

Perspectives on Neoliberalism for Human Service Professionals

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ABSTRACT This article provides an overview of recent perspectives on neoliberalism, which serve as a foundation for the assessment of neoliberalism's influence on human services practice. Conventionally, neoliberalism has been conceived of as an ideology, but more recent perspectives regard neoliberalism as an art of government, a thought collective, and an uneven but path-dependent process of regulatory development. We argue that these new perspectives have the potential to contribute to our critical capacity and open avenues for the analysis of contemporary transformations of public policy and its delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is a rather overblown notion that “has been used, usually by a certain kind of critic, to characterize everything from a particular brand of free-market political philosophy and a wide variety of innovations in public management to patterns and processes found in and across diverse political spaces and territories around the globe” (Dean 2014, 150). As a form of economic rationalism, neoliberalism affects human service professionals in their daily practice. In Australia, human service professionals most commonly encounter neoliberalism through the strictures placed on professional

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practice and service delivery and their work with service users by New Public Management (NPM), or market-oriented government policies aimed at making the public sector more efficient and cost effective. The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) report on poverty indicates that, in 2010, 52 percent of consumers on bridging benefits (temporary benefits) and 45 percent on parenting payments (for the principal caretaker of a dependent child) lived below the poverty line (ACOSS 2012). This article addresses some of the key issues raised by the discourse of neoliberalism and proposes that human service professionals' understanding of neoliberalism might be enhanced by thinking of it in terms of an art of government (drawing on the later Foucault), a thought collective (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), and an uneven, path-dependent process of regulatory development (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). We suggest ways in which these perspectives might contribute to a more innovative analysis and understanding of human services work that takes seriously the problem of the state.

LITERATURE REVIEW: NEOLIBERALISM'S INFLUENCE ON THE HUMAN SERVICES

There is much confusion over what neoliberalism is and how it differs from classical liberalism, which can also be referred to as economic conservatism. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) refers to the growth of neoliberalism as a "conservative revolution" (35), and prior treatments of neoliberal capitalism have seen it as a form of economic rationalism. Critique rooted in Marxism, such as that of David Harvey (1989, 2005), has been most influential in the critical discourse on liberal capitalism and the steady rate of economic growth, endless profits, and long-term capital accumulation underlying a healthy capitalist economic system. Neoliberalism, however, signals a change from free market economics resting on supply and demand to manipulated markets serving powerful vested interests.

CRITICISM OF NEOLIBERALISM

Given that the main target of postwar neoliberals has been the Keynesian welfare state, human service professionals (the term we use to collectively describe welfare workers of all ilk, including social workers) might be seen as an inevitable target of neoliberals bent on welfare reform. For the most

part, an unchallenged, hegemonic view of neoliberalism pervades the human services literature. Neoliberalism is blamed for the restructuring or dismantling of welfare services, financial stringency, punitive regulation, privatization, managerialism, austerity, and so on (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Garrett 2010, 2012; Wallace and Pease 2011; Penna and O'Brien 2013). Certainly neoliberalism has been a major force in the transformation of the welfare landscape. Sanford Schram (2012) believes it "is best understood as a re-envisioning of the relationship of the state to the market, granting greater leeway to markets to operate without government restrictions, while marketizing state programs so they themselves operate in market-compliant ways while getting clients to do the same" (67). Simply put, neoliberalism has led to services operating on a business rather than a nonprofit model, a reduced role for the state in direct welfare provision, privatized services, increased service-user choice and user-pay models, and intense competition for government-contracted services (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Garrett 2010, 2012; Wallace and Pease 2011; Lawler 2013).

Social work and social policy academics from the United Kingdom have been among the most vocal critics of neoliberalism and its effect on welfare reform. For example, Stanley Houston (2013) sees neoliberalism as a welfare ideology based on the standardization and commodification of services and organizational governance involving increasing modes of surveillance, pacification, and discipline of professional staff and service users alike. As a policy framework, it features populist notions of individual life planning, the personalization of welfare, and a growing tendency to psychologize human problems or see them in psychological terms and negate their societal basis. In short, for Houston (2013), neoliberalism "commodifies relations and negates social connectivity" (65) through individualized services. This places responsibility onto the individuals, families, and communities being served (responsibilization). Most crucially, neoliberal austerity measures have resulted in targeted, rather than universal, provision.

