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Review: Globalists. The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism – By Quinn Slobodian

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Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism –
by Quinn Slobodian, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. Hardcover $35.00, Pp. 400, ISBN 9780674979529

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In a recent essay in *Dissent Magazine*, historian Daniel Rodgers argues that few concepts have increased more in use in the last twenty thatn "neoliberalism." Rarely spoken of during its alleged watershed moment following the collapse of the cold war ideological schism, the term is, according to Rodgers, "the linguistic omnivore of our times, a neologism that threatens to swallow up all the other words around it."[1] The observation is hard to disagree with; neoliberalism has been invoked to describe everything from Blairite Labour or Emmanuel Macron's vision of the French "start-up nation" to Reaganism, and associated with such different scholars as Anthony Giddens and Milton Friedman, or such different political actors as Hillary Clinton and Augusto Pinochet. Furthermore, neoliberalism is conceptualized to fit the frame of almost all academic disciplines; what was earlier defined as an economic policy doctrine is now read and seen as a wide-reaching intellectual-cultural regime that penetrates every social field and sphere.

This exponential increase in usage and the ever-widening perceived scope of neoliberalism leave scholars with a difficult problem. While the claim that we live under a neoliberal global regime, or in the neoliberal era, is frequently invoked, the watering down of the concept itself makes it difficult to address the meaning of what that may imply. A thin description, in which neoliberalism is merely equated with a predilection for markets and market logic, makes for a flexible concept, but it also represents a concept that has been de-historized and de-contextualized. For historians, a natural starting point for addressing this problem is a critical examination of its origins: where and how was neoliberalism born, and how did the circumstances of its birth shape its trajectory? This, embedding neoliberalism in intellectual history, is the project of historian Quinn Slobodian, currently at Wellesley College, in *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, which has revived the historical debate on what is said to be the ideology shaping our world since the book's publication last year.

Two theses are at the core of Slobodian's work. The first is of one of neoliberalism's genealogy, and the second of neoliberalism as a political ideology with a global agenda. In recent intellectual history, the European origins of neoliberalism have been highlighted by such scholars as Daniel Steadman Jones, uprooting a US-centered narrative in which the ideological tendency is primarily centered around the Economics Department at the University of Chicago in the mid-1970s.[2] In current debates, the birthplace of neoliberalism is usually thought to be either Paris, where the term neoliberalism was coined in the Walter Lippman Colloquium in 1938, or Geneva, where key intellectuals later seen as the godfathers of neoliberalism coalesced around institutions like the

1 Daniel Rodgers, "The Uses and Abuses of "Neoliberalism," in *Dissent Magazine* 65 no. 1 (Winter 2018): 78-87, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/uses-and-abuses-neoliberalism-debate.
2 Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Graduate Institute of International Studies (HEI) in the 1930s and 40s. Slobodian casts the latter city and institution as the neoliberal hotbed, and invokes the term "the Geneva School" to describe the visions of among other Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke, Gottfried Haberler and Friedrich Hayek, whose scholarly lives centered around Geneva's multiple headquarters of international institutions, in addition to the mentioned institute. Although many of them found new homes, often in the Anglophone world, the Geneva School, through institutions like the International Chamber of Commerce, the International Studies Conference and, later, the Mont Pèlerin Society, came to persist as a social-intellectual circle from which a neoliberal vision was promoted.

Slobodian's innovation is not the emphasis on Geneva as the intellectual center of neoliberalism as such. Rather, the author casts Geneva as an institutional node, and the epicenter of an array of networks. For him, the Geneva School's vision is one shaped by a Central European imperial and post-imperial experience, as many of its proponents spent their formative years in the decaying Austro-Hungarian Empire, and witnessed the former imperial capital becoming "Red Vienna," the site of strikes and violent social confrontations. As Hayek and Mises, Vienna residents and protagonists in Slobodian's narrative, saw this world of nations, in which a burgeoning political sphere of popular struggles dominated, begin to replace the world of empire, they cast their mission as global-political, not national-economic. By invoking the schism introduced by Carl Schmitt of a world of *imperium* and a world of *dominium*, Slobodian argues that the post-imperial experience framed the imaginary of the neoliberals, leading them to search for an order in which the global market could thrive uninterrupted by the perceived calamities of national politics. The *imperium*, in this case, represents the world of boundedness, one of people and national politics, while the *dominium* is the world of capital and property, global in nature, according to the Geneva School. The neoliberal project became, then, a globalist endeavor to "solve the riddle of the post-imperial order" by establishing an "institutional order that safeguarded capital and protected its right to move throughout the world" (p. 9). In other worlds, to protect proprietary *dominium* from popular *imperium*.

