

# WHAT KIND OF THING IS 'NEOLIBERALISM' ?

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*Jeremy Gilbert*

**Abstract** *This essay introduces the special double issue (80/81) of New Formations, Neoliberal Culture. It situates the eleven other contributions to the volume in the context of the wider field of debate over the existence and nature of 'neoliberalism' as a specifiable and analysable phenomenon. In particular it considers the conceptual status of neoliberalism as a discursive formation, a governmental programme, an ideology, a hegemonic project, a technical assemblage, and an abstract machine.*

**Keywords** neoliberalism, discursive formation, government, ideology, hegemony, technical assemblage, abstract machine

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The term 'neoliberalism' is believed to have originated in the 1930s with the work of Arthur Rüstow and the *Colloque Walter Lippmann*, an international meeting of liberal theorists including Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. This is the origin attributed by Foucault in his now famous lectures at the *Collège de France*.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, most critical scholarship on neoliberalism either follows the career of the set of theses developed by these thinkers and their followers - as they emerged from obscurity to become the ruling dogma of advanced capitalism at the end of the twentieth century - or else stresses the history of neoliberalism as an actual enacted programme of government, beginning with Pinochet's coup in Chile in 1971. The pivotal point of relay between these two histories was, of course, the 'Chicago School' of economics centred on Milton Friedman, students of whom devised Pinochet's programme of privatisation and union repression.<sup>2</sup>

The approaches taken by the contributors to this special double issue of *New Formations* encompass the best of both of these traditions while also innovating beyond and between them, in the process exploring a number of different interpretations of the meaning and significance of 'neoliberalism'. Within the broad family of ideas normally designated 'neoliberal' there are obviously a range of positions on and approaches to the core issues of economic policy, public sector governance and market management; each of these in turn is potentially compatible with a range of opinions and approaches to social policy, cultural practice and public administration, while nonetheless retaining a high degree of internal consistency and expressing a strong set of connecting themes. This fact has confused some commentators, leading in some cases to the claim that 'neoliberalism' as such is an incoherent concept with no objective referent.<sup>3</sup> The denial of the very existence of neoliberalism as a potential object of analysis tends to go along with the rejection of related concepts like ideology, capitalism and hegemony. Such positions arguably tend to be predicated on a rather simplistic understanding of the concepts being rejected: assuming, for example, that 'neoliberalism' could only be a meaningful term if it referred to a wholly uniform and explicit doctrine, manifested in a homogenous and discrete policy programme.

This issue of *New Formations* is clearly predicated on the assumption that there is such a

thing as neoliberalism, but the challenge, which the ‘neoliberal deniers’ present to any such body of work, remains a serious one. It is clearly the case that there have been marked practical and conceptual differences between many of the ideas, programmes and policies to have been labelled ‘neoliberal’ by commentators, while the very notion of ‘neoliberal culture’ assumes a set of connections between these and many other elements of contemporary social life which must be demonstrated rather than assumed. The basic question which this problem raises is: what *kind* of a thing is ‘neoliberalism’? In this introductory essay I will consider a range of possible answers to the question, considering the status of neoliberalism as an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies, and what Deleuze and Guattari call an ‘abstract machine’.

## NEOLIBERAL IDEAS AND THEIR DISCURSIVE REGULARITIES

There will not be space here for an exhaustive account of the ideas of the founders of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘ordoliberalism’ - Hayek, von Mises, et al. - or for one which departs in any significant way from that offered by Foucault. Instead we begin with a consideration of Foucault’s approach to this subject and his key conclusions about it. By the time of Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism and biopolitics, his main methodology had moved on from the ‘archaeology’ of his early work towards the more dynamic investigation of changes in relations of power and knowledge which he sometimes called, after Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, ‘genealogy’. Nonetheless, some remarks from his famous summary of his method in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are certainly germane here. Proposing the ‘discursive formation’ as the proper object of study in the history of ideas, Foucault writes that it should be considered as ‘a unity of distribution that opens a field of possible options, and enables various mutually exclusive architectures to appear side by side or in turn.’<sup>4</sup> ‘The discursive formation is not therefore a developing totality, with its own dynamism or inertia, carrying with it, in an unformulated discourse, what it does not say, what it has not yet said, or what contradicts it at that moment; it is not a rich, difficult germination, it is a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions’.<sup>5</sup> The explicit point here is that simply because a set of statements, ideas and practices does not have the absolute uniformity of a pure doctrine, it can nonetheless be identified and analysed as a coherent object.

In his lectures, Foucault offers a careful and not unsympathetic exposition of neoliberalism’s intellectual evolution and its main tenets, although it is implicitly left to his audience to determine whether this aggregation of ideas possesses even the unity of a ‘discursive formation’. He takes a particular interest in the relative novelty of neoliberal approaches to the role of government in managing populations and facilitating the development of individuals’ capacities, pointing to a crucial difference between neoliberalism and ‘classical’ liberalism, in particular as manifested in the tradition of *laissez faire* associated with thinkers such as Adam Smith and the classic liberal orthodoxy of Victorian economics. This tradition has tended to view government intervention into social and economic scenes, other than for the purpose of inhibiting monopoly-formation and protecting property rights, as generally unnecessary and deleterious to the cultivation of the kind of entrepreneurial culture and market economy to which it aspires. Neoliberalism takes a quite different view, inspired by similar ideals and

aspirations, but heavily influenced both by the example of social liberalism and social democracy in according a more positive role to state institutions, and by the political success of various forms of collectivism - fascist, socialist and communist - in the early and mid-twentieth centuries.

