

Social Work and Society:

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Neoliberalism

Introduction

From the mid 1970s onwards, neoliberalism has been the most influential political ideology. This influence has been exercised in several ways. In the Global North, neoliberal ideas have underpinned the electoral success of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Following their successes, progressive opposition parties such as New Labour under Tony Blair shaped their policies in response to a new political, economic and social landscape that had been created. In the Global South, following neoliberal economic policies became a condition of receiving support from supranational institutions such as the World Bank. Finally, the emerging economies of the post Soviet bloc followed key elements of neoliberal ideas. Neoliberal is almost all pervasive. Harvey's (2007) book *A brief History of Neoliberalism* has on its cover, alongside Reagan and Thatcher, pictures of the Chilean military dictator, Pinochet and the Chinese Communist leader Deng Xiaoping. Testament to reach, influence and flexibility of this political and economic ideology.

Neoliberalism has at its core a belief in the supremacy of the market. Any interventions that prevent the operation of a free market should be resisted. The electoral success of parties such as the Tories under Thatcher and Republicans under Reagan have meant that there is a danger that these are seen as inevitable (Stedman-Jones, 2012). Inevitable because they were seen to reflect the alleged fact that there was ultimately no alternative to the market. This is certainly the view that was put forward by Thatcher - *there is no alternative* (Young, 2014) at the time and by Conservative analysts such as Sandbrook (2013) and Moore (2014). This is part of the mythology of Thatcherism.

Hayek

The Austrian economist, Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) is the key thinker in the development of neoliberalism. Hayek wrote the key text in neoliberal political economy - *The Road to Serfdom* which was published in 1944. Hayek and his followers never accepted the developments that led to the establishment of the modern welfare state in the UK such as the NHS and the expansion of public education. In 1950, Hayek moved from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences to the University of Chicago. From that point onwards, Chicago has been the centre for the development of neoliberalism - occasionally referred to as the *Chicago School*. In the 1950s and 60s, western liberal democracies followed broadly similar social democratic economic, social and political policies. In the area of economics, Keynesian policies were followed which focused on public investment and the need to maintain full employment. The state is seen to have a positive role in intervening to rectify the failings or inadequacies of the market. Hayek and free marketeers were opposed to any such interventions. He was thus very much outside of mainstream thought during this period.

Hayek's work played a key role in the providing an intellectual case against social democratic trends. His work became a key influence in the development of anti-statism that was part of the preparing the ground for the subsequent successes of Thatcher in the UK. His influence can be seen in the work of libertarian think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). Wacquant (2009) outlines the way that think tanks alongside Conservative journalists and publications helped to shape public opinion and create an anti-welfare state narrative. IEA would float ideas that initially were out of step with mainstream thinking but then were taken up by Conservative columnists.

Key neoliberal ideas

This section will examine the main features of neoliberal thought. One of the key arguments that is put forward here is that neoliberalism has to be understood as a political and social project not simply a technocratic economic one. The view that the market is the most effective form for the organisation of the distribution of resources that leads to broader views about the role of the state and so on.

There are two key beliefs that are at the heart of neoliberal thinking. The first is the *supremacy of market*. The second is a commitment to *liberty*. Liberty is generally defined as in this school of thought as freedom from state or other interference. Hayek (1944) argued that the role of the state should be limited to ensuring that the markets can operate. There is a role for the state in guaranteeing a legal system to ensure that commercial contracts can be enforced. Nozick (1974) in setting out a philosophical support of neoliberalism argued for a minimal or “nightwatchman state”. There is a limited role for the state in the market but there is a key role in protecting the individual citizen - i.e law and order - and in the defence of the realm. For individual liberty to flourish then there needs to be effective sanctions against those who breach its rules in whatever sphere of life.

