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EDITORIAL/I

NEOLIBERALISM AS THE “CONNECTIVE TISSUE” OF CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT: What can we understand better about contemporary economic, social, political and cultural processes using the category of neoliberalism? What can it add to an understanding of the present existing forms of social organization? The article tries to answer these main questions in theoretical terms considering the arguments of those who claim to have stopped using the concept and of those who, on the contrary, sustain its theoretical value. Neoliberalism is considered as the “connective tissue” of contemporary capitalism, which is able to shape historically significant links between processes, ideas and practices regarding not only different sub-social systems (political, economic, cultural, etc.), but also diverse scales of action (from global to local scale and vice versa). For this “ontological” reason the concept of neoliberalism seems to show an epistemological relevance, which rests on the capacity of this concept to disclose the interconnections not only between different phenomena, but also between each of them and a more general fabric of contemporary society. This regards especially functional relationships between the ontic and ontological dimensions of neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism. For this purpose the concept of neoliberalism as a “connective tissue” shows potential analytical advantages

KEYWORDS: Capitalism, hegemony, critical theory, neoliberalism, neoliberalization

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1. Introduction. Neoliberalism: an (un)helpful concept?

«Neoliberalism is heartless—both metaphorically and analytically». This brilliant statement by J. Clarke (2008, p. 140) encompasses and sets out many of the issues regarding the theoretical, methodological and empirical problems in the analysis of contemporary neoliberalism. It also indirectly contains a seemingly interesting paradox: neoliberalism in analytical terms seems an elusive concept, but when implemented in policy and programs it has social and economic consequences that are both real and disastrous¹. How can a slippery concept such as neoliberalism determine actions and practices with such real impacts? Obviously the evidence of a causal relationship between the development of the theories and practices of neoliberalism and the concomitant growth of inequalities must be proved. However, we must first of all consider what is the heuristic utility of the concept of neoliberalism (and that of the neoliberalization). What can we understand better about contemporary economic, social, political and cultural processes using the category of neoliberalism? What can it add to understanding of the present existing forms of social organization?

This article aims to find some preliminary answers to these questions and is organized as follows: further on in this first paragraph both the arguments of those who claim to have stopped using the concept and of those who, on the contrary, sustain its theoretical value, are considered and analysed. The second paragraph is devoted to analyzing the main definitions of neoliberalism, the leading approaches to the study of it, and the normative implications of both the concept and analysis of neoliberalism. The main thesis of the article is set out in the third and fourth paragraph. In brief, neoliberalism is considered as the “connective tissue” of contemporary capitalism, which is able to shape historically significant links between processes, ideas and practices regarding not only different sub-social systems (political, economic, cultural, etc.), but also diverse scales of action (from global to local scale and vice versa). For this “ontological” reason the concept of neoliberalism seems to show an epistemological relevance. In order to better identify the connective functions of neoliberalism, its ideational power and structural relationship with contemporary capitalism are considered in the

¹ Without going into the question and choosing one of many researches into the growth of inequalities in the USA, we find that: «the fortunes of the richest 1% in the USA took a rather remarkable turn after the appointment of Paul Volker (and his flamboyant monetarism) to the US Federal Reserve in 1979, and the election of Ronald Reagan as President a year later: including realised capital gains. The share in national income of this small group increased from 8.9% to 22.8% between then and 2006—or from 8% to 18% if capital gains are excluded» (Palma 2009, p. 836). This trend does not change when considering global or European data.

fifth paragraph.

There are many outstanding critical analysis of the concept neoliberalism (e.g. Barnett 2005; Kipnis 2008; Hilgers 2011; Goldstein 2012; Collier 2012; Peck and Theodore 2012; Jessop 2013) and recently R. Venugopal (2015) – considering many fundamental and very relevant issues such as the relationship between state and market, the "fetishization" of the market itself, the impacts of the values of neoliberalism on the individual subjectivities, the case of Chinese neoliberalism and much else besides - has put the question in very clear terms: «can neoliberalism as a broad, catch-all term adequately serve so many different phenomena and theoretical conceptualizations?» (p. 166). In order to address this question R. Venugopal considers neoliberalism as a «signifier» for which he attempts to scrutinize definitions, track the conceptual evolution of the term, map patterns of usage and the types of user (p. 167). The result of this analysis is that the term does not show a compelling analytical capacity and that it should be used just as a «descriptive shell: a broad indicator of the historical turn in macro-political economy» (p. 182). If R. Venugopal develops his criticism of the term neoliberalism by considering its inability to understand contemporary economic thought, Clive Barnett (2005), a little over a decade earlier, argued that neoliberalism tends «to reduce the understanding of social relations to a residual effect of hegemonic projects and/or governmental programmes of rule» (p. 10). For this crucial reason he suggested that «we should try to do without the concept of “neoliberalism” altogether, because it might actually compound rather than aid in the task of figuring out how the world works and how it changes» (p. 10). In brief, neoliberalism, in these perspectives, is not able to explain either economic or social processes and therefore should be kicked out of scientific interpretative frames. J. Clarke (2008) has come to a similar conclusion, starting from the promiscuity, omnipresence and omnipotence of neoliberalism. It should be retired because – Clarke argues - «we need terms that would allow us to think better» (p. 145).

Recently, a Special Issue of *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2016) focused on the topic of urban neoliberalism. The question of the helpfulness of the concept of neoliberalism was debated by a group of influential French and British scholars. Gilles Pinson and Christelle Morel Journal (2016) - set their sights on articles by the most quoted contemporary radical or critical geographers (such as Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, Adam Tickell, Erik Swyngedouw) - identifying the definitional, descriptive, analytical and normative limits of the concept of neoliberalism (pp. 141-149). In definitional terms it seems unstable, while in descriptive ones it is very hard achieve a satisfactory operationalization of the concept of neoliberalism (indeed the radical geographers have carried out a prevalently theoretical analysis). G. Pinson and C. Morel Journal,

considering the analytical dimension of neoliberalism, highlights that it often ceases to be a general label under which different phenomena are grouped, and that the correlated idea of neoliberalization is considered as a general trend of macro-change. A constructivist bias or, better, an overestimated emphasis on the role of ideas in political and economic processes, completes the list of the analytical limits of the concept of neoliberalism. Lastly, the main normative limit of neoliberalism is apparently paradoxical: « by reifying neoliberalization as the sole hegemonic project able to change the world, the scholars defending the neoliberalization thesis have unwittingly deprived alternative forces for change of any form of social visibility. More precisely still, it has not tooled up progressive forces with a grip on reality and an assertive view of their ability to change it» (p. 148).

