
Article

Critical theories of neoliberalism and their significance for left politics

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Abstract Few have treated the critical literature on neoliberalism as an object of study in its own right. Those that have question the literature's partisanship, theoretical coherence, and explanatory power, denouncing it as a thinly veiled form of leftist politics. Rather than leave the matter there, I pick up the thread and ask the following: if the critical theorization of neoliberalism is a leftist pursuit, what does it do for the left? How does the critique of neoliberalism affect the left's self-understanding, coherence, direction, and future? In this article, I argue that the critique of neoliberalism (a) defines today's political left via the negation of its neoliberal Other, (b) is the ideological–discursive means by which the left articulates its diverse constituencies, and (c) builds theoretical resources necessary for the left to go beyond marriages of convenience and achieve unity. Regarding the latter, the literature augurs a left battling for the subjectivity of popular actors, with solidarity, social freedom, and democracy as both the weapons and the stakes. I conclude the article by reflecting on what often goes missing in the literature – namely, *Kapitalkritik* and socialism – and the significance of these omissions for the left in light of the arguments above.

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The humanities and social sciences have produced an array of studies into neoliberalism, primarily of a critical variety wherein the intent is to know neoliberalism so as to change or eliminate its activities. Few have treated this critical literature on neoliberalism as an object of study in its own right. Those that have question the literature's partisanship, theoretical coherence, and explanatory power, denouncing it as leftist politics dressed up as scholarship (and bad scholarship, at that). Fewer still have analyzed the political ramifications of the literature, seeking to understand the work it may do as critical theory. To the literature's targets, the work it does is clear: to fashion in 'neoliberalism' a political slur (Chait, 2017; Hartwitch, 2009). Here I pursue this angle from the perspective



of those building critical theories of neoliberalism (CTNL, for short). If the critical theorization of neoliberalism is a leftist pursuit, what then are the valences of the literature for the political left?

To this question I offer several arguments. First, the political left develops an identity by virtue of constructing neoliberalism as its Other. Of course, this is not the *only* means by which the left comes to understand itself. Today's left has as much to do with escalating inequality or the hollowing of democracy – outcomes which CTNL critiques – as it does CTNL itself. And yet, how one comes to know these events and trends is formative of how one responds to them, of one's politics, one's sense of friends and enemies.¹ Second, CTNL does not just define the left; it has helped unify the left. When analysts name neoliberalism as an agent of capital, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, anthropocentrism, and extractivism, they create an enemy common to each left faction and therein the possibility of their articulation into an alliance. Third, amidst the theoretical eclecticism that pervades the literature I find a common concern for how neoliberals create neoliberal subjects, persons who (a) will their own participation within a system that subordinates them, and (b) think and act in ways that impede the development of left movements. By convincing many in the public that they stand alone as individuals, that market life is the key to individual freedom, that the political is to be avoided or distrusted, and that the state is to be feared rather than conquered, neoliberals have produced subjects who not only have an aversion to collective action but need not join left movements because they are already free. Fourth, I argue that this focus on subjectification holds promise for the left: if neoliberal subjectivity threatens the critical vision and solidarity necessary for *all* left movements, then CTNL has given the left a basis for unification. The left may achieve unity and direction not only by contesting neoliberal subjectivity but also by generating its own. This is perhaps the best way to make sense of the calls for democracy and political life found in the literature – it heralds a left seeking to make subjects who understand and desire *social* freedom. Taken as a whole, CTNL performs an 'external' function by defining the left negatively versus its neoliberal adversary and an 'internal' function by advancing the theoretical resources necessary for the left's articulation and direction.

I draw these arguments by placing the CTNL literature and left politics into reciprocal contact, treating the literature as an artifact of left politics and as a body of ideas that has the power to shape the left (its concerns, worldview, trajectory). To put it another way, I set out to convert critiques of neoliberalism into an object of political theory and initiate a new discussion as to their political import. This is a crucial line of analysis given that CTNL is to the twenty-first century what Marxian critical theory was to the twentieth, a repository of knowledge and desire shaping the left. That said, this is dangerous analytical ground. To speak on behalf of 'the left' is famously tricky business. As Jodi Dean puts it, the only thing that seems to unite the left is the denial that 'the left' exists (2009, p. 2). Much of this has to do



with the historical tensions generated between an economic left that sought to define left politics through economy and class and the ‘new’ (now old) social movements that expanded the domain of the left to include a variety of struggles for recognition, inclusion, and equality. Here I treat the left as a politics that critiques liberalism and capitalism, including the individualism and formal liberties of the former and the structural violence of the latter. Furthermore, the left advances a portrait of an equal society built through common endeavor. In so doing, left politics converges upon and resists violence that eliminates the common, including the categories/hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, nativity, etc. Today’s left is, in this way, a constellation of politics known through these various points of struggle and their affiliation. But the left is at the same time engaged in a constant push and pull between those who would emphasize various points in this constellation and those who seek to subordinate those points under the rubric of a total critique and project (Dean, 2015).²

As with referencing ‘the left,’ to speak authoritatively regarding the critical theorization of neoliberalism is also a treacherous affair. The literature lacks an ur-text and has ramified into a labyrinthine form (see Davies, 2014, for a useful bibliographic review). To give shape to the literature, I include texts that feature the signifier ‘neoliberalism’ rather than ones that speak of ‘market triumphalism’ or other possible cognates. Neoliberalism is the go-to signifier, the ubiquitous reference, and therefore I am interested in the work it does. I have also sought to incorporate into my study the most widely influential texts on neoliberalism, regardless of academic discipline. To this interdisciplinary mix, I include voices from political theory in order to demonstrate their role in building the CTNL literature and reflect on their ideas vis-à-vis left politics.

