



HYPERMODERN HYGIENISM AND THE LEFT: TOWARD A POSTIDEOLOGICAL TOTALITARIANISM

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On November 28, 2021, the people of Switzerland voted on the so-called “Covid-19-Law,” established to retroactively legitimize the measures taken by the Swiss state to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Thirty-eight percent of the population opposed the law. Despite this result, the constantly repeated official narrative is that a preponderance of the Swiss population approved of the protective measures against the coronavirus and only a negligible minority did not. But almost 40 percent of the population is not a minority. And we can assume that the result would have been similar in other countries, had there been comparable referenda. But at no point during the last two and a half years did this part of the population gain the status of a political opposition. Rather, critics were condemned as irrational and thereby denied political recognition. Yet a public political debate about the proportionality of the global anti-Covid measures would certainly have been merited, especially considering that SARS-CoV-2 would not have qualified as a pandemic had the criteria for defining a spreading disease as a “pandemic” not been changed by the WHO in 2009.¹ If we take into account that from the beginning of the crisis the media massively downplayed the global protests against the preventive measures, it is not entirely wrong to say that Covid-19 was the first pandemic whose existence the people had to be persuaded of, as the *Manifeste Conspirationniste* puts it (p. 8).

This situation is new—and somewhat incomprehensible, especially against the backdrop of European history. German history, in particular, shows how easy it is to misuse medicine to dress up political illiberalism in the cloak of science and progress. In this case, however, the illiberal tendency originated on the Left. This runs contrary to the broad consensus among social scientists since World War II that illiberal tendencies—and hence the danger of a new authoritarianism—are to be found on the right of the political spectrum.

For political observers with a Marxist background, such as the author of this paper, it was therefore disconcerting to see that large parts of the Left not only approved of the mitigation measures implemented by the state from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, but even became leading advocates thereof. Nor was it only leftist parties that were part of governments—and therefore represented the interests of the state—which backed the measures. Indeed, the non-parliamentary Left, which had to that point been rather skeptical of the state, rallied unreservedly behind the measures—and sometimes, as in the case of the “Zero Covid” initiative, even called for tightening them further. Theretofore, this urban milieu of young adults, which also comprises large parts of culturalist-leftist academia, had condemned each minuscule disciplining by the state and accused it of violent normalizations (of gender, for instance). Overnight, this milieu became staunch defenders of state measures that are without precedent in terms of their rigor and impact on the most intimate spheres of life.

This coalition of “radical left-wing” and “left-liberal” forces had already announced itself by expressing support for handling social problems through individual sacrifice. During the Covid-19 crisis, this escalated into a veritable *dispositif* of self-incrimination, articulating the ungrounded but firm belief that people not only contributed to causing this misery (that the virus was, perhaps, an effect of our immoderate ways of life), but also that we could effectively combat it by way of self-sacrifice.

I see this approval of state measures as the expression of a hope (a false hope, in my opinion) that, through their rigor, these measures might put the critique of the bourgeois subject, accomplished by a twentieth-century critique of subjectivity, into practice, notably by subordinating its proclaimed self-identity to the necessities of the social [common good](#). This hope seems misguided to me because the problem of self-identity is merely transferred from the individual subject to some kind of an overall subject (the *Volkskörper*: think “herd immunity”). With this transfer, nothing is gained in terms of decentralization of the subject: true, the individual now seems to be deprived of power, but not the *Volkskörper*, to which the phantasm of self-identity is transferred.

In this paper, I will not, however, defend any type of freedom against the demands of a social collective. To do so would only contribute to the classical conflict between Left and Right. Rather, I think that we are dealing with a new phenomenon: that segment of the Left that approved of the mitigation measures was fervently opposed to a critique of Covid politics even when it was formulated from a decidedly [leftist viewpoint](#). This position was illiberal because it did not accept criticism of the anti-Covid measures as a possible leftist position, but declared it to be illegitimate, right-wing or even right-wing extremist. Instead of opposing the further [reduction](#) of hospital beds, which was even expedited during the pandemic; instead of pointing out that nursing staff were overburdened because of [systemic underfinancing](#) and thus an *actively promoted* reduction of hospital staff; instead of denouncing the fact that the lockdowns were first and foremost an economic catastrophe for the countries of the [global South](#) and amounted to a declaration of war against the poor in capitalist centers as well, the left-wing supporters of anti-Covid measures focused on criticizing the critics of these measures.

Why has the Left never pointed out that the measures were class-biased? It soon became clear that the initial euphoria at a reinvigorated state, which was seen as a new version of the Keynesian welfare state, was an illusion, as the enormous economic damages brought about by the lockdowns could never be compensated for by public counter-measures, especially not for the poorer strata of the population. But this did not change their position at all: the leftists not only did not focus their critique on classes, but also—and paradoxically—condemned those who made the class argument as right-wing. This calls for an explanation.