In the same *Special Issue* Michael Storper (2016) claims that there is no evidence of any widespread withdrawal of public action from contemporary cities, or deregulation and reduction in public good. In other words, there is no evidence that «cities have become more neo-liberal» (p. 242). P. Lé Galés (2016) arrives at the same conclusion arguing also that «it may be fruitful to be clearer about the content of neoliberalism rather than adopting an all-encompassing constructivist framework» (p. 156) in order to understand and explain contemporary urban processes.

Certainly, the latest and strong criticisms put forward by R. Venugopal, G. Pinson and C. Morel Journal, M. Storper and P. Le Galés highlight effective weakness in the concept of neoliberalism and they focus well on a specific issue. Indeed they consider neoliberalism, even though with different emphasis, as an explanans of economic processes (Venugopal) or urban change (Pinson and colleagues). Consequently the limits of neoliberalism regard its unsatisfactory explanatory capacity, first of all because it seems too elusive a concept. As a matter of fact the weakness of this concept is a consequence of a slight theoretical myopia in which neoliberalism as explanandum is broadly undervalued. Here, on the topic of neoliberalism, that which B. Jessop (2003) argued in the past on the subject of globalisation: «would be better seen as an explanandum than as an explanans» (p.1) can be usefully repeated. Neoliberalism and neoliberalization are hybrid and polymorphic processes, which have – again paraphrasing B. Jessop - much less of an explanans and much more of an explanandum. In other words neoliberalism has to be considered «both as a political-economic- cultural phenomenon, and as an explanatory concept» (Peck 2013, p. 133). Certainly this is true. However we have to add that neoliberalism, both as a phenomenon and as a concept, must be first and foremost defined in historical terms. It means that the explanans varies with the historical changing of the explanandum. Consequently the quest for a pristine concept of neoliberalism seems an exercise in gibberish.

From this perspective, the interesting proposal by R. Venugopal (2015) to consider neoliberalism as a signifier also seems at least partial, because it cannot be detached from what is signified. Following the interpretation of the relationship between signifier and signified in Saussurean Linguistics (de Saussure 1992) proposed by T. De Mauro (1997), we can gain two main valuable and interlinked bedrock principles for analysing the «sign» (signifier plus signified) of neoliberalism. The first regards the arbitrary nature of the signs, which is considered by F. de Saussure as «the founding principle of the linguistic reality»² (De Mauro 1997, p. XIII). It means no sign has an autonomous value if it is detached from the linguistic system in which it is placed. In other words, a specific sign acquires a signified exclusively within a system of manifold and interlinked relationships between different signs. In brief, the structure of the system is what permits us to identify the signified of each sign. The second bedrock principle concerns the idea by which signifiers and signified «have a validity spatially and temporally circumscribed, linked to the duration of specific structures of human societies ... they have a radically historical character» (De Mauro 1997, p. XVIII)³.

In line with this analysis we cannot understand neoliberalism simply as signifier, but we must think of it from within a historical and systemic perspective. So we do not have to drop the category of neoliberalism, as directly or indirectly suggested by different scholars that criticize the explanatory use of it, but rather we must drop the ahistorical definition of neoliberalism from our interpretative frameworks.

2. Definitions (of) and approaches (to) neoliberalism between normative and analytical statements

If neoliberalism cannot be considered purely as a signifier, then what is it? How do we define it? What are its typical features? Must we reflect upon neoliberalism, or can we also give consideration to neoliberalisms? Are there different types of neoliberalism? If there are different types of neoliberalism, how do they change in space and time? What can we say about the relationship between the concept of neoliberalism and the process(es) of neoliberalization(s)? Why is it not simple to define neoliberalism?

Starting with the last general question, we can say that defining neoliberalism is a challenging task as a result of several reasons. The first one regards the very differenti-

² Translated by the author.

³ Translated by the author.

ated theoretical roots of neoliberalism. The «construction of neoliberal reason» indeed has «many authors, many birthplaces» (Peck 2008) and it could be understood «as a 'plural set of ideas than as a singular '*pensée unique*'» (Plehwe, Walpen and Neunhöffer 2006, p. 2). Also, critical analyses of neoliberalism are carried out starting from different theoretical perspectives and using diverse analytical approaches: from political economy and more structuralist approaches that emphasize a «process perspective», to poststructuralist ones that emphasise a «contingency perspective» (Springer, Birch and MacLeavy Forthcoming, p. 4). The powerful normative connotations of the concept of neoliberalism, as regards both its sympathizers and critics (see below) contribute significantly to making a definition of neoliberalism difficult. We have also to consider that neoliberalism is a topic within different disciplines (philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, urban studies, human geography, anthropology, etc.) characterised by different theories, epistemological premises and methodological tools. The existence of different typologies of neoliberalism (Jessop 2002; 2010), the varieties (Fourcade-Gourinchas, Babb 2002; Macartney 2011; Hilgers 2012) and variegation (Peck, Tickell, 2002; Peck, Theodore 2007; Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010) of its existing forms complete the list of the reasons that hinder the definition of a "single definitive" neoliberalism. So it is not surprising that J. Clarke (2008) has listed an astonishing and in-exhaustive number of "things" that can be identified as neoliberal: « states, spaces, logics, techniques, technologies, discourses, discursive framework, ideologies, ways of thinking, projects, agendas, programs, "governmentality", measures, regimes, development, ethno-development, development imaginaries, global forms of control, social policies, multiculturalism, audit cultures, managerialism, restructuring, reform, privatization, regulatory frameworks, governance, good governance, NGOs, third sector, subjects, subjectivities, individualization, professionalization, normalization, market logics, market forms of calculation, the "destatalization" of government and the "degovernmentalization" of the state» (p. 138)

As consequence of all these previous reasons we find a huge number of definitions of neoliberalism in the contemporary and ever-growing literature about it, and they usually share the starting point that neoliberalism is difficult to pin down. Defining neoliberalism as, variously, a rascal (Brenner, Peck Theodore, 2010), elusive (Hilgers 2013) or also a chaotic concept (Jessop 2013) has now become a sort of common habit. Consequently different authors feel the need to clarify the concept of neoliberalism, but often the final result of these efforts is that neoliberalism becomes a trope (Kipnis 2007) for academic fencing. The crux of the matter cannot be avoided and inescapably we contribute to a further increase in these maudlin discussions. So we start considering very briefly the main existing definitions of neoliberalism, the main approaches for

analysing it and, finally, the analytical and normative implication of its the different meanings. On this basis, a theoretical and historically founded definition of neoliberalism will be proposed in the following paragraph.