Neoliberalism holds that state intervention - either in the form of legislation or by the state control of assets - distorts the functioning of the market. Hayek and other key neoliberals such as Friedman were influenced by the classical economist of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith. Smith (1776) argued that an economy will function if individuals are allowed to trade freely amongst themselves without government interference. The market and the laws of supply and demand alongside competition will determine the price of goods. Smith’s notion of the *invisible hand* of the market is used to explain that in laissez-faire capitalist societies, there is no overall control. Entrepreneurs start business with ideas for products or services that they think consumers will want. Consumers then decide by the choices that they make whether those entrepreneurs are successful. All these individuals’ decisions result in needs being met. Thus the unintended common-good is the result of activities of the individuals in pursuit of their own interests. The mantra of choice is a key feature of neoliberal approaches. There should be few, if any, restrictions placed on the choices that adults can make. Neoliberalism is dynamic. Its libertarian wing’s commitment to personal freedom extends from the market outwards to other areas. This creates a tension or clash in areas such as sexuality with more traditional Conservative positions.

In practical political terms, neoliberalism provides a very clear template. The role of the state in the economy is to be reduced. This means that state assets will be

sold. The privatisation of utilities, telecoms and other major industries. The Thatcher government followed these policies. The argument here is that state enterprises are sheltered from competition - in that sense they are outside of the disciplines of competition. Competition ensures that organisations have to always be looking at ways to become more efficient as well as developing new products. Public sector bureaucracies, it is argued, become bloated and inefficient. These state concerns are monopolies so are not subject to the discipline of the market - consumers cannot exercise choice and use another provider. In addition, public sector workers are seen as overpaid and ineffective bureaucrats enjoying generous pay and pensions - certainly in comparison to workers in the private sector. Alongside the introduction of competition, it was argued that the sale of public assets would be the start of the creation of a share owning democracy. Political and economic visions are intertwined here.

As noted above, individualism and the exercise of choice are highly prized within neoliberal thought. Markets operate on the basis of choice. We make decisions about the purchases of goods and services based on our own needs and tastes but also price and other factors. In the neoliberal economic model, individuals are rational actors. Becker's (1968) work on Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is important here. He argued that it was possible to apply economic models to all areas of human behaviour. For example, he argued that crime and offending needs to be understood as the result of a cost benefit analysis. An offender when deciding to commit a crime makes the decision on the basis of a number of factors - the value of the goods stolen, the likelihood of being caught and any potential punishment. If the rewards are greater then it is worth taking the risk. This model has the advantage of recognising the agency of offenders. However, there are huge debates about whether it really reflects the nature of most offending - for example the impact of drugs and alcohol on decision making.

The public sector organisations are a statement of collectivism that Hayek (1944) so strongly opposed. Areas such as education and health where the state had been forced to intervene because of market failings were not excluded in this analysis. For neoliberals, these should be viewed as commodities or services like any other. Therefore, they could and should be bought and sold. Friedman (1962)

whose *Capitalism and Freedom* had a key influence on the Thatcher and Reagan governments was strong proponent of the introduction of a voucher system for schools. This system has never been introduced but is an excellent example of the thinking in this area. Rather than attending a local school, such a scheme would give parents to spend on their children's education at a school of their choice. Parents would also have the option of using the voucher in the private sector - they would need to top it up to meet the cost of fees. Such approaches crystallise neoliberal thinking as they extend the market into areas where it did not previously have a foothold. In addition, such a scheme would it is argued break the power of educational bureaucrats. Michael Gove when Education Secretary argued that he was fighting the Blob a group bureaucrats, unions and academics who were committed to opposing his reforms. This discourse of the individual against the over mighty but also elitist and distant state bureaucrat is a powerful trope in neoliberal social policy.

Neoliberalism and the state

The role of the state is a key question in the discussion of any political ideology. Political theory at its core is concerned with the relationship between the individual and the wider society. Neoliberalism's key intellectual thinkers Hayek, Friedman and Nozick are fundamentally committed to a "small state". The role of the state is to be reduced. This means that neoliberals are inherently suspicious on what might be seen as state intervention or interference in the lives of citizens. Like all liberals, they are suspicious of an over mighty state or state functions that restrict the rights of individuals. This libertarian strand in political thought would be opposed to measures such as the introduction of identity cards and would be very concerned about the potential for the state to monitor individual citizens. In the broader political field, this libertarian view opposes any restrictions on free speech. It is also concerned that equality and diversity legislation give special protections to particular groups - thus restricting the freedom of or disadvantaging others. As well as these concerns about the potential exercise of state power, this school of thought is very vexed by what it sees as the intrusion of the state into the daily lives of citizens. In a whole range of areas, from public health advice on diet and exercise to government guidance on parenting, it

is argued that the state is seeking to restrict choice. The term “nanny state” captures the feeling that bureaucrats have too much power.

