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A state without a future: neoliberal despotism, crisis-fighting, and government through fear

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study on the neoliberal state, its relation to time and its ongoing transformation through crisis. It is spurred by two seminal works – Hartog’s on historicity and Rosa’s on acceleration – that catalogue a collapse of the modern temporality defined by progression from past to future. The article develops this problematic by focusing on the state as a key organiser of social temporalities. As the state has, in the course of the 21st century, been occupied with fighting crises, the assessment of its transformation and its relation to time proceeds from an analysis of its crisis-response. It finds that the state cannot articulate a vision for the future. This is a historically unique development, and the article traces its causes and consequences. It argues that the loss of the future perspective results from neoliberalism’s success in enhancing capital’s power over society. This makes both capital and the state avert to change, even as crisis and disruption become systemic elements of the neoliberal order. This causes the neoliberal state to acquire the form of neoliberal despotism: a state whose purpose is to impose social stasis and, since it cannot lead towards an appealing future, can only govern through fear.

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1. Introduction

The second declaration of the end of history triggered reflection on society’s relation to time, a reflection that is still ongoing across the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Osborne 1995, Nowotny 1996, Virno 2015, Traverso 2016, Bunyard 2017). This article expands the range of relevant studies by addressing this relation from the perspective of state theory. It is informed, and provoked, by two outstanding accounts of the time–society relation. From historiology, François Hartog (2015) argues that our ‘regime of historicity’ – the social consciousness of history, its general direction, and society’s part therein – has become presentist: an atrophic historic consciousness that absorbs past and future into a bloated eternal present. From sociology, Hartmut Rosa (2015) notes that the constant acceleration of social activity that marks modernity has now climaxed into a ‘frenetic standstill’: an entrapment in a hyper-accelerated, disjoined and random temporality that has no dimension beyond the present – and is therefore essentially static. Both authors register a monumental shift in the modern

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consciousness of time and history, which was defined by linear progression from past to future, with the present a transient point in between. This progression entailed improvement; therefore, modern time moved towards the future and unfolded under its hegemony (Koselleck 2004). Instead, our time is consumed by the present. It is a ‘monstrous time’ dictated by the ‘tyranny of the instant’ (Hartog 2015, pp. 202–203); a frantic present without perspective and, therefore, without escape (Rosa 2015, pp. 233–247).

Spurred from Hartog’s and Rosa’s analyses, this article examines the way in which the contemporary state relates to, and acts in, time. It certainly does not offer a full treatment of the state-time relation. From the broad range of temporal dynamics these authors address, it focuses on the apparent *erasure of the future dimension* that they both observe – for I appreciate this development as the culmination of, and the most consequential among, the temporal relations they analyse. Specifically, the article finds that, for the first time in its history, the capitalist state cannot articulate a vision of the future. Considering this to be a monumental development, the article offers an explanation for it, an explanation that can apply to the broader collapse of modern temporality that Hartog and Rosa outline; and traces its implications for the state and its relation to society.

The article focuses on the state, its power, and its relation to time. Drawing from the strategic-relational approach developed by Bob Jessop and Nicos Poulantzas, it conceptualises the state as a social relation: a condensation of power relations between different social forces (here, between classes) and a strategic agency in social antagonism; as well as a condensation and a co-author of social temporality and historicity. Thus, in addressing the state the article addresses social relations of power and their temporal dimension as these are impressed on, and expressed by, the state. Given that ‘the state’ does not exist in abstract, but takes socio-historically specific forms that pertain to different types of state, the article discusses the neoliberal *form of the capitalist type of state* – the state-form currently predominant across Europe and North America.¹

The analysis connects the collapse of modern time to the triumph of neoliberalism, and its crisis. The heart of the argument is that the neoliberal state does not and cannot articulate a vision of the future, and this is due to the triumph of capital over society that neoliberalism represents. As the 21st century comprises a phantasmagoria of crises, and the state has been dedicated to combating them, the assessment of the state, its temporal dimension, and its transformation are made by examining its response to crisis.

Schematically: to understand time, the article looks to the state; and to understand the state it looks to crisis. Thus, in [section 3](#), the article briefly outlines the state’s response to the four crises that have marked the century thus far: terrorism, the financial crisis, and the twin crises (biosecurity and economic) ensuing from the pandemic. It does so in order to outline the state-form that emerges from them. It produces this outline in [section 4](#), and labels this emerging from ‘neoliberal despotism’. This is a state that cannot offer society a vision of a future, can therefore only govern through fear, and does whatever it takes to impose social stasis. Before this analysis starts in earnest, [section 2](#) sets out its object: the neoliberal state and its relation to time.

2. The neoliberal state and its time

The neoliberal state is currently the predominant form of capitalist state. Being a capitalist state, its overall concern is to secure the conditions for the reproduction

of capitalist relations: the continuation of capital accumulation in a class-divided society under the leadership of the capitalist class (Poulantzas 1973, pp. 123–125, Agnoli 2020, p. 122, 162). Normal forms of capitalist state (liberal-democratic, as opposed to exceptional-dictatorial ones) are founded on a separation between political power and economy activity, a public and a private sphere, the state and society. Each of these realms and their interrelation are set in law. Thus, the state's institutionality and powers are defined constitutionally, and its relations to society are organised as a net of legal rights, obligations and liberties (Jessop 2016, pp. 212–216). Indeed, the capitalist state is the first state that acknowledges limits to its power *in principle*. Thus, paradoxically, it has to secure the continuation of capital accumulation but cannot command the economy or intervene in it directly. Instead, it must shape society, and each individual therein, as productive – as fit and willing to contribute to accumulation. It is thus constantly occupied with an endless array of tasks ranging from education, deviance, health, and transportation, to housing, alimentation, and demographics. In short, the capitalist state is inherently biopolitical (Foucault 2008, Agnoli 2020, pp. 122–128).

The neoliberal state differs from earlier normal forms of capitalist state. *Contra* welfare, corporatist, or nationalist states, for the neoliberal state the market is *the only* organising principle of society. Moreover, for neoliberalism, the market is defined by competition, rather than exchange; and it is not a natural order but a moral one that needs to be established politically (Hayek 2013, Biebricher and Vogelmann 2017, Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 533–535). Thus, the neoliberal state must turn society into a competitive market and individuals into entrepreneurs that valorise themselves in a market-society. It must itself be entrepreneurial, seeking to curtail its costs and enhance accumulation within its territory against competition from other states. And, it must safeguard the market-society against encroaching threats. This, then, is a *totalising* state. Unlike the liberal state that accommodated a pluriprotence of forms and logics (economic, judicial, political, ideological, aesthetic, moral) and drew its dynamism from their tense coexistence; the neoliberal state is founded on the singular principle of market competition, and exists for a singular purpose: to turn all social relations into market relations.