In the book's seven chapters, Slobodian masterfully lays out the ideational trajectories of the Geneva School. Recognizing the political nature of the group's project, Slobodian highlights the need not only to present a case for the utility of a global neoliberal project but also rather to emphasize its moral superiority. In chapters 1 and 2 (respectively entitled "A World of Walls" and "A World of Numbers") Slobodian describes the Vienna- and later Geneva-based scholars' work to not only present a counter-narrative to social-democratic visions and Keynesian macroeconomic ideas, but to create an ideational world of symbols, tropes, and language to encompass their arguments. Two examples stand out as particularly enlightening. The first is the work within the International Chamber of Commerce and the League of Nations to portray tariff barriers and unionized labor demands as walls, a powerful trope frequently invoked in the

present. The second is the gradual turn *away* from economic modelling, and towards a conceptualization of a global economy as something "unknowable," out of reach for human comprehension. These tendencies evolved into a vision in which planning is futile and legalistic frameworks appear as the only valid tool of regulation, an idea that would be aggressively promoted in the aftermath of World War II.

Originally, then, a "critique of national sovereignty" (p. 117), the neoliberal project took on a more comprehensive agenda in the construction of the post-war order. In chapter 3 and 4 ("A World of Federations" and "A World of Rights") the struggle over new international institutions and the vision of individual rights are the central components, as the main mission of the neoliberals was to promote a legalistic regime favoring capital and discouraging economic nationalism. Slobodian again shows the historical importance of the Habsburg imperial experience; the Habsburg Empire was argued to be a potential model of how nations could coexist within a single "economic space" (p. 106). Although the Geneva School failed in gaining momentum for a federal framework, the effort to contain global "politization" of new international institutions won the day. The successful campaign against an International Trade Organization and the promotion of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) are the most important components in the story. The latter would eventually evolve as a vehicle to separate economic and political spheres, through the institutionalization of global market policies in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Additionally, the language of the neoliberals transformed to fit a new paradigm, namely that of rights as the protection of property from the state, central in their later work to promote international investment regulation.

The 1960s posed multiple challenges to the promotion of the neoliberal doctrine on a global scale, some of which led important members of the Geneva School to part ways. In chapter 5, "A World of Races," Slobodian explores the neoliberals' thinking on decolonization and races, where especially Röpke stands out as an unapologetic white supremacist (p. 151). South Africa became a hot topic in neoliberal circles. Many within neoliberals were in principle opponents of Apartheid. Nevertheless, far more effort was put into demonstrating the ills of sanctioning the regime than of the regime itself. The boycott campaign pushed forward by countries in the Global South "transgressed the borders separating the world of property and the world of states," a divide that had been the basis of the world order envisioned by the Geneva School from the beginning. The chapter unfortunately reads more like a detour than an integral part of Slobodian's narrative, and many questions are left unanswered. For instance, how do conceptions of race inform neoliberals' staunch resistance against the New International Economic Order (NIEO), their aversion towards the United Nations as a tool of governance, and their critique of modernization theory? Although Slobodian's discussion on the ideational framework of the neoliberals is generally highly engaging, neoliberalism as an ideology embedded in European

imperial heritage in which racial hierarchies were pivotal remains somewhat underexplored.

Nevertheless, the subsequent chapter largely dealing with the NIEO and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (chapter 7, "A World of Signals") as a fundamental challenge to the neoliberal idea of global market supremacy is highly informative. Along with the discussion of the diverging opinions of Geneva School intellectuals on the European integration and the European Economic Community (EEC) (chapter 6, "A World of Constitutions"), they serve to connect pre-war discussions and the post-war struggles on the main topic in the era of decolonization: national sovereignty and the north-south divide. While many neoliberals opposed the EEC initially, claiming that preferential treatment and outward protectionism impeded the effort of opening markets through the GATT, a new generation, primarily inspired by Hayek, eventually came to see the EEC framework as stepping stone for the institutionalization of global governance. With the decline of the NIEO movement in the early 1980s, the strengthened legalism and the "multilevel governance" of the EEC eventually became the model for the GATT's successor, the WTO, which Slobodian sees as the "last episode of the twentieth century neoliberal search for an institutional fix in a world they saw as always threatened by spasms of democracy and the destructive belief that global rules could be remade to bend toward social justice" (p. 257–8).

By expanding the narrative beyond US-centered tales and exploring the connections between past imperial perceptions and both modern and present-day institutions, *Globalists* offers to the reader a comprehensive and coherent counternarrative to standard portrayals of neoliberalism and its origins. Quinn Slobodian not only argues the case of the globalist nature convincingly. He also manages, albeit not explicitly and perhaps not even intentionally, to cast present discussions on neoliberalism and global affairs in a new light. Alluding to the influence of the Geneva School on US conservatives, Slobodian's narrative may be read as an interpretation of the origins of two forceful visions of globalization. One usually referred to as neoliberal, favoring a world order in which nation-states fade away and remain only as cultural spheres while global markets prevail. The other, perhaps closer to the original vision of the Geneva School, a vision favoring a world of two worlds; one in which capital may move freely, and one in which the nation-state serves a container of human agency and prevents a global effort for equality, democracy, and the promotion of human rights - both political, as well as social and economic. *Globalists* is therefore not only a highly important work of modern and contemporary intellectual history. It is also an essential read for those wanting to understand the roots of our current moment, in which clashes of different notions of rights often define political struggle.