

## ARTICLE

## Pierre Rosanvallon, from the Critique of Utopian Liberalism to the Critique of the Critique of Neoliberalism\*

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The objective of this article is to problematize the place of liberalism in the work of Pierre Rosanvallon through a comparison of two moments of his intellectual career. The first moment is the book 'Le capitalisme utopique', in which the author extends Claude Lefort's critique of totalitarianism to the classical economic liberalism of the 18th century, which he accused of suppressing the political in its representation of society as a market. The second moment is the book 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique 1968-2018', in which Rosanvallon criticizes the use of the concept of neoliberalism by the contemporary intellectual left, stating that the critique of this monolithic and elusive concept prevents us from imagining political alternatives. The question I probe is whether this criticism of contemporary uses of the concept of neoliberalism is compatible with the author's critique of classical liberalism. To understand the evolution of the problem of liberalism in Rosanvallon's work, I explore his dialogue with Michel Foucault, arguing that this exchange adds complexity to Rosanvallon's interpretation of liberalism. In closing, I assess Rosanvallon's position on overarching concepts such as totalitarianism and neoliberalism, in light of the distinction between the critique of the founding utopias of modernity and the analysis of democratic experiments in contemporaneity.

**Keywords:** Liberalism; neoliberalism; Pierre Rosanvallon; totalitarianism; contemporary French political theory.

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The work of Pierre Rosanvallon has attracted the attention of the Brazilian community of political theorists in recent years (CINTRA, 2022; CUNHA and CASSIMIRO, 2022; CUNHA and LYNCH, 2021; MAGNELLI, CAMPOS and SILVA, 2019). In this article, I problematize an aspect of Rosanvallon's thought that remains underexplored: the author's assessment of liberalism and its critiques. As is known, Rosanvallon's intellectual maturation in the 1970s and 1980s occurred amid the so-called 'French antitotalitarian moment' (CHRISTOFFERSON, 2004), marked by the publication in 1974 of the French translation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 'The Gulag Archipelago' "a work that produces the effect of a nuclear bomb" (DOSSE, 2018, p. 240)<sup>1</sup>. Within French intellectual circles, this moment of critique of communist totalitarianism saw a decline in the Marxist tradition that had been hegemonic since the end of World War II. The period was followed, between the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, by a rediscovery of the liberal tradition, to the point that some preferred to characterize the 'antitotalitarian moment' positively as a 'liberal moment' (SAWYER and STEWART, 2016). Rosanvallon's early academic works, 'Le capitalisme utopique: critique de l'idéologie économique', published in 1979, and 'Le moment Guizot', published in 1985, are part of this resurgence of studies on the liberal tradition. Thus, investigating the place of liberalism in the author's political thought can move us towards a more comprehensive understanding of his work.

Despite his curiosity towards liberalism, Rosanvallon's criticism of classical liberals, especially the 18th-century economists he discusses in 'Le capitalisme utopique', is striking. As we will see in more detail, the author characterizes the market society theorized by philosophers like Adam Smith as an embryo of totalitarianism, since this representation of society would deny social division and the autonomy of 'the political' - the double negation that defines totalitarianism for Rosanvallon's intellectual mentor, Claude Lefort. Starting his academic career in this way, one might expect Rosanvallon to be an implacable critic of liberalism (or, at least, of economic liberalism), someone who sees in the contemporary neoliberal project a return of the totalitarian ghost of the homogeneous, transparent society

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<sup>1</sup>'un ouvrage qui fait l'effet d'une bombe nucléaire'.

absorbed by the market paradigm, suppressing — in the process — the autonomy of the political and cultural spheres.

In recent years, Rosanvallon has expressed a more nuanced view of neoliberalism. Indeed, the author has criticized the very use of the concept by contemporary leftists. In 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique 1968-2018', Rosanvallon asserts that, in attempting to synthesize all the ills of contemporary society in a totalizing manner, the word 'neoliberalism' "fails (...) to serve as a support for instrumental criticism, and thus cannot offer the perspective of an alternative or a way to overcome it" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 378)<sup>2</sup>. This word "simultaneously gives the feeling of being faced with the ungraspable and the unbreakable" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 378)<sup>3</sup>. In other words, while other leftist intellectuals have presented neoliberalism as the new global rationality of contemporary society, which reduces the social to a competitive market that puts democracy at risk by absorbing the political sphere — in a reasoning that evokes Rosanvallon's reading of classical economic liberalism — Rosanvallon himself does not consider it fruitful to attribute all the ills of contemporary society to a single encompassing concept, a monster so indomitable that "it can be denounced, its manifestations deplored, but without being able to affirm anything beyond a vague imperative of resistance or a powerless lamentation" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 278)<sup>4</sup>.

The question that will guide this article is: is Rosanvallon's critique of contemporary uses of the concept of neoliberalism compatible with his critique of classical liberalism in 1979, or is there a change in position? How can we understand that the same author who denounced, in 1979, the representation of society as a market as an embryo of totalitarianism, criticized in 2018 those who denounce the neoliberal reduction of society to a competitive market? In short, to what extent does Rosanvallon consider, in 1979 and in 2018, a (neo) liberal global project as a relevant object of criticism?

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<sup>2</sup>échoue (...) à pouvoir servir de support à une critique instrumentale, ne pouvant donc offrir la perspective d'une alternative ou d'un dépassement'.

<sup>3</sup>'donne du même coup le sentiment de faire face à l'insaisissable et à l'inébranlable'.

<sup>4</sup>'on peut le dénoncer, en déplorer les manifestations mais sans pouvoir affirmer autre chose qu'un impératif flou de résistance ou une déploration impuissante'.

To answer these questions, this article will proceed as follows. Section I will examine the thesis of 'Le capitalisme utopique' in light of the 'French antitotalitarian moment', seeking to understand how the critique of totalitarianism informs Rosanvallon's interpretation of economic liberalism. Section II will analyze the broadening of Rosanvallon's understanding of liberalism in later years, in critical dialogue with Michel Foucault, and driven by the exploration of the French doctrinaires' liberalism, which was very different from the 'utopian liberalism' studied in the 1979 book. Finally, Section III will address Rosanvallon's critique of the use of the concept of neoliberalism by the contemporary 'resistance left', seeking to understand the alternative use of Foucault's analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism proposed by the author in 2018. The conclusion will take stock of Rosanvallon's position on overarching concepts such as totalitarianism and neoliberalism, in light of the distinction, present in his work, between the critique of the founding utopias of modernity and the analysis of democratic experimentation in contemporary times.