The neoliberal state must create and reproduce the conditions for the market society. This involves setting a constitutional framework that organises and promotes it, a framework premised on the primacy of private property and contractual relations; open and competitive markets; a competitive price mechanism; and monetary stability (Jessop 2019b). It must forge the entrepreneurial subjectivities optimal for the market-society through a combination of indoctrination, compulsion and coercion (Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 471–493). Finally, it must eliminate potential threats to the market. The state must do all these on a premise of unknowability. The market is a complex and fast-moving entity whose full knowledge is impossible (Hayek 2013, Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 276–283); so are the threats it faces. Thus, the state is constantly surveilling society, to extract the fullest possible knowledge of its affairs, trends and threats, knowing that such knowledge cannot be complete or definite. On the basis of incomplete knowledge, the neoliberal state employs both negative/coercive and positive/enhancing interventions in order to shape the social environment so that only market relations can be reproduced therein, and threats cannot grow. In one word, *pre-emption* is its predominant modality of power. Pre-emption is a management of future potentialities; it makes drastic

interventions in the social environment to ensure that only certain subjectivities and relations can come to exist therein, while threats cannot materialise (Stampnitzky 2013, pp. 165–200, Massumi 2015, Boukalas 2023, pp. 58–67).

The threat to the market-society stems from collective, deliberate mobilisations aiming to promote social equality – a purpose alien to the market that undermines its function. Succumbing to such social pressures makes the state interfere with, and contravene, the market. This sets both state and society on a path to totalitarianism. The state must therefore be shielded from, and irresponsive to, popular-democratic pressures (Hayek 1993, 2013, p. 463, 476–477, Cristi 1998, Bonefeld 2017, Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 210–211, 225, 256, 268–270, 319–320). Indeed, neoliberal states curtail the channels of democratic representation; set economic policy beyond democratic control; undermine and militate against organised labour; and develop a coercive arsenal to preclude and repress social challenges (Boukalas 2014, pp. 196–221; Streeck 2014, 2016, Jessop 2016, pp. 211–237; Gallas 2017). Moreover, *contra* Keynesian-welfare states, neoliberal ones are guided by supply-side economics that see the wage as a cost of production, rather than a source of demand (Jessop 2002, p. 152). Accordingly, they seek to minimise this cost by repressing wages, pensions and the social wage, and by reducing public services and the taxes needed to fund them. The neoliberal state is, in one word, a workfare state aiming to devalue labour.

The neoliberal state relates to time in a unique way. It achieved, and declared, the end of history, and set itself at history's apex. The historical past is either useless, since it has been fulfilled in the present social order; or abhorrent: a litany of atrocities and traumata. History, then, cannot and must not occur anymore. The neoliberal state is the first post- and anti-historical form of capitalist state.

It is also the first without *temporal sovereignty*: it has lost the ability to set temporal standards, initiate processes and set their temporal horizons, and control the overall pace of social activity (Jessop 2008, p. 195). This loss is caused by the acceleration of economic activity and events, which press political decision-making to keep up. Thus, the economy comes to dictate the temporal horizons and pace of the state. The state invited this development. It is the architecture of the institutional infrastructure that enables economic acceleration, especially that of hyper-accelerated finance; and it meticulously refrains from engineering a deceleration of economic activity. Instead, it accelerates policy-making processes in a (futile) attempt to synchronise them with economic ones. This accelerated policy is privileging the executive over the legislature and the judiciary; is detrimental to the rule of law and conducive to ad hoc and ephemeral legislation; undermines formal decision making and democratic participation; weakens institutional memory and the capacity to evaluate policy effects and learn from mistakes; and precludes long-term planning, as policy becomes a quest for temporary fixes (Jessop 2009, pp. 152–156; 2016, pp. 207–209).

Crucially, the slow process of democratic deliberation involved negotiation and synthesis of differing interests, positions and goals. It thus preserved – or construed – the unity of social time, making the multitude of particular social temporalities cohere (Rosa 2015, pp. 259–260). Indeed, the capitalist state was crucial in unifying the fragmented time of capital. The time of accumulation is (a) outcome-oriented; (b) abstracted, homogenised, and measured; (c) spiral, and hence endless and irreversible; (d) regimented: fragmented, serialised and parcelled; and (e) pressing and compressed: ever accelerated. Accumulation makes time inherently and desperately scarce; but also, through its perpetual repetition, endless. This complex and contradictory time could only cohere through a second-degree unification

effectuated by an extra-economic agent. The state unified social time by producing grand narrations of the people-nation. It would appropriate the nation's past, ascribe specific meanings to it, and align key historic events in a trajectory towards a national future or destiny (Poulantzas 1978, pp. 112–113). Thus, upon a fractured capitalist time, the state superimposed a meaningful and linear one, that progressed from past to future – the temporality of modernity was precisely this. The state created and embodied the unity of social time and its meaning. Its temporal sovereignty – the capacity to determine social tempi – stemmed from this, and is lost with it.

The ability to unify social time and give it meaning and purpose was a pillar of legitimacy – especially for a state that sought to organise the hegemony (rather than the mere dominance) of the capitalist class and drew its authority from future-oriented projects (Gramsci 1998, Jessop 2016, pp. 86–88, Kojève 2020). With this ability lost, the neoliberal state replaces the semantics of progress that hitherto defined its discourse with a rhetoric of objective forces with which society has to grapple but cannot influence. Accordingly, state legitimacy shifts from promise to necessity (Fairclough 2002, Rosa 2015, p. 269).

Temporal sovereignty is transferred from the state to the economy – especially its fastest player, finance. Finance dictates social tempi, forcing them to accelerate – hence Hatog's 'tyranny of the instant'. Financial sovereignty dominates but does not lead. It dictates without offering a reason or purpose; and it is atomised: imposed on every institution and individual in competition to others. It homogenises social time, but does not unify or inscribe meaning to it. Crucially, financial accumulation is pure circulation, it omits the stage of production. Thus, while its time resembles that of the full accumulation process, it is not regimented, fragmented, serialised or parcelled (point (d) above). Its time is uniform and flat: *identical*. It has no variation, rhythm or prospect. Presentism is precisely this identity of time, its collapse into a non-dimension.

The transfer of temporal sovereignty from the state to finance re-articulates social time and its consciousness: from collective, progressive linear movement, to atomised, competitive and meaningless omni-acceleration. The legitimacy of the state is disrupted, and time cannot cohere. Time becomes *anomic*: hectic, indefinite and synchronous, without prospect, dimensions or reason.

In sum, the neoliberal state is a totalising state that recasts society as accumulation; it is an anti-historical state that invites the identical time of finance to define social temporality. Without alterity and tension between organising principles, society has no dynamism; and it succumbs to a time that has no dimensions and is therefore essentially static. Such a social order cannot cope with (its) change; it experiences it as crisis, as a threatening occurrence it must extinguish. Ergo, for twenty-five years, the neoliberal state is combating crises and preparing for more. To register its ongoing transformation we must examine the manner of this.

3. Crises

Terrorism, finance, the pandemic, war, inflation, climate catastrophe: the 21st century is a pile up of emergencies and crises. The state is hectically managing them – and doing little else. For almost 25 years, it has been forced to act on the present instant, responding to unexpected catastrophic events. Here, I examine the state's response to the first four crises of the century – terrorism, finance, and the

twin crises ensuing from the pandemic – aiming to establish the form that the state acquires by fighting them. This examination will necessarily be brief and dense; even so, it offers a rare account of the crises that have marked the century *in conjunction*.

3.1. Security

On 9/11, the century was inaugurated by a security crisis that redefined cultural, legal and political relations and significations. Security policy has political activity as its target; pre-emption as its principal modality; and installs suspicion as the overarching social relation.

