

Book review

The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition

William Davies

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It is next to impossible for anyone keeping tabs on the social sciences and humanities to not have noticed the surge of books on neoliberalism in recent years. While some might cynically interpret this as a response to the post-crash market for theories about what might have caused current economic predicaments, the long production time of academic works makes one wonder if such a trend can be explained in this way. Neoliberalism is in any case one of the twentieth century's most influential doctrines, and that it is being taken seriously by an increasing number of critical scholars is long overdue.

Much of the critical pre-crash work on neoliberalism was shaped by Marxian perspectives. There was of course the generation of critical geographers following in the footsteps of David Harvey's late 1980s work on urban transformations, but also the lively British debates on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, perhaps best encapsulated by Stuart Hall and Bob Jessop's iconic face off. By the late 2000's the English-language publication of the entirety of Michel Foucault's 1978-1979 *Collège de France* lectures on neoliberalism provided a focal point for a wave of reinterpretations of the neoliberal history of ideas. *The Limits of Neoliberalism* by William Davies is a book that fits well in that particular moment, although it draws on other theoretical sources of inspiration than Foucauldians like Wendy Brown, Bernard Harcourt, and Stephen Collier that recently have come to dominate this research field.

The Limits of Neoliberalism is not a hefty tome, but it is rather densely written. This makes its very close engagement with neoliberal theory both a demanding and a rewarding read. The reason for both reactions is the book's disciplined focus on the complex tensions within neoliberal doctrine, largely disconnected from the more mundane political terrain where most readers might have encountered concrete neoliberal projects. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, one might argue that connections between neoliberal thought, policy reforms and political struggle often have been deployed too flimsily and muddled key differences within neoliberal circles. Still, *The Limits of Neoliberalism* might be a somewhat difficult read for those wanting an introduction to neoliberal intellectual history. Indeed, the importance of what might seem like fringe debates between obscure figures writing decades before Thatcher or Reagan is sometimes lost because of this disconnection between the world of ideas

and policy. This, then, is not a book that one casually assigns as the main reading for a student seminar, but instead a text that provides more depth for those already familiar with the broad outlines of neoliberal intellectual history.

Methodologically Davies draws on the sociological “convention theory” pioneered by Luc Boltanski as a way to home in on the critical exchanges between neoliberal experts. Analytically this focus is welcome. The role of neoliberal technocrats is an under-researched but crucial aspect of the history of neoliberalism. Convention theory is certainly not the only possible framework for studying the work of neoliberal experts, but it helps the author to analytically focus on important issues and appears to allow him to do some very productive interpretive work. However, Boltanski’s theory is, one must admit, largely invisible outside the book’s introduction. Instead this approach rather silently shapes the book’s concrete analytical focus on conflicts between neoliberal academics and experts.

The bulk of the book’s analysis can be found in its three analytical chapters that follow the introduction, each taking on different problems that neoliberals have wrestled with. The most hard-hitting analyses are found in the book’s second chapter that seeks to explore how the notion of competition has been used in neoliberal debates. Joseph Schumpeter and his somewhat younger and less well-known contemporary Ronald Coase, an economist at the LSE and Chicago University, are the central protagonists in this story. Through their arguments one can discern how the concept of competition gradually shifted within liberal economic theory from being a feature of markets to lay the foundations for the kind psychological theories that underpin much broader claims about “economic man”. If there is any section of the book that should be read widely it is certainly this chapter. It contributes substantially to ongoing debates on neoliberalism, and makes a very interesting argument with some serious implications for academics in the social and human sciences.

The third chapter focuses on the early experiments at Chicago’s Law and Economics Departments with neoliberal modes of calculation. This analysis is more straightforwardly empirical in following the trials and tribulations of less well-known intellectuals struggling with how to conceptualize the relationship between competition, market and prices in new ways. The reader is introduced to the academic environment of Chicago University, and is given a historical overview of how neoliberal economics as a concrete toolkit was worked out arduously in tension with the more highbrow intellectualism of figures like Hayek and Popper.

The final analytical chapter is again somewhat different, turning towards more recent developments and away from the work of the Chicago school. The debates retold here are much more dispersed, and more concerned with what happened to neoliberal ideas as they shifted scale to supranational institutions and diffused to sites far beyond the movement’s initial bases. At the core is the idea of benchmarking competitiveness, and how experts and lobbyists around for instance the Davos World Economic Forum and in the European Commission have drawn on and elaborated neoliberal doctrine. Interestingly one can see the, otherwise largely invisible, concern of convention theory with expertise more clearly in this part of the book that shifts the focus away from academia.

The fourth and final chapter comparatively breaks the least new ground for the understanding of neoliberal reason per se, but is still the part of the book that feels most dynamic and urgent. If there is any chapter that I would recommend to a reader interested in relationship between neoliberal ideology and the concrete politics of the present, it would be this one. Not only does it provide a model for at least part of the global ascent of neoliberalism that is much more precise than some of the widely read rather general accounts. It also convincingly shows the specific role of intellectuals and

lobbyists in a process of political change in a way that surely is useful for researchers, students and the public at large to think about in the present moment.

With *The Limits to Neoliberalism* William Davies has made a substantial contribution to the study of neoliberal doctrine and policy-making. The book is not an altogether easy read, but is a must for those writing in any way on neoliberalism and not unnecessarily difficult in relation to the complex topic it charts. It clearly breaks new ground by shedding light on debates beyond the most famous neoliberal intellectuals, debates that not many critical scholars until recently have seriously engaged with. The chapters that make the most serious contributions to the field can at times feel somewhat removed from present concerns that, to speculate, many potential readers probably have – something which might lead to it being read less than it deserves. It is unfortunately only the final analytical chapter that clearly connects to the present moment and how neoliberal government today is shaped by lobbyists and policymakers.

If there is one aspect that leaves the reader less convinced, it would have to be to what degree the book's theoretical premises, Boltanski's convention theory, provide the best way to approach the problem. It might certainly have helped the author write this in many ways important book, but to the reader it is largely absent as an explicit part of a continuous analysis. Another issue one could raise is that the introductory and concluding discussions perhaps could have positioned results, specifically the neoliberal construction of competition as an idea and metric, against other competing definitions of neoliberalism. The emerging debate on definitions of neoliberalism beyond the rollback of the state and free market Thatcher-era jargon would certainly have been pushed forward by the findings of this book in a more decisive way if it had been written to intervene more authoritatively in this field.

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