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The geographical and ethical origins of neoliberalism the Walter Lippmann Colloquium and the foundations of a new geopolitical order

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ABSTRACT

Observers tend to overlook the early neoliberalism that derived from the “Lippmann Colloquium” organised in Paris in 1938. Analysis of the discourse produced and books published at this founding moment shows that neoliberalism was then presented as a geopolitical doctrine aimed at redressing the spatial fragmentation of the world into States. The means to achieve this, according to this first neoliberalism, was by implementing what, in 1978, M. Foucault called “governmentality”: a multiscalar political system based on the submission of territories to the transnational discipline of a multilateral free division of labour. This thinking was very similar to the convictions of a number of political leaders who, from the 1940s onwards, were involved in creating a new international order uniting Western Europe and the United States, the foundations of which had many similarities with the principles of the first neoliberalism.

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Introduction

Neoliberalism is often presented, especially by radical intellectuals (Chomsky, 1998; Harvey, 2007), as a transnational political ideology that combines promoting a market economy and restricting State economic intervention with deregulation and the dismantling of national systems of social protection. Neoliberal doctrine is then viewed as the fruit of a long process of intellectual maturing that took place within the Mont Pèlerin Society, created in 1947 by economist Friedrich Hayek. It is thought to have subsequently spread to the authorities of many countries via the work of Anglo-Saxon think tanks (Cockett, 1995). The implementation of neoliberal policies is said to have begun during the 1970s and 1980s when various governments intended to resolve their stagflation crises by applying the measures recommended by the economists of the second Chicago School, united at the time around the figure of Milton Friedman. According to this reading, the first neoliberal experiments were seen in the policies of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and even Augusto Pinochet in Chile. In this view of events, neoliberal principles were then imposed upon the rest of the world, relayed by various intergovernmental organisations (such as the IMF and the World Bank) that facilitated the implementation of a new world

order. According to geographer David Harvey, the rise of this neoliberalism, which was seen from the 1970s onwards, marked the end of a period of “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie, 1982) as well as the decline of the welfare state and of Keynesian policies. However, this critical interpretation, which became established during the 1980s and 1990s, fails to take into account an earlier neoliberalism that was born in late 1930s Europe with the Walter Lippmann Colloquium.

For several years now, taking up the intellectual archaeology begun by Michel Foucault (1978), several authors have endeavoured to untangle the different roots of “neoliberalism”, underlining the diversity of the moral foundations underpinning such a composite doctrinal field (Dardot & Laval, 2009; Denord, 2007; Denord, 2009; Denord & Schwartz, 2010; Peck, 2010; Turner, 2008). For instance, Jackson (2010) and Audier (2012) have shown that not all of the first neoliberal thinkers were opposed to welfare state policies. The rediscovery of the origins of neoliberalism has even led some commentators to conclude that there are in fact several neoliberalisms (Audier, 2012; Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009; Burgin, 2012; Stedman Jones, 2012). Based on these considerations, the aim of this article is to look further into the initial neoliberalism born in the wake of the Lippmann Colloquium. More specifically, the intention is to identify the geographical specificity of the normative principles upon which this doctrine was based. This perspective will allow us to show that “spaces of neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002) are wider than is commonly

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accounted for by critics, especially those in the field of radical geography, who tend to equate neoliberalism with the conception of the free market popularised by the Chicago School since the 1960s.

In order to fully understand all the aspects of neoliberalism, it is necessary to situate it within the geohistorical context in which it came to light. Far from being simply an abstract vision, this doctrine was presented above all as a response to the broad issues at stake in the 1930s world. This sensitivity to context explains the eminent role played by the geographical dimension in neoliberal thought. Critical geopolitics (O'Tuathail, 1996) offers an approach allowing us to envisage this original neoliberalism as a veritable geopolitical doctrine, calling upon a view of power relations that is sensitive to the scalar relationships between political actors while also putting forward a “moral geography” (Smith, 2000) of the organisation of the world. A comparative reading of the main works published by the first neoliberal authors between 1937 and the 1950s (Table 1) confirms the existence of a “thought collective” (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009) grounded in two complementary elements: in the first place, the initial neoliberals established a common conclusion about the worrying state of the world in the 1930s before, in the second place, drawing up a set of recommendations aimed at refounding this world on the basis of a renewed geopolitical vision of liberal internationalism. In this new perspective, the construction of a transnational market embedding States is seen as a way to integrate them into a vast system of mutually beneficial

interdependence that is supposed to convince nations to submit to impersonal rules of global competition. The neoliberals considered this model to be more efficient for stabilising international relations than economic isolationism or intergovernmental bargaining.

