Crisis, Mutant Neoliberalism, & Critical Education Policy Analysis

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Abstract

The economic dislocations and political antagonisms brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are once again fueling speculation that we are collectively witnessing the terminal crisis of the neoliberal order. It will be argued here that this crisis rhetoric is grounded in a fundamental misconception of neoliberalism that fails to capture its dynamism and its ability to mutate in response to historical change. Neoliberalism will be defined here as a reactionary political project operating at global, national, and local levels that is defined by mutation. Implications of this analysis for critical education policy analysis will be explored.

Keywords: *critical education policy analysis, neoliberalism, mutant neoliberalism, crisis, neoclassical economics, conservative movement, cyber-utopianism, COVID*

Introduction

It is now quite common to encounter claims that neoliberalism is entering a period of terminal crisis. Cédric Durand (2021) argues that the rise of right-wing populism, the climate crisis, and the great game politics of a binary world-system dominated by China and the United States (US) has led to a dramatic policy shift away from neoliberalism toward more statist policies. Wendy Brown (2019) argues that decades of neoliberal restructuring has set into motion the anti-democratic forces of right-wing populism that represents both a stark departure from the kind of society neoliberals envisioned and a threat to the

viability of the neoliberal project itself. Nancy Fraser (2019) sees the neo-fascist rhetoric of right-wing populism as evidence of a backlash against the progressive neoliberalism of the Third Way Left and as evidence of a hegemonic crisis of the neoliberal formation. These three examples are evidence of a much larger conversation about political and policy shifts taking place during a time of multiplying crises, from the global financial crisis of 2009 to the public health and economic crises associated with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Despite the diversity of thought at work in this body of literature, what unifies this crisis discourse is the argument that the neoliberal hegemonic order is entering a period of terminal crisis that portends a dramatic shift in public policy in the coming years.

There is, of course, good reason to be suspicious of crisis rhetoric. One of the defining characteristics of the neoliberal era is the emergence of a 'crisis industry' (Roitman 2014, Walby 2015). Still, it is important for scholars and activists working in education policy to engage this discourse. Education policy is always already situated within larger systems of governance. The mass societies of the mid-twentieth century informed mass education and situated schools and universities within a technostructure of state management and Keynesian policy (Galbraith 1968). Likewise, education policy from the 1980s forward reflected a larger shift toward neoliberal policy. If we are indeed living through a time of neoliberal crisis then it would be reasonable to assume that a dramatic shift in education policy is on the horizon.

It is also important to note, however, that we have been here before. The global financial crisis of 2008 led prominent scholars to theorize a shift away from neoliberalism (Stiglitz 2008) and a radical shift in the way we collectively talk about education (Giroux 2009 Peters 2011). Jamie Peck (2010) argued that four decades of neoliberal governance had become consumed by attempts to

ameliorate societal problems created by previous neoliberal reforms. In Peck's telling, neoliberalism had entered a period of terminal crisis in which it continues to lumber forward like the undead, what he termed zombie neoliberalism. What occurred in the aftermath of these disruptions, however, was not neoliberal crisis nor the slow shuffle of the undead but an acceleration of neoliberal restructuring (Mirowski 2014a). It was another case of the 'strange non-death of neoliberalism' (Crouch 2011).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss contemporary claims of neoliberal crisis on the basis of past predictive failure. It could be that earlier calls for a terminal crisis of neoliberalism were correct in substance but premature in timing. To know if a neoliberal crisis is afoot or even what the category of neoliberal crisis might mean requires, I want to argue, a materialist conceptualization of neoliberalism as a political project. If the reactionary movements and morbid symptoms of our present circumstance are indeed evidence of a hegemonic crisis of neoliberalism then it is important to clarify what it is that is being contested and, just as importantly, what explains the resiliency of neoliberalism in a time of multiplying crises. '[W]e need more and better analyses of [neoliberal] mechanics, its morphology, and the stations of its metamorphosis' (Plehwe, Slobodian, & Mirowski 2020, p. 2).

The task for this article is to extend ground-breaking work by Aldo Madariaga (2020) exploring the dynamics of neoliberal resiliency in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Madariaga demonstrates that the resilience of the neoliberal political project is a function of democratic containment and the building of a political infrastructure of hegemonic leadership. Neoliberalism is most resilient in a political context in which the democratic aspirations of the populace are constrained by a legal constitutional order and in which private and public actors successfully construct a political infrastructure to both advance its

ideological project and delegitimize oppositional forces. In this article, I will seek to extend these observations by adding a third element: mutation. I will argue that neoliberalism is best understood as a reactionary political project that is defined by its mutability and adaptability to specific contexts and that its mutability helps to explain its resiliency in the contemporary conjuncture.

In what follows, I will first review the central arguments advanced by contemporary crisis discourse in order to demonstrate the problematic way in which this discourse conceptualizes neoliberalism. I will then attempt to develop a more robust conceptualization of neoliberalism by tracing its historical development from inter-war Vienna to its rise to hegemonic dominance in the 1970s and 80s. The next section will attempt to unpack this conceptualization by grounding it in a historical analysis of neoliberal development in the US using privatization and 'school choice' policies as a paradigmatic example. And, I will conclude by exploring the implications of this conceptualization of neoliberalism for scholars and activists doing critical education policy work in the contemporary conjuncture.

The study detailed here will be a challenging read involving historical analyses that will venture far afield from education policy. However, I want to argue that this is necessary work that can challenge not only contemporary neoliberal crisis discourse but also the often problematic ways in which neoliberalism is operationalized in education policy analysis. I will argue that there is little reason to believe that neoliberalism is in terminal decline, that the neoliberal project is mutating and shifting in response to historical change, and that a necessary task for scholars doing critical education policy work is to map the terrain of political struggle in the contemporary conjuncture in order to better understand how neoliberalism is mutating in response to societal change and to

inform the work of activists seeking to challenge neoliberal education policy and practice.