The polysemy of the term neoliberalism has prompted several authors to carry out comparative analysis of the main definitions of neoliberalism, in order to identify what core elements they share. W. Davies (2014a), as a first example, suggests that definitions of neoliberalism share four main things. Neoliberalism is considered as a modernizing force aimed at producing a new political and social order, and not as a nostalgic project; it tends to introduce market-oriented solutions for different policy issues; it considers the State as a proactive actor in "marketization"; and it claims ethical and political visions that are dominated by the principle of competitiveness (p. 310). A decade earlier C. Hay (2004, pp. 507-508) identified the main hallmarks of neoliberalism in its: confidence in the allocation capacity of the market; belief in the desirability of a regime of global and free trade and free capital mobility; claim for the withdrawal for the State in economic issues and/or for a public regulation aimed at boosting market mechanisms and competition; rejection of the Keynesian program fostering instead neomonetarism and supply-side economics; retrenchment of the welfare state; enhancing of flexibility in the labor-market; and trust in the market, or quasi-market, mechanism in the provision of public services. Also Bob Jessop (2014, p. 217) tried to lay down a sort of typical set of neoliberal policies, which includes: liberalization, deregulation, privatization, marketization, reduction of tax burdens (especially on entrepreneurial income, and internationalization to boost free flows of capital, services and goods. V. Schmidt and M. Thatcher (2014, p. 40) set out the core ideas of the politics of neoliberalism, which establish the high level of importance of the market, the limited size of the state and its pro-active role in freeing market forces, the residual nature of the welfare system, the huge extent of competition, the greater flexibility of labor markets, and the rules that govern corporations aimed at increasing – using a stark reminder of C. Crouch (2011, p. ix) – their «political power».

In brief, five recurring core principles emerge: privatization, liberalization, deregulation, a monetarist focus on inflation control, and the marketization of social relationships (Hay 2004; Mudge 2008; Jessop 2010; Tyfield 2010; Lohmann 2010; Shaoul 2010; Birch and Mykhenko 2010).

D. Plehwe and B. Walpen (2006, p. 27), moving from the politics and policy of neoliberalism towards their discourses and practices, highlight that they: emphasize the importance of the market mechanism and competition-driven processes of capitalist development; support the retrenchment of government action for the protection of individual rights, first and foremost, of property rights; and promote the privatization

and liberalization of markets. From the same perspective P. Mirowski (2009), in his masterful and impressive effort to approach neoliberalism as a “thought collective”, states that even though «it cannot adequately be reduced to a set of Ten Commandments» it is also possible to identify some underlying statements for neoliberalism. Here, for the sake of brevity, it is not possible to reconstruct these statements in greater detail (see Mirowski 2009, pp. 434-440). However, what matters is the definition of neoliberalism « as an authoritarian variant of the liberal tradition» Mirowski (2009, p. 441). Against the naïve creed of an inescapable enfeeblement of the state in the neoliberal world, Mirowski clearly establishes «the central tenet of neoliberalism—that is, that a strong state was necessary to neutralize (...) the pathologies of democracy» (p. 443). So neoliberalism can be considered as an authoritarian “thought collective” that produces and reproduces «arguments for the existence of a strong state as both producer and guarantor of a stable market society» (p. 435). Starting from a different theoretical perspective L. Wacquant (2010; 2012) arrives at similar conclusions arguing that the neoliberal reengineering of the state is based on four main institutional logics: commodification, disciplinary social policy, expansive penal policy, and « the trope of individual responsibility as motivating discourse and cultural glue that pastes these various components of state activity together» (Wacquant 2012, p. 72). What matters is that neoliberalism, throughout the reengineering of the state, is able to reengineer contemporary societies towards increasing marketization and commodification not only of services and goods, but also of social relations.

The different definitions of the concept of neoliberalism should be put in the context of the different approaches to studying neoliberalism. There is no space in this article to develop these questions, which can be briefly summarised by distinguishing between structuralist and poststructuralist approaches⁴. While the former are, both directly and indirectly, based on a Marxian perspective that highlights the political-economic or institutional determinants of neoliberalization paths, the latter are, mainly, built up on a Foucauldian frame that focuses on the manifold technologies of “governmentality”.

Alongside this well-known distinction C. Hardin (2014) adds an «epochalistic» approach, which «uses neoliberalism as one of a set of epochal concepts to describe re-

⁴ It is not possible due to the huge quantity of literature that discusses the main approaches to neoliberalism and neoliberalization and their specific characterisations in different disciplinary fields (sociology, anthropology, human geography, economics, etc.). For a preliminary introduction and reference bibliography see: Barnett 2005; Plehwe and Walpen 2006; Boas and Gans-Morse 2009;; Mirowski 2009; Amable 2011; Hilgers 2011; Bockman 2012; Centeno and Cohen 2012; Collier 2012; Wacquant 2012; Jessop 2013; Davies 2014a), Fine et al. 2016; Venugopal 2015; Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, Forthcoming. Obviously it is just a suggested list and not a complete one.

cent economic developments in conceptual terms» (p. 207). Also R. Venugopal (2015) – starting from the distinction between neoliberalism as a «given doctrine» and the forms of «actually existing neoliberalism in the real world» (pp. 166-167) – advances a third way of representing neoliberalism. It is explored as a «signifier». This approach «does not take neoliberalism as a given body of textual knowledge in need of interpretation, or as a self-evident real world phenomenon or field of practice in need of abstraction, but examines what the word has come to mean, how it is used and what the consequences are thereof» (p. 167).

Not only can nuanced differences be found within these approaches, but also useful efforts to overcome the main differences between them. The literature of neo-Marxian geographers on «variegated neoliberalism» (Peck, Tickell, 2002; Peck, Theodore 2007; Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010) represents one of the more challenging efforts in this direction. One of the most sophisticated attempts in the theoretical interpolation between structural and post structural analysis of neoliberalism is represented by the reflections of J. Peck (2013), who tries to define the methodological assumptions of this cumbersome challenge, which implies: «positioning local case in relational and conjunctural terms, rather than terrain of typicality or exception. It means striving to make part-whole connections, while recognizing that this more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts phenomenon only exists by dint of its part. It means uncovering local constitutions of global forces, rather than resorting to top-down ‘impact’ models. And it means rendering the moving landscapes of neoliberalization as theoretical problematics in their own right» (pp. 151-152). The principles of «relationality and connectivity» (p. 149) emerge as cornerstone of this approach. It means, in the words of B. Jessop (2013), recognizing that neoliberalization and «its context are always co-constitutive» (p. 68). As we see shall below the issues of connectivity and co-constitutive historical relationships between practices of neoliberalization and their contexts can be considered as central in understanding both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of neoliberalism itself.

