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Neoliberalism as discourse: between Foucauldian political economy and Marxian poststructuralism

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Contemporary theorizations of neoliberalism are framed by a false dichotomy between, on the one hand, studies influenced by Foucault in emphasizing neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, and on the other hand, inquiries influenced by Marx in foregrounding neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology. This article seeks to shine some light on this division in an effort to open up new debates and recast existing ones in such a way that might lead to more flexible understandings of neoliberalism as a discourse. A discourse approach moves theorizations forward by recognizing neoliberalism is neither a ‘top-down’ nor ‘bottom-up’ phenomena, but rather a circuitous process of socio-spatial transformation.

Keywords: discourse; governmentality; hegemony; neoliberalism; political economy; poststructuralism

Gérard Raulet: ‘But does this . . . mean that, in a certain way, Marx is at work in your own methodology?’ Michel Foucault: ‘Yes, absolutely’. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 46)

In reply to Marx’s famous thesis that philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world when the real point is to change it, Foucault would no doubt have argued that our constant task must be to keep changing our minds. (Goldstein, 1991, p. 14)

Introduction

Reading my title one would be forgiven for thinking I made a mistake in the placement of my adjectives. Yet, as hinted by the opening quote, this was no mistake. My purpose here is not to offer a framework for what a ‘Foucauldian political economy’ or ‘Marxian poststructuralism’ might look like. Instead, my title is meant to be provocative as I want to suggest that the rupture that exists in current theorizations of neoliberalism is to at least some degree framed by a false dichotomy between those studies that have been influenced by Foucault in emphasizing governmentality, and those studies that foreground ideas of hegemonic ideology, drawing influence from Marx. In this article, I do not presume to work out all the tensions that inevitably arise between poststructuralist and Marxian accounts, yet to be very clear, nor do I seek to. My purpose is much more modest than that. In the spirit of ‘changing our minds’, I instead seek to shine some new light on a factional issue in the interest of opening up new debates and recasting existing ones in such a way that might lead to more flexible and circuitous understandings of neoliberalism.

Within the broader literature, my approach is signaled by the ‘cultural turn’ of both international political economy and economic geography. The emphasis on cultural approaches to understanding economies and their geographies, or what Sayer (2001) has called a ‘cultural
economy’, envisions ‘culture’ as a bottom-up method of analysis, augmenting the more traditional top-down approach of political economy (Hudson, 2006). This shift in focus recognizes the meanings that social practices and relations have for those situated within them, and further that economic agents do not merely submit to the abstract category of ‘market’. Rather, their economic world is infused with contestation over what constitutes the market/state, and the rules and conventions according to which actors should operate. Equally, it also presumes a degree of reflexivity among political economists, recognizing that their theories are (re)produced in specific space–time contexts as ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988). From a feminist perspective, Nagar, Lawson, McDowell, and Hanson (2002) have argued that political economic geography must necessarily be extended even further to begin accounting for the gendered spatial dimensions that underpin local-cum-global economic processes, and particularly the analytical erasure of the role of feminized subjects and the informal work they perform. Congruent to this project is the need for future studies to cut across scales, bringing together perspectives from both the north and south in highlighting the relationship between particularized and generalized economic processes (Nagar et al., 2002). This is a call answered by Sparke et al. (2005, p. 359), who attempt to model ‘a more socially, culturally, and internationally inclusive critique of neoliberal globalization for economic geographers’ through an evaluation of the degree to which criticisms of neoliberalism articulated at the World Social Forum facilitate the inclusion of excluded subjects, spaces, and informal economic spheres into formal economic directives. In short, a culturally informed critical political economy has a major role to play in developing politically enabling understandings of the entanglements of power (Sharp, Routledge, Philo, & Paddison, 2000) in an increasingly interdependent neoliberal world.

