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Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture

by **William Callison and Zachary Manfredi** (eds)

Fordham University Press, 2020.

Nine Lives of Neoliberalism

by **Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian,
and Philip Mirowski** (eds)

Verso, 2020.

The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism

by **Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings,
and David Primrose** (eds)

SAGE Publications, 2018.

“Neoliberalism” is becoming an academic discipline. The books mentioned here are plausible proofs of this: some even talk about “studies of neoliberalism” that will soon become part of academic curricula. Its form of a “handbook” also alludes to a “discipline” that is stable enough to be presented didactically and to allow the reception and transmission of relevant knowledge even at the university level.

In fact, the books I am presenting are the evidence of a new, intensified interest in the phenomenon of “neoliberalism”. Truth be told, if we were to complete the list of those books that complexly thematize neoliberalism, then we should add some more books to the list. However, the ambition to *recapitulate* neoliberalism is manifested at very turbulent times: we are witnessing the eruption of an unreserved global pandemic that has added some new uncertainties to the old modes of uncertainty, and there is fear for the fate of capitalism, which could mean new regressions. Complaints that capitalism has lost its contours, that it is threatened with a collapse, are relatively common in renewed crises that are emerging (Gillian Tett 2019).

Such books are positioned in meaning abundant contexts. First, the obituaries to neoliberalism have already been written so many times, and it has been buried several times. There was one funeral announced loudly in 2007, when a deep crisis broke out, which was “great” by all its characteristics. Many used the time prefix “post” or “after”, this was when the world was placed in the context of “after neoliberalism”. However, neoliberalism was also buried during Brexit, or in 2016 when Donald Trump came to head the United States and announced an economic policy that many

interpreted as the end of globalization spirit and as an announcement of protectionism that was *bête noire* for “neoliberal” self-understanding. However, neoliberalism and Trump are very difficult to separate. Regardless of our interpretation of Trump’s economic-political moves, he not only continued the logic of “neoliberalism”, but also completed “neoliberalism” by adding new characteristics (for example Thomas Palley 2017). Predicting the end of neoliberalism remained only as unproven anticipation. Some economists (Dani Rodrik 2017) would be happy to get rid of the ballast of “neoliberalism” and think that it would be best to take it off the economic repertoire. Yet, it is impressive with its vitality and massiveness, and it keeps rising like a phoenix. Hence, the striking ironic title of one of the books presented here, “nine lives of neoliberalism” (alluding to cats which have seven or nine lives in different cultures, whichever is preferred).

Second, despite the wide interpretations of neoliberalism, there is still doubt about its existence. Moreover, we can note that although many socio-scientific disciplines recognize “neoliberalism” as a defining phenomenon that must be systematically treated, skepticism toward “neoliberalism” is most prevalent among economic theorists, especially those who adhere to orthodox patterns (the ironic Philipp Mirowski that appears as an editor as well in one of the books, but typically as a much-cited author, particularly emphasizes the ideologized myopia of those economists who persistently deny the existence of “neoliberalism” but emphasize the sacrosanct aspect of “correct economics” and draw utilitarian benefits out of it). As if there is a disciplinary gap: deep divergence between different disciplines reveals epistemological differences and makes cooperation between the same disciplines more difficult. By the way, it should be mentioned that the mentioned divergence is not politically conditioned, the rejection of “neoliberalism” “as a concept” can be recognized on both the left and the right of the theoretical scope (Bill Dunn 2015, Rajesh Venugopal 2015) (this can be countered by the fact that the “concept” also appeared in the discursive framework of the IMF (Jonathan D. Ostry, Prakash Loungani, and Davide Furceri 2016), although not as an official term).

The agnostic attitude regarding the (in) existence of neoliberalism can be expressed in different ways. For example, it can be stated that “neoliberalism” lacks subjects because only a few would proclaim themselves as “I am a neoliberal” (although this sometimes does happen, but relatively rarely, Sam Bowman 2016). If a subjective interpretation is fundamental for accepting a phenomenon, then “neoliberalism” can either not be identified, or is identified only by those who use “neoliberalism” as a critical organon against the existing tendencies of capitalism. This would then mean that “neoliberalism” does not have “self-awareness”; the representatives who are often attacked would like to be free from characterization, or a negative stigma that often goes hand in hand with the term “neoliberalism”.