Put simply, neoliberalism, from the moment of its inception, advocates a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating the type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour which the liberal tradition has historically assumed to be the natural condition of civilised humanity, undistorted by government intervention. This is the key difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism: the former presumes that, left to their own devices, humans will naturally tend to behave in the desired fashion. By contrast the latter assumes that they must be compelled to do so by a benign but frequently directive state. This, according to neoliberals, is partly because a certain habitual tendency towards collectivism, if left unchecked, will lead commercial producers, workers, service-providers, managers and government officials to act only in their selfish corporate interests. It is also, they believe, because such corporate selfishness is itself only an expression of an even more basic tendency towards competitive, acquisitive and uniquely self-interested behaviour which is the central fact of human social life. Whereas Smith seems to expect the division of labour in a market society to lead to a relatively egalitarian and co-operative distribution of roles and resources, neoliberalism understands individual interests to be largely mutually exclusive, self-interest to be the only motive force in human life and competition to be the most efficient and socially beneficial way for that force to express itself.

## NEOLIBERAL EQUALITIES

Andrew Gamble points out, with good grounds, that neoliberal rhetoric and policy prescriptions have always been split between the radically anti-state, aggressively *laissez-faire* rhetoric of the Anglo-American libertarian Right and the 'social market' tradition more closely associated with German 'ordoliberalism'.<sup>6</sup> We could include in the former category the work of the Austrian 'anarcho-capitalists' such as von Mises and the hugely influential writings of Hayek. However, it is highly debatable what influence the libertarian tendency has ever had on significant public policy programmes: even in the case of governments such as Margaret Thatcher's, claiming explicit inspiration from Hayek, *laissez faire* neoliberalism only ever provided a part of the rhetorical justification for the broad programme of privatisation while the actual reductions in public spending effected were far from impressive. Actually existing neoliberalism seems to have been characterised by a consistently interventionist approach.

Of course, the same could be said of actually existing liberalism in the nineteenth century, which was never short of programmes promoting particular modes of civility and subjectivity, and whose entrepreneurial ideal of self-help has bequeathed a crucial legacy to contemporary neoliberal culture, as Paul Gilroy demonstrates in his contribution to this volume. Gilroy's timely intervention examines the appeal of discourses of entrepreneurial self-help for members of black and migrant communities in contemporary neoliberal cultures: finally observing that, as regrettable as the prevalence of such ideas may be from a leftist perspective, the fact that neoliberalism is adaptable and adoptable by them may also be an indication of the relative

integration of such communities into societies such as that of the UK. From this perspective, perhaps what is most strikingly novel about neoliberal theory is its commitment to certain kinds of highly individualistic egalitarianism, promoting programs aimed at widening property ownership and distribution and securing equality of access to the competitive labour market for members of disadvantaged social groups, irrespective of their class or ethnic background.

This issue is explored from differing perspectives by several of our contributors. Paul Patton examines the fascinating relationships between neoliberal ideas and those of John Rawls, arguably the most influential thinker on the Anglophone 'centre-left' of the past four decades, particularly in the light of Rawls' advocacy of 'property-owning democracy' as an *alternative* to capitalism.

Patton argues very persuasively that Foucault's interest in neoliberalism may in part have been sympathetic, motivated partly by his famous observation that there had never yet existed a socialist art of government<sup>7</sup> (a remark generally interpreted as implying that it would be good if there were such a thing), whereas the early neoliberal thinkers were of interest precisely for their close attention to possible new techniques for the management of populations: to the art of government, as it were. Patton suggests that Foucault's interest in these thinkers may also have been partly inspired by that hostility to concentrations of arbitrary power (political or economic) which the early neoliberals seem to share with Rawls, which itself resonates with various conceptual and practical traditions of radical democracy.

Against that tradition which reads Foucault's concern with power and its usage as informed by an essentially anarchist politics, Patton points to Foucault's explicit criticism of Leftist 'state phobia'. Conversely, while Foucauldian scholarship from the 'governmentality' school has for some time promoted the idea of Foucault as a reformist - even, implicitly, a resource for technocrats<sup>8</sup> - Patton's argument implies that it is a mistake to divorce those aspects of his intellectual project which seem only concerned with the detached analysis of governmental mechanisms from a broader normative - and even, arguably, utopian - dimension. At the same time Patton implicitly reminds us of one of the most under-examined but potentially significant conceptual innovations made by Foucault in this lecture series: his suggestion that there is no such thing as 'the State', but only varying projects for, processes of and degrees of 'statification'<sup>9</sup> on the part of competing tendencies, groups and institutions. Intriguingly, this is an assertion which is surely consistent with Marx's own critique of alienation and reification,<sup>10</sup> according to which it is crucial to recognise 'the state' as a malleable product of human interactions.