Implicit in these notions of a culturally informed political economy is an appreciation of poststructural critique, which renowned political economist Cox (2002) makes explicit by adopting poststructuralism’s classic critique that all power/knowledge is for someone, serving some purpose, and any notion of disinterested objectivity is illusory. Wright (2006, p. 83) neatly summarizes poststructuralism’s position on objectivity, suggesting ‘not only is the idea that we can grasp meaning through language a fiction, albeit a necessary one, but so also is the idea that we can know (conceptualize) or represent original meaning through scientific inquiry’. In other words, as Foucault (1978, 1980) demonstrated through his dismantling of the subject as a self-knowing and autonomous actor, human reality is a protean landscape, produced through innumerable signifying activities, whose origins can never be located through historical, philosophical, or ‘scientific’ inquiry. Poststructuralism thus advances a constructivist position, which deconstructs the truth claims of an objective science by ‘showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 578), which in turn dismantles the possibility of any apparatus that might be used to effectively talk about the ‘real world’. The current influence of neoliberal reason (Peck, 2010) offers no exception to the notion that power operates as a field of knowledge serving some purpose, and through such understanding we begin to open a window to how poststructuralism might be able to accommodate the political economy appraisal that neoliberalism is an elite project concerned with the (re)constitution of class power (see Duménil & Lévy, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Plehwe, Walpen, & Neunhoffer, 2006).

In recognition of the cultural turn, and informed by both political economy and poststructuralist critiques, in this article, I set out to argue in favor of understanding neoliberalism as a particular discourse. I argue that conceptualizing neoliberalism as discourse enables a potential merger of political economy and poststructuralist approaches by recognizing the importance of both critical perspectives without privileging either. How we understand the translation of global capital across various spaces and cultural contexts, and in particular, how we interpret the fluidity between those who produce and those constrained by neoliberal discourse is a
paramount consideration if we are to counter problematic notions of neoliberalism as an unstoppable force. The latest wave of neoliberal ‘roll-out’ following the financial crisis that began in 2008 makes countering this ‘juggernaut view’ even more urgent, as what Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010) have dubbed ‘neoliberalism 3.0’ begins seeking out new paths and extensions of power. In tracing the contours of neoliberalism as discourse, I begin with a discussion that outlines the lack of consensus in defining neoliberalism that has contributed to misunderstanding between scholars before moving forward to discuss how various interpretations of neoliberalism might be sutured together.

In short, the primary purpose of this article is to contribute to theorizations that might enable more forceful critiques of the power of neoliberalism. A discourse approach moves our theorizations forward through an understanding that neoliberalism is neither built from the ‘top-down’, as in Marxian understandings of ideological hegemony, nor from the ‘bottom-up’, as in poststructuralist notions of governmentality. Rather, neoliberalism is instead recognized as a mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends. There is, no doubt, a terrible danger in a dematerialized poststructuralism, but I set out to argue that poststructuralist thought need not be separated from the material. My purpose is not to replace ‘neoliberalism as monolithism’ with an immaterial discursivism. Rather, the version of neoliberalism as discourse I present acknowledges the inherently transitory nature of ‘the social’, but remains ‘grounded’ by recognizing both the Marxian lineage of poststructuralist critique and through an understanding of materialism as an ‘archeology of knowledge’ (Foucault, 1972/2002) that necessarily couples discourse with practice. What is at stake is an understanding of neoliberalism that is duly aware of both ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, thus capturing the discursive production of neoliberalism.

**Toward a neoliberal discourse: ideological hegemonic project, policy and program, state form, and governmentality**

From initial explorations concerned with the implications for state reform, the expansion of neoliberalism into a field of academic inquiry has been meteoric. Scholars are now examining the relationships between neoliberalism and everything from cities to citizenship, sexuality to subjectivity, and development to discourse to name but a few. Concomitant to such theoretical expansion, consensus on what is actually meant by ‘neoliberalism’ has diminished. Consequently, some commentators have demonstrated considerable anxiety over the potential explanatory power of the concept, labeling neoliberalism a ‘necessary illusion’ (Castree, 2006) or suggesting that ‘there is no such thing’ (Barnett, 2005). Drawing on Gibson-Graham’s (1996) misgivings over the discursive fetishization of capital, these reservations are anxious about how pervasive neoliberalism has become in academic writing and are equally concerned about the monolithic appearance of neoliberalism owing to its characterization as expansive, dynamic, and self-reproducing. These critiques offer an important call for further reflection, as it is vital to challenge the ‘neoliberalism as monolithism’ argument for failing to recognize the protean and processual character of space and time (Massey, 2005; Springer, 2011c). Similarly, by constituting an external and supposedly omnipresent neoliberalism, we neglect internal constitution, local variability, and the role that ‘the social’ and individual agency play in (re)producing, facilitating, and circulating neoliberalism. Such criticisms have triggered an increasing propensity in the literature to replace discussions of neoliberalism with a new language of ‘neoliberalization’, which acknowledges multiplicity, complexity, variegation, and contextual specificity (see Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; England & Ward, 2007; Heynen & Robbins, 2005; Purcell, 2008; Springer, 2010b, 2011a). As a protean process, neoliberalization is considered to ‘materialize’ very differently as a series of hybridized and mutated forms of neoliberalism,
contingent upon existing historical contexts, geographical landscapes, institutional legacies, and embodied subjectivities (see Peck, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