Furthermore, it can be argued that “neoliberalism” is deficient in terms of objectivity and analysis. This, too, raises numerous issues and makes “neoliberalism” a real battlefield that provokes many (though rarely direct) conflicts. Those who are interested in criticizing refer to “neoliberalism” as a genuine “political project” (David Harvey 2020) as a political drive that covers up the economic sphere. In contrast, other theorists who oppose the “concept” of neoliberalism blame the critics of the discussed

phenomenon for introducing a “surplus” of politics into analyses and for losing the objectivity sharpness. In other words, they believe that “neoliberalism” obscures objectivity and prevents access to empirically secured data that is crucial for economics. The postulated axioms of those who advocate “neoliberalism” hinder the path to analytical scientific theory. In other words, “neoliberalism” as a critical tool shows deficits regarding analysis: its representatives are fascinated by the idea of criticism and favor critical knowledge but develop arguments based on deductive and axiomatic principles that do not allow the affirmation of the basic principles of analysis. Finally, different definitions of neoliberalism (deregulation, privatization, “pro-markets”, “pro-property rights”, “pro-growth”, “individualism”, “empiricism and open-mindedness”, “globalism in outlook”, “optimism about the future”, “focusing on changing the world for the better”, *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*, p. 24) do not allow a sufficiently rigorous notion of “neoliberalism” to be constructed, which could be theoretically legitimate. Simply, the fluidity of the definition of “neoliberalism” makes it impossible to define the “concept” concisely enough, so one can get the impression that “neoliberalism” is a metaframe for various phenomena that are addressed as “problematic” from a critical point of view. In addition, “neoliberalism” relates to very different phenomena (“economic liberalization”, “fiscal austerity”, etc.), to different historical sequences (Thatcher, Trump, for example). Under these circumstances, the “concept” of neoliberalism does not meet the criteria of scientific knowledge; we should mention the well-known criterion of falsification, the same concept cannot be subordinated to the logic of falsification. “Neoliberalism” is, as some critics say, not a concept but an expression of mere dissatisfaction without a theoretical basis.

Finally, “neoliberalism” is criticized for its attribute “neo”, being only an artificial intervention in the construction of liberalism; it would be quite enough just to derive the constitutive significance of the market from the liberal paradigm as the rational economics will be satisfied with the reference to the market. That is, economics can operationalize market categories; it may even introduce the elements of behavioral economics, cognitive sciences, psychology (bounded rationality), etc. but invoking “neoliberalism” is unnecessary as well as harmful.

We should attempt to reply to these accusations. First of all, the emphasis put on the rigor is certainly a good point given to certain scientific virtues, but its affirmation as an absolute measure can be a double-edged sword. Nobel laureate George Akerlof recently spoke of a “hardness bias” that is deeply embedded in economic discourse, but which can act as a shield against new ideas. “Hardness bias” also acts as blocking energy for “challenging of existing paradigms” (George Akerlof 2020). Namely, it should not be forgotten that “new idea is less well-formulated than ... well-established ideas and therefore rejected for lack of rigor” (Bruno Frey 2003).

The authors presented here are looking for “new ideas”, even with the risk of less rigor. Their articles can also be read as replicas of the above-mentioned, unsystematically derived criticism of the legitimacy of “neoliberalism”. This is not a search for a scholastic definition of neoliberalism in the sense of definitive formulation, but an attempt to articulate multidimensional manifestations of “neoliberalism” in iterative approaches. Of course, the authors and editors of these books are aware of the criticisms that have been directed at them, too, regarding the “inadequate” existence of

their subject of research, namely, “neoliberalism”. All these books are voluminous (*The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*, for example, 717 pages long); their volume and heterogeneity of topics already suggest that the subject of “neoliberalism” still exists despite all the opposing assessments and that it deserves full attention. In other words, these books offer us a consideration of a performative effect: “neoliberalism” is relevant for the understanding of substantial tendencies of today’s era. However, many of the authors who have contributed to these books approach the definition of “neoliberalism” and some of them think that there are certain agencies behind “neoliberalism” which, in the conflict between the welfare state and the logic of capital, had ambitions to regain dilapidated power. Others simply talk about neoliberalism “as a systematic attack on the welfare state” (Palley 2005, 2020). There are also those who treat the “neoliberal project” that rudimentarily emerged in Vienna in the 1920s as a primordial project of globalization against “totalitarian dangers”, while others think that we can understand “neoliberalism” as a compressive philosophy with elements of an “epistemological order” harnessed for political purposes, which implies that the market proves to be “epistemic truth”.