Neoliberalism is committed to a small state and personal freedom. The economic and political are intertwined here. One of the key policies in both the Thatcher and Reagan governments was the reduction in the levels of income tax - particularly on higher earners. There are two elements to the argument supporting low income tax. The first is that entrepreneurs and risk takers need to be rewarded - it is argued that high levels of personal taxation stifle initiative and so on. There is no incentive to work harder if any rewards are lost because of higher rates of taxation. Nozick (1974) argued that taxation could be seen as akin to forced labour. The second element to this argument is that the funds raised by taxation are spent by public sector bodies. These are, as noted above, inevitably inefficient. In this model, individuals and families make better choices about how to spend money - even if they made poor choices that is their responsibility. The reduction in the rates of personal taxation was one of the most influential elements of Thatcherism. New Labour under Blair made it clear that they were committed to these relatively low levels of personal taxation.

Giroux (2011) highlights the way that neoliberal ideas have been able to set the agenda across social, political, economic and cultural fields. Bauman (2008) describes a culture of “*hyperindividualism*” which leads to a loosening and weakening of social and community ties. It is an error to view neoliberalism as an economic project. It is clearly a political one which aims to recast the role of the state. In this regard, it has been very successful. From both the radical Right and Left, there are concerns about the role of the state. For the Right, it is the destroyer of individual freedom, for the Left it should be seen as a protector vested interests and a barrier to radical social progress. From the 1980s onwards, the role of the state has undergone a radical change. The expansion of the market or market mechanisms into a range of areas has seen the state become an equal player - in the jargon “a stakeholder” alongside others. Thus we see the involvement of private companies such as G4S and Serco in areas, for example, prisons and the Criminal Justice System, that were previously seen as public sector areas.

Skelcher (2000) outlines the development of new models of the state. These are

- 1960/70s - an *overloaded* state
- 1980s. early 90s- *hollowed out* state
- late 1990s - *congested* state

In the *overloaded* state of the 1960s and 70s, key industries such as mining and telecommunications were held in public ownership. Trade unions had a key role in the workplace but also in the broader development of economic policy. These features were of particular concern to neoliberals. Trade unions because of collective bargaining were seen as distorting the market. In addition, they were seen as restrictive of individual freedom - particularly where a closed shop operated. Under a closed shop, management agreed that workers had to be members of a trade union. Closed shops were outlawed in the UK in 1990. The role and influence of trade unions in UK public and industrial life changed significantly from the late 1970s onwards. The Thatcher governments saw trade unions not as partners in the development of industrial strategy but as a militant opposition. This political shift was accompanied by a decline in manufacturing industries - mining, steel, shipbuilding and cars - that had been the base of the trade union movement. The subsequent rise of finance and service sectors, alongside more part-time and short-term contract work made it more difficult for trade unions to recruit members - particularly in the private sector. The number of trade union members dropped dramatically. Alongside legislation to reduce the power of trade unions, the move to the *hollowed out* state of the 1980s involved the sale of assets that were held in public ownership. In the UK, these included the sale of council houses at discounted rates to occupiers and shares in gas and electricity companies.

Theoretically, neoliberalism seeks to limit the role of the state. However, one of the paradoxes of this period has been the development of new systems of regulation and audit. Pollitt and Bouckaert (1999) describe the rise of processes that are termed *New Public Management* (NPM). NPM can be understood as a means, by which, elements of the market were introduced to the public sector. It should be noted that these reforms were a hybrid - they could not be seen as complete

privatisation. In health and social care, the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) led to a purchaser/provider split to end monopolies.