Terrorism is a political crime. Broadly, it is legally defined as any *already criminal* conduct that is politically motivated (Patriot Act, s.802). Alternatively, any conduct – including lawful – that, regardless of intention, involves violence against persons, endangers life, damages property, poses a risk to health or safety, or disrupts an electronic system can be terrorism *as long as* it is politically motivated: ‘designed to influence a government’ or ‘made for the purpose of advancing a political cause’ (Terrorism Act 2000, s.1; Cram 2009, p. 51, Anderson 2014, p. 86, Boukalas 2017, pp. 363–364). The recent outlawing of protest (Liberty 2022) is the logical conclusion of that definition: political expressions that the state does not endorse or tolerate are criminalised, signalling that *the state shall not be influenced*.

Security aims to shield the state from social pressure. It does so pre-emptively, by neutralising the threat before it materialises. Thus, offences that punish a final terrorist act that has *not* been committed cause havoc with criminal law (Ashworth 2009, Zedner 2009, McCulloch and Pickering 2010, McCulloch and Wilson 2016, Boukalas 2017). Guided by the axiom that the threat can take any form and is always present, as a potentiality, in society even when there is no evidence of it (Massumi 2015, Neocleous 2015), the state legalised the perpetual surveillance of interactions en masse, with the sole purpose of discovering suspicions and threats (Boukalas 2020). Given that the threat resides in political conviction, counter-extremism programs police the ideation of individuals who (due to their age, material or mental circumstances) are not seen as fully integrated in society, to prevent them from espousing non-liberal political ideas (Baker-Beall *et al.* 2015, Wolton 2017, Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2018, Boukalas 2019). Thus, the only ideology allowed to reproduce in society is liberalism. Pre-emptively, security cancels the possibility of political change by making it inconceivable.

Geared to arrest harms that have not, and may never occur, pre-emption is omni-suspicious. The perpetual monitoring of everyone and everything means that everyone is always suspect. For the state, the threat is co-expansive with society. For society too: counter-extremism brings an army of professionals – in health, education, child and social care – to suspect that their pupils, patients, etc, may be becoming terrorists; and it brings the latter to suspect that they are being monitored to be coerced and reformed. Thus, suspicion becomes the universal social meta-relation.

In a nutshell, security shows a state deeply suspicious of society undermining social bonds of trust and shielding itself from social influence by pre-emptively erasing antagonistic politics – and with it society’s potential for political change, for a political future.

3.2. Finance

The response to the financial crisis was quite different. The state provided unlimited and unconditional liquidity to the financial sector through grants, loans and quantitative easing. It bought collapsing banks, owned them until they could safely return to private hands, but refrained from running them. It instituted agencies to monitor banks for practices that pose system-wide risks, but without powers to sanction such practices. It required banks to hold augmented capital in reserve, and to separate their investment activities from quotidian banking (Lapavitsas 2013, pp. 281–305, Alexander and Schwarz 2015, Buckley 2015, Boukalas 2021, pp. 6–8; Dardot and Laval 2022, p. 424). More instructive was what the state could but did *not* do: preclude banks from becoming too big to fail, divide them into lending and investment institutions, impose a Tobin tax that would decelerate financial transactions, or raise taxation on capital gains. This is not surprising, for the response to the crisis was dictated by the top executives of financial institutions (Sayer 2016, pp. 279–281, Dardot and Laval 2022, p. 424). The state is merely mediating finance's self-regulation. Ergo, the UK is already dismantling its post-crisis regulation regime (Dunn 2023).

The state found itself indebted to the sector it had rescued. Its response to the financial crisis caused an explosion of public debt, which the state faced with severe cuts in wages, pensions and services. This regime of austerity resulted to a deep recession followed by chronic stagnation. In the UK and the European South where it was particularly harsh, it undermined state legitimacy, caused political instability and social angst, and tightened finance's grip on society (Jessop 2018, pp. 24–32; Lapavitsas et al., 2012). In short, the key response of the state in the financial crisis was to transfer its costs to society.

The deep cause of the financial crisis was the chronic depression of wages and the social wage. It led to anaemic effective demand, which necessitated an explosion of credit and debt (Milios and Sotiropoulos 2009, pp. 175–178, Lapavitsas 2012, p. 25; Boukalas 2014, pp. 218–221). Essentially, instead of recovery, the crisis was deferred in time. This was done through (further) pauperisation, concentration of wealth, and shrinking of aggregate demand. The crisis is deferred now at the cost of exacerbating the next one (Streeck 2016, pp. 17–19). Through austerity, *the state overcame the crisis by exacerbating its causes*. This means that it did not register the *past* of the phenomenon it addressed. And, in contrast to counterterrorism, the state was strictly reactive: it alleviated capital's difficulty, forced the cost on society and, in doing so, laid the groundwork for another crisis. This means that it did not register a *future* either. Its response was tied to, and exhausted in, the present instant. Blind to causes and prospects, the state's purpose was to preserve economic relations intact, to avert the possibility of change.

The state's security response refers to politics; that to the financial crisis, to the economy. The first is pre-emptive: it tries to determine the future, so that threats cannot develop. The second is re-active: it fights crises as they come. Through opposing temporalities, both responses converge in the same aim: that politics and the economy will remain as they are; there will be no change, no future.

3.3. *The twin crises of the pandemic*

The pandemic presented the state with two crises of tremendous magnitude that erupted simultaneously in its core areas of responsibility, security and the economy. Still, the real bind for the state was that anything it could do to alleviate one crisis would inevitably exacerbate the other. The dilemma cut to the constitutive core of the capitalist state. As a state, its first imperative is the security of its population; as capitalist, it is the continuation of capital accumulation. Thus, the twin crises combined into a crisis of crisis-management – manifest in incoherent, recalcitrant, and contradictory policy.

3.4. *Biosecurity*

Prima facie, the pandemic was a public health hazard; the state immediately framed and treated it as a security one, a war against an invisible enemy. Thus, operationally, biosecurity resembles counterinsurgency and develops counterterrorism tropes, while epidemiologists understand themselves as security operators (Philippides 2020, Farrar 2021, Boukalas 2023, pp. 5–7). This smooth transition from counterinsurgency to epidemiology is owed to counterinsurgency being modelled on epidemiology in the first place (Heath-Kelly 2017, Philippides 2020, pp. 28–31). Both types of operation aim to eradicate an enemy by targeting society as a whole (Philippides 2020, p. 26, 31).

Anticipating the pandemic, the UK provided for the continuity of its security apparatus (Coronavirus Act 2020, ss.23–24); mobilised all public health resources (ss.2–18; Schedules 1–6); and sought to secure food supplies (ss.26–29; Schedule 15(7)). This describes a state of siege. To combat the pandemic, State Secretaries drew on constitutional and legislative provisions allowing them to govern by decree: to impose any regulations and measures, on any standards, and regardless of their impact and effectiveness, as long as *they* had determined that an emergency was at play. The result was an uncertain, unstable, and chaotic regime in which neither citizens, the police nor the lawmakers knew what the law was (Cowan 2021, Boukalas 2023, pp. 35–37).

The legal regime of biosecurity offers an insight to the temporality of emergency law. It consists of hyper-accelerated mass-issuing of ephemeral norms addressing the present instant: measures, regulations, powers, instructions, guidances. This manic mobilisation occurs within a context of perfect immobility: the frozen time of the state of siege. This is the law of animated suspension, of Rosa's 'frenetic standstill'.