Neoliberal Crisis?

Contemporary crisis discourse is centered around two major shifts in the political landscape of the Global North in recent years. First, the rise of right-wing populist parties and social movements has led to speculation that the economic antagonisms created by neoliberal restructuring of the global economy has opened the door to nationalist and authoritarian politics. Societies meant to be depoliticized by neoliberal economic restructuring have become re-politicized by populist, nationalist, and patriarchal movements that now pose a direct threat to the neoliberal social order (Brown 2019). The problem with this line of thought, however, is that actually existing populist governments have not challenged the neoliberal economic order but have worked to advance neoliberal policies. The illiberal government of Victor Orbán may denounce the European Union (EU) using populist rhetoric, but the policies pursued by his government closely align with the neoliberal austerity policies advanced by the EU (Fabry 2019). Likewise, the Trump administration's 'America First' agenda represented not a challenge to neoliberalism but a continuation of policies and practices first introduced in the Reagan era (Wraight 2019). What we see in actually existing populist governments is not a crisis of neoliberalism as much as evidence of mutation and advancement, what we might call 'neo-illiberalism' (Hendrikse 2021).

Second, the dramatic state response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic across the Global North has led to speculation that we are collectively witnessing the rise of a new activist state more closely aligned to post-war Keynesianism than neoliberalism. The mitigation efforts put into place by the Boris Johnson government in the United Kingdom (UK) to ameliorate income loss, growing

unemployment, and the strain being placed on the National Health Service represents a notable exercise in state power by a conservative government. Likewise, recent economic proposals from Joe Biden in the US dealing with child credits, the environment, and taxation have led to media speculation making comparisons between Biden and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Gergen 2021). However, a close reading of Biden's legislative agenda reveals the neoliberal thought informing his proposals, e.g. references to 'public-private partnerships' and 'asset recycling' (Psaki 2021), and critical analyses of Johnson's policies in the UK point toward the advancement of neoliberal austerity and responsibilization (Duncan 2021). As with the financial crisis of 2008 and the Euro crisis of 2010, the policy response to the pandemic points toward the acceleration and mutability of neoliberal policies in the contemporary conjuncture.

The problem with contemporary crisis discourse is that it too often conceptualizes neoliberalism as market fundamentalism. Neoliberalism is here a theory of free markets made up of atomized, utility-maximizing agents, i.e. the homo oeconomicus of neoclassical orthodoxy. It is an anti-statist theory of economic policy that works to lower taxes, remove barriers to the movement of trade and capital, privatize state services, and roll back the powers of the state. There is, of course, a kernel of truth to this conceptualization of neoliberalism. The past four decades of education policy across the Global North have been marked by privatization, austerity, and the marketization of teaching and learning (Saltman 2014). However, it is a conceptualization that takes neoliberal political rhetoric at face value thus rendering invisible the complex structures and networks of actors working to advance neoliberalism as a political project.

Philip Mirowski notes that the primary source of this mis-conceptualization is the conflation of neoclassical economics and neoliberalism (Lash & Dragos

2016). The term neoclassical economics was first used by Thorstein Veblen (1900) to describe the mathematical formalism of an economic science that models itself after physics. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, is an elite political project founded by a diverse group of European and American intellectuals in the aftermath of the Second World War to challenge the Keynesian, social democratic, and socialist politics of the mid-twentieth century. As will become clear, there was considerable overlap and intellectual exchange among these two groups of actors, and neoliberals were/are fond of employing the categories of neoclassical economics to advance their political goals. However, neoliberalism departs from neoclassical economics in important ways, and this is especially true when the axioms of neoclassical economics come into conflict with its political ambitions. For example, neoclassical economics conceptualizes monopoly as market failure leading to rent-seeking behavior and inviting regulation to restore market competition. Neoliberals view monopoly as the outcome of Darwinian competition in the marketplace, as evidence of efficiency and natural hierarchy, and as the engine of innovation (Schumpeter 1943, Van Horn 2009). The market society envisioned by neoliberals is a hierarchical, Darwinian order established through market competition. Monopoly is a feature not a bug.

Moving beyond the mystification of neoliberalism as market theory requires a materialist conceptualization grounded in the historical development of neoliberalism as a political project from its origins in the Mises Seminar of interwar Vienna to the founding of the Mont Pelèrin Society after the Second World War to the construction of dynamic, embedded policy networks across the globe from the 1970s to the present (Djelic & Mousavi 2020, Mirowski & Plehwe 2009; Wasserman, 2019). Neoliberalism is here a reactionary political project requiring a strong, managerial state to both construct a constitutional order operating at the national and supra-national levels to constrain the

democratic ambitions of national populations (Slobodian 2018) and to rationalize human behavior through systems of technocratic governance (Clarke 2004). The goal of neoliberal politics is to construct and protect a 'market society' via a legal constitutional order (Hayek 1978) modeled on a romanticized vision of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Slobodian 2018, Wasserman 2019). To be clear, the neoliberal project does envision the price-signaling mechanism of capitalist markets as a cybernetic system that can rationalize human behavior and human societies (Hayek 1952), however neoliberalism cannot be reduced to market theory (Mirowski 2014b). It is best conceptualized as a political philosophy of statecraft and governance informing a political project with global ambitions in which mutability and reflexivity are defining characteristics.

Mutant Neoliberalism

Understanding neoliberalism as a political project defined by its mutability and adaptability begins with tracing its historical development from the first and second schools of Austrian economics (Wasserman 2019). The first Austrian school is associated with Carl Menger and the marginal revolution in economic theory. According to Menger, value is located not in labor time but in the utility function of consumer preferences, a shift in economic thinking that revolutionized the field in the twentieth century. It was this first school that emerged from late Habsburg Vienna that constructed a coherent school of thought, i.e. the 'Austrian school.' However, it was the second Austrian school that emerged from the ruins of the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that built the political networks and intellectual core of what would become the neoliberal political project.