As well as structural changes, there was an important shift in the use of language. Patients, parents and passengers became customers. Policies were shot through with the language of consumerism and choice. These shifts were, probably, most apparent in the fields of health and education. For example, the introduction of league tables for schools was meant to give parents more choice and involvement in decision making about their children's education. These changes led a new system of regulation and inspection for public bodies - OFSTED inspecting schools being the most high profile example. Opposition to these moves was based on the cost and burdens that these new regimes placed on staff. The measurement and evaluation of the performance of any organisation is complex. In the field of health and social care, it is a particularly difficult task. One of the key concerns was that the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that were chosen were actually quite crude measures. In addition, the collection and analysis of data became a hugely bureaucratic exercise in itself. Neoliberal thought has a very strong iconoclast streak within it. This is evident in its distrust of experts - public servants, academics and so on. These are seen as a group with a vested interest who are trying to restrict the freedom of individuals because of a paternalist assumption that they know best.

Garland (2014) notes that all states are "welfare states" as they are involved in one way or another in the provision of services that address the welfare needs of their citizens. It would be bizarre in the modern world if they did not. Garrett (2017) demonstrates the way that in modern political discourse welfare has taken on almost wholly negative meanings. Welfare has come to mean benefits paid to those who are not in work, rather than the whole range of support that citizens access across their lifetime. This is an important point as it disguises the real nature of distribution of benefits (Hills,2014). The myths about the generous nature of benefit payments and who receives them is an important part of the political attack on the notion of the welfare state. Neoliberalism is suspicious of any state organisation. It is particularly suspicious of welfare state systems for social and economic reasons. The welfare state can only be funded via taxation so the more

generous the state, the higher the rates of taxation on either individuals or corporations. Either route will result in the restriction of choice. Neoliberalism views what it terms the dynamism of the free market as one of its most attractive features. In this model, it is important to recognise that in markets there are winners and losers and that skills and talents are valued differently. Economic inequality is thus an inevitable outcome of a market economy. Any attempts to create more equal societies will fail because they do not recognise or accept this fact. Any attempt to create more equal societies leads to a loss of liberty or freedom - Hayek (1944) summed this position up thus “*A claim for equality of material position can be met only by a government with totalitarian powers.*”

The welfare state is also viewed as creating dependency. As noted above, this is a particular use of the term welfare. It does not cover the biggest area of welfare spending in the UK. These ideas are most closely associated with Murray (1990) and his concept of the “*underclass*”. Murray argues that the welfare state because of its generosity has created a class that is cut off economic, socially and very importantly in his terms morally from the wider society. In this schema, the welfare state rewards rather than punishes anti social behaviour. Murray has a very traditionally Conservative view of morality and personal relationships. For example, he sees the increase in the number of one parent families as a huge social problem and the cause of a whole range of other problems such as poor educational performance and offending. The welfare state seeks to tackle these issues but its interventions make a bad situation worse.

Austerity

Neoliberal ideas and approaches have become deeply embedded in the wider political culture. The realities of government and day to day politics mean that even though there have been huge changes in the UK since the election of the first Thatcher government in 1979, for many neoliberals the state remains too large. In areas such as education and health, from this perspective, there is still huge scope for the extension or the introduction of the market and market mechanisms. Alongside this, the neoliberal and libertarian focus on individualism has seen it at the forefront of the backlash against what they term identity politics.