On the other hand, some have called for a moment of pause, suggesting that we should be wary of overly concrete or introspective analyses of the local, as such accounts inadequately attend to the principal attributes and meaningful bonds of neoliberalism as a global project (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). The ‘larger conversation’ that neoliberalism provokes is regarded as imperative in connecting similar patterns of experiences across space, which may serve as a potential basis for building solidarities (see Brand & Wissen, 2005; Escobar, 2001; Featherstone, 2005; Kohl, 2006; Routledge, 2003; Springer, 2008, 2011b; Willis, Smith, & Stenning, 2008). Thus neoliberalism as a concept allows poverty and inequality experienced across multiple sites to find a point of similitude, whereas disarticulation undermines efforts to build and sustain shared aims of resistance beyond the micro-politics of the local. Accordingly, conceptualizing neoliberalism requires an appreciation of the elaborate and fluctuating interchange between the local and extralocal forces at work within the global political economy (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Peck, 2001). Ong (2007, p. 3) corroborates this notion by conceptualizing ‘big N Neoliberalism’ as ‘a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes’, while ‘small n neoliberalism’ operates in practice ‘as a logic of governing that mitigates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts’. In this light, Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 383) propose ‘a processual conception of neoliberalization as both an “out there” and “in here” phenomenon whose effects are necessarily variegated and uneven, but the incidence and diffusion of which may present clues to a pervasive “metalogic”. Like globalization, neoliberalization should be understood as a process, not an end-state’. Thus, neoliberalism-cum-neoliberalization can be viewed as a plural set of ideas emanating from both everywhere and nowhere within diffused loci of power (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006). The inability to straightforwardly align neoliberalism to particular individuals, organizations, or states, and the further recognition that there is no ‘pure’ or ‘paradigmatic’ version of neoliberalism, but rather a series of geopolitically distinct and institutionally effected hybrids (Peck, 2004), plays a significant role in the difficulty of realizing consensus on a conceptual definition of ‘neoliberalism in general’. Neoliberalism, it would seem is simply too nebulous to isolate or determine (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

Nonetheless, following Ward and England (2007) within the existing literature, we can identify four different understandings of neoliberalism:

1) **Neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project.** This understanding maintains that elite actors and dominant groups organized around transnational class-based alliances have the capacity to project and circulate a coherent program of interpretations and images of the world onto others. This is not merely subordination to particular coercive impositions, but also involves a degree of willing consent. Attention is focused on the people and ideas behind the conceptual origin of neoliberalism, as well as those who are at the forefront of its adoption in a range of geographical settings (see Cox, 2002; Duménil & Lévy, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Peet, 2002; Plehwe et al., 2006).

2) **Neoliberalism as policy and program.** This frame of reference focuses on the transfer of ownership from the state or public holdings to the private sector or corporate interests, which necessarily involves a conceptual reworking of the meaning these categories hold. The understanding itself is premised on the idea that opening collectively held resources to market mediation engenders greater efficiency. The usual motifs under which such policy and program are advanced include privatization, deregulation, liberalization, depoliticization, and monetarism (see Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Klepeis & Vance, 2003; Martinez & Garcia, 2000).
(3) Neoliberalism as state form. In this understanding, neoliberalism is considered as a process of transformation that states purposefully engage in to remain economically competitive within a transnational playing field of similarly minded states. This is thought to involve both a quantitative axis of destruction and discreditation whereby state capacities and potentialities are ‘rolled back’, and a qualitative axis of construction and consolidation, wherein reconfigured institutional mediations, economic management systems, and invasive social agendas centered on urban order, surveillance, immigration issues, and policing are ‘rolled out’ (see Peck, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

(4) Neoliberalism as governmentality. This interpretation of neoliberalism centers on acknowledging a processual character where neoliberalism’s articulation with existing circumstances comes through endlessly unfolding failures and successes in the relations between peoples and their socially constructed realities as they are (re)imagined, (re)interpreted, and (re)assembled to influence forms of knowledge through ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Brown, 2003; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Larner, 2003; Lemke, 2002). This understanding implies power as a complex, yet very specific form centering on knowledge production through the ensemble of rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques concerning the mentality of rule that allow for the de-centering of government through the active role of auto-regulated or auto-correcting selves who facilitate ‘governance at a distance’ (Foucault, 1991a).

