

NEOLIBERAL CULTURE

Jeremy Gilbert

This special issue of *New Formations* takes as its subject the genesis, persistence and poly-valency of neoliberalism across a range of cultural sites and discursive genres. The volume opens with a long introductory essay by the editor, situating the contributions to the collection and its topics historically, and in terms of the existing scholarship on neoliberalism, linking together all the contributions while addressing the question of what kind of 'object' 'neoliberalism' actually is.

Amongst the contributors, Paul Patton examines the relationships between neoliberal ideas and those of John Rawls, while Paul Gilroy considers the appeal of discourses of entrepreneurial self-help for members of black and migrant communities in contemporary neoliberal cultures. Jo Littler, like Gilroy, demonstrates in her contribution that neoliberal government has increasingly legitimated its practices and the form of society that they produce in terms of an ideal of meritocracy, which valorises a hierarchical and highly unequal set of social relations while claiming to offer individuals from all backgrounds an equal chance to compete for elite status.

Jodi Dean's essay identifies the ways in which the complexification of social and economic life is both actively produced by neoliberalism and becomes an alibi for the inefficacy of political challenges to it. Neal Curtis similarly investigates the persistence of neoliberal assumptions and practices in government and popular journalistic discourse following the disastrous financial crash of 2008. His argument draws on Heidegger's understanding of the nature of *Dasein*, the coherence of the subject's lifeworld, and the importance to the subject of maintaining the coherence of their 'world', even in the face of events which seem wholly to disprove their earlier assumptions about it. Exploring a more detailed instance of neoliberal ideology, Lucy Potter and Clare Westall chart the ways in which ideas and practices around the production, preparation and consumption of food have been mobilised in order to invite continued affective investment in consumption and consumerism while simultaneously legitimating the austerity programme which has formed the core of the UK government's resolutely neoliberal response to the post-2008 crisis.

Nicky Marsh's essay discusses the highly circumscribed rhetoric of neoliberal 'failure' which emerged from that moment, moving on to consider the conceptualisation of failure in the writing and teaching of American experimental novelist William Gaddis. Specifically Marsh addresses Gaddis' 1975 novel *JR* - which satirises the emergent world of asset-stripping and financialised capitalism - and in particular its relation to the writings of Norbert Wiener, widely regarded as the founder of cybernetics, and a sometime colleague and collaborator of Milton Friedman's. In a complementary fashion, Mark Hayward focuses on one highly specific history of technological innovation, charting the progress of twentieth-century developments in electronic technologies which contributed to the development of the teleprompter, the ATM machine and the self-service photo booth, and the participation of this history in the development of a techno-social regime of 'neoliberal optics'.

Stephen Maddison's paper considers the pornography industry and its apparent promotion

of modes of sexuality which might be regarded as wholly consistent with neoliberal culture - treating sex itself as a consumptive rather than a relational act, and participating in the general commodification of sex which is one of the most striking characteristics of neoliberal culture today - while Angela McRobbie looks at the precise forms of accommodation which current forms of neoliberalism make with the historic demands of feminism and the women's movement. McRobbie's key object of analysis is the emergent figure of the working mother, now fully valorised by the types of mainstream media outlet that until recently vilified any deviation from the mid-twentieth century family model. McRobbie points out that for all of her difference from the 'traditional' housewife, the ideal neoliberal mother is now expected to engage in forms of costly and highly restrictive self-management in order to demonstrate that working motherhood is no obstacle either to glamorous and highly sexualised modes of self-presentation - a continuation of the 'post-feminist masquerade' in which young working women are expected to participate - or to efficient and responsible household-management.

One of the most widely-read recent critiques of neoliberal culture, Mark Fisher's very widely-cited *Capitalist Realism*, analyses the persistence across a range of sites of an attitude which assumes neoliberal capitalist norms to be unchallengeable at the level of actual social or political practice. We finally present, as a contribution to this collection and to wider political and theoretical debate, a dialogue between the issue editor and Fisher reflecting upon some of the political implications of his analysis, and of the possibilities for democratic challenge to neoliberal culture in the immediate future.