

Neoliberalism Stretched Thin? Analytic Vagaries of an Indispensable Concept

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Harvey Shapiro's "reconsideration" of neoliberalism in higher education provides a valuable contribution, insofar as going beyond Foucault's influential characterization enables us to better understand the shifting institutional ground upon which we stand. The core of his argument, following Wendy Brown,¹ is that Foucault rightly identifies the conception of human being as *homo oeconomicus* at the core of the neoliberal "order of reason." Foucault fails, however, to appreciate (or perhaps anticipate) that within this order, demands of economic growth actually override and relativize the individual's pursuit of their own interests. The subject is transformed from an originator and underwriter of self-interests into a means or medium for achieving the interests of the neoliberal economic order—that is, they are reduced to human capital. This corrective insight closes the gap between Foucault's analysis and the pervasive empirical fact that self-interest is constantly and readily sacrificed within allegedly neoliberal contexts where, in this view, individuals are "subjectified habitually" by imperatives of self-investment and self-provision.

To the extent that individuals in higher education are motivated by institutional imperatives of efficiency which efface their personal values, and that students, faculty and staff members alike accept arrangements antithetical to their self-interest, going "beyond Foucault" is analytically essential for understanding our present situation. Shapiro agrees with Brown that Foucault under-emphasizes neoliberalism's eclipse of "the political," of *homo politicus*, the subject who participates on equal terms

with others to determine the aims and the frames of a common existence. Indeed, the ways in which political (and especially democratic) goals and values have been “economized,” reinterpreted in terms of the metaphor of the market, is perhaps the essential insight that unifies critical scholarship on neoliberalism today.²

A number of scholars have raised doubts as to the descriptive accuracy and practical utility of the concept of neoliberalism, pointing out how widely it has been deployed for disparate purposes across a growing number of disciplines and fields.³ My own view is that, despite promiscuous uses and frequent abuses, we simply cannot do without the concept of neoliberalism (or something much like it) if we are to understand and ultimately influence the unfolding of contemporary post-industrial capitalist societies.⁴ Nevertheless, I agree with the critics of neoliberalism’s critics that there are important limitations to the type of critique that Shapiro and others put forward. These are the focus in the remainder of this article.

The first concern is with the general absence, in defining neoliberalism, of the “neoliberals” themselves. This could result from the use of Foucault as a starting point, as he offers a thoroughly *externalist* critique. A more adequate account would include an *internal* perspective on the movement, which requires engagement with its proponents—with their texts, their words, their ideas. We are in danger of misunderstanding any social phenomenon when we neglect to engage it on its own terms. This is admittedly difficult to do in the case of neoliberals, as it’s a designation almost no one self applies. When we do directly engage neoliberalism’s canonical figures, as identified by the critics, through their own words (Hayek and Friedman, and others), we better grasp the *moral logic* underlying the neoliberal “order of reason.” This is essential to understanding the ideology’s power. While an in-depth analysis would be out of place here, it

will suffice to indicate the ways that neoliberalism developed as a response to fundamental contradictions inherent in classical liberalism. Proponents sought to resolve, dissolve or transcend these contradictions—between ideals of freedom and equality, concepts of public and private—through appropriation of the metaphor of the free market as a master principle. Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” is elevated to the position of magical prime mover *because* it is imagined to overcome the opposition between private and public interests, freedom and equality, within a unified theory. This background is key to understanding economic rationality’s colonization of the political. Furthermore, without an alternative that meets and, ideally, supersedes this functional achievement, it is unlikely that scholarly assaults on the neoliberal order of reason will have any practical effect.

The second concern is related to the first. When we move from the actual intellectual content advanced by proponents of the neoliberal vision to abstract talk of *habitus* and “subjectification,” there is a great risk of falling into a pseudo-theological, Manichean vision of social life as defined by vague and irresistible forces. Brown describes neoliberalism as “ubiquitous and omnipresent, yet disunified and non-identical with itself.” Such “everywhere and nowhere” talk suggests the analysis may beg the question. If neoliberalism is defined as everything and nothing, then it functions more as an article of faith and a catch all term for linking together complex dynamics that we (critics of neoliberalism) find unfortunate from a social perspective. It becomes a catch all for that which we disapprove, defined *ad hoc* via juxtaposition to all that we wish we had more of, or that we feel we have lost.

