Destroying Democracy

Solty, Ingar, Saad-Filho, Alfredo, Radebe, Mandla J, Pillay, Devan, Nilsen, Alf Gunvald, McKInley, Dale T, McKinley, Dale T, Kaaf, Gunnett, Kaaf, Gunnett, Gordon, Linda, Gordon, Linda, Duncan, Jane, Duncan, Jane, Satgar, Vishwas, Satgar, Vishwas, Williams, Michelle, Williams, Michelle

Published by Wits University Press

Solty, Ingar, et al.
Destroying Democracy: Neoliberal capitalism and the rise of authoritarian politics.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94421.

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On 23 May 2019, the results of India’s seventeenth general election were announced: the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with Narendra Modi at the helm had secured another five years in power, and overwhelmingly so. Indeed, the BJP’s 2019 win outstripped the impressive results of 2014 as the party increased its seat share from 282 to 303 out of a total 543 seats in the lower house of India’s parliament, the Lok Sabha. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) now controls a huge majority of 353 parliamentary seats. The BJP also made substantial inroads into parts of India where the party had previously been on the margins of electoral politics. The eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha, where the BJP is now the second-largest party, are cases in point, and so is the southern state of Karnataka, where it won 26 of 28 seats (Nilsen 2019a).

Indian capital responded very favourably to these results. Uday Kotak, one of India’s leading bankers and number 12 on Forbes’ list of India’s richest in 2018, tweeted in celebration: ‘Time for transformation of India. Time for deep reform. I dream of us as a global superpower in my lifetime. Heartiest congratulations to @narendramodi, the BJP, and the NDA.’ Kotak, who saw his fortune increase by 43 per cent to US$10.1 billion in 2017, is only one of many among India’s corporate elite who have done well under Modi. Others include Mukesh Ambani, who doubled his fortune from US$23 billion to US$55 billion from 2014 to 2019, and Gautam Adani, whose rise in the Indian corporate world has been coeval with Modi’s ascent to power – first in Gujarat, and then nationwide (Crabtree 2018; Muralidharan
2014; Schmidt 2017; Srujana 2019). Of course, Indian capital had clearly shown its support for Modi in the lead-up to and during the 2019 election campaigns. For example, we know that the BJP received 94.5 per cent of the bonds issued under the electoral bond scheme introduced by the party’s finance minister, Arun Jaitley. As observers noted, the scheme, which yielded 31.18 per cent of all party funds for the 2019 campaigns, enables unlimited anonymous corporate donations. There is no doubt that this was instrumental in furnishing Modi and his party with the means to spend somewhere between 45 and 50 per cent of the US$8.65 billion that went into funding the 2019 elections (Business Standard Web Team 2019; Tanwar 2019; Ulmer and Ahmed 2019). Of course, this kind of capitalist elite alignment behind an authoritarian populist resonates with the American and Brazilian scenarios deciphered by Solty and Saad-Filho in this volume.

Corporate support notwithstanding, the 2019 election results defy the basic laws of political gravity in some key ways. It is crucial to bear in mind that in the world’s largest democracy, it is the poor – that is, India’s subaltern citizens – that exercise their right to vote most eagerly (Nilsen et al. 2019). And the poor, in turn, have not fared well under Modi’s regime: unemployment has reached its highest level in 45 years, rural India’s agricultural crisis has deepened and inequality has increased. In late 2018, the BJP faced losses in important state elections and major protests by farmers and agricultural workers (see Nilsen 2018a, 2019b). But despite all this, Indian voters have handed Modi and the BJP a resounding new mandate. How do we explain this? And what does Modi 2.0 signify for the future of the world’s largest democracy?