[A New Accumulation Regime](#)

The initial idea that the state had finally started to value the protection of lives higher than the interests of capital has proved to be erroneous. Although we might not yet be capable of fully integrating the events of the last three years into the big picture, we have reason to argue that the pandemic regime did not harm the interests of capital at all. Rather, the anti-Covid measures have promoted a new accumulation regime, which became necessary for reasons internal to capitalism. Since the major economic crisis of the 1970s, one question has remained unanswered: Has capitalism ever managed to really overcome that crisis, which was caused by stagnating productivity and thus declining profit rates, and to stop the drift of investment-seeking capital to the financial sector? Or have we lived in some kind of constantly delayed crisis ever since?

The Covid-19 crisis and the acceleration of digitalization represented a turning point. The economic historian [Andrea Komlosy](#) states that the digitalization imposed by the Covid measures has paved the way for the future

development of a cybernetic capitalism—or maybe even helped to establish it already. But this “cybernetic turn” no longer concerns the production sphere, which is already widely digitized. Rather, it targets the interaction of humans and digital networks—which is now technically possible—for the purpose of optimizing human life on the basis of technical means. Thus, it opens up a huge field of investment. This could be the gateway to a new economic upswing, with MANBRIC-Technologies ([Grinin & Grinin](#)) as the new leading technology and a digitized health care economy as the new leading sector. Against the backdrop of these business-cycle ideas, the anti-Covid measures take on the role—intended or not—of a “creative destruction,” as Joseph Schumpeter put it, that paves the way for innovations necessary for the further accumulation of capital. Similarly, [Shosana Zuboff](#) argues that the digitized way of life opens up major new possibilities for generating profit because we have become involuntary producers of the most important raw material, namely data, which we leave as digital traces. “Surveillance capitalism,” as she calls this new “form of production,” can use these data to generate profit in undreamed-of dimensions. From a different angle, [Fabio Vighi](#) argues that behind the Covid-19 crisis loomed from the fall of 2019 a gigantic financial crisis that could only be deflected by flooding the financial markets with unprecedented liquidity. According to Vighi, the [lockdowns](#) bought some time by cooling down the economy. Without insinuating that the measures were invented for this purpose, they proved to be equally useful for flattening another curve: the danger of hyperinflation resulting from this influx of liquidity. The fact that we are now witnessing somewhat more moderate but continuous inflation seems to confirm Vighi’s assertion. Not only did the big collapse fail to happen, but the economy is now enjoying record profits once more—which, of course, is not to say that people are better off. Whether intended or not, we must in retrospect note that by implementing anti-Covid measures, the state has helped to establish a new way of life that has opened up new markets for capitalism facing a deep crisis of valorization—perhaps even paving the way for a new economic boom. Against this backdrop, the state authoritarianism that manifested itself in the anti-Covid measures appears in a different light: as a stabilization of capital interests by authoritarian means.

Already by the 1960s and 1970s, authors like [Nicos Poulantzas](#), [Johannes Agnoli](#), and [Franz Neumann](#) were warning of the risks of interpreting the emergence of totalitarianism solely as an unfriendly takeover of the state by groups hostile to the state. They claimed, instead, that totalitarian tendencies were inherent to the capitalist mode of production and located within the state, which vouches for this mode of production. Under the heading “inverted totalitarianism,” [Sheldon S. Wolin](#)—and, in a slightly different form, [Hannes Hofbauer](#) and [Giorgio Agamben](#)—thinks along these lines by pointing out that totalitarian tendencies can very well take root in Western democracies. Since the beginnings of neoliberalism in the 1980s, this has been addressed frequently. But whereas the increasingly illiberal forms of neoliberalism had been broadly criticized by the Left before the Covid-19 crisis under the umbrella of “authoritarian neoliberalism,” this critique has since stopped—even though the new authoritarianism, in many regards, inherits the authoritarian character of neoliberalism or at least fits into it without any problems (if illiberality is not already at the core of neoliberalism).

With this, we find ourselves in a new situation. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (if not before), and presumably without knowing it, the Left has become a decisive force of integration for this new illiberalism. This development raises two questions that point to two ways of tackling the problem: on the one hand, it raises the question of why capital is seeking its most important allies on the Left; on the other, we have to ask why the Left is giving up its historical distance from capital.