Biosecurity measures brought everyone under perpetual omni-surveillance; they circumvented rights and restricted movement, association, and employment. Notably, while biosecurity law authorises open-ended powers, it *does not impose a single duty* on the state – not even to protect the rights to health and life, for the benefit of which all other rights were overcome (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2020, Boukalas 2023, pp. 30–34). Ergo, care home residents were abandoned and even jeopardised (Tarrant and Hayes 2021); and governments would lift measures whilst infection rates were rising to allow economic activity to resume.

The state did not know what to do with its biosecurity powers. Its aim was to 'control the virus' —i.e. anything between 'zero covid' and 'free covid'. It had no aim and, consequently, no strategy to achieve it. Its key concern was political rather than epidemiological. It was to erect the image of a robust public health system able to cope with the

most outrageous emergency (Boukalas 2023, pp. 38–46). A visible collapse could have led to re-evaluation of the state's health policy over the last decades, and, from there, to an examination of the overall function of the neoliberal state (Philippides 2020, p. 43, Boukalas 2023, p. 41). To avert potential challenge to the neoliberal order, the state erected the shining image of public health when public health was no more.

To achieve this, the state sacrificed the lives it was purporting to save. It excluded from care those who needed it most – in care homes, 'death wards', or at home, denied transfer to hospital (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021). Further, it erased the public sphere – and with it politics, which was reduced to a televised state monologue. And, it entrapped all reproductive *and productive* functions and relations within the domestic sphere, the household. As the household is not designed to cope with the tensions inherent within these relations *and* between them, the results were explosive and mostly felt by women as domestic violence. Thus the idyl of liberal ideology was shuttered: the domestic sphere, that safe abode from the turmoil of social life, became a trap; safety could only be found in the public sphere, which did not exist (Boukalas 2023, pp. 46–50).

Biosecurity reduced the body into hyper-abstracted, policed and commodified data; and reduced life into metabolism – an animation bereft of meaning, purpose, or sociality that caused scarcity in spaghetti and toilet paper. This life is biosecurity's object of protection. But it is also the agent of the threat. Any-body can be or become infected, and therefore threatening, at any time. Hence, everyone is suspect, always. Suspicion comes to envelop the self: I can never be sure I am not carrying a virus and, hence, a threat (Boukalas 2023, pp. 24–26, 137). The self is a threat: installed by counterterrorism, the condition of universal suspicion is now perfected.

The universality of suspicion ensues from the temporal modality biosecurity shares with counterterrorism: pre-emption. Neutralising the threat before it materialises means intervening while its form is unknown – hence everything and everyone must be assumed to be a potential threat. Biosecurity's defining measures – vaccination and lockdown – are markedly pre-emptive. Vaccination is anticipatory. It alters the environment of the threat – the biological organism – so that the virus cannot grow therein. And it does so by encouraging contact with the threat, in terms that would neutralise it. Similarly, lockdown is a drastic intervention that reshapes the social environment so that the threat cannot grow therein.

In lockdown the state canceled society. It had to: the threat of the virus is in contagion; and the threat of contagion is in physical contact and proximity, in the *act* of society (Boukalas 2023, p. 24). To cancel society is the apotheosis of state power; a power so complete it consumes itself.

Biosecurity is a compound of peculiar temporalities. Operationally, it sought to pre-empt the threat, to preclude its growth. But it did so by reacting to it – by hectically issuing and imposing measures. Decision-making time was random and instantaneous. It was inscribed within a broader policy-making time that was determined by epidemiological time: measures were reviewed, lifted or strengthened in three week intervals, replicating the average circle of the disease from infection to death. These temporalities were punctuated by a ritual time of daily addresses to the nation. All this occurred within a social time defined by enclosure and lack of movement. A captive, eventless time, where hours, days and seasons became hard to distinguish or experience. A time melt into indefinite sameness, an identical time. Finally, biosecurity time had an end, decreed by the state: return to normality, recovery of the pre-pandemic past. It had an end but not a future.

3.5. Economy

Biosecurity caused economic activity to cease, raising the immediate prospect of total collapse. The state tried to mothball the economy so that it would emerge pristine at the end of biosecurity. This took a titanic effort, involving the greatest counter-cyclical exercise in history, and affirmed the economy as *political*.

In its roadmap for overcoming the crisis, the IMF instructed that while biosecurity restrictions remained tight, the state should do everything to sustain an economy that had been erased: it should provide grants, loans and tax breaks to capital, and pay the wages of idled workers. It should essentially become the economy. In the post-pandemic recovery phase, the state should continue with counter-cyclical policy, this time by handing contracts to private enterprise to invigorate anaemic private investment. Help to workers and underperforming firms should now be withdrawn, leading the latter to bankruptcy; and more stringent demands placed on welfare recipients. Finally, in the ‘new normality’ phase, state expenditure stops. The state is now concerned with reducing the debt it has accrued, and intensifies workfare, while the liquidation of underperforming capital results to a leaner, fitter economy (IMF International MonetaryFund 2020). Thus, the purpose of counter-cyclical policy is to preserve the neoliberal economy: its endgame is a new normality exactly like the old one.

Still, even the generous counter-cyclical policy was unusual. For dominant capital, it was mainly expressed through grants and endless liquidity; it was unlimited and unconditional. By contrast, labour and small capital are paying back with interest, through onerous debt, cuts in public services, inflation, and wage suppression. In short, the neoliberal state promptly jettisons the neoliberal economic rulebook to save a neoliberal economy from collapse; but, its counter-cyclical policy is designed to redistribute wealth upwards. Ours, then, is a *dual economy*: Keynesianism for dominant capital, neoliberalism for everyone else (Boukalas 2023, pp. 115–129).

Despite mothballing, the economy did change: its spatio-temporal horizons shifted. Supply chains are redrawn, and just-in-time production is undermined. Thus, the spatial envelope of accumulation is shrinking, returning to regional and even national frameworks; and the temporality of production is expanding, decelerating. Indeed, there is persistent malfunction and strategic confusion in the institutions charged with advancing capitalist integration – culminating in the exit of the UK from the EU; prolonged deadlock on key appointments to transnational directorates stemming from US-China confrontation (including the Appellate Body of the WTO, which leaves international trade disputes unresolved); and the expansion of BRICS. To this chronic decomposition, the pandemic added mistrust towards expanded supply chains; and the spectacle of petty pilfering of vaccines and protective equipment among states, including those of the EU, the most integrated transnational bloc (Schwab and Malleret 2020, p. 108, 112–113, Boyer 2021, p. 23, 149–152, 184, IMF 2021, p. 20, 141–142; Boukalas 2023, pp. 119–122). There is, in short, a movement away from globalisation and its space-time compression. This gives an advantage to labour, strengthening its negotiating position – for, within the national envelope, labour is finite. The state is robustly resisting this tendency. It suppresses wages, extends the length of the working day and life, imposes endless austerity and outlaws strikes and protest.

During mothball, neoliberal states adopted a set of ‘automatic stabilisers’ – measures of fiscal relaxation that kick in automatically, without previous authorisation or decision, once

the economy enters crisis. Thus, the state acknowledges crises as a structural element of the economy, shoulders the burden of confronting them, and sets the parameters of crisis-management beyond discussion. The relation between the economy and crisis goes deeper. The major beneficiaries of the lockdown economy were biomedical industries, data-exploiting IT, and all businesses that can put on a 'green' livery. These, along with finance, are set to be the protagonists of the 'new normality' (Boukalas 2023, pp. 107–110). Biomedical enterprises were strengthened thanks to biosecurity. Data extraction and commodification benefited from the lockdown, as IT was the only moving part of the economy and a key instrument for biosecurity action. Its infrastructure and impetus date from counterterrorism and the push it gave to surveillance technologies. And, the 'green economy' is rising thanks to the climate emergency. In short, all the emerging key sectors were forged in, and owe their stature to, crisis. Accumulation is driven by, and depends on, crisis (Bichler and Nitzan 2013).

