Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research, 35, 64-79 (2024)

Right Populism or Neoliberalism? Understanding Austerity in Doug Ford's Ontario

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines how right populism and neoliberalism can be regarded as ideologically co-constitutive in the context of Doug Ford's election as Premier of the Province of Ontario. In the case of Ford, this article demonstrates that right populism and neoliberalism can be mapped by understanding how they are ultimately complementary to one another, even when right populism appears as reactionary to neoliberalism. This is achieved through the performance of right populism and the enactment of neoliberalism co-existing at the point of both discourse and the material environment of legislation and the economy. Utilizing his political memoir (*Ford Nation*), the Conservative 2018 election platform, and the first two years of critical legislation passed by his government relating to de-democratization and disempowering labour and workers, this article shows that the socio-historical specificity of Ford's ideological plan is rooted in austerity politics. While sharing rigid market fundamentalism with neoliberalism, Ford's brand of right populism obscures the complexity of economic and democratic issues in Ontario, allowing a legislative agenda built around the continued neoliberalization of Ontario.

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism; De-democratization; Populism; Doug Ford; Ontario; Austerity

When Doug Ford was elected Premier of Ontario in the Spring of 2018, it marked a departure from the previous 15 years of uninterrupted Liberal rule. Previous Liberal premiers Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne had cultivated a "softer" form of neoliberalism and austerity (Albo et al., 2019), usually titled "Third Way" neoliberalism (Jones, 2018; Peck and Tickell, 2002). At that time, the province reached a turning point in its model of capitalist accumulation. Following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the rise of anti-government populism in North American political culture, the Liberals sunk to new lows in their approval ratings and leading up to the 2018 election, the Progressive Conservatives (PC) were polling ahead on the strength of "bread-and-butter" issues in the suburbs: namely, crime, the economy, and jobs (McGrath, 2018).

They were also polling significantly ahead in rural areas, certainly compounded not just by voter fatigue with 15 years of Liberal rule but also multiple political spending scandals involving previous Premier McGuinty. Liberal government scandals regarding public spending and a lack of accountability and transparency in their style of governance (Perrella et al., 2020) resulted in McGuinty's resignation and replacement with Premier Wynne but failed to remedy the situation. Ford had recently left municipal politics but was spring-boarded into the Conservative leadership by the downfall of Patrick Brown in a scandal. Ford purported to represent the "silent majority" and "the people," juxtaposing himself against "Liberal elites" who were unaccountable and rode the "gravy train" of big government (Ford, 2016). The transfer of Ford Nation narratives from his brother to himself, along with a historic collapse of Liberal support and a lack of New Democratic Party (NDP) representation of class interests, led to Ford's electoral success.

Early media accounts of Ford's victory attributed his success to the deployment of Trump-style politics, placing his win in the broader context of right populism and authoritarian politics in Europe and the United States. While Trump's comparisons no doubt played a role in his election, it reduced complexity for the sake of generalizable theory and reduced the differences between an

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often welfare-state-supporting European model and a market fundamentalist anti-welfare state model of right populism in North America (Pelinka, 2013). It also obscures two critical aspects of his brand of governing. Firstly, the type of populism Ford cultivates is a right populism rooted in geography and a legacy that (in)directly harkens to Harris's Common Sense Revolution (CSR). Ford's discourse also relies on a "neoliberal common-sense" message highlighting Ontario's geographic cleavages (Silver et al., 2020; Erl, 2021). Secondly, it is crucial to understand the relationship between (right) populism and neoliberalization. Populism and neoliberalism exist in socio-materially complex and contingent environments and must be analyzed in their co-existence with other ideologies and rationalities. Ford's populist politics must be understood as reactive yet intrinsic to existing neoliberalization processes. When combined with market fundamentalism, these constructions allow right populist discourse and neoliberalization processes to co-exist in the material environment of discourse and the state.

The first section explores ways of conceptualizing populism and neoliberalism and how these elements co-exist in the campaigning and governing strategies of Doug Ford. We can understand how neoliberalism has created the conditions for the rise of the current strains of right populism (Brown, 2019; Kiely, 2020; Puhringer and Otsch, 2019; Putzel, 2020) while utilizing populist language at specific historical and cultural moments. Secondly, a case study of Ford's political memoir, *Ford Nation*, and his 2018 PC political platform will be analyzed to understand how he performs populist discourse and narrative. Thirdly, Ford's government legislation related to local democratic institutions and labour relations in the province will be analyzed to contrast his performance of right populism with the reality of his neoliberal austerity policies.