Alongside the analysis based on structuralist or poststructuralist premises and those aimed at arranging a theoretical and methodological mediation between them, approaches based on the general assumption that “ideas matter” should be considered. From this viewpoint, “ideas matter” because they can crystallize both in «thought collective» and a «faith community» (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), which using powerful «second-hand dealers» (Hayek 1949) permits neoliberalism to «make its world» (Mitchell 2009). However, ideas also matter because they shape normative and cognitive frames (Campbell 2002; 2004), and «discursive institutions» (Schmidt 2002; 2008; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013) in which political, economic and social actions are embed-

ded. From this perspective neoliberal ideas, in their complex relationship with the real world of interests (Hay 2011), «have become so all pervasive that they have largely receded into the background even as they have served to guide public understandings of the possible and set the limits of the imaginable» (Schmidt 2016, p. 318).

As we shall see in greater detail below, defining what is both possible and imaginable is tantamount to framing a sort of “epistemic meaning horizon” capable of channeling public action and its ruling role, the strategies of economic actors, and more widely social beliefs and behaviour.

The fact that neoliberal beliefs can take on this epistemic role also means that it is a concept, like many other sociological and political concepts, in which the analytical and normative dimensions are necessarily blended.

The analytical and normative statements about neoliberalism can be judged in a divergent manner. The former do not mechanically determine the latter. In particular, the alleged reification of neoliberalism does not necessarily imply a sterilisation of critical thought about it. Stuart Hall (2011), one example among many, argues that «the term neoliberalism is not a satisfactory one», however at the same time, he also affirms that it is «politically necessary to give resistance to its onward march content, focus and a cutting edge» (p. 706). In the same vein, W. Davies (2014, p. 3) considers the term ‘neoliberalism’ a necessary one, because it plays a pivotal role in the «attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation, including, but not exclusively, the evaluations offered by markets». Others (Pellizoni and Ylönen 2012) welcome the polysemy of the concept of neoliberalism, because it «is positive to the extent that it draws attention to the dynamic, complex nature of the issue» (p. 1).

Obviously, these aims can be better achieved if neoliberalism is not reduced to a trivial «radical-theoretical slogan» (Peck 2004, p. 403), but is well defined in historical, theoretical, methodological and empirical terms. If trivialisation of neoliberalism helps its dominance, a «deeper sociological analysis» (Centeno and Cohen 2012, p. 332) of its main characteristics can undoubtedly favour the identification of the economic, political, ideational and social alternatives to it.

However, if it is true that a sociological perspective on neoliberalism can contribute to better understanding of its traits, it is also true that the concept of neoliberalism can permit a better representation of the contemporary forms of social organization. In this same perspective Dardot and Laval (2013, p.14) argue that «the originality of neoliberalism is precisely its creation of a new set of rules defining not only a different “regime of accumulation”, but, more broadly, a different society».

In brief, neoliberalism is imbued with the forms and processes of production and reproduction of society. However if we speak about society, without defining it histori-

cally, we are working with a meaningless abstraction. From this perspective we can reflect «on the meaning and usefulness of grand abstractions, such as “neoliberalism”» (Ward and England 2007), only if we are able to define it within the context of a historically defined society.

So, the main question becomes: what kind of historical society? In order to address this question it could be useful to start at the end, namely from the contemporary social and economic aftermath of the crisis, which - in the scathing definition of M. Aalbers (2013, p. 1086) - «is turning out to be a neoliberal dream, in the making». A dream, we can add, corresponding to a nightmare for all those who are not the few actors benefiting from the solution to the crisis, that is: «showering giant corporations with public money and cutting all other public spending» (Aalbers 2013, p. 1086). In other words, a nightmare for the losers of what L. Gallino (2012, p. 12) defines as «class struggle, after class struggle», a sort of class war fought «from above» (p. 12). The contemporary crisis and its “solutions” reveal that neoliberalism is framed within the historical context of the current global and financial forms of capitalist society. A form that D.M. Kotz (2015, p. 4) defines «neoliberal capitalism». In partly different words neoliberalism can be considered as «the current phase, stage, or mode of existence of capitalism» (Fine et al. 2016, p. 6) It means that neoliberalism is consubstantial with financial capitalism and that we cannot understand the former without analysing the latter, and vice versa. Without going into the relationship between neoliberalism and capitalism in depth (which will be analysed in the paragraph 4), we can also preliminarily agree with S. J Collier (2012, p. 191) when he writes that neoliberalism is «a concept we cannot do without», however we must first clarify if and what neoliberalism offers « anything of substance in capturing the contemporary world» (Fine et al. 2016, p. 6). The next paragraph is devoted to this issue.

3. Neoliberalism as “connective tissue”

This analysis of the debate regarding the helpfulness or otherwise of the concept of neoliberalism and the discussion about both its definition and normative implications seem to lead towards a nonsensical circular logic: neoliberalism can be understood in its social and historical context, however, at the same time, contemporary societies can be better understood using the concept of neoliberalism. This apparent illogicality vanishes if we apply one of the most important Marxian methodological lessons to the category of neoliberalism, according to which « even the more abstract categories ... are ... the product of historical condition and they have full validity only for and within

these conditions» (Marx 1859, tr. it. 1979, p. 193)⁵. According to this approach the more general abstractions arise in places where «a characteristic becomes common to a huge number of phenomena» (p.191). It is very useful consider the Marxian example concerning the abstraction of labour. Marx writes: «this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another... Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general...» (pp. 192-193). The result is that the abstraction of labour appears real «only as category of the most modern society» (p. 193). Therefore the abstract category of labour can logically exist only because it corresponds to a specific historical process of wealth production, that is when abstract labour produces wealth. We have also to consider that in the Marx's view each form of production "produces its own legal relationships, its form of government, etc." and all these "things are organically connected" (p. 176)

If we apply this methodological approach to neoliberalism, we can obtain four specific and inter-connected theoretical advantages. Firstly, we can better understand (and also define) it as the historical product of the crisis of the Fordist accumulation model and its related Keynesian policies. Secondly, the abstraction of neoliberalism can appear only when it is able to link – again using a Marxian term - «organically» an increasing number of phenomena. Thirdly, it exists insofar as it is a new model of production, and an accumulation of wealth emerges. Fourthly, it is able to create the extra economic conditions of reproduction of the accumulation model, such as legal relationships and forms of government and regulation.

