

Conference “Neoliberalism in the Anglophone World”

Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, 10th-11th March 2017

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Conference “Neoliberalism in the Anglophone World”

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- 1 This international conference was hosted by the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (EMMA, Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone) and sponsored by CHCSC (Centre d’Histoire Culturelle des Sociétés Contemporaines) and the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines and CRECIB (Centre de Recherches en Civilisation Britannique). It was organized by Simon Dawes, Associate Professor at the Université de Versailles’s IECI (Institut d’Études Culturelles et Internationales) and Marc Lenormand, Associate Professor at the Université Paul-Valéry. The two-day conference comprised eight workshops and two keynote sessions.
- 2 As the conference organizers noted in their call for papers, the relevance of “neoliberalism” is noticeable in the increasing number of citations to articles whose titles include the term “neoliberalism” or “neo-liberalism” between 1992 and 2015, as well as in the abundance of public debate following the global financial crisis of 2008. This crisis has arguably resulted in the questioning of neoliberal logic and in a renewed scholarly focus on the impact of neoliberalism, not only in political science and economics, but also in area studies, history, social science, literature and linguistics. The ambitious aim of this conference was to cover these different fields from a wide range of perspectives in the Anglophone world that extends from the US and the UK to other English-speaking areas, including South Africa and India. The result was a very rich mix of contributions from scholars focusing on such diverse research objects as politics, economics, ethics, education, the state, the city, gender, race, sexuality, media, and culture.
- 3 This account will focus on the speakers who tackled neoliberalism more specifically in the United States. A list of the papers mentioned can be found at the end of this review.

1) The historical framework of the concept

- 4 Most speakers pointed out the absence of an explicit definition of the concept of neoliberalism by those who use it, including scholars. Jean-François Bissonnette (Université Paris-Nanterre) called “neoliberalism” a “catch-all term” lacking precision while Jacob Hamburger (École Normale Supérieure de Paris) noticed it is often used for everything that has gone wrong under the so-called “Washington Consensus.” When it is defined, often in very vague terms, neoliberalism is most commonly related to the declining role of government in social and economic affairs. Lucie de Carvalho (Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille 3) and Bradley Smith (Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis) laid out the idea that neoliberalism is frequently defined as the antinomy of Keynesianism: whereas the Keynesian model advocates state intervention to “steer” markets in a socially desirable direction, the “neoliberal” model is often defined by its promoters and opponents alike in terms of opposition to state intervention. The traditional historical periodization considers that the Keynesian model dominated Western policymaking between the 1930s and the 1970s, and was followed by a “neoliberal revolution” that has brought about the pre-eminence of the neoliberal model since the late 1970s. As Andrew Diamond (Université Paris-Sorbonne) explained, this outlook prevails among historians and was largely influenced by Marxist geographer and social scientist David Harvey, who views the 1970s and 1980s as the pivotal moment of the neoliberal turn.
- 5 Neoliberalism, however, cannot be reduced to its opposition to Keynesianism. Jacopo Marchetti (Università di Pisa) identified three different historical phases that shaped the neoliberal philosophy: 1) the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris in 1938, where the term “neoliberalism” was first coined; 2) the formation of the Mont Pèlerin Society led by Friedrich Hayek in 1947; 3) the advent of American hegemony in the liberal intellectual community from the 1960s. This third phase entails that the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s may not simply be the outcome of the so-called “Reagan revolution”.
- 6 Diamond aimed precisely at demonstrating that the change actually proceeded step by step. By focusing on urban policy at the local level between the 1920s and the 1980s, he showed that the market logic only gradually penetrated political institutions and the broader political cultures of American cities. This means that neoliberalization should be considered a process that took place over decades rather than a dramatic shift. Similarly, de Carvalho and Smith chose to talk about a “neoliberal turn” rather than a “revolution”. Their point was that, contrary to common assumption, the American and British state apparatuses have not ceased to intervene and “steer the markets” over the past four decades. More specifically Smith convincingly established that through a combination of indirect means such as financial incentives, targeted deregulation and guarantees, the United States government has encouraged investment in such sectors as housing and mortgages. A pointing example is the continuous deregulation of the banking industry between 1980 and 1999 through three pieces of legislation that effectively repealed the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933. This, according to Smith, illustrates what he called “neoliberal interventionism,” which has been constant, though more or less direct, depending on specific political objectives.