Crucially, accumulation has shifted to an 'intensive' mode, premised on a perception of scarcity. This would typically refer to scarcity in energy, especially oil. It is now coupled with scarcity in food, semiconductors and rare earth materials. The quest to control scarce resources is conducive to conflict: alongside conflict over oil and gas, confrontation is now firmly joined, especially between China and the US, over semiconductors and rare earths – the key materials for the production of everything that involves cybernetic systems (D'Eramo 2022). Thus, all universal commodities are perceived as scarce. This mode of accumulation demands expensive money, proceeds through severe devaluation of labour and capital cannibalism, and its hallmark is stagflation (Nitzan and Bichler 2009, pp. 334–397). It is an unstable mode of accumulation that generates crisis and thrives on it. It is best described as *phobic*: it is premised on fear and fear is its general output.

Finally, instead of the fabled recovery, the state is facing a new dilemma: inflation or recession. It cannot address one without causing the other. For almost a year the state was paralysed, hesitating to tame inflation by risking recession. Worryingly, governments believed their own pronouncements that inflation was due to exogenous one-off events (Russia's invasion of Ukraine) and that the astronomic amounts of money that fourteen years of quantitative easing have injected in the economy were irrelevant (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2023, Partington 2023). This inaction exacerbated inflation. But when it took the plunge, the state was emphatic: it would curb inflation by *engineering* a recession to 'create uncertainty and frailty' in the economy, making workers fear for their jobs and stop asking for pay rises (Karen Ward, cited in B.B.C. 2023). In sum, crisis management generates crisis: the state differs one crisis by engineering another. The state denies, or cannot register, this. It uses phobic accumulation as a mode of government, aiming to discipline and devalue labour.

3.6. Detour: capital's new plans

While continually mired in crisis, the post-pandemic economy presents two increasingly defined plans for drastic transformation: green capitalism and artificial intelligence. Rather than specific drivers or objects of accumulation, these aim to encompass and redefine accumulation as a whole: production, circulation and valorisation. Here, I make a detour from the main narration of the article in order to discuss the state's stance towards them and their temporal features and implications.

Out of data-manipulation technologies emerges a self-accumulating technology for accumulation: artificial intelligence (AI). It is not a technological novelty, but a development of cybernetic systems. Neither is it an intellectual innovation: AI is the logical conclusion of supply side economics. Its ultimate horizon is the full replacement of living labour, freeing capital from its costs, while disregarding what happens to demand. AI promises the full emancipation of capital from society; capital fails to see the danger that this emancipation could become mutual.

Regarding its temporality, AI, like all cybernetic systems, is atemporal. Systems register time exclusively as delay. It is a disruption of their feedback loops: inevitable, but nonetheless undesirable and impossible to fully determine and control (Meadows 2008). A delay is a lapse, a distance (however long) from zero-time. Registering time as delay means that the temporal horizon of AI systems is naught. Their only temporality is instantaneity. Time is an inconvenience and possibly a threat: delay may cause their interventions to misfire. Systems are homeostatic and, hence, inherently presentist. Whether they are geared towards maintaining dynamic equilibria or generating growing ones; whether they perform on feedback or feedforward loops, they always operate on the basis of reproduction and continuity (Georgiou 2023, pp.23-28, Meadows 2008, 2023). They cannot account for disruption and discontinuity. They suffer, acutely, from the malaise that haunts rationalism. As they aim to the calculability of abstracted contents, they must posit these contents as stable. They can only grasp the becoming of these contents as a system of laws that address all predictable possibilities. They are thus unable to cope with the unpredictable, they cannot grasp the new (Lukács 2022, pp. 248–249). Not only unable to cope with the future, cyber-systems are, by conception, an instrument against it. For Abraham Moles, a high-priest of the nascent cybernetics science, '[i]t is obvious that the totality of society [...] can be regulated in such a way as to be *protected from the accidents of becoming* so that only eternity can change it. This is the ideal of the stable society expressed through objectively controllable apparatus' (in Tiquun 2023, pp. 41–42; emphasis added).

The cybernetic promise of a stable, eternally and automatically reproduced, society appeals to the state not only as a purpose but also as a method. Automated government promises the passing from the government of people to the 'administration of things' – by things. It secures the reproduction of the social order, preloads decision and makes it imperceptible, and thus frees state actors from accountability. Yet the state is starting to see AI as a threat. Indeed, AI is the first human artefact that evades human control *and* understanding. Here, again, the state is in a bind: it sees AI as a threat in itself, but also in the hands of hostile states and actors. It fears it, but must allow it to develop faster than adversaries do. Its conundrum is how to regulate it without surrendering ensuing competitive advantages.

The environmental crisis is the point where the continuation of accumulation meets the limit of the reproduction of nature. They cannot both continue. The state's response to this clearly outlined omni-crisis comprised decades of denial and paralysis. It now hopes to respond to environmental destruction by breaking it down to a host of security threats (to anything from food scarcity to 'cultural' integrity) and manage *them* accordingly. Capitalists accept an environmental armageddon and an ensuing social collapse as *fait accompli*, and are preoccupied with securing the wealth they have extracted from the planet and the societies they have destroyed (Rushkoff 2022). In short, state and capital

are not only bereft of a vision of the future; they are even unable to cope with long-term continuity. A way out of this impasse appears as capital finds ways to valorise the environmental destruction it causes. Green capitalism emerges as the latest transformation of capitalism in response to resistance from society and nature. Except, there is no transformation. The problem of environmental destruction is posed (by scientists, politicians, and activists) as a technicality: fossil fuels resulting to carbon emissions and, hence, global warming. The solution is also technical – shift to sustainable energy – and states and capital align to it, as long as it offers serious profitability prospects. Environmental destruction is not seen as related to the social order, to the way in which society is made to function. Accordingly, the latter remains unquestioned and can continue unaltered. Indeed, a technical solution is introduced *in order to* allow the social order and accumulation processes to continue as they are. To take the example of a singular ‘green’ sector, (ironically) automobiles: the abrupt replacement, within a few years, of the global vehicle fleet from combustion- to electricity-motored cars is an unprecedented boost to the automotive industry; its benefit – or damage – to the environment is not that clear. Also unclear is how the disposal of cars’ lithium-based batteries will not poison the soil for decades. It seems that green capitalism aims to enhance accumulation; it is unlikely to save the planet, and neither does it aim to. Far from representing change, green capitalism is a technical adjustment aimed to maintain and intensify the existing economic relations and practices. It does not represent a future but the unobstructed continuation of an unviable present.

Thus, while drastic, capital’s plans represent nothing new. They are continuations and intensifications of existing economic relations and aim to the advancement of the same.

4. Neoliberal despotism

The most striking – and least noticed – element in the state’s responses, was that they did not include a vision for a post-crisis future. Instead, the state petulantly promises a recovery of the pre-crisis past, a return to normality that stubbornly refuses to materialise. *For the first time in its history the capitalist state has no vision of a future* (Boukalas 2021). In what follows, I trace the causes and outline the consequences of this predicament.