To answer these questions, I consider the nature of certain key trajectories of change in India over the past one-and-a-half decades. In particular, I analyse how the hegemonic project of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which ruled India from 2004 to 2014, is different from that of the incumbent Modi regime. On the economic front, of course, there is little to distinguish the two regimes from each other: the BJP has mostly followed in the footsteps of the Congress by prioritising the continuing pursuit and consolidation of neoliberalism. However, whereas the UPA regime attempted to build popular consent for its rule by combining economic policies that advanced and consolidated the market logic with rights-based legislation that enshrined new civil liberties and socio-economic entitlements, the Modi regime has fused its neoliberal policy with majoritarian and coercive initiatives. This can be thought of as a transition from ‘inclusive neoliberalism’ (Ruckert 2010a, 2010b) to ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall 1988) as the prevailing hegemonic project in the Indian polity. This is, of course, similar in many ways to the transition from the PT regime (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or
Workers’ Party) to the Bolsonaro regime in Brazil, as discussed by Saad-Filho in this volume. As Zoya Hasan (2019) remarked in response to the 2019 election results, the onward march of Modi’s authoritarian populism pushes India decisively in the direction of a majoritarian democracy. If this tendency is at all to be halted, it is imperative that we understand the logic that animates it.

THE UPA REGIME AS INCLUSIVE NEOLIBERALISM

The 1990s was not a good period for the Indian National Congress. Indeed, by the end of the decade, the protracted erosion of its hegemonic position in the post-colonial polity had culminated in the installation of the first BJP-led coalition government at the national level. In the lead-up to the general elections of 2004, it was evident that senior Congress leaders were keenly aware that the party had alienated much of its popular support base, especially in rural India, as a result of spearheading the neoliberal restructuring of the economy since the early 1990s. The political resurgence of the Congress was perceived by its high command to hinge in large part on the party’s ability to reconcile neoliberal accumulation strategies with new forms of legitimation that could appeal to those groups who languished in the underbelly of the Indian boom (Nilsen 2019c).

Following the general elections of 2004, the UPA regime pursued such a strategy through what political scientist Sanjay Ruparelia (2013) refers to as India’s new rights agenda. This agenda established civil liberties and socio-economic entitlements as legally enforceable rights. The new rights-based legislation includes the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Forest Rights Act of 2006, the Right to Education Act of 2009, and, most recently, the Right to Food Act and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Act, both of 2013. The laws that were put in place emerged from the Common Minimum Programme on which the UPA centred its election campaign, and which emphasised the need to achieve growth with a human face (see Das 2013). Significantly, each of these laws responded – to greater or lesser extents – to social movement projects that had crystallised in India during the 1990s. The processes of policy making that yielded these laws incorporated social movement activists and civil society actors in crucial ways, and were shaped in significant ways by extra-parliamentary mobilisations and campaigns (see Chopra 2011a, 2011b; Sharma 2015; Vaidya 2014).

In his analysis of rights-based legislation, Ruparelia (2013: 570) has argued that laws such as the NREGA and the RTI Act have the potential to establish ‘new
standards for social citizenship’ in India. Crucially, this ‘new welfare paradigm’ is distinctive because of the fact that ‘new governance mechanisms furnish poorer citizens with an opportunity to challenge the practices of corruption and patronage that have enabled benefits to be targeted towards or captured by particular social groups in the past’ (Ruparelia 2013: 571). There is undoubtedly a grain of truth in such assessments, but it is equally important to be aware of the role that rights-based legislation played in enabling the Congress to construct a new hegemonic project that remained, at its core, essentially neoliberal. First, in terms of economic policy, the UPA did not break in any significant way with the process of neoliberalisation that the party had initially set in train in the early 1990s; on the contrary, it sought in many ways to add impetus to the globalisation of the Indian economy (see Bhaduri 2008; Drèze and Sen 2013; Nayyar 2006; Walker 2008). Second, although activists were significantly involved in shaping policy making, the law gained salience as a terrain of mobilisation in a conjuncture when many of the new social movements that emerged in India during the 1970s and 1980s were declining (Harriss 2011; Nilsen and Nielsen 2016).

Consequently, rights-based legislation is most adequately conceptualised neither as an unequivocal expression of democratic accountability on the part of the Indian state during the UPA regime, nor simply as a stratagem of co-optation and deflection. Rather, inclusive neoliberalism as it was practised in the UPA decade is arguably best understood as a complex, and at times contradictory, practice aimed at the negotiation of a compromise equilibrium between dominant groups whose economic interests are intimately linked to the exploitation of the spaces of accumulation that have been opened up by neoliberalisation in India over the past two-and-a-half decades, and subaltern groups who are both vulnerable to marginalisation and capable of mobilisation. The introduction of rights-based legislation under the UPA regime was intended to serve this purpose by mitigating the impact of poverty, inequality and dispossession. The objective of pursuing such a strategy, in turn, was to facilitate the long-term advance of neoliberalisation in a global context where India was rapidly emerging as a serious contender for the status of the world’s fastest-growing economy (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015).