### **Classical economic liberalism as the germ of totalitarianism**

Revisiting the intentions behind the book 'Le capitalisme utopique: critique de l'idéologie économique', published in 1979<sup>5</sup>, a product of a doctoral thesis supervised by Lefort, Rosanvallon states, in 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique',

My approach had been somewhat overdetermined by my concern to broaden my understanding of totalitarianism. At a time when some were putting Marx on trial and holding him responsible for the Gulag, it seemed important to me to emphasize that it was more broadly modernity that needed to be questioned in order to understand the pathologies of the present (ROSANVALLON, 2018, pp. 112-113)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>In 1989, the book was republished under the title 'Le libéralisme économique: Histoire de l'idée de marché'. In 1999, the third edition merged the two titles to become 'Le capitalisme utopique: Histoire de l'idée de marché'.

<sup>6</sup>'mon approche avait été en quelque sorte surdéterminée par ma préoccupation d'élargir ma compréhension du totalitarisme. Au moment où certains mettaient Marx au banc des accusés et le rendait responsable du Goulag, il me semblait important de souligner que c'était plus largement la modernité qu'il fallait interroger pour comprendre les pathologies du présent'.

By mentioning those who were putting 'Marx on trial and holding him responsible for the Gulag', the author is implicitly referring to the 'new philosophers', among whom André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy stood out. These philosophers had achieved great media success in the 'French anti-totalitarian moment' of the second half of the 1970s, drawing a direct line between Marx and totalitarianism and proposing a philosophy based on a pessimistic rejection of politics and history, in the name of a return to individuality and morality<sup>7</sup>. In the same historical context, a much more sophisticated critique of totalitarianism was voiced by Lefort and some of his disciples, including Marcel Gauchet. Lefort's interpretation of totalitarianism dates back to his articles for the 'Socialisme ou barbarie' journal in the 1950s, especially 'Le totalitarisme sans Staline: L'U.R.S.S. dans une nouvelle phase', published in 1956. However, it was in the second half of the 1970s, when "the anti-totalitarian problematic came out of hiding" (GAUCHET, 2005a, p. 99)<sup>8</sup>, that this interpretation gained greater political and intellectual resonance, especially with the 1976 publication of 'Un homme en trop: Réflexions sur L'Archipel du Goulag', Lefort's book on Solzhenitsyn's work. Rosanvallon's effort to question modernity 'to understand the pathologies of the present' is based on this Lefortian interpretation of totalitarianism, then at the height of its impact.

In 'Le totalitarisme sans Staline', Lefort formulates his interpretation of totalitarianism as a form of society (rather than a political regime) that...

...claims to deny the characteristic separation of bourgeois capitalist society into various domains of social life; the political, the economic, the legal, the ideological, etc. (...) Totalitarianism is therefore not so much a monstrous outgrowth of political power in society as it is a metamorphosis of society itself, whereby the political sphere ceases to exist as a separate domain (LEFORT, 1979, pp. 190-191)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>Regarding the 'new philosophers' and their role in the 'French anti-totalitarian moment', see: Christofferson, 2004, Chapter 05; Anderson, 2005, p. 34; Dosse, 2018, Chapter 09.

<sup>8</sup>'la problématique antitotalitaire est sortie de la clandestinité'.

<sup>9</sup>'prétend nier la séparation caractéristique du capitalisme bourgeois des divers domaines de la vie sociale ; du politique, de l'économique, du juridique, de l'idéologique, etc. (...) Il [le totalitarisme] n'est donc pas tant une excroissance monstrueuse du pouvoir politique dans la société qu'une métamorphose de la société elle-même par laquelle le politique cesse d'exister comme sphère séparée'.

The suppression of the political as a separate domain, in a homogeneous social universe dominated by the hegemony of a single system of values, becomes the core of Lefort's interpretation of totalitarianism, developed and deepened in a series of texts in the following decades. The essay 'Sur la démocratie: le politique et l'institution du social', published by Lefort and Gauchet in 1971 in the journal 'Textures', is based on a course taught by Lefort between 1966-67. In it, the authors propose a way of relating and opposing democracy and totalitarianism from the dimension of the political, conceived as the symbolic place of recognition or denial of social division and conflict (LEFORT and GAUCHET, 1971). The denial of social conflict and the erasure of the division between power and society come to be considered as the two main defining criteria of totalitarianism in the influential texts published by Lefort and Gauchet in the second half of the 1970s. In short, totalitarianism consists, for them, in a representation of society as harmonious, homogeneous, and transparent in relation to itself, being fused with legitimate power in the form of a "purely social power" (LEFORT, 1981, p. 100)<sup>10</sup>. The economic, legal, and cultural spheres become intertwined in this purely social power, as the order of power, the order of law, and the order of knowledge lose their specificity: "the process of identification between power and society, the process of homogenization of social space, the process of closure of society and power, are linked to constitute the totalitarian system" (LEFORT, 1981, p. 101)<sup>11</sup>.

Like the 'new philosophers', Lefort and Gauchet make a connection between Marxism and the totalitarian enterprise, although this link is established in a nuanced way. According to their reading, Marx revealed the centrality of social division — the foundation of democracy for these French authors — but predicted the near abolition of social conflict in the future communist society. Communism was conceived as "a society in which there would no longer be fundamentally divergent interests among individuals. A *unified* and *same* society" (GAUCHET,

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<sup>10</sup>'pouvoir purement social'.

<sup>11</sup>'Le processus d'identification entre le pouvoir et la société, le processus d'homogénéisation de l'espace social, le processus de clôture et de la société et du pouvoir s'enchaînent pour constituer le système totalitaire'.

2005b, p. 436; author's italics)<sup>12</sup>. The utopia of this society emancipated from conflict and division would have provided the ideological basis of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, at least in their communist versions.

However, neither Lefort nor Gauchet spare the so-called 'bourgeois ideology' from this critique of the attempt to suppress civil conflict, an attempt that resulted in the totalitarianisms of the 20th century. According to Gauchet, "fascism has its 'theoretical' origin in bourgeois ideology, whose essential work is to mask social division under capitalism (GAUCHET, 2005b, p. 441)<sup>13</sup>. Although more focused on the communist version of totalitarianism, Lefort also involves, in some way, the 'bourgeois ideology' in the history of the totalitarian project. In a significant passage from 'La logique totalitaire', published in 1980, he establishes a continuity between the Marxist vision of the future communist society, marked by the suppression of class struggle and the division between the state and civil society, and the market society theorized by classical economic liberalism:

The fiction of an organization of production under the direction of associated workers, that is, in fact, under the direction of their representatives, has replaced the fiction of a market that would reconcile interests and satisfy needs through self-regulation. Thus, the liberal denial of class antagonism in the actual reality of capitalism has been answered by the illusion of abolishing this antagonism in a more or less near future, through a revolution or the gradual abolition of private property (LEFORT, 1981, p. 89)<sup>14</sup>.