I am now trying to reconstruct the possible answers to the above given criticisms. They say that the fluctuating meanings of “neoliberalism” are not irrefutable proof of its illegitimacy. It is no coincidence that one of the books presented here bears a title that refers to a genetic “mutation” (*Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*). We have witnessed that “neoliberalism” has nine lives and at the same time it is in the form of a constant metamorphosis: for example, it can be said that Bill Clinton embodied “progressive neoliberalism” (Nancy Fraser 2017), with a synthesis of the process of deregulation and identity politics, or so it can be said that Trump represented “regressive neoliberalism” with transformed “neoliberalism” elements. In fact, the genesis of “neoliberalism”, which appears as a separate topic in all these books and which is related to the 1930s, shows that “neoliberalism” in itself has been a kind of “mutant” from the very beginning. Some theoreticians define the range of this mutation as broader or narrower compared to the “original liberalism”, but they all recognize the shift of “neoliberalism” with respect to the original political and economic liberalism (already mentioned here, Mirowski, in the famous book (Philipp Mirowski 2013) tunes “neoliberalism” as a distance from enlightenment). This is quite understandable because “neoliberalism” (at least in terms of the ideological germ) arises as an attempt to overcome the perceived crisis in the mentioned period and as an effort to renew the foundations of liberalism but in a significantly changed historical context. Thus, the fact that there is a deeply imprinted dynamism in “neoliberalism” does not deprive him of the right to scientific-theoretical legitimacy, that “neoliberalism” is subject to change, and that different meanings are attached to it (military, financial, even protectionist) does not speak a priori against it. Liberalism itself has experienced numerous transformations and recompositions, that is, it has not remained the same despite the (relative) consistency of its core. Just as capitalism is structurally dynamic, so “neoliberalism” adapts to the same dynamics, that is, it draws its metamorphoses from the dynamics of capitalism.

Furthermore, “neoliberalism” is indeed a “contested” concept with noticeable confrontational contents. Those who use the term in question mostly (not always) try

to form a certain critique in terms of existing trends or the mode of domination in the modern world. However, that does not mean that “neoliberalism” lacks explanatory aspects, that it does not put important moments in the limelight. The fact that users-theorists of the phenomenon of “neoliberalism” have in mind a critical argumentation with today’s capitalism (either for reform or something else, it does not matter here) does not prevent the integration of scientific criteria into argumentation. If the scope of criticism would prevent the possibility of providing an explanation, then economic discourse would indeed move dangerously away from the normative ideals of the Enlightenment.

The authors who are represented in these books and who base their criticism on “neoliberalism” know that this term is used by media as well, which does not contribute to its precision and analytical aspect. They also know that there is an exoteric use of the term with its shallow demonization and emphasis. Undoubtedly, “neoliberalism” is suitable for expansive and imprecise use. That is why books like these are needed, to introduce clear meaning in the contexts of this subject and provide guidance in terms of orientation.

The critics of those who use the term “neoliberalism” must realize that the same theoretical orientations should not be modeled too quickly as “anti-markets” or put into the framework of “anti-competitiveness”. This is often the reason why the discourse is determined by unverified prejudices. Proponents of economic liberalism often leave all the meanings of “neoliberalism” as they assume that critics of “neoliberalism” unreflectively condemn the market as a specific place for “voluntary exchange” and the basis for “a self-organizing social system”. The arguments that economic discourse should recognize “what markets can - and cannot-do” (Samuel Bowles 1991), that “markets have inherent limits” (John O’Neill 1998), that “markets are non-neutral”, or that markets can be linked to different modalities of social constructions which implies certain domination, does not mean abstract denial of the market, but its contextualization. Critics of “neoliberalism” do not criticize the market *per se*, but claim that there is always a certain interpretation of the “market”, or rather they criticize the “neoliberal” interpretation of the market. It is even explicitly stated that “postulates of a free market are not neoliberal *per se*” (*Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*). They do not criticize the market (not even the often mentioned “market fundamentalism”) as much as a certain (“neoliberal”) combination of market and state, with the state mimetically adopting certain market norms in terms of evaluation and benchmarking. The market is always determined by “prerequisites it cannot guarantee itself” (*ibid.*). “Neoliberalism” does not project the spontaneity of a market that autopoietically reproduces itself; on the contrary, “neoliberalism” is inconceivable without intervention. Therefore, the research in this book leads us to the conceptualization and phenomenology of amalgam between the market as a social construction and the state that always interprets market codes, normalizes market processes, but never non-neutrally.