Generally speaking, this was done by offering limited legal concessions to some of the longstanding demands of progressive social movements in order to curtail more radical forms of mobilisation. For example, the new LARR Act of 2013 introduced seemingly generous provisions for resettlement and rehabilitation, but, on the other hand, it widened the definition of the public purpose for which the state can acquire land. The first part of the move was a clear concession to the longstanding demands of social movements that have challenged forced displacement.
In contrast, the second part of the move makes it possible for the Indian state to continue both expanding and consolidating spaces of accumulation for corporate capital in the Indian economy (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015).

In addition, the law as such arguably creates a terrain of mobilisation that constrains the actual conduct of subaltern resistance. For example, Aradhana Sharma’s (2013: 310) work on RTI activism has shown how the RTI Act relies on an insistence on the use of formal rules and terminology that normalises statist technologies of rule: ‘The RTI law works as a governmental mechanism . . . that forces people to engage and audit the state in its own idiom.’ Not only does this exclude subaltern groups whose knowledge and command of the state’s bureaucratic vocabularies and routines might not be sufficient to pursue claims under the law, but it also channels oppositional collective action in such a way as to foster ‘bureaucratized activism and procedural citizenship’ (Sharma 2013: 319). Finally, as Chacko (2018) has noted, it should be borne in mind that in its second term, the relationship between activists and the UPA regime cooled down quite considerably: several activists left the National Advisory Council as a result of disagreements that flowed from attempts by Prime Minister Singh and Montek Ahluwalia, the head of the Planning Commission, to ensure that market discipline prevailed over activist claims for accountability, and the government cracked down on several movements and NGOs that were perceived to be critical of its developmental agenda. In other words, whereas the introduction of rights-based legislation was far from inconsequential from the point of view of progressive social movements, for the Congress elite its purpose was clearly to serve as a vehicle that would enable the party to win popular support for a hegemonic project that ultimately attempted to deepen the neoliberalisation of the Indian economy.

The fact that this did not ultimately succeed, and that public opinion shifted massively in favour of Modi’s fusion of market liberalism and Hindu nationalism, has a lot to do with the fact that the UPA regime was unable to respond to the popular aspirations that its rule engendered – precisely because the underlying trajectory of growth failed to deliver improved employment opportunities and access to the kind of social infrastructure that equalises and enhances life chances.

THE MODI REGIME AS AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM

The 2014 elections ‘signified for the first time ever the replacement of the Indian National Congress by the Hindutva-motivated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the central point of reference of the Indian polity’ (Vanaik 2017: 343, emphasis in original). What explains this scenario?
The first thing to note is that the standard right-wing argument that the UPA regime failed to bring about growth is demonstrably false: growth rates were consistently high during both UPA periods – eight per cent from 2004 to 2009 and seven per cent from 2009 to 2014. This is the fastest growth rate witnessed in India since the onset of neoliberal restructuring in the 1990s, and exceeds the economic achievements of the BJP government that ruled India from 1998 to 2004 (Ghatak et al. 2014: 34). There was, however, a slowdown in growth during the last three years of the UPA, and combined with food price inflation and major corruption scandals, this contributed to popular discontent. However, more importantly, economic growth never translated into job opportunities; on the contrary, unemployment continued to rise during the decade that Congress and the UPA ruled India. This fostered a sense of frustrated aspirations among India’s subaltern citizens that made it possible for the BJP to extend its sway downward in the Indian socio-economic pyramid (Sridharan 2014). At the same time, Indian capital sided decisively with Modi. In part this was due to the fact that, in late 2013, the BJP beat Congress in a series of state elections. However, it was clearly also a shift that was propelled by dissatisfaction with the rights-based legislation that had been put in place by the UPA: ‘India’s capitalists regarded these welfare and social expenditures a wasteful drain on the fisc which squandered the opportunity buoyant revenues offered to control the deficit’ (Desai 2014: 53).

