

‘Contesting Neoliberalism and its Future’: Workshop held at the University of Sydney 2-3 Dec 2010.

Sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, in conjunction with the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Sydney and the Institute of Social Science at the University of Sydney.

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Neoliberalism has become a renewed focus of public debate, particularly regarding its role in causing the global financial crisis. In this context many have argued that the dominance of neoliberalism in public policies is coming to an end. Such pronouncements tend to understand neoliberalism as being synonymous with 'free markets' or, at least, as the drive to extend the scope for markets vis-à-vis government intervention. Indicative of this is former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's description of neoliberalism as 'free market fundamentalism' in the article he wrote for *The Monthly* magazine following the onset of the global financial crisis.

However, this public debate often glosses over the contested scholarly understandings of neoliberalism. For example, missing from much of the public discussion are the insights of Foucauldian scholars who view neoliberalism as a system of 'governmentality', whereby individuals regulate themselves in accordance with a market rationality. Missing also are the insights of the 'regulatory capitalism' approach, which notes the proliferation of regulation during the neoliberal era, thus questioning the extent to which neoliberalism is an appropriate description of the major changes to the state and economy during the last three decades. Public debates also tend not to engage with Marxian accounts of neoliberalism, which view it as the product of class power and contradictions within the capitalist mode of production, rather than merely as a particular set of ideas. While scholars have developed these, and other, alternative conceptions of neoliberalism, in Australia there has been little direct engagement between the proponents of the different scholarly conceptions of neoliberalism.

The ASSA-sponsored workshop on 'Contesting Neoliberalism and its Future' was conceived as a way of filling these gaps by bringing together leading Australian scholars for a focussed investigation of the nature of neoliberalism, both in theory and practice. Based upon these understandings, the policy implications of the current global financial crisis for the future of neoliberalism were considered.

The workshop was held at Women's College, The University of Sydney. It was attended by 23 participants, ranging from senior scholars to early career researchers. Two full days of discussion (on 2-3 December 2010) were supplemented by a conference dinner.

Key questions considered by the papers and discussion sessions at the workshop included: What is neoliberalism? Has neoliberal policy making been superseded? Is neoliberalism a misnomer as a description of the major policy trends during the last twenty years? Does the global financial crisis herald a new era of regulation? Which avenues for public policy are opened up and which are curtailed by the global financial crisis?

The workshop was organised around topic areas which represent distinct approaches to understanding neoliberalism and its future in the wake of the global financial crisis. Each session was framed by one of these topic areas, with each of the two papers in the session addressing the topic. Each session began with a summary and evaluation of the two papers by a discussant. The authors of the papers then provided a brief response, after which the topic was opened up to the other participants for questions and comments. The papers were made available to all participants prior to the conference to give enough time for them to be read in advance. This process, particularly the somewhat unusual discussant-led format, provided for a highly informed discussion that was detailed and constructive.

Papers considered at the workshop began by questioning popular conceptions of neoliberalism. John Mikler's presentation in the opening session drew attention to the influence of slowly evolving institutional structures, and argued that history remains a better guide to the future than the impact of the recent global financial upheaval. Quantitative evidence on the size of the public sector in OECD economies, for example, suggests that there has been no general 'rollback of the state'. Elizabeth Thurbon's paper in the same session looked in more detail at industry policy in Australia, also suggesting that the influence of neoliberal ideas in Australia may have been overstated. There has been constant and ongoing influence of developmental policy ideas over the last three decades in the realm of federal industrial governance.

Further papers explored the potential for some useful ways of thinking about neoliberalism. Lynne Chester outlined the nature of Australia's contemporary mode of *régulation* following the political ascendancy of neoliberalism, emphasising the increasing interventions of the state to secure the growth regime. Martijn Konings explored the lead-up to the financial crisis in the U.S., arguing that the neoliberal era *extended* the state's regulatory power, contradicting neoliberalism's ideological emphasis on deregulation.

Tensions within neoliberalism were then teased out in the following session, with Joy Paton arguing that neoliberalism is not so much a coherent theory as an inherently political phenomenon embodying tensions that challenge its claim to be a modern expression of liberalism. Damien Cahill put forward a framework for understanding neoliberalism as a deeply embedded set of institutional rules, class relations and ideological norms – a constellation of features which have proved to be resilient in the face of crisis.

The ideas infusing neoliberalism were also critically considered. Mitchell Dean suggested a two-fold approach to understanding neoliberalism. First, drawing upon the Foucauldian tradition of governmentality studies, neoliberalism can be conceived of as a regime of state, involving particular techniques of governance. Second, drawing upon the recent work of Mirowski and Plehwe, neoliberalism can be conceived of as a 'thought collective' or militant movement that mobilises to influence sovereign power. Melinda Cooper and Jeremy Walker's paper explored the traces of Hayek in the 'resilience' thinking becoming popular in financial circles in the wake of the recent crisis, warning that complex systems theory has transformed from a critique of power to a methodology of power.

Finally, political futures and possibilities were explored. Lindy Edwards suggested that rejecting the identification of ‘markets’ with ‘individualism’ opens up the scope for a new political agenda which takes account of the importance of co-operation within markets. Ben Spies-Butcher charted the way that post-materialist issues have realigned with the traditional class issues in the Australian electorate, and argued that in conjunction with fragmentation of the major parties’ voter bases, this creates the potential for federal government policy to be shifted to a progressive ‘nation-building’ path.

Workshops such as this are often more useful for debating and seeking to clarify key issues and questions than for reaching agreement about policy futures or analytical frames – and so it proved on this occasion. While participants differed on the appropriate conceptual tools and research traditions for understanding neoliberalism, a consensus emerged about the existence of distinct *dimensions* of neoliberalism: neoliberalism as ideology; neoliberalism as a movement; and neoliberalism as a policy regime. This informed a common recognition that the relationship between neoliberal theory and practice is fundamentally problematic, and that government policies over the last three decades are not simply the reflection of neoliberal ideas.

The need to be attentive to the global and local characteristics was also noted. While an overarching logic of neoliberalism can be identified at the global level, the extent and nature of neoliberal restructuring varies between countries. It was pointed out that analyses of neoliberalism tend to privilege the experiences of the global ‘North’, yet neoliberalism is also to be found in the ‘South’ with Pinochet’s Chile being the first example of neoliberalism in practice. So, while much of the discussion focussed upon the specificities of the Australian situation, it was recognised that aspects of this experience are not universal.

As for public policy directions and the future of neoliberalism in the wake of the global financial crisis, different viewpoints remain. Participants in the workshop variously highlighted the importance of new policy ideas, new discursive policy frames, new regulations, a renewal of the nation-building agenda and the role of different agents, such as public servants, political parties, social movements, and class forces. Nonetheless, the workshop sketched some of the factors and constraints likely to shape policy responses in the post-crisis environment. The ‘institutional stickiness’ of both neoliberalism and its predecessors was noted. Neoliberal forms of regulation continue in many areas, but older forms of governance and institutions remain pervasive. This suggests that enduring policy shifts need to be firmly embedded within institutional rules and structures. Participants also noted the role of vested interests, whether conceived of in class or other terms, in post-crisis regulatory responses. This suggests the importance of the distribution of political and economic power in shaping both neoliberalism and alternative policy directions.

This topic will be a matter of ongoing consideration, evolving with the changing conditions in the wake of the global financial crisis and the various attempts to establish a more stable political economic order. Participants in the workshop agreed that a publication based on the papers considered at the workshop would be a valuable input to these ongoing deliberations. Accordingly, the workshop convenors are making arrangements with an international publisher and hope to have the book completed and available during 2011.