

THE CONSOLATIONS OF 'NEOLIBERALISM'

Clive Barnett
Faculty of Social Sciences
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

Abstract

Recent work on neoliberalism has sought to reconcile a Marxist understanding of hegemony with poststructuralist ideas of discourse and governmentality derived from Foucault. This paper argues that this convergence cannot resolve the limitations of Marxist theories of contemporary socio-economic change, and nor do they do justice to the degree to which Foucault's work might be thought of as a supplement to liberal political thought. The turn to Foucault highlights the difficulty that theories of hegemony have in accounting for the suturing together of top-down programmes with the activities of everyday life. However, the prevalent interpretation of governmentality only compounds this problem, by supposing that the implied subject-effects of programmes of rule are either automatically realised, or more or less successfully 'contested' and 'resisted'. Theories of hegemony and of governmentality both assume that subject-formation works through a circular process of recognition and subjection. Both approaches therefore treat 'the social' as a residual effect of hegemonic projects and/or governmental rationalities. This means that neither approach can acknowledge the proactive role that long-term rhythms of socio-cultural change can play in reshaping formal practices of politics, policy, and administration. The instrumental use of notions of governmentality to sustain theories of neoliberalism and neoliberalization supports a two-dimensional understanding of political power – which is understood in terms of relations of imposition and resistance – and of geographical space – which is understood in terms of the diffusion and contingent combination of hegemonic projects. Theories of neoliberalism provide a consoling image of how the world works, and in their simplistic reiteration of the idea that liberalism privileges the market and individual self-interest, they provide little assistance in thinking about how best to balance equally compelling imperatives to respect pluralistic difference and enable effective collective action.

“Liberalism” means different things to different people. The term is currently used in Europe by the Left to castigate the Right for blind faith in the value of an unfettered market economy and insufficient attention to the importance of state action in realizing the values of equality and social justice. [...] In the United States, on the other hand, the term is used by the Right to castigate the Left for unrealistic attachment to the values of social and economic equality and the too ready use of government power to pursue those ends at the cost of individual freedom and initiative. Thus American Republicans who condemn the Democrats as bleeding-heart liberals are precisely the sort of people who are condemned as heartless neoliberals by French Socialists.” (Thomas Nagel 2002, 87).

1). Irreconcilable differences?

Judging by recent conference papers, journal articles, and the like, it seems that a reconciliation of a political-economy analysis of “neoliberalism” with a poststructuralist analysis of “advanced liberalism” is well under way. Commenting on this trend, Wendy Larner (2003) suggests that poststructuralist accounts that draw upon Foucault’s scattered ruminations on governmentality can usefully supplement the prevalent Marxist analysis of neoliberalism and neoliberalization. The Foucauldian approach is recommended because it is more attuned to the contingency and unanticipated consequences of neoliberal agendas. However, at the risk of reopening a set of debates that may or may not be “hackneyed”, I want to suggest that the Marxist and Foucauldian approaches are not necessarily as easily reconciled as it might seem. They imply different models of the nature of explanatory concepts; different models of causality and determination; different models of social relations and agency; and different normative understandings of political power. We should not finesse these differences away by presuming that the two approaches converge around a common real-world referent, so-called “neoliberalism”.

By consolidating the taken-for-granted reference to “neoliberalism”, this convergence between Marxist and Foucauldian approaches installs a narrative that is even more disabling than stories about “globalization”. The common usage of “neoliberalism” as a descriptive concept and of “neoliberalization” as an explanatory concept reproduces a narrative in which recent history is understood in terms of a motivated shift away from public-collective values to private-individualistic values. Stories about “neoliberalism” thereby succeed only in finessing a set of interminable conflicts between equally compelling values of individualism and collectivism, autonomy and responsibility, freedom and obligation. They do so by aligning themselves with a one-sided picture of what liberalism is concerned with. Liberalism

