COMMENT

Neo-liberalism: Dominant but dead

Neil Smith

Some years ago Jürgen Habermas (1991) diagnosed modernism as dominant but dead. Neo-liberalism may still be in its youth, having come to fruition only after the 1970s, but it seems reasonable to conclude that neo-liberalism too is “dominant but dead.” The ferment of new ideas, however much they were simultaneously recycled axia from the earlier liberal tradition, reached its peak in the 1980s. We are likely to come to recognize that the anti-globalization uprisings of Seattle and Genoa and Quebec, among others, together with the powerful trenchant recentering of power in the national (US) state in reaction to 11 September 2001, brought neo-liberal innovation (if not neo-liberalism itself) to a grinding halt. Today we are not so much seeing new neo-liberal ventures as a filling in of the commercial, institutional, and geographical interstices of that overall project. As national states bale out indebted banks, there are even signs that the entire project is crumbling.

In this respect, there is a lot in John Clarke’s piece to agree with, indeed a lot that the vigilantly generous Clarke also says that echoes others and may not, as he indicates, be especially new. I am delighted to be asked to engage with this piece and take John at his word about having a conversation. I have no quibble at all with the idea of neo-liberalism as conceptually “omnipresent,” “omnipotent,” and “promiscuous,”

qualified as each of these descriptors is. Further, he is undoubtedly correct that local instances of neo-liberalism vary widely, that neo-liberalism changes with time and has no basaltic core, and that the language of neo-liberalism has become *pro forma* to the point of eroding its critical edge. Only a straw-figure portrait of neo-liberalism could really deny any of these contentions, and so in that sense I do not see Clarke’s article as controversial at all. On the other hand, far more contentious indeed is the suggestion that we should do away with the idea of neo-liberalism—try “living without neo-liberalism.” What are the politics of this move?

As a way of tackling this question, let me raise two symptomatic silences in the article. The first is history, the second political opposition. Although he is strenuous in rejecting any rigid omnipresence to neo-liberalism, Clarke’s largely discursive engagement levers itself on the continued presence of just such a discourse, and although insisting on the mutability of neo-liberalism, he is just as strenuous in avoiding anything like an historical perspective on neo-liberalism. This is important because of course if one does not just take a time-slice through what may or may not be considered neo-liberal, then the mutability of that idea is inbuilt and does not need to be asserted. One of the conundrums about neo-liberalism, in whichever vis-

age, is that it is so conservative, and although this may seem a contradiction—liberalism versus conservatism—in Britain and the United States, in Latin America, where opponents of neo-liberalism insisted on the name as early as the 1970s (taking self-avowed neo-liberals such as von Hayek and Friedman at their word), the idea that liberalism has been conservative since at least the nineteenth century is conventional wisdom (Smith 2005). Neo-liberalism is neither inevitable nor natural, hence the lack of omnipotence; it is as much a class project as was its eighteenth-century liberal progenitor emanating from that century's and subsequent bourgeois revolutions. As a specific moment of capital accumulation and all its entailments, neo-liberalism re-centers the fundamental cultural and political relations and social institutions of the market, private property, and possessive individualism. I accept Clarke's inclusion of efficiency and authority—but among other historical differences, crucially, it does so this time round as a global rather than national class project. It is no accident that the idea of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003; Perelman 2000)—a historical rethinking of "primitive accumulation"—emerges in the neo-liberal era. That neo-liberal discourse is a cobbled-together assemblage as Clarke suggests is self-evident, but that should not blind us to the social interests it is assembled to serve.

Clarke's account, by contrast, sees "something troubling" about the "central and problematic character of the economic" in such historical analyses, preferring a "Foucauldian analytic of governmentality" in which "sites" and "technologies" of administration, management, and power displace "the economic" into a discursive construction of "governmental work." Whatever the merits and lacunae of Foucault on governmentality—for myself, I think it registers much too narrow a reading of Foucault—this discursive construction of the problem poses far too abrupt a binary. If we ask what work this binary does, it is apparent that one of the results of eschewing a constitutive economics to neo-liberalism is an explicit blurring of what neo-liberalism might mean. I take this to be not a byproduct so much as the goal of Clarke's analysis, and I take

it to be an explicitly political choice. But what are the politics? This brings me to the second omission.

It is notable that Clarke's consideration of neo-liberalism fails to raise any question at all concerning opposition to neo-liberalism. Although he reasonably questions Foucault's dissociation of politics from the state, thereby keeping the state in focus as a political entity, in place of any kind of resistance or struggle the discussion moves among "articulation," "negotiation," "translation," "innovative political and governmental strategies," and so forth. At best there is a concern with "contestatory discourses." Again this is deliberate and precisely the point. The focus for Clarke is squarely on the flexible and disordered nature of neo-liberal societies and on the refractive need, therefore, to keep our concepts of neo-liberalism equally "open." But this is surely a rather crude and ultimately false homology of reality and concept, which considerably forecloses the question of political choice, change, and strategy. Its major conceptual work is to hide any and all political targets. Further, he concludes, "analytically and politically, ambivalence seems an appropriate relationship to both states and non-state governing." But ambivalence is hardly a convincing political strategy. To my eye it embodies a blanket resignation to defeat at the hands of a dominant if dead neo-liberalism—instead of resistance, one can only negotiate, discourse, or articulate differently. The irony becomes apparent: without gesturing toward specific ways in which neo-liberalism might be resisted (cf. Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard 2007), this conclusion itself expresses an extraordinary omnipotence of neo-liberalism and a prostration before that power.

I am not sure this is where John wants us to end up, but such a conclusion seems inescapable to me from his analysis. Although I do not see this in Clarke's work, present or past, such a result renders certain readings of post-structural theory as alibis for political inaction or, even more ironically, for ameliorative work—doing what we can—within the state. Clarke is right that "neo-liberalism" is now entirely overworked, precisely because of the label's power, but the

answer is surely not to blunt the politics further by discarding it in favor of ambivalence or resignation. The language of “resistance” or “activism” is equally compromised, to be sure, but this does not mean that we should not still pursue the oppositional political work that gave such words power in the first place. In their various incarnations, and their various constituents, the anti-globalization movement, anti-capitalist, and social-justice movements deserve more credit than they have taken for blunting the forward progress of neo-liberalism. The urgent issue now is the reconstitution and expansion of that movement and the political work that will make “neo-liberalism” a cliché in practice as well as in concept, and will point the way to a different future.

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