First and foremost, this lack of distance may be due to a historical shift in the ideological state apparatus. We are dealing with a confusing situation, as the authoritarian state serves the interests of capital—and thus acts like what is commonly called a right-wing authoritarian state—but without having to resort to ideologies we think of as right-wing: open racism, conservative values, and a firm anti-egalitarianism. On the contrary, the current state clothes itself in political correctness. Its exponents are not charismatic leaders, but experts

committed to a cause. Their language is objective, they refer to facts, they are solution-oriented out of conviction. Ideologies are (ostensibly) strange to them. And this is what gives them their integrating power: they stand for an open-minded, multicultural society and they talk a lot about inclusion. This state—and this capitalism—has no use for the old regalia of right-wing ideologies. These, I dare to say, have even become dysfunctional for the demands of today’s accumulation of capital. This is why capitalism that keeps itself alive with the help of an authoritarian state looks for allies today not in the ranks of the political Right, but within the Left, which stands for precisely these values: open-mindedness and progressiveness.

With this, the Left has taken over the historical role of the Right. In the 1920s and 1930s, capital aimed at an alliance with the Right in order to ward off the danger of a socialist revolution looming in the West—as well as because of the Great Depression. To do this, capital needed the help of the Right’s ideology: racism and the readiness to use violence that was associated with it.

But now, the situation is different. I believe that today, the danger emanates not from the Right, but from this novel coalition between capital and a leftist state. The state comes to the aid of capital with authoritarian means, but its actual authoritarianism does not seem authoritarian to us because it is cloaked in a leftist value system. If we stare, as if spell-bound, at what has happened on the fringes of demonstrations against the anti-Covid measures, we fail to understand that right-wing ideology and the right-wing state are drifting apart and to perceive the new danger that lies in the very consensual alliance between the Left and the state in the service of capital interests.

In what follows, I will argue that this new coalition is only possible against the background of a development I will call—following the Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati—“postideological totalitarianism” (or at least a tendency toward it). This is a completely new or novel form of totalitarianism that largely does without the characteristic features of its twentieth-century precursors.

Hypermodern Hygienism in the Postideological Constellation

The term “postideological totalitarianism” was coined by [Massimo Recalcati](#) in a paper [first published](#) in 2007, in which he connects it with something he calls, tellingly, “hypermodern hygienism.” Unsurprisingly, the field in which this hypermodern hygienism plays out is the domain of (public) health. Therefore, in Recalcati’s analysis, public health is the decisive hinge for this novel form of totalitarianism. With the term “postideological,” Recalcati aims to describe an ideological constellation that no longer sees itself as such. The tendency of this constellation is totalitarian because it lacks any kind of ideal and therefore no longer has any sense of a “beyond.” “Postideological totalitarianism is not a worldview, but the demise of any possible worldview” (p. 352/Ital. p. 319). It smothers, Recalcati writes, life with a presence (a kind of immanence of pure life) that can associate unreservedly with that which has taken the place of the missing ideal: a scientism that steps up to take care of the improvement of life. This postideological form of the totalitarian does not use power by way of “terror or discipline,” but rather governs life “horizontally” (p. 338/Ital. p. 310), as Recalcati puts it. This “horizontal governance” is guided by highly specialized knowledge and its scientific-technical practices:

Without resorting to barbaric forms of violence, biopolitical power promotes aseptic procedures of evaluation, through which it supports the gray power of a hyper-specialized knowledge, thus ascertaining the influence of technical-scientific practices on the governance of life. These no longer take on the brutal forms of censorship or repressive prohibitions, but

rather take the shape of a general quantification of life, which is misinterpreted as progressive (p. 353/Ital. p. 320).

This power can hardly be called repressive because it presents itself as an offer: the quantification of life only serves the purpose of creating parameters which allow for the provision of information about the wellbeing of the population. This “horizontal governance of life” does not aim (vertically) at an ideal that reaches beyond it, but at the immanent goal of pure optimizability that does not refer to anything beyond itself, as if caught in a cybernetic loop. In this light, the postideological comes across as the ideological equivalent of cybernetic self-regulation: the only ideal it knows is incessant improvement. This is its hermetic core because, in this way, “the requirements of the Good become a universal measure” (p. 337/Ital. p. 309), Recalcati writes. The “ideology of wellbeing” (ibid.) first reduces the human to their health, for which it then provides a universally valid measure. Maybe this “hygienic ideal of health” (p. 333/Ital. p. 307) is the last remaining ideal—and itself becomes an all-encompassing demand:

This is the paradox of hypermodern hygienism: the protection of health becomes a protocol that we have to abide by as a new social obligation – as an unprecedented imperative of the Good (p. 354/Ital. p. 320).