The Better Local Government Act (2018) restructured Toronto's city council by cutting nearly half of the councillor seats and ties into the critical theme of neoliberalism's focus on restructuring liberal democratic institutions. The final three bills all focus on the neoliberal attempt to undercut the power of labour in the province and assert the power of capital and employers in their relationship with labour. Studying legislative change is critical because, as Chandler notes (2020, 126), current research has focused on how populists perform and win elections but dedicated far less attention to the policy agendas they implement while in office. Much of the existing analysis on Ford claims he is either a populist at the level of only discursive analysis and pre-governing (Budd, 2020; Erl, 2021) or is focused on exploring the social construction of what constitutes "Ford Nation" (Macaulay, 2023; Silver et al., 2020).

A study combining pre-office discourse, campaign discourse, and the material legislation of the first two years of an elected executive is vital to understanding the ideological flexibility of right populism from a discursive perspective. However, it also allows for understanding how the neoliberal materiality of economic policies relates to the populist veneer of self-proclaimed populists and the ultimate manifestation of market fundamentalism and austerity measures that are instituted by the government in question. This contributes to the critical literature on populism and neoliberalism, and the case study choice allows for a historical and geographic sub-national contextual analysis that can substantiate the conceptual goals of actually-existing neoliberalism. The case study is limited to the first two years of governing due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which presents a significant disruption in politics and governing for the Ford government. An independent study of Ford's pandemic governance would be a worthwhile undertaking in its own right but cannot be effectively undertaken within the confines of this analysis.

Understanding (Right) Populism and Neoliberalism

Let us begin by defining neoliberalism. Wendy Brown's oft-cited definition describes neoliberalism as an assemblage of economic and social policies that affirm free markets, i.e. Deregulation, austerity, privatization, end of wealth redistribution, the privileging of finance capital, and the extension of economics further into previously uncommodified aspects of social lives (Brown, 2015, 28). While this encompasses the breadth and depth of neoliberalism as an ideology, on its own, it does not suffice as a tool to interrogate Ford's policy regime. A theoretically adequate approach must also emphasize the "contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring processes" by focusing on how neoliberalism is implemented in historically and geographically contingent contexts (Brenner et al., 2002; Brenner et al., 2010; Peck and Theodore, 2019). It is necessary to understand "actually-existing neoliberalism" as a geographically, historically, socially, and materially specific form (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Brenner et al., 2010; Peck et al., 2018). Neoliberalism is never fixed or finished; it does not fail or evaporate in moments of crisis or change. Instead, it is adaptable and can be reconstituted. Neoliberalism must not be essentialized or treated in isolation from its social context, nor may it be used to explain every aspect of the social order.

This is where the current rise of right populist rhetoric comes into play. Populism, at its most basic, invokes a type of revolt against established structures, values, and institutions in the name of and in appeal to "the people" (Canovan, 1999; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Stanley, 2008; Mudde, 2015; Chandler, 2020). For Stanley, populism has four clear base principles: (1) the existence of two homogenous units of analysis (the people and the elite); (2) the antagonistic relationship between the two; (3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and, (4) the positive valorization of the people and the denigration of the elite (2008, 102). Others invoke similar descriptions of populism (Chander, 2020; Mudde, 2015; Otsch and Puhringer, 2017), often adding that populist politics tends to rhetorically demonize "special interests" (Laycock, 2005; Brown, 2019).

Right populism as a sub-type of populism is the most robust concept for understanding Ford's methods of governance. Arguably, right populism is an "illiberal democratic response to an undemocratic response to an undemocratic liberalism" (Mudde, 2015). But this definition only captures one component of a more complex picture. Despite rhetorical appeals to "the people" and condemnations of the elite, right populism also features anti-democratic values and is often used to support the implementation of repressive methods of population control through a strong state. It differs from neoliberalism in its more anti-globalization politics rooted in protecting domestic labour and issues of national sovereignty over borders and trade. However, this is significantly less explicit, or even implicit, at sub-national and regional levels of government, like that of provincial governments.

Right populist rhetoric provides symbolic responses to the legitimation crises caused by neoliberal policies by representing the victimized "people" as victims of public administrative power rather than capitalism. In this manner, the state's power is much more of a problem of access, with inorganic elites corrupting existing institutions and compounding that power by using bureaucracy and liberal democratic institutions to repress the organic people. Michael Bray argues that populism is a symptom of repressed class antagonisms forming in the representative institutions of the capitalist state, where: "Because the problem is construed as one of 'private government,' the solution tends to appear as 'the people' regaining the control of the public functions proper to common-sense notions of governing. Control over the economic functions of the state can appear as the endgame of social transformation, masking the structures of exploitation" (2015, 44).