Thus, the internal dynamics of neoliberalism in this understanding are underpinned by an unquestioned ‘commonsense’, meaning quite literally, a sense held in common. Given that scholars of neoliberalism typically amalgamate two or more of these views on neoliberalism, my alignment of the studies cited in each understanding of neoliberalism remains open to reader interpretation. Potential misgivings over the associations I have made with regard to particular scholar’s views on neoliberalism actually reinforces my argument that each interpretation of neoliberalism does not exist in isolation, but is actually connected to and recursive of the alternative views. Recent contributions demonstrate a growing readiness to sift through the methodological, epistemological, and ontological differences between these four definitions (see Larner, 2003; Peck, 2004; Peet, 2007), even if particular views on neoliberalism still come through. Nonetheless, important ‘middle ground’ inquiries are emerging, where Gilbert (2005), Raco (2005), and McCarthy (2006) all develop more amalgamated interpretations. Yet truly hybridized approaches that attempt to synthesize or at least reconcile these divergent conceptions in any sustained sense are much less common. A series of progress reports by Sparke (2004, 2006, 2008) offers a notably rare exception. Concatenating such divergent theorizations is clearly no small task, as it is one that necessarily involves reconciling the Marxian political economy perspective of hegemonic ideology with poststructuralist conceptualizations of governmentality, where policy and program along with state form approaches fall somewhere in between. For Barnett (2005) the potential of such an exercise is entirely unconvincing as the two intellectual projects imply different models of the nature of explanatory concepts, of causality and determination, of social relations and agency, and different normative understandings of political power. Thus, he argues, ‘We should not finesse these differences away by presuming that the two approaches converge around a common real-world referent’ (Barnett, 2005, p. 8). Similarly, Castree (2006, p. 3) disavows what he calls the ‘both/and agenda’ for its ‘intractable inability to “fix” [neoliberalism’s] meanings with real-world referents’ stemming from the use of multiple definitions where ‘the real world’ can only partly function as a “court of appeal” to resolve competing claims as to what is (or is not) neoliberal in degree or kind’. Castree (2006, p. 3) uses the peculiar analogy of water to illustrate his point, taking its meaning from positivist scientism as having liquid, gas, and solid forms, yet always
remaining water ‘wherever and whenever it is’. This comparison, however, belies a faux realism as it fails to consider how different languages, cultures, and individuals may have very different meanings for and understandings of ‘water in general’. The idea that Inuit peoples have hundreds of words for the English language equivalent of ‘snow’ is an anthropological myth (Martin, 1986), but it is nonetheless instructive of how ‘the real world’ can be viewed as little more than a semiotic construction, where even something as seemingly universal as water may be reduced to competing claims as to what it is (or is not) in degree or kind. In other words, Castree (2006) engages a very narrowly and privately defined understanding of the ‘real’, which is mobilized as a cipher for his own idealism.

England and Ward (2007, p. 251) are far more sympathetic, where the trick in reconciling a political economy approach with poststructuralist perspectives is ‘to acknowledge the power of neoliberalism without reinscribing it as a unitary hegemonic project’. But while England and Ward acknowledge that an assemblage of ideas generally fall under the category of ‘neoliberal’, they seem to overlook the possibility of understanding hegemony in the Gramscian sense as neither unitary or monolithic, but itself rife with contingencies, ruptures, and contradictions. Indeed, such variegated hegemonies play themselves out as neoliberalizations in myriad situated contexts (Brenner et al., 2010). Such recognition of the hegemony of neoliberalism (or more appropriately the hegemonies of neoliberalizations) as in Marxian approaches is not at all inconsistent with poststructuralist inspired notions of governmentality. Rather, the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1991a) is part of how neoliberal hegemonic constellations have assembled themselves, particularly through networks of think tanks, whose embodied participants can be broadly conceived of as a transnational capitalist class (Carroll, 2010). These situated actors

