



**Corona Pandemic, symptom of the event**  
**The transformation of Neoliberal policies to a social imaginary**  
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Received: 17, November, 2020

Accepted: 26, December, 2020

**Abstract**

In Deleuze's views "event" is not an occurrence in the present, it is a process of becoming, which simultaneously is attached to past and future. It belongs to the trans-historical realm of Aion that in accord with the historical realm of Chronos creates a kind of perception which makes the event contingent. It is not a phenomenon or a thing, it is a creative, complex, yet immaterial force, something of thought and consciousness. Since, potentially, it has different possibilities for historical change in itself, by the break that it brings into historical perception of society, creates something new. Neoliberalism by its fundamental critique of the welfare state in Iran provided a condition in which, at least at the theoretical level, the withdrawal of the government from the social spheres has been considered as an imperative. Accordingly, a new social order was formed, the neoliberalism actualized its principals in society, but life has become more and more exhausting and unbearable for the lower classes. The Corona Pandemic better than any other occurrence exposed the falsity of the neoliberal perspectives. Not only Coronavirus did convince most of the people for the government's return to society, it also at the expense of neoliberal individualism revived the social. The misery of present situation from one side destroys the social imaginary that caused the application of neoliberal policies as historical event on life of people; from other side it brings to society a chance to imagine a better future. In this article by leaning on Deleuze view of "event", we are going to show how neoliberalism by transforming itself to a "social imaginary" became a path breaking event that promised to open up a new era of socio-political life in Iran. The study offers how corona pandemic discloses the neoliberal disguise on the progress and welfare; it attempts to reveal the delusion neoliberal promise, particularly in its relation to lower classes of society.

**Key words:** Corona pandemic, Neoliberalism, Deleuze, Event, Welfare state.

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## **Introduction**

Depending on the type of relationship that presently exists between government and society, the current modern life of Iranian society, compare to its former period, entails a significant reduction in government activities in areas that are related to social welfare. This process, with the title of “structural adjustment” has been practically started since 1989 in Iran. Along with changing the relations that governing the field of economic activities, it also redefined social and cultural realms of society according to the logic of market. The result of this rethinking on the relation of state and society was the formation of a relative consensus in society for the detachment of the government from various economic, cultural, and social spheres. Hereby, neoliberalism transferred itself from an ideology to a “social imaginary”, it became a discourse of changing of the status quo. In such a situation, Corona pandemic causes the most damage to the groups that have the least competitive ability in a dog-eat-dog condition of social living, it disclosed the ugly part of the “event” that has commenced since 1989.

## **The tragedy of state curtailment**

The experience of the collapse of the Soviet government and the failure of the Satellite regimes in creating economic prosperity, along with the heavy presence of Iranian state in all social areas of life, and public dissatisfaction with the status quo, creates conditions for all groups, including the left and right, to welcome the diminishment of state presence in various parts of society. The irony of the matter is that it happens at a time when outcry of the end of ideology has been loud on all sides. But the official structural adjustment policies were based on an ideological doctrine that clearly was affected by the formation of a social perception on the presence of state in society. There was manifestly an ‘imaginary’ for neo-liberalism, a discourse of neo-liberalism, before strategies to operationalize and implement this imaginary and discourse in practice started to be effective. A liberal ‘counterrevolution’ against broadly social-democratic and ‘statist’ forms of capitalism had long been imagined and prepared by Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and their followers (Fairclough, 2013: 12-13).

Along with the global wave that has been launched against any kind of state-oriented and social democratic thought, almost after the Iran-Iraq war, under the pretext of making the government efficient, and empowering the society, the ideas prescribed by neoliberal thinkers became operational in Iran too. In this way, neoliberalism is presented as the ideology of fundamental change, the developments that not only eliminate the inefficiencies formed after the Islamic

Revolution, but by relying on liberal narratives and its fundamental values, it represents a future that also makes possible to release cultural and political realms from the domination and control of the government. In this process, neoliberalism by becoming a social imaginary, which is simultaneously interpreting the past and prescribes the evolution of the future, becomes a discourse of transformation of the present. A discourse that, by structuration of a certain kind of cognition and speech act which precedes any kind of realization, gives meaning to actions and speech in the social arena (Torfing, 1999: 84).