This has much in common with Stuart Hall's argument that the crisis of social democracy in the 1970s-80s UK was driven by the ability of Thatcherism to ingratiate itself with popular elements (Hall, 1985). Hall allows for an understanding of the linkage between legitimation crises and populism, wherein crisis is often the stage in which populism performs (Knott, 2020, 116). This is also true because while right populists pose a threat to neoliberal *consensus*, their focus on spatial and institutional aspects stops short of confronting the foundational economic premises of neoliberalism (Davidson and Saul argue (2017, 717; italics added by author). This invokes both a theoretical and practical understanding of neoliberalism and its primary protagonists to understand the assumptions that are made about the economy and the state, intervention vs. (perceived) lack of intervention, and the "size" of government (Kiely, 2020; Peck, 2010; Puhringer and Otsch, 2018).

Despite analytical discredit, failures, and contradictions, the continued survival of neoliberal ideas is based on its continued "mongrelization" or its ability to be forged into new hybridities (Peck, 2010, 40). After all, Hayek claimed that it was not the amount or extent of state intervention but rather the character of the interventions in question (Kiely, 2020, 404). With inequality on the rise and increasingly consistent economic crises, rhetoric from the right attacking the state maintains the need for more neoliberalization and austerity but in the name of the people against elites who have captured public policy-making processes. Undermining liberal-democratic principles and attacks on attempts at inclusivity under progressive neoliberalisms does not challenge the core principles of capitalism in any way. It also mimics the neoliberal thought of James Buchanan and the public choice school, who portray liberal democracy as inherently dysfunctional due to representatives being "rent-seeking" individuals and the average person under the current system is unable to hold them accountable due to lacking a "fiscal morality that refrained from running deficits and abhorred debt" (in Biebricher, 2020, 48). He further argues that "establishment elites" are the enemies of a flourishing society and economy, evangelizing a form of politics in which the arbitrarily intrusive and illegitimate liberal democratic governments have undercut constitutional order (in Biebricher, 2020, 52). This also invokes the strategy of authoritarian populism, deploying the discourses of "the people" against class, unions, and the "others" cast as the cause of society's ills while receiving special treatment from the social democratic project (Knott, 2020, 115-116).

However, the debates around the thin-ness or thickness of populism (Stanley, 2008) seem to miss much of the point of analyzing right populism specifically, that being a need for historically specific and contingent analysis of political actors, both materially and discursively. For the sake of generalizable theory, the conceptual usefulness of populism, in any analytical form, can become so stretched and vague that "if everything is potentially populist, nothing is really populist anymore" (Tarragoni, 2024, 44). It is also crucial to address not just the inherited institutional and geographic frameworks of said "populist" political actors but a critical understanding of pre-existing histories of ideology. If we attempt to understand right populism in any ideological manner, we have an imperative to address the past alongside the present because ideologies are historical formations (Bray, 2015; Freeden, 1996). In some cases, right populism may be thin and performative at the level of discourse; in others, it could be thick due to foundational ideas where "Scarce and vital resources should be distributed according to the principle that certain people, those within an ethnic group or other criterion of deservingness that excludes others, should be prioritized in allocating resources" (Schroeder, 2020, 15). On both of these grounds, right populism interacts with the inherited ideological frameworks and institutional impacts of neoliberalism, specifically in Ontario.

Several scholars have noted that the rise of right populist rhetoric and more brutal austerity measures have followed the failure of socially liberal (Third Way or progressive) neoliberalism (Fraser, 2017; Kiely, 2020). Rejecting any notion of the public or the social, these reactionary forms of politics seek to undermine the rights-based approaches to diversity and government welfare programs of these softer forms of neoliberalism (Kiely, 2020, 399; Putzel, 2020, 421). Indeed, softer forms of neoliberal approaches to social policy have created reactionary resentment among middle-class and working people who have experienced economic decline (Putzel, 2020). Kiely (2020) argues that right populism is typically a response to the socially liberal variant of neoliberalism and fails to generate any fundamental systematic critique of the economic realities of neoliberalism. Friesen (2021, 1) builds on this: "Although populism is often conceived of as a rejection of neoliberalism, its right-wing formations generally only object to the 'globalization' elements of neoliberalism, but otherwise advance neoliberalism's faith in the justness of markets and morals over redistributive social justice. Indeed, this rejection of redistributive state interventions and bureaucracy moves hand-in-hand with the reactionary elements of right-wing populist formations." In this manner, contemporary right populisms react to both more complex and softer forms of neoliberalization, yet at the same time reinforce the dominant social relations of neoliberalism – that is, the extension of market logic over nearly all forms of daily life. The rigid categorization of "populist politicians" obscures the complexity of their policies and ideas.

At its core, the right-populist moment rejects the institutions of political elitism that exist within neoliberalizing states: the "government oligarchy" and "senior bureaucratic caste," the media, and academics/experts are framed as the "discursive cement of oligarchic power." It is less a response to the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism and more a response to how neoliberalism has remade institutions and is reproduced daily both within and without those institutions. Neoliberalism's starvation of liberal democracy has created the conditions for this blowback. This is aided by Brown's assertion that neoliberalism achieves legitimacy by "cloaking itself" in liberal democratic discourse (2003, 49), and both she and Brenner et al. (2010) argue that neoliberalism works within inherited liberal democratic institutions to remake itself and the institutions themselves. Actually-existing neoliberalism constantly shifts in its interactions with other actors, always cloaking itself in discourses that aim to soften the hard edges of austerity and surveillance wherever it appears.