Neoliberal egalitarianism is not the egalitarianism of Marx and the wider traditional Left, however: 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' and 'the free development of each shall be the condition for the free development of all' could hardly be further from the conception of the good society, which informs either the writings of early neoliberal theorists or the policy agendas of neoliberal governments. Both of these phrases - central tenets not just of communism but of socialism, social democracy, and even, arguably, of the 'social liberalism' of L.T. Hobhouse and his tradition - imply a level of reciprocity and an aspiration to lived equality which is entirely at odds with neoliberal assumptions. As Jo Little demonstrates in her contribution to this issue, and as Gilroy also mentions in his, 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. Rawls, on Patton's reading, also seems at least partially to endorse such a model.

In the light of these complementary observations, we could argue that what defines the regularity of neoliberalism as a discursive formation is precisely the persistence of an individualistic conception of human selfhood and of the idea of the individual both as the ideal locus of sovereignty and the site of governmental intervention. In fact this observation may help us to explain the peculiar persistence and success of neoliberalism in recent decades. While it can clearly be understood as a modernising project in the tradition of liberalism and its forebears in radical Protestantism, neoliberalism's attention to the specificity of discrete governmental tactics and to the management of individuals *qua* individuals is arguably what has enabled it to flourish so impressively under postmodern conditions. If the fragmentation of the social world has presented major challenges to competing programmes and philosophies of government requiring a greater level of social cohesion and public consensus for their successful legitimisation - from communism to traditional conservatism - neoliberalism has been able to take full advantage of the same situation in order to promote a vision of individualised competition in the marketplace as the only effective or legitimate mechanism for the distribution of rewards or the adjudication of opinions.

## NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY

Neoliberals themselves tend not to welcome the label 'neoliberal'. While some deny significant differences between their own perspectives and those informing classical liberalism,<sup>11</sup> others tend to refute any notion that their assumptions and policy prescriptions are informed by a consistent philosophical approach at all, instead characterising themselves as addressing discrete, largely technical problems of government from a point of view unencumbered by ideology or grand designs.<sup>12</sup> One of the most characteristic tropes of such discourse - exemplified by the rhetoric of Tony Blair and his government - is the repeated use of the term 'modernisation' to describe a specific programme of labour-market deregulation, tax-cutting, privatisation and union repression which any objective view must recognise as in fact only one possible way of reforming and updating social and economic institutions in the twenty-first century. From this perspective, the gesture of positing a 'neoliberalism' which is much wider in scope than the texts discussed by Foucault or his followers, and is active across a far more diverse set of fields, even if its constituent elements do not necessarily recognise themselves as belonging to a specific or consistent formation at all, is a contentious one in itself. Such a move belongs to the tradition of ideology critique which has been problematised by generations of critics at least since the 1960s - not least Foucault himself - for its tendency to identify uniformities of interest and intention where none may actually exist. However, in the case of a formation such as neoliberalism, the onus of proof is surely on those who wish to deny that neoliberalism functions as a full-blown ideology as classically understood.

The gesture of identifying neoliberalism as a broad ideology even where its constituent elements may not recognise themselves as adhering to it, is surely justified in this instance by at least two key factors. One is the sheer regularity and similarity of the basic elements of 'neoliberal' policy the world over: privatisation of public assets, contraction and centralisation of democratic institutions, deregulation of labour markets, reductions in progressive taxation,

restrictions on labour organisation, labour market deregulation, active encouragement of competitive and entrepreneurial modes of relation across the public and commercial sectors. The other is the extent to which a range of significant cultural phenomena seems clearly to share and work to reproduce the basic presuppositions of neoliberal thought and the long-term social objectives of neoliberal policy.

In the former case, perhaps the extreme case for consideration is the development of economic policy in China since the early 1980s. David Harvey's widely-read *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* devotes a well-researched chapter to this history. Harvey clearly assumes that a policy regime explicitly oriented to the maximisation of private and corporate profit through the deregulation of labour markets, the political repression of organised labour, and the privatisation of state and communal assets, is specific enough and similar enough to its European and American counterparts to be described without hesitation as 'neoliberal'. Harvey and comparable Marxist commentators<sup>13</sup> have rarely if ever even alluded to the problem of whether or not Chinese policy has ever been directly influenced by the classic neoliberal literature; but on their terms this is a question which can justifiably be regarded as secondary to an analysis of the mechanics of actually existing neoliberalism.

In the latter case, it is the widespread dissemination of highly competitive, individualistic, meritocratic norms at sites as diverse as self-help literature, popular fiction, mainstream television, consumer publishing, music culture and food journalism which attracts notice. Here again, the explicit and implicit assumption of the objects under discussion seem so overwhelmingly consistent with the norms and objectives of classical neoliberalism that the onus of proof must be on those who might wish to refute the assumption that they belong to a singular discursive formation, and that they are in fact expressions of a coherent ideology. From this perspective, to which the majority of contributions to this issue are clearly sympathetic, it is perfectly legitimate to describe as 'neoliberal' policies, texts, concepts and programmes which share neoliberalism's core assumptions and objectives whether or not they make any explicit reference to European and American economic theory of the mid twentieth century: in fact understanding these non-explicit connections, and the interests and power relations which they serve, is a crucial objective of much of the political and cultural analysis presented here.