If the reader is willing to grant a stay of execution and read on, I will put the CTNL literature and left politics into conversation as follows. First, I will summarize extant social scientific objections to CTNL such that we might approach them, and the CTNL literature, from a different angle. Critics advance three claims: that neoliberalism does not exist in reality, that the literature is the product of left partisanship, and that the literature is incoherent (with regards to its conceptualization and analysis of neoliberalism). I will then seek to invert these claims by asking a question: what if that which is problematic from the perspective of social science is productive from the perspective of the left? In subsequent sections I will explore this proposition, connecting the literature’s perceived faults to the left’s need to define an enemy and coalesce a coalition. I will then confront a distinct criticism, one coming from the political left itself: that the incoherence of CTNL undercuts left politics (Dunn, 2017). This critique is particularly important, given that Dunn takes the same line of inquiry as that of this article but reaches the opposite conclusion. In response, I aim to demonstrate that there is a certain coherence to the literature: a critique of ‘ontological neoliberalism’ and a common desire for democratic life, tied together by a focus on subjectification. But I will



also explore, in the concluding passage, some problems that CTNL may bear for the left. First, CTNL may spark a ‘politics of purification’ wherein movements attempt to expunge (real or imagined) neoliberal qualities among their members and therein open up divisions. Second, CTNL lacks a certain critique of capitalism needed to dispel the neoliberal story of freedom. And third, by pursuing democracy rather than socialism CTNL may deprive the left of critical and utopian energies.

Criticism of Neoliberalism: Scientific or Political?

In this section, I will introduce the existing literature treating CTNL in order to establish how its claims regarding the qualities and value of CTNL may be inverted from the perspective of left politics. First, critics of the literature argue that neoliberalism does not exist in *fact* but rather in the partisan *imaginary* of the left and, relatedly, that CTNL is not social science but instead a thinly veiled form of left partisanship. Others treat CTNL on its own terms, accepting its pretenses to social science, but determine that the literature is not *good* social science. These critics see an incoherent theoretical mishmash, a lack of conceptual and analytical rigor. Less frequently encountered, but important for this article, are critiques made by left partisans who argue that CTNL does not form an effective critical theory. Unlike the first line of attack – that CTNL is politics dressed up as scholarship – this latter criticism takes for granted that scholarship is and should be political, but denies the efficacy of CTNL with regard to advancing left politics. As we shall see, these critiques are not wholly without value. But other authors generally make this point to denounce CTNL as an academic exercise, failing to pursue the politics that CTNL could in fact produce.

Critics usually treat the first two objections in tandem: it is the political motivation behind CTNL that leads the scholar astray, who is seemingly unable to remain clear-headed in her analysis of the social world. As one author states, ‘neoliberalism often features, even in sober academic tracts, in the rhetorical toolkit of caricature and dismissal, rather than of analysis and deliberation’ (Venugopal, 2015, p. 179). Another: ‘our contribution should be to bring facts and reasoned arguments to the table as opposed to politically charged language’ (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009, p. 158). CTNL thus seems to carry more affect than reason, fueled by political passions rather than the values and methods of science. One frequently cited article suggests a psychological dimension, that academics disconnected from actual political battles ‘console’ themselves by fighting political battles on paper, with neoliberalism their nemesis. Hence, if there is one thing that CTNL clearly communicates, it is the leftist ideological orientation of those building the literature (Dunn, 2017; Barnett, 2005). The result is a literature that ‘builds barriers’ between the left and its opponents rather than constructive dialogue (Dunn, 2017, p. 436; Venugopal, 2015, p. 180).



To make matters worse, we have a concept with so many supposed referents that it does not in fact refer to anything specific. Neoliberalism appears to be a singular definitive force subjecting everything to its rule, but also something that is malleable and therefore found in myriad variations around the globe (Laidlaw, 2015). There is no escape, but at the same time it is unclear what we are supposed to be fleeing (or fighting). Some press this point by enumerating the variety of processes that analysts seek to explain by reference to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism explains the shrunken state, marketized state, and penal state; it is economic technocracy, class rule, and imperial project; it is a policy toolkit and an ideological force of subjectification. Better yet, no one can decide what belongs to this variant of liberalism, or whether it is new at all (Dunn, 2017, p. 445; see also Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008). As such, ‘it shoulders an inordinate descriptive and analytical burden in the social sciences’ (Venugopal, 2015, p. 169).

Critics connect the ‘promiscuity’ of the neoliberalism concept to a certain lack of analytical rigor, specifically with regard to the way analysts individually or collectively alternate between Marxian and Foucauldian modes of analysis. These frameworks appear to ‘cohabit in unexamined harmony,’ allowing scholars to connect ‘material’ transformations in the economy and ‘ideological’ movements in liberal thought to a common cause, neoliberalism (Dunn, 2017, p. 441). This is a problem, given that ‘the Marxian and Foucauldian approaches are not necessarily as easily reconciled as it might seem’ (Barnett, 2005, p. 8). Each understands causality, social relations, agency, and power in divergent ways, thus we should not presume ‘that the two approaches converge around a common real-world referent, so-called “neoliberalism”’ (Barnett, 2005, p. 8). Invoking Marxian thinkers who take ideas seriously, like Gramsci, seems to be of no help. Nor does Althusser’s influence upon Foucault (Barnett, 2005, pp. 9–11). Personal politics seem to matter as well: because Foucault wrote in opposition to the Marxian thinking of his day, today’s scholars who try to unite these frameworks must be doing some injustice to Foucault’s thought. Rather than treat Foucauldian studies of neoliberalism as creative appropriations of Foucault’s thought, we should consider them ‘anachronistic’ for their failure to cordon off Foucault from Marx (or Gramsci; Flew, 2012, p. 47).