Just as in 2019, corporate support played an absolutely crucial role in enabling the BJP to campaign on an unprecedented scale in 2014: aided by aircrafts owned by the Adani group, Modi traversed some 300,000 kilometres between September 2013 and May 2014, and held an average of four to five meetings per day during March and April 2014 (Desai 2014; Sinha 2017; Vanaik 2017). However, this only goes some way towards answering the most crucial question about Modi’s first general election victory: how did a party that initially emerged at the helm of middle-class and upper-caste reaction to lower-caste and Dalit assertion in the 1980s manage to secure electoral support from the popular classes that the Congress had attempted to appeal to through its strategy of inclusive neoliberalism? This question is best answered by considering the BJP’s hegemonic project as a case of what Stuart Hall (1988) has referred to as authoritarian populism – that is, a form of conservative politics that constructs a contradiction between common people and elites, and then uses this contradiction to justify the imposition of repressive measures by the state.

Authoritarian populism under Modi is constructed, first of all, around a narrative of development that seeks to address frustrated subaltern aspirations in the context of jobless growth while opposing dynastic elitism and promulgating individual entrepreneurialism. A key strategy in this regard was to foster a narrative and
an image of Modi as a man of development who had demonstrated his leadership skills during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, and to build a national cross-class and cross-caste consensus around the imperative of giving power to a strong man who could make headway where others had failed. This narrative, of course, elides the inconvenient fact that Gujarat's growth rates are by no means unparalleled, and, more importantly, that growth in Gujarat has failed most dismally to translate into the kind of human development that would actually amount to the *ache din* (good days) that Modi promised to bring to Indians during his campaign for the 2014 elections (see Desai 2011; Jaffrelot 2015b; Joshi and McGrath 2015; Sud 2012). Nevertheless, as Manali Desai's (2015) research on Dalit and OBC (Other Backward Classes) informal workers in Gujarat has shown, it is a narrative with considerable persuasive force among India's subaltern citizens (see also Desai and Roy 2016). The fact that the BJP won 34 per cent of the lower-caste vote, 24 per cent of the Dalit vote and 38 per cent of the Adivasi vote in the 2014 elections only reinforces this point (see Nilsen 2019a).

The developmental narrative was linked to a putative anti-elitism that pivoted on opposition to the dynastic politics of the Congress party. Modi's objective of achieving a Congress-free India was portrayed as a quest to rid India of a privileged and corrupt elite that was out of touch with the ground realities of the country's common people (see Jaffrelot 2015a; Palshikar 2015; Sridharan 2014). Anti-elitism was closely conjoined with anti-corruption: Modi, the campaign narrative went, was not only not tainted by corruption, but also not afraid to act decisively against it. And what is more, Modi celebrated individual entrepreneurialism in opposition to the rights-based welfare approach of the Congress-led UPA regime (see Chacko 2018; Jaffrelot 2015a; Nilsen 2019c).

To some commentators, this focus on growth, good governance and development amounted to a move away from the Hindu communalism that had been so central to the BJP's expansion from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, and which culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (see Desai 2002; Hansen 1999). Such views, however, fail to grasp the ways in which the market-oriented developmental narrative is linked to a majoritarian cultural nationalism and an ever more aggressive authoritarianism. Hindu nationalism was in no way entirely absent from the BJP campaign trail in 2013/2014, and after the elections it has become more and more central to the party's agenda (Kaul 2017). A majoritarian cultural politics has crystallised around issues such as cow protection, the communal policing of interreligious love and of women's sexuality, the rewriting of school textbooks to bring them in line with Hindutva historiography, and the promotion of religious
reconversion among Muslims and Christians. Hate speech has proliferated, and majoritarian rhetoric is clearly linked to communal violence against Muslims and other marginal groups, such as Dalits (Nilsen 2019c). In fact, it was recently estimated that more than 86 per cent of all vigilante attacks on Muslims and Dalits since 2009 had taken place under Modi’s premiership (Abraham and Rao 2017).