As Hall and Bray show, populist discourse, at even a performative level, is often crucial for the operationalization of neoliberalism. Puhringer and Otsch build upon populism to show how these ideas are present in both right populism and different varieties of market-fundamental reasoning, which is the foundational basis of neoliberalism (2017, 2018). They invoke both a theoretical and practical understanding of neoliberalism and its primary protagonists to understand the assumptions that are made about the economy and the state, intervention vs (perceived) lack of intervention, and the "size" of government (Kiely, 2020; Puhringer and Otsch, 2017, 2018,). In this manner, neoliberalism uses the crises it generates and constantly exacerbates to better impose the logic of capital and undercut competing notions of what the state should represent.

For these reasons, it is necessary to wed the ideational to the institutional to understand the relationship between the discursive and material power of what constitutes neoliberalism and its associated social relations in Ontario. By taking analytical lessons from discursive institutionalism and critical discourse analysis, a more critical understanding of how ideas are actualized into material politics. Vivienne Schmidt is illustrative here when she argues: "Discourse is not just ideas or 'text' (what is said) but also context (where, when, how, and why it was said). The term refers not only to structure (what is said, or where and how) but also to agency (who said what to

whom)" (2008, 304). Both Van Dijk (2015) and Fairclough and Wodak (1997) highlight the necessity to address discourse as embedded in social relations and structure, how power relations are discursive and how discourse is historical, does ideological work, and is a form of social action. This necessity to understand Ford's discourse as embedded in the social relations of capitalism, and more specifically neoliberalism, grounds the analysis in the following sections.

Populist Discourse: Ford Nation and the PC Platform

While he portrays himself as a populist, Ford's policy-making pursues rollbacks from Third Way neoliberalism and the reconsolidation of harder forms of neoliberalism from the 1980s and 1990s. Canada's neoliberal governments of the 1990s and 2000s aimed to prevent the state from "interfering" in markets and undermined social provisioning through austerity measures in the name of business principles (Laycock, 2005). Ford borrows heavily from this Canadian legacy of right populism that was most concretely formulated in the 1990s in Alberta and the West by the Reform Party and, to a lesser degree, in Ontario by the PC's. Harris used right populist rhetoric to argue that it was 'time we demanded the same from the people we elect and the bureaucrats we hire' (CSR, 1995), playing into the people vs the elites and common-sense vs bureaucratic decision-making dichotomies. Austerity was justified by needing to protect taxpayers from a bloated government stealing from their paycheques and one that 'justifies the existence of bureaucrats who run it' (CSR, 1995). The notion that they will 'put the people first' ahead of big government means privatization and the necessity of the 'government does business like a business' and 'put the customer first' (CSR, 1995). Again, we see the use of right-populist and neoliberal categories like the taxpayer, the customer, and the people, all cast against the elites, bureaucrats, and special interests who use the state to benefit themselves. Rather than merely demonizing the state, both Harris and Reform used right populist dichotomies to herald the mythical "people" and anti-elitism as tools to legitimate austerity.

Ford Nation was written by Doug Ford and inspired by his late brother, Rob Ford. It is as much a political platform as a memoir, an uncompromising and unfiltered manifesto for his brand of right populism and neoliberalism and how he would manifest it in Ontario and Toronto. It would be his unfiltered instrument to communicate with "the people" and the "taxpayers," terms that were foundational to the book. "The people" is used to construct a homogenous group of support no less than 13 times in the book, such as: "The people are smart,' Rob would always say. 'They know what they want.' Well, he was right. The people knew what they wanted in 2010. They wanted Rob Ford to fix Toronto" (Ford, 2016, 80).

This rhetoric constructs "the people" as the group who supports the Ford family ideology, while those who do not are dismissed as irrelevant through their construction as non-members. The only reason he does not say "the people" more is because he uses the term "Ford Nation" interchangeably to represent the same conceptual group. He relies on the historical capitalist and neoliberal discourse of constructing a dichotomy of givers and takers regarding the welfare state. He relies on the simultaneously neoliberal and right populist language of the "taxpayer," the person who gives to the economy and pays their fair share, constructed in opposition to the people who are takers. "Taxpayers" is used as a positive group signifier throughout the book and is placed in a dialectic with members of the out-group: the union members, the government workers, welfare recipients, and special interest groups. While the idea of the taxpayer is utilized by all parties under neoliberalism, in different political ways, taxpayers are a key conceptual dichotomous category used to represent the socially constructed "middle class" and their resentment of "non-taxpayers" or the undeserving poor within capitalism. Ford represents a fine-tuning of these politics by

wedding market fundamentalism to populist language, where "the people" and "the taxpayers" are meant to represent the in-group in Buchanan's public choice paradigm, where the other "elites" and "special interests" stand in the way of economic liberalism. Nowhere was this more evident than when Ford demonized all other councillors in an attempt to bolster his brother's image, arguing, "I will always believe that Rob was a better politician drunk or sober than the vast majority of people presently holding office in Toronto" (Ford, 2016, 209)