Paul Garrett (2010, 2012) highlights seven interconnected components of neoliberalism: the need to understand the relationship between neoliberalism and the embedded liberalism it sought to supplant or displace; that the neoliberal state is in fact interventionist in ensuring an institutional framework to support a competitive market for service providers and an active approach to public management despite its claims of free-market

orientation; the need to remain cognizant of the gap between existing neoliberalism and its theory and rhetoric; that a disturbing aspect of neoliberalism is its redistribution in favor of the rich; that neoliberalism's stringency and activation programs have led to insecurity and precariousness; that neoliberalism has led to a renewed and retrogressive faith in incarceration and what has been termed the "new punitiveness" (Garrett 2010, 340); and that neoliberalism has shape-shifting qualities and inherent contradictions because it needs to pragmatically adapt to different national settings. Garrett (2012) is particularly concerned about the shrinking state brought about by cutting jobs and services, welfare austerity measures within the public sector, and the increasing importance of private sector and large corporate providers in service provision; restrictive legislation regulating the social work and social care workforce, which seemed to further the neoliberal aspiration to erode the boundary between home and work and make value-based practice ever more difficult (Garrett 2007a, 2007b); and the increasing use of technology to monitor those deemed at risk, which compels practitioners to spend more time in front of computer screens and less time in face-to-face contact with service users (Garrett 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Garrett (2012) is especially wary of the political discourse of the broken society and moral underclass and the "effects of neoliberal competitiveness and inequality" (Finlayson 2010, 26). The problem, as he sees it, is "not the 'intrusive state but the intrusive economy'" (Finlayson 2010, 27), echoing Foucault's ideas on how neoliberalism exercises political power through the market economy.

Sue Penna and Martin O'Brien (2013) argue that social work's tendency to dismiss or demonize neoliberalism stems from its attack on the welfare state, but it is too simplistic to claim it totally rejects welfare and mutual support. It is better to interrogate how it reconstructs notions of individual independence, freedom, choice, and responsibility "*against* the social democratic principles of social justice, social planning and State intervention" (Penna and O'Brien 2013, 139) or even reinterprets those social concerns within the postwelfarist regime of the construction of markets, individual and collective obligation, and an enterprise culture.

Mimi Abramovitz (2012) highlights the contradictions of neoliberalism in the United States, where a theoretical downsizing of the state belies the reality of expanded state intervention. She emphasizes the punitive and controlling aspects of neoliberal processes and practices, borne from an ideological campaign based on economic, political, racial, and moral panic (see

also Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Abramovitz (2012) claims that the “U-turn in public policy” was assisted by “weakening the influence of social movements best positioned to resist the austerity program” and “restoring ‘patriarchal family values’ and . . . a color-blind social order to undo the gains of the women’s liberation and civil rights movements” (37–38). Services increasingly incorporate social control and correct poverty and unemployment through paternalistic, directive, and disciplinary approaches.

Clearly, most social work writers have a pessimistic view of neoliberalism’s influence on the human services and how it has substantively changed the way in which professionals fulfill their social mandate. Neoliberalism’s effect has been framed in terms of the loss of professional autonomy and institutional legitimacy arising from the backlash against welfare; a transfer of power from the hands of public service professionals to managers of public and private organizations; changes in state-held organizational and institutional legitimacy as a result of private organizations taking increasing power in a market-oriented human services environment, thus compromising professionals’ moral authority; use of contingency staff such as temporary staff or independent and self-employed practitioners; and changing forms of social-service delivery (Harris 1998, 1999, 2003, 2008; Dominelli 1999; Harlow 2003; Ferguson 2004; Findley and McCormack 2005; Jones 2005; Lorenz 2005; Baines 2006, 2008, 2010; McDonald 2007; Harris and Unwin 2009; Singh and Cowden 2009; Garrett 2010, 2013; Wallace and Pease 2011).

THE INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERALISM ON HUMAN SERVICES PROFESSIONALS

A number of UK studies have examined the influence of neoliberalism and managerialism, that is, the belief that professional managers are best able to manage human service organizations (Harris 1998, 1999, 2008; Carey 2007, 2008*a*, 2008*b*, 2009*a*, 2009*b*, 2011, 2013; Penna and O’Brien 2013). Malcolm Carey (2011) refers to contingency social work arising from the casualization of the human services workforce. While it allowed for greater flexibility to cater for diverse service-user needs, it brought new challenges, such as problems in building relationships with service users and carers, the need for training or experience among a more diverse care workforce, greater uncertainty and paradox, and reduced advocacy. How-

ever, it also brought greater continuity of care and a strong service ethos (see also Harris and McDonald 2000).