In response, I suggest that we take seriously the argument that the critical literature on neoliberalism is a form of leftist politics. But rather than close the debate on neoliberalism, this conclusion opens a new one: what does CTNL do for the political left? Thus far, this question has received little direct comment. Stuart Hall states that neoliberalism is not a ‘satisfying’ concept, that it may lend itself to ‘reductive’ analyses, but also that ‘naming neoliberalism is *politically* necessary, to give resistance content, focus and a cutting edge’ (2017, p. 338). Similarly, Bob Jessop states that ‘neoliberalism may serve more as a socially constructed term of struggle...that frames criticism and resistance than as a rigorously defined concept that can guide research’ (2013, p. 65). But these authors do not pursue this thread in



any depth. That distinction goes to Bill Dunn (2017), who directly addresses the potential of neoliberalism and its critical theorization to give direction to the left. Dunn takes a decidedly dim view of the literature, claiming that neoliberalism as a referent matters only to academics, that scholars exaggerate the newness of neoliberalism, and that the literature's theoretical incoherence undermines any attempt to form resistance. His claims largely mirror those made by CTNL's social scientific critics, which, when taken together, are highly suggestive. One may conclude that neoliberalism is an empty political slur resting atop an incoherent critical theory whose import is found only within academia. This 'theory of everything' is in fact an explanation of nothing, subverting the aims of both social science and the political aspirations of its authors.

I propose that by treating CTNL reciprocally with recent developments in left politics, we will be able to resituate and reverse the arguments of its critics. I argue that the CTNL literature reflects and treats certain problems of the left, including its internal heterogeneity and factionalism, the waning of anti-capitalism circa 1989–2007, and the swing toward liberalism made by purportedly socialist political parties. As I will attempt to show in the following sections, not only has CTNL taken up a place in 'actual' politics, it matters precisely *because* it is political and advances an expansive, eclectic view as to the nature and reality of neoliberalism.

Actually Existing Neoliberalism?

First, let us consider the argument that neoliberalism does not exist, or matter, outside the exercises of the academic left. Echoing the criticisms of Barnett and Dunn, historian Daniel Rodgers states that a 'progressive-left' given over to fighting neoliberalism is 'never going to win outside a few university departments' (Rodgers, 2018). This argument rests on the assumption that neoliberalism as a critical signifier only travels in academic circles, and that no one in 'actual' politics is fighting something called 'neoliberalism.' Leaving aside the problematic assumption that the research, writing, and discourse of academics is somehow not real, or not political, I argue that neoliberalism is in fact a critical signifier active in left politics.

To begin with, it is easy for analysts in the US and Europe to overlook the fact that neoliberalism has long featured in Latin American political discourse. It is impossible to understand resistance to globalization, the Washington Consensus, and the socialist 'pink tide' without reference to neoliberalism as a critical concept (Rosen, 2002; Silva, 2009; Connell and Dados, 2014). The concept has become prevalent in the US and Europe as well. Newspaper mentions give us a crude metric by which to ascertain this: in 2017, the term 'neoliberalism' appeared 116 times in the *Guardian*, 36 times in the *New York Times*, 109 times in *El País*, and



69 times in *Le Monde* (per LexisNexis). Another metric is the prominence of the term within public discourse. While prominence is very difficult to measure, we might say that the use of the term neoliberalism by widely read opinion writers is indicative of its purchase. Notable moments include George Monbiot's (2016) primer on neoliberalism, 'the ideology at the root of all our problems'; Cornell West's (2017) controversial denunciation of Ta-Nehisi Coates as 'the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle'; and the debate that erupted when Jonathan Chait declared neoliberalism 'the left's favorite insult' (2017). To this we could add neoliberalism's regular appearance in left intellectual venues, including *New Left Review*, *Dissent*, and *Jacobin* (notable examples include Fraser, 2009; Rodgers, 2018; Harvey, 2016).

Of course, beyond simply demonstrating that neoliberalism exists as a concept informing contemporary political discourse, I wish to highlight the work that it does for the left. Here political campaigns and the rhetoric of parties can be useful, showing us that neoliberalism is a meaningful signifier (else, we shouldn't expect campaigners to be using it). In recent years, we find leaders and parties making use of the term to not just attack business as usual but also to demarcate a boundary between the left and the liberal center. Corbynite Labour turns to neoliberalism to attack Tory and EU austerity, but also to brand its Blairite predecessors and reestablish Labour's socialist credentials (Seymour, 2017). Pablo Iglesias and Podemos use the term in similar fashion, to denounce the dictates of Brussels as well as the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and its shift toward liberalism (Iglesias, 2015). In the US, neoliberalism has made improbable inroads into the left's discourse given that the left in the US is typically called 'liberal.' Indeed, the critique of neoliberalism informs a new distinction between 'left-progressives' and 'liberal Democrats,' creating (for the first time in recent memory in the US) a left-liberal debate that would be familiar to Europeans or Latin Americans. This manifested in the 2016 Democratic Party primary campaign, wherein Bernie Sanders' supporters distinguished his ideas from Hillary Clinton's by reference to neoliberalism, marking Sanders as socialist-left and Clinton as liberal-center. Naming Clinton a neoliberal gave Democrats a choice between the Clinton-Obama status quo and left progressivism, with its distinct political economic vision (West, 2016; Rottenberg, 2016).

In other words, the term 'neoliberal' has become part and parcel of left politics, in the academy and beyond. But rather than make this observation in order to delegitimize the CTNL literature – as its social scientific critics do – I argue that it is this very partisanship that makes the literature significant. The critique of neoliberalism is a political practice that constitutes the left's sense of self and other. By naming its enemies and collecting them within a common referent, the left comes to have an adversary and thus an identity of its own. I refer to this as the 'external' function performed by the CTNL literature, to be complemented by the 'internal' functions it provides with regard to articulating the left from within.



