

Book Review: The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic by Paolo Gerbaudo

In *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*, Paolo Gerbaudo explores how the crises of populism and the COVID-19 pandemic are giving rise to a 'great recoil' from neoliberal globalisation, leading to the return of the state and notions of sovereignty, protection and control. While Gerbaudo outlines how the left can seize this moment to build a society of care committed to overlapping visions of equality and security, Marco Bitschnau remains unconvinced by the book's interpretation of the long-term impact of populism and the pandemic.

***The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic.* Paolo Gerbaudo. Verso. 2021.**

The future's uncertain and the end is always near

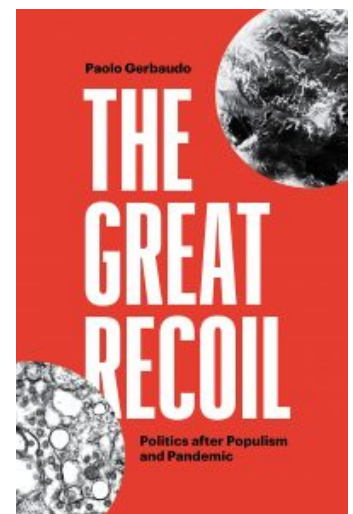
– The Doors, Roadhouse Blues (1970)

Times of crisis are times of change – but also times to contemplate the nature of this change, to discuss it and put one's thoughts to paper. Paolo Gerbaudo is one of those seizing such an opportunity in *The Great Recoil*, addressing the question of systemic transformation against the backdrop of two major crises: *populism* – the rise of populist actors and increasing demands for policies based around people-centrism – and the COVID-19 *pandemic*. How will they shape the world of tomorrow, he asks, providing an answer in the nine chapters of this 288-page book. Or, in more concrete and politically charged terms: *what comes after neoliberalism?*

This question is central to Gerbaudo, who follows many other thinkers on the left in identifying 'neoliberalism' as the dominant ideological structure of the present, a 'political and economic doctrine that has held sway over the world since the end of the Cold War' (18). But now, he argues, it is crumbling. As the aforementioned crises show, its 'playbook of free competition seems unfit to address present dilemmas' (19) and a 'systemic change in ideological space' (38) that converges around the return of state power (neo-statism) is about to replace it. With each social certainty succumbing to crisis pressure, with each iteration of market forces failing to mitigate its impact, with each instance of the political centre ceding ground to demands from the populist periphery, this change becomes more conspicuous. Ultimately, it is merely a matter of time until the neoliberal signifier that is freedom gives way to the neo-statist 'master-signifiers' (40) of sovereignty, protection and control. Gerbaudo devotes a single chapter to each of these, tracing their history and mapping their meaning.

Yet, there is more that unites than separates these signifiers, first and foremost their joint root in experiences of powerlessness and alienation. The craving for sovereignty, for instance, is described as a reaction to democratic preferences being subjected to the primacy of the market: it is a revolt against neoliberals who conceive of the term as a 'steel encasement suffocating the ability of individuals to determine' (80) their own fate and have no hesitation to hollow out the promise of democracy. The same pertains to protection, a concept that may appear 'alien to those who have spent most of their adult lives before the great crises' (99) of the past decade but has now become a necessity to fend off the threat posed by *laissez-faire* capitalism. Control, the third signifier, is basically a more practical form of protection, revolving around the perception that 'political control [...] has been lost', resulting in the demand to 'return to order and stability amid a world caught in chaos' (141).

In practice, Gerbaudo admits, all three concepts are strongly interlinked and may be best imagined as different aspects of a shift from *exopolitics* to *endopolitics*, from politics oriented towards the outside to those primarily concerned with the collective self. Debates that used to centre around future possibilities are increasingly dominated by a desire to preserve and protect, with more and more people responding to the precariousness of modern life by calling for the intervention of a potent state. In this moment, Gerbaudo claims, lies a historic chance for those advocating radical social change. After all, what could be a better way out of this misery than a 'socialism that protects' (252) and provides a real alternative to the masses? The ground has already been prepared – now the left must overcome its internal divisions to spark change and build a society of care, in which the commitment to equality and the pursuit of security seamlessly complement each other.