Figure 1. Neoliberalism as discourse: a circuitous understanding of neoliberalism.
face various forms of incorporation and resistance dependent upon context, and thus mutate their approaches to neoliberal governance accordingly. As such, the notion of hegemony is not diametrically opposed to a more nuanced understanding of neoliberalization, nor is there an insurmountable disjunction between the four forms of neoliberalism. These theoretical strands are reconcilable insofar as the hegemonic project has particular policy goals that re-shape state formations, making them ‘differently powerful’ (Peck, 2001). Simultaneously, principles from different systems of thought are combined into one coherent ideology (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), which becomes ‘commonsense’ allowing governance at a distance to operate. In turn, the circle is closed – and thrown back on itself – by individual subjects who reconstitute hegemony through the coalescence of circumstances of their everyday lives. Thus, the productive power of neoliberal ideology constitutes and constrains, but does not determine. Instead, as a process of becoming through which one simultaneously obtains the constitution of a subjectivity (Foucault, 1988b) and undergoes subjection (Butler, 1997), neoliberal subjectivation works on individuals who are rendered as subjects and subjected to relations of power through discourse (Foucault, 1982). Accordingly, as Figure 1 indicates, neoliberalism can productively be understood as a circulating discourse.

Articulating poststructuralism and Marxism: historical materialism, discursive performativity, and the future of neoliberalism

Precisely because discourse can be defined as a group of statements belonging to a single system of formulation (Foucault, 1972/2002), neoliberalism understood as discourse is able to articulate a synthesis of complementarities between theoretical positions that are seemingly mismatched. Yet there can be little doubt that some readers will retain their hardened epistemological positions and want to continue to see these interwoven strands as disparate. For example, from a poststructuralist perspective this model of neoliberalism as discourse can be criticized for assuming a Marxian political economy inspired structure insofar as it still recognizes the hierarchy behind and involved in the construction of neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project. But when is poststructural critique ever actually ‘beyond structure’ in that regard? As Rancière (2006, p. 2) argues, ‘critique acknowledges something’s existence, but in order to confine it within limits’, and accordingly poststructuralism necessarily acknowledges structuralism and so presupposes structure. Moreover, there is no single definition of poststructuralism, no agreed upon methodological or theoretical imperatives. Instead, it refers to conceptual signposts collected from a diverse set of ideas based on the writings of authors like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. Indeed, it is inconsistent with poststructural concepts to codify itself in any concretized manner (Harrison, 2006). The term ‘poststructuralism’ itself was first applied to Derrida’s practice of deconstruction in the 1970s. Yet he showed some degree of discomfort with this label, suggesting it was ‘a word unknown in France until its “return” from the United States’ (Derrida, 1983/1988, p. 3). Instead, Derrida actually spoke of himself as both a communist and a Marxist (Ryan, 1982), where Specters of Marx clearly exemplified his position on the ongoing relevance of Marx and his belief that we must continue to sift through Marx’s possible legacies (Derrida 1994). Deleuze (1995, p. 171) also suggested he ‘remained Marxist’, having been intrigued by Marx’s analysis of capitalism as an imminent system that is constantly overcoming its own limitations, he contended that ‘any political philosophy must turn on the analysis of capitalism and the ways it has developed’. For his part, Foucault (1991b, p. 157) refused to define his position or ‘play the part of one who prescribes solutions’, regarding each of his books as an experiment that necessarily changed his opinions. Thus, one should not expect poststructuralist views to contribute to any sort of canon, for such a canon does not exist.
Poststructuralism instead begins from the position of destabilizing hierarchies of meanings, labels, knowledges, ideas, categories, and classifications, where the purpose is to challenge entrenched assumptions (Belsey, 2002). Deconstruction affirms that any social text, whether spoken or written, contains implicit hierarchies, through which an order is imposed on ‘reality’ exercising a subtle repression, as these hierarchies exclude, subordinate, and hide various other potential meanings (Lamont, 1987). This in itself, however, is the recognition of the existence of certain structures through the distinctions we make, even if they are not given as natural material realities reflecting a ‘real world’ and only exist as abstractions produced by the systems of symbolization we learn (Lacan, 1998). Furthermore, poststructuralism welcomes a variety of perspectives to create multifaceted interpretations, even if these interpretations conflict with one another. So although poststructuralism is often seen as antagonistic to traditional Marxism inasmuch as it ‘is believed to militate against the grand theory claims and the macro-phenomena level analysis adopted by Marxism, to focus upon the fragmentary, the incompleteness, the local, the indeterminate, and the partial nature of theory’ (Peters, 2001, pp. 7–8), poststructuralism might instead be understood as placing its theoretical attention on the social and political institutions that Marxists view as being determined by the economic, whereby the economic is not denied but instead its libidinal and liminal formations are suggested.

