

**Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian and Philip Mirowski (eds)**, *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, New York: Verso, 2020. ISBN: 9781788732536 (paper); ISBN: 9781788732550 (ebook)<sup>1</sup>

These days, a general reader of Anglophone broadsheet media may be forgiven for thinking that neoliberalism, whatever it once was, is no more. Indeed, over the past decade and a half, neoliberalism has been repeatedly and loudly declared dead. The 2008 financial crash, the Brexit vote, Donald Trump’s election victory, and indeed any sign, however faint, that austerity is about to come to an end – all of these have been cited as evidence that neoliberal policy is a thing of the past. There was no shortage of obituaries for neoliberalism in 2020, either. Stringent lockdowns and increased government spending in response to the Covid-19 pandemic supposedly marked the “return of the state”, thus once more sounding neoliberalism’s death knell.

However common they are, these takes betray a poor grasp not only on neoliberalism, but also on the by now sizeable body of scholarship surrounding it. After all, critics of neoliberalism have long since pointed out that neoliberalism was never about destroying or even minimising the state, but about changing its priorities and redesigning its institutions. Neoliberalism, differently put, is and always has been a robust and complex philosophy of the state’s place in society, not a one-dimensional ideology of “market fundamentalism”. This means that even if statism were making a “comeback” – a moot point in any case – this would not automatically imply that neoliberalism as such has expired.

This, indeed, is the argument put forward by the editors of *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian and Philip Mirowski. The stubborn commonplace of neoliberalism’s demise, they argue, rests on a faulty understanding of the nature of the neoliberal project. Less a monolithic and homogeneous policy programme than a specific set of intellectual and political goals, the particular concepts and arguments that constitute neoliberal reasoning or policy tend to shift and adjust in the face of changing

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circumstances. Once this is grasped, the urge to declare neoliberalism dead whenever a new policy crisis looms dissipates. For them, and for the contributors to the volume, the scholarly response to neoliberalism's repeated crises must be to deepen rather than abandon our study of neoliberal ideas. Instead of the metaphor of neoliberalism's "death", the editors propose to think of the neoliberal project as catlike, gifted with a feline's proverbial nine lives. "As a body of thought and set of practices", write Slobodian and Plehwe in the introduction, "neoliberalism too has proven agile and acrobatic, prone to escaping alive from even the most treacherous predicaments" (p.2).

Although it makes for a catchy title, this nod to neoliberalism's feline proclivities is not much more than a play of metaphors that, with one exception, does not get picked up by any of the volume's contributors. More pertinent to the intervention this volume seeks to make is its underlying research agenda, which rests upon the firm conviction that the study of the neoliberal project must be able to account for neoliberalism's inherent heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeed adaptability. This research agenda builds on a rich and expanding body of previous work, some of the key methodological and conceptual pillars of which were first pioneered by the three editors themselves (see Mirowski 2013; Plehwe and Mirowski 2009; Plehwe et al. 2006; Slobodian 2018).

By focusing their attention on what they call the "neoliberal thought collective" (NTC), scholars adopting this approach have identified a more or less coherent body of ideas that may legitimately be termed "neoliberal". What makes these ideas and thinkers part of a specifically neoliberal tradition is not that they are aligned with certain political parties, that they support a particular and streamlined policy agenda, or even that they fetishize the "free" market, but rather that they share in common a particular set of political and intellectual ends, and that they actively rallied themselves as an activist movement in the pursuit of these ends. Organised initially around the Mont Pelerin Society (founded by F.A. Hayek in 1947) before becoming embedded in an ever-expanding network of think tanks, the NTC was – and indeed remains – a highly active, well-organized, and influential intellectual movement. If we're to understand not only the history of neoliberal thought and politics but also the place that

neoliberalism continues to occupy in today's political and ideological landscape, we must therefore document the specific ways in which key neoliberal ideas were articulated, trace the complex paths these ideas then travelled, and identify the networks of influence neoliberal activists have established to make these ideas into policy.

It is this research agenda, then, that *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* seeks to further. Each of the 11 chapters departs from these methodological premises and presents a particular case study as a means of capturing neoliberal ideas in action. This also explains why the resulting volume is less a timely intervention in the public debate, as the title and introduction seem to suggest, than it is a collection of essays in intellectual history. This, to be sure, is not a weakness. As far as academic essays go, the studies presented here are without exception impressive pieces of scholarship. Prioritising detailed exegesis and careful historical contextualisation over sweeping claims, each of the chapters makes a focused and measured contribution to extant scholarship on neoliberalism. Whilst this may mean that the volume is of limited relevance to the general reader, it certainly has an important place in the literature.