This construction is placed within the populist dichotomy of the people vs. the elites, the latter being represented by "lefties," people from "downtown" [Toronto], and the liberal-dominated "media." Within populism, the in-group is reinforced by knowing what it is in opposition to, and these dichotomies are crucial to the reproduction of ideology and interpretations of power. "Lefties" and variations of the word ("downtown lefties," "downtown left-wingers") are used pejoratively throughout, for example: "Rob used to say that if everyone in Etobicoke. Scarborough, and North York would *come together and vote as a block*, they wouldn't be ignored by the *downtown elites*" (Ford, 2016, 94, italics added). This geographical, classist, and demography-based signifier of "downtown" is used pejoratively to construct the group of elites that repress the natural rule of "the people." Ford specifically used right-populist language to create a divide between Toronto and the rest of Ontario while at the same time having a long (and continued) history of creating divides between downtown Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These collapse all economic and social complexities to simple antagonistic discourses based on where people live, with attacks directed at the differing forms of Toronto. His invocation of these binaries is meant to further previous neoliberalization projects of Harris (amalgamation and neoliberalization to undercut the "progressive" demands of downtown Toronto) and Ford's late brother, Rob (who constantly attacked various groups of people who were seen to compose the population and interests of downtown Toronto).

Finally, the term "customer service" is glowingly used throughout the book, often highlighting what democratic politics lacks compared to populist and neoliberal ideas. Ford consistently harkens back to his father's focus on customer service that he (and Rob) then brought to their political careers, for example: "All I had to do was take that good old customer service model and carry on" (Ford, 2016, 109). This is another clear ideological and intellectual linkage to neoliberal thought, focusing on making government run more like a business and citizens be rendered as "customers" or "taxpayers." To the Fords, "the answer is running things more efficiently," to be found through reducing the "thousands of people on the city payroll filling up the unions" and the "10 tiers of middle managers… really doing anything except justifying their own jobs" (Ford, 2016, 92). The government is constructed as a gravy train full of people who steal and waste taxpayers" money, and only when this is overthrown will order be restored in society and the market. This is one of the critical tenets of not just a more generalized conception of neoliberalism but the actually-existing neoliberalism that has operated in Ontario since the CSR of Mike Harris in 1995.

Ford's 2018 campaign for Premier of Ontario mentions policy choices more specifically. Still, it failed to create clear and cost-analyzed policy ideas in the platform – which he was heavily criticized for by the 'liberal media.' Despite being a much smaller document, the platform has seven positive constructions of "the people," "special interests" are used as a scapegoat for Ontario's problems four times, "open for business," and "respect for taxpayers" are featured prominently throughout as subheadings and key slogans (*Plan for the People*, 2018). Again, we see apparent tensions between surface-level populism and coded neoliberal discourse. These tensions are no more explicit than when Ford states: "You know me. You know what I stand for.

You know that I am here for the people… make life easier for you and your family" (*Plan for the People*, 2018). To reproduce his populist image, he uses personalistic depictions of himself as an outsider or benevolent everyman you would want to have a beer with. His language is rooted in much of the same discourse of his book, such as arguing to: "clean up the mess in government and restore respect for *taxpayers*," "put people ahead of insiders and elites," "*The people* see that the system just isn't working for them anymore," and "With your help we can Open Ontario for business again" (*Plan for the People*, 2018, italics added). This is in response not to previous three decades of neoliberalization in the province but rather because "the Liberals are a corrupt elite that prioritize special interest groups" and the "people demand respect from the Ontario government as taxpayers… [and] that pay taxes to the political elites" (*Plan for the People*, 2018). Like all political parties in Canada, Ford places capitalism in a vacuum. However, he uses populist rhetoric to render all economic issues as the fault of the constructed "elite," which does not include investment firms, major corporations, or the real estate industry.