The relation between Marxism and poststructuralism can be understood as a shared understanding of capitalism as a central problem, where both attempt to decode and destabilize the power relations of capitalist axiomatics (Jameson, 1997). In this sense, and notwithstanding the epistemological and ontological differences, Marxian political economy and poststructuralism are not necessarily incommensurable at all, and the fact remains that Althusserian structuralist Marxism had a profound impact on thinkers we now call ‘poststructuralist’, as each came to terms with Marx in their own distinct ways (Peters, 2001). In Foucault (1991b, pp. 59–60) own words:

One of the essential points of my intellectual formation is found also in reflecting on science and the history of science. … But an analogous discourse also came out of the Marxist camp to the extent that Marxism … claimed to be a science or at least a general theory of the ‘scientificity’ of science: a kind of tribunal of reason which would permit us to distinguish what was science from what was ideology. … And I still recall the influence that Louis Althusser himself had on me in that regard.

In this sense, Foucault’s entire philosophical project began from a critical reflection on Marxism and its (in)ability to offer a ‘history of truth’, where his ‘intellectual course . . . ran somewhat parallel to that of the existential Marxists until the early 1960s’ (Poster, 1984, p. 3).

Nonetheless, the materialist interpretation of history is one key feature of Marxism that many believe cannot be easily reconciled with poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is often said to establish an orientation toward history that denies material historical truth, yet far from being a denial of temporality, it is instead to emphasize the forces that go beyond any telos of history that can be fully known, appreciated, and articulated by human actors (Peters, 2001). So while Foucault, for example, rejects Marxism as a particular theory of the mode of production and as a critique of political economy, he nonetheless forwards a critical view of domination which, like historical materialism, recognizes all social practices as transitory, and all intellectual formations as integral with power and social relations (Poster, 1984). Thus, although often critical of Marx, by Foucault’s (1988a) own admission, his approach also bears striking parallels to Marxism. In Foucault’s rendering, the historical relativity of all systems and structures (society, thought, theory, and concepts) is recognized alongside a materialism of physical necessities (Olssen, 2004). A discursive approach to Foucault thus represents a questioning of the very relation between structure and agency, which evokes a complementary between
Marxian and poststructuralist thought. As such, Poster (1984, p. 12) contends that Foucault’s approach understands discourse and practice as a couplet, which enables Foucault ‘to search for the close connection between manifestations of reason and patterns of domination. Foucault can study the way in which discourse is not innocent, but shaped by practice, without privileging any form of practice such as class struggle. He can also study how discourse in turn shapes practice without privileging any form of discourse’. In this sense, Foucault rejects Marx’s understanding of historical materialism as a mechanism through which material (non-discursive) practice is separated from discourse and by which the latter is subsequently subordinated to the former (Olssen, 2004). In contrast to Marx, the objective of Foucault’s (1972/2002, p. 180, original emphasis) version of materialism as an Archeology of knowledge is to reveal relations between discursive formations and non-discursive domains (institutions, political events, economic practices and processes) [wherein] these rapprochements are not intended to uncover great cultural continuities, nor to isolate mechanisms of causality . . . nor does it seek to rediscover what is expressed in them . . . it tries to determine how the rules of formation that govern it . . . may be linked to non-discursive systems: it seeks to define specific forms of articulation.

For Foucault, unlike Marxian understandings, human destiny is not directed by a single set of factors and instead ‘the forms of articulation and determination may differ in relation to the relative importance of different non-discursive (material) factors in terms of both place and time’ (Olssen, 1999, p. 54).