4.1. Capital’s neoliberal triumph

The neoliberal offensive delivered a definitive triumph of capital over society – a victory so complete that the dominance of the capitalist class has reached its asymptote (Bichler and Nitzan 2012). The capitalist class wants to prolong its moment of triumph to infinity. It is avert to change, to a future. The triumph of capital has important consequences for society, the state, and accumulation. I address them in turn.

Underlying capital’s augmented profitability is its unprecedented capacity to shape society – practices, relations, institutions and significations – to the image of accumulation. From law to health, art and education, social practices lose their specifying logics, meanings, purposes and temporalities and are determined by those of the market: investment, turnover time, cost-benefit analysis, value-for-money (Debord 1998, Brown 2015, pp. 17–45). The individual too is recast as capital and its relation

to itself as an accumulation process (Brown 2015, pp. 79–111; Rosa 2015, pp. 161–173, Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 517–520). This shaping of society as market and of the self as capital is constitutive of the neoliberal programme and its key demand from the state (Böhm 1937, Dardot and Laval 2022, pp. 273–275, 497–499, 533–535). Thus, society becomes *integral accumulation*; and capitalism becomes total: there is no antilogue to it. But it was precisely social antilogue – alterity, resistance and antagonism – that forced capitalism to change, develop and progress. Without it, capitalism loses its dynamism, it tends towards static equilibrium. Capitalism becomes entropic and is only animated by crisis.

The accumulation process that forged society to its mould, has itself changed. The neoliberal offensive was led by finance (Streeck 2014, Jessop 2018), resulting to its profitability being orders of magnitude larger than that of industry. Capital has ceased being productive; it has become rentier, extractive (Lapavistas 2013, Piketty 2014). It does not seek to create wealth, but to concentrate it. Crucially, production is future-oriented: it occurs now, but will be valorised in the future. Moreover, production means change; it alters things, and therefore *makes* time. Extraction, by contrast, is presentist. Both in the nanosecond transactions of high finance and in the long-term relations that underpin other forms of rent, it necessitates and commands the reproduction of the present. Extraction *suspends* time. Thus, apart from unwilling, capital is unable to envision a future, for society or for itself.

Finally, this capitalist class has captured the state – a development instrumental in bringing forth the other two. Its state is structured and operates as a private enterprise in a competitive market: it is ruled by economic laws; led by a hyper-active executive branch whose top personnel fashion themselves as CEOs; treats citizens as clients; and is accountable only to its stakeholders – i.e. capital, who is the sole director and evaluator of policy (Dardot and Laval, 413–469).

As the state is captured by capital, it is charged with freezing time at the moment of capital's triumph.² Crucially, its shielding from other social forces means that the state loses its synthetic role in relation to society. With it, the state loses its capacity to devise strategy – for strategy is precisely the outcome of a selective synthesis of contrasting social interests into a project (Boukalas 2021). Shielded from social challenge, 'power believes that it no longer needs to think; and indeed can no longer think' (Debord 1998, p. 38). Moreover, strategy is future-oriented: it is devised in the present but fulfilled in the future, by making that future. Having lost its strategic ability, the state is not only avert to, but genuinely incapable of a future.

Surprisingly, this triumphant capitalism is disintegrating. It is no longer able to underpin social cohesion and, hence, it is imploding: collapsing not due to pressure from social antagonism but due to its very success in overpowering it (Streeck 2016, pp. 35–36, 57–58, 65). Since the turn of the century, this triumphant capitalism is constantly generating intense crises, anticipates more of them and nothing else. The neoliberal state is transformed by, and *for*, crisis-fighting. Its main contours are now decipherable.

4.2. Neoliberal despotism

Emerging from the crises is a state whose power knows no limits. It can bend the laws of the economy, suspend rights, cancel society. This omnipotent state has no duties or

responsibilities to society. Towards capital, the same state is nothing but obligation. Crises have a revelatory aspect (Knio and Jessop 2019, 9); what is revealed now is the neoliberal state *in the pure*.

Yet, this magnificent power has no purpose. Crisis-management lacked strategic cohesion or a defined goal; and the state never articulated a vision of a post-crisis future. It employed opposite temporal interventions – pre-emption, reaction – but always to the same purpose: to impose stasis. This is the strategy of a state incapable of strategy.

From terrorism to climate change, everything is causing existential crisis threatening ‘our way of life’ which must be defended by all means. This points to a collapsing social order that requires quite an effort to support. As accumulation now depends on crisis, it is due to generate endless series of them. To sustain this precarious social order, the state acquires a form that we are starting to face.

Qua legal order, the state has undergone a fundamental shift. Its legal framework does not cohere around notions of justice, fairness or autonomy, but is determined by the imperative to defend the existing social order (Boukalas 2017, p. 382). Accordingly, recourse to arbitrary power becomes a measure of first resort: easily available, frequent and typical. There is neither penumbra or core of rights that resists this power in defence of the social order. Rights are adhered to if and as circumstance permits; they become exceptional (Contiades 2020, pp. 81–82). And, they do not convey duties to the state. They are not, strictly speaking, rights, but allowances the state makes to society.

Without obligation to society, the state transfers responsibility for jeopardies and failures to the individual. It defuses its loss of legitimacy and relieves governmental overload by turning the citizenry from a source of potential resistance and disruption, to atomised and self-responsibilised agents of their own subordination – enhancing thus the efficiency of economic and political domination (Jessop 2016, p. 179). The responsible individual is the flip-side of the irresponsible state. Purely neoliberal, this is the first capitalist state that does not acknowledge any responsibility towards society.

This state cannot bear responsibility because it never decides. Its actions are forced: dictated by the necessity to defend a social order facing catastrophe. Still, this is not a state of necessity. A state of necessity arises to fend off a specific threat. Its *raison d’être* is to defeat the threat that made it necessary. Having done so, it dissolves. The goal of the state of necessity is to make itself redundant. For our state, by contrast, anything can be a threat. What it is fighting against has lost definition. What the threat is; what defeat or victory would look like; whether either is accomplished and the confrontation ended – none of these can be said conclusively. Ours is a state of *endless pseudo-necessity* (Boukalas 2023, pp. 152–156). It makes necessity an ontological condition, governs through it, confronts it powerfully and haphazardly, and perpetuates itself as such.

A state of necessity can only be *in* and *for* the present; the state of pseudo-necessity extends its present to perpetuity. Reversely: a presentist state, whose only provenance, concern and horizon is the present, can only be a state of pseudo-necessity. Thus, the neoliberal state ceases to be a historic force: if history is the total of society’s creative agency, without it society is reduced to a passive object that forces beyond its control act on it as they may. Having declared history to be over, the state now discovers that beyond it lies not the shangri-la of technocratic ‘administration of things’, but the nightmare of necessity: an infinite, amorphous realm where monstrous threats emerge randomly and unceasingly.

Operationally, this state does ‘whatever it takes’ to defend the social order. Its power is not defined or limited by democratic principles, law, or dogma. It cannot be otherwise: principle is forged in the past, to define and guide towards a future. A presentist state cannot be a principled one; it does what it can and must.

Above all, this is a state hostile to society and determined to be secluded from it. The shielding of the state from social influence is the core programmatic tenet and achievement of neoliberalism. For neoliberals, *the problem never was whether the state can intervene in the economy, but whether society can intervene in the state* (Boukalas 2023, p. 166).

