



Nine Lives of Neoliberalism

edited by Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski, London and New York, Verso, 2020, 368 pp., £25.00 (paperback), ISBN 1788732537

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BOOK REVIEW

Nine Lives of Neoliberalism, edited by Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski, London and New York, Verso, 2020, 368 pp., £25.00 (paperback), ISBN 1788732537

‘A cat has nine lives,’ a popular proverb goes. ‘For three he plays, for three he strays, and for the last three he stays.’ Rather than providing yet another account of what neoliberalism ‘is,’ three eminent scholars of the intellectual history of neoliberal thought – Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski – mobilize the ‘Nine Lives’ metaphor as a cultural heuristic through which they try to make sense of why neoliberalism survives one crisis after another.

There are at least three, oftentimes overlapping, ways in which we can study neoliberalism: by tracing its intellectual history and the formation of its ideas, by conceiving it as an epistemological program, or by studying it as a product of the structural contradictions of globalized capitalism. In trying to make sense of neoliberalism’s longevity, Plehwe, Slobodian, and Mirowski opt for the first approach, which allows for conclusions regarding the second. And they have ‘no quarrel with’ the third way, as they do not ‘insist dogmatically on the primacy of ideas’ and consider Marxian approaches ‘essential for making sense of the present’ (p. 2).

What the ‘Nine Lives’ metaphor adds to these approaches analytically is ‘an irruption of one context upon another’ (Bontekoe 1987, p. 211), because, as anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga (2005) tells us, metaphors are not simply representations detached from social reality. Rather, they ‘do’ things: they display and disguise significations, and engender and enact political affectivities. For the editors, the ‘Nine Lives’ metaphor signifies the ways in which a ‘body of thought and set of practices,’ has proven ‘agile and acrobatic, prone to escaping alive from even the most treacherous predicaments’ (p. 2). Here, neoliberalism is ‘less a policy orthodoxy than a consistent approach to policy problems’ with the ultimate aim of ‘safeguarding what neoliberals call a competitive order and exposing humanity ever more to the price mechanism’ (p. 6). Garrett Hardin’s (1974) or Friedrich von Hayek’s (1992) Darwinian-utilitarian theorizations on the calculus of human lives, amongst others, have shown that ‘many neoliberals are more than willing to find a middle ground between their own principles and those of an exclusionary culturalist, and even racist, right’ (p. 7).

And herein lies the book’s central claim: neoliberalism has been able to survive precisely because of its malleability, not least due to how it, almost parasitically, encroaches upon competing worldviews. The book’s object, therefore, is to make these entanglements visible, by observing the historical development and progression of neoliberal ideas, while also ‘tracking the linkages of elements of those worldviews to competing ideologies, or the mixed morphologies of both conservative-neoliberal and progressive-neoliberal perspectives’ (p. 11). In order to do so, *Nine Lives* is organized in four parts and explores the conflictual formation of neoliberal ideas in their respective *zeitgeist*, theorizations on individual and collective forms of subjectivity, the popularization efforts of neoliberal politics, and the translation of ideas into policy practice via personal, academic, and think tank networks through the eyes of lesser known neoliberal figures, such as Fritz Machlup, Herbert Giersch, and Günter Schmolders.

Part One of the book is concerned with the epistemological groundings of central neoliberal ideas. Martin Beddeleem traces the epistemological reconfiguration of (neo-)liberal thought in 1930s Vienna in light of the increasing popularity of scientific reasoning, state planning, and the rise of socialist ideas. Drawing on the debates between early thinkers such as Karl Popper, Michael Polanyi, and Ludwig von Mises, Martin Beddeleem delineates the construction of a scientifically grounded neoliberal epistemology that sought to further the ideological project of neoliberalism.

The strength of Martin Beddeleem analysis lies in shedding light on the contradictions of this project: on the one hand, neoliberalism is a strictly scientific program of knowledge construction that mobilizes the doxa of the superiority of the market. On the other hand, there is a somewhat anti-democratic ideological goal of controlling, diffusing, and implementing this knowledge. Martin Beddeleem elucidates the ambiguities of trying to bridge these efforts.

Edward Nik-Khah too engages with neoliberal approaches to knowledge construction, by following the views of Chicago economist George Stigler on the university and ‘whether and under what circumstances the university upheld the epistemic virtues of the marketplace’ (p. 48). How could the market, an ‘information processor more powerful than any human brain’ (Mirowski 2014, p. 54), give rise to intellectual positions that are hostile to its very existence? Nik-Khah shows how Stigler’s initial position against the student-as-customer changed as he grew increasingly suspicious of the knowledge of the public, not least because of his growing disdain of the 1960s student movement. In following Stigler, Nik-Khah allows us to make sense of the early days of the ‘neoliberal university’ and the commercialization of science (e.g. via private donors).