Rosanvallon's 'Le capitalisme utopique' should be understood as an effort to deepen and systematize the intuition of Lefort and Gauchet. According to them, a first germ of totalitarian logic could be found in a 'bourgeois ideology' associated with classical economic liberalism and its belief in the market's capacity for self-regulation, even before Marxism projected the ideal of a harmonious and

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<sup>12</sup>'ne société où il n'existerait plus d'intérêts fondamentalement divergents entre les individus. Société *une et même*'.

<sup>13</sup>'le fascisme a son origine « théorique » dans l'idéologie bourgeoise, dont le travail essentiel est de masquer la division sociale sous le capitalisme'.

<sup>14</sup>'La fiction d'une organisation de la production sous la direction des travailleurs associés, c'est-à-dire, en fait de leurs représentants, est venue se substituer à celle d'un marché qui accorderait les intérêts et satisferait les besoins par autorégulation. Ainsi à la dénégation libérale de l'antagonisme des classes dans la réalité effective du capitalisme a répondu l'illusion d'une abolition de cet antagonisme dans un avenir plus ou moins proche, grâce à une révolution ou à l'abolition progressive de la propriété privée'.

transparent society for the future communist revolution<sup>15</sup>. In his reading of the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, Rosanvallon investigates the formation of a utopia that elevates the market to a principle of social organization. His central thesis is that Adam Smith's economic liberalism does not simply make the market a technique for organizing economic activity, but a model of society, a symbolic representation of how society is instituted and self-regulates:

The essential consequence of such a conception is a total rejection of politics. It is no longer politics that should govern society, but the market. The latter is not limited to a simple technical instrument for organizing economic activity, but it has a much more radical sociological and political meaning. Viewed in this perspective, Adam Smith is not so much the founding father of modern economics as he is the theorist of the withering away of politics (ROSANVALLON, 1999, pp. III-IV)<sup>16</sup>.

Informed by Lefort's political theory, which defined totalitarianism as the suppression of the autonomy of 'the political' through the fusion of power and society, Rosanvallon sees in Smith's representation of society as a market a germ of totalitarianism. Rather than being denied by the absorption of society by the State-Party, however, 'the political' would be ruled out by the spontaneous harmonization of interests through the market. According to the author, this totalitarian potential of economic liberalism would be most clearly manifested through its transposition into the political liberalism of the late 18th century, particularly in the works of Thomas Paine and William Godwin, representatives of English political radicalism at the end of the 18th century.

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<sup>15</sup>In this effort to deepen and systematize Lefort and Gauchet's intuitions on the distant origins of the totalitarian imagination, Rosanvallon establishes a dialogue with two innovative interpretations of classical political economy that had been published in 1977: Louis Dumont's 'Homo aequalis I: Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique' and Albert Hirschman's 'The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph'. In addition to Dumont and Hirschman, Rosanvallon's book also engages with Karl Polanyi's classic, 'The Great Transformation', published in 1944, which had then caught Dumont's interest. Dumont would later write the preface to the French translation of Polanyi's work, published in 1983 (DUMONT, 1983). Polanyi was one of the first to study the advent of the market society from an anthropological perspective, exploring what was at stake when the market, 'embedded' in the social life of traditional societies, emancipated itself from other spheres and came to dominate society (POLANYI, 1957).

<sup>16</sup>'La conséquence essentielle d'une telle conception consiste en un refus global du politique. Ce n'est plus la politique qui doit gouverner la société, mais le marché. Ce dernier n'est donc pas limité à un simple instrument technique d'organisation de l'activité économique, il a beaucoup plus radicalement un sens sociologique et politique. Relu dans cette perspective, Adam Smith n'est pas tant le père fondateur de l'économie moderne que le théoricien du dépérissement de la politique'.

According to Rosanvallon, these authors follow Smith's utopia, which is based on the representation of society as a market, so that 'commerce', in the broad sense that the word acquires in the 18th century, becomes the paradigm for all social relations, which should be based on fair, peaceful, and balanced exchanges between free and equal individuals. The society projected by this liberalism, which the author characterizes as utopian, would be a democracy reduced to a social state of equality between independent individuals, which would dispense with government and politics, planting the seeds of totalitarianism.

Rejection of the political, utopia of a transparent society, criticism of intermediary and autonomous social structures: everything is in place for the political appropriation of such ideology to lead to a totalitarian society. It is in this sense and based on these characteristics of democratic anarchism derived from the representation of society as a market, that it is possible to analyze the conditions for the reversal of democracy, understood as utopian liberalism, into totalitarianism (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. 160)<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, the legacy of Smith's economic liberalism would not be in the capitalist system, which, according to Rosanvallon, only consolidated in the 19th century and does not have a direct relationship with classical political economy<sup>18</sup>. Smith's economic ideology would have been transmitted to the political field and would have nourished all the great anarchist or socialist utopias of the withering away of the state in the 19th century: "The true heirs of Smith are Godwin, Proudhon, Fourier, Bakunin, Saint-Simon, Marx" (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. 223)<sup>19</sup>. In short, the problem that Rosanvallon identified in liberalism in 1979 was not the legitimation of an economic system external and independent of the domain of

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<sup>17</sup>Refus du politique, utopie de la société transparente, critique des structures sociales intermédiaires autonomes: tout est en place pour que la saisie politique d'une telle idéologie puisse conduire à une société totalitaire. C'est en ce sens et à partir de ces caractéristiques de l'anarchisme démocratique dérivé de la représentation de la société comme marché qu'il est possible d'analyser les conditions du retournement de la démocratie, comprise comme libéralisme utopique, en totalitarisme'.

<sup>18</sup>"Capitalism is not the realization of a utopia or a social plan. It is not the result of a rational and premeditated construction. Capitalism is merely the result of concrete economic and social practices. (...) The liberal utopia of the market society is, in this sense, totally foreign to capitalism" (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. 211; author's italics). 'Le capitalisme n'est pas la réalisation d'une utopie ou d'un plan de société. Il n'est pas le résultat d'une construction rationnelle et préméditée. Le capitalisme n'est que la résultante de pratiques économiques et sociales concrètes. (...) L'utopie libérale de la société de marché est en ce sens tout à fait étrangère au capitalisme'.

