Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

VICTOR NASCIMENTO

“The Hegemony of the Neoliberal Narrative: Right Wing Discourses of ‘Common Sense’, the Weaponization of the Term ‘Liberal’, and the Shifting of the Political Spectrum”

Department of Sociology

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Remote Defence

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Abstract

Some of the most notable trends of the last several decades in the United States have been the rise of corporate power, the entrenchment of neoliberalism, the rise in inequality, along with discussions regarding the ‘culture wars’ and the phenomenon of polarization. The onset of the neoliberal era has been accompanied and facilitated by a decades-long marketing campaign propagating the consistent narrative of individualism over the collective, that government is the problem rather than a solution to problems, while associating freedom exclusively with the market. This thesis project draws on critical theory, Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power, discourse, narrative and communications theory, along with some insights from social psychology to examine the discursive shifting of the political spectrum that has occurred over the last four decades and has helped to entrench market fundamentalism as a hegemonic common sense. The thesis pays particular attention to the weaponization of the word ‘liberal’ and how this strategy has affected the understanding of the political spectrum and how the centre is currently framed. The research design I use to interrogate this entails a qualitative content analysis of various media sources noting how terms such as ‘liberal’ are utilized by Republican operatives and conservative commentators, as well as by the mainstream media and the general public. Using a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach and a methodological framework provided by Stone and Parker, I deconstruct and analyze the narratives that have been built up around neoliberalism (as a ‘common sense’ populist discourse) and how such affect-infused narratives and slogans serve to reinforce neoliberalism as a little-questioned hegemonic paradigm, often bypassing cognition. I conclude that corporate power (on a macro level) is using its significant resources to create long-running communications campaigns to market the free market (meso), and influence individual dispositions and subject formation in accordance with neoliberal logics, often through affective triggering (micro). Weaponization of the term ‘liberal’ is a central component of this. Neoliberal logics reject the political in terms of participatory democracy, while still requiring a strong state to stabilize the economic order. The resulting erosion of democracy augurs the possibility of right-wing authoritarian populism (already discernable in the US), exacerbating inequality, and a growth model that is unsustainable ecologically.

Keywords: liberal/liberalism, neoliberalism, corporate power, political spectrum, narratives, populism, anti-reflexivity, affect, system justification, polarization