In sum, this is a state secluded from society and without duty to it. Its power is unlimited and has no purpose. It is a sequence of spasmodic reactions to necessity. Unable to articulate a vision of the future, the state’s only goal is to preserve everything as is. It exercises magnificent power to achieve nothing – and achieving this gets increasingly harder.

This is the state of *neoliberal despotism*. It is an authoritarian state, for it exercises augmented power on society, while precluding society from influencing it (Poulantzas 1978, pp. 203–204). Rather than generically authoritarian, it is more specifically despotic: for its *raison d’être* is to impose social stasis. It is sheer force against change. This state exists to secure the continuation of wealth concentration occurring from an extractive accumulation that depends on, and produces, crisis. It strives to maintain the eternal present of capital’s triumph in the face of the social implosion it causes.

Neoliberal despotism corresponds to, and encapsulates, the hegemonic collapse of capitalism (Boukalas 2021). Hitherto, the capitalist state could devise hegemonic projects and mobilise large parts of society towards a seemingly appealing future under the leadership of the capitalist class (Jessop 2016, pp. 86–88): the rule of law, liberty-equality-fraternity, nationalist heroism, the great society, the global village governed by human rights. Now, for the first time in its history, the capitalist state has no future to offer society. It leads nowhere, but forces society to stick to a decomposing present. Neoliberal despotism is the state of a capitalist class that can no longer lead, but seeks to dominate eternally.

As a structural articulation, neoliberal despotism is a Friedmanian, national, workfare apparatus. *Friedmanian* because it is charged with setting and maintaining the conditions for an accumulation that proceeds by disrupting them (Bourgeron 2021). Caught in the ever-accelerating turnover times of accumulation, Schumpeterian ‘innovation’ (Jessop 2002, Schumpeter 2010) has now turned into ‘disruption’. The neoliberal project now advances not only through the institutions it has captured or created, but also by dismantling them.³ This tactic originates in US neoliberalism (Jessop 2019b), especially the Chicago School. Thus – rather tenuously – I label the predominant economic state policy after the most emblematic figure of that approach. Its motto: ‘there are no disasters, only opportunities. And, indeed, opportunities for fresh disasters’ (Boris Johnson, cited in Robinson 2023). Neoliberal despotism is a *national* state in the sense that its economic horizon *and* its legitimacy retreat to the national envelope, turning away from globalisation. Moreover, in tandem with the decomposition of the transnational machinery for capitalist integration, economic and security policy-making returns to the national state and is increasingly centralised within it (Boukalas 2014, pp. 214–215; 2023, pp. 170–172). There is, in short, a retreat of transnational multi-scalar governance (Jessop 2002) and a resurgence of national-statist government. Neoliberal

despotism is a *workfare* state, for the continuing devaluation of labour remains its core objective. And, without capacity to produce strategy, this state is merely a mechanism, an *apparatus* (Boukalas 2023, pp. 168–173).

Neoliberal despotism is a structurally misarticulated state-form. Its entrenchment in the national scale contradicts the interests of dominant capital *and* the structural necessity for capital to expand. It also counteracts the state's workfare mission as it offers labour a structural advantage. Its Friedmanian aspect charges the state with sustaining a (self-)destructive accumulation – an absurd, self-negating task. There is, moreover, an existential anomaly: a future-less, stasis-imposing state is called to orchestrate capitalism, a dynamic, future-oriented system. Either neoliberal despotism is an aberration, a moribund transitional state-form; or capitalism has morphed into a static order.

The logic of neoliberal despotism – the premises that frame the state's view of the world and its role therein – is *threat governmentality*. Threat governmentality is a biopolitical reversal of biopolitics. Whereas biopolitics sees life and society as innately creative and, accordingly, seeks to nurture, enhance, control and exploit these creative faculties so that they become productive (Foucault 2008); threat governmentality sees life and society as innately destructive – and seeks to avert, suppress, and erase their destructive potential. Essentially, whereas the objective of biopolitics is labour-power (Virno 2015, p. 159, 166), that of threat governmentality is threat-power. Certainly, these potentialities – to create and destroy – are one. They are the innate potency of society to change (Boukalas 2023, pp. 133–146). The state fears society's capacity to make its future. The threat is *social becoming*, and neoliberal despotism is set to avert it.

Threat governmentality is the governmental logic of neoliberalism. For neoliberalism, the market must be the organising principle of society, and the relation that defines the market is competition. Thus, society must be a competition of each against all; market and society are a cosmos of threat. Moreover, the neoliberal market is not a natural order, but a human creation that can be undone. The market can be, and is, threatened. Because it is threatened, it needs the constant intervention of the state. Here, neoliberalism reverses the core liberal relation between market, society, and the state. In classic liberalism, the market and civil society were on the same side *vis-à-vis* the state: suspicious of its monopoly of violence, they demanded to be free from its arbitrary power. For society and the market, the state was a threat. In neoliberalism the state has sided with the competitive market, it is its champion and guardian. They are both threatened by deliberate, collective social action. Thus, the market is a place of threat, is itself under threat, and the threat emanates from society.

Neoliberal despotism incorporates the core features of neoliberal political normativity in their extreme, pure form. We have seen: the seclusion of the state from society; its irresponsibility; the pre-emptive modality of state power; the opposing treatments for society and capital; the annihilation of labour; the logic of threat governmentality. Neoliberal despotism is the limit-form of the neoliberal state. It cannot see a future because it has already arrived: it has achieved the fullest development possible for its kind. It is *the last* capitalist state. That it emerges to rescue the neoliberal social order from implosion, suggests that this might be the last capitalist state not only conceptually, but also historically.

4.3. *Dialectics of government through fear*

Without an appealing vision of the future to offer society, the state can only govern it through fear – fear of the future. Society must stick to its eternal present, or get blown up by Al Qaida, beheaded by Isis, invaded by Putin, asphyxiated by viruses, subjugated by China, murdered by automata, roasted by the sun. The future is pregnant with threats – only. The future *is* threat, and the state protects from it.

This abundance of exotic threats is felicitous for the state. It is its last remaining platform of legitimacy and allows the state to be judged not on its principles, achievements or projects, but on the enemies and threats it faces. Facing them justifies the state to leverage intense powers, which it exercises on society. Further, their exoticness – their spatial exteriority and conceptual remoteness – deflects fear away from the quotidian angst that individuals suffer in a competitive market in which they are unprotected (for the state has turned the safety of welfare into the punitive burden of workfare), alone (for they are personally responsible for everything, especially their failures) and prospect-less (for this present will never end). Finally, the exoticness of the threats obfuscates the role of accumulation and policy in bringing them about. What the state offers is the *spectacle* of security (Debord 1994): a concrete inversion of the nature of the threat and of the state–society relations organised around it.

The inversion goes deeper: *the state fears the society it is purporting to protect*. It sees society as threat, and is defined by this view. The state fears society's capacity to change, to make its future. It fears this, because the present that the state seeks to perpetuate is a threat to society: 'accumulation now constitutes the pre-eminent danger to the continuation of all forms of human life' (Harvey 2020, p. 116). The state fears society because it knows society should fear it. It equates change with threat, because it cannot envision change. It cannot control or cope with it. Any change would come besides and against the state – as a threat.