<sup>19</sup>Les vrais héritiers de Smith, ce sont Godwin, Proudhon, Fourier, Bakounine, Saint-Simon, Marx'.

ideology, but the temptation of the utopia of an apolitical society. This utopia came to nourish both the revolutionary left and conservatives like François Guizot, who would insist on the suppression of politics and conflict in a social state marked by civil and legal equality, reducing democracy to this social state (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. 225). Throughout his work, Rosanvallon criticizes this utopia of the suppression of the political, which goes against his conception of democracy and is associated with the Lefortian conceptualization of totalitarianism as a "society in harmony with its ends, in coincidence with itself" (LEFORT and GAUCHET, 1971, p. 11)<sup>20</sup>. However, the author's critique of liberalism has become more complex, as we will see.

### **Developments in Rosanvallon's interpretation of liberalism, in dialogue with Foucault**

The intellectual dialogue between Rosanvallon and Foucault is an important element for understanding the evolution of Rosanvallon's treatment of liberalism, following the publication of 'Le capitalisme utopique' in April 1979. In that same month, Foucault had concluded his famous course at the Collège de France, 'Naissance de la Biopolitique', which had focused precisely on liberalism and neoliberalism. The two intellectuals had been in contact since 1977, when they had met at the 'Forum sur l'expérimentation sociale', organized by the magazines 'Faire' and 'Le Nouvel Observateur', but it was from 1979 onwards that the interpretation of liberalism began to occupy a central place in this dialogue. "If you are right, I am wrong"<sup>21</sup>, Foucault is said to have told Rosanvallon (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 101), faced with the contrast between Rosanvallon's interpretation of liberalism as a perspective of the decline of politics and his definition of liberalism as a "principle and method of rationalizing the exercise of government" (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 323)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup>'société en harmonie avec ses fins, en coïncidence avec elle-même'.

<sup>21</sup>'Si vous avez raison, j'ai tort'.

<sup>22</sup>'principe et méthode de rationalisation de l'exercice du gouvernement'.

This contrast was real and had as its background an important theoretical-methodological divergence<sup>23</sup>. Although both intellectuals place "the *historical clusters* around which new political and social rationalities organize themselves" (ROSANVALLON, 2009, p. 192; author's italics) at the center of their investigations, Rosanvallon understands that the dimension of the political allows access to a global representation of the social. In the case of the eighteenth-century utopian liberalism, this was a matter of studying the representation of society as a market that would dispense with the political process. Foucault, on the other hand, by adopting power relations as a starting point, always beginning with the question of how power is exercised (FOUCAULT, 1994, pp. 232-235), rejects any globalizing approach to the social. Thus, from a Foucauldian point of view, it makes no sense to think of liberalism as a utopia of suppression of 'the political': "We cannot say, therefore, that liberalism is a never realized utopia - unless we take as the core of liberalism the projections that it was led to formulate from its analyses and its criticisms" (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 325)<sup>24</sup>. Far from being a representation of society that would dispense with government, liberalism would be a specific rationalization of government practice itself.

However, I would suggest that Foucault and Rosanvallon's interpretations of liberalism are not limited to this fundamental divergence. On the contrary, the two thinkers agree on some significant points. Foucault's analysis ends up approaching Rosanvallon's<sup>25</sup> when, in the last four lectures of 'The Birth of Biopolitics', he emphasizes the utopian dimension of American neoliberalism, a dimension that makes him cast a new look at classical liberalism. Rosanvallon, in turn, seeks to approach Foucault's analysis of liberalism as a form of governmentality by electing as his object of study, in the first half of the 1980s, the

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<sup>23</sup>On the distinction between Rosanvallon's method and Foucault's method, see: Rosanvallon, 2009, pp. 201-202. On the relationship between Foucault and Rosanvallon, and more generally between Foucault and the so-called 'French liberal moment', see: Behrent, 2016.

<sup>24</sup>'On ne peut donc pas dire que le libéralisme soit une utopie jamais réalisée – sauf si on prend pour le noyau du libéralisme les projections qu'il a été amené à formuler de ses analyses et de ses critiques'.

<sup>25</sup>It is likely that Foucault had access to the content of 'Le capitalisme utopique' while preparing his course, given the dialogue that had been taking place between him and Rosanvallon. This book is referred to as 'important' in the summary of the course published in the Yearbook of the Collège de France (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 326).

French doctrinaires' liberalism, in what distinguishes it from the utopian liberalism studied in the 1979 book. These points of convergence between Foucault and Rosanvallon are important for this article for two reasons. First, because the approach to liberalism as a form of governmentality brings more complexity to Rosanvallon's understanding of liberalism. Second, because, as we will see, Rosanvallon's criticism of the uses of the concept of neoliberalism by contemporary intellectual leftists is based on a dispute over the interpretation and political uses of Foucault's course 'The Birth of Biopolitics'.

When Foucault begins his analysis of American neoliberalism in the March 14, 1979 lecture of 'The Birth of Biopolitics', he introduces a style of liberalism that cannot be reduced to the simple role of a governmental technique - the approach to liberalism that he had been conducting in the previous lectures of the course:

American liberalism is not - as it is in France these days, as it was in post-war Germany - simply an economic and political choice formed and formulated by government officials or within government circles. Liberalism, in America, is a whole way of being and thinking. It is a type of relationship between rulers and ruled, much more than a technique of rulers towards the ruled. (...) Currently, American liberalism does not present itself only, or even primarily, as a political alternative, but rather as a sort of global, multifaceted, ambiguous claim with roots on both the right and the left. It is also a kind of utopian focus that is always reactivated. It is also a method of thinking, an economic and sociological analytical framework (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 224)<sup>26</sup>.

This dimension of liberalism as a "general style of thought, analysis, and imagination" (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 225)<sup>27</sup>, with a strong utopian component, brings new elements to Foucault's interpretation of liberalism. It is partly responsible for its ambiguities and for the controversy between those who see

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<sup>26</sup>'le libéralisme américain, ce n'est pas – comme il est en France ces jours-ci, comme il était encore en Allemagne dans l'immédiat après-guerre – simplement un choix économique et politique formé et formulé par les gouvernants ou dans le milieu gouvernemental. Le libéralisme, en Amérique, c'est toute une manière d'être et de penser. C'est un type de rapport entre gouvernants et gouvernés beaucoup plus qu'une technique des gouvernants à l'égard des gouvernés. (...) le libéralisme américain, actuellement, ne se présente pas seulement, ne se présente pas tellement comme une alternative politique, mais disons que c'est une sorte de revendication globale, multiforme, ambiguë, avec ancrage à droite et à gauche. C'est également une sorte de foyer utopique qui est toujours réactivé. C'est aussi une méthode de pensée, une grille d'analyse économique et sociologique'.

<sup>27</sup>'style général de pensée, d'analyse et d'imagination'.