While praising Harris as a "real no-bullshit straight shooter" that "Rob and I both followed his example in our political careers" (Ford, 2016, 41), he spends as much time praising the CSR's radical neoliberal re-orientation of society in Ontario. He uses the performative power and valorization of what Moffit (2014) refers to as "everyday experience" and Schmittian divisions between "us and them" to complement the more toned-down and hidden neoliberal realities of the policies he invokes. Rather than the technocratic style of Third Way neoliberalism, he espouses what Moffit and Tormey describe as a form of bad manners, political incorrectness, and the championing of "common sense against bureaucrats, technocrats, representatives, or guardians of our interests" (2014, 391). He is not mobilizing a group like other more overt right populists (including white nationalists), but instead mobilizing through the language of neoliberal individualism, reoriented to attack the surface of the system of neoliberalism without changing its fundamental dispossessions and contradictions. The system retains what Putzel (2020, 421) says is "the people as a collection of separate individuals pursuing their unlimited right to private well being;" albeit constructed differently due to the changing socio-material context at play.

Right-populist discourse at the surface level obfuscates the goals of neoliberalization while at the same time invoking the same foundational conceptualization of the free market and a clear-cut dichotomized view of who is deserving and authentic versus who is undeserving and parasitic on the system. Consistent is the appeal to market fundamentalism throughout the book and the platform, allowing for a convergence between neoliberalism and right populism. However, this cannot be fully explored without evaluating the policies and actually-existing neoliberalism in Ontario since Ford's election. The following section will outline Ford's government's legislative and policy reality beyond the right-populist discourse of his book and platform.

Less Deliberation, More Business: De-democratization of Toronto City Council

When looking closer at the Ford government's legislative record (pre-COVID), we can see much of the flesh given to the bones of the campaign promises and claims in his memoir. It is necessary to understand politics at the legislative and material level, as opposed to strictly discursive, which exposes both the convergences and divergences between rhetoric and legal-institutional structures. Due to this, it is too simple to claim that Ford's policy agenda reflects either right populism or neoliberalism. By focusing on two critical ideological and legislative categories, namely liberal democratic institutions and the political economy of labour and business, this section will show how it is much more complete to understand how Ford has specifically assembled aspects of right populist rhetoric and neoliberal materiality along the lines of market

fundamentalism, but also how this results in right-populist discourse that can cloak and/or distract from what amounts to neoliberal austerity.

In his book, Ford said that the first thing he would attempt to implement was a strong mayoral system that imbued veto and discretionary power in the mayor's office to cut through the "dysfunctional" decision-making processes within a city council containing 47 members (Ford, 2016). *The Better Local Government Act* (2018) was the onset of this and the more neoliberal goal of undermining liberal representative democracy to insulate austerity from oversight and critique. This bill utilized the "creatures of the province provision" of the Constitution to unilaterally cut the city council from 47 to 25 seats in the middle of an election period, with the stated object of saving $25 million. Ford invoked right-populist ideas of too much politics, too many politicians, and nothing getting done. In reality, the policy continues Harris's neoliberal attacks on local government, especially concerning the City of Toronto.

Harris amalgamated cities across the province, fired hundreds of municipal politicians, and reduced the size of the Ontario legislature. The effect was to centralize power further in Queen's Park and the Premier's office, allowing the province to run roughshod over municipalities and their budgets in the name of "efficiency" and "accountability." This concentration of power has increased, with Ford keen to reduce the space for electing, as he put it: "lefties in Toronto that he informally invoked the rarely used notwithstanding clause to limit democratic and judicial oversight (Albo, 2018). Ford further remarked that the only people fighting the council's restructuring were special interest groups and left-wing councillors "hoping for a free ride on the backs of taxpayers" (Rieti, 2018). Ford's goal was simple: making government more "efficient" at the expense of essential liberal-democratic deliberation and privileging market fundamentalism to flourish as it is both normalized and insulated from critique.

The ethos of this disruption of Toronto's democratic institutions is rooted in Ford's populist rhetoric about "downtown elites" and the issues with progressive councillors standing in the way of his and his late brother's plan for harsher forms of austerity at both the city and provincial level. Ford's logic was rooted in Buchanan-esque anti-deliberative decision-making views (additionally intertwined with anti-downtown rhetoric), reflected in such statements as "Nothing gets done at City Hall" (Benzie, 2018a) and that the change was necessary from the provincial level of government because: "Everyone opposed are a bunch of downtown politicians… Your [member of parliament] MPP wants bigger government. Do you want more transit with the $25 million, do you want more housing, or do you want *22 overpaid politicians from downtown*?" (Ford, 2018b; italics added by author). His populist appeals against downtown political elites are used to animate the demands for neoliberal institutional efficiency and for the government to run like a business. Ford's opinions on consultation and deliberation were made pretty clear by his brother's former deputy mayor, Norm Kelly, who stated: "I don't think he enjoys the cut and thrust of debate because, as a business person, he wants to get all the facts out on the table and make a decision as quickly as possible" (Pelley, 2018). For Ford: "Good governance in any corporation is seven to nine because you can't get anything done if you have 20 people around the table" (Ford, 2018a).