All these issues are mutually linked and equally important. However the organic interconnectedness between different phenomena – produced and at the same time represented by the category of neoliberalism - seems particularly significant. J. Clarke (2008) moving from a different perspective - which both stresses the contingent, fluid and mobile characteristics of neoliberalism and reflects in critical manner on the helpfulness of the word neoliberalism – emphasises that "the combination of a logic of a market rationality, a conception of personhood, a calculating framework of efficiency, and a view of authority as a fundamental political bond" (p. 141) represents that which gives coherence to the different theories and practices of neoliberalism. Even though J. Clarke recognizes that these four elements are not particularly original, he points out that "it is their combination and interplay that marks the distinctiveness of neoliberalism" (p. 141). In other words, the specific nature of neoliberalism is its capacity to cre-

⁵ The author has translated all the quotations of K. Marx.

ate meaningful connections between different aspects of social life. Furthermore, this capacity concerns neoliberalism as an abstract category, as well as a concrete historical process. The theoretical proposal offered by M. Hilgers (2010; 2012) to approaching neoliberalism by integrating an analysis of its cultural, structural and governmental dimensions goes in the same direction. Also his later suggestion to consider the implementation of neoliberalism "within a triangle constituted by policies, institutions and dispositions" (2013, p. 85) as well as the "historicity" of the same implementation process hinges on the assumption that neoliberalism implies an interconnection between phenomena that occur within different spheres of action. This conclusion can be reinforced by considering a previous statement made by J. Ferguson (2009), in which - reflecting on the elusiveness of the concept of neoliberalism, - he argued that "there is also some utility in words that bring together more than one meaning. As long as we can avoid the mistake of simply confusing the different meanings, the word can be an occasion for reflecting on how the rather different things to which it refers may be related" (p. 172). The point of the matter is the "real" relationship between different social processes. This is the issue that has to be highlighted and explained. Christian Arnsperger (2008), reflecting on the theoretical possibility of setting up a "Critical Political Economy" perspective, considers Hayek's social ontology, showing that it provides "the vision of a society that self-organizes into an emergent whole" (p. 57). The crux of the matter here is not whether we endorse this social ontology or how it works, or not. Rather we must consider that it implies a vision of society considered as whole, or better still, using the words of P. Mirowski (2009), it should "imply a comprehensive long-term reform effort at retatting the entire fabric of society" (p. 431).

For the same reason it is very useful to think about neoliberalism as covering the whole of the "new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility" (Springer, Birch and MacLeavy Forthcoming, p. 2).

While the different arrangements reflect the ontic dimensions of neoliberalism, the underlying vision of the fabric of society expresses its ontological dimension. Only by considering the historical dialectic between the ontic and ontological dimensions of neoliberalism (as a process), can we understand and specify in theoretical terms its epistemological significance (as an explanatory category).

In order to develop this last point we define neoliberalism as a sort of "connective tissue" for contemporary capitalist society. What does it mean? Why and how can this definition be useful for an understanding of contemporary forms of political, economic, cultural, and social organization?

In Histology a connective tissue is defined as a tissue, which gives structural and metabolic support to other tissues. It links together different anatomic formations and fills the interstitial spaces between different and various structures. Sometimes it constitutes the support scaffold for other tissues or organs. It is also important underline that connective tissues are a large group of tissues that can be quite different, but which have some common features that allow us to group them together. These connective tissues form a framework and support structure for body tissue and organs. It is also useful to note that its metabolic function makes it possible for organisms to grow and reproduce, maintaining their structure and responding to the demands of their surrounding environment. In other words, this function also permits the development of the adaptive capacities of organs and organisms. So neoliberalism can be considered as a variegated set of theories, beliefs, institutions, discourses, and practices that gives structural and metabolic support to contemporary capitalism and permits its historical reproduction. It provides a structural coherence to processes, which occur in different sub-social systems.

We are well aware of the functionalist flavour of this definition of neoliberalism, however we maintain that the possible theoretical advantages outweigh the potential risk of a criticism involving organismic determinism. These advantages become clearer when considering what specific characteristics this variegated set takes in different sub-social systems⁶. In order to address this issue, and following J. Comaroff's (2011) suggestion, we have to avoid considering neoliberalism as a "noun", because in this form it tends to reify historical processes that, instead, vary in spatial, temporal and sectorial terms. As J. Comaroff (2011, p.142) states: "the adjective neoliberal is much easier to grasp discursively and politically, since it may be taken to describe a tendency, a more-or-less realized, more-or-less articulated, unevenly distributed ensemble of attributes discernible in the world. In the active voice, as adverb, it connotes an aspiration, a species of practice, a process of becoming, however unbecoming that process may be to our eyes". So it may be useful to analyse the political, social, moral, cultural, and subjective (and also intra-psychic) dimensions of this "species of practice".

⁶ As regard the variegation of neoliberalism we can consider that «It is a methodological fact of life that neoliberalism can only be encountered through such contingent, conjunctural and concrete formations: there are only hybrid manifestations of neoliberalism, it does not originate in a singular time or space, nor is there a pristine essential centre or starting point from which to theorize the political diffusion and development of the neoliberal project» (Birch and Tickell 2010, p. 44). See also Peck 2004 and, on sectoral variegation of neoliberalism, Moini 2015.

4. The main dimensions of neoliberalism and their interconnections

Starting with the political dimension we have to consider that neoliberalism first of all implies a reconfiguration of relationships between state and market. Here the trivialisation of "less state and more market" must absolutely be avoided. The political project of neoliberalism rather implies – as effectively stated by N. Tickell and J. Peck (2003) – a "mobilization of state power in the contradictory extension and reproduction of market (-like) rule" (p. 166). So, we find not less state, but more state to enable the development of market and competition. In other words, "neoliberalism is not necessarily based on the idea of less government or less politics; rather, neoliberalism is conceived in terms of different forms of state intervention and political engagement, across all scales" (Birch and Tickell 2010, p. 45) in order to support market-oriented behaviour. P. Mirowski (2009) stresses this point arguing that the existence of a stable market society must be constructed by a strong state and for this same reason he considers "neoliberalism as an authoritarian variant of the liberal tradition" (p. 441). This strong role of the state, as a matter of fact, is based on a weak democracy or, better still, on an elitist definition of it, as argued by B. Amable (2011): "in the neo-liberal tradition, the people are viewed through elitist lenses: they are ignorant and capricious and by no means sovereign" (p.17). The market or neoliberal society is not naturally (pre)given, but it is historically and politically produced. It, again following B. Amable, "must be a society ruled by private law (Hayek), and these laws must be out of democratic power's reach" (p. 16). The idea of post-democracy proposed by C. Crouch (2004) and A. Mastropaolo (2001) sums this political process up well. In brief, as noted by M.A. Centeno and J.N. Cohen (2012), "the political world of neoliberalism may be best understood as being based on increasingly asymmetrical power" (326) between private and public actors. Within this main trend, the depoliticisation of the politics of neoliberalism (Burnham 1999; Flinders and Buller 2006; Hay 2007, Kettel 2008; Marsh 2011; Flinders and Wood 2014; Fawcett and Marsh, 2014; Jessop 2014; Hay 2014)⁷ can be considered not only as one of the main ways to weaken contemporary democracy, but also one of the main political and discursive resources used for reproducing the hegemony of neoliberalism (Moini 2015).

