

Alexander Svitych
Research Statement

Positioning

I have been animated broadly with two research questions. Does the ongoing transformation of the postwar socio-economic order of “embedded liberalism” give rise to political change? How is it that free market ideas remain so durable? The political and policy challenges to the embedded liberal order have been constituted anew through a resurgence of nationalist sentiments both across the global “North” – as symbolized by Trumpism and Brexit – and in the global “South” – as represented by aggressive nationalism in places like India and Brazil.

The overarching theme of my research is thus the relationship between markets and social stability in the context of the current international economic order. I follow this broad direction by examining several inter-related topics, including: the autonomy of nation-states under globalization; neoliberalism as an economic ideology and a hegemonic discourse; reproduction of domestic power structures underpinning the current order; instrumental and structural power of business over state, and perpetuation of power imbalances within capitalist societies; the ensuing social protest movements broadly, and populist nationalism in particular; the electoral dynamics of populist-nationalist parties and identity-based mobilization. In all lines of inquiry, I recognize the interlinkages between the domestic and international forces.

From a disciplinary perspective, my research agenda spans across several sub-fields in Political Science: International Relations, Comparative Politics, International and Comparative Political Economy, Political Sociology, and Critical Theory. Methodologically, I aim to employ both structural analysis at the macro-level and situated comparative empirical analysis at the micro-level via both quantitative and qualitative inference.

Dissertation Research

In contrast to the previous waves of marketization which saw an anti-market response from the state, the third wave of neoliberal globalization brought about re-regulation, rather than retreat, of the state for market. Society appears to be under a double assault from economy and state (Crouch 2000). This development in turn creates a climate favouring political mobilization in the form of, albeit not limited to, populist-nationalist countermovements. My dissertation addresses these dynamics in the member-states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. I explore what systemic forces are causing neo-nationalism – measured through the electoral success of neo-nationalist parties – by focusing on the OECD countries during the period of 1980-2015. Drawing on Karl Polanyi’s study of the “great transformation” (Polanyi [1944] 2001), I demonstrate that neo-nationalist reaction is better explained by pro-market re-regulation at the domestic level rather than by structural forces such as globalization (Beck 1992, Swank and Betz 2003, Rodrik 2018), economic grievances (Jackman and Volpert 1996, Lubbers and Scheepers 2000, Cochrane 2014) or cultural grievances (van der Brug et al. 2000, Rydgren 2008, Inglehart and Norris 2016).

I substantiate my claims through a combination of quantitative statistical analysis and four qualitative case studies (Australia, France, Hungary and South Korea). As part of the dissertation project, I have also developed two datasets for 35 OECD members over 36 years: the capital-state index (CSI) measuring the degree of state marketization; and the level of neo-nationalism in these countries.

Embedded in two literatures – the surge of populist nationalism and transformation of the state (*capital-state*) I demonstrate that state, capital, and identity politics are intertwined. There is an inextricable link between free market reforms, declining state legitimacy and identity-based mobilization. My research shows that the process of market expansion – facilitated by the state – can cause deep divisions in societies. I therefore highlight two issues often neglected in scholarship: there is a moral dimension to the operation of the economy; and understanding the economy is a pre-requisite for understanding politics and public policy.

Publishing trajectory

Based on the dissertation research, I have currently one manuscript in submission for peer-review. In this manuscript, I show that populist nationalism constitutes a backlash against pro-market restructuring of nation-states under neoliberal globalization – two sides of the renewed Polanyian double movement. I coin the term “capital-state” to capture the state reconfiguration, as well as emphasize the term “neo-nationalism” to describe the ideology articulated by political parties often referred to as radical, populist, or nativist. I also develop the capital-state index to quantify the degree of state transformation among OECD countries, and demonstrate association between the rise of neo-nationalism and the rise of the respective capital-states.

My next two journal publications will deal with specific case studies exploring longitudinally the mechanisms that link the evolution of the capital-state to the populist-nationalist reaction (or lack thereof). Further, I will be developing a book proposal incorporating my current and planned research projects into a single manuscript.

Further research agenda

While there are several lines of inquiry stemming from my current work, I plan to start by building directly on my dissertation. My follow-up research project will thus examine the interaction between demand-side (i.e. institutionalization of the capital-state and perceptions of declining state legitimacy) and supply-side factors (i.e. discursive framing of this process as a threat) behind the rise of neo-nationalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, Kriesi and Pappas 2015). This is because most studies have focused on either side, and the ones that include both do so in additive, rather than interactive manner. I therefore intend to understand how exactly populist parties “plug into nationalism” (which rhetorical devices, discursive strategies, etc.) to channel insecurities and anxieties created by the state’s facilitated expansion of commodification.

Furthermore, whereas my dissertation project focuses on the institutional (material) sources of the capital-state, I also recognize that the latter is entrenched discursively through the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism (Cox 1981, Blyth 2012). However, beyond projection from the elite level, free-market ideology may also become internalized as habits of thought at the individual level (Hopf 2002, Watson 2005). Such naturalized “common-sensical” conceptual frame can in turn render alternatives to the current economic order unthinkable. Arguably, the intersubjective underpinnings of the current economic logic have obtained a taken-for-granted character. My working hypothesis in this regard is that the capital-state configuration is least prone to political contestation in societies where “neoliberal reason” is the dominant shared predisposition. Methodologically, I intend to pursue this line of inquiry through a series of comparative discursive analytic studies.

These projects will allow to test the hypotheses that I did not have room to address in the dissertation. In tandem with the empirical data already generated, this can bring an understanding of both the structural *and* reproductive power of the capital-state, and evaluation of the prospects for “top-down” and “bottom-up” alternatives to capitalism.

In sum, by seeking to understand how economic concerns connect with social and political ones, I engage with the broader traditions of classical sociology and political economy. The issues of globalization, state transformation, populist nationalism, politicization of values and de-politicization of class interests are inter-related in my research agenda. I contend that such an overarching approach is relevant for understanding real-world problems while at the same time illuminating the “big picture.” More specifically, from a political economic perspective, I am with Clift (2004) to recognize the interactions between the domestic and international levels and seek to explore the interplay between national political economies and the global context.

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