Like Harris amalgamating Toronto with the suburbs around it, Ford purposefully empowered suburban conservatism to undercut the idea of the "progressive downtown" character. Dennis Pilon (2018) argues that the goal is to weaken the already shallow substance of liberal democracy, all in favour of strengthening neoliberalism, austerity, and the power of those with substantial wealth. Ultimately the goals are to embrace market fundamentalism: reducing the size of the state concerning the character of its intervention in the market and limiting the ability of liberal democratic institutions to critique austerity politics.

When challenged by multiple courts, Ford sternly stated that unelected judges should stay out of the elected Premier's territory (Rieti, 2018). The discourse and narrative used by Ford and Harris are explicitly right-populist, but they are also intensely neoliberal, utilizing both ideologies' dichotomizations to justify their policy choices. Those interested in issues of democratic representation are painted as the other, the left-wing ideologues and special interests, the enemies of the people, and the taxpayers within neoliberal and right-populist dichotomies. It is representative of what Bray argues is the use of populist appeals to further de-democratize the neoliberal state, mainly its economic functions (2015, 50).

Open For Business: Consolidating Capitalist Class Rule

The principal animating rhetoric used by Ford to represent his pro-employer, anti-labour ideological framework was the slogan indicating Ontario was "Open For Business." Presented as the name of bills, talking points to the media, and physical signs at border entry points across the province, the idea of making Ontario open for business iterates two essential claims. First, it was not open for business before, despite the neoliberal convergence of all Ontario political parties regarding anti-worker and anti-union policymaking over the last 30 years. In this way, Ford represents the continuity of the permanent exceptionalism masquerading as temporary fiscal measures targeting labour (Evans et al., 2023). Secondly, if it had not been open for business before, the solution to the failures of neoliberalism would be more neoliberalism. "Open for Business" reflects the neoliberal principles of making government more efficient and more flexible, essentially privileging capital over labour via deregulation and austerity. It echoes the concern of Evans et al. (2023) when they argue that freedom under neoliberalism is for those who do business, not those who work for companies or governments (who increasingly act like businesses themselves). While appearing as a hardline form of neoliberalism, Ford uses the right-populist language and dichotomies to attempt to insulate the actual politics and social relations from critique. Ontario becomes representative of the people, as Ford constructed in his book and campaign (now that he leads the province), and they are to be protected from the demands of the elites (labour and public-sector unions).

The *Making Ontario Open for Business Act* (2018) was the first strike against labour and one of the first sweeping legislative acts by the Ford government. The key provisions of the act undid previous Liberal (previous Bill 148) improvements to labour standards, namely removing paid sick-day guarantees, eliminating equal pay for equal work provisions between part-time and full-time workers doing the same work, made it harder to join a union, removed job protections by allowing certain employers to classify workers as contractors, and most notably, cancelled the minimum wage increase (from $14 to $15) (Mojtehedzadeh, 2018). Through much consultation with businesses, MPP Michael Parsa argued: "Ontario imposes thousands of rules that businesses are telling us just don't make sense," and, "We'll also do what smart businesses do, we will listen to our customers" (Parsa, 2018). Invoking race to the bottom neoliberalism, Ford demanded that detractors "listen to the job creators" while claiming the minimum wage increases were "worse than the carbon tax when it comes to job-killing," alongside the hyperbole of being "the worst bill for the front-line hard-working people this province has ever seen" (Benzie, 2018c). At a private event for Ontario Chamber of Commerce member corporations, Ford warned that special interests were trying to thwart the bill, accusing them of violence and intimidation, while assuring the interests of capital to: "Keep fighting with me. You know that I am here to fight for the little guy" (Benzie, 2018d). At this point, the right-populist rhetoric has wholly disappeared, and a neoliberal inversion of the framework of elites and the people has been reoriented to make the interests of

capital indicative of the proverbial little guy. By invoking pro-labour legislation as the "red tape that is driving jobs and investment out of our province" (Toronto Star Editorial Board, 2018b), Ford is reproducing foundational neoliberal frameworks and language to justify disciplining labour to increase profits. He would continue this in the following two bills as well.

The equally aptly named *Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act* (2018) was omnibus legislation that builds on these rollbacks under the guise of "reducing red tape" and creating "good jobs" (Rushowy, 2018). The government removed overtime caps and protections resulting in lower pay for the same work and re-classified non-construction employers (municipalities, hospitals, universities) so they could hire non-unionized labour (effectively cancelling existing bargaining agreements). The language invoked in support of the bill bears much in common with the previous bill and the language utilized by Ford in his platform and book. PC MPP Andrea Khanjin referred to the Liberal era as "darkness in the province" and that restoration was necessary through a: "progressive government that's bringing back the light again, bringing in the competitiveness" (Khanjin, 2019).