The ‘Promiscuity’ of Neoliberalism as Left Unification

Next, we should consider the argument that neoliberalism is so imprecisely defined that scholars find it everywhere they look, effecting a ‘neoliberal Leviathan’ of mystical proportion and magical power (Collier, 2012, pp. 192–193). This charge has provoked pushback – which concepts do not stretch, and why should we be surprised at the capacity of the powerful to change thought, behavior, or institutions? It has also led thinkers to reconsider the coherence of the literature, and of neoliberalism writ large (Ferguson, 2009; Mirowski, 2013; Dean, 2014). Here I advance a very different line of inquiry: what if the ramifying literature reflects not wanton scholarship in pursuit of the latest fad but something regarding the politics of the analyst herself? If CTNL is the literature of the left, what does its construction of an omnipresent adversary say about left politics? My argument here is that CTNL acts as connective tissue tying an overarching critique of liberalism to the various struggles characterizing the left. My claim is not that this activity is directed in any way by some central body or project, but that by building patriarchal, environmental, economic, political, racial, and imperial depictions of neoliberalism scholars in a networked fashion create a collective adversary, or an enemy known to all. In other words, the critique of neoliberalism works within the left to bring together its constituent parts. Studies have related neoliberalism to a string of concerns, including the decay of democracy, the persistence of patriarchy and ‘traditional’ family values, and white control and repression of black populations, doing so – crucially – while exploring the political-ideological and economic stakes involved (Brown, 2006; Fraser, 2009; Cooper, 2017; Soss *et al.*, 2011; Schram, 2015). Taken as a whole, these studies enable actors to connect marketization and the upward redistribution of capital and income to persisting problems regarding the quality of our democracies, as well as gender and racial inequalities (not to mention matters of imperialism or the environment, see Robinson, 2004; Gill, 1995; Bakker, 2005; among others). This cross-disciplinary convergence upon neoliberalism is remarkable for the speed at which it unfolded, and the sheer quantity of literature it produced. Less obvious is the fact that it gives academics working on an array of studies a common critical referent, and thus a sense of working against a common foe.

Whether the sundry critics of neoliberalism intended to have this articulatory effect is beside the point, although one relatively early text on neoliberalism gets us close. Lisa Duggan’s *Twilight of Equality* is a polemic that is equal parts invective against neoliberalism as critique of the left and its political impotency. Neoliberals, she claims, have succeeded by doing that which the left has not: allying groups pursuing cultural and identity politics with those seeking a different type of state and economy. Duggan proceeds to demonstrate the creation, in the US, of a neoliberal alliance synthesizing racism, paternalism, and liberal political economy.



Riven by an ‘economy/culture’ split, the left found itself trampled, an irony given that (per Duggan’s telling) neoliberalism implicates the entire left. Duggan concludes that ‘as long as the progressive-left represents and reproduces itself as divided into economic vs. cultural, universal vs. identity-based, distribution vs. recognition-oriented ... branches, it will defeat itself ... Only an interconnected, analytically diverse, cross-fertilizing and expansive left can seize this moment to lead us elsewhere’ (2003, pp. xx, xxii).

‘Alliance neoliberalism’ must be met by an allied left – but how? What Duggan implicitly suggests, but leaves unstated, is that the type of critique of neoliberalism she offers could be that which unifies this plural and fractured left. The conjunction of an expansive critical theory with empirical studies implicating and connecting various left groups would give the left a unifying mode of analysis and politics. Minimally, it generates the logic of ‘the (neoliberal) friend of my (racist/sexist) enemy is also my enemy,’ creating a basis for cross-sectoral cooperation (even if it is more a marriage of convenience than outright solidarity). There is, however, one hiccup in this argumentation. Whereas liberals of yesteryear like James Buchanan may have made a common cause of liberalism and racism (MacLean, 2017), racism and the like are neither necessary nor even logical constituents of liberalism (as, say, testified to by Barack Obama). Actors fighting on behalf of women or minorities may be satisfied by liberal packages of markets and strong civil rights. Militating against the attractiveness of the liberal package, critics of neoliberalism have increasingly built upon Duggan’s premises, arguing that neoliberalism hits vulnerable groups the hardest – via workfare, declining social provisioning, and a penal system that backstops this system while disproportionately imprisoning minorities (Wacquant, 2010; Soss *et al*, 2011; Harcourt, 2011). If taken seriously, these arguments would divert advocates of equality away from the liberal center and toward the left.

This maneuver is reflected in recent attempts made by Sanders, Corbyn, and Podemos to unite a transversal coalition around the rejection of neoliberal political economy. But the party that perhaps best exemplifies this strategy is the insurgent Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In its recent ‘strategy document’ neoliberalism provides the master frame, represented as a simultaneously economic, political, imperial, and racial project (DSA, 2016). This enables the DSA – which seeks to unite the left constellation by representing *inter alia* workers, women, non-whites, and immigrants – to give itself and the left an internal coherence. Hence, under the header ‘Insurgent Responses to Neoliberalism,’ the document collects electoral actors including Syriza, Podemos, Corbynite Labour, and the Bernie Sanders campaign along with movements committed to ‘thorough-going critiques of capitalism, racism, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression’ (DSA, 2016, p. 3). What is notable here is not that these struggles are grouped together, but how. Despite their differences, they have anti-neoliberalism



in common; this generates political comradeship, giving the left coherence and direction.

Caveats abound. The DSA is just one example, and the alliances formed by neoliberals vary by locality. The US provides a case wherein neoliberals made common cause with racism and patriarchy, but such an alliance is *ad hoc* and not necessarily to be found elsewhere (though the Thatcherite combination of liberal political economy with Tory social conservatism provides a clear counterpart, see Hall, 2017, pp. 263–264). Thus, though important, critical narratives of ‘alliance neoliberalism’ will likely only take left unification so far. More powerful would be a critique of neoliberalism that makes this coming together *necessary* rather than politically convenient. As suggested above, the argument that neoliberal policies preponderantly harm women and minority populations has had some purchase. In the next section, I will argue that CTNL harbors another articulatory possibility for the left.