The second school was constructed around the famous Mises seminar in inter-war Vienna. Ludwig von Mises used his position in the Viennese Chamber of

Commerce to organize private seminars that attracted some of the most notable social scientific figures of the era both on the political right, such as Gottfried Haberler, Fritz Machlup and Oskar Morgenstern, as well as notable figures on the political left, such as Otto Bauer, Nikolai Bukharian and Otto Neurath. The Mises seminar was a site of spirited debate over a wide range of topics, from political philosophy to economics, that would often carry on well into the night in Viennese cafes. The Mises seminar is, however, more than a historical curiosity or site of obscure academic debate. The development and structure of the seminar made two foundational contributions to the neoliberal project that would follow.

The first contribution can be located in Frederick Hayek's observation that 'he who is only an economist cannot be a good economist' (Hayek 1967, p. 267). Debate within the seminar extended well beyond economics. These early neoliberals clearly understood that achieving the market society they envisioned would require a political project global in scope. Importantly, Mises' connections to political and business leaders in Vienna and beyond created opportunities to build networks of support for both the seminar itself and to advance the political project being developed there.

The early neoliberals became adept at cultivating influence among political leaders and building social networks to fund and promote their ideas in a time of Keynesian ascendancy. These political networks enabled the Austrians to escape to the US during the Second World War and, more importantly, to slowly gain political influence across the Global North in the aftermath of the war.

> The Austrians adapted to disciplinary marginalization by drawing on a wellspring of Viennese talents: networking with academic, business, and government insiders; forming autonomous institutions; and stimulating one another's work. Even as the appeal of their economic ideas waned, their political views waxed, finding new support in conservative circles... Slowly but surely, the urbane, cosmopolitan Austrians attracted new sources of support. They projected an image of status and authority that resonated with US elites and conservative intellectuals... With a new basis of support in new lands, the Austrian School ceased to be the coffeehouse school of earlier vintage. Its members became standard-bearers for a program to restore the values of another age, the Austrian world of yesterday. (Wasserman 2019, p.164)

The Mises seminar established a foundation for the neoliberal project that would follow by constructing networks of support for a reactionary political project oriented around a romanticized vision of Mises' lost Austro-Hungarian Empire. Funded by wealthy philanthropists and corporations, the goal of this elite political project was to constrain the democratic demands of the working and middle classes of the Global North and those of the former colonial subjects achieving liberation across the Global South (Slobodian 2018), political demands they termed 'collectivism.'

The second contribution the Mises seminar made to the neoliberal project can be located in the structure of the seminar itself. The seminar was a place of strenuous debate and stark, often bitter, disagreement. Categorizing this group of thinkers as 'Austrian' obscures the often fierce disagreements and points of contention among these fellow political travelers. They clashed over everything from political strategy to economic methods, and their disagreements often became personal, with Hayek famously excommunicating Joseph Schumpeter from the Austrian camp in the 1960s. More importantly, it was in the Mises seminar that these early neoliberals developed an intellectual culture in which

diversity of opinion was the norm and in which debate was oriented toward developing concrete political strategies.

This brief history of the second Austrian school and the Mises seminar is an important and too often neglected topic in critical education work exploring neoliberalism. It is important because it foregrounds the historical development of neoliberalism as a reactionary political project animated by a market imaginary. It was the political networks and intellectual culture developed in the Mises seminar that laid the foundation for the first meeting of the Mont Pelèrin Society (MPS) in 1947 and the neoliberal thought collective developed there (Mirowski & Plehwe 2009).

Hayek's vision for the MPS was to mobilize the networks of support developed by the Austrians to build an international society of intellectual debate and political advocacy. His vision was to build on his experience with the Mises seminar, in which heated debate and intellectual diversity were the norm, to advance an elite political project of democratic encasement and elite restoration. The first meeting of the MPS brought together a wide array of public intellectuals, journalists, and social scientists from across the globe in a closed, invitation-only meeting to debate the nature of the threat posed by 'collectivism' and to strategize how it might be defeated. It was this model of political work that would come to define both the MPS in the decades that followed and, more importantly, the contours of the neoliberal project itself.

The MPS became a collective space in which relatively diverse groups of actors came together to construct an 'esoteric doctrine for a small, closed elite, envisioned as the keepers of the flame of the collective's wisdom,' and an 'exoteric version of its doctrine for the masses' (Mirowski 2014a, p. 68) in order to reconstruct the global order. The exoteric discourse advanced by the

neoliberal project is an anti-statist ideological discourse of 'free markets,' individual freedom, market democracy, and the rule of law. The esoteric discourse, however, envisions an activist state working to construct and protect capitalist markets from democratic publics. It is this esoteric discourse that is absent from contemporary crisis discourse.

If the utopian vision toward which neoliberals strive is a market society then the world they see around them is threatening and in perpetual crisis. The early neoliberals who founded the Mont Pelèrin Society saw around them a western society in decline and threatened by the dominance of 'collectivism,' a category encompassing New Deal liberalism, social democracy, and socialism. They understood the 'collectivism' of the twentieth century in Polanyian terms as a move by societies to embed economic systems within social and cultural norms of redistribution, a political orientation that they argued inevitably leads down the road to serfdom (Hayek 1956). If there is a state of nature in neoliberal thought it is communitarian and democratic, thus the market society they envision requires political work and constant vigilance. From the founding of the Mont Pelèrin Society to the present, neoliberals see democratic demands for redistribution as a threat to the 'market society' they envision.

Neoliberalism is, at its core, a reactionary project against 'collectivism' and democratic challenges from below. What emerged from the MPS is an array of adaptive political strategies that are context specific yet remain committed to a global political project of democratic encasement and elite restoration. Walter Eucken and Milton Friedman were both founding members of the MPS and brought neoliberal thought home, but the German ordoliberalism and the neoclassical influenced Chicago school of neoliberalism they championed respectively looked very different in practice. Each was uniquely adapted to its national context.