With the expansion of this semantic structure in different areas and domains of society, the propositions of neoliberal ideology were considered as natural rules, and were accepted by all social reference groups, scientific as well as non-scientific, with the hope that relations in these areas will fundamentally change. Acceptance of the neoliberal guidelines by society gives it a hegemonic position. As a result, it is possible for it to impose its discursive order throughout the society. Thus, different areas that previously enjoyed governmental support in favor of the underprivileged, transform into competitive domains that are governed by market-based relationships. By cutting or reducing supportive subsidies, floating foreign currency, shrinking state through privatization of companies and public assets, reducing the bargaining power of workers through temporary employment, commercialization of public services, especially in the education and health sectors, and by transferring responsibility in these areas to the citizens ( of course, citizens who were part of the circle of power), to a large extent, the followers of neoliberalism succeeded in ending the life of the welfare state in Iran. The consensus that led to the significant weakening of the welfare state in Iran resulted to the implementation of that type of policies that, the society, despite its hope for the realization of a better future, witnessed, in various forms, the occurrence of the catastrophic effects of the event. In the face of all the promises made by the followers of neoliberal policies, for the poor and middle layers of society, it had no gain but the different forms of disasters. A significant increase in the number of unemployment and suicides among these groups proofs the impact of what happened with the end of the welfare state to the society. For the poor, reduction of governmental expenditures means non-fulfillment of government commitments in the field of health and education, and handing them over to market forces, it means handing over activities to the private sector with higher prices and lower quality. In this way, reducing government's spending and limiting credit lead to tax increase, lowering real wages and reducing employment, rising prices for consumer goods, thus increasing poverty and social ills in the society. In general, the structural adjustment, as considered by neoliberals, will increases the income of those with scarce productive resources,

for example, the income of those who have financial capital or have high skills, it directs the distribution of income from other groups toward these privileged groups. This revenue transformation, by harming the income chances of the unskilled labor, puts its negative effects on the nutrition and health of the poor (Elahi & Birjandi, 2015: 57). The wider spread of the corona virus among the low-income groups, and their higher mortality rate than the upper layers of society, is another sign of the tragedy that erupted this country after the structural adjustment. The calamity which is resulted from the political consensus on implementation of the neoliberal policies.

### **From welfare state to good governance**

Up to now, in political sociology we are dealing with some kind of duality that cannot be easily ignored. Dualities such as state - civil society, private – public, domination - freedom, left - right, and so on, it would be a great mistake to define neoliberalism solely on the basis of its negative aspects toward the institutions of welfare state. According to critics of neoliberalism an apparent retreat from state-administered areas, was a positive technique to spread itself to all domains of society. Neoliberalism in most cases, like its predecessor liberalism, rather than defining itself as an ideology that competes with other ideologies on how to run society, from a seemingly meta-ideological standpoint, introduces itself as a moral order of society, and at the same time as a scientific and intellectual method of governmentality. In this way instead of applying the concept of state which ensures inclusion, and at the same time acceptance of responsibility towards its citizens, prefers to use the terms government and governance. When the concept of governance replaces the concept of state, make it possible to cover a wide range of areas from commerce, education, environment, cyberspace to public health and many other social areas, without the ideological burden of this presence be felt. Thus governmental machineries penetrate the areas which according to the principles of classical liberalism, must be free from the influence and interference of the government. By degrading politics to the method of governance, neoliberalism discarded the state-civil society dichotomy. Foucault's brief definition of neoliberal governance may make it easier to understand, the most concise definition of governmentality that Foucault ever produced states that governmentality is the '*conduct of conducts*' (Cotoi, 2011: 110-111). Contrary to the perception that the concept of neoliberal brings to mind, the ideal society for neoliberalism is not based on the laissez-faire and the policies of non-interference of the government in people's affairs, especially economic affairs and trade, but rather it is a mechanism to bring all the areas of social life under

competitive rules of free market capitalism. By extending market rules to all social spheres, a fragile structure is formed that has the ability to monitor and regulate the society, a structure that needs various formal supports to continue its influence. Thus neoliberalism, however, presents itself as a defender of the fundamental values of liberalism, by ignoring the separation of government from civil society, human agency, the right of self-determination as a basic human right, and by giving priority to competition rather than free exchange, it replaces liberalism.

### **Event and necessity of rupture**

"The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind"