Foucault's interest in neoliberalism as a kind of fascination, and those who insist on the critical nature of his approach (cf. GRENIER and ORLÉAN, 2007; LAGASNERIE, 2012; SAWYER and STEINMETZ-JENKINS, 2019). In the lecture of March 28th, the author returns to the 18th century to study the emergence of the 'homo economicus' as the basis of the new liberal governmental rationality. Here, his approach is no longer the same as in the early lectures of the course, in which liberalism was defined as an art of governing formed within the framework of the reason of state, though perfecting the latter through the principle of self-limitation of government. In the March 28th lecture, the political economy of the 18th century is no longer presented as a pursuit of the reason of state by other means, but as a "critique of governmental reason" (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 286)<sup>28</sup>. Adam Smith is treated as a critic of governmental reason - and Foucault emphasizes that he is using the word 'critique' "in the proper and philosophical sense of the term" (FOUCAULT, 2004, pp. 286-287)<sup>29</sup>, referring to Kant - since the Scottish economist points out the impossibility of the government knowing the totality of the economic process, just as Kant will later point to the impossibility of man knowing the totality of the world.

The object of liberal governmental rationality would thus not be the economic process, but civil society, the subject of the last lecture of 'The Birth of Biopolitics', on April 4th. After analyzing the concept of civil society in Adam Ferguson's 'Essay on the History of Civil Society', Foucault briefly develops the problematic of the relations between state and civil society, starting in the late eighteenth century in Germany, England, and France. In England, the development of this new liberal political technology centered on civil society would lead to a questioning of the very need for a government to regulate this civil society. Here, Foucault cites the famous passage from Paine, in which society is defined as a blessing, and government as a necessary evil (FOUCAULT, 2004, pp. 313-314).

In short, although Foucault started with the definition of liberalism as an art of governing formed within the objectives of the reason of state, his course ends with a much broader and radical understanding of liberalism: since his starting point is

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<sup>28</sup>'critique de la raison gouvernementale'.

<sup>29</sup>'au sens propre et philosophique du terme'.

civil society, the very need of a government for this civil society could be questioned. Like Rosanvallon, Foucault ends up taking his analysis of liberalism to the proto-anarchist utopia of Paine.

If Foucault ends up approaching Rosanvallon in his understanding of liberalism as a utopia of a society without external government, Rosanvallon ends up approaching Foucault in the project of understanding liberalism as a form of governmentality. In 1980, he embarked on a second doctoral thesis under the guidance of Lefort, which culminated in the book 'Le moment Guizot', published in 1985. According to Rosanvallon's account, it was Foucault who, together with Lefort, encouraged him to study François Guizot, the main exponent of the so-called 'French doctrinaires' liberalism that flourished between 1814 and 1848, "in order to explore this question of liberal governmentality that was completely absent from my work on the Scottish Enlightenment" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 385)<sup>30</sup>. In 1980, Rosanvallon presented the first results of his research on the doctrinaires' liberalism in Foucault's public seminar at the 'Collège de France', focusing on what Guizot called 'interior means of government', that is, the embedding of government in society through the management of passions, interests, and ideas.

By moving from Smith to Guizot, Rosanvallon's idea was precisely to move from a depoliticizing liberalism to a liberalism founded on an 'art of governing', to use the expression made famous by Foucault. Guizot's philosophy would move away from utopian liberalism by rejecting the perspective of a decline of politics and a self-regulation of society, and by suggesting that political power is intertwined with society in the form of a 'social power'. Political power would be thought of as "the head of a society to which it is completely incorporated" (ROSANVALLON, 1985, p. 49)<sup>31</sup>. Guizot's entire political theory would have as its horizon the interpenetration between government and society, to the point that even classic liberal tenets such as decentralization, publicity, and freedom of the press would not be thought of as mechanisms to defend the individual or civil society against the state. Rather, they would be a 'means of government' intended to strengthen power and

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<sup>30</sup>'pour explorer cette question de la gouvernementalité libérale qui était totalement absente de mon travail sur les Lumières écossaises'.

<sup>31</sup>'la tête d'une société à laquelle il est complètement incorporé'.

deepen its roots in society. Some scholars have argued that Rosanvallon's reading of Guizot's theory of representation as constant communication between the state and society would become an important element of his own theory of democracy, as he has developed it in the following decades (CINTRA, 2022, p. 18; JAINCHILL and MOYN, 2004, pp. 135-136).

However, the relationship between liberalism, depoliticization, and totalitarianism continues to be explored in 'Le moment Guizot'. We saw that, in 'Le capitalisme utopique', Guizot's conservatism, which aimed to reduce democracy to a social state of civil and legal equality where there would be no more conflict, was considered by Rosanvallon as one of the heirs of Smithian utopia of the suppression of politics, with its totalitarian seeds. This perspective remains in the 1985 book, although Rosanvallon now aims to understand how a sophisticated thinker like Guizot, aware of the centrality of politics in any society, could degrade into this limited conservatism. The author's answer is that, from the July Monarchy (1830-1848) onwards, Guizot's political horizon came to reside in the "*management of a post-revolutionary society*" (ROSANVALLON, 1985, p. 277; author's italics)<sup>32</sup>, based on the illusion that the Revolution of 1830 had ended history by concluding the work of the French Revolution, thus allowing for a society without conflict and without politics. Like Marx, Guizot believed that a final revolution would establish an undivided and depoliticized society that would become the object of mere management. The only disagreement would be about the dating of this final revolution, in which Marx would be much more demanding (ROSANVALLON, 1985, p. 278). As in 'Le capitalisme utopique', Rosanvallon aims to point out the common totalitarian seeds of liberalism and communism, both based on the utopian perspective of a society emancipated from conflict and political power<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>'gestion d'une société post-révolutionnaire'.

<sup>33</sup>In Freller (2023), I explored in more detail how Rosanvallon's interpretation of Smith and Guizot was informed by the Lefortian critique of totalitarianism in the 1970s. The subject of that article is not, as it is here, the relationship between Rosanvallon's critique of utopian liberalism and his recent critique of the critique of neoliberalism, but rather the relationship between the 'French antitotalitarian moment of the 1970s' and the revival of liberal studies during the turn of the 1970s to the 1980s, focusing on the interpretations of classical liberalism by Rosanvallon and Gauchet.