In the United States, Ray Woodcock (2012) sees neoliberalism as no lesser or greater an evil than other political philosophies with the potential to dominate society more generally. However, Sanford Schram and Basha Silverman (2011) take a more sinister view of how neoliberalism ensures compliance through the imposition of rewards and penalties. This has been accompanied by reductions in supportive services; cost shifting between national, state, and local governments; load shedding from the public to the private sectors; privatized services and government contracting with for-profit providers; and performance monitoring within a business-oriented model (Schram and Silverman 2011). In this environment, front-line workers have become corporate employees rather than professionals with a commitment to service. In short, neoliberalism has changed the form and function of human services work in contexts where there is “increasing tension between the focus on the individual and . . . change in the broader society” (Schram and Silverman 2011, 5–6). Schram and Silverman (2011) relate to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) idea of the paradox of inclusion, whereby the client is empowered to be included in a society that places him/her on the bottom, at the margin, and as a less-than-full citizen without respect or entitlement.

In the neoliberal environment, professional legitimacy is contingent on market compliance and, in any event, social work has always shown a preference for encouraging clients to be self-sufficient rather than making them subjects of the state. Schram and Silverman (2011) believe this is consistent with a continued differentiation between the deserving and undeserving poor. Categorizing those most likely to practice personal responsibility as deserving ensures that “moral instruction of a paternalistic sort has cast a long pall over the profession that continues today in a neoliberal guise” (12).

In Australia, where the term *economic rationalism* was first used to describe the influence of neoliberalism, John Wallace and Bob Pease (2011) claim that neoliberalism’s pervasive influence on the profession remains largely untested. Successive critiques of neoliberalism abound, from Pierre Bourdieu (1998) on increasing individualism and declining collectivism, to Megan Alessandrini (2002) on the market and state sector’s serious threat to civil society, to Zygmunt Bauman’s (2001) thesis of risk and uncertainty that Wallace and Pease (2011) note results from “the

loss of state-centered institutions; the moral blindness of unfettered market competition; the unbounded freedom given to capitalism; and a new form of interpersonal relationships founded on market individualism” (133). Marina Findley and John McCormack (2005) attribute tightened client eligibility criteria and expanded means testing, transfer of financial responsibility to individuals and families, and decreased stability in the labor market to the effects of neoliberalism. But, despite claims of the deleterious effects of neoliberalism on Australian social work and the human services, research on this topic in Australia is scarce (McDonald and Jones 2000; Healy 2002; Healy and Meagher 2004; Gray and McDonald 2006; McDonald 2006; McDonald and Chenoweth 2009). These international studies provide a highly pessimistic analysis of the way in which neoliberalism restricts professional autonomy and legitimacy, reintroduces the discriminative deserving/nondeserving distinction in deciding entitlements, reduces the state’s responsibility to care for its citizens through cutting back on and privatizing services, and thus transfers this responsibility onto individuals, families, and communities (Gray 2010, 2011).

RESISTING NEOLIBERALISM

A second group of researchers go beyond this pessimistic framework to identify possibilities of resistance. They offer a slightly more optimistic view, giving professionals agency even in harsh, restrictive, neoliberal environments. For example, in tracing the development of managerialism and its steady encroachment on the autonomy of frontline workers in the United Kingdom, John Harris (1998) argues they had “command over their time and, at the point of contact with service users, decided: how much time to give and how it was used; the frequency with which they would meet service users; the strategy to be adopted with people with whom they were working; and even, in some cases, whether they would provide a service at all” (Harris 1998, 850).

By working through the cracks, professionals can resist neoliberal managerialism by working alongside service users and carers, building new alliances, engaging in collective activity and political campaigning, and representing service-user interests despite strictures on their advocacy role (Ferguson 2013). This resistance is seen in small acts of resistance and refusal (Carey 2007; Singh and Cowden 2009; White 2009; Ferguson 2013),

suggesting that Michael Lipsky's (1980, 1984, 2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy is as relevant now as it ever was.

There have been other suggestions. Canadian feminist activist Judy Rebick (2009) sees participatory democracy, or the democratization of services through user control, as the best strategy for resisting neoliberalism. Likewise, Nancy Fraser (2009) seeks a "post-neoliberal anti-étatisme" (116) to bolster public services through participatory democracy. Another variation of this is Malcolm Carey and Victoria Foster's (2011) notion of deviant social work, defined as "small-scale acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception, or even sabotage that are typically hidden yet scattered throughout parts of the social work labour process" (576). However, while these individualistic forms of resistance to neoliberalism might improve the situation for specific clients, they do not target the root of neoliberally generated inequalities or contribute to positive change on a wider level. Furthermore, practitioners might well be wary of approaches that might be seen to contravene agency policies and procedures.

Whether advocating resistance at an individual level or collective action more broadly, these critical approaches still view neoliberalism mainly as a coherent, self-fulfilling ideology with an almost predictable trajectory: more cuts, harsher and more restrictive penalties, and even less autonomy for professionals. Although some have offered more empowering options, what is lacking is a governmentally inventive and politically effective practice focused on the state.