However, neoliberalism it is not only a political project but also an anthropological and sociological one (Hilgers 2102). The social dimension of neoliberalism can be rep-

⁷ Also J. Clarke (2008) considers the topic of depoliticisation: «Here I want to argue that neo-liberalism should be understood as the latest in a dishonourable history of strategies of "depoliticization" of politics that attempt to conceal the problems and conflicts of politics behind an appeal to forms of knowledge and varieties of technical expertise» (p. 142).

resented – using the stark definition given by S. Hall (2011) – as a "permanent revolution", that is a permanent reconstruction of society along the ideas and practices of commodification and individualism (722) and in this revolution "a massive depoliticisation has done its work" (p.723). In the long run, we are not facing a process of individualisation but a more radical process of social atomisation. We have witnessed, and we are witnessing, an extraordinary historical reversal of the idea of a "society of individuals" proposed by N. Elias (1987) in which "an individual can say 'I' only if at the same time he is able to say also 'we' ... statements such as 'I am' and ever more 'I think' depend on the existence and coexistence with others – in short a group a society" (p. 76-77). In other words, "Individualisation" implies an acknowledgement of the social dimension of human existence, unlike "Atomisation" which produces a sort of "I without we" and which finds a good historical, political, and concrete example in the 'ownership society' concept advanced by J. W. Bush. We are locked into a "market civilisation", which engenders "a perspective on the world that is ahistorical, economistic, materialistic, 'me oriented', short-termist and ecologically myopic" (Gill 1995, p. 399). In social terms, competitiveness becomes a central principle of the individual and of social life, and neoliberalism implies the creation of a combination of rules that produce a particular kind of society (Dardot and Laval 2013). The contemporary process of financialisation finds one of its main driving forces in the commodification of many aspects of human life and of the course of life (baby bonds, student loans, car loans, credit-card debt, health insurance, private pensions, residential mortgage loans, etc.) (Blackburn 2008). In brief, a capitalization has been made of almost everything (Leyshon and Thrift 2007) in social life, and K. Birch and V. Mykhnenko (2010) summarize this process and its main consequences effectively: "individuals are constructed as rational subjects – encouraged to compete in flexible labour markets that depend on entrepreneurship, life-long learning and transferable skills (that is, employability) – by shifting responsibility for social justice, wellbeing and health outcomes from the state to the individual (...) One particularly invidious example of how this is enacted is in the expansion of consumer credit – and hence debt – in Anglo-American countries, encouraged in large part by stagnation in real wages resulting from flexible labour markets and unemployment (...) Easy credit and increasing levels of debt have left countless households in ruin as a consequence of the current crisis" (p. 8).

Competition is not only a central principle of social life, but it also appears as a sort of moral imperative of economic behaviour and the political realm (Amable 2011). Competition plays "a central role in the establishment of neoliberal society" (p. 4), becoming a moral value that reinforces the legitimacy of capitalism. As B. Amable writes: "we must be clear about which moral values we mean. In neoliberal capitalism, ideo-

logical pressures arise to delegitimize collective action when it is liable to lead to redistribution or protection from competition. These pressures take the form of a moral duty to commodify labour power and respect the market competition outcomes as just. This leads not only to a challenging of social protection as economically inefficient and morally reprehensible, but also to a critique of democracy and sovereignty of the people" (2011, pp. 4-5). In moral terms what seems very important is not only that "competition and competitiveness appeared to have become unquestionable social and economic goods" (Davies 2014, p. X), but also that the structuring of social and political life have to follow and, at the same time, produce and reproduce them. The "market ethos" appears unquestionable. It appears to be a powerful depoliticised system of beliefs to which human and social behaviour have to conform. It is useful to consider that here - according to W. Davies' analysis (2014) - we find a theoretical and practical overturning of the classical Weberian relationship between ethos and capitalist rationality. While M. Weber explained the emergence of modern capitalist rationality by considering the role of the Protestant ethic "Hayek and his followers believed that various forms of quantitative evaluation could provide the conditions and guarantee of liberal values" (Davies 2014, p. 7). Cognitive technical rationality - which can assume different and apparently divergent forms, from evidence-based policy to nudging strategies (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) - supports the normative and substantive values of competition and competitiveness. In brief, the founding moral values of neoliberal thought are being shielded by technical precepts.

A market ethos deeply permeates the cultural dimension of contemporary societies and acquires an increasing consent in the popular consciousness (Hall 2011, p. 721). The issue of the culture of neoliberalism is too important and complex to deal with here in a satisfactory way. We can just note that the leachate progressively produced by the culture of narcissism (Lasch 1979) has promoted a situation in which "simply put, people felt they were living much better thanks to the market" (Centeno and Cohen 2012, p. 331). The increase in both household consumption and indebtedness are simple examples of the cultural hegemony of neoliberal values.

The "permanent revolution" of neoliberalism mentioned above, that is, the idea of reorganising society through the multiplication and intensification of market mechanisms, inescapably implies a transformation of subjects and subjectivity, in a word, it implies the birth of an enterprising subjectivity or, better, of a «neo-subject». Following the mighty analysis of the birth of the neo-subject carried out by P. Dardot and C. Laval (2013) we can say that "neoliberal rationality encourages the ego to act to strengthen itself so as to survive competition" (p. 424). The novelty of this mechanism consists "in triggering a 'chain reaction' by producing 'enterprising subjects' who in turn will repro-

duce, expand and reinforce competitive relations between themselves. In accordance with the logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, this requires them to adapt subjectively to ever harsher conditions which they have themselves created" (p. 422). In other words, the main innovation consists in the perfect coincidence between "the way a man 'is governed from without' to the way that 'he governs himself from within'" (p.425). Through a complex, and in some ways apparently contradictory, performance/pleasure apparatus which governs the neo-subjects – described by P. Dardot and C. Laval and which we cannot consider in depth here - the neoliberal technology of the self arrives not only to influence the sexual behaviour (Stychin 2003; Bell and Binnie 2004; Duggan 2002; Richardson 2005, p. 517), but also the intra-psychic life of individuals, using particular kinds of psychotherapies and counselling (Bondi 2005). In other words, it can be found a sort of psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic fostering of this neo-subject.