has its roots in the affirmation of the moral sovereignty of the individual, expressed in the principle of equality. Historically, liberalism's commitment to equality as a political principle generates a tendency to use the power of the state to extend equality and oppose inequality. Herein lies the source of the apparent incongruity noted by Nagel above, whereby liberalism names both the defence of liberty against undue state intervention as the opposite doctrine, according to which state power should be deployed to ensure the conditions of equal liberty. This incongruity in meaning points to a set of conflicts of value which are not easily resolvable, unless one is happy to accept the idea that any and all political conflict is really an expression of the seamless unfolding of the latent contradictions of capitalism. Liberalism is one tradition of thought, amongst others, that is concerned with elucidating the conditions for living peaceably with interminable conflicts of value, guided by the hope of progress but without the fantasy of transcendence. It seems entirely plausible to suppose that some of Foucault's later writings might throw new light upon the established dilemmas of liberal thought. But whatever potential Foucault's ideas might have in this respect is likely to be annulled if those ideas are instrumentalised for the purposes of shoring up the holes in Marxist narratives of "neoliberalism".

2). A marriage of convenience

The prevalent conceptualization of "neoliberalism" is indebted to Gramscian state theory, inflected by a heavy dose of French regulation theory. "Neoliberalism", from this perspective, is basically a new variant of a class-driven project of state restructuring in the interests of free-markets and expanded accumulation. Accordingly, "neoliberalism" is supposed to refer to a programme of policies and governance arrangements that favour privatization, the liberalization of markets, and more competition. Understood in this way, "neoliberalism" is presented as a coherent ideological project with clear and unambiguous origins, whose spread is sustained and circulated by an identifiable set of institutions. The basic analytical claim is that "neoliberalism" is a "hegemonic" project. This refers to two related propositions: firstly, that political dominance is exercised by the formation of coalitions amongst different interests; and secondly, that the primary medium for suturing together such formations is a set of coherent ideas and images about the world. This second aspect of theories of "neoliberal hegemony" in turn has a double aspect. Hegemonic ideas are supposed to tie together different elite actors within a ruling bloc; but they are also

supposed to do the rather more ordinary ideological work of legitimizing the political subordination of whole populations. The notion that “neoliberalism” amounts to a clearly defined, purposive project pursued by specifiable interest groups, which aims to subordinate public values to those of the market, conveniently resolves the analytical problem of the relationship between politics and economy. It does so by presenting “neoliberalism” as a “hegemonic” project “in which capital's logic is vocalized as a political programme and directive ideology. We don't have to worry about how to think about 'relative autonomy' since we (apparently) live in a period when politics and economic interest are directly fused” (Clarke 2004a, 4).

The political economy conceptualization of “hegemony” is related to a particular framing of the geographies of “neoliberalism”. On the one hand, it supports the idea that “neoliberalism” diffuses downwards and outwards from a coherent set of institutional sites located in the United States and Europe. On the other hand, this means that academics can reassure themselves as to their sensitivity to difference and contingency by insisting that “neoliberalism” arrives differently in different places, combining with other processes to produce distinctive manifestations of what, nevertheless, remain varieties of a single *genus*. The recent turn to Foucault amongst theorists of neoliberalism fits well with this geographical framing of the centres and peripheries, the necessary properties and contingent realizations, of “neoliberal hegemony”. Foucault is invoked in two ways. Firstly, in the diffusionistic narrative of neoliberalism-as-hegemony, extensive use is made of the idea that “neoliberalism” can be understood as a “discourse”, where this is understood to refer to the institutionally located and regulative usage of ideas and concepts to shape pictures of reality. The concept of discourse is therefore understood instrumentally, as a synonym for ideology. It is used to refer to a set of imaginary-representative tools deployed by specific interest groups in pursuit of their interest in augmenting their own power.