2) A moral framework

- 7 As much as these neoliberal reforms have been designed to provide a framework for markets, they are not without moral justifications. In this respect, Smith used the example of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act passed in 1999, which contributed to the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act at the end of the Clinton era. The rationale was that it was supposed to encourage banks to provide more housing loans to low-income families. This same moral rationale was also used by the George W. Bush administration.
- 8 In fact, in the last four decades, both Republicans and Democrats have not only accepted, but even made the case for the moral nature of the free market that is at the heart of the neoliberal philosophy. This is particularly visible in presidential rhetoric since Ronald Reagan. Thus, Jérôme Viala-Gaudefroy (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3) showed that all post-cold war presidents, with the exception of President Trump, used similar metaphors providing a deterministic economic model that makes free market and free trade the only natural course to follow. He analyzed how, in presidential discourse, the market is presented as a moral agent that is benevolent, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, which are all traditional features of the divine. He concluded that Donald Trump’s break from the presidential rhetoric of the last forty years may be seen as a form of heresy that may precisely explain his success.
- 9 Bissonnette also demonstrated that this “moral economy” has permeated the American society through the development of credit, which is supposed to provide access to middle-class status symbols, such as homeownership and higher education. This echoes what Gabriele Ciampini (Università degli Studi di Firenze) called a “strategy to bring the individual to the market economy model.” Both Bissonnette and Ciampini acknowledged the influence of Foucault’s philosophy on their analyses of neoliberalism, particularly his concept of “governmentality” and the idea that political power might encourage individuals to adapt to the discourse of the “entrepreneurial self” and competition.
- 10 Bissonnette focused on the topic of debt and credit in the United States to exemplify the neoliberal turn in public policy that has resulted in turning individuals into economic subjects. Credit has had a strategic value in this process. As a consequence, there has been a growing acceptance of a “payback morality” and self-discipline on the part of those subjects, including systemic surveillance in the form of credit-scoring and transaction-tracking algorithmic technologies. The role of IT in reinforcing neoliberalism has also been argued by David Harvey, as Charles Egert (Télécom École de Management) also noted in his paper. More generally, Bissonnette considered that a “culture of indebtedness” has been generated in the last decades, particularly in the major Anglophone countries and primarily in the United States. This culture is attested by other scholarly research showing that risk has shifted from collective and public to individual and private entities. In other words, it is no longer government but private debt that is now supposed to ensure the security and well-being of individuals.

3) An “American” neoliberalism?

- 11 Ciampini also identified discipline as a major element of neoliberalism’s moral framework that may be more specifically American in its nature. This, he claimed, comes with other

distinctively American moral assumptions such as a positive view of competition, a spirit of independence, the belief in freedom of initiative, and mistrust of an intrusive central government. For Ciampini, all these elements are not only constitutive of the American cultural identity, but also more specifically of the Southern conservative culture. Drawing on the thought of two influential conservative thinkers, James Buchanan and Russel Kirk, he explained that their opposition to Keynesianism was prompted by a fear of the abandonment of those traditional American values. He emphasized their belief in the moral superiority of small communities as a way to resist state power. His conclusion was that neoliberalism is indeed closely related to a politically conservative view.

- 12 The word "conservative", however, can also be a catch-all term that probably needs to be defined. Hamburger made an important distinction within the conservative movement between neoliberals and neoconservatives, even though both have allied to defend the Western model of capitalism within the Republican Party. This distinction lies in the difference in their motivations for the defense of American-style capitalism. His study of Irving Kristol, the "Godfather of Neoconservatives", illustrates how neo-conservatism is primarily founded on anti-communism and is first and foremost motivated by the defense of political liberalism and liberal democracy. Neoliberal thinkers, on the other hand, such as Milton Friedman, focus almost exclusively on economic liberalism. Hamburger noticed that these two ideologies are often confused as they were brought together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, primarily within the Republican Party.
- 13 Another distinct feature of American neoliberalism, according to Marchetti, is to interpret all human action as economic action, thus endowing economics with a distinct heuristic value from the wider perspective of social sciences. For Marchetti, this particular branch of neoliberalism, which he called "the second generation of neoliberals," developed first in the United States and was influenced by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics. They must be differentiated from the early proponents of neoliberalism that began with the Austrian School of Economics such as Friedrich Hayek who connected economic choices with political arguments and social science premises.
- 14 In addition to this academic approach, a series of speakers also focused on how neoliberalism has resulted in a series of social changes that have fundamentally altered the use of space, particularly in urban areas, as well as artistic expressions since the 1980s. In this regard, Diamond emphasized the important role of urban historians in illuminating the effect of neoliberalism at the local level. More specifically, Marine Dassé (Université Paris-Nanterre) examined the relationship between anti-homeless laws and the neoliberalization of public spaces in Los Angeles. She argued that the city's attempt to "clean up the street" in Skid Row was part of complex neoliberal politics that started in the 1980s. Her point was that this particular example illustrates a larger phenomenon of trying to make the streets more elitist by blurring the boundaries between public and private, and by restricting their access to such categories of people as artists, non-conformists or the poor. Focusing on territory and the arts, Egert analyzed the struggle between artists in the New York City metropolitan area in the 1980s and what he termed the "controllers of mass media." He showed how artists defended alternative identities and languages against the growing monopoly and control of the mass media, and against the territorial encroachment of neoliberalism in inner cities.
- 15 Paradoxically, however, mass cultural production can also participate in challenging the neoliberal order when, for instance, the economic crisis becomes its subject matter.