Pragmatism and adaptability are defining characteristics of the neoliberal political project from its founding at Mont Pelèrin to the present day. Indeed, the often profound differences among the notable 'schools' of neoliberal thought, such as the Geneva school, Freiburg school, Chicago school, etc., offer easy examples of the ways in which neoliberal ideas were both tailored to specific cultural and political contexts and contested by competing actors within the neoliberal thought collective. There was never just one neoliberalism but neoliberalisms. What unifies the diverse schools of thought and actors in the neoliberal project is a shared fear of the demos, a social Darwinian view of society centered around competition and hierarchy, and an approach to political rhetoric animated by a free market imaginary.

A materialist, historical conceptualization of neoliberalism must understand this object of analysis not as market theory or even a unitary object of analysis, but as a series of embedded networks (or nested dolls), with the thought collective of the MPS at its core, pursuing a political project that is at once global and local, that is a coherent political philosophy of governance and statecraft oriented toward 'retating the entire fabric of society' (Mirowski 2009, p. 431). I want to argue that this conceptualization of neoliberalism as a political project can help us to think critically about contemporary crisis discourse.

Callison & Manfredi (2020) argue that contemporary neoliberal crisis discourse employs heuristic schema that are out of place in this historical moment. Using Peck's 'undead' framing, they argue that:

> the discourse of an "undead" neoliberalism has, perhaps unwittingly, inherited certain strands of revolutionary political thought. For it imagines that a historical event like the financial crisis will finally reveal a regnant ideology as defunct. And when social and political forces failed to transform this historical "event" into a new order, an old

> Marxist question reemerged in a new form: "Why did the revolution fail to occur?" became "Why did neoliberalism not die?" The task was then to explain why an expected event never materialized. Under-writing these questions, however, is the quasi-teleological assumption that, once revealed as false or outmoded by historical events, hegemonic regimes are bound for crisis and will thus be replaced by wholly new paradigms of thought and practice. (Callison & Manfredi 2020, p. 4)

The issue with contemporary crisis discourse rests on its apparent assumption that contradiction and shifts in rhetoric are evidence of failure and crisis, an assumption that takes the exoteric discourse of neoliberalism at face value. Callison and Manfredi argue, instead, for a conceptualization of neoliberalism as a political project that is dynamic and mutable. Their 'mutant neoliberalism' offers a way of thinking about contemporary political trends not as a clean break or rupture but as examples of mutation.

Specifically, they point toward the image of a 'mutant' striving to survive in a dynamic environment. In biology, mutation is the engine of evolution. Not all mutations are beneficial, but those that help an organism adapt to a specific environment thrive and expand throughout a population.

Callison and Manfredi encourage us to conceptualize neoliberalism as a political project that is continually responding and adapting to societal change. 'Neoliberalism emerged neither by necessity nor all at once, but rather developed through a series of local and global projects that induced particular mutations - the earliest case of which could be seen as the birth of neoliberalism itself' (Callison & Manfredi 2020, pp. 5–6). Slobodian and Plehwe (2020a) argue:

> It is ill-advised, in most cases, to seek a kind of "pure" neoliberal doctrine from which one can draw conclusions about the world. Neoliberal thought – like all genres of political thought – is subject to processes of constant bifurcation and recombination.

> Following the trajectories of specific intellectuals and the organs of their expression, such as think tanks and political parties, offers one methodology for seeing how ideas are both formed and serve as the basis for new political platforms and idioms of claim-making… If we understand neoliberalism as embodying less a credo than an injunction - to defend capitalism against democracy – then mutations should be expected. Prescriptions change with the threat. (Slobodian & Plehwe 2020a, p. 105)

Conceptualizing neoliberalism as 'mutant neoliberalism' helps to explain why previous crises yielded not transformation but an acceleration of neoliberal policy, and it calls into question whether contemporary neoliberal crisis discourse is justified or even a productive line of inquiry. The question that we should be asking ourselves is not 'Is this the crisis of neoliberalism we have been anticipating?' but 'How is the neoliberal political project mutating in a time of multiplying crises?' Insight into possible answers for this question can be found in a distressing body of scholarship exploring neoliberal mutations emerging in the contemporary conjuncture.

This body of literature advances a compelling challenge to conventional narratives about right wing populism as being a challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy by demonstrating how these political movements not only emerged from neoliberal thought and political practice but how these movements work to advance a dangerous mutation of neoliberalism, what Henry Giroux (2019) terms neoliberal fascism. This scholarship demonstrates that the nationalism, xenophobia, and white nationalism of the alt-right in the US is grounded in the neoliberal thought of the Virginia school and James Buchanan (Biebricher 2020, Cooper 2021a) and the libertarian variant of neoliberalism championed by Murray Rothbard of the American Austrian school (Cooper 2021b, Slobodian 2019). In a similar vein, there is a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that the populist backlash against the EU is being driven, in part, by a shift in neoliberal strategy in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis (Slobodian 2020), and

the bewildering politics surrounding the coronavirus pandemic is fueling the emergence of novel political movements that defy traditional political categories (Callison & Slobodian 2021), a context in which a mutant political project can thrive.

Conceptualizing the neoliberal political project as 'mutant neoliberalism' offers an important corrective to the common framing of neoliberalism as market theory. It requires us to take seriously the contexts in which the neoliberal project is actualized and the patterns of exchange among its fellow travelers. It troubles the category of neoliberalism as a unitary object of analysis and forces us to confront a dynamic, mutable, and opportunistic political project operating at local, national, and global scales.