NEOLIBERALISM AND CLASSIC LIBERALISM

One of the latent issues in this literature concerns the relationship between neoliberalism, its post-1970s implementation, and classical liberalism. As we have seen, there is a tension in the above accounts of neoliberalism's effects within the human services. There are narratives that emphasize, on the one hand, the radical anti-statism of neoliberalism, interpreted as a rolling back of the state; a commitment to smaller government; and the privatization, corporatization, and contracting out of human services. On the other hand, there is a growing realization that this is often accompanied by greater levels of surveillance, discipline, and intervention into the lives of those citizens who require assistance. In contrast to a classical economic liberalism (popularly represented in Adam Smith's

invisible hand [1776/1812]), which regards the market as a quasi-natural domain that delivers beneficial outcomes if unencumbered by excessive governmental regulation, neoliberalism often appears to rely on an increasingly authoritarian legal and regulatory apparatus to construct the conditions of such a market. Moreover, classical political liberalism, derived from the Enlightenment more broadly, is associated with political humanism, respect for the individual, and concepts of rights. Again, neoliberalism seems to regard such values as often incurring additional state burdens and prefers instead a model of individual subjectivity based on the entrepreneur. In navigating this territory, neoliberalism can be said to be a preference for economic over political liberalism, while at the same time rejecting much of the naturalism of classical political liberalism and its doctrine of faith in small government *laissez-faire*.

To summarize, in this section we have conducted an initial survey of the literature on neoliberalism. A number of key challenges have emerged: neoliberalism as an active form of public management; an interventionist role for the state; the rhetoric-reality gap; neoliberalism's adaptability and shape-shifting nature; and increasing precarity, heightened inequality, and the reappropriation and redistribution of public and private resources to neoliberalism's punitive ends. At base, there is the apparent contradiction between the claims that neoliberalism is working through individual freedom and rolling back the state and its active appropriation of state resources and functions to institute a form of life based on a competitive market. This raises the fundamental question of the relationship between neoliberalism and classical versions of liberalism. The task of conceptualization and theorizing these problems in a way that helps guide human services knowledge and practice is not at all straightforward. Our further examination of neoliberalism offers a brief review of several theoretical perspectives that might open further paths for empirical analysis.

PERSPECTIVES ON NEOLIBERALISM

The perspectives offered here suggest the beginnings of an alternative to the depressingly disempowering, dominant position in contemporary critiques of neoliberalism. We begin by discussing the model derived from Marxist analyses of neoliberalism as an ideology as the standard critical account. We then move onto three themes from recent literature that displace, complement, or build upon this model. In the first, following Fou-

cault, neoliberalism becomes an art of government in the exercise of political sovereignty. In the second, neoliberalism is approached as a thought collective, or a movement of political intellectuals seeking to appropriate various forms of social and political organization in the name of the market and the principle of competition. Finally, the notion of path-dependent processes allows some degree of reconciliation between the historical contingency of the other two approaches and the enduring character of apparently discredited neoliberalism.

NEOLIBERALISM AS A THEORY OR IDEOLOGY

The dominant critical model of neoliberalism is derived from Marxism, which regards classical liberalism above all as a theory or ideology favoring certain forms of individual freedom and free markets. There are important differences between the free markets of classical liberalism, working on the model of demand and supply, and the manipulated markets characteristic of neoliberalism. David Harvey (2005), a key proponent of this critical view, argues that “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2).

The manipulation of markets and creation of markets “by state action if necessary,” where they “do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution)” is thus characteristic of neoliberalism (2005, 2). Classical liberals want markets to operate freely without state intervention; neoliberals want to create markets in areas where they do not exist, so powerful interests have a free hand in manipulating markets for profit.

The characterization of classical liberalism and neoliberalism in this critical view pivots on its ideational content, or even what a less circumspect approach would call ideology. Stuart Hall’s retrospective view on the policies of Margaret Thatcher’s government highlights its contradictory ideology:

Ideology is always contradictory. There is no single, integrated “ruling ideology”—a mistake we repeat again now in failing to distinguish between conservative and neoliberal repertoires. This is particularly damaging, since it

fatally obscures the deep antinomies, the ambivalences of and fault-lines in that most capacious of political traditions and “structures of feeling”—Liberalism: its progressive and regressive characteristics, its interweaving of and oscillations between contradictory strands (e.g., social conservatism and free market economics) or, in the colonial sphere particularly, the double faces of “liberal governmentality.” (Hall 2011, 713)

Here, Stuart Hall (2011) reveals the confusion surrounding classical free-market, minimum-state-intervention liberalism and the conservative elements introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States that gave the state a pivotal role in advancing what became drastic cuts to and the privatization of public services through welfare reform. The subsequent demise of the welfare state led to public welfare policy centered on unemployment and stringent welfare-to-work measures aimed at activation or economic participation as the overriding imperative. The resultant neoliberal welfare policies came with stringent monitoring and surveillance aimed at moving people off welfare into work. As Schram (2012) notes: “Since the era of Reagan and Thatcher, the market-oriented ideology of neoliberalism has merged with a new paternalism for managing poverty, creating an intense focus on disciplining the poor to become market compliant in their behaviours” (67).