To understand how the phenomena under consideration function ideologically, it is worth recalling Althusser's classic account of the working of ideology and 'Ideological State Apparatuses'.<sup>14</sup> The first point to make here is that ideology almost by definition works to refute its own specificity and historicity: it is only fully effective, arguably, to the extent that it can pass itself off as promoting trans-historical 'common sense'.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Althusser argues, this common-sense is not primarily a matter of clearly-held beliefs to which the subject consciously accedes, but of the materially instantiated, institutionalised, 'ritual' forms of behaviour in which they are obliged or persuaded to engage. This is an approach which clearly prefigured and arguably influenced both Foucault's studies of discipline and government and Deleuze and Guattari's analyses of the 'machinic' dimensions of power, despite the fact that all would at some point try - if only rhetorically - to refute the very category of 'ideology'.<sup>16</sup> It also influenced Butler's sophisticated theorisation of the performative and iterative nature of gender discourse.<sup>17</sup> Neal Curtis' article in the present collection makes a novel and intriguing contribution to this tradition, while drawing on a wholly different intellectual lineage. Curtis examines 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. Curtis offers thereby a compelling account of the sheer inertia which seems to have characterised public imaginative responses to that crisis and to have inhibited the emergence of radical responses to it, even at those sites where critical reflection ought to be most vigorously promoted: universities.

A related similar argument, drawing on more conventional conceptual resources, is made by Mark Fisher's very widely-cited *Capitalist Realism*,<sup>18</sup> which 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 present as a contribution to this collection a dialogue between the issue editor and Fisher reflecting upon some of the political implications of his analysis. Drawing in part on Žižek and Lacan, one of the most intriguing elements of Fisher's account of 'capitalist realism' is his emphasis on its ideological efficacy even in the face of explicit rejection by the very subjects whose behaviour it organises. Put crudely, perhaps the most commonplace relation to capitalist realism - or neoliberal ideology - in the contemporary world is an explicit rejection of its norms and claims accompanied by a resigned compliance with its demands. We know that we don't like neoliberalism, didn't vote for it, and object in principle to its exigencies: but we recognise also that unless we comply with it, primarily in our workplaces and in our labour-market behaviour, then we will be punished (primarily by being denied the main consolation for participation in neoliberal culture: access to a wide range of consumer goods), and will be unlikely to find ourselves inhabiting a radically different social terrain. This paradox is made bearable by a crucial feature of neoliberal ideology itself: the insistent belief that it is our private, personal beliefs and behaviours which define our 'true' selves, whereas our public behaviour can be tolerated precisely to the extent that it is not invested with any emotional significance.

The very complex relationships between the personal and the public, and the ways in which those relationships are managed by neoliberalism, are central topics of concern for two contributions to this collection which address in very different ways issues of gender and sexuality. 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. At the same time Maddison looks to innovations such as the experimental film *Made in Secret* - which purports to document the activities of a radical Canadian collective's attempt to produce a non-sexist, non-individualist, pro-queer porn movie - for their potential to challenge such attitudes and practices. Drawing on Lazzarato's concept of 'immaterial labour' (more recently developed by Hardt and Negri with their notion of 'biopolitical labour'), Maddison posits 'immaterial sex' - sexuality expressed in virtual forms, and at the level of communication and affect - as a site of increasingly intensified exploitation for sex workers but also a source of potential efficacy and agency, specifically where it can be mobilised in resolutely non-individualist and non-commodified forms.

Although its topic is very different, Angela McRobbie's essay points to a similar fault line between neoliberalism and its political opponents, the central issue being the conflict between

individualism and collectivism. Bringing together many of the themes of the volume, McRobbie builds on her important recent work and that of other commentators to look at the precise forms of accommodation which current modes 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. Crucially, McRobbie identifies the ideological and practical rejection of all forms of collectivist and state-supported childcare - which she understands as key demands of socialist and social democratic feminism in the twentieth century - as a fundamental feature of the neoliberal programme and its wider ideological manifestations.

Almost all of the contributions to this collection can be drawn on to support an account according to which neoliberalism is understood in terms of its persistent promotion and reproduction of an ideology of competitive individualism, itself a contemporary manifestation of what C.B. Macpherson famously called 'possessive individualism': a model of human nature and human society according to which acquisitive individualism is both an inherent feature of the human personality and the only logical basis for human civilisation.<sup>19</sup> However, in encountering arguments such as Curtis', Fisher's, Gilroy's, Littler's and even McRobbie's, it is always useful to recall Abercrombie Hill and Turner's classic problematisation of 'the dominant ideology thesis',<sup>20</sup> according to which it is dangerous to overstate the efficacy of ideological rather than practical and material obstacles to radical political mobilisation. Put very simply (and this is my own formulation/simplification rather than anyone else's), it is perfectly possible to recognise the exploitative and iniquitous nature of capitalism, and the social and personal costs of neoliberalism, without being motivated to oppose them. Put even more crudely, as long as feeding one's children (still the principal preoccupation of most adult humans, as it has been throughout history and before) remains an achievable but difficult task, then energies are likely to be devoted to the accomplishment of that goal: energies which cannot then be channelled into political activity of any kind. Where this objective becomes unachievable, populations are likely to resort to desperate, perhaps revolutionary, measures. Where it becomes too easily realised - as it did for the generation which came to maturity in the post-war years of social-democratic ascendancy - then capitalism is also likely to find itself subject to challenge by constituencies no longer intimidated by the immediate threat of destitution. Much of the neoliberal programme can be understood in terms of the efficacy and precision with which it engineers precisely the outcome of an economy and a society within which feeding their children and keeping them out of relative poverty remains an achievable but highly demanding task for most actors: actively producing insecurity and 'precarity' across the working population, without allowing the level of widespread desperation to pass critical thresholds.<sup>21</sup> As such, it could be argued that the genius of the neoliberal programme is that it really requires no ideological component at all.