The attraction of the concept of hegemony is supposed to lie in its broadening out of the ways in which political domination is meant to operate – through consent as well as coercion. But the recurrent feature of the political-economy invocation of hegemony is that it lacks any clear sense of how consent is actually secured, or any convincing account of how hegemonic projects are anchored at the level of everyday life, other than implying that this works by “getting at” people in some way or other. And this is where the second use of Foucault in theories of neoliberalism-as-hegemony comes to the fore. Extending the range of activities that are commodified,

commercialized and marketized necessarily implies that subjectivities have to be re-fitted as active consumers, entrepreneurial subjects, participants, and so on. Accordingly, the notion of "governmentality" is appealed to in order to explain how broad macro-structural shifts from state regulation to market regulation are modulated with the micro-contexts of everyday routines.

In the emerging paradigm which sees "neoliberalism" through the lens of Foucault's ideas on governmentality, there is a repeated tendency to interpret governmentality as a distinctive modality of state action. On this reading, governmentality refers to a mutation of state-power that allows for the more precise and incipient regulation of conduct at a very detailed level at the same time as extending the reach of state power over large territorial scales. The literature on governmentality provides theorists of neoliberalism with a set of concepts – such as "apparatuses", "technologies", and "assemblages" – that are understood to be the instrumental mechanisms by which clearly defined actors, possessed with clearly articulated interests, pursue their clearly articulated programmes. Unfortunately, Foucault's ideas on governmentality, as systematized by writers like Nikolas Rose, can't actually do the work that they are called upon to do by theorists of "neoliberalism". This is because when it comes to defining how top-down initiatives are articulated to everyday routines, theories of governmentality have exactly the same problem as theories of neoliberalism-as-hegemony. This problem is completely elided in Foucault's influential work on discipline, wherein detailed and bounded spatio-temporal routines automatically inscribe precise subject-effects. In contrast, the attraction of notions such as governmentality and biopolitics is that they address a different scale of activities – that of whole networks of institutions, bureaucracies, and states. But there is still a persistent tendency to assume that governmentality simply refers to the extension of a disciplinary mode of power over larger spatial scales under the auspices of the territorialized state. The trade-off between the *scope* and *intensity* of forms of rule that is implied by the idea of governing-at-a-distance is therefore ignored (see Barnett 2001, Allen 2003). In this elision of discipline and governmentality, Foucault's authority is invoked to refine a story that continues to present the reproduction of power-relations as a matter of *social control*.

The variable relationship between the scope and intensity of rule should open up a set of questions about various middle ranges of agency. However, an entire paradigm of poststructuralist theory is unable to address these because it remains in thrall to an

account of subject-formation that privileges mechanisms of recognition and subjection. In this respect, the turn to Foucault amongst theorists of “neoliberalism” recalls the repressed memory of the strengths and weaknesses of the Althusserian concept of Ideological State Apparatuses. The new favoured vocabulary of “enrolment” and “enlistment” echoes Althusser’s attempt to combine the dual sense of self-formation as a process of being both a *subject-of* and *subject-to*. Indeed, one can even blend the vocabulary of governmentality with that of actor-networks and performativity in order to provide seemingly compelling accounts of the ways in which, for example, new styles of management knowledge magically “interpellate” and “hail” new subjects into existence (Thrift 2001). The recourse to this vocabulary of hailing and interpellation alongside that of enrolment and enlistment marks the point at which the problem of defining the precise relationship between an open-ended sense of the enactment of power-relations and a sense of power as direction is closed down without any specification of the causal mechanisms through which these articulations are sustained.

3). There is no such thing as neoliberalism!