In this way, through rhetoric and through violence, the Modi regime has constructed the ominous ‘other’ that authoritarian populism depends on in order to frame a unitary conception of the nation and national culture. These majoritarian constructions of the ‘other’ are closely linked to a sustained effort to draw a line between true Indians and their enemies, and rallying popular support for a crackdown on those enemies. And crucially, the ‘other’ is not just the Muslim or the Dalit, but also the political dissident who dares to question and challenge a government that is acting in the interest of the people (Nilsen 2018b). Accordingly, dissidents are accused of being ‘anti-national’ and subjected to harassment, silencing and murderous violence, as evidenced most recently by the attempt on student activist Umar Khalid’s life, and before that by the assassinations of scholars, journalists and public intellectuals such as M.M. Kalburgi, Govind Pansare, Narendra Dabholkar and Gauri Lankesh. Raids, arrests and harassment of human rights activists are also commonplace under Modi’s regime, and testify to the authoritarian pattern that is beginning to emerge in the Indian polity (Nilsen et al. 2019: 9–11). Between the general election in 2014 and early 2018, the BJP consolidated its position in the Indian political system through a series of victories in state elections. At one point, the BJP’s dominance in electoral politics extended from the national level in Delhi to 21 of India’s 29 states. But then the tide seemed to turn. In the electoral sphere, the party’s performance at state level proved disappointing, with setbacks in Gujarat, losses in by-elections in north India, and eventually, in late 2018, election defeats in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the BJP was the incumbent. These electoral setbacks were paralleled by the emergence of a new wave of farmers’ protests in India in response to an agrarian crisis that has only deepened under Modi’s reign. In addition, the period from 2016 to 2018 also witnessed the emergence of new and radical Dalit–Bahujan politics that fuses opposition to caste-based discrimination with demands for land rights and dignified work (Nilsen 2019a). However, none of this made any kind of dent on the general election results: the BJP strengthened its gains from 2014 and increased its vote share from 31.1 per cent to 37.4 per cent in 2019 (Kumar and Gupta 2019). In the concluding remarks, I reflect on what this consolidation tells us about the nature and trajectory of authoritarian populism under Modi and what it might entail for Indian democracy.
CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE MEANING OF MODI 2.0

What do we know about the rise of Modi’s authoritarian populism? First, we know that it is based on the BJP extending its electoral sway downward in the Indian social pyramid in a decisive manner. Indeed, the 2019 elections saw an intensification of this trend: compared to 2014, the party increased its vote share from 34 per cent to 44 per cent among lower-caste groups, from 24 per cent to 34 per cent among Dalits, and from 37 per cent to 44 per cent among Adivasis. Whereas the party increased its vote share across all classes, the largest increase happened among poor Indians – from 24 per cent in 2014 to 36 per cent in 2019. To be sure, the core BJP vote base remains the upper castes, 61 per cent of whom voted for Modi; the lower-middle and middle classes, 37 per cent of whom voted for Modi; and the upper-middle class and the rich, 44 per cent of whom voted for Modi (Kumar and Gupta 2019; Sardesai and Attri 2019; Venkataramakrishnan 2019). However, there is no doubt that ‘the BJP made disproportionate gains largely among groups where it has traditionally lacked support’ (Kumar and Gupta 2019). This deepening of subaltern support for authoritarian populists is, of course, part of a larger global trend, and also witnessed in countries like Brazil and the USA (see Saad-Filho and Solty, this volume).

It is of signal importance to note that these gains happened in the context of a campaign where the BJP entirely discarded its message of growth and development in favour of unbridled and unapologetic Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 2019). The 2014 image of Modi as vikas purush – a man of development – gave way to Modi as a chowkidar – a watchman – who would keep India safe from both foreign and domestic enemies. This enabled the BJP to sideline questions of policy and thorny issues such as jobless growth, agrarian distress and escalating inequalities, and to assert itself as ‘a relentless crusader for the cause of the Hindus . . . at the pan-India level’ (Kishore 2019). Coupled with clever electoral engineering – the party reached out to specific lower-caste and Dalit groups who were not represented by established lower-caste parties and enlisted their support by offering both representation and public resources – this paid rich dividends in the form of a solidification of the Hindu vote: in 2019, 44 per cent of all Hindu voters supported Modi, up from 36 per cent in 2014 (Sardesai and Attri 2019). The ramifications of this for Indian democracy are potentially dramatic.