These authors want “conceptual heuristics” (William Callison and Zachary Manfredi, *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, p. 10), they do not want to present “neoliberalism” as “policy orthodoxy” as much as an “approach to policy problems” (Quinn Slobodian, Dieter Plehwe, *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, p. 6). If I may use a witty methodological remark, I would say then that Occam’s

destruction is explicitly rejected here as the parsimony of argumentation (Giandomenica Becchio 2020). One feature that these books share is the refusal to simplify the definition of “neoliberalism”. On the contrary, they insist that “neoliberalism” cannot be imagined as a “single” or “readymade” blueprint, which a careless and too abstract critique would otherwise assume. The authors of these articles, the editors, want to articulate, instead of “parsimony”, the *complexity* that characterizes the manifestation of the dynamics of “neoliberalism” (Julia Elyachar, Leslie Salzinger).

I would like now to write about the books separately. Namely, even though they have a strong common denominator, they still differ in their scope and structure. The book *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture* has ten authors and aims at introducing us to the current constellation, that is, to the situation of “mutate forms”, “particular, material, historical, and practical constitution of neoliberalism”. Mutations here imply a revitalization that renewed “neoliberalism” in the second decade of the 21st century. The conceptualization of “neoliberalism” should follow the paths of the same revitalization (Wendy Brown). However, the authors are less oriented towards school definitions; they are interested in historical transformations, as well as institutional shifts. In doing so, the editors intentionally want to break down the entrenched prejudices about “neoliberalism” that prejudice the often mentioned dichotomies such as “neoliberalism” *versus* (economic) populism, neoliberalism *versus* conservatism. The book arouses interest also because it opens the door to economic-anthropological debates, and thus opens insufficiently studied dimensions of “neoliberalism”. At the same time, it sheds light on regional, local contexts. It explains the dynamics of identity with economic consequences.

There is genealogical research here as well. For example, Sören Brandes (see the article, *The Market’s People: Milton Friedman and the Making of Neoliberal Populism in Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, pp. 61-66) shows by the example of the said Nobel Prize winner how “neoliberalism” reached mass public and how it established a common sense. The deconstructive significance stems from the fact that it demonstrates a well-chosen example of how the whole “endeavor” was directed towards gaining masses in terms of creating hegemonic patterns. Melinda Cooper shows bipolar reactions to fiscal austerity (especially during the crisis) and breaks down the prejudice that opposition to austerity as an economic-disciplining mechanism represented only the privileges of the disgruntled left. The fact that the right has been inclined to accept fiscal expansionism in many contexts shows that the situation is much more complicated than the often-presented one. Dieter Plehwe and Quinn Slobodian also add notes of deconstruction to existing arguments: against the oft-repeated claim that the European Union is constitutively determined by moments of “neoliberalism”, they show a strong “neoliberal” current that opposes the EU, especially post-national aspirations. Part of this process is to broaden the horizons of “neoliberal” authors, namely, a series of lesser-known theorists appear here, actors who are not in the foreground but are important for understanding the phenomenon. Michel Feher deals with Europe and its neoliberal horizons: he strongly emphasizes the structural discrepancy that exists between Friedrich Hayek’s “ideological projections” and others, as a detailed analysis of “financialization” proves it. There is also mentioning of the shifts between the public and private spheres (Megan Moodie and Lisa Rofel),

the neoliberalization of the university (Christopher Newfield) and the book ends with a discussion about “absolute capitalism” (Balibar) which apparently links “neoliberalism” to the absolutization of capitalism.

The book *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* consists of four parts. The first part discusses “neoliberal science”, alluding to the fact that “neoliberalism” achieves hegemony through the transmission and control of knowledge. Indeed: “neoliberal” authors (Hayek, for sure) concentrate strongly on the analysis of science, and this is by no means a trivial fact. I should quote: “Neoliberalism was thus born out of a collision between the controversial importation of the methods and authority of the experimental sciences into politics on the one hand, and the acknowledgment of the social and political conditions for the discovery and justification of knowledge on the other” (Martin Bedelleem). This way, an analysis of the disavowal of macro-planning emerged: appropriate philosophy and sociology have harnessed their forces to make planning meaningless and hand it over to corporations as the only locus that can legitimately plan their moves to enter the market. This is followed by an analysis of Nobel laureate George Stigler’s position regarding the “market of ideas” (Edward Nik-Khah). Stigler remained on the margins of various debates about neoliberalism, but this article corrects that. Quinn Slobodian writes about an intriguing question for neoliberals, the question of intellectual property; the topic is not technical in its nature but affects the center of “neoliberal” projections (how, for example, can patent law be integrated into “neoliberal” discourse, and is this even possible?).

