliberal political economy but they also appear to be over-determining of some key aspects of neoliberal political economy and its international political-institutional regime in particular. The racialized crisis of neoliberalism and, with it, the revival of the far-right expose the myth of a ‘colour-blind’ or ‘post-racial’ neoliberal world. And whilst it is too early to predict, with certainty, the direction of the neoliberal/far-right nexus it does seem clear that whilst the internationalist or cosmopolitan dimensions of neoliberalism are in jeopardy the substantive operation of a ‘national’ neoliberalism in Britain and the US look likely to result in an intensification of its racialized pathologies.

The key question, then, here is how far this contradiction between the normative and political-institutional logic of neoliberalism can continue to sit with the socio-economic dislocations caused by it; that is, do these two developments reflect a breaking point? Whilst earlier crises of neoliberal political economy – including the 2008 crisis – had racialized effects, these reverberated within a broader (international) liberal democratic political-institutional context where the authoritarian and racist far-right were less significant in determining the prevailing ‘popular common sense’. Now that the balance has tipped in a much more authoritarian and far-right direction it remains to be seen if the cosmopolitan and *liberal* promise within neoliberalism is, in effect, dead and whether what was pregnant in the racialized origins of neoliberalism now becomes the dominant driver of actually existing (neoliberal) political economy across the Anglo-American world. Only time will tell, but if this scenario is not to play out it will require the popularization of an alternative ideo-political imaginary of solidarity and citizenship to quickly emerge and, an effective electoral-politics that can channel it at the ballot box.²²

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Notes

¹ The (German) ordo-liberal tradition associated with the work of Wilhem Röpke in particular does contain a set of highly racialized assumptions concerning both the nature of communism and the possibility of self-government by former colonies (see Solchany, 2014). In addition, James Buchanan, the originator of the Public Choice strand of neoliberalism, was also a supporter of Jim Crow and a long-standing opponent of affirmative action legislation (see MacLean, 2017).

² These thinkers operate from within a social ontology that is removed from any recognition of colonial dispossession and the legacies of enslavement; the social world of their present and their theoretical models were and are removed from a present connected to a historical past and an economic structure defined by the colonial-imperial episode. Consequently, writers such as Becker, Friedman and others argue that any state-based affirmative action policies are regarded as ‘racial privileging’ through offering advantages to one racial group to the cost of other groups (Omi and Winant, 2015:53-73). This also extends to their claim that such policies – because of their ‘market distorting effects’ – create a ‘culture of poverty and dependence’ (see Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

³ Defined as ‘a system property, permeating, circulating throughout and continuously constituting society’ (Kim, 2003: 9).

⁴ I do not have the space here to cover the definitional debates and complexities associated with the ‘far-right’ (though see the following: Berlet and Lyons, 2000; Hainsworth, 2008; Mudde, 2007; Wodack, *et al*, 2013). However, with respect to the discussion that follows I take the far-right to consist of a range of historical and contemporary political currents extending from parties such as UKIP in the UK or the ‘Tea-Party wing’ of the Republican Party to fascist movements. What unites these two strands of the far-right are: (i) an idea of politics and citizenship rooted in a racialized imaginary (based on hierarchy and separation) of nation that also relates to a social conservatism that extends beyond race to gender and sexuality; and (ii) a political project of popular mobilization that, whilst disproportionately drawing on petit-bourgeois support, also situates itself between the forces of organized labour and its associated class politics, and that of traditional and existing ruling classes and especially those connected to cosmopolitan and internationalist forms of governance and co-operation.

⁵ In this respect, then, my discussion seeks to highlight the commonalities in liberal thought and practice with that of neoliberalism as concerns race.

⁶ See Glickman (2016) for a useful historical audit of the terms liberal and liberalism in the context of US politics since the New Deal that speaks to the continuities within liberal political economy.

⁷ This, I hope, addresses any suggestion that my argument is either ‘functionalist’ in the sense that what I set out below could be read as the ‘primary role’ of the far-right is to act as an agent of liberalism to rescue it from the revolutionary left’, or conflates these two distinct ideo-political orientations.

⁸ In the contemporary context of anti-Muslim racism and more generalized attacks on ‘multi-culturalism’ Gary Younge (2009; see also Lentin and Titley, 2011) highlights how this plays out in the calls for Muslims to make explicit and public declarations of their commitment to ‘Britishness’ which works as an additional and discriminatory qualification to Muslims being accepted as equal citizens.