Mutant neoliberalism is a conceptualization that captures the complexity of a coherent political project with a specific historical development from its founding at Mont Pelèrin down to the present day. Neoliberalism is here a reactionary political project of elite restoration and democratic encasement informed by a sophisticated political philosophy of governance and statecraft. Mutant neoliberalism challenges us to eschew simplistic conceptualizations of neoliberalism and invites us to see it as a political project that reflects the political sophistication of early neoliberals and the individuals, groups, and organizations that have followed in their wake.

Contextualizing Neoliberalism

I now want to turn to the implications of conceptualizing neoliberalism as a political project defined by mutation and adaptability for critical education policy analysis. Understanding political shifts taking place within the contemporary conjuncture requires a move toward radical contextualism (Ellison 2019, 2021). I want to argue that critical education policy analysis must

work to construct dynamic contexts around objects of analysis in order to populate the policy landscape with relevant agents and to map the terrain of political struggle, that is construct what Bourdieu (1989) would term the social field on which policy is produced and contested and the cross-field effects between the education policy field and other social fields influencing and being influenced by it (Rawolle & Lingard 2008). Doing so will provide insight into both contemporary policy shifts as well as potential mutations and lines of development.

In this section, I will attempt to make the case for this approach to critical inquiry by examining neoliberal mutations in the US. This will require, first, that I trace the development of the neoliberal project in the US in order to identify its fellow travelers and the patterns of exchange among and between them and, second, to flesh out the historical development and mutations of specific policies at work in the contemporary conjuncture over the same period of time. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on one specific policy: school privatization and market competition.

The neoliberal social formation that rose to dominance in the US from the conjuctural crisis of the 1970s was constructed by a constellation of political actors and movements. Understanding the development of the neoliberal project in the US requires that you situate it within this context and tease out the complex patterns of cooperation, contradiction, and competition among these various actors and movements. Doing so helps us to understand the complexity of neoliberal thought and practice in the US, to make sense of recent policy debates and controversies, and to anticipate potential lines of development.

The neoliberal project first made headway in the US in university-based economics departments in Chicago, Harvard, and New York University.

However, the relationship between early neoliberals and American economists was complicated. Milton Friedman easily navigated the inter-play between econometrics and the neoliberal project, but the Austrian émigrés were deeply conflicted about the proper methods of economic science. Hayek was especially critical of the positivist orientation and mathematical modeling that defines neoclassical orthodoxy (Hayek 1978), and, despite the fact that he is often associated with the Chicago school of economics, it is important to note that his privately funded professorship at Chicago was in the Committee of Social Thought. Hayek's relationship with his fellow travelers in American economics was more fraught than is commonly acknowledged. This was equally true for Mises and the German ordoliberals.

Nevertheless, there were/are key points of alignment between neoclassical economics and the neoliberal project. First, the free market fundamentalism of neoclassical economics closely aligns with the exoteric discourse of the neoliberal project. Second, neoclassical economics and the neoliberal project share a technocratic orientation that the 'free markets' they envision must be constructed and continually reconstructed (Polanyi 1944), even if they often part ways on how to do so. Indeed, the alignment of these two projects helps us to understand the early success of neoliberalism in university economics departments. More importantly, the growing imperialism of economics (Lazear 2000) in the US helped to both legitimize neoliberal thought and to spread neoliberal ideas to other disciplines across academia.

The success of the neoliberal project in the US, however, cannot be reduced to its success in elite university-based economics departments nor economics imperialism. The success of both neoliberalism and neoclassical economics from the 1970s onward was the result of their articulation with the modern conservative movement. It may not be readily apparent at first glance how a

group of cosmopolitan globalists and technocratic social scientists could make common cause with a movement of nationalists and religious conservatives. Indeed, prominent neoliberals such as Buchanan (2005) and Hayek (1960) went out of their way to say that they were not conservatives. However, there was nothing necessary about the articulated formation of xenophobic and racist nationalists, globally oriented neoconservatives, and evangelical Christians that made up the post-war conservative movement.

It was the 'fusionism' of William F. Buckley that brought this unlikely constellation of actors into productive cooperation with the neoliberal project (Nash 1976). No one better exemplified this fusion than Milton Friedman whose scholarly work informed the construction of a post-Bretton Woods policy regime during the Nixon administration (Friedman 1961) and whose cultural work informed the popular political rhetoric of the Reagan era (Friedman & Friedman 1990). What the neoliberal project contributed to the modern conservative movement was an esoteric political philosophy of governance and statecraft ideologically aligned with the reactionary politics of conservatism (Robin 2011) and an exoteric discourse of liberty and free markets that neatly aligned with the virulent Christian nationalism of American conservatism (Kruse 2015). This exchange was not, however, unidirectional. The conservative movement influenced neoliberal thought, especially regarding moral philosophy and human rights (Cooper 2017, Whyte 2019), and it provided the neoliberal project with an institutional structure of philanthropic funding, think tanks, and media outlets to popularize and advance neoliberal policies.

What is important to note is that it was the rise of conservative hegemony in the 1970s (Perlstein 2001, 2008) and the political realignment of the Reagan revolution in the 1980s (Perlstein 2014) that brought the neoliberal project to

political ascendancy in the US. This is not to conflate these two very different projects with very different histories and distinct political grammars. However, what they share is a reactionary politics of loss and restoration. Both projects call back to an idealized past, and both begin 'from a position of principle - that some are fit, and thus ought, to rule others - and then recalibrates that principle in light of a democratic challenge from below' (Robin 2011, p. 18).

The point is that the post-1970s neoliberal formation was the product of an articulation of two distinct political movements. As Wendy Brown (2006) notes, we must think neoliberalism and conservatism together. It is also true that the Democratic party adopted neoliberal policies in the 1990s, what Fraser terms progressive neoliberalism. However, what is less commented upon is that Clinton era policies were also deeply conservative. Shifts in economic policy, criminal justice policy, and welfare reform were just as much attempts by the opposition Democratic party to remain viable on a political landscape reshaped by the conservative movement as they were examples of a shift toward neoliberalism.