Quinn Slobodian illuminates neoliberal positions on intellectual property rights, which historically were far from consensual. Can ideas be treated as property? While Chicago School thinkers like Stigler were key in elevating today’s intellectual property regime to the level of status quo, libertarian and Austrian neoliberals – such as Fritz Machlup – were, at times, radically critical of them. Slobodian shows that those neoliberal ideas about intellectual property most compatible with corporate interests have translated into law, tacitly fusing the history of ideas with the distributive power of the capitalist class.

Part Two delves into modes of subjectivity in neoliberal thought. Melinda Cooper’s insightful take on neoliberal positions on family and kinship shows how neoliberal thinkers did not promote, as one would assume, the freedom to (individualizing) lifestyle choices. Rather, neoliberals revived poor law traditions and mobilized conservative morality conceptions about the economic function of the family, so as to offload state responsibilities of basic welfare provision onto the family unit. Indeed, as Jessica Whyte has recently argued, ‘social conservatism, including explicit appeals to family values, Christianity and “Western civilisation,” was foundational to the consolidation of organised neoliberalism in the mid twentieth century’ (Whyte 2019, p. 9). Cooper’s contribution sheds light on the instrumental rationality of these developments, while simultaneously indicating the erosion of (state-organized) solidarity in the name of (Christian) morality.

Dieter Plehwe brings us to the heroic figure of neoliberal pop culture – the entrepreneur. His contribution critiques the tendencies of business gurus and critics of neoliberalism alike of essentializing the entrepreneur to its Schumpeterian conception. By dissecting the entrepreneurship theorizations by Giersch, Schmolders, Mises, and Kirzner, Plehwe shows how in fact discourses shifted between 1950 and 1980 from a naturalized and idealized entrepreneur, to one that is politically contingent, and that reacts to market opportunities. This conceptual shift allowed for critiquing state policies, as now entrepreneurship opportunities became a question of (overcoming) structural constraints. The strength of Plehwe’s analysis lies not least in laying bare the think tank-funded double effort of furthering entrepreneurship as an object of empirical analysis, as well as a heroized subject position.

Rüdiger Graf draws attention to the ambiguous relationship between neoliberal thought and behavioral economics by shedding light on the often-overlooked taxation economist and former president of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), Günter Schmolders. A former member of the NSDAP and the SS in Nazi Germany, Schmolders praised the potentialities of authoritarian regimes for offering ‘greater opportunities for technocracy’ (p. 149) than democracies. Graf convincingly illustrates how behavioral economics can serve both the extension of state regulation, as well as de-regulation. In so doing, he hints at the ways in which neoliberals have flirted with authoritarianism historically, despite their liberal proclamations.

Part Three of the book pays attention to the transnational elite networks of neoliberals. Hagen Schulz-Forberg takes us to the early discussions among neoliberals before and after the 1938 Walter

Lippmann Colloquium. He sheds light on their discourses about ‘good society,’ the necessity of bridging Christianity and liberalism, and the kinds of values a new liberal order ought to represent. Central to Schulz-Forberg’s analysis are discussions amongst such neoliberal luminaries as Hayek, Marjolin, and Baudin regarding the role of freedom as either a means of achieving human dignity, or an end in and of itself. Far from today’s often utilitarian precepts of neoliberalism, which seem to ‘eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense’ (Fisher 2009, p. 17), Schulz-Forberg explicates historical neoliberal presuppositions regarding moral authority. In connecting these discussions to the elite networks of neoliberal figures at the time – from the MPS to the League of Nations – Schulz-Forberg illustrates how ‘they can be thought of as normative actors fully aware of their very norm making’ (p. 194).

Matthias Schmelzer investigates the disputes among neoliberals in the 1950s and 1960s about a monetary order post Bretton Woods. For neoliberals such as Hayek and Friedman, free capital movement was essential for a new order, as direct controls to monetary exchange were seen as ‘the most effective way to convert a market economy into an authoritarian economic society’ (Friedman 2002, p. 57), revealing much about neoliberal notions of freedom. While in the 1947 founding MPS conference almost all participants argued for the reintroduction of the gold standard, neoliberals’ mistrust of governments to stick to the rules, as well as rising inflation in West Germany and the US at the time, led to the increasing support for floating exchange rates. In tracing the formation of this changing position, Schmelzer highlights that neoliberalism is in a ‘constant process of becoming’ (p. 213), transforming according to shifting conditions. This way, he lays bare the concerted effort of a transnational network of neoliberal figures to first define, and then ‘popularize their vision for taming democracy and liberalizing capital’ (p. 217).