The blind-spot in theories of neoliberalism – whether neo-Marxist and Foucauldian – comes with trying to account for how top-down initiatives ‘take’ in everyday situations. So perhaps the best thing to do is to stop thinking of “neoliberalism” as a coherent “hegemonic” project altogether. For all its apparent critical force, the vocabulary of “neoliberalism” and “neoliberalization” in fact provides a double consolation for leftist academics: it supplies us with plentiful opportunities for unveiling the real workings of hegemonic ideologies in a characteristic gesture of revelation; and in so doing, it invites them to unproblematically align their own professional roles with the activities of various actors “out there”, who are always framed as engaging in resistance or contestation. The conceptualization of “neoliberalism” as a “hegemonic” project does not need refining by adding a splash of Foucault. Perhaps we should try to do without the concept of “neoliberalism” altogether, because it might actually compound rather than aid in the task of figuring out how the world works and how it changes. One reason for this is that, between an overly economic derivation of political economy and an overly statist rendition of governmentality, stories about “neoliberalism” manage to squeeze out any thicker sense of social relations as anything other than a residual effect of hegemonic projects

and/or governmental programmes of rule (see Clarke 2004a). Stories about “neoliberalism” pay little attention to the pro-active role of socio-cultural processes in provoking changes in modes of governance, policy, and regulation. Consider the example of the restructuring of public services such as health care, education, and criminal justice in the UK over the last two or three decades. This can easily be thought of in terms of a “hegemonic” project of “neoliberalization”, and certainly one dimension of this process has been a form of anti-statism that has rhetorically contrasted market provision against the rigidities of the state. But in fact these ongoing changes in the terms of public-policy debate involve a combination of different factors that add up to a much more dispersed populist reorientation in policy, politics, and culture. These factors include *changing consumer expectations*, involving shifts in expectations towards public entitlements which follow from the generalization of consumerism; the *decline of deference*, involving shifts in conventions and hierarchies of taste, trust, access, and expertise; and *the refusals of the subordinated*, referring to the emergence of anti-paternalist attitudes found in, for example, women’s health movements or anti-psychiatry movements. They include also the development of *the politics of difference*, involving the emergence of discourses of institutional discrimination based on gender, sexuality, race, and disability. This has disrupted the ways in which welfare agencies think about inequality, helping to generate the emergence of *contested inequalities*, in which policies aimed at addressing inequalities of class and income develop an ever more expansive dynamic of expectation that public services should address other kinds of inequality as well (see Clarke 2004b).

None of these *populist* tendencies is simply an expression of a singular “hegemonic” project of “neoliberalization”. They are effects of much longer rhythms of socio-cultural change that emanate from the bottom-up. It seems just as plausible to suppose that what we have come to recognise as “hegemonic neoliberalism” is a muddled set of *ad hoc*, opportunistic accommodations to these unstable dynamics of social change as it is to think of it as the outcome of highly coherent political-ideological projects. Processes of privatization, market liberalization, and deregulation have often followed an ironic pattern in so far as they have been triggered by citizens’ movements arguing from the left of the political spectrum against the rigidities of statist forms of social policy and welfare provision in the name of greater autonomy, equality, and participation (e.g. Horwitz 1989). The political re-alignments

of the last three or four decades cannot therefore be adequately understood in terms of a straightforward shift from the left to the right, from values of collectivism to values of individualism, or as a re-imposition of class power. The emergence and generalization of this populist ethos has much longer, deeper, and wider roots than those ascribed to "hegemonic neoliberalism". And it also points towards the extent to which easily the most widely resonant political rationality in the world today is not right-wing market liberalism at all, but is, rather, the polyvalent discourse of "democracy" (see Barnett and Low 2004).