The rise to power of the neoliberal project in the US is bound up with these other political movements and actors. The exoteric discourse of the neoliberal project neatly aligns with the free-market ideology and rational agents of neoclassical economics and the limited government, individual freedom, and free enterprise dogma of conservative ideology. However, the rise and resilience of this articulated formation cannot be explained by ideological coherence among these various elements alone.

What explains its resiliency is the alignment of political practice among these various political actors and movements. The esoteric discourse of governance and statecraft advanced by the neoliberal project aligns with the technocratic

logics of neoclassical economics as well as the proclivity of movement conservatives to use state power to police individual behavior, protect the market power of corporations, and advance white, Christian nationalism. What unifies this articulated formation is a reactionary project of elite societal engineering committed to constraining the demos and constructing a market society of atomized and disciplined subjects.

Indeed, viewed through this lens, education policies often framed as being quintessentially neoliberal appear more complex than such a framing would seem to suggest. One excellent example of the syncretism of neoliberal policy is privatization and market competition among schools. The impetus for 'school choice' policies in the US is often credited to the publication of Milton Friedman's Capitalism and Freedom in 1962, although he made his first proposal for school vouchers in 1955 (Friedman 1955, 1962). It was a policy proposal that closely aligned with the ideology of market efficiency associated with neoclassical economics as well as the exoteric discourse of neoliberalism that Friedman championed in the public sphere.

However, the first concrete proposal for school choice was advanced not by Friedman but by the Southern segregationist governor of the state of Georgia Herman Talmadge in 1953 as a means to resist school desegregation (Kruse 2005). Friedman's proposal for a public voucher system that would allow individual schools to charge tuition beyond that made available by public funding was tailor made to both challenge the 'collectivist' orientation of public education and to replace it with a hierarchically ordered system that would reward and reproduce privilege. In this sense, it very much aligns with the esoteric discourse of neoliberalism. Yet, both the genesis and salience of school choice policies in the US from the 1970s forward are the product of an interface between neoliberal actors and neoclassical economists and the white nationalist

backlash against the Civil Rights movement, the growing power of a politicized evangelical Christian movement, and the racialized electoral strategies of the early conservative movement in the Republican Party (Maxwell & Shields 2019, Phillips 1969). It may very well be appropriate to term 'school choice' neoliberal, but it is equally appropriate to term it conservative (deMarrais, Herron, & Copple 2020).

What this example demonstrates is that education policies commonly categorized as being 'neoliberal' are the product of articulated formations made up of a diverse set of actors and movements working in complex patterns of exchange. There is nothing necessary about these articulations, yet they constitute operative policy structures driving educational change in the US. The neoliberal project is situated within this larger formation, and the policies and practices that fall under the rubric of neoliberalism are bound up with the activities, practices, and ideologies of a diverse set of actors associated with neoclassical economics and the modern conservative movement.

What I am attempting to describe here is an articulated social formation constructed in the US from the 1970s forward that is commonly termed the neoliberal era and that contemporary crisis discourse sees as entering a period of terminal crisis. It is an articulation made up of a diverse set of political movements and agents operating in complex relations of cooperation, competition, and contradiction. Their various interests do not perfectly align, yet they make up a historical bloc of hegemonic leadership. It may very well be appropriate to term this social formation 'neoliberal,' but it is important to resist the erasure of complexity and contradiction bound up with this useful abstraction. If there is a crisis of neoliberalism at work in the contemporary conjuncture then it is this articulated formation that is in crisis.

From Crisis to Resiliency

I have attempted in the preceding sections to trouble taken-for-granted conceptualizations of neoliberalism as market theory. First, I traced the historical development of neoliberalism as an elite political project of democratic containment and societal engineering that is defined by its mutability. This 'mutant neoliberalism' speaks to a sophisticated political philosophy of governance and statecraft that is adaptable to specific contexts and to historical change. Second, I attempted to demonstrate the mutability of the neoliberal project by situating its historical development in the US using school privatization and market competition as a paradigmatic example. In this concluding section, I will attempt to extend this line of argument by demonstrating the ways in which this reconceptualization of neoliberalism brings to the surface the inadequacies of contemporary neoliberal crisis discourse and by discussing the implications of this analysis for scholars and activists doing critical education policy work.

Contemporary crisis discourse is premised on the emergence of two phenomena: state activism in response to the economic dislocations brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the rise of right-wing populism across the Global North. The argument that recent examples of state activism is evidence of a terminal crisis is the easiest to dismiss, because it fails to distinguish between the esoteric and exoteric discourses of neoliberalism. Michel Foucault's engagement with neoliberalism may be deeply problematic (Dean & Zamora 2021), but his observation that neoliberalism rejects the naturalism of classical liberalism is basically correct. For early and contemporary neoliberal intellectuals, their vision of a market society 'will triumph only if it becomes reconciled to the fact that the conditions for its existence must be constructed and will not come about "naturally" in the

absence of concerted political effort and organization' (Mirowski 2009, p. 434). Neoliberalism is first and foremost an activist political project.

Contra Foucault (2004), neoliberal discourse does not interpellate entrepreneurs of the self but governable subjects who must continually navigate a maze of institutions to access public services, such as education and health care, and who must continuously 'hustle' between jobs to make ends meet in an increasingly precarious and polarized labor market. The best way to depoliticize a populace is to keep them busy, precarious, and in debt. Indeed, the 'job training,' high tuition costs, and means-tested assistance programs that define the contemporary American university can be traced back to then governor of California Ronald Reagan's project to pacify the student protest movements against the war in Viet Nam (Perlstein 2008). It may be quite common to encounter claims that neoliberalism works to produce market subjects, but it is more accurate to say, borrowing from Foucault's less problematic scholarship, that it works to produce 'subjected and practised bodies... [that] increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)' (Foucault 1995, p. 138).