This argument is worth bearing in mind as a corrective to the naive tendency to imagine that



it is mere ignorance of the social facts which keeps populations acquiescent with neoliberalism (a tendency typical of popular North American commentators such as Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky), but it would not do to take it too far. Apart from anything else it would leave unanswered the question of just why there is so much evident ideological work - as all of these studies show that there is - put into the normalisation of neoliberal assumptions at sites as diverse as schools, tv programmes and supermarkets. In fact what all of these analyses point to from their different positions is a key function of ideology within neoliberal culture: to secure consent and generate political inertia precisely by enabling the experience of precarity and individualised impotence to be experienced as normal and inevitable. The distinction with a simplistic understanding of ideology is crucial here however: what is normalised by contemporary ideological mechanisms is not an explicit set of beliefs - only a tiny minority of the public in any neoliberal society has actually wanted or willingly voted for much of the neoliberal programme - but a set of negative affects whose normalisation prevents them becoming the basis for a sustained popular critique of neoliberalism. Put crudely, the point of neoliberal ideology is not to convince us that Hayek was right; it is to console us that the sense of insecurity, of perpetual competition and individual isolation produced by neoliberal government is natural, because 'that's what life is really like': this, for example, is the message and intended affective consequence of almost all 'reality television'. What emerges from all of these accounts - as well as from Foucault's and Patton's - is a picture within which we can see the inseparability of neoliberalism the ideology from neoliberalism conceived as a concrete programme for the government of individuals and populations. They each legitimate each other while materially producing conditions which are conducive to each other's propagation, in a politico-cultural feedback loop which can easily be experienced as simply unbreakable.

Jodi Dean's essay takes this analysis still further, identifying the ways in which the complexification of social life and economic life is both actively produced by neoliberalism and becomes an alibi for the inefficacy of political challenges to it. Dean deploys the psychoanalytic concept of drive - that compelling force which is manifest in the compulsion to repeat and goes beyond any mere desire for an object - to understand the affective feedback loop driving both the behaviour of financial markets leading up to the 2008 crash and, arguably, the inability of current mainstream politics to think itself out of a repetition of the events and behaviours which produced it. Crucially, Dean points to the tendency for the hypercomplex opacity of scenes such as the derivatives market, to become the excuse for a failure of governments to make any significant attempts to intervene in them, thereby perpetuating the power and unaccountable authority of a self-sustaining plutocratic elite. Here, Dean's analysis of the psychic mechanisms of finance capitalism converges with Little's account of meritocracy as an ideology which serves to legitimate the status of a self-serving elite based around the main global centres of financial trading.

## ACTUALLY EXISTING NEOLIBERALISM: POWER, GOVERNMENT AND INTERESTS

This raises a crucial issue about the consistency of neoliberalism as both an ideology and a governmental programme, as distinct from the aggregation of ideas and texts discussed by Foucault and compared by Patton with the philosophy of Rawls. The great historic value of Patton's analysis arguably only becomes apparent when we consider that what he has

demonstrated is the *non-inevitability* of the recruitment of that family of ideas to the wider ideological project which Dean calls 'real existing neoliberalism'; this is an account to which Gilroy's discussion of black articulations of neoliberalism also lends great richness and credibility. In order to explore this issue further, however, it is clearly necessary to consider the question of what the apparent objective of existing neoliberalism has actually been, given that, on all available measures, it has not led to a wider distribution of wealth and resources, a more egalitarian income spread or, crucially, an increase in social mobility relative to the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>22</sup> which are exactly the outcomes that a programme informed by classic neoliberal ideals ought to have tried to produce. While access to the property market and to certain kinds of consumption (foreign travel, for example) has increased, the key measure of 'equality of opportunity' accepted by most social scientists is social mobility, and social mobility has not increased at all under neoliberal governments in any instance. In fact the combined decreases in social equality and social mobility generated by neoliberal government in practice lend very serious weight to David Harvey's claim that the fundamental aim of actually existing neoliberalism has been the 'restoration of class power' on the part of the capitalist class, following a major erosion of that power in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Dean, echoing the work of political economists such as Andrew Glyn,<sup>23</sup> points to the expansive role of the financial sector in contemporary capitalism. This suggests that neoliberalism should be understood as bound up not merely with a restoration of capitalist class power, but with a re-balancing of the relative power of industrial and financial capital within that class, and to some extent a re-composition of capital itself and its constitutive practices. It is important to sound a note of caution here as to how far this represents a radical break within the history of capitalism. Speculative finance has exercised considerable power at previous moments in that history (during the period, roughly, 1870-1929, for example). The great historian of capitalism, Fernand Braudel, believed that long-range, international speculative finance - trading in risks and virtual goods while gambling on future commodity prices - was the basic constitutive activity of capitalism as such from the moment of its inception in the Italian mercantile cities of the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> As such the moment of neoliberalism may represent an assertion of capitalist class power of unprecedented magnitude and abstract purity, but not a moment of absolute novelty.