In 2008, the New Labour government in response to the financial crisis made the decision that the banks were “*too big to fail*” . The resultant bailout of the banks cost an estimated £141 billion (Oxfam, 2013). This is clearly a huge sum of money. The irony was, of course, that this represented the most vocal proponents of neoliberal economics turning to state aid. In the 2010 General Election and ever since, David Cameron and opposition parties argued that the country faced a national emergency because of the profligacy of the New Labour governments. The 2010 coalition government introduced a range of spending cuts that amounted to the biggest cuts in state spending since World War II (Crawford, 2010). These include the loss of over 900, 000 public sectors between 2011 and 2018 (Institute of Fiscal Studies,2012). It is important to note that austerity measures were also part of a recasting of the welfare state in line with neoliberal views about its nature and role. These measures included the trebling of University tuition fees to £9, 000 per annum. Annual increases in a range of benefits such as Jobseeker’s Allowance and Child Benefit were limited to 1% - an effective cut - for three years. These are not simply financial decisions that have a detrimental impact on the poorest people in society. They are also hugely symbolic statements. These measures are an attack on the vestiges of the social state - a second wave of Thatcherism. The Cameron administration introduced a series of policies that followed classic neoliberal arguments. These include cuts in the rates of personal taxation to encourage individuals and cuts in the rates of welfare spending - apart from pensions - to tackle the alleged problems of welfare dependency.

Comparative Perspectives

The Neoliberal perspective sees the market as the most effective system for the distribution of resources. Interfering in the market is, therefore, to be avoided or reduced to the minimum. It does not oppose individual acts of charity - this is an individual exercising choice. However, it is opposed to the involvement of the

state. This is on the grounds of cost but also a moral position that sees the welfare state as damaging and rewarding anti social behaviour and poor choices. It argues that the state should provide very minimum levels of protection. The welfare system should operate in such a way that it deters claims. Those who do make claims should be subject to strict conditions. Esping-Andersen (1990) in his models of welfare capitalism outlined three type of regime : *liberal, conservative and social democratic*. He saw the UK regime as something of a hybrid regime with elements of all three types. The *liberal* regime as outlined by Esping-Andersen would come closest to the neo-liberal ideal. It is a residual model of welfare. Market solutions should be sought in most circumstances. Any state services will be at a very basic level. There is a clear divide between the public and private sectors. The polar opposite of this would be the social democratic model of welfare most commonly associated with Scandinavian countries. Public services are funded by comparatively high levels of personal taxation. Public services are not seen as inferior or stigmatising.

The marketisation and privatisation of health and social welfare services that has taken place over the past thirty years has been heavily influenced by the neoliberal belief in free markets. Alongside these moves, policies of increased welfare conditionality have been introduced across the benefits system. For example, claimants have to search and apply for a set of jobs per week and so on. Failure to do so leads to sanctions including reduction in benefit payments. These processes are designed to deter claims but they also play on a range of stigmatising attitudes to those who are in receipt of benefits such as that they are feckless and workshy.

Conclusion

Policies influenced by this approach have been adopted across the world by parties of both the political Right and the Left. One of the most profound impacts of neoliberal ideas has been not only their reach but also the way that they have shaped the political discourse. IN the UK, for example, New Labour as a political project can only be really understood in the context of the catastrophic general election defeats of the 80s and 90s. There is no doubt that Neoliberalism has been a successful political ideology in that it has underpinned the thinking and

policies of governments across the world. There are clearly historically and culturally influenced variations of the form these policies take. If we focus on the UK, we can see the long term influence of Thatcherism in a number of areas. The privatisation of key services and utilities is one key example. The argument put forward that this has led to vastly improved services has to be weighed against the monopoly conditions that have been created where a small number of firms exert control. In addition, the CEOs of these companies are now paid salaries that dwarf those paid to the heads of any nationalised concerns. Privatisation did not produce the dream of a share own democracy as share ownership remains concentrated in institutions.

The critics of neoliberalism argue that it simply ignores or glosses over the failings of the market. If we cast success or failure in individual terms, we take no account whatsoever of the huge structural factors and inequalities that form the context, in which, these occur. The economic policies of neoliberalism, it is argued, have done great social and economic damage. Deindustrialisation has seen the rise of a service economy very reliant on financial and related services. Alongside this, there has been the development of precarious forms of employment (Standing, 2011). Many workers are on short term or zero hours contracts in low paid work. The UK has become a much more unequal society and the division between rich and poor are increasingly stark. Garthwaithe's (2016) work on food banks illustrates the impact of these shifts in patterns of employment. Employment was seen as the answer to poverty but the period of austerity has seen a rise in work poverty.