Foucault’s approach to discourse as a coupling with practice is of paramount importance to understanding neoliberalism as discourse for the central reasons of geography and history. Given the increasing appreciation for how the geographic and temporal placement of performances of neoliberalism make a difference – hence the concept of neoliberalization replacing neoliberalism – it must be recognized that discourse does not have the same effects in any given location. The critical importance here is in wanting to avoid reducing all the heterogeneities of neoliberalism involved to just discursive ones (in the sense of language), thereby overlooking neoliberalism’s specific variations in conjunctural articulations with different sorts of material practices on the ground. Hence, understanding neoliberalism as discourse is an approach that goes beyond simply the profusion and dissemination of language that occurs either though hegemonic ideology or governmentality, and necessarily recognizes the material practices of state formation and policy and program implementation that characterize the specificities of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), or neoliberalization in practice. In different geographical and institutional contexts neoliberal discourse will circulate and function in variegated ways that intersect with the local culture and political economic circumstances to continually (re)constitute ‘the social’. This is not to ‘treat “the social” as a residual effect of hegemonic projects and/or governmental rationalities’ (Barnett, 2005, p. 7), as neither ‘the social’ nor hegemonic projects ever amount to a fully actualized material reality. If neoliberalism is to be understood as a discourse, ‘the real world’ both Castree and Barnett suppose neoliberalism is premised upon is an impossible contradiction of the symbolic and imaginary connotations of language (Lacan, 1977/2006). Again, this is not to deny materiality, but to recognize that the material and the discursive are always refracted through each other, and further that social practice is transitory so that we can never quite put our finger on a definitive historical materialism that can be pinned down as a ‘real world’. Of course Barnett and Castree take this notion of a ‘real world’ from the literature on neoliberalism, but they never pause to problematize its application. Instead, they seem to replicate its possibility and focus their critiques on how their versions of a ‘real world’ differ from those of other scholars concerned with neoliberalism/neoliberalization. Put differently, the structure of hegemony that neoliberalism as discourse seemingly invokes is only possible through the discourse of neoliberalism itself. There is no ‘before’ discourse, and accordingly Figure 1 shows no point of entry.
Suggesting that there is no entry point is not meant to imply an absence of historical trajectory to the idea of neoliberalism, it is simply meant as a reconfigured understanding of historical materialism through a Foucauldian archeology. So while Peck’s (2008) account of the ‘prehistories’ of ‘protoneoliberalism’ argues that there is a historical lineage to the development of neoliberalism, the lack of entry point here refers to the slow processes of discursive circulation that allowed a fringe utopian idea to congeal as a hegemonic imperative (see Plehwe et al., 2006). There is clearly a history, but in line with Peck’s (2008, p. 4) rejection of an ‘immaculate ideational flashpoint’, the circuitous paths of neoliberalism have no precise discernable beginning because it is impossible to disentangle them from previous ideologies and discourses. In this sense ‘neoliberalism in general’ is simply a semiotic sign of neoliberalization, as it is necessarily ‘something that stands for something else, to someone in some capacity’ (Danesi & Perron, 1999, p. 366). For its part, ‘the social’ is always a figment of ‘the self’, which is not a coherent entity but a constitution of conflicting tensions and knowledge claims (Derrida, 2002; Lacan, 1977/2006). In short, ‘the social’ and ‘the self’ are mutually constituted through discourse. Accordingly, what we are left with are rearticulations and representations of neoliberal discourse in the form of particular discourses of neoliberalization, where individual actors take a proactive role in reshaping the formal practices of politics, policy, and administration that comprise the dynamics and rhythms of socio-cultural change.

There is no presentation or constitution, only representation and reconstitution, because as we produce social texts we create meanings. Such ‘discursive performativity’, Butler (1993, p. 107) argues, ‘appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make. ... [g]enerally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares’. Hence, the issue is not about a purported reality of scientific truths, where neoliberalism is seen as an end, but the interpretation of cultural constructs (Duncan & Ley, 1993), wherein neoliberalism becomes a means. The implications for the current neoliberal moment is that it is just that, a transitory moment on its way to becoming something else. And while there will be no perceptible line in the sands of history where neoliberalism categorically ends, the patterns of contextually specific discourses of neoliberalization will eventually and inevitably mutate into something that no longer has any resemblance to ‘neoliberalism in general’. The question then, provoked by Barnett (2005) and Castree (2006), is does neoliberalism in general ever exist? The answer I would venture is ‘yes’, but like anything we can name, and even things we can touch like water (to revisit Castree’s peculiar analogy), they are always and only understood as representations through the performative repercussions of discourse. Some readers might contend that this caveat amounts to a ‘no’, and they would be correct if ‘neoliberalism in general’ is understood as a ‘real word’ referent, something I have been arguing against. Again, the rejection of an assumed ‘real world’ does not refuse a certain materiality to neoliberalism or other phenomena, but instead recognizes materialism in the Foucauldian sense of an ‘archeology of knowledge’ whereby discourse and practice, or theory and event, become inseparable. Thus, recognizing neoliberalism as a general form becomes possible once we consider it through its discursive formation, whereby the four understandings of neoliberalism are read as an ongoing reconstitution of a particular political rationality (Brown, 2003). Far from negating the need for resistance to neoliberalism, recognizing neoliberalism as representation still requires social struggle. Moreover, and notwithstanding Gibson-Graham’s (1996) criticism, the building of transnational solidarity through a ‘larger conversation’ is also needed, because such activity hastens the pace at which neoliberalism may recede into historical obscurity to be replaced with a new discourse, a novel representation that we can hope produces a more egalitarian social condition. Contestation actively works toward and opens pathways to achieving this goal (Purcell, 2008; Springer, 2010a, 2011b), and while discourse may for a time reinscribe the power of particular logics, Foucault (1990) insists that no discourse
is guaranteed. So while particular discourses prevail in some spaces, the potential for meanings to shift or for subaltern discourses to unsettle the orthodoxy remains.