In the following decades, Rosanvallon frequently presented Guizot's liberalism as one of the pathological forms of reducing democracy to a utopian figure, in which its necessary complexity is denied. In 'La démocratie inachevée', published in 2000, this reduction of democracy to a pacified social state of civil and legal equality is considered the first pathology inherited from the founding aporias of the political culture of the French Revolution (ROSANVALLON, 2000, pp. 101-138). In a parallel way, in the preface to the 1989 edition of 'Le capitalisme utopique', reformulated and expanded in the preface to the 1999 edition, the author seeks to present a general theory of liberalism that accounts for its different, and sometimes contrasting, dimensions: economic, political, and moral. According to Rosanvallon, although there are few authors who have been able to combine the three variants of liberalism – only the Scottish philosophers of the eighteenth century and John Stuart Mill ever outlined this "*absolute liberalism*" (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. X; author's italics)<sup>34</sup> – all these variants refer to the same utopia of a society founded and self-regulated on the principle of individual autonomy, without the voluntarist intervention of sovereign authority. While the market can be presented as a simple economic technique, and the rule of law as a simple instrument to guarantee pluralism and individual rights, both refer, if taken to their logical conclusion, to the utopia of a society that dispenses with the political sphere, since the legal system and the laws of the market would be sufficient to regulate social relations (ROSANVALLON, 1999, pp. VII-X).

Thus, Rosanvallon's mature thought consolidates a general critique of liberalism as one of the pathological utopias of modernity, founded on the belief in the impersonal and spontaneous self-regulation of society. It is true that the author will also criticize, with the same vehemence, what he understands to be the opposite pathological utopia of modernity, which derives from anti-liberalisms, on which ends the preface of the 1999 edition of 'Le capitalisme utopique', 'Le marché et les trois utopies libérales'. These anti-liberalisms, especially economic and legal anti-liberalism, "refer to the ideal of a society that is instituted and governed in a

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<sup>34</sup>'libéralisme absolu'.

deliberately voluntarist fashion" (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. XIII)<sup>35</sup>. The critique of the utopia of a general will that would manifest itself in an evident and unified way, acting on society without the mediation of impersonal institutions, informs Rosanvallon's recent critique of populism (ROSANVALLON, 2020). Like his early works, this critique engages in a dialogue with Lefort's idea of totalitarianism as an internal perversion of democracy. In this critique of the "two opposing utopias of modernity - the sacralization of will and the praise of impersonal regulation" (ROSANVALLON, 1999, p. XIII)<sup>36</sup>, what place can neoliberalism, which has been the subject of so much criticism by the intellectual left, assume?

### **Rosanvallon and the question of neoliberalism: an alternative reading of Foucault**

In the first decades of the 21st century, influential authors such as Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, and Wendy Brown theorized neoliberalism not simply as an ideology or economic policy orientation, but rather as the new global rationality that governs both states and individual subjectivities. Under this system, individuals become like firms in a perpetual state of competition with one another, constantly needing to invest in and valorize their 'human capital' in all domains of life (BROWN, 2015; DARDOT and LAVAL, 2009). These authors emphasize the novelty of neoliberalism compared to classical liberalism, first because the 'homo economicus' of neoliberalism is no longer the same as that of Adam Smith and 18th century political economy – that is, an economic agent focused on profit in commercial exchanges from which everyone benefits. Rather, the new neoliberal subject is an enterprise in a fierce competition, which will create few winners, and he must fight alone for the valorization of his human capital in a world with no guarantee of success or protection against failure. Second, neoliberalism has expanded the logic of 'homo economicus' to spheres never imagined by economists of the 18th century: education, culture, family, sexuality, knowledge production, law, and more.

Despite this distinction between neoliberalism and classical liberalism, and although Dardot, Laval, and Brown do not have the explicit concept of

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<sup>35</sup>'renvoient à l'idéal d'une société délibérément instituée et gouvernée de façon volontariste'.

<sup>36</sup>'deux utopies contraires de la modernité – la sacralisation de la volonté et l'éloge de la régulation impersonnelle'.

totalitarianism as their focus, their analyses of neoliberalism resemble, in many respects, Rosanvallon's interpretation of classical economic liberalism. As in 'Le capitalisme utopique', what is at stake is not a simple ideology or political orientation, but a global representation of society as a market. This representation denies the particularity of different social spheres, since the market logic of competition between companies would be imposed on the most diverse domains, from culture, school, and university to affective, family, and sexual life. These authors particularly insist on neoliberalism's effort to dissolve the specificity of the political sphere, colonizing it using economic criteria and business logic, which would lead to a process by which democracy is hollowed out from within (or, at worst, simply suppressed). In Brazil, Marilena Chaui's analyses of neoliberalism are of interest in relating an interpretation close to those of Dardot, Laval, and Brown with the Lefortian concept of totalitarianism, which also informed Rosanvallon's interpretation of classical liberalism: "(...) as Claude Lefort explains, totalitarianism is the refusal of social heterogeneity, the existence of social classes, the plurality of ways of life, behaviors, beliefs and opinions, customs, tastes, and ideas, in order to offer the image of a homogeneous society, in agreement and harmony with itself" (CHAUI, 2020, p. 321)<sup>37</sup>.

Despite the correspondence between Rosanvallon's interpretation of classical economic liberalism and these contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, the author of 'Le capitalisme utopique' ended up becoming a critic of these latter critiques, even questioning the relevance of the concept of neoliberalism altogether. Restoring the context of this criticism is important to understanding it, as well as to taking stock of it in relation to the critiques of liberalism that Rosanvallon had been developing since 1979.

In spite of its autobiographical elements, 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique 1968-2018', published by Rosanvallon in 2018, is far from being just a book of personal memories. The problem posed by the author in this reconstruction of the trajectory of French political and intellectual trends over the last fifty years is

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<sup>37</sup>'Como explica Claude Lefort, o totalitarismo é a recusa da heterogeneidade social, da existência de classes sociais, da pluralidade de modos de vida, de comportamentos, de crenças e opiniões, costumes, gostos, ideias para oferecer a imagem de uma sociedade homogênea, em concordância e consonância consigo mesma'.

to try to understand the frustration of the progressive horizon opened up by the events of May 1968, placing in the foreground the frustration of the hopes of his own political group, the 'second left' (deuxième gauche), gathered around Michel Rocard. His objective is to grasp the roots of the 'servile feeling of powerlessness'<sup>38</sup> prevailing in the contemporary French left, "whether confessed as such or disguised behind the formulation of a critique of the world that makes its subversion unthinkable" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 11)<sup>39</sup>.

Rosanvallon's analysis of the frustrations of the French left after the political and intellectual experiments of the 1970s operates on several levels. First of all, the book contains a self-criticism of the 'second left', of which he had been a kind of organic intellectual. According to Rosanvallon, the second left was limited by its overly negative way of thinking, which in turn was founded in its critiques of totalitarianism, Jacobinism, social-statism and archaisms (ROSANVALLON, 2018, pp. 150-170). Second, the author criticizes the trajectory of the 'governmental left' (gauche de gouvernement) in France, particularly after the election of François Mitterrand as President in 1981. The renunciations of this governmental left to the initial program of the left were not properly explained to citizens, leading it to sink into a realism that has become an end in itself, disconnected from any emancipatory goal (ROSANVALLON, 2018, pp. 171-211).