G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Although in philosophical studies there is tendency to consider "wound" and the scar left by it as spatial and dependent on a space, In Deleuze's philosophy with emphasis on the temporality of wound relates it to an area of time that is defined by the concepts such as break, evolution, and rupture, a moment in time when breaks from one period and entering into another period conceptually becomes possible. The priority he accords to the nick of time, this temporal wound, does not follow from a commonsense understanding of temporal anteriority, such as the observation that scarification follows from, and is a direct causal consequence of, a prior wound. Rather, Deleuze advocates a distinctively new understanding of both time and the relation between cause and effect in *Logic of Sense*. There the event is explicitly understood as an effect rather than a cause (Reynolds, 2007:145). Deleuze in his transcendental empiricism does not seek to present a philosophical account of the infinite and universal, as had been done by Hegel which according to the necessities that are related to its realization, through the creation of the event, rectify the lack in order to heal historical injuries. Deleuze seeks to find the conditions in which the new appears as an event, it is a transcendental that belongs neither to the world of phenomena nor to the realm of Hegelian ideas. It is eternally that which has just happened and that which is about to happen, but never that which is happening. The event, being itself impassive, allows the active and the passive to be interchanged more easily, since it is neither the one nor the other, but rather their common result (Deleuze, 1990: 8). It belongs to an area of time that he refers to as "Aion". The domain of concepts and idea. This transcendental empiricism is based on a kind of dualism which at first glance evokes confrontation and contradiction in the mind, but very soon we will find out that they are related concepts and during the process of becoming they get connected and correlated. Deleuze's philosophy is full of these dual concepts,

the duals like Aion and Chronos, Surface and Depth, Wound and Scar, Event and State of affairs, Virtual and The actual, etc.

The event in Deleuze's views belongs to the transhistorical realm of Aion which along with the historical realm of Chronos creates a kind of consciousness and perception that makes its occurrence possible. Deleuze consistently associates Aion, and wound with the event, or at least with the 'truth of the event.' he associates the event with the privileged time of Aion, which subdivides endlessly into the past and future, and the event that likewise never actually occurs in present time. The time is never present that allows for an event to be realized, or to definitively exist (Reynolds, 2007: 146-147). The present as being of reason which is subdivided ad Infinitum into something that has just happened and something that is going to happen, always flying in both directions at once. The other present, the living present, happens and brings about the event. But the event nonetheless retains an eternal truth upon the line of the Aion, which divides it eternally into a proximate past and an imminent future (Deleuze, 1990: 63). For Deleuze it lacks the present when according to calendar and historical time it is possible to define a definite place for the past and the future. In this way, while escaping from the present, Aion is constantly moving between the past and the future. Unlike Aion, Chronos, which is composed of a set of presents, always connects the present to the past and the future, a landmark between the past and the future. Accordingly, the fundamental question is this: what is this time which need not be infinite but only "infinitely subdivisible"? It is the Aion. We have seen that past, present, and future were not at all three parts of a single temporality, but that they rather formed two readings of time, each one of which is complete and excludes the other: on one hand, the always limited present, which measures the action of bodies as causes and the state of their mixtures in depth (Chronos); on the other, the essentially unlimited past and future, which gather incorporeal events, at the surface, as effects (Aion) (Ibid.: 61).

The implication of this reading of time for thinking about the event is that the event cannot be located in the present, but only in relation to the past and the future. As Deleuze points out that the event often takes the form of a "double question": the questions of what is going to happen, and what has just happened (Lundborg, 2009). It is not a phenomenon or a thing, it is a creative, complex, yet immaterial force, something like thought and consciousness, since it potentially has different possibilities of historical change, with the break that it brings into historical consciousness, creates the new. This process links the realm of Aion to the historical realm of Chronos. The process by which the future and the past are creating the present. The event exists on the line of the

Aion, and yet it does not fill it. How could an incorporeal fill up the incorporeal or the impenetrable fill up the impenetrable? Only bodies penetrate each Other, only Chronos is filled up with states of affairs and the movements of the Objects that it measures. But being an empty and unfolded form of time, the Aion subdivides *ad infinitum* that which haunts it without ever inhabiting it —the Event for all events. This is why the unity of events or effects among themselves is very different from the unity of corporeal causes among themselves (Deleuze, 1990: 64). Consequently, as it has been mentioned by Lundborg, the incorporeal creates corporeal and the historical. The new is a potentiality in the virtual realm which becomes objective during the process of becoming in its engagement with the reality. Thus, the relationship between the real and virtual reality is a two-way relationship in which one side is the event in its ideational form and the other side is the realized situation.

### **The Neoliberal policies and the living conditions under the pandemic**

Historical happenings are instants or moments that Event, as a social imaginary, embodies and objectifies itself through them. A set of discursive processes that by a fundamental break from the past they give objectivity to the event. They make things happen in a different fashion, distinct from the way that they used to be done in the past. In this process, the political issue rather than be related to power relations and its distributive mechanisms, it is connected to the areas of social life that according to the prescriptions of a particular doctrine, which was transcended to become a social imaginary, got the possibility to create a historical rupture, by which a new moral order of the society presents itself as a necessity and an alternative to the still dominant moral order. The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations people have as individuals in regard to each other (Taylor, 2004: 4). Considering that we understand social imaginary as a way of thinking shared in a society by ordinary people, the common understandings that make everyday practices possible. As has been mentioned by Charles Taylor, by social imaginary, we mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. In this way Taylor is thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (Ibid.: 23)