As Linda Gordon’s chapter in this volume brings out, authoritarian populist and fascist regimes are often closely linked to reactionary social movements, and India is no exception. Indeed, in order to fully understand why the ramifications of the Modi regime are so serious for India’s democracy, we have to remind ourselves that the BJP is part of a wider Hindu nationalist movement. The backbone of this
movement is constituted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – a deeply ideological volunteer organisation formed in 1925, which today has more than 50,000 branches and somewhere between five and six million members across India. Working towards the goal of making India a Hindu nation, the RSS is the central node of a network known as the Sangh Parivar – literally, the Sangh family – that comprises organisations that operate in specific domains and work with particular groups throughout Indian society (for example, students, workers, women and youth). Over time, the Sangh Parivar has successfully embedded itself deeply in the institutional fabric of civil society, and as a result the Hindu nationalist movement wields considerable power and influence in India today (see Jaffrelot 1996; Thachil 2016). The BJP is the electoral wing of the Sangh Parivar, and after the consecutive victories of the 2014 and 2019 elections, its mandate is far stronger than during its previous period in power at the national level in India (1998–2004). This is a crucial advance for the wider Hindu nationalist movement and its majoritarian project. Indeed, it represents nothing short of what Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot (2019: 1) refer to as 'the contemporary ascendance of Hindu nationalist dominance to establish a majoritarian state in India'.

We also know that this ascendance is both enabled by and profitable to Indian capital. In saying this, I am not suggesting that there is some kind of intrinsic link between Hindu nationalism as a political project and Indian capital. As much as Indian business currently supports Modi and as much as the BJP’s economic policies have shown a consistent pro-business and pro-market orientation, Indian capital has also been happy to throw its weight behind Congress when this was opportune, and Congress, of course, has played a crucial role in advancing neoliberalisation – and with that, corporate interests – in India. The current embrace between the BJP and Indian business elites, then, is first and foremost a strategic alliance. Leading Indian business houses profited handsomely under Modi’s first period in power, and there is already strong evidence that this will continue under Modi 2.0. At the time of writing, Modi’s new government has already introduced corporate tax cuts, and further substantial economic reforms are expected to follow, such as changes in labour laws, new rounds of privatisation and the establishment of land banks for industrial development (Sengupta 2019). What this indicates, of course, is that the next five years are sure to witness the further intensification of both the structural and instrumental power of capital in India’s political economy (see Murali 2019; Sinha 2019). This will push redistributive reform even further to the margins of politics in a society where the richest one per cent of the population controls 73 per cent of all wealth, and consequently deepen the already entrenched social deficits of Indian democracy (Nilsen et al. 2019).
In 2021, the rise of Hindu nationalism as a deeply entrenched hegemonic project and the strengthening of the power of capital in India’s political economy might receive a further boost if the BJP achieves a majority in the Rajya Sabha – the upper house of India’s parliament. With majorities in both houses, the BJP will be in a position to push through major legal reforms without significant opposition. The fact that the party has already populated public institutions with its henchmen and will continue to do so – specifically in the judiciary – only adds to the momentum of this process. On the ground, violence and coercion has continued unabated since 23 May 2019. For example, within four days of Modi’s election victory, Indian media reported six incidents of violence against people from vulnerable and marginalised communities – among them a Muslim man who was severely beaten for wearing a skullcap. And in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, a freelance journalist was arrested and kept in jail for close to a week for social media posts about the state’s chief minister, the Hindu priest Yogi Adityanath. Given these circumstances, there are no grounds for falling back on complacent assumptions about the resilience of Indian democracy. As historian Federico Finchelstein (2019) has pointed out, we live in an age where populism fuels fascism, and India under the authoritarian populism of Modi 2.0 might very well prove to be an example of precisely this.

NOTE
1 This analysis draws on a Gramscian perspective on hegemonic processes. See Nilsen (2015) for a full discussion of the centrality of the notion of compromise equilibrium in Antonio Gramsci’s theorisation of hegemony.

REFERENCES