While this may sound impressive at first, one cannot help but recall the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy in 2008. Back then, almost everybody on the left seemed similarly convinced that this was the beginning of a new era; that from the ashes of [casino capitalism](#), a different society was bound to arise, a more egalitarian society in which the savage beast of financial markets would finally be tamed. But despite these prophecies, it did not take long for the global economy to recover, the bankers to return to their offices and the Occupy Wall Street protesters to fold up their tents in New York's Zuccotti Park. Not the faintest sign of revolutionary change, not even a fierce outcry of the mythical 99%, but plenty of disappointment for those who were premature in their judgment and sought salvation from a future that never came into being.

Gerbaudo is no soothsayer, and his analysis is more astute than the utopian dreams of the Occupy crowd. And yet, there are striking similarities, especially his conviction that we are witnessing a real paradigm shift rather than a straw fire. A bold claim, given that his argument rests on a quite exaggerated interpretation of both crises. Populism, if ever that [relevant](#), has clearly entered a phase of stagnation or even retreat. Since the 'Trump peak' in 2016, populist challengers have lost high-profile elections in [France](#), the [UK](#) and the [Netherlands](#), populist parties were ousted from power in Austria and Norway and populist positions have lost much of the 'forbidden fruit' status that contributed to their appeal. No longer do they represent serious challenges to a sclerotic status quo but rather corruption and incompetence, from Donald Trump's obscene narcissism to [Heinz-Christian Strache's Ibiza adventures](#).

At the same time, the perception of COVID-19 is also shifting in some countries from that of an unprecedented health crisis into that of an everyday nuisance. With mass vaccination campaigns being rolled out, mask mandates lifted and 'Freedom Days' proclaimed, the pandemic is increasingly loosening its tight grip on many societies and is beginning to fade from the centre of public attention. There is no doubt that it is leaving lasting scars, but there is little reason to agree that we are 'likely to see a phase of outright deglobalisation' and an 'existential challenge' (52) to global capitalism as Gerbaudo argues. Not only is this the [most robust \(albeit uneven\) economic recovery in 80 years](#), but there is very little empirical evidence in support of the deglobalisation thesis. In fact, prominent economists such as Pol Antràs have called such predications 'hyperbolic' and the pandemic 'not likely to constitute a significant de-globalization force' (2021: 2). Are all of these experts simply propagandists of the neoliberal cause – or could it rather be that Gerbaudo is a prisoner of his own argument?

Apart from this macro-critique, there are more points to be highlighted. For instance, it remains unclear to what extent populism and neoliberalism are actually in opposition to each other. Gerbaudo constructs such an opposition when he casts populism as a 'negative counterpart of neoliberal elitism' (21), but the truth is that populist parties form no monolithic bloc and some of them are [even more pro-market than the average centre-right party](#).

Similarly, one could question the view that COVID-19 has sparked a pro-statist consensus. It is certainly correct that most governments were riding on a wave of support during the early phase of the pandemic, but it is likewise correct that this support has waned since, with lockdowns and mandatory vaccinations giving rise to anti-state sentiment and mistrust towards political institutions. And even if we were to assume that there is a real 'return of the state', would this necessarily be tantamount to the end of neoliberalism? Even leftist thinkers such as Miloš Šumonja have their doubts, suspecting that 'the corona crisis might, in retrospect, appear as just another capitalist crisis, an integral part of its life cycle' (2021: 220).

What is more, Gerbaudo's argument is in places built around vague notions. He writes extensively about sovereignty, protection and control, but the relationship between them remains opaque and many details appear superfluous. Jean Bodin's *Six Livres sur la République* are always worth a read – but is it really necessary to go back to the sixteenth century to grasp the meaning of sovereignty, a term that is ultimately little more than 'a signifier [that] is filled by a variety of signifieds' (93)? In addition, the analysis of 'speeches, public declarations, policy documents and campaign messages' (39) is sparse and the tone polemical at times. Evidently, Gerbaudo is no friend of markets but contending that they 'can only be efficient when shielded by active patronage of the state' (199) or that free trade is 'subservience to the rapacious logic of international capitalism' (214) does not exactly help to advance his argument. It merely conveys a reductionist account of economic matters.

Still, *The Great Recoil* is not without merit. It draws on a depth of theoretical resources, provides elements that are stimulating – for example, the concept of long ideological waves – and does not cloak its argument in incomprehensible jargon. One would also do Gerbaudo wrong to consider him an apologist for unrestricted state power; he even warns ‘not to fall in the opposite trap [and worship] the state as an infallible actor’ (201). It would only have been beneficial if he had extended the same caution to the rest of this book. Perhaps he is right, and we will hear the roaring of the Leviathan for many years to come – it just does not seem very likely.

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