⁹ The greater public visibility of people of colour, the significance of black cultural icons and the growth of black entrepreneurs in the corporate world and, of course, the election of an African-American to the US presidency are all indicative of the post-racial possibilities within a neoliberal social universe. Further, the embrace of neoliberal social and cultural nostrums and ideological tropes by non-white citizens (see Oprah Winfrey or Damon Buffini, but also the most infamous case, perhaps, as revealed in the O. J. Simpson story), is also suggestive of the way in which neoliberalism can be seen as a source of individualized racial emancipation (see Pitcher, 2012). However, whilst we might see these developments as reflecting the social and political advance of a small number of non-white individuals as quintessential neoliberal subjects (see Gilroy, 2013), that is, they are no longer seen as ‘black’ in the dominant popular consciousness or media framing, collectivities of people of colour continue to be structurally and institutionally racially disadvantaged.

¹⁰ Indeed, the (former) UKIP leader, Nigel Farage has been explicit about this (Holehouse, 2014).

¹¹ The history of the international capitalist economy between 1870 and 1945 in particular was punctuated by episodes of the forces of the far-right and liberalism coming together in response to periods of economic crises. Such ‘embraces’ were evident in the nationalist and protectionist turns in Germany and France in the 1880s and

1890s, as well as the shifts in some currents of liberal opinion towards protectionism in the British Empire. Its most dramatic examples, were, obviously, evident in the coming to power of fascist movements in Italy and Germany after 1918 and the involvement of liberal political forces in such developments (see Abraham, 1986; Riley, 2010).

¹² In the notorious case of Chile after the 1973 military coup, Hayek was willing to publicly defend such authoritarian, quasi-fascist arrangements. See Bonefeld (2017a) and Kiely (2017) for further comment.

¹³ Aspects of this argument also appear in liberal commentary on ‘populism’ (see Müller, 2016).

¹⁴ ‘External’ in the sense of being outside the political ontology of liberalism in terms of both the functioning of the ‘free’ activity of market exchange and with respect to the constitutional legal and representative bases of state power.

¹⁵ There is also evidence to suggest that such political developments were no impediment for the strengthening of some (neo)liberal economic imperatives (see Bel, 2010).

¹⁶ In the context of the Cold War in what used to be called the Third World, the suspension of liberal democracy (or the possibilities for its development) by far-right forces became a much more regular occurrence in moments of social and political crises and where political elites, usually supported by Western powers, perceived a threat from the forces of the revolutionary left (Halliday, 1986; Saull, 2011). And whilst these examples of far-right regimes in parts of the South during the Cold War were reflective of a *generic* far-right politics we also need to locate them within a broader imperialist system of racism and hierarchy atop of which sat the Western liberal powers.

¹⁷ The racialized nature of American liberalism also played out in anti-communism where communism was seen as an ideology that African-Americans were particularly susceptible to (Borstelmann, 2001; Seymour, 2016).

¹⁸ Indeed, the increase in fiscal outlays for policing and criminal justice that has characterized much of the neoliberal era across the Anglosphere was not only a reflection of the influence of far-right ideas, but also reflected the specificities of much neoliberal thinking concerning the need to reconfigure the state to make it a more effective guardian of a market order (see Cristi, 1998).

¹⁹ Thus, whilst we can identify differences in both policy and rhetoric under the ‘centre-left neoliberalism’ of New Labour and the Clinton Democrats both upheld the core dimensions of the neoliberal/far-right nexus established under Reagan and Thatcher with regard to welfare reform and law-and-order policies. Thus, in both cases forms of workfare and a punitive sanctions regime remained in place and in terms of penal policy, (racialized) incarceration rates actually increased (see Sim, 2015; Murakawa, 2014).

²⁰ For discussions of the racialized character of British social democracy and earlier far-right interventions see: Joshi and Carter, 1984; Layton-Henry, 1992; Miles and Phizacklea, 1984; Paul, 1997; Piether, 2016; Schwarz, 1996; Solomos, 1993; Virdee, 2014.

²¹ A key claim of the far-right – as echoed in Trump’s inauguration address – is that ‘foreigners’ (through the off-shoring of production) and ‘immigrants’ have taken (American) jobs. The evidence, however, suggests that it has been the ruthless logic of innovation and the search for value that has been as much, if not a greater destroyer of skilled and semi-skilled manufacturing jobs in industries such as car production, through the increased use of labour-saving automated production techniques (Cocco, 2016; Ignatius, 2016).

²² Anne Philips (1999) work makes an important contribution in addressing this issue head on. Particular thanks to the anonymous reviewer for alerting me to this text.

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