This danger is apparent, I think, in Shapiro’s discussion of actual examples from contemporary university life. The allocation of conference travel funds by a faculty committee does not strike me as novel. Deliberation about the use of collective resources based on unit goals

does not, on its face, require neoliberal interpretation. Shapiro suggests that this is an example of “responsibilization” in that it contrasts with other approaches that would depend on role hierarchies and/or value faculty members professional autonomy as individuals. But could this same phenomena be just as well interpreted as an example of politics in action, of negotiation in the service of achieving individual and group interests? A more detailed description of the committee’s practices would perhaps make clearer the reasons that Shapiro finds this a compelling case. But it’s not obvious, on the face of things, that an interpretation in terms of neoliberalism is necessary or helpful in suggesting interventions or action for change. We might worry that the analysis falls victim to a philosophical version of the well-worn aphorism, “If all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail.” When neoliberalism is theorized as a pervasive and hegemonic force with a monolithic, coherent logic (e.g., as an “order of reason”), empirical data tend to be interpreted as instances rather than analyzed on the basis of alternatives. The former is a philosophical blind alley, the latter allows evaluation of available analysis on the basis of likely and actual consequences.

This brings us to a third and final concern regarding the implications of Shapiro’s analysis, namely issues of agency, hope and despair. Critical scholarship on neoliberalism expressly aims to challenge and ultimately change policies and practices. Yet such scholarship tends to be long on diagnosis and vanishingly short on both prescription and prognosis. Brown’s book is representative of this tendency when, in the final chapter, she acknowledges her analysis includes no strategy for change. She offers in its place reflections on the temptation to despair in the face of neoliberalism’s apparent inevitability. We should consider the possibility that our failure thus far is not despite but because of the analytic tools we have brought to bear.

In conclusion, Shapiro's critique has much to recommend it. Neoliberalism is a construct that names and organizes disparate phenomena in terms of a transformation of key, underlying social meanings. It is helpfully characterized as a "stealth revolution" within higher education contexts, in that these changes were well underway by the time they were noticed, much less have they been adequately negotiated. But the temptation to despair is also a function of such analysis, which in my view gives too much power to neoliberalism, reifying complex social processes under its rubric. Interpreting a wide range of disparate institutional practices and rhetorics in terms of a single, pervasive "force," à la Shapiro and Brown, tends to provide coherence while disabling insight for action.

Our institutional contexts are marked by nothing so much as internal contradictions. These settings are vectors where complex cultural forces intersect to shape and reshape a landscape itself constituted by layers of historical sedimentation. Theories of social change often focus on contradictions internal to and between competing discourses. I have argued here that failure to account for neoliberalism's functional achievements on its own terms, as articulated by its progenitors and proponents, obscures the sources of its power. On the other hand, neoliberalism as a grand explanatory framework, a "hegemonic force," may actually reinforce the phenomenon. Neoliberalism is positioned as a principle rather than a product of social forces—a "first cause" in the explanatory sense, an *a priori*. One reason for neoliberalism's appeal as a critical construct is that it construes the chaos of disparate contending phenomena to expressions of a single, coherent logic. Ironically, the light such analysis seemingly casts upon experience may come at a cost—coherence at the expense of effective strategies for challenge and change. The latter are most likely found in the ideology's shifting shadows, in cultural fissures and cracks. We should not settle for social critique that finds neoliberalism lurking around every corner, under every rock. Let us recognize the power of

this indispensable concept without losing sight of the actual ambiguities, the conflicting, heterogenous heritages and nascent alternatives that lend themselves to a different and better future.

1 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2016).

2 Michael Peters, *The Last Book of Postmodernism: Apocalyptic Thinking, Philosophy and Education in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

3 Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," *Studies in Contemporary International Development* 44, no. 2 (2009): 137-61; Stanley Fish, "Neoliberalism and Higher Education," *New York Times*, March 8, 2009.

4 David E. Meens, "Democratic Education versus Smithian Efficiency: Prospects for a Deweyan Ideal in the 'Neoliberal Age'," *Educational Theory* 66, no.1-2 (2016): 211-226.