CTNL’s Theoretical Eclecticism and Beyond

To appreciate this next possibility, let us first begin with the aforementioned criticism that the CTNL literature is theoretically incoherent. The literature appears to swerve between Marxian and Foucauldian frameworks, which, critics allege, is a problem given that these frameworks are incompatible. This translates into a confused notion of what neoliberalism is – thus its omnipresence – and no firm ground upon which to base resistance (Dunn’s most important claim). As I argue here, this criticism is misplaced. What we find in the literature is not incoherence but eclecticism, or a permissive cohabitation of different frameworks. The idea is that neither Marxian nor Foucauldian analyses can capture neoliberalism on their own, and that they are in some way complementary (on complementarity, see Montag, 1995; Lemke, 2001; Brown, 2015; Bidet, 2016). Critics would likely respond that we can do better than mere eclecticism; that we should make some effort to create a unified critique. While I consider this point debatable (see below), I will at the same time propose that (*contra* Dunn and Barnett) there is in fact a common thread to be found. On one hand, we find a critical vision of what I will call ‘ontological neoliberalism’; on the other, a positive theory centered on democracy.

To be clear, I advance these claims in order to analyze the *political* potential of the literature. What can such eclecticism do for the left? And if we can bring to the surface a unified negative and positive vision, one premised on ontological neoliberalism and democracy, could this lend the left a coherence and power?

Theoretical eclecticism is testified to by the fact that there is no pitched sectarian battle between those studying neoliberalism as a political economy (the ‘Marxian’)³ and those studying it as a governmental project designed to constitute



particular types of social and political subjects (the Foucauldian; cf. Ong, 2007). Instead, they cohabitate the literature. This, I suggest, would not be possible if neoliberalism were simply a code-word for capitalism, and if studies of neoliberalism were rooted in historical materialism. Though analysts do treat neoliberalism as an ideology and class project emerging in reaction to falling rates of profit (giving some semblance of a historical materialist account, see Duggan, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Streeck, 2014), the economic ‘trigger’ (declining profits) is not explained through structural-economic contradictions but rather through politics – labor militancy, inflationary policies, and an increasingly open global economy. As such, neoliberalism is a political phenomenon with a political economic basis (for a succinct account of this ‘political reading,’ see Harvey, 2016). Secondly, though we should understand neoliberalism as class politics, this does not mean reverting to a capitalist-proletarian binary, or any sort of privileging of the working class. In Harvey’s words, we must reject ‘golden age’ narratives depicting some ‘proletarian field of Marxian fantasy.’ The battle is now between ‘elite class power’ and ‘popular control,’ a left populism catalyzed by subjects with ‘interwoven’ racial, gendered, and economic identities (Harvey, 2005, pp. 201–202). In short, this variant of CTNL names and critiques neoliberal political economy while avoiding treating the economy as the privileged ground for social and political transformations.

Cohabitation would also be hindered if Foucauldian approaches had nothing to say regarding the economy. While Foucault does not emphasize class power or declining profit rates, he does narrate neoliberalism as a form of economic government, or the bringing to bear of market reason upon the state and individual. The state is remade into an ‘economico-judicial’ institution, tasked principally with implementing the laws necessary for the operation of markets, while simultaneously retreating from the provisioning of public goods (Foucault, 2010, particularly pp. 163–167). The task of ensuring security or some basic prosperity shifts from the state to the individual, who is reconceived as a bearer of capital and an object of self-investment. No longer citizens of a government of right, and operating without public support, all individuals must become economically rational, maximizing their capital within the market so as to ensure their own well-being. Political subjectivity is shorn off; *homo economicus* is born (Brown, 2015, ch. 3).

What are the political payoffs of said eclecticism? Most obviously, permissiveness abets alliances of convenience. ‘Marxian’ accounts stressing elite class politics and Foucauldian accounts emphasizing subjectification can easily work side-by-side, given that neither depicts the harms of neoliberalism as befalling upon any particular social actor, nor reserves emancipatory potential to any such actor. In these depictions of contemporary life, all ‘non-elite’ suffer the consequences of neoliberalism, if for no other reason than the loss of political life (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, the open-endedness of these critiques may be important within an



intellectual milieu wherein there is pressure to choose one's patron saint (Bidet, 2016). To fight neoliberalism is not to choose Marx and the working class, but to be part of an expansive political front of workers, feminists, environmentalists, anti-imperialists, etc. Or even better, to be each of these simultaneously.

But can an 'expansive political front' operate upon an eclectic theoretical base? In Dunn's estimation, the literature 'tilts at targets it perceives only indistinctly and fails to focus the discontent it expresses' (Dunn, 2017, p. 449). Could the eclecticism of CTNL leave the left rudderless, without a discrete enemy to fight and future to propose? To this, there are several possible responses. We might say that this places undue emphasis upon the power of critical theory to direct political projects, or that politics is necessarily a messy product of acting in singular contexts that, by virtue of said singularity, no theoretical framework can properly encompass (Zerilli, 2005, pp. 35–39). Relatedly, we might say that political action begins with a 'politics of similarity' such that necessarily plural actors come to see themselves as comrades in the same fight (Wolin, 2016). If so, the very eclecticism of CTNL may be what the left needs with regard to articulating a political identity, even as it leaves underdetermined the exact nature of the enemy and how to fight it. Alternatively, we might concede to Dunn that political action is most effective when informed by a coherent critical theory, and then seek to find it within the literature. Without necessarily wishing to privilege the latter perspective, I believe the literature does advance a common enemy, which I will call 'ontological neoliberalism,' and a common future, democracy. First, I will work through these negative and positive visions, then I will examine them for their productivity vis-à-vis left politics.