Recent theories of "neoliberalism" have retreated from the appreciation of the long-term rhythms of socio-cultural change, which Stuart Hall once developed in his influential account of Thatcherism as a variant of authoritarian populism. Instead, they favour elite-focused analyses of state bureaucracies, policy networks, and the like. One consequence of the residualization of the social is that theories of "neoliberalism" have great difficulty accounting for, or indeed even in recognizing, new forms of "individualized collective-action" (Marchetti 2003) that have emerged in tandem with the apparent ascendancy of "neoliberal hegemony": environmental politics and the politics of sustainability; new forms of consumer activism oriented by an ethics of assistance and global solidarity; the identity politics of sexuality related to demands for changes in modes of health care provision, and so on (see Norris 2002). All of these might be thought of as variants of what we might want to call *bottom-up governmentality*. This refers to the notion that non-state and non-corporate actors are also engaged in trying to govern various fields of activity, both by acting on the conduct and contexts of ordinary everyday life, but also by acting on the conduct of state and corporate actors as well. Rose (1999, 281-284) hints at the outlines of such an analysis, at the very end of his paradigmatic account of governmentality, but investigation of this phenomenon is poorly developed at present. Instead, the trouble-free amalgamation of Foucault's ideas into the Marxist narrative of "neoliberalism" sets up a simplistic image of the world divided between the forces of hegemony and the spirits of subversion (see Sedgwick 2003, 11-12). And clinging to this image only makes it all the more difficult to acknowledge the possibility of positive political action that does not conform to a romanticized picture of rebellion, contestation, or protest against domination (see Touraine 2001).

Theories of "neoliberalism" are unable to recognize the emergence of new and innovative forms of individualized collective action because their critical imagination

turns on a simple evaluative opposition between individualism and collectivism, the private and the public. The radical academic discourse of “neoliberalism” frames the relationship between collective action and individualism simplistically as an opposition between the good and the bad. In confirming a narrow account of liberalism, understood primarily as an economic doctrine of free markets and individual choice, there is a peculiar convergence between the radical academic left and the right-wing interpretation of liberal thought exemplified by Hayekian conservatism. By obliterating the *political* origins of modern liberalism – understood as answering the problem of how to live freely in societies divided by interminable conflicts of value, interest, and faith - the discourse of “neoliberalism” reiterates a longer problem for radical academic theory of being unable to account for its own normative priorities in a compelling way. And by denigrating the value of individualism as just an ideological ploy by the right, the pejorative vocabulary of “neoliberalism” invites us to take solace in an image of collective decision-making as a practically and normatively unproblematic practice.

The recurrent problem for theories of “neoliberalism” and “neoliberalization” is their two-dimensional view of both political power and of geographical space. They can only account for the relationship between top-down initiatives and bottom-up developments by recourse to the language of centres, peripheries, diffusion, and contingent realizations; and by displacing the conceptualisation of social relations with a flurry of implied subject-effects. The turn to an overly systematized theory of governmentality, derived from Foucault, only compounds the theoretical limitations of economistic conceptualisations of “neoliberalism”. The task for social theory today remains a quite classical one, namely to try to specify “the recurrent causal processes that govern the intersections between abstract, centrally promoted plans and social life on the small scale” (Tilly 2000, 345). Neither neoliberalism-as-hegemony nor neoliberalism-as-governmentality is really able to help in this task, not least because both invest in a deeply embedded picture of subject-formation as a process of “getting-at” ordinary people in order to make them believe in things against their best interests. With respect to the problem of accounting for how “hegemonic” projects of “neoliberalism” win wider consensual legitimacy, Foucault’s ideas on governmentality seem to promise an account of how people come to acquire what Duncan Ivison (1997) calls the “freedom to be formed and normed”. Over time, Foucault’s own work moved steadily away from an emphasis on the *forming-and-*

norming end of this formulation towards an emphasis on the *freedom* end. This shift was itself a reflection of the realization that the circularities of poststructuralist theories of subjectivity can only be broken by developing an account of the active receptivity of people to being directed. But, in the last instance, neither the story of neoliberalism-as-hegemony or of neoliberalism-as-governmentality can account for the forms of receptivity, pro-activity, and generativity that might help to explain how the rhythms of the everyday are able to produce effects on macro-scale processes, and vice versa. So, rather than finding convenient synergies between what are already closely related theoretical traditions, perhaps it is better to keep open those tiresome debates about the degree of coherence between them, at the same time as trying to broaden the horizons of our theoretical curiosity a little more widely.

Notes

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