Finally, Bill 124, the *Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act* (2019), was announced within a year of Ford's election and notably imposed a complete overruling of collective bargaining rights by the state in the name of neoliberalism and attacks on public-sector unions. The bill limits compensation increases to one percent per bargaining round, blaming the government deficit on public sector workers rather than revenue shortages, tax cuts for corporations and the rich, and appropriation of state funds through public-private partnerships. The bill effectively overrules open collective bargaining and the rights of unionized workers. Ford utilized fault lines between private and public sector unions by attacking public unions and contrasting them with the "hard-working people in private sector unions" specifically (Ford, 2019). He differentiates between good and bad unionists, the "hard-working people, folks who don't always toe the union line" and, "the people we are up against, they're the same ones who drove the province into the ground" (Stone, 2022). This rhetoric employs the right populist imaginary but in the service of market fundamentalism and the anti-worker politics of neoliberalism. The Ontario Court of Appeal found the legislation unconstitutional in February 2024, resulting in billions of dollars of back pay owed to public sector workers. Even as it was defeated and Ford backed down, he would argue against constitutional supremacy by stating, "the parliament is supreme, meaning the people are supreme," and saying that wage restraint should be left to the government and not the courts (Jones, 2024).

These significant pieces of legislation draw upon the right populism and neoliberalism of Ford's memoir and platform. The embrace of market fundamentalism through attacks on pay equity, minimum wage, workers' safety, and labour rights is evident immediately and reflects the economic ideology of the state under neoliberalism. More specifically, it embraces explicit dichotomous constructions to justify itself, namely that of the market vs. big government (by cutting regulations, wage equity, and worker safety) and public sector union employees vs. everyday workers (attacking collective bargaining rights). The idea of the abstracted economy is to be privileged above actual people, outlined in a vacuum categorically separate from the reality of the social relations of capitalism. Those making minimum wage or using sick days are constructed as problematic, notably inferred as lazy or undeserving rather than hard-working, deserving workers, or as impediments to a prosperous economy. These wage and employment protections were referred to by Ford as "job killers" (Bleyer, 2018), and MPP Laurie Scott said the minimum wage should be decided by "economics and not politics" (Crawley and Janus, 2018). By artificially separating politics from economics, they reproduce economic liberalism and capitalism

in ways that insulate austerity choices as logical, rational, and inevitable beyond political discussion and critique. Wendy Brown argues that the depoliticization of social problems under neoliberalism strips economic and social outcomes of how they have been historically produced, continuing the project of depoliticizing capitalism itself (2006; 2015). This further builds on the broader traditional trajectory of capitalism, which Ellen Wood argues is predicated on the "expulsion of politics" from the areas with which it was always traditionally intertwined (Wood, 2012, 27). Ford explicitly builds on Buchanan's laments against pre-Keynesian fiscal orthodoxy and intergenerational debt, arguing: "The transfer of debt from one generation onto the next is not an acceptable proposition" (Hauen, 2019).

By framing public sector unions as out of touch with the abstracted market, he aims to rile up non-unionized workers to support his attacks on labour in general. Rather than representing workers as right-populist discourse inaccurately infers, it becomes a race to the bottom within neoliberalism as public-sector unions are gutted, driving down labour compensation across the board in both the public and private sectors. Both right populism and neoliberalism assembled under Ford to reinforce attacks on the working class and reconsolidate and reconstitute austerity as it became frequently discredited in a post-Financial Crisis political and economic context.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Doug Ford's ideology cannot be understood through a dichotomy of being exclusively right populist or neoliberal. Ford utilizes right populist rhetoric and legitimation to justify the necessity for more neoliberalization and austerity in the province of Ontario, resulting in the necessity to have a critical understanding of both right populism and neoliberalism. This is similar to the case within authoritarian populism, where Hall and Bray both argue that populist rhetoric is essential to legitimizing neoliberalism. While Ford uses clear right populist tropes such as "the people" vs "the elites," anti-bureaucratic and special interests language, and casts the sole villain of society as the liberal democratic state and its capture by these groups, the materiality of the legislation he passes is rooted in neoliberalization and austerity measures. When analyzing his legislative record while in office, it is clear that the material reality of his political project is rooted in market fundamentalism and neoliberalism, both a type contextual to him and his government, but also as a continuation of 30 years of neoliberalization in the province. As shown in this article, his labour and liberal democratic reform policies utilize right populist discourse but reflect foundational neoliberal ideas. Analyzing either rhetoric or legislation in a vacuum from one another is an ineffective approach to understanding the actuality and specificity of austerity politics. Further exploration of these subjects post-2020 would be especially fruitful due to the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which saw many neoliberal politicians pivot (albeit temporarily) to more direct interventionism into supplementing workers' wages, amongst other policies. Ford was perhaps known best for his ideological flailing throughout COVID, maybe the most reactionary and prone to the political retreat of all Canadian and provincial leaders. This would also showcase the necessity of investigating neoliberalism as it is actually-existing as a contingent historical process.

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