In various key versions of neoliberalism, such as those outlined above, the welfare state becomes the major target of critique because it is viewed as inefficient, overly bureaucratized, wasteful, costly, and undermining the competitiveness and enterprise necessary to advanced economies. However, these ideational aspects of neoliberalism need to be linked to its status as a form of intervention, as one of the key rationalities of contemporary liberal-democratic government that can only become effective when linked with the techniques, devices, and mechanisms that seek to implement its paternalistic aims, such as those constituting New Public Management (NPM). In short, the focus on the ideational content of neoliberalism and its contradictory form does not quite capture several crucial concerns for those working in contemporary human services, not least its disempowering effects on those who see themselves as agents of change wanting to achieve social justice outcomes for their clients. By directing attention to the rationalities and technologies by which neoliberalism seeks to accomplish its goals, the art of government perspective might lead to greater clarity about how we are governed neoliberally and may enable

us to address some of the issues preventing us from achieving just outcomes for our clients.

THE ART OF GOVERNMENT

Michel Foucault (2008) enhances our understanding of neoliberalism as a practical approach to governing, or what he calls an “art of government” (176). Foucault’s approach to neoliberalism is documented in his published lectures of 1979 (Foucault 2008). For Foucault, neoliberalism is less an economic theory of the market and more about the practical exercise of political sovereignty, characterized paradoxically by a fundamental mistrust of the state. He approaches neoliberalism as a method and technique for the rationalization of government, in which the market is both a site of veridiction, or of truth-production, and the basis for the legitimization of the state. Foucault makes these arguments through the recent history of liberal thought and a genealogy of anti-statism. He terms this mistrust of the state “state phobia” (Foucault 2008, 76) and offers a genealogy of radical anti-statism that was often manifested on the Left in his own time, especially in its characterization of the contemporary West German state as fascist. Foucault’s genealogy uncovers the significant postwar influence of the German Ordoliberalism, so named after the journal *Ordo*. In a fashion not dissimilar to that of Friedrich Hayek, Ordoliberalism viewed Nazism as a manifestation of an “antiliberal invariant” (Foucault 2008, 111), which summed up and expressed all the pathologies of state intervention, social planning, and economic protectionism. Nevertheless, joining conservative thinkers such as Carl Schmitt (Ptak 2009; Dean 2014), Ordoliberalism discerned the state’s role in ensuring the functioning of free markets, which relied upon preexistent structures within a particular social and economic order.

Foucault highlights the differences between German Ordoliberalism and the more influential neoliberalism of the Chicago School during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these differences are questions of heritage from classical liberalism. In Europe, classical liberalism was a moderating principle, a first means of containing the state that emerged in absolutist state administrative apparatuses. In the United States, liberalism underpinned its key founding documents as a polity, including the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (Foucault 2008). Liberalism legitimized rather than limited the state and could be viewed as giving rise to inter-

ventionist policies in the mid-twentieth century (hence, the identification of liberalism with progressive politics in the United States). American neoliberalism would come, however, to see the New Deal in the 1930s and the War on Poverty and Great Society programs of the 1960s as key examples of an inflated role of the state (Tribe 2009).

The common enemy for both US and German neoliberals was John Maynard Keynes's paradigm of social programs and economic interventionism, which uses fiscal policy and public expenditure as so-called macro-economic tools to combat unemployment and economic depression. If the United States inherited institutions, practices, and mind-sets shaped by eighteenth-century liberalism, then German Ordoliberalism would no longer be concerned with setting constitutional limits on the state in the name of the people and individual rights but with founding its legitimacy on a constructed rather than natural market and on legal frameworks and social and political interventions consistent with a market or enterprise society. In Germany after 1948, liberalism was "the founding and legitimizing principle of the state" (Foucault 2008, 217). At the core of Foucault's position is the idea that neoliberalism is based on a particular epistemology that views the market or economic order as simultaneously natural and cultivated. As Colin Gordon (1991) remarks in his seminal commentary, this is what makes neoliberalism a "prodigiously fertile problematic, a continuing vector of political invention" (18).