By ontological neoliberalism, I refer to the idea that neoliberals have sought to create the atomized-individualized society that liberals have long presupposed (an argument advanced by thinkers as distinct as Hall and Foucault). This means constituting a certain type of subject: the individual who understands herself to be alone, but whose isolation is not disempowering because she makes her own choices. Such choices render her free. Even the corresponding sense of responsibility that comes with free choice – that she must own all her life outcomes – connotes empowerment because she has the power to choose right from wrong, or good from bad. Any sense of being part of a broader drama in which her life is structured, and thus calling into question these freedoms, must be eliminated. Creating such a subject includes discourse (and its repetition), but it also means ensuring the capacity of subjects to practice these ideas. Enter the market, which appears to enable independent individuals to coordinate with each other in a way that is non-coercive, such that all can choose their ends, have their needs met, and do so in a way that is equally, individually free. The market not only obviates the need for any collective association, it converts liberal discourse into affect and truth (through the market one feels and knows oneself to be free). Self-responsibility enters the moment there arises the suggestion that the market houses or accentuates



inequality and the corresponding lack of freedom. Dynamics or histories that exceed the individual are dismissed and outcomes revert to the individual, to be owned by the individual herself. Additionally, the state must withdraw from provisioning goods that could be procured in the market, lest subjects think that there exists a collective political body, and the possibility of achieving goods through collective decision-making. This atomized-individualized subject is thus partly the product of state policy. Similarly, all problems that implicate society as a whole must be resolved through the market. Climate change, for example, cannot be mitigated through state transformation of the energy or transportation sectors but instead through the creation of permits that enable the buying and selling of the right to pollute.⁴

In other words, ontological neoliberalism would create a subject who (a) treats social patterns as the aggregate product of individual success and failure, (b) treats in isolation her own struggles to escape inequality or achieve security, and (c) bases these perspectives upon the presumption of equal freedom for all, as realized in particular through the market. This gives us the *what* of neoliberalism, to be compounded by the *who* and *why*. Here the literature is consistent: neoliberalism is driven by philosophers, economists, and business elite seeking to contain (as Hayek would put it) collectivist impulses in society, particularly those that would threaten the free play of market forces (Philips-Fein, 2010; Burgin, 2012). But the ‘who’ also include the very neoliberal subjects themselves, the ones who think and practice neoliberal reality (indeed, creating neoliberal reality through their practice). Increasingly, the literature treats these people not as dupes, or pawns, but as willing participants in this transformation of society (Rushing, 2016; Konings, 2015).

Undoubtedly, this portrayal of the CTNL literature (and neoliberalism itself) is partial; any attempt to paint a coherent picture of such a sprawling literature will leave a significant remainder. That said, we can affirm this critical theory of neoliberalism by treating it alongside the positive theory or political desire advanced by neoliberalism’s critics. Because neoliberalism is predominantly taken as an individuating and economizing project of elites, critics respond by asserting the collective and privileging ‘the people.’ In short, the answer to neoliberalism is a certain populist conception of democracy. As Harvey puts it, the goal is to ‘regain popular control of the state apparatus and to thereby advance the deepening rather than the evisceration of democratic practices and values’ (2005, p. 206). Popular control means more than episodic accountability via elections, it is a ‘constant endeavor in which patterns of commonality are collaboratively enacted’ (Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008, p. 157). Importantly, achieving such a democracy would require replacing the neoliberal ontology with one based on the reality of the social and the desirability of collective, political life. Per Wendy Brown, democrats must spark popular belief in ‘the powers of knowledge, reason, and will for the deliberate making and tending of our common existence.’ She considers this the chief



characteristic and task of the left: ‘the Left alone persists in a belief...that all could live well, live free, and live together’ (Brown, 2015, p. 222). Meaning, the left cannot remain content within its critical theories; it must create a new affective disposition toward collective life that would challenge and displace neoliberalism (Hardt and Negri, 2017, pp. 222–223). The left must appropriate ideas like ‘empowerment’ from the neoliberal imaginary, not only revealing the entrepreneurial mode of living to be a form of subjection but also making freedom a social product (Foster, 2015; Tronto, 2013, pp. 37–41).⁵

There is, therefore, a common message to be found within the critical literature on neoliberalism. We might take a step further and argue that the critique of ontological neoliberalism points backwards toward Marxian and Foucauldian frameworks, identifying a possible conjunction or reconciliation of the two. In them, we find a convergent interest in explaining the possibility and reproduction of the liberal state and capitalist economy. Two common theoretical moves stand out, later to be concretized by studies of neoliberalism: the liberal state and capitalist economy are made possible by the formation of certain subjects; and subjecthood is defined not by the belief in certain ideas but instead is the (material) practice of certain ideas. In other words, what Dunn sees as an inconsistent oscillation between materialist and idealist explanations of history is instead an attempt to overcome the binary he presupposes (cf. Dunn, 2017, p. 444). To be clear, I am referring to a certain Marxism, characterized by Gramsci and Althusser, that seeks to understand how ideas legitimating the capitalist state and economy come to be espoused by a repressed, exploited people. This is also to point toward a certain Foucault, one concerned with the discursive-material techniques that institutions and the state deploy to create certain self-governing subjects (‘governmentality’). These three thinkers, despite their differences, agree that order is not the product of physical repression alone, but they also refuse to treat ideas separately from their material instantiation.

But more important than whether CTNL helps us reconcile the Marx/Foucault debates is whether the critique of ontological neoliberalism can incorporate aspects of these authors’ thinking and move the political left forward. I propose that it has.