The second part of the book is entitled “Neoliberal Subjectivity beyond Homo Economicus”. The meaning of the chapter is to deconstruct the prejudice that the figure of *homo economicus* can be equalized with the mode of subjectivity in “neoliberalism”. Melinda Cooper shows this in her analysis of the connection between “neoliberalism” and “family values”. Why do “neoliberals” who advocate a smooth market order accept and affirm “non-contractual obligations”? How does “neoliberalism” cope with “family responsibility”? Dieter Plehwe writes about how “neoliberalism” transforms Schumpeter’s figures of entrepreneurs, and proves that Ludwig von Mises, unnoticed in this perspective, contributed to the rise of the figure in question. It should be noted, particularly from the aspect of economic perspective, that there is occurrence of a topic presenting behavioral economics (Rüdiger Graf is the author: he focuses on the lesser-known Günter Schmolders). This orientation showed loopholes in the figure of a homo economicus, especially after the crisis in 2007 when similar research gained importance; but what is the relationship of behavioral economics and “neoliberalism”?

The third part of the book destroys the equality between Washington-consensus and “neoliberalism”. Hagen Schulz-Forberg starts the chapter with an analytical evocation of the transnational elements of early neoliberalism from the 1930s. Matthias Schmelzer presents relevant discussions after Breton Woods. Philipp Mirowski, one of the most important actors in discussions about “neoliberalism”, broadly treats the “neoliberal” context of the Nobel Prize: it is probably one of the most detailed works on the Nobel prize (“the neoliberal ersatz prize”) - in a critical perspective, that is, for a critical sociology of economics.

In the fourth part, we read about “neoliberalism” “beyond Thatcher and Reagan”. It begins with the globalization of think tanks such as Atlas network (Marie-

Laure Djelic and Reza Mousavi). Afterward, a similar procedure is implemented with think thank networks in Germany.

The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism is the most difficult one to present. It is even impossible to remember all the topics circulating in this book. Simply put, “neoliberalism” relates to all the important issues of today. It is a huge book with seven sections (Perspectives, Sources, Variations and Diffusions, The State, Social and Economic Restructuring, Cultural Dimensions, Neoliberalism and Beyond), 48 parts and a large number of authors. Some authors who appear in other books presented here, such as Melinda Cooper or Dieter Plehwe, have also taken part here. If “neoliberalism” is interpreted as “ideational collective”, as the interpreters who treat “neoliberal” reality in the perspective of ideas do, then we can paraphrase that there is a kind of “ideational collective” and those who systematically deal with “neoliberalism”. It is a genuine transdisciplinary project that provides insights into all fragments of “neoliberalism”. This is how historical discourses are classified, different approaches are developed, that is, “neoliberalism” is approached from several perspectives.

The same approach is taken for the present, and the selected topics are referred to with regard to the dynamics of the present. The book even suggests that the repertoire of “neoliberal” topics will expand in the future. “Neoliberalism” is constantly renewing itself, even with its own expansion. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that it got involved in the crises, although the publishers of its death prematurely declared its disappearance from the scene. Yet, the utopia of “sustainable neoliberalism” is really a utopia; “neoliberalism” produces crises.

To sum up: the authors here share the intention to explain the resilience of neoliberalism and are happy to use biological metaphors (a cat with “nine lives”). Anyhow, after these analytically calibrated books, it is difficult to present “neoliberalism” as the result of a conspiratorial imagination, as it is difficult to claim that “neoliberalism” is used unreflectively. The books presented here provide all insights in one place, they satisfy all scientific needs, and represent the pinnacle of critical energy in relation to “neoliberalism” which, according to Dani Rodrik, marks “our age”, or which is, by other theorists much more critical than Rodrick, described as a “special era”. However, it is difficult to assume that it could encourage serious dialogue between those who classify themselves as critics of “neoliberalism” and those who are addressed as “neoliberals”. We remember the old example which certainly does not leave too much hope: the once impossible encounter (or practice of avoidance) between Myrdal and Hayek on the occasion of the Nobel Prize (otherwise described in detail in one of these books), and those who self-qualify as the bearers of a critique of “neoliberalism” would probably have a quick reaction to this lack of encounter: “admixture of science and politics”, deep epistemological and ontological divergences create such a discursive configuration that (for now) allows only simulation of pluralism.

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