Thus, for Foucault, both liberalism and neoliberalism are not a withdrawal of the state but are ways to exercise political power through the market economy. While classical liberalism crowned sovereign individuals exchanging in the market and the invisible hand that worked through them to make a kind of exception to the juridical-political sovereignty of the state, neoliberalism deploys and manipulates the market and market-like rationalities to assess, measure, and decide state activity (see Tribe 2009). Shifting his focus from "effective mechanisms of power," Foucault examines the "self-consciousness of government" (Sennelart 2008, 387; see Gane 2008, 357) and is thus more interested in the reflective practice of government than in a purely empiricist understanding or description of government practices. He focuses on the way in which the individual under neoliberalism becomes a form of human capital: a sum total of inherited and acquired investments with the individual as a kind of enterprise (Foucault 2008). Through his notions of capital and enterprise, he brings the broader economic domains into the equation, linking his governmental analysis to his

earlier concerns with biopolitics by tracking the emergence of a politics of life called, by the prominent Ordoliberal Alexander von Rüstow, a vital politics (Foucault 2008; Gane 2008). In this new biopolitics, failure could be individualized—a consequence of the competition inherent in the enterprise society and, in this sense, a failure of individual entrepreneurship. Radical Foucauldians have drawn the implication that failure was pathologized and subjected to “new biopolitical techniques of control such as medicalisation, psychological reassignment, or punishment for individuals” (Venn 2010). If this were extended to a global scale, failure might be attributed to the underdevelopment of human capital or various political pathologies, such as failed or rogue states or regimes lacking transparency, good governance, and democratic institutions. Indeed, neoliberalism and its prescriptions have been applied in many regions of developing markets from Latin America in the 1970s to East Asia and the former Soviet countries in the 1990s.

In short, following Foucault, neoliberalism is a form of government that no longer naturalizes the free market as in classical liberalism but is an active approach to public management, often combining diverse governmental, biopolitical, and disciplinary regimes of regulation to reconfigure the social domain as a series of markets in services and expertise and a set of obligations between individual and community overseen by the state, what might be called a “post-welfarist regime of the social” (Dean 2010, 200). To take the example of the government of unemployment, employment services have been put out to competitive bid by government and are no longer delivered by public authorities, thus deliberately creating or expanding existing service markets supposedly in order to deliver efficiency and effectiveness. On the other hand, the unemployed, particularly those at risk of long-term unemployment, are treated less as citizens with welfare rights and more as users of services who need to be made job-ready by measures ranging from individual case management to work-based welfare schemes. There is thus both an active construction of markets in areas of previous public services and an intensification of the regulation of the agency and obligations of those to be governed. If classical liberalism imagined a government through the interests of those who were naturally free, neoliberalism increasingly seeks to govern by enforcing the putative obligations of those who missed out in the competitive game of constructed markets.

Foucault opens up a number of avenues for rethinking neoliberalism, acting as an antidote to the tendency among scholars and social commenta-

tors to use neoliberalism to describe everything from any market political economy, conservative public policy, and innovation in public management to types of society and their global processes of change. He demonstrates the virtue of confining the term to a relatively narrow group of schools of thought and intellectual and political movements and following their diverse effects. He advises his listeners to regard neoliberalism as a form of problematization of existing and possible forms of rule (Keynesian, the welfare state, and totalitarianism) and as a reflected practice of government, a methodology of governing, or an art of government. This art of government consists not only in rationalities that construct problems (notions of welfare dependency, social exclusion, etc.) in certain ways but also in technologies that would be employed to make them actionable (from individual case-management to risk technologies and workfare). For human service workers, regarding neoliberalism as an art of government means focusing on the local, contingent conditions of its emergence, the specific rationalities it employs, and, in particular, the kinds of technologies through which it operates. It means approaching neoliberalism not just as a political philosophy or an ideology, but also as a way of thinking about problems and rendering them actionable.

NEOLIBERALISM AS A THOUGHT COLLECTIVE

Foucault's reliance on the intellectual history of different schools of thought has been refined more recently by a group of intellectual historians, drawing on Ludwik Fleck, who have approached neoliberalism as a thought collective, or a group of thinkers engaged in a more or less coherent conversation with a strategic objective, that can be traced back to the meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society (an international organization that has played a militant role through the creation of think-tanks, grassroots movements, and groups within university departments concerned with the promotion of neoliberal policies) in Switzerland in 1949 (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Mirowski 2013). Neoliberalism from this perspective becomes a practical, contradictory, and divergent thought space of political intellectuals wanting to appropriate the powers of national governments and international bodies so as to institute a particular vision of society presented as a renovation of classical liberalism. Neoliberalism is a form of politically oriented action rather than a unified, coherent, and noncontradictory theoretical body of thought. As Max Weber ([1922] 1968) puts it, it is an action