The argument that the rise to prominence of right-wing populism is evidence of a terminal crisis of neoliberalism is equally problematic. Right-wing populists in the Global North may indeed denounce the 'free trade' policies and globalization associated with neoliberalism. However, as we have seen, the policies pursued by right-wing populist governments hardly break with neoliberal practice, and this is especially true for education policy. For example, the education policies of 'school choice,' testing, and accountability pursued by the Trump administration were a continuation of those pursued by the Bush and Obama administrations that preceded it, and there is little evidence that the current Biden administration is altering course.

More importantly, those advancing contemporary neoliberal crisis discourse again make the mistake of adopting the ideological discourse of right-wing populists uncritically. The disconnects and contradictions between the exoteric discourse of neoliberalism and the ideological discourse of right-wing populists are not new nor are they evidence of a terminal crisis. Stuart Hall notes:

> Ideology is always contradictory. There is no single, integrated 'ruling ideology' - a mistake we repeat again now in failing to distinguish between conservative and neoliberal repertoires. Ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments - finding what Laclau called 'systems of equivalence' between them. Contradiction is its metier... [F]ew strategies are so successful at winning consent as those which root themselves in the contradictory elements of common sense, popular life and consciousness. Even today, the market/free enterprise/private property discourse persists cheek by jowl with older conservative attachments to nation, racial homogeneity, Empire, tradition. 'Market forces' is good for restoring the power of capital and destroying the redistributivist illusion. But in moments of difficulty one can trust 'the Empire' to strike back. (Hall 2017b, p. 326)

Indeed, Hall was prescient in describing the neoliberal project of the Thatcher government in the 1980s as a form of 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 2017a).

Callison and Manfredi's mutant neoliberalism captures the dynamism and syncretism of the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism is, on the one hand, a reactionary political philosophy of statecraft and governance oriented toward democratic encasement and elite restoration with global ambitions while also being, on the other hand, a dynamic, mutable, and opportunistic political project that adapts to specific cultural, historical, and political contexts. '[N]eoliberals are avowed interventionists of their own kind, rethinking policies according to context and showing both a capacity for improvisation and an attitude of flexible response. If the end goals remain constant - safeguarding what

neoliberals call a competitive order and exposing humanity ever more to the compulsions of adjustment according to the price mechanism - the means of arriving at this goal shift with time and place' (Slobodian & Plehwe 2020b, p. 6). The search for and diagnosis of a terminal crisis of neoliberalism appears to be, from this vantage point, a fool's errand.

> Neoliberalism is not on its deathbed, but is instead splintering and mutating to survive in changing circumstance - with potentially devastating effects for human and planetary life. As political ruptures yield unexpected lines of alliance and enmity, prevailing strategies of market rule are also being reprogrammed... In times when resistance must be as radical and adaptable as the world it seeks to change, the "mutant" seems a more adept metaphor. Challenging neoliberalism's mutant progeny will require critical interventions rooted in robust visions of political freedom - interventions that, after [Stuart] Hall, take no guarantees from past orthodoxies and yet seek to construct radically different futures. (Callison & Manfredi 2020, p. 26-27)

The task at hand is not the unmasking of contradictions, asking how it is that neoliberalism survived yet again, nor even constructing speculative post-neoliberal imaginaries (Lather 2020). The task at hand is to think conjuncturally and to explore what it is that makes neoliberalism resilient (Madariaga 2020). Doing so will reveal that neoliberalism is not entering a period of terminal crisis. It is experimenting and mutating.

Recent controversies in the US over the issue of race, school curriculum, and critical race theory (CRT) are instructive here. Since 2020, state governments led by conservatives in the Republican party have instituted bans on the teaching of 'divisive concepts' and CRT in primary and secondary schools. The impetus for these laws is a series of absurd claims that: a) CRT is included in school curricula or, at least, influences what is being taught in schools; b) it is a racist ideology that promotes an anti-white agenda and reverse racism; c) it is an

explicit rejection of the Enlightenment rationality upon which the American republic was founded; and d) its intellectual heritage can be traced back to Marxism, fascism, and the segregation of the Jim Crow South (Pletka et al. 2021). These assertions are, of course, absurd and fantastical. However, unpacking this madness is instructive on how neoliberalism is mutating in response to societal change.

The CRT controversy was popularized by Christopher Ruffo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and must be understood in relation to a larger reactionary backlash against racial justice protests taking place in the US over the past decade. The Manhattan Institute is a politically powerful think tank funded by conservative philanthropies that conducts partisan research, publishes policy reports and model legislation, and produces a steady stream of media content online and through outreach to traditional media in order to advance a political agenda of school privatization; the promotion of nationalist school curricula; standards, testing, and accountability policies; and the expansion of STEM and labor force training curricula. The key to Ruffo's success was his September 2020 appearance on the flagship program of Rupert Murchoch's Fox News Channel Tucker Carlson Tonight (Wallace-Wells 2021). The day after the interview aired Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows contacted Ruffo to inform him that the President had watched the interview and intended to act.

Trump issued an executive order days later banning diversity training in federal agencies and among federal contractors in order to halt the spread of 'divisive concepts' (Exec. Order No. 13950 2020). The issue was quickly taken up by prominent conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation and its policy advocacy organization Heritage Action for America, that crafted and promoted model legislation banning 'divisive concepts' and CRT from primary

and secondary schools that, as of February 2022, had either been introduced or made into law in 25 states (Heritage Foundation 2022). Citizens for Renewing America, a political advocacy organization run by former director of the Office of Budget and Management under Trump and former vice president of Heritage Action for America Russell Vought, now publishes a toolkit to teach parents and concerned citizens 'how to stop critical race theory and reclaim [their] school board' (Schwartz 2021). Not surprisingly, local school boards across the country are reviewing school curricula and banning books, and local school board meetings are increasingly becoming arenas of conflict involving threats of violence (Mervosh & Heyward 2021).