At the same time it is important to note that various constituencies outside of the financial elites (although never very distant from them socially, culturally, politically or geographically) have benefitted from the major social and economic changes with which neoliberalism has been associated. A new social elite, quite different culturally (if not socially, functionally or genealogically) from the historic 'establishment' has arguably crystallised from the interconnections between the worlds of finance, commercial media, information and communications and technologies, and some branches of government, in recent decades. Less powerful social groups - most notably managers of both commercial and public-sector organisations - have been able to acquire power and obtain privileges to the extent that they have been willing and able to reproduce the culture of that elite while serving its interests. Typically, this culture tends to endorse a highly individualistic worldview which is explicitly hostile to all forms of collective organisation or public provision while remaining highly defensive of privileges which its members - as Littler shows in her essay - must believe themselves to have won fairly in the open competition of the labour market. By the same token this elite culture

is genuinely hostile to visible forms of prejudice and discrimination, especially on grounds of gender, sexuality or race, which seem to go against its individualist ethos. It will even make common cause in defence of this position with forces from the Left, against perceived threats from conservative constituencies, when necessary (hence the heavy financial support for Barack Obama's election campaign coming from major Wall Street investment banks in 2008). As such, professional women (at least those sufficiently affluent or motivated not to require state or community support to raise children), gay professionals and entrepreneurs and non-white professionals and entrepreneurs have all benefitted considerably from the cultural ascendancy of this neoliberal elite and its values, as McRobbie, Maddison and Gilroy all explain in their contributions.

However, it is clear enough that such gains - both socially and materially - have been enjoyed almost precisely to the extent that the groups and individuals in question have been able to participate in and facilitate the wider project of neoliberalisation, and that the hard economic benefits of that process have accrued to them only and exactly to the extent that they have been able to draw close to and access the real concentrations of wealth in the financial institutions: be it via salaries, pensions, bonuses, options or royalties. As such, the successes of these groups do nothing to problematise the claim that what defines the consistency of actually existing neoliberalism as a governmental programme is simply its promotion of the interests of finance capital and the processes of financialisation above and - if necessary - to the exclusion of all other interests. Littler's description of this elite as a 'plutocracy' - which may at first strike the reader as somewhat archaic - seems therefore, on reflection, both apposite and precise. Indeed, Dean offers concrete examples of major financial institutions using very similar language to describe themselves and their practices.

## THE HEGEMONIC PROJECT OF NEOLIBERALISM

Dean, like Curtis, gives considerable attention to the political, epistemological and ontological conditions of possibility both for the 2008 crash and for the subsequent persistence of neoliberalism as the animating ideology of most governments worldwide. Lucy Potter and Clare Westall focus more closely on the contours of neoliberal culture in post-crash Britain. As Dean points out, it is problematic simply to associate neoliberalism with the expansion of consumer culture, partly because the great historic moment of such expansion was certainly that of Keynesian demand-management and welfare capitalism, partly because the neoliberal assault on global wage levels arguably runs contrary to any long-term goal of expanding popular consumption levels. Despite the veracity of such observations, there can be little question that the neoliberal epoch has in fact been characterised by an expansion of consumption levels in the richer countries - enabled through an enormous inflation of household debt and by the export of production to parts of Asia with extremely low labour costs - and, more significantly, by the influence of discourses such as Public Choice Theory, a key component of neoliberal government since the 1980s, which have attempted to re-model a vast range of social relationships (most notably between public sector professionals and service users) as retail transactions, promoting a consumer mentality as the only mode of active and empowered subjectivity available in any public or private situation. Clearly the expansion of (indebted, exploitative) consumption has been the major compensation for the decline of real wages and

relative economic position, as well as the decline in opportunities for meaningful democratic input to political decision-making, suffered by most citizens of such countries since the 1970s. As such the precipitous deterioration of living standards, and wage/price ratios in the UK since 2008, might have been expected to provoke a major crisis of consent for neoliberalism.

The fact that this crisis of consent has so far clearly not materialised - despite the occasional riot - forms the backdrop to Potter and Westall's detailed analysis of the 'foodscape' of contemporary Britain. Potter and 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, in keeping with the broader policy agenda accepted by and across the European Union (and distinct from the Obama administration's quasi-Keynesian stimulus strategy). The challenge of perpetuating an ideology which is organised primarily around the interpellation of subjects as consumers, while simultaneously legitimating a political programme which actively undermines the capacity of citizens to consume, is one which requires the mobilisation of very specific ideas of self-sufficiency and the creativity of domestic labour, as Potter and Westall demonstrate in persuasive detail. Of course, such an analysis only fully makes sense in the context of an understanding of neoliberalism as the ongoing attempt to mobilise a particular set of ideas and governmental practices, and to some extent an entire ideology, in the pursuit of a particular set of interests, neutralising and forestalling the emergence of political threats to this endeavour: in other words, as a hegemonic project.