Juliette Feyel (Lycée Uruguay-France) and Clémence Fourton (Université de Poitiers) studied the representations and narratives of the 2008 crisis in fictions and documentaries that have been met with commercial or critical success in the US and in the UK. While these cultural productions operate as spaces where narratives of the crisis can emerge, these narratives can be either amplified or silenced. This may take the form of an indictment of neoliberal capitalism, as in the documentary *Inside Job* (2011), or of a rather didactic stance when discussing the crisis, as in the fictional feature *The Big Short* (2015). Feyel and Fourton developed a typology of representations of the crisis where the socio-economic can either remain in the background or become a key dramatic element.

CONCLUSION

- 16 This conference contributed to the advancement of American studies by offering a platform of discussion that delineated the contours of neoliberalism and assessed how neoliberal ideas and policies have developed in the United States in the past four decades. Three points of convergence seem to emerge. First, it appears that beyond the so-called Reagan revolution, the shift towards a neoliberal philosophy has been a long process rooted in conservative movements. It was reinforced and made more visible from the 1980s onward, thanks to political, societal and technological changes, and the increasingly global spread and influence of neoliberal think-tanks and lobbyists. Secondly, one can only conclude from the different panels that, despite what is generally assumed, the government has played an active role both at the local and federal levels in promoting neoliberalism, regardless of party affiliation. Finally, it is clear that this shift was popularized by a moral discourse that made such changes acceptable by the general population. Further analysis of a growing anti-neoliberal sentiment might also be necessary in future discussions.
- 17 Overall, however, this conference confirmed the richness and variety of the research done in relation to neoliberalism. Notwithstanding this wealth of scholarly analysis, it also highlighted how the academic world remains largely influenced by two traditional critical approaches: a Marxist perspective, illustrated by the work of David Harvey who was often cited in the papers (Egert, Feyel and Fourton, Diamond, Dassé), and a Foucauldian approach through his theory of governmental rationality (Bissonnette, Ciampini). If the academic discussion today continues to be heavily indebted to the legacies of these philosophies, it is certainly because neoliberalism is about the nature of power in modern society and the relationship of individual subjects to this power. These approaches, however, also reflect two contrasted outlooks on power: on the one hand, an emphasis on ideology and a binary class struggle in which power is owned by the dominant class (Marxism) and, on the other hand, a focus on discourse and a more dynamic and positive view of power that can be owned by individuals and does not necessarily flow from top to bottom (Foucault). While these approaches are different, they may also be complementary, as illustrated in urban studies (Diamond). Nonetheless, it might be necessary to widen and renew the scope of academic theoretical and methodological approaches in order to adjust to the challenges of understanding such a complex phenomenon and controversial topic as neoliberalism.

List of the papers mentioned:

- Bissonnette, Jean-François, “Credit as Political Technology: Finance and the Production of the Neoliberal Subject”
 - Ciampini, Gabriele, “The Conservative Neoliberalism of James M. Buchanan and Russell Kirk and the Moral Justification of Economic Austerity”
 - De Carvalho Lucie, and Smith, Bradley T. “Has the State Stopped Steering Markets? Rethinking Periodization and Neoliberal Interventionism in the United States and the United Kingdom”
 - Dassé, Marine, “The Broken Window Theory, Anti-homeless Laws and the Neoliberalization of Public Spaces in Los Angeles”
 - Diamond, Andrew, “Historicizing Neoliberalization at the Grassroots”
 - Egert, Charles, “Urban Arts in the 1980s: Dreams and Deceptions”
 - Feyel Juliette, and Fourton, Clémence “Representations of the 2008 Crisis in British and American Films: What Makes a Successful Crisis Narrative?”
 - Hamburger, Jacob, “Irving Kristol’s Conservative Liberalism: When the Neocons Were Critics of Neoliberalism”
 - Marchetti, Jacopo, “Birth and Changes of Neoliberal Policies from 1930s to 1980s: In and Out of the ‘Myth’ of Free-Market”
 - Viala-Gaufroy, Jérôme, “Mythification of Market-Based Economics through Metaphors in Post-Cold War US Presidential Discourse”
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