The Islamic Republic inherited the corporatist welfare organizations of the Pahlavi monarchy but also created a second set of post-revolutionary welfare organizations that directly targeted those segments of the population excluded

from the previous system. This dual welfare regime was more inclusionary than the Pahlavi regime. Through the expansion of education and welfare, both the rural-urban gap and the center-provincial gap narrowed to an extent never experienced before in Iran. This process nationalized Iranian society, equalizing the aspirations across the country for upward mobility and a higher standard of living. Millions of people went to school for the first time, sent their children for annual checkups for the first time, read newspapers for the first time, and moved to cities for the first time. The egalitarian spirit of the revolution and the mobilizational spirit of the war opened pathways for this transformation, as did the bottom-up participation of both women and men. (Harris, 2017: 144). Despite of the sort of successes, the process did not go as supposed to go. The state dominant model of modernization created its own problems and challenges. The regime couldn't caught up over the post revolution time to levels of affluence enjoyed by the developed countries. The state and its over loaded presence in socio-cultural arena was blamed for the deficiencies, the decade has been considered by majority of the people as the lost decade. Under the discursive imperatives of the age, the people wished the state out and market in.

In the mid-1980s, criticisms of the basic needs model, due to reduced growth, as well as the resulting political instability in the country, emphasis on equality of rights was questioned. As a result, it led to a shift in the development model, it inclined towards a growth-oriented strategy and the structural adjustment of economy. (Mozafarinia & Manoochehri, 2017: 94) The first decade of the revolution was the decade of unplanned and dailiness in most economic policies. The country had faced with internal and external crises and tensions resulted from the regime change, the lack of stabilization of the state, the war, and the economic sanctions. These factors, made impossible the implementation of any effective program for the development of the country. The pervasive and inflated role of government in the economy, managerial inefficiency and severe waste of economic resources, irregular population growth and the state incentive and support programs to increase fertility, expansion of governmental support programs in the form of subsidies, imposition of pricing system, the exchange rate stabilization, and out flow of capital were the hallmarks of the first decade of the post Islamic revolution. End of the war and the urgent need to rebuild the country, increase in the social and cultural problems following the increase in the country's population, the economic recession, Inflation (increase of inflation rate in 1988 to 29.1%), Unemployment (in 1988 to 15.9%), severe budget deficit, and a sharp decline in economic resources following eight years war with Iraq, it made inevitable for the policymakers to formulate the country's first development plan in 1989. This



program had no homogeneity with the economic adjustment programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But after the representatives of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank met with the economic experts of Hashemi Rafsanjani's government in 1990, the government decided to implement economic adjustment policies. The economic adjustment plan was proposed and implemented in 1990 as an alternative plan to the first development plan (shirali, 2020: 201).

The above mentioned crises helped the discourse of neoliberalism to transform itself from a doctrine to a social imaginary. As a result, it creates a series of events that cause a fundamental rupture, both at the conceptual level and at the concrete level, in the nature of the state and its relationship with social forces and the relations of these forces to each other in bottom of the society. It enables the formation of a new history based on a different relationship of the state and society. In fact, this ability to break with the past, make it possible to bring about a new history, through new processes of transformations at different levels of society and government, Neoliberalism demonstrates itself as a history-maker event. In this way, by creating new perspectives, it undertakes to bring a radical break with the agonies of the past by promising to overcome the limitations and shortcomings which was attributed to the past order. Neoliberalism successfully portrays itself as an emancipatory event. An ideological formulation that by creating hope for the elimination of shortcomings, transforms the fantasy of building a new world into a social imaginary, the dream of a new world in which suffering from the lack is considered to be terminable.

According to our reading of Deleuze in this article, the event does not necessarily have the positive characteristics that thinkers such as Badiou consider loyalty to it as a moral duty for political action. Relevant to the reductionist approach that is used in this paper, an ideological discourse makes an event possible when it becomes a social imaginary, that means an ideological discourse when becomes a social imaginary, has the power to realize the event as a potentiality. Therefore, in order to establish a social order distinct from the previous order, event's historical realization is dependent on its ability to create a historical rupture with present order of the society. The imagined new order, in dealing with the historical context in which it becomes real and takes objectivity, can either be in the direction of the hope that the social imaginary promised, or it can be a distinct process from the created hope. In this context, considering the relationship between the hope that the event carries and the historical context in which the event takes place, an event is always an

unfinished process of becoming that its historical and objectified moments can be considered positive or negative in terms of their social consequences.