Following Jacques Lacan, Recalcati claims that totalitarianism is not defined by its relation to the Evil, but by its relation to the Good, which takes on the (inverse) form of a moral and social demand. As an imperative emanating from the superego, this Good has a libidinal and even a sadistic component, as Freud observed: It has to be implemented at any price. “In this imposition of the measure of the Good, or, if you will, in this moral utilization of the Good as universal measure for happiness” lies—in Recalcati’s words—the essence of totalitarianism according to Lacan (p. 338/Ital. p. 310).

For the Lacanian psychoanalyst [Colette Soler](#), the main aim of this “generalized hygienism” (p. 56) is to replace the soul with something medical. Medical knowledge has become the “new master signifier,” as she puts it, especially because we do not deal with “real science and its blind spots and debates, but with the idea of science as such” (p. 53).

This construct “science” becomes, as a kind of substitute for religion, the new global “subject supposed to know” (p. 52). But if we suppose this subject to know, it can hardly appear to us to be violent:

As we believe in this science-subject supposed to know, the obedience to its imperative seems to be justified and nobody hits on the idea that this implies a voluntary serfdom that we would denounce if we dealt with the obedience to any other master, be it the *Führer*, Father Stalin or a *pater familias*. The Italian philosopher Agamben rightly qualifies medicine as a religion, it is the current subject supposed to know. [...] A knowledge which seduces the political master, because the state allocates the money. Today, brains, genes, hormones, etc., are thought to control our emotions, our behavior or even that which psychoanalysis calls symptoms and which in times past used to be called torments of the soul. But we don’t have souls any more, we have brains, genomes, neurons, hormones, etc. (p. 53-54)

Once the soul has taken this form, it can easily be treated with all sorts of technical devices. It can also be subjected to standardization. Eventually, hypermodern hygienism comes down to finding a general “measure for desire,” as Recalcati writes. This measure would indicate the right relation to happiness, “in accordance with

a moral pedagogy gone mad,” ultimately defining “that which shall be the living conditions of desire for everybody” (p. 337/339/Ital. p. 309/310).

While traditional hygienism—which was a movement in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, comparable to the *Lebensreform* movements in Germany—still focused on strengthening the immune system, hypermodern hygienism puts its faith in the technical achievements of modern life sciences, which are able to substitute the inner lives of humans, as well as their immune systems, for something artificial and, thus, better.

Today’s ideological constellation is characterized by this scientism, which has itself made recourse to a *technocratic solutionism*, in conjunction with the social Good. This constellation has to be called postideological because it claims to have no other content than putting itself at the service of optimizing the common good. This scientism both resonates with a left-wing value system and holds out the prospect of miraculously solving the problem of valorization of capital.

If we follow Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the new accumulation regime relies on the digitization of work, but even more so of life itself. It aligns with the project of transhumanism, with its two pillars: scientism (a scientifically founded way of living) and consumption. But here, consumption primarily means the consumption of *technical devices* that aim to unite humans and technology.

From this perspective, the ideal person and employee has no children and no care duties. He works from home on a screen, where he also usually consumes his goods: from sex to his partner to health care services and visits to a (virtual) landscape. The idea that human nature can continuously be optimized by technical-cybernetic means—the transhumanist project—has no use for conservative values like family. Rather, it needs young, male, technophile, open-minded, and progressive people who feel comfortable in multicultural teams as well as at sterile airports, and who believe in the technical designing of the future human, the future environment, and future production. Progressive values mesh with this much better than racism; tolerance, open-mindedness, and a belief in progress are called for.

As this *technocratic solutionism* could simultaneously solve the problem of falling profit margins (because unlike care work, which creates little value, technical solutions can increase productivity), it turns out to be a “lucky find”—for the state, which is facing the increasing cost of social services, and for capital, which supplements these services with technical devices—thus opening up a gigantic new market.

Translated by Bernadette Grubner

¹ Until 2009, the WHO defined a pandemic as follows: “An influenza pandemic occurs when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity, resulting in several, simultaneous epidemics worldwide with enormous numbers of deaths and illness. With the increase in global transport and communications, as well as urbanization and overcrowded conditions, epidemics due the new influenza virus are likely to quickly take hold around the world.” (<http://web.archive.org/web/20061230201645/www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/pandemic/en/print.html>). The criterion of high mortality was omitted in 2009; only the worldwide spread was kept in place. Without a doubt, Covid-19 can be a very dangerous illness for certain groups of people. Notably, however, the criterion of “enormous numbers of deaths” does not apply to Covid-19: according to the current state of knowledge, the infection fatality rate (IFR) of Covid-19 is 0.314 percent worldwide (with salient regional differences) (cf. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)02867-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02867-1/fulltext)). Thus, it cannot be compared to such pandemics as the Spanish Flu. For comparison, the IFR of seasonal influenza is around 0.1–0.2 percent.