CTNL’s most obvious effect has been that of shifting the left from the pursuit of ‘objective’ (read: structural-economic) determinants of history to the ‘subjective dimension,’ wherein the question becomes the formation of subjects. Consider Stuart Hall’s lament from 1988: ‘the conventional culture and discourses of the left, with its stress on “objective contradictions”, “impersonal structures” and processes that work “behind men’s [*sic*] backs”, have disabled us from confronting the subjective dimension in politics in any coherent way’ (2017, p. 252). That this quote seems from another time has many potential explanations, including the multi-pronged assault on historical materialism. But we might also say that it has something to do with CTNL, which has moved the subjective dimension of politics into the center of the conversation. Hall’s trajectory suggests as much. He treats



Thatcherism as a project to create a new political subject ('entrepreneurial man') and proposes we understand neoliberalism as a hegemonic project to form the popular consciousness and common sense (Hall, 2017, pp. 284, 317–335). Once neoliberalism is known as such it necessitates launching into a specific political contest, wherein one contests the creation of the neoliberal subject, both in discourse and via the marketization of social life, as well as the actors involved in this project.

Secondly, unlike in the Marxian story wherein the proletariat is the class that carries forward history by virtue of its place within the system of production, a world known as neoliberal does not contain a predetermined emancipatory subject. Instead, by theorizing neoliberalism as a project to create an atomized-economized subject, the neoliberal project is situated *alongside* other systems of social subjectification, e.g., those producing patriarchy, heteronormativity, nativism, etc. The neoliberal subject is also a racialized subject is also a gendered subject; given this, the left may draw upon the affect of a variety of subordinations in order to coalesce resistance. On the other hand, this means that neoliberalism is not the left's sole adversary. Should we then conclude that CTNL opens up possibilities for intersectional thinking and activism, while situating neoliberalism as just one enemy among many?

There are reasons to think the answer is no, that neoliberalism is, in fact, the left's preeminent adversary. By radically individualizing (i.e., stripping away any sense of collectivity) and economizing the individual, neoliberals erode the solidarity necessary for the advancement of the struggles comprising the left constellation (Mohanty, 2013). In this, it is unique. Other forms of subjectification create categories of people – gays, workers, blacks, immigrants – who can repurpose that category and its lived experience as a political glue, creating a basis for solidarity. By contrast, under neoliberalism one's solidarity is with oneself – self-help – which is *not* felt as disempowerment because the neoliberal subject authors her own life. This self-help narrative not only perpetuates the classical response to inequality (work harder, be more responsible). It also obviates the need to think in terms of structural power, given that there are no structures (nor *structuring*), only individuals and their choices.

For instance, in Christina Scharff's study of young British and German women and their relationship to feminist politics, the author finds that her subjects were reticent to engage or take a critical position on gender and gendered power relations (Scharff, 2016, ch. 3). Instead, they were more willing to speak as individuals and read their personal experience with inequities through the lens of self-responsibility. Not only did they eschew analysis based on collective membership (as women) they also expressed a skepticism or unwillingness to consider collective association, e.g., feminism. Individuals do not need to think in terms of membership or associate in a collective project if they are already, from the start, autonomous agents. Catherine Rottenberg finds the same dynamic at work *inside*



feminism. Exemplified by the recent writings of Sheryl Sandberg, she argues that a neoliberal feminism has emerged which elides structure and inequality, and which seeks to generate a ‘feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial’ (2014, p. 419). This is a feminism of strong women who create solutions to their particular problems of work and family and who are, conversely, ‘divested of any orientation toward the common good’ (2014, p. 428).

From this perspective on neoliberalism, the articulation of the left is no longer merely convenient, it becomes necessary. The neoliberal subject does not think in terms of structural power, collective responsibility, or common good because her own power and responsibility are preordained. Thus all movements within the left constellation must denaturalize neoliberal rhetoric in order to create the consciousness of structural violence and collective membership necessary to catalyze their struggles. None of this is to argue that there is a seamless account of neoliberalism adopted and utilized by members of the left; rather, the sum is that every member of the left can agree that neoliberal subjectivity is a central problem. CTNL maintains the horizontality prized by those in the left constellation while pressing forward the need to understand, critique, and reform neoliberal discourse and practice even among those whose struggle is not centered upon the problem of the economy.

Reflecting on CTNL’s Valences For/Within the Left

Ample evidence demonstrates that neoliberalism has migrated out of the world of academic conferences, literature, and classrooms and become a growing part of the broader left’s discursive repertoire, shaping what it means to be on the left today with regard to its worldview and the politics it seeks to generate. I have argued that CTNL performs ‘external’ and ‘internal’ functions, defining for the left its enemies and serving to articulate its own political constellation. Rather than reiterate these arguments here, I will conclude by exploring potential tensions contained within the left’s turn toward (and against) neoliberalism. These, too, are valences of the literature. First, the literature may inform a new politics of purification by which the left, attempting to cleanse itself of its own neoliberal tendencies, comes to fracture its coalition; second, orienting the left around the fight against neoliberalism presumes a critique of capitalism that is largely missing in the literature; and third, the literature propels the left toward democracy and away from socialism, to its potential detriment.

Let us begin by turning to an issue that challenges the very claims made in this article regarding the capacity of neoliberalism and its critical theorization to create a more coherent left. When neoliberalism (or any other theoretical construct) comes to define (via negation) a political group, it also acts within that group as a purifying device, a tool for the purpose of identifying and eliminating any traces of



one's political opposite (Taylor, 1985, p. 105). In our case, theorists may turn the critique of neoliberalism inward and allege that important areas of left politics have been colonized by neoliberal reason. Recent debate over whether feminism has been co-opted by neoliberalism gives us an excellent example of this dynamic (see Prügl, 2015 for an overview). One text here stands out – Nancy Fraser's essay claiming that contemporary feminists have abandoned the radical critique of second-wave feminism and in doing so have formed a 'dangerous liaison' with neoliberalism (2009, p. 109). Neoliberalism, she tells us, has induced feminists to discard the politics of redistribution and critiques of structural violence – discourses dangerous to neoliberalism – and seek instead recognition and equal terms within the market. In turn, Fraser calls to feminists to purify their practice by shedding neoliberal tendencies. While she notes that the 'point, of course, is not to drop the struggle against traditional male authority,' her essay predominantly stresses the requirement that feminism becomes 'post-neoliberal' (2009, p. 115).