Rather like 'neoliberalism', 'hegemony' is a concept which a number of commentators have recently suggested no longer usefully describes the functioning of contemporary power relations. Most such accounts tend to argue from a position which assumes 'hegemony' to describe a situation in which active and explicit consent to the social authority of a hegemonic group or ideology is consciously expressed by subaltern groups. From this perspective, the situation which we have already described in this essay, in which it is hard to identify much clear enthusiasm amongst populations for the political philosophy of neoliberalism or even for its general norms, is not describable as one of neoliberal hegemony. However, this account of 'hegemony' is really not one which is compatible with Gramsci's or any post-Gramscian account, because it simply does not take into account two issues which are crucial to any such theory of hegemony. Firstly, it ignores the possibility that, as Gramsci points out, subaltern groups may at times consent only 'passively'.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, it ignores the variety of ways in which different groups can be mobilised, recruited, pacified, neutralised or marginalised by a hegemonic project: for example, in the case of neoliberalism, it is clear from the foregoing analysis that only the core neoliberal elite and key strategic sectors of its periphery (notably corporate management) have to be recruited to any kind of active belief in neoliberal norms, as long as no singular alternative wins widespread popular support, in order for the rest of a population to remain convinced of the unviability of any political challenge to those norms. The result may well be a broadly shared culture of 'disaffected consent', wherein a general dissatisfaction with neoliberalism and its social consequences is very widespread, but no popular alternative is able to crystallise or cohere with sufficient potency to develop the necessary critical mass to challenge neoliberal hegemony. By 'hegemony' I mean specifically *not* a condition of generalised domination, but

rather, in Gramsci's sense, a position of social, cultural and political 'leadership' enjoyed by a particular set of interests and the norms which give ideological expression to them. The power enjoyed by the elite which shares these interests is not the power to order every aspect of daily life, but rather to determine the general direction of travel in which social processes tend. This seems very well to describe the position of neoliberalism today in many national contexts and indeed at the global level.

This is not to say, however, that what we might call - following Scott Lash - the 'epistemological' dimension of power has simply become unimportant.<sup>26</sup> Curtis shows very clearly how the inability to imagine an alternative to neoliberalism has contributed to a situation in which the very failure of neoliberal economics has been redefined as an excuse for more and intensified neoliberalism in the form of the European Union's austerity agenda. Clearly, the meanings which groups and individuals give to events, phenomena and identities remains a crucial issue, and the heavy symbolic work done by key media actors in order publicly to define various social and cultural changes in neoliberal terms is clearly demonstrated here by contributors to this issue such as McRobbie, Gilroy, Littler, Potter and Westall.

One way of understanding this issue is in terms of the necessity for neoliberal propagandists to construct plausible narratives explaining the meaning of key social changes of recent decades. As Hall *et al* showed 25 years ago,<sup>27</sup> neoliberal advocates achieved a high level of political success in the 1970s by constructing a public narrative which both responded to a set of political demands - from militant labour, black people, women, youth and the counterculture - and offered an explanation and solution for the social crisis which those demands precipitated. The narrative of the New Right defined those demands as largely unreasonable and proposed to respond to the crisis by repressing them with a combination of neoliberal economics and social authoritarianism. In the long term, as I have suggested elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> the social conservatism of the New Right was not politically sustainable in the cultural context produced by both neoliberalisation - with its tendency to erode social norms in favour of competitive individualism - and the relative success of the new social movements in challenging entrenched forms of sexism, racism and homophobia. Today, therefore, it is necessary for neoliberal hegemony that the experience of changing gender relations in the labour market be defined very carefully in terms which do not accord any authority to the historically collectivist dimension of organised feminism; that the right to sexual self-expression be acknowledged in terms which nonetheless marginalise the historic demands of gay liberation and the counterculture for an authentic sexual utopianism; that the legacies of colonialism and slavery be offered inclusion in the cultural mainstream on terms which resonate with their own history while reinforcing neoliberal norms. The processes by which each of these operations is conducted are precisely the topics of McRobbie's, Madison's and Gilroy's respective contributions to this collection.

At the same time as representing a historic political response to the challenge posed by oppositional constituencies, neoliberalism also represents a response by capital and its agents to the changing technological milieu of the late twentieth century. It may yet be too early to say whether the cybernetic and digital revolution is as significant an event of world history as the industrial revolution. What is clear is that the threats posed and opportunities offered to the interests of finance capital by that enormous shift constitute a key context for the emergence and success of actually existing neoliberalism, and the mobilisation of neoliberal ideas by finance capital in the service of its hegemonic project. On the one hand, as I, like

others, have commented elsewhere, the emergence of post-Fordist techniques of production, distribution and management can be understood in part as a response to the challenges posed to capital at the end of the 1960s;<sup>29</sup> on the other hand it can be seen as itself presenting a set of opportunities to capital, of which the adoption of the neoliberal strategy was the ultimate realisation. Actually existing neoliberalism would not have been implementable without the mobilisation of a set of techniques and devices which made possible a vast automation and depersonalisation of both industrial processes and financial transactions. Without robotics, container shipping, and above all electronic command and control systems, it would not have been possible to undermine the bargaining power of organised industrial workers, on which the political viability of the social democratic state had always depended. Without the development of a complex and mutually supportive array of techniques in mathematics, information processing and the creation of credit, the expansion of both the financial markets and the consumer economy could not have taken place as it did.