This article has covered a lot of ground. Before it ends, it must look back on itself. Triggered by the claim that the perspective of the future is erased, a claim advanced by two major contemporary thinkers in authoritative accounts on different registers, this article brought into relief the state, and its relation to time. The state is seen as a social – and, importantly, a temporal – relation. For this, focussing on the state allows a connection between temporal and other social dynamics – a connection that can offer a key to explaining the predicament that Hartog and Rosa describe. The state in question is neoliberal: It is the first form of capitalist state that is anti-historical, and hence ceases to be a historic agent. It is also the first to lose its temporal sovereignty, its capacity to define social tempi and temporal horizons and make time cohere. It is, moreover, a workfare state: it sees labour as a cost of production, a cost that the sum total of its policies seek to repress; and it is a state that seeks to be secluded from social pressures and demands.

This state is observed through the prism of crisis – for combating crises has been its main occupation during the 21st century. An examination of the first four major crises of the century outlines the main contours of the state's response, including its temporal modalities and horizons. This examination provides a first outline of the transformation of the neoliberal state through, and for, crisis-fighting.

What emerges from this account is *a state without a future*: a state hostile to change and incapable of it, for it has lost its strategic capacity. This loss results from it being the

first capitalist state fully captured by capital, a class that has now lost its need and appetite for change, for a future. This is the key development: all others stem largely from it, and, possibly, so do presentism and the erasure of the future more broadly. This, then, is the first capitalist state without a vision for the future. I label it *neoliberal despotism*: a despotic state set to impose social stasis, in order to maintain the triumph of capital over society that the neoliberal project has achieved.

This state will do whatever it takes to preserve the neoliberal social order. It has to do a lot: judging from the endless occurrence of existential crises, this social order is collapsing. The core of what the state strives to maintain is a *phobic accumulation*: a presentist, extractive and destructive mode of accumulation that depends on, and generates, crisis.

Accordingly, the neoliberal state morphs into a *state of endless pseudo-necessity*: to secure a disintegrating social order, it claims unlimited power and acknowledges no responsibility towards society; it is, again, the first capitalist state to do either. It hermetically insulates its power from social influence by outlawing and pre-emptively neutralising all forms of social pressure and resistance.

It is guided by the logic of *threat governmentality*: it understands and treats society as suspect, as an inherently destructive, threatening force that must be controlled and suppressed. It makes suspicion its key relation to society, and defuses it within society until it even encompasses the self. For it locates the threat anywhere/everywhere in society: in the latter's innate capacity to change, to make history and create its future.

The structural articulation of neoliberal despotism, including its temporal structures, is unfeasible. Bereft of a vision for the future, the state cannot make social time cohere and cannot lead society anywhere. It operates, and entraps society, within an anomic time: frantic, identical, spasmodic, without meaning or prospect – a collapsed time without dimensions, punctuated by crises. To preserve a disintegrating social order; and to overcome its structural misalignment, neoliberal despotism would need to resort to force.

In short: determined to eternally fix time on the present of capital's triumph in the face of the social collapse that results from it, neoliberal despotism is defined by *absolute fear of change*. Fearing change, fearing society and having no future to lead it towards, this state can only govern through fear. Fear of exotic threats; fear of quotidian generalised precarity; fear of the force the state puts on display against any provocation.

This is my account of the state we are in. It does suffer some serious limitations. First, it runs the danger of overgeneralising, by extrapolating the Anglo-American version of the neoliberal state to other varieties of this form – even if it draws insights from them too (France and Greece) and finds remarkable coincidence of trends among them. Second, it only focuses on class dynamics, and does not register other terrains of social struggle (gender; the nation; race; sexuality) and how they inform, and are informed by, the state. This points to the third, and major, limitation of this article: it has a blindspot to society. It sees the latter only through the eye of the state. Thus, society registers as inherently threatening, and therefore suspect; it is made unable to influence the state; it is atomised, and (personally) responsible for everything; it is rightless; reduced to metabolism; and it is systematically and intensely devalued as labour and as life. The state fears society and strives to reduce it, as historic agency, to naught. Still, it stirs.

Under lockdown, while it was officially cancelled, society reinstated the public sphere and affirmed itself as political, physical and in-common. It did so in protest: against racism, fascism, misogyny, police brutality. In doing so, it negated life's reduction to metabolism and

affirmed life as meaning, for which life can be risked. It produced relations, logics and temporalities alien to accumulation: deliberate action that is premised on solidarity, draws from traditions of struggle, and aims to a better future. To do so, it overcame the fear of arrest, violence, contagion, and death. It overcame the order of fear – and negated the state’s remaining source of authority.

The state responds with fear-inflation: the imminent threat of world war and nuclear extermination. Also, protest is outlawed; protestors disappear while armed *faci* go on parade (US); vigils and public gatherings face intense police violence (Belgium, Greece, France, the Netherlands, UK). As the state’s eternal present holds nothing good for society, it can only be maintained through force. From manager of fear, the state is becoming its author.

Notes

1. The classification of the state does not follow the further distinction between variegations of neoliberal states according to the way in which they historically became thus; and does not explore the specific ways the tendencies it outlines are expressed within the context of particular neoliberal nation-states. It thus risks homogenising the neoliberal state and over-generalising the broad trends it describes, by extrapolating developments in neoliberal states that emerged from ‘neoliberal regime shift’ dominated by finance, to those that followed different pathways to neoliberalism. It sidesteps states that became neoliberal through an accumulation of ‘neoliberal policy adjustments’ but maintain a significant welfare state and promote and export-based accumulation, which force them to adopt longer-term planning. It should, however, be noted that the trends outlined here present marked similarity across different varieties of neoliberal state; after all, the temporal accounts that triggered this study originate from France and Germany – both of which pertain to the ‘neoliberal policy adjustments’ variety, and maintain substantial welfare infrastructures and industry base (On the variegations of the neoliberal state: Jessop 2019a, pp. 344–345). This generalisation potentially costs the article important nuance and insights. It offers, however, two advantages. First, it sets a platform for more specific, detailed, and comparative studies across varieties and national neoliberal states. Second, it allows the analysis a degree of clarity it would not otherwise have: the article discusses a complex relation-of-relations (the state), drawing from security and economic policy (a combination rare in political analysis), to address issues of time and its experience (the most abstract relation), and develops a complex and novel argument on this basis. It sacrifices some nuance in order to allow this argument to stand as boldly and clearly as is possible within the confines of a singular article.
2. There is an apparent discrepancy here. In the Introduction, I proclaimed the state to be a social relation, a condensation of the balance of power between social forces. From now on, the state appears to be monopolised by one such force – capital – and becomes its organ. There is no necessary contradiction between these two claims: the state as an organ of capital is still the state as a condensation of the balance of power between forces. *It is precisely this balance that has shifted drastically* in favour of capital – and largely thanks to the state, which is not merely a passive condensation of, but also an active agency in, social dynamics.
3. Promulgated by, especially US and British, high-finance, the disruption tactic is expressed within the state and makes it its object. In Britain and the US, the Conservative and Republican parties are captured by a breed of right-wing neoliberal politicians that, between them, have railed against and, to deferring degrees, undermined: the civil service; the judiciary; international trade treaties; the EU; an ‘antigrowth coalition’ (comprising central bankers, international economic governance institutions, the City of London, workers’ unions, and 30 years’ worth of Chancellors to the Treasury); the police; the institutions promoting the Washington Consensus; the UN, and even NATO.

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