Attempts at purification may create a more homogeneous or united left, or it may do the opposite and create fractures. For example, Fraser's portrayal seems to equate feminism with the activism of affluent white women (e.g., Sandberg) and ignores wide swaths of radical feminist activism. This not only brings back third-wave criticism of the white and Western orientation of feminist theory (Aslan and Gambetti, 2011), the collapse of feminism into the fight against neoliberalism provokes those who see feminism as a discrete project. As Nanette Funk puts it, 'global feminism is a movement for gender justice first and foremost, not only a movement to challenge neoliberalism, however much these are related, and however important both goals are' (2013, p. 193). Hence, the critique of neoliberalism may draw together the left constellation (wherein gender justice requires challenging neoliberalism), but it may also elicit pushback from those who fear subsumption into a neoliberal vacuum. One may agree that neoliberalism is an enemy but contest narratives that reduce the left to fighting neoliberalism (i.e., making it *the* enemy).

Second, the critique of ontological neoliberalism presupposes a critique of capitalism that earlier leftists foregrounded and made explicit, particularly concerning the problem of property. In short, the Marxist argument linking class power and worker exploitation to the property system is necessary to make sense of the claim that the neoliberal subject's freedoms are false. The market is not a place of equal freedom for all because property (like race and gender) delimits one's power to choose. Individuals are not equally free because most are compelled to make inequitable contracts with the owners of capital in order to secure a living. In short, the critique of capitalism is a necessary adjunct to the critique of neoliberalism. My point is not that critics of neoliberalism are unaware of Marxian critique, rather that in most of the literature the critique of property remains submerged, perhaps on the assumption that property and its power asymmetries can go unsaid.



But precisely here the left may run into a problem: how to convince the popular audience of the falsities of neoliberalism without recourse to overt *Kapitalkritik*? One may denounce the capitalist class and its maneuvers around worker solidarity, inflation, declining effective demand, and the idea of stakeholders. One may collect these maneuvers – including globalization, fiscal discipline, financialization, and shareholder value – into a package called neoliberalism. In turn, audiences experiencing the loss of jobs, stagnating wages, the growth of debt, the decline in investment, or the loss of a social safety net may prove receptive to neoliberalism’s critique. But none of this directly addresses the neoliberal claim to free the individual by limiting the state and making for her a life in the market. If the left wishes the willing subjects of neoliberalism to will collective life, and to see freedom as only accomplishable via solidarity with their peers, then they must carry forward a critique of property, emphasizing the political economic asymmetries that property engenders within market society.

This leads to our third consideration: in the literature it is democracy, not socialism, which informs the positive vision of neoliberalism’s critics. What ramifications might this have? For one, socialism expresses ideas that powerfully rebut the neoliberal view of freedom: that private property is power-over and not just power-to, and, as Axel Honneth argues, that ‘the community of solidarity, rather than the individual, is the bearer of freedom’ (2017, p. 25). Socialism, therefore, may be able to do more for the left than can democracy with regard to informing an effective critique of neoliberalism and a positive project distinct from the (purportedly democratic) *status quo*. In turn, one could argue that this distinction is but nominalism – people rally around proposals for change rather than signifiers. Critics of neoliberalism might also claim that their democracy is social democratic, or even socialist, seeking to collapse the distinction between the two. There is validity in these positions. On the other hand, because socialism typically connotes a more expansive political and economic project, making socialism the mantra may better ensure that resistance to neoliberalism goes beyond government and includes the creation of economic institutions whereby *social* freedom becomes known and felt.

To conclude, if I have been successful I will have convinced the reader that CTNL has emerged out of the concerns of the political left and that it reciprocally informs and shapes the left going forward. I have argued that the literature carries certain positive valences for the political left, though three reservations – as to the politics of purification, the ambiguous place of capitalism in the literature, and the call for democracy rather than socialism – may call into question some of my claims. Even so, as CTNL recurs with greater frequency within contemporary political discourse, and given its political potentialities, it behooves scholars to treat it as an object of political theory in its own right. In doing so here, I hope to initiate a new dialogue within political theory and elsewhere.



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Notes

- 1 As Charles Taylor states, theoretical activity does not just describe the world, it also furnishes its authors with ‘constitutive self-understanding’ (1986, ch. 3).
- 2 It is also tricky business to speak of the left when considering its variation across space: ‘left’ politics means different things in different places. The arguments made in this paper are informed primarily by the political histories of Europe and North America, though as noted later in the paper the import of Latin American leftism to the critique of neoliberalism should be emphasized.
- 3 It should be noted that there are few outright references to Marx to be found in the CTNL literature; by contrast, many draw directly from Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*.
- 4 To form this synthesis, I draw on a variety of readings. For neoliberalism as a discourse of individual empowerment, see Foucault 2010, pp. 215–238 with regard to human capital; also Peck, 2013, ch. 5; Konings, 2015, ch. 8; Rushing, 2016. On market freedom, see Harvey, 2005, ch. 1; Gill, 1995. On the state and its transformation, see Burchell, 1993; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Soss *et al.*, 2011; Cooper, 2017; also Crouch, 2011, particularly regarding the privatization of demand management. On individual responsibility, see Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008, p. 150; Rose, 1999, pp. 158–160; Cooper, 2017, ch. 3.
- 5 Of course, not all critics of neoliberalism find succor in democracy. Jodi Dean despairs that democracy has become the ‘fallback position for left politics, all that remains of our wounded and diminished political aspirations’ (Dean, 2009, p. 76). But by establishing herself as the exception to the rule, Dean underlines the hold that democracy has over the left imaginary.

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