The neoliberal concern for the potential for an over mighty state has been outlined above. The state far from being "rolled back" in this period has been recast and re-engineered. In the economic sphere, the state has always had a key role (Chang, 2013). In the modern state, private companies have taken on what were previously seen as key state functions - prisons and roles in the CJS being prime examples - and made significant profits. Wacquant (2009) outlines what he terms a "*centaur state*". The state has retreated from some roles, for example, the regulation of markets and the provision of social protections for workers. Elites in

both their work and private lives are much less likely to be subject to state regulation or sanction. However, the state is more heavily involved in the lives of some groups of citizens - particularly people living in poverty. For example, the rate of imprisonment has more than doubled in the UK since the mid 1980s.

The late Stuart Hall (1932-2014) proved to be one of the earliest and most perceptive critics of neoliberalism. He is credited with coining the term Thatcherism. His major works such as *Policing the Crisis* and *The politics of Thatcherism* remain key texts for the analysis of the rise and success of neoliberal ideas. One of the most important themes in Hall's work is that an economic explanation is never in and of itself. The rise of Thatcherism and neoliberalism cannot be explained solely by the economic crisis of the mid 1970s, this is undoubtedly a very important factor but on its own it does not offer a complete explanation. In the cultural sphere, neoliberalism anti-statism and appeal to individualism was in tune with broader social attitudes. These have been become much more deeply entrenched since that period. In an interview with the Guardian in 2012, summed up his approach thus

"I got involved in cultural studies because I didn't think that life was purely economically determined. I took all this up as an argument with economic determinism. I lived my life as an argument with Marxism and with neoliberalism. Their point is that, in the last instance, economy will determine it. But what is the last instance? If you are analysing the present conjuncture, you can't start and end at the economy. It is necessary but insufficient."

In 1979, Hall published "*The great moving Right show*" - the article where he coined the term "Thatcherism" - before she had been elected. In this analysis, Hall shows how neoliberal anti statism was used as rhetorical device that allowed Thatcher to pose as "being with the people". As he noted, the appeal here is grounded in the fact that for many ordinary people, their experience of the state is not a positive one. The agencies of the state are experienced as punitive, uncaring, bureaucratic or a combination of all of these. Neoliberalism cannot be seen as simply an economic project. It is clearly rooted in economic ideas but it has much broader social, political and cultural influence. Its key themes have seeped into many areas.

Key features of Neoliberalism

- *Markets and competition are the key to generating wealth and an efficient economy*
- *Individuals should be able to make choices free from state interference*
- *Personal taxation needs to be kept low to reward effort and innovation*
- *The Welfare State creates dependency*
- *The State has become too large, bureaucratic, inefficient and wasteful*

Critical questions for readers

- *How does neoliberalism define freedom and individual choice ?*
- *How does neoliberalism argue that the markets and competition make organisation more efficient ?*
- *Why does neoliberalism argue for a “smaller state” ?*
- *Why is neoliberalism so critical of the welfare state?*

Further Reading

Chang, H. 2013 *Economics: The user's guide* London: Pelican.

An excellent introduction to economic theories that underpin social and public policy

Cummins, I., 2016. Reading Wacquant: social work and advanced marginality. *European Journal of Social Work*, 19(2), pp.263-274.

This paper examines the work of Loic Wacquant one of the key critics of neoliberal social and welfare policies

Garrett, P.M., 2010. Examining the ‘conservative revolution’: Neoliberalism and social work education. *Social Work Education*, 29(4), pp.340-355.

This paper explores the impact of neoliberal thinking on social work education.

Garrett, P.M (2016) *Words matter: deconstructing ‘welfare dependency’ in the UK*

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/%EF%BB%BFwords-matter-deconstructing-welfare-dependency-in-the-uk/>

Excellent blog that examines the politics of the term “welfare dependency”

Hyslop, I., 2018. Neoliberalism and social work identity. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(1), pp.20-31.

This article explores the impact of neoliberal ideas on broader approaches to social work practice. It argues that social work needs to develop more collective responses to social problems.

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