Although I can only scratch the surface here, I want to briefly list the arguments made by some of the volume's chapters before I highlight the ones that made the strongest impression on me, primarily because of the contribution they make to the volume's underlying research agenda.

Martin Beddeleem's chapter offers a thoughtful portrait of early neoliberal approaches to epistemology and the philosophy of science, as well as their continued relevance to the neoliberal project as it has developed ever since. Edward Nik-Khah's chapter documents how George Stigler gradually changed his mind about the nature and role of universities in a free society, whilst Dieter Plehwe's chapter explores how neoliberals reconceptualised the figure of the entrepreneur in response to Joseph Schumpeter's work. Rüdiger Graf's chapter seeks to show that the emergence of behavioural economics owes more to neoliberal theory than is often acknowledged in existing scholarship, and offers some very interesting insights into the life and writings of Günter Schmolders along the way. In his chapter, Hagen Schulz-Forberg delves into neoliberalism's pre-history and contextualises the Walter Lippmann Colloquium,

widely viewed as a key moment in the formation of the neoliberal movement, by showing that the Colloquium did not fall from the sky but was itself embedded in and made possible by a long-standing transnational network of institutions and intellectuals. Stephan Pühringer's chapter offers a detailed overview of the profound impact that neoliberal thinkers have had on German academia, politics, and public debate and concludes that German economic thought is dominated by a dense and well-organised network of neoliberal scholars and activists.

Although, as I indicated, each of these contributions makes a worthwhile intervention, the chapters that really shine are those that further develop the analytical tools available to students of neoliberalism. The chapters that, in my opinion, stand out in this regard are the following. Quinn Slobodian's and Matthias Schmelzer's chapters, which document neoliberal debates over intellectual property and international monetary frameworks respectively, stand out because they demonstrate that the neoliberals strongly and passionately disagreed over some crucial issues, an insight that, in Schmelzer's words, "offers a prophylactic against attributing to neoliberals superhuman or unrealistic levels of internal consistency, party discipline, or foresight" (p.218). Melinda Cooper's chapter, which explores neoliberal approaches to the family unit, forcefully shows that analysis stands to gain nothing from all-too-crude distinctions between neoliberalism and other prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century traditions of thought, such as neoconservatism, as neoliberals were willing to make alliances with intellectuals and activists from different camps so long as this suited their agenda – as was the case, as Cooper argues, in the neoliberal "opposition to the expansion of the welfare state under the sign of 'sexual freedom'" (p.104). The chapter by Philip Mirowski proposes that we view the Bank of Sweden Award in Economic Sciences in Honor of Alfred Nobel, or the "ersatz Nobel Prize", as he calls it, as a successful piece of neoliberal propaganda essentially designed to popularise neoliberal economics with the wider public. By drawing attention to the activism of central bankers and prize committees as well as neoliberal intellectuals, Mirowski shows that history of ideas alone is not enough to understand the NTC's reach. Marie-Laure Djelic and Reza Mousavi's rigorous and insightful chapter on the formation and evolution of the Atlas Network, finally, documents the way "the well-delineated

organizational template of the modern (neoliberal) think tank” (p.281) went global from the 1980s onwards. Like Mirowski, the authors prioritise the sheer complexity and professionalism of neoliberal activism over neoliberal ideas themselves and in doing so set a firm methodological benchmark for future studies of the influence and reach of neoliberal thought.

Like many of the editors’ previous works, *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* is likely to become a staple text for students of neoliberal thought and politics. It not only contributes to an already impressive body of scholarship on the NTC but also opens up new avenues for further research. For scholars of neoliberalism this is a welcome contribution, and it may be hoped that the book also gets picked up beyond academia, as it contains some indispensable lessons about the neoliberal project and its essential malleability. This should be helped by the fact that it’s available for free as an Open Access resource, which is certainly to be applauded.

The political importance of these lessons in the present moment cannot be overstated. Indeed, as our societies begin the long road to recovery from the economic, social, and moral wounds left behind by Covid-19, we can be certain of one thing: like their predecessors, today’s neoliberals will lose no time mobilising to ensure their ideas are the basis on which post-Covid policy is erected. Indeed, neoliberal think tanks are already churning out reports on economic recovery, offering Hayekian theories of pandemics, and organising workshops on free-market policy. Anyone who wishes for a different future, one that does not lurch from one crisis of the neoliberal imaginary to another, would do well to familiarise themselves with the way the neoliberal movement is organised, as it’s not likely to relinquish its hold on our political imaginary anytime soon.

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