Philip Mirowski’s contribution on the often mistakenly called ‘Nobel Prize in Economics’ also elaborates on the strategic efforts of normalizing and popularizing neoliberal positions via the cultural capital of institutions. In this case, he traces the equally contingent, concerted, and, at times, dubious efforts of the Swedish Riksbank in the 1960s to introduce what Mirowski eloquently refers to as an *Ersatz* Nobel Prize. The invention of this award ultimately supported the elevation of the previously marginal discipline of (orthodox) economics to what is today generally considered a science proper. Mirowski shows how the prize not only gave credibility to many neoliberal thinkers, but also how it promoted their intellectual positions.

The *Part Four of Nine Lives* investigates the influence and expansion of neoliberal ideas through the invention of think tanks and what may be called the ‘academization’ of the knowledge they produced. Marie Laure Djelic and Reza Mousavi trace how the Atlas Network went global, in order to develop their important claim that ‘not all ideas that circulate become performative – only those that are framed, carried, adopted, appropriated, enacted, and institutionalized successfully’ (p. 257). The authors show how the relationships between influential figures such as Antony Fisher and later on Alejandro Chafuen on the one hand, and considerable funding possibilities on the other, furthered the development of a globalized think tank network that strategically influenced public opinion in countries of the Global North and South alike, so as to then persuade legislators to favor neoliberal positions.

Alas, Stephan Pühringer final chapter of the volume certainly is the odd one out, methodologically speaking. In developing what he calls a ‘performative footprint,’ Pühringer seeks to quantify the ‘potential impact of’ over 800 economists at German universities ‘on politics and society’ between 1954 and 1994 (p. 290). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pühringer’s data brings the dominance of neoliberal figures in German academia and think tank networks to the fore, which simultaneously are more likely to have a higher media presence and key positions in policy advising.

Overall, *Nine Lives* provides a telling and accessible history of the formation of key neoliberal (policy) positions and, therefore, of how neoliberals mobilized the market discursively as a seemingly impartial communication mechanism so as to not merely produce knowledge, but rather to produce the ideological precepts of the ‘right’ kind of knowledge. At the same time, by pointing to the intellectual struggles among neoliberals, and situating them in historical context, the

contributions of this volume are careful to point to the fact that neoliberalism is far from homogeneous and consensual – despite the fact that it managed to popularly position itself as such, even within the ranks of its critics. This volume therefore deserves to be read alongside other standard works of the intellectual history of neoliberalism, including Walpen's (2004) unfortunately not (yet?) translated *Die offenen Feinde und Ihre Gesellschaft*, Mirowski and Plehwe's *Road to Mont Pèlerin* (2009), as well as Chernomas and Hudson's (2017) *The Profit Doctrine*, which all in their own way trace the intellectual history of neoliberal thought and its thinkers, so as to make sense of why certain ideas became accepted, while others were ignored.

By including understudied figures of neoliberal history, the empirical strength of 'Nine Lives' lies in adding to the corpus of either forgotten, or previously invisible, historical actor-network configurations. However, it would have been much welcome if the volume included marginalized neoliberals of the Global South, which continue to be understudied – although, to be fair, Djelic and Mousavi at least touch upon the topic from a think tank viewpoint.

If there is one critique to be made, it is about the relationship between neoliberalism and the ascendance of right-wing populism globally. There are some intriguing questions tacitly lurking in the volume regarding the peculiar relationship between the authority of neoliberal expertise and intellectual primacy on the one hand, and the assumed *Mündigkeit* (maturity) of individuals (in a Kantian sense) via freedom, on the other. This ambiguous relationship is touched upon in Beddeleem and Graf's chapters. But considering the importance the editors attribute to these 'mixed morphologies' (p. 11) in the introduction, there is surprisingly little that follows regarding the conditions of possibility for fusing neoliberal thought with anti-democratic, authoritarian, at times even racist, positions and state-institutional arrangements. This would have been possible in a conclusion chapter, which is, unfortunately, missing.

Nonetheless, *Nine Lives* convincingly elucidates why it is important to continue inquiry into the history of neoliberal ideas. From a pragmatist viewpoint, this is because revisiting observations about the past through the lenses of ever-changing presents allows us to re-signify historical configurations anew. In line with the metaphor, *Nine Lives* illuminates neoliberalism's three lives of playing, and its three lives of straying, so as to hopefully provide its readers with a hunch for how many more of its last three lives it's staying.

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