Summarising: authoritarian state, weak democracy, depoliticisation, social atomisation, capitalization of almost everything in social life, competition as a moral imperative, permeation of a market ethos into the popular consciousness, and the emergence of entrepreneurial neo-subjects are some of the most evident ontic expressions of neoliberalism⁸. Taking them as a whole, we can identify the ontological dimension of neoliberalism, that is a process capable of connecting these tendencies in order to support an underlying vision of society. The epistemological significance of neoliberalism rests on the capacity of this concept to disclose the interconnections not only between different phenomena, but also between each of them and a more general fabric of contemporary society. It is precisely for this reason that neoliberalism can be defined as a "connective tissue". However there is another substantial and historical reason, which supports the epistemological usefulness of the concept of neoliberalism, perceived as "connective tissue". It allows us to identify a functional relationship⁹ between the ontic and ontological dimensions of neoliberalism and contemporary modes of production and reproduction of wealth. In a word, between these dimensions and contemporary capitalism. The latter cannot survive and reproduce itself without the support of neoliberalism¹⁰.

⁸ It is almost superfluous to note that this list does not have exhaustive pretensions.

⁹ This functional relationship can be better defined considering the concept of function proposed by N. Elias (1986 tr. It 1990). After he had purified it of its ultimate purpose characteristics, typical of structural-functionalism, he defined a function in relational terms. A function, in Elias' analysis, can exist only where « we are p with interdependencies» (p. 87), which leads us to «it is not possible to understand the function that A plays for B if we don't consider the function that B plays for A» (p.88). (Translated by the author).

¹⁰ In order to have a better empirical understanding of this functional interdependence, we can also consider neoliberalism as a historically determined form of public action (Moini 2015). Public action is «the whole of relationships, practices and representations, which contributes to politically, legitimated produc-

Before analysing the relationships between neoliberalism and contemporary financial capitalism more precisely, and how neoliberalism plays its connective function (next concluding paragraph), it might be useful summarise the main analytical advantages of maintaining the concept of neoliberalism as a “connective tissue” in our explanatory models. It permits us to: i) recognize and understand the relationships between processes that occur in different spheres of action (political, social, cultural etc.); ii) connect phenomena that occur on different scales of action (from global to local and vice versa); iii) link micro and macro dynamics; iv) represent the forms of contemporary social organisation in a systemic manner; v) identify the relationships between actions, practices, institutions and discourses, and beliefs developed in different space and temporal (historical) contexts; vi) favour a theoretical dialogue and exchange between different disciplines with their methodological apparatus (sociology, economics, political science, human geography, social history, anthropology, etc.); vii) find possible interpolations between the different approaches to the study of neoliberalism (structuralist vs. poststructuralist); viii) discover original relationships between the ideas of neoliberalism as *explanans* and *explanandum* or between neoliberalism as signifier and signified; ix) overcome the increasing rhetoric of neoliberalism as a slippery and "rascal" concept; x) set up an object of analysis with which to test a founding category of the social sciences (e.g. the category of hegemony).

5. The material and ideational powers of neoliberalism within contemporary capitalism

After having described the mutual relationships between different dimensions of neoliberalism - that is between processes that happen in different spheres of action - the specific relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism has to be considered. Obviously there are a lot of theoretical, historical, and methodological problems that must be taken into account in order to analyse this complex relationship. What does the adjective ‘contemporary’ mean? What are the temporal boundaries of contemporary capitalism? How can we resolve in methodological and empirical terms the issues of variety and variegation within contemporary capitalism? Can we define contemporary capitalism as financial capitalism? Furthermore what is financiali-

tion of modes of regulation of social relations» (Dubois, 2009, p. 311). So neoliberalism can be considered as a historically determined kind of public action that – with forms and contents changing in time, space, sectors and scales – favours the accumulation strategies of elite classes.

sation? Was financialisation the origin of neoliberalism or, on the contrary, does neoliberalism determine the development of financial accumulation strategies? These are just some of the preliminary questions that should be addressed, but which cannot be examined in the limited space of a single paragraph. So we'll just highlight some fundamental issues regarding the relationship between contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism in order to arrive at an explanation of how the latter plays its connective role.

The starting point of the analysis is the serious crisis in capital accumulation which began at the end of the 1960s when: «the embedded liberalism that had delivered high rates of growth to at least the advanced capitalist countries after 1945 was clearly exhausted and was no longer working. Some alternative was called for if the crisis was to be overcome» (Harvey 2005, p. 12)¹¹. More precisely, that main question was: «how were the conditions for the resumption of active capital accumulation to be restored» (p. 13). The ruling elite and ruling classes were not only economically threatened by stagflation but also politically challenged by the advance of social-democratic forces. Neoliberalism in this perspective is considered as a political project aimed at responding to these threats and at restoring the ruling classes' revenues and power. In the clear-cut words of G. Duménil and D. Lévy (2004) «the neoliberal order aims to reaffirm the fundamentally capitalist nature of our societies» (p. 3). The roots of the neoliberal turn must be searched for and identified within the crisis of the accumulation model of previous embedded liberalism or, in only partially different words, «within the working of the economic system itself and not simply an ideological sea change that occurred in isolation from the changes in the structure of the international economy» (Shaoul 2010, p. 240). It means not only that the «profit making strategies of capital have become dependent upon neoliberalism» (Cahill 2014, p. 85), but also that neoliberalism emerges as a matter of class (Scherrer 2014). The reproduction of conditions for capitalist accumulation through institutions, beliefs, practices, processes, and the strategies of different economic and political actors - in brief through neoliberal forms of public action (Lascoumes and Le Galés 2012) – appears embedded in the relationships of ruling classes. Using the words of C. Lapavistas (2009) in the contemporary «financialised capitalism, the ordinary conditions of existence of working people have become increasingly within the purview of the financial system» (p. 132). This perspective does not seem incompatible with a representation of neoliberalism in terms of a political project, because it is exactly the political project of the dominant elite or, better still, a project that «emerges ultimately in a structural landscape of class formation

¹¹ Analogous considerations can be found in Harman 2010 and Brenner 2006.

processes» (Kalb 2012, p. 324) aimed at reducing the power of labour (Sad-Fhilo and Johnston 2005) and at the same time at restoring capitalist class power (Overbeek and van Apeldoorn 2012). The material basis of neoliberalism, or the relationships between neoliberalism and capitalism, emerge more clearly if we consider specific concepts that are able to describe value production such as the concept of «social structure of accumulation» (Gordon et al. 1982; Kotz et al. 1994) which allow us to define contemporary capitalism as «neoliberal capitalism» (Kotz 2015), or the idea of a ‘System of Provisions’ which makes it possible to consider neoliberalism as «a new stage in the development of capitalism emerging in the wake of the post-war boom» (Fine et al. 2016, p. 6).