**Conclusion**

In arguing for an understanding of neoliberalism as discourse, I do not presume that comprehending neoliberalism separately as a hegemonic ideology, a policy and program, a state form, or as a form of governmentality is wrong or not useful. Rather I have simply attempted to provoke some consideration for the potential reconcilability of the different approaches. My argument should accordingly be read as an effort to destabilize the ostensible incompatibility that some scholars undertaking their separate usage seem keen to assume. Without at least attempting to reconcile the four approaches we risk being deprived of a coherent concept with which to work, and thus concede some measure of credibility to Barnett’s (2005) claim that ‘there is no such thing as neoliberalism’. Such a position renders the entire body of scholarship on neoliberalism questionable, as scholars cannot be sure that they are even discussing the same thing. More perilously, to accept such a claim throws the project of constructing solidarities across space into an uneasy quandary, where the resonant violent geographies of our current moment may go unnoticed, a condition that plays perfectly into the ideological denial maintained by the current capitalist order (Zizek, 2011). In ignoring such relational possibilities for resistance to the contemporary zeitgeist, Barnett (2005) seems keen to engage in disarticulation ad nauseam. Yet deconstruction is meant to be interruptive not debilitating. As Spivak (1996, p. 27) contends, ‘Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. . . . It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are formed’. It is about noticing what we inevitably leave out of even the most searching and inclusive accounts of phenomena like neoliberalism, which opens up and allows for discursive understandings. Rather than making nice symmetrical accounts of the ‘real’ at the meeting point of representational performance and structural forces, neoliberalism understood as a discourse is attuned to processual interpretation and ongoing debate.

While there are inevitable tensions between the four views of neoliberalism that are not entirely commensurable, their content is not diametrically opposed, and indeed a considered understanding of how power similarly operates in both a Gramscian sense of hegemony and a Foucauldian sense of governmentality points toward a dialectical relationship. Understanding neoliberalism as discourse allows for a much more integral approach to social relations than speech performances alone. This is a discourse that encompasses material forms in state formation through policy and program, and via the subjectivation of individuals on the ground, even if this articulation still takes place through discursive performatives. By formulating discourse in this fashion, we need not revert to a presupposed ‘real-world’ referent to recognize a materiality that is both constituted by and constitutive of discourse. Instead, materiality and discourse become integral, where one cannot exist without the other. It is precisely this understanding of discourse that points to a similitude between poststructuralism and Marxian political economy approaches and their shared concern for power relations. I do not want to conclude that I have worked out all these tensions, my ambition has been much more humble. I have simply sought to open an avenue for dialogue between scholars on either side of the political economy/poststructuralist divide. The importance of bridging this gap is commensurate with ‘the role of the intellectual . . . [in] shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking, of dispensing commonplace beliefs, of taking a new measure of rules and institutions . . . and participating in the formation of a political will’ (Foucault, quoted in Goldstein, 1991, pp. 11–12). Such reflexivity necessarily involves opening ourselves to the possibility of finding common ground between the epistemic and ontological understandings of political economy and poststructuralism so
that together they may assist in disestablishing neoliberalism’s rationalities, deconstructing its strategies, disassembling its technologies, and ultimately destroying its techniques. In changing our minds then, so too might we change the world.

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Note

1. The financial crisis that began in late 2008 and Barack Obama’s ascendency to the presidency in the USA has lead some commentators to proclaim neoliberalism dead (see Bello, 2008; Rocamora, 2009; Wallerstein, 2008). While I would suggest such pronouncements are premature (see Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010; Smith, 2008), the emerging debate surrounding ‘postneoliberalism’ (see Brand & Sekler, 2009; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2010) nonetheless hints at a discursive shift as capitalist rationalities inevitably begin to change.

References