However, it is at a third level of analysis of the frustrations of the French left that Rosanvallon's reflection on neoliberalism develops: his critique of the "resistance left" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 269)<sup>40</sup>. According to the author, one of the sources of the feeling of paralysis that takes hold of the French left in the 1980s and 1990s is linked to what he calls "radicalities of impotence"<sup>41</sup> (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 222), particularly "the radicality of academic posture"<sup>42</sup> (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 222), which consists of "the consensual *dissociation* between thought and action, different expressions of intellectual radicality going hand in hand with the recognition of a factual impotence

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<sup>38</sup>'sentiment rampant d'impuissance'.

<sup>39</sup>'qu'il soit avoué comme tel ou dissimulé derrière la formulation d'une critique du monde qui rend impensable sa subversion'.

<sup>40</sup>'gauche de résistance'.

<sup>41</sup>'radicalités d'impuissance'.

<sup>42</sup>'radicalité de posture académique'.

to redirect the course of things" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 213; author's italics)<sup>43</sup>. The 1990s saw the installation of a "left-wing melancholy" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 226)<sup>44</sup> in significant intellectual circles, which would have come to content themselves with a radical critique of the world, conceived in such globalizing terms that no specific action on reality would be imaginable, thus allying "actual resignation and radical posture" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 228)<sup>45</sup>.

Related to this 'radical impotence', the idea of 'resistance' emerged as the main slogan of a part of the French left starting in the 1995 strike. Rosanvallon considers the trajectory of Pierre Bourdieu, one of the main intellectuals to engage in that strike, as significant for the crystallization of this 'resistance left'. Whereas, until the early 1990s, the French sociologist conceived the state as "a concentrated institution of domination whose ascendancy was disguised behind the rhetoric of the general interest" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 274)<sup>46</sup>, he later praised a policy of resistance against the withdrawal of the state, which began to be defined as "a depository of all the universal values associated with the idea of the public" (BOURDIEU apud ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 275)<sup>47</sup>.

For this new resistance left, the main enemy is neoliberalism, not capitalism. According to Rosanvallon, the left's criticism of capitalism had always been accompanied by a debate on alternatives in terms of forms of ownership, modes of organization of economic structures, the role of workers and unions in corporate management, conceptions of macroeconomic regulation, and so on. However, neoliberalism, defined as "a form of society and a mode of thought, in short, a way of naming modernity itself"<sup>48</sup>, becomes a "much more indomitable hydra" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 278)<sup>49</sup>. This substitution of capitalism for neoliberalism as the main object of criticism would be both a

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<sup>43</sup>'dissociation consentie entre la pensée et l'action, différentes expressions de radicalité intellectuelle allant de pair avec la reconnaissance d'une impuissance de fait à réorienter le cours des choses'.

<sup>44</sup>'mélancolie de gauche'.

<sup>45</sup>'résignation de fait et posture radicale'.

<sup>46</sup>'un organe concentré de domination dont l'emprise était dissimulée derrière une rhétorique de l'intérêt général'.

<sup>47</sup>'dépositaire de toutes les valeurs universelles associées à l'idée de public'.

<sup>48</sup>'une forme de société et un mode de pensée, bref un mode de dénomination de la modernité elle-même'.

<sup>49</sup>'une hydre beaucoup plus immaîtrisable'.

symptom and a cause of the political imagination block suffered by the contemporary left.

Rosanvallon returns to the issue of neoliberalism in the fourth and final part of his book, after developing his theory of "the three eras of modernity" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, pp. 363-374)<sup>50</sup>. The concept of neoliberalism is often used to refer to the third era of modernity. This era begins in the 1970s with the crisis of the industrial society formed by well-defined social classes represented in the state, giving way to a more individualized society that is more difficult to represent politically, due to the decline of class consciousness and belonging. The author deplores, in the concept of neoliberalism, as well as in the apocalyptic accounts of an individualistic radicalization of modernity (he has in mind, among other authors, Marcel Gauchet), the simplification of a complex and contradictory reality. Neoliberalism...

...is rather the generic and clumsy term given to our current world with all the contradictions and conflicts that run through it. To speak of neoliberalism is therefore above all to uncover the ambivalent nature of the realities it covers, with the consequences that derive from it. The confusion and superposition between insidious mechanisms of domination and the positive recognition of the singularity of individuals is an example of this (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 378)<sup>51</sup>.

In this spirit, Rosanvallon takes up Foucault's analysis of liberalism and neoliberalism in 'The Birth of Biopolitics', an analysis whose divergences and similarities with Rosanvallon's interpretation of liberalism were pointed out in Section II of this article. This resumption is linked to the fact that interpretations of neoliberalism as a 'new reason of the world', such as those of Dardot, Laval, and Brown, are developed in explicit affiliation with Foucault's course. Now, Rosanvallon proposes a different reading of 'The Birth of Biopolitics', seeing in it not the anticipation of neoliberalism as the perfectly constituted and coherent new global rationality that has become the main target of contemporary

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<sup>50</sup>'les trois âges de la modernité'.

<sup>51</sup>'est plutôt la dénomination générique et maladroite que l'on donne à notre monde actuel avec toutes les contradictions et les conflits qui le traversent. Parler de néolibéralisme, c'est donc avant tout mettre au jour le caractère ambivalent des réalités qu'il recouvre, avec les conséquences qui en dérivent. La confusion et la superposition entre des mécanismes insidieux de domination et la reconnaissance positive de la singularité des personnes en sont un exemple'.

leftism, but rather "a free exploration, which has as its first characteristic to let Foucault's open questions appear" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 381)<sup>52</sup>.

In this 'free exploration' conducted by Foucault, liberalism and neoliberalism would not have a fixed and globalizing meaning, but would be apprehended through a crossing of multiple approaches (liberalism as an art of governing, as a conception of the market, as a conception of freedom, in addition to an anthropological approach and a political approach). Moving away from the controversy between those who see Foucault as one of the first critics of neoliberalism and those who see in the 1979 course a neoliberal temptation of the French philosopher, Rosanvallon argues that Foucault was not concerned with taking a position, but rather interested in exploring the ambiguities of neoliberalism. This reading of 'The Birth of Biopolitics' highlights a tension particularly present in American neoliberalism: the tension between liberalism as a governmental reason and as a matrix of utopian thought<sup>53</sup>:

The structuring ambiguity of (neo)liberalism (...) is rooted more deeply in the fact that it participates in a culture of emancipation, by affirming the centrality of the figure of the autonomous individual, while at the same time favoring the development of social situations that often ultimately lead to forms of enslavement of that same individual. It is Foucault's sensitivity to these ambiguities related to the transformations of modernity that seems to me to be the decisive element to be retained and meditated upon in this course (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 387)<sup>54</sup>.