that aims “to exert influence on the government of a political organization; especially at the appropriation, redistribution or allocation of the powers of government” (55). As such, neoliberalism is a form of political action aimed at appropriating the powers of government and other organizations, but with the paradoxical intention of limiting, dismantling, and restructuring the state to give greater freedom to markets and market-like forms of organization. The aim is to take over state powers to implement the conditions of so-called free markets. This led to Philip Mirowski’s (2009) depiction of neoliberalism as a system of “double truths” (440), preaching the language of freedom to the outside public while simultaneously internally seeking control of state apparatuses and key organizations (from universities to national and international nongovernmental bodies). It has one message for the public and a deliciously contrary one for the inner sanctum of the elect. In this view, neoliberalism is then less a contradictory ideology or philosophy than a construct of systems of double truths between, for example, constructivist and naturalistic conceptions of the market, democracy and the demand for constraints on it, deregulation and reregulation, claims concerning the limits of knowledge and programs for unfettered growth and welfare, free trade and the need for international regulation by international organizations, and, ultimately, the ideal of a free market and a strong state to enforce it. At the core of neoliberalism is the claim that no social science or other form of knowledge can approach the knowledge generated by the greatest information processor ever known to humankind: the market. Paradoxically, while they would preach the impossibility of a knowledge of society, and thus of social science, they would exempt themselves from their own radical skepticism.

As a thought collective, neoliberalism draws its strength from its problematization of the social, the welfare state, Keynesian macroeconomic management, and the accompanying public administration sphere. Combining these approaches, neoliberalism brings a different kind of government, which operates in diverse “sites of truth” accompanied by “a new application of power, and a new set of demands on [individual] conduct” (Gane 2008, 358). It brings new and different freedoms (Gane 2008), but equally new and different forms of power and regulation, and a new government of and by the state.

Perhaps political activists can learn from the experience of neoliberalism as a thought collective. So, too, can human service professionals. As a thought collective, human service professionals can act as specialist public

intellectuals engaged in political struggles by virtue of their access to specialized knowledge, not only of disadvantage, social problems, poverty, and so on but also of the kind of techniques and technologies of governing that they require to address them. Rather than being neoliberalism's victims, human services professionals are potentially contributors to, and key agents within, renewed arts of government. To approach neoliberalism as a thought collective is to address attention to its limited, historical nature and the specificity and plurality of the groups involved. It is no longer an inevitable, pernicious force that pervades all public and social policy and disempowers its agents, but can be rendered visible and pliable; cut down to a manageable and digestible size, neoliberalism can be studied, known, grappled with, and contested. At best, the thought collective model of neoliberalism teaches human service professionals that they too can form common purposes and, despite differences of position and internal argument, can act in solidarity with other social and political actors, including their clients, to appropriate the collective resources of the state and other organizations. This does not mean other powerful thought collectives will necessarily disappear; it simply means they cannot be contested effectively by resort only to local, privatized means. One lesson for activists is that they must be part of a larger political force for change that includes conventional political organizations, such as unions and political parties if they hope to oppose the injustices arising from the gross inequalities neoliberalism has wrought.

MARXISM REDUX: NEOLIBERALISM AS A PATH-DEPENDENT PROCESS

The key problem with earlier versions of Marxist approaches to neoliberalism is that they reduced it to an aspect of the development of capital accumulation and were unable to grasp the historical specificity of neoliberalism's various forms and the contexts in which they emerged. On the other hand, historical and genealogical analyses, such as those of Foucault and, to a lesser extent, the intellectual historians of thought collectives, are unable to account for the persistence of neoliberal policies and practices even after successive crises (the Global Financial Crisis from 2007 to 2008 and the continued debt crisis in Europe, to name only two of the most recent), even in the absence of explicit intentionality on the part of government or consensus among citizens. This is where the scholarly contributions of contemporary urban geographers and sociologists have proven helpful. Accepting that contemporary liberal government is a contingent and irre-

ducible assemblage of heterogeneous ideas, practices, and techniques (after Foucault and governmentality studies), Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner (2009) point to the uneven process of governmental or regulatory innovation, experimentation, application, and development under neoliberalism. From this uneven process, particular trajectories called path-dependencies emerge. The claim here is that, once implemented, neoliberal policies and practices can begin to follow necessary developmental frameworks. For Brenner et al. (2010), neoliberalism is a “rascal concept” (182) that, though pervasive, is empirically vague, has changing definitions, and is highly contested; disagreements stem from diverse “sources, expressions and implications of contemporary regulatory transformations” (182). Peck and colleagues (2009) view the recent global financial crisis both as a challenge to, and failure of, neoliberal governance; while Brenner et al. (2010) propose that neoliberalism takes a kind of “zombie” form after the crisis, remaining a “variegated, geographically uneven and path-dependent process . . . [of] regulatory experimentation; inter-jurisdictional policy transfer; and the formation of transnational rule-regimes” (327; see also Peck 2010).