Paris, 1938: the birthplace of “neoliberalism”

The term “neoliberalism” was first coined by French economist Louis Marlio during the “Lippmann Colloquium” organised in Paris in August 1938 by philosopher Louis Rougier (Audier, 2008; Brennetot, 2013). From the proposals made by the American journalist Walter Lippmann in his book *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society*, published the year before, this colloquium was intended to discuss the possibility of a renewal of liberalism. The Lippmann colloquium was the result of Rougier's awareness, from 1937 onwards, that his own political thinking converged with the ideas developed in several books published by various authors during the same period in Europe and in the United States. The colloquium was one of several initiatives he launched in the late 1930's.

To promote the principles of the agenda defined during this Colloquium, he created the year after the Centre International pour l'Étude et la Rénovation du Libéralisme (CIERL) in Paris, whose activities were soon interrupted by the Second World War. To facilitate the dissemination of their ideas, Rougier also commissioned the French translation and publication of the books of

Table 1
Document 1 – First neoliberal works published by *La Librairie de Médecis*.

Author	French title	Year of publication in France	Title in original language	Year of publication of first edition	Author's country of origin
BAUDIN L. ▶	<i>La Monnaie, ce que tout le monde devrait en savoir</i>	1938	–	–	France
MISES L.V. ▶	<i>Le Socialisme</i>	1938	<i>Die Gemeinwirtschaft: Untersuchungen über den Sozialismus</i>	1922	Austria
LIPPMANN W. ▶	<i>La Cité libre</i>	1938	<i>An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society</i>	1937	United States
ROUGIER L. ▶	<i>Les Mystiques économiques</i>	1938	–	–	France
LAVERGNE B.	<i>La Crise et ses remèdes</i>	1938	–	–	France
ROBBINS L.	<i>Économie planifiée et ordre international</i>	1938	<i>Economic Planning and International Order</i>	1937	United Kingdom
MISES L.V. ▶	<i>Les Illusions du protectionnisme et de l'autarcie</i>	1938	–	–	Austria
ROUGIER L. ▶	<i>Le Colloque Walter Lippmann</i>	1939	–	–	France
HAYEK F. ▶	<i>L'Économie dirigée en régime collectiviste</i>	1939	<i>Collectivist Economic Planning: Critical Studies on the Possibilities of Socialism</i>	1935	Austria
MACHLUP F.	<i>Guide à travers les panacées économiques</i>	1939	<i>Führer durch die Krisenpolitik</i>	1934	Austria
RÖPKE W. ▶	<i>Explication économique du monde moderne</i>	1940	<i>Die Lehre von der Wirtschaft</i>	1937	Germany
HAYEK F. ▶	<i>La Route de la servitude</i>	1946	<i>The Road to Serfdom</i>	1944	Austria
ALLAIS M.	<i>Abondance ou Misère</i>	1946	–	–	France
VILLEY D.	<i>Redevenir des hommes libres</i>	1946	–	–	France
HEILPERIN M. ▶	<i>L'Économie internationale</i>	1948	<i>The Trade of Nations</i>	1947	Hungary
RÖPKE W. ▶	<i>Civitas Humana</i>	1946	<i>Civitas Humana. Grundfragen der Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsreform.</i>	1944	Germany
MISES L.V. ▶	<i>Le Gouvernement omnipotent</i>	1947	<i>Omnipotent Government</i>	1944	Austria
ROBBINS L. ▶	<i>Essai sur la Nature et signification de la science économique</i>	1947	<i>An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science</i>	1932	United Kingdom
RUEFF J. ▶	<i>L'Ordre social</i>	1946	–	1946	France
MISES L.V. ▶	<i>La Bureaucratie</i>	1946	<i>Bureaucracy</i>	1946	Austria
BAUDIN L. ▶	<i>L'Aube d'un nouveau libéralisme</i>	1953	–	–	France

Methodological note: The authors published by the *Librairie de Médecis* who were not part of the MPS have not been selected here. Those who participated in the Lippmann Colloquium are indicated by an arrow (▶). The works published in several languages are underlined. Several other works by these same authors are referenced in this article (see references).

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