Rosanvallon's comments on 'The Birth of Biopolitics' in 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique 1968-2018' reveal how important his intellectual dialogue with Foucault was in expanding his understanding of liberalism, despite the differences between the two authors. While, in 'Le capitalisme utopique',

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<sup>52</sup>'une exploration libre, qui a pour première caractéristique de laisser apparaître les interrogations ouvertes de Foucault'.

<sup>53</sup>In Section II, I sought to bring together the approaches of Foucault and Rosanvallon through this tension.

<sup>54</sup>'l'ambiguïté structurante du (néo)libéralisme (...) tient plus profondément au fait qu'il participe d'une culture de l'émancipation, en affirmant la centralité de la figure de l'individu autonome, en même temps qu'il favorise le développement de situations sociales qui conduisent souvent in fine à des formes d'asservissement de celui-ci. C'est la sensibilité de Foucault à ces ambiguïtés liées aux transformations de la modernité qui me semble aujourd'hui être l'élément décisif à retenir et à méditer dans ce cours'.

liberalism was treated as a representation of society as a market that foreshadows totalitarianism (in an approach reminiscent of Dardot, Laval, Brown, and Chauvi), the deepening of the dialogue with Foucault leads Rosanvallon to pay more attention to the tension between utopia and governmentality inscribed in liberalism. Whereas, in 1979, the utopian character of liberalism was apprehended purely in negative terms, Rosanvallon gradually begins to treat (neo) liberal utopia as an ambiguous phenomenon, in which promises of individual autonomy intersect with new forms of subjection and weakening of democracy.

In sum, if Rosanvallon becomes a critic of contemporary critiques of neoliberalism, it is because his understanding of liberalism has become more complex. Far from being a monolithic reality that reduces the social to a large market, liberalism — like democracy itself — is a field of problems, tensions, challenges, and experiments.

## Conclusion

Although the political theorist always needs to work with generalizations of reality, categories that are too totalizing run the risk of not contributing to the adequate apprehension of the object in question (after all, that which attempts to explain everything often explains nothing). Similarly, overtly broad concepts do not point us to any political action regarding such objects (after all, what can we do against an entity that dominates the totality of social life, being above the choices of political agents?). This kind of dilemma appears in the debates of the second half of the 20th century about the concept of totalitarianism. Raymond Aron, for example, in his 1954 critical review of Hannah Arendt's 'The Origins of Totalitarianism', criticizes the author's effort to know the 'essence' of totalitarianism, arguing that the specificities of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes derive from particular historical circumstances, not from terror and ideology as an essence of an all-encompassing whole called totalitarianism (ARON, 2005).

Rosanvallon's intellectual starting point is the thought of Lefort, who diverges from Aron's critique of Arendt and sees totalitarianism as a system that has its own logic of instituting the social through the representation it makes of it (LEFORT, 2007, pp. 993-999). In 'Le capitalisme utopique', the aim is to think about

liberalism according to the globalizing logic of the concept of totalitarianism: utopian liberalism is defined as a global representation of society as a market, in which the heterogeneity of the other social spheres, and particularly the political domain, is denied.

In 'Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique', the author is more critical of the intellectual project of grasping the totality of contemporary political and social life through a concept such as neoliberalism. As a final reflection in this article, it is possible to relate Rosanvallon's attitude to the polarity between modernity and contemporaneity as one of the conceptual pairs that structure his system of thought (GUÉNARD, 2015, pp. 14-16). According to Florent Guénard, Rosanvallon's modern history of the political is dedicated to studying the different ways in which modernity imagined the constitution of a society based on individuals liberated from traditional bonds sanctified by religion. Thus, the author would have investigated the Scottish liberalism of the 18th century, which makes the market the principle of organization of social relations; the contractualism of the 17th and 18th centuries, which thinks of the contract as the paradigm of the institution of the social; and the French doctrinaires' liberalism /conservatism of the 19th century, for which the government would be the producer of social ties. According to Guénard, Rosanvallon thinks of contemporaneity in discontinuity with modernity<sup>55</sup>, as an era that needs to reinvent its democratic normativity in the light of the failure of the founding theories of political modernity: "contractualism is hypothetical; market liberalism, which seeks to organize social relations without relation to personal power, remains utopian; conservatism quickly becomes reactionary and antidemocratic" (GUÉNARD, 2015, p. 15)<sup>56</sup>.

In his modern history of the political, Rosanvallon criticizes the ideologies that, at the beginning of modernity, sought to simplify social reality, reducing it to a single paradigm, with the hope that this paradigm would allow for the advent of a utopian era without conflict or the need for politics. His critique of

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<sup>55</sup>On the notions of discontinuity and novelty in Rosanvallon's interpretation of contemporary democracies, and the place of the long history of democracy in the face of this contemporary novelty, see Cintra, 2022.

<sup>56</sup>'le contractualisme est hypothétique; le libéralisme du marché, qui entend organiser les rapports sociaux sans relation à un pouvoir personnel, reste utopique; le conservatisme devient vite réactionnaire et antidémocratique'.

the liberal utopia of the market society has no relation to the actual functioning of capitalist societies – as we have seen, Rosanvallon considers this utopia as pre-dating industrial capitalism, and therefore not directly related to the capitalist mode of production. The author's critique of liberalism is thus a critique of a utopian aspiration to suppress politics present in different founding discourses of modernity, not a critique of the operating principles effectively in place in modern society.

After the failure of the founding theories of political modernity, with their utopian and simplifying tendency towards reality, Rosanvallon sees contemporaneity as the terrain of social and political complexity, which would open up a field of new experiments towards the complication of democracy. This field would be crossed by problems, tensions, ambiguities, and emancipatory potentials intertwined with new forms of subjection and democratic regression. It is precisely this intertwining of new paths towards autonomy and new forms of domination that interests Rosanvallon in his reading of Foucault on liberalism and neoliberalism.

The theories of neoliberalism as the 'new reason of the world', the new global rationality that would subject all dimensions of social life to the same paradigm of business competition, could be considered, on the contrary, as a new attempt to simplify social complexity at all costs, this time in a dystopian rather than utopian manner. The criticism of a representation of social reality ends up being confused with a criticism of social reality itself, contrary to what Rosanvallon intended to do in his criticism of utopian liberalism. Thus, the concept of neoliberalism, understood in this globalizing form, is pointed out by the author as an obstacle to the deepening of democratic experiments made possible by the advent of the contemporary world.

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