However, this material power of neoliberalism – linked to the prominence of capitalistic social relations of production - may not be detached from its ideational power: while the former cannot produce its impacts without the legitimisation of the latter, this latter cannot exert its influence without the support of the former. The substantial interdependence between the material and ideational dimensions of neoliberalism, or in partially different terms, between their structural and semiotic aspects (Sum and Jessop 2013), cannot be overlooked, not only if we want to avoid worthless, dangerous as well as complementary theoretical and methodological reductionisms and determinisms (materialistic vs. idealistic), but also if we want to better understand and explain the long-lasting hegemony of the actors, interests and belief system of neoliberalism.

In accord not only with the variegation of existing forms of neoliberalism but also with the historical prevalence of financial capitalism, hegemony tends to assume a «selective» character which does not imply «expansive hegemonic projects potentially embracing the whole of society, but rather projects directed toward selective groups» (Smith 2011, p. 29)¹². This sort of variegation of hegemonic strategies can be well observed, just as one example, in the field of neoliberal urban policy in which different accumulation strategies are built on different hegemonic projects, which are able to mobilize «support behind a concrete program of action that asserts a contingent general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction) and thereby privileges particular economic-corporate interests compatible with this program while derogating the pursuit of other interests that are inconsistent with the project» (Jessop 1997, p. 62). This selectivity implies a deconstruction of the whole idea of hegemony, and the concept of «hegemonic constellations» proposed by D. Plehwe, B. Walpen and G. Neunhöffer (2006) seems very useful for this purpose. These authors, following the Gramscian belief, state that «hegemony requires the active consent and participation of the ruled

¹² For an interesting critical discussion of the concept of «selective hegemony» see: Collins 2011; Robotham 2011; Susser 2011.

and thus finds expression in coalitions and compromises designed to integrate diverse social forces into (asymmetrical) historical power blocs» (Plehwe et al. 2006, p. 3). This integration can be better achieved considering the particular and contingent characteristics of the diverse social forces or, better, their spatial, cultural, economic, political and, more generally, specific historical features. Hegemony should be modelled on the changing specific characteristics of the historical power bloc. So «instead of a global, homogeneous neoliberal hegemony, we thus need to think of potentially quite distinct neoliberal hegemonic constellations, which may be constructed at national, transnational, world-regional and global levels. Neoliberal historical power blocs inevitably feature distinct characteristics and constituencies, although intensified 'globalization' insures some important overlap. Over time, new historical power blocs may be formed through political struggle and these can alter the orientation and content of earlier hegemonic paradigms» (Plehwe et al. 2006, p. 3). These hegemonic constellations are the result of the ideational activity of several actors: think tanks, epistemic communities, scholars, (organic) intellectuals, discourse communities, but also a transnational capitalist class (Carroll and Carson 2003; Carroll 2010; Sklair 1994) and corporations (Beder 2006; Miller 2010). In this perspective not only the materiality of ideas matters¹³, but also that «the interrelation of conceptual and social aspects within today's capitalism is important to better understand neoliberal hegemonic constellations» (Plehwe et al. 2006, p. 5). The possibility to express hegemony in more nuanced manner, that is as different hegemonic constellations which selectively activate different social forces in historically changing power blocs, lets us establish the strong relationship between neoliberalism and a reproduction of the power of the contemporary capitalist class avoiding, at the same time, a generic and blurred definition of it.

This selective capacity favours the «ecological dominance» (Jessop 2010) both of contemporary capitalism and of its class relationships. This idea is derived from the biological sciences and «it refers to the relative dominance of different species in an ecological system» (p. 176). When this idea is translated to the social world describes «relative dominance of one subsystem or institutional order within a self-organizing ecology of subsystems or institutional orders» (p. 176) and with specific reference to the issue of neoliberalism it means that «the profit-oriented, market-mediated logic of capital accumulation (including its extra-economic supports), operating on a world scale, can shape the development of other ensembles of social action more powerfully than they can shape it» (p. 177).

The final question is: how is this ecological dominance developed? The ideational

¹³ In more specific terms: «ideas matter because they are an inseparable part of the social» (Plehwe et al. 2006, p. 23).

power of neoliberalism does not rest only on a shared «set of epistemic commitments» (Mirowsky e Plewhe, 2009, p. 417). It is founded also on the ability of global and local mediators (Jobert and Muller 1987) to define a sort of 'epistemic horizon of meaning', which connects and links actions and practices developed in different subsystems or diverse institutional domains. Neoliberalism tends to provide an episteme for political, social, economic, moral, and subjective actions. The power of an episteme is that it describes theoretical and rigorous aspects of knowledge, which, for this reason, enable different activities. The strength of an episteme is that it stands in opposition to 'opinion' (as δόξα), so it appears, for this same reason, immediately convincing. Its apparent neutrality makes it believable.

In conclusion: neoliberalism as an episteme appears in a depoliticized "sense making" role structuring the rules of contemporary capitalism. It means that this ideational power cannot be exerted without the support of the material power of the different hegemonic fractions of capital involved in the current production of wealth. From this perspective neoliberalism provides a 'connective tissue' for contemporaneous capitalism and therefore can be considered one of the main resources of its «ecological dominance». The critical analysis of neoliberalism as a connective tissue for contemporary capitalism must be further better developed in methodological and empirical terms in order to overturn the relationship between neoliberalism as an episteme and opinion. Neoliberalism, as with all mankind's intellectual products, is a result of historical development and not a pre-given condition of nature. For this reason we can find ways to overcome its dominance. The first step is continuing to study and analyse the 'beast'.

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