#### TECHNICAL ASSEMBLAGE AND ABSTRACT MACHINE

This construction and mobilisation of what we might call the 'neoliberal technical assemblage' is a key concern of both Nicky Marsh's and Mark Hayward's contributions to this issue of *New Formations*. Marsh's essay echoes strongly both Patton's engagement with proto-neoliberal political ideas and Curtis' and Dean's attention to the political response to neoliberal government's demonstrable breakdown in 2008. Discussing the highly circumscribed rhetoric of neoliberal 'failure', which emerged from that moment, Marsh moves 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. Marsh explores Wiener's proximity to and distance from the neoliberal 'rational choice' theorists who would make use of some his ideas, and in particular draws attention to his positing of a model of the human subject defined by its exterior relations and its actions rather than its interior motivations or self-interested rationality. Wiener's and Gaddis' scepticism as to the simple predictability of systemic outcomes and their attendant risks prefigures uncannily the situation described by Dean, wherein the existence of a financial market so complex as to be genuinely unknowable becomes the alibi for a neoliberal refusal to exercise democratic control over the economy and the interests in which it is organised.<sup>30</sup> And ultimately what Marsh, like Patton, partly shows us is the extent to which the neoliberal assemblage has depended upon a very specific manipulation of tools and techniques that could have been put to quite other uses.

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'. As Hayward himself remarks, and convincingly demonstrates, 'neoliberalism is a complex social formation that involves many different elements; it is more than simply a body of conceptual and theoretical arguments about the economy which has subsequently been implemented

within various contexts, a process by which “neoliberalism proper” fans out across society. The technologies discussed here and their analysis in light of neoliberal optics, draw our attention to the way that a number of pre-existing technologies and cultural practices have been enlisted in the service of the process of neoliberalisation’. Hayward makes innovative use of the thought of Gilbert Simondon to investigate the contribution of these technologies to the emergence of a neoliberal regime of individuation, for example relating how the invention of the photobooth was motivated by a specific desire to allow students graduating from Yale university to take their own yearbook pictures in order to avoid the homogenising conformity characteristic of professional portraiture. Here, even as early as 1929, several years before the *Colloque Walter Lippmann*, we encounter the idea that *individuality* should be seen as the ultimate privilege of a particular kind of elite: an elite which, unlike its antecedents, is constitutively unwilling to recognise its own corporate character, its members’ status having been hypothetically earned - meritocratically - at an elite educational institution. We might say that here, in the moment of the photobooth’s conception and implementation, we can see already operable the ‘abstract machine’ of neoliberalism.

I have used this latter term elsewhere, borrowed from Guattari and Deleuze, to suggest something of the virtual and dynamic consistency of neoliberalism.<sup>31</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘abstract machine’ is a name for the immanent dynamics of an assemblage or formation,<sup>32</sup> emphasising that the consistency of any such object is to be understood at a certain level of abstraction, rather than in the homogeneity of its concrete instantiations, while also stressing the extent to which such consistency is a function of productive and transformatory processes rather than merely the static ‘distribution’ of Foucault’s ‘discursive formation’. The abstract machine is constituted by a set of vectors, emergent tendencies and potentialities with greater or lesser chances of expression and actualisation. We might put this very crudely by saying that the abstract machine works to make certain outcomes probable while others less so. In the case of neoliberalism, then, what is it that defines the specificity of this ‘abstract machine’?

I would suggest that if any function defines the machinic specificity of neoliberalism, it is the tendency to potentiate individuals *qua* individuals while simultaneously inhibiting the emergence of all forms of potent collectivity. Whether we are referring to self-photographing Yale graduates, self-helping black entrepreneurs, self-reliant working mothers, lone porn users, rational-choosing economic subjects, austerity-age ‘foodies’ or self-motivating meritocrats: it is entirely, but genuinely, as *individuals* that the neoliberal machine contributes to a real expansion of powers and freedoms. What is achieved by the obfuscatory insistence on the political unknowability of capitalism, the ‘idiotic’ (to use a term explored by Curtis) insistence on sustaining the neoliberal project in the face of its own failure, and the reduction of all egalitarian ideals to the pursuit of equality of opportunity, is precisely the inhibition of any possible emergence of collective and democratic solutions to social problems. There is little point in denying that for most of our contributors and for this author, neoliberalism therefore presents itself as a problem to be overcome. In the dialogue between the issue editor and Mark Fisher, there is some tentative exploration of what such overcoming might involve. It is not really the task of a scholarly journal to plot revolution, however. What we hope is that this issue will at least contribute to a wider understanding of neoliberal culture in all its complexity, its possibility, and its limits.

## Notes

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