Peck, Theodore, and Brenner observe how neoliberalism operates in different national and international contexts, preparing itself for, and capitalizing on, crisis and flexibly mutating and adapting through each subsequent crisis, in much the same way that Abramowitz (2012) does in her analysis of neoliberalism’s influence on the welfare state (see also Gray and Webb 2013). Neoliberalism’s path-dependency occurs at the intersection of a the governmental aspirations of the members of that thought collective within definitive regimes of national and international government, punctuated by catastrophic events and crises that nonetheless provide the means for its further innovation, elaboration, and development. In this respect, from their sophisticated rereading of Marxist political economy perspective, the scholars who promote the path-dependent theory of neoliberalism offer a correction to and a continuation of the Foucauldian emphasis on locality and contingency. In this sense, their work could be used to derive what Bob Jessop (2011) calls another Foucault effect, which would continue to view the state as a crucial site for the institutional integration of power relations, particularly those in favor of certain forms of capital accumulation.

The idea of specific path-dependencies in different national and international contexts means professional knowledge has to be able to analyze the history of these different contexts, organizational locales, and struc-

tures and examine how neoliberal reform came to be inscribed in the institutional practices with which human service professionals and their respective professions are confronted. The persistence of neoliberal pathways reminds us that what appears today as necessary and inevitable grew out of contingent struggles and a “macro” view of neoliberalism need not be disempowering and cast its agents and clients as victims of an oppressive system. On the other hand, it also confirms that policies are related to the structural character of economic development within varieties of capitalism.

CONCLUSION

We can see how these three perspectives might enhance our understanding of the workings of neoliberalism. While Foucault emphasizes the sense in which neoliberalism is an active approach to public management and governance, the thought collective viewpoint sees it as a form of politically oriented action. The problems arising from the contradictory nature of neoliberalism become more intelligible when viewed as a reflective form of political and governmental action than as a theory or an ideology organized by its own oppressive coherence. Here Foucault’s observation of the neoliberal view of the market as at once natural and constructed and Mirowski’s (2009) notion of a system of double truths are key starting points. Both of these perspectives view neoliberalism as vying for control of state powers to implement forms of life, despite neoliberalism’s explicit anti-statist claims. Anti-statism facilitated neoliberal reform but did not exhaust it. The existence of a strong and often authoritarian state with a promotion of a free market no longer appears as a paradox. Finally, the simultaneous adaptability and apparent immutability of neoliberalism is addressed when we combine an analysis of its specific and contingent historical emergence in different national and international contexts, found in both the art of government and thought collective perspectives, with the idea that, once inscribed within governmental practices and rationalities, neoliberalism can, as it were, take a life of its own. Once so embedded, it develops along path-dependent lines that seem relatively impervious to, and often thrive from, its own crises and failures.

David Harvey (2011) urges neoliberalism’s opponents to “constructively rebel” to stem back the tide of “endless compound growth through endless capital accumulation,” seeing this as “the political necessity of our times”

(277). However, beyond small pockets of resistance, there is no evidence of a collective will of human service workers to stem the tide of neoliberalism. As Schram (2012) notes, qualified social workers with MSW degrees have long flown the coop of public welfare, opting for psychotherapeutic and private practice. Harry Specht and Mark Courtney's (1995) "unfaithful angels," with their excessive trust in individualistic solutions to social problems, have abandoned their mission. Instead, many social workers can be found doing workforce development (through activation programs) to help vulnerable women and men fit into poorly paid jobs. The key government agency in Australia's welfare-to-work program is one of the largest employers of trained social workers.

However skeptical one might be of the pernicious effects of neoliberalism, the state is important, and perspectives such as those presented here are needed to increase the diagnostic and analytic capabilities of professional knowledge and experience. These perspectives show not only that the state is important but how it is important, despite the limits, challenges, and opportunities presented by neoliberalism. Working within the state need not necessarily mean blind complicity with its policies and practices. As Lipsky (1980, 1984, 2010) and Schram (2012) remind us, human service professionals are constantly working for and against the state simultaneously, trying to reap the best it has to offer for their clients, while seeking to minimize its harshest effects. They constantly seek to invent new ways of practicing their profession in collaboration with their clients and other social and political actors and agents. The perspectives we have presented open the possibility for a new boldness, a new willingness for political contestation at a thought collective level, and a new governmental invention with constant room for resistance.

NOTE

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