Contrary to popular belief which the corona pandemic is referred to as a historic event, given worldwide extent of the corona and its direct and indirect calamities that has changed many practices in political and social life, in this article, the pandemic and its aftermaths rather than being the causes of historical change as an event may bring about, it shows the disastrous effects of a series of occurrences that in the name of structural adjustment and downsizing of the state, since 1989 have taken place in Iran. Though the present conditions of living under the pandemic, and considering its relationship with the order of the past, and by relating these conditions to an outlook of the future, which inside of itself has the hopes to break with the present practices, can be part of the formation processes of a new event. This is the significance of the present situation; the corona has exposed the falsity of neoliberalism better than any other incident. Present condition of living with the covid-19, by exposing the inefficiencies of the existing order, has become a constructive element to imagine an alternative moral and political order of society.

Many people due to the weakness or lack of democratic institutions, the existence of rentier state and lack of a market which is independent of this rentier construction, and Iran's non-adherence to the trends of globalization, fundamentally deny the occurrence of neoliberal policies. Despite accepting the items listed above in the case of Iran, but, it is clear that since 1989, neoliberal policies have been strongly implemented in various forms in this country. Implementation of privatization and semi-privatization policies, especially in the fields of health care and education, weakening of the subsidy system, enforcement of the competitive rules of market on the social areas of living, and weakening the social against the strengthening of individualism, has made neoliberalism the real in this country, which according to the context in which it has become objective has fundamental and important differences compared to its Western predecessors. These policies have led to further spread of poverty and other types of deprivation among the deprived and middle classes of society. Neoliberal policies by preferring the isolated individual as the agent of his own destiny who competes with others for his own interests, have undermined the social. In such a competitive situation that the supporting state has stepped back in many areas of social life, the corona pandemic causes the most damage to groups that have the least competitive ability to use medical facilities. Contrary to popular belief, the corona is not a democratic virus that does not differentiate between rich and poor, because for the rich it is possible does not appear in the public for months in order to protect himself from the

outbreak of coronavirus without any livelihood problem. But in the absence of a strong social security system, which has resulted from privatizations, the poor even for a week will not be able to stay away from the workplace. Correspondingly, they are much more vulnerable to get infected by the virus than the rich. Let's not forget that the corona attacks the immune system, in the absence or weakness of the collective welfare system, the poor people who suffer from malnutrition are also the most vulnerable in terms of the immune system. Much more than the corona, the neoliberal policies have endangered the lives of the poor and middle classes. In fact, contrary to all the promises made by neoliberalism about growth and prosperity, for the poor It has been more deadly than the corona.

### **Conclusion**

Deleuze constantly reminds us that historical events are not the cause of change in social living, but due to the belonging of event to the non-historical realm of time, they are the consequences of the changes that have taken place in human perceptions, which are formed by his thought movement in the past and future, and vice versa. Neoliberalism, with its fundamental critique of the past of the state activities in Iran, created a situation in which, at least on a speculative level, the withdrawal of the state from the social sphere was considered a necessity. In people's mind, this rupture was to eliminate and stop the continuity of the shortcomings and the disadvantages that have caused the suffering of citizens in various ways. By fostering this hope and becoming the ideology of changing of the status quo, neoliberalism transformed itself to a social imaginary. But after the implementation of its ideological strategies, this was not the promised future embodied in the social imaginary that was realized as present, rather, it was the severe wounds of the past that continued to be the real. A new social order was formed, the promised rupture happened, but life had become more and more unbearable for the deprived classes. The corona pandemic revealed, better than any other thing, the falsity of neoliberal perspectives. It not only convinced everyone for the active return of the state to the social arena of life, but to the detriment of Individualism, as it has been considered by neoliberalism, it revived the social. In the face of the weakness of the supporting government, these were the active civil society groups that in a vigorous way sought to control the incident. The Corona showed that neoliberal policies for the poor who are separated from the community and away from a supportive state, is more deadly than any virus.

On the one hand, the tragic conditions of the deprived social groups in the age of corona pandemic made them to be averse to the social imaginary, which

in order to determine the present and the objective life of society, developed the neoliberal policies into a historical event, on the other hand, by reflecting on the current situation and thinking about the nature of the past that supposed to be changed, it also provides the possibility to imagine a future, which is free of the hardships of today and yesterday. Our present living condition, which is affected by the constant threat of Corona, and the helplessness of low-income social groups, expresses a wound and a lack that results from the inconsistency of the objective facts of the present society with the perspectives that have been made by dominant ideology. It was supposed that by rupture from the past the wound will be healed. The promised future by its actualization became the present, but the wounds of the past got worse.

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