The success of the Manhattan Institute in manufacturing a controversy around CRT is a perfect example of the complex patterns of exchange between neoliberal and conservative political grammars as well as the efficacy of a proven political tactic: stirring populist anger at educational institutions to advance a neoliberal agenda of privatization, technocratic management, and human capital development by coupling these policies to a conservative agenda of white Christian nationalism. Indeed, this was one of the most successful tactics employed by the Right in the 1970s during the rise of Ronald Reagan's conservative-neoliberal presidency (Kruse 2005, Maxwell & Shields 2019).

The precedent for this political tactic was developed during a similar controversy that erupted in Kanawha Country West Virginia in 1974 over school curricula teaching Black history, multiculturalism, and human sexuality, what activists termed a 'secular humanist' curriculum (Kincheloe 1980). What began as a grassroots movement headed by the conservative activist Alice Moore was quickly picked up by the Heritage Foundation, the John Birch Society, and other right-wing organizations from across the nation that coordinated protests, led parent boycotts, provided legal counsel, and made

what began as a local school board dispute over textbooks into an international news story (Perlstein 2014). The controversy quickly escalated into violence with multiple school bombings, death threats against school officials, gun violence at picket lines, and protesters firing guns at empty school buses. The controversy died down by 1975 but only after destroying the careers of school officials who had endured death threats, forcing the resignation of school board members, and (ultimately) establishing a model for the 'culture war' politics of the contemporary conjuncture.

It was during the Kanawha controversy that the then fledgling Heritage Foundation experimented with and refined the political tactics that would come to define the culture war politics of the Reagan era (Laats 2015), an articulated formation of white, Christian nationalism, neoclassical economic theory, and neoliberal governance. The Secretary of Education during the Reagan administration Terrell Bell is most remembered for the being the driving force behind the federal report A Nation at Risk that set the stage for four decades of neoliberal restructuring and responsibilization (Endacott et al. 2015, Shuffleton 2020). However, Bell was also fond of issuing public declarations warning textbook publishers against curricula that run counter to parents' values and advocating for traditional curricular texts, such as the Christian Bible and McGuffey's Readers (Laats 2015, p. 233).

The point that I am attempting to make here is that neo-illiberalism is not a new phenomenon nor a sign of an impending terminal crisis of neoliberalism. It is just neoliberalism. Or, more specifically, it is neoliberalism as it developed in the US. Neo-illiberalism is a mutant variant of an elite political project with global ambitions that mutates and shifts in response to different contexts and historical change. In fact, it may very well be that the neoliberal project needs

the neo-fascist politics gaining ground in the contemporary conjuncture to further advance (Patnaik 2021).

The central claim that I wish to advance is that scholars and activists working in critical education policy analysis should be, at the very least, skeptical of contemporary crisis discourse. I want to argue that a more fruitful line of research would be to explore how the neoliberal project is shifting and mutating in the contemporary conjuncture and how this work can open up new horizons for education policy and practice. I speak here of critical education policy analysis as an intellectual practice of radical re-contextualization.

Specifically, I envision an approach to education policy analysis that seeks to map the political terrain, plot the relations of force, and trace potential lines of development of the neoliberal political project within the contemporary conjuncture (Ellison 2021). The task for this line of research is to trace how neoliberalism is working to advance its political agenda through education policy, to identify and untangle the complex policy networks through which neoliberalism operates on the education policy field, and to unpack the complex patterns of cooperation, competition, and contradiction among and between the various actors at work in these policy networks (Ball 2012, Rawolle & Lingard 2015).

Three broad categories of policy inquiry are relevant here. First, researchers can employ tools from social network analysis and discourse analysis to trace the circulation of funding and resources, analyze policy texts and legal documents, and map the relations among and between the elite actors at work on the policy field (Ellison, Aloe, & Iqtadar 2019, Galey-Horn & Ferrare 2020). Second, researchers should use qualitative tools to explore how non-elite, situated actors navigate the policy field and to understand the sophisticated ways in which they

both enact and challenge policy directives (Ellison & Allen 2018). Third, researchers can employ tools from qualitative research to reposition non-elite, situated actors, such as students (Rodriguez 2017), parents (Shuffleton 2020), and teachers (Anderson et al. 2021, Ellison et al. 2018), as policy actors possessing situated knowledge relevant to policy development. The task is to, on the one hand, map the terrain of political struggle (or map the education policy field) and to, on the other hand, construct new policies, practices, and ideological discourses that can advance progressive political change.

What I am describing here is a Gramscian approach to education policy analysis that seeks to expand the horizon of the possible through a materialist analysis grounded in the discipline of the conjuncture (Hall 1988). This will require an approach to inquiry that both makes distinctions between the elite actors structuring this articulated social formation and that maps the patterns of exchange and mutation among these policy-actors. The task of critical education policy analysis is to use specific education policies, practices, or controversies as heuristic devices to disarticulate larger formations, to demonstrate how they are bound up with and entangled with larger political dynamics at work in the conjuncture, and to expand the horizon of the possible by elevating the voices of marginalized actors at work on the policy field. Put simply, the task is to map the terrain of political struggle as a necessary precondition for ‘practical (political) activity’ (Gramsci 2000, p. 209). I want to argue that this approach to critical education policy analysis is urgently needed in this increasingly dangerous historical moment of neoliberal mutation and radical right politics.

Understanding the ways in which the neoliberal project mutates and shifts in response to historical change requires understanding the various elements surrounding the neoliberal political project, both globally and in specific contexts, and the patterns of exchange among and between these various

elements. Neoliberalism draws upon a range of political grammars to advance its political project, and this diversity of thought and practice is a reflection of both a sophisticated political philosophy and practice and the complex networks of actors and institutions working to achieve its normative aims in diverse settings across the globe. The various illiberal mutations of the neoliberal project we see today are not evidence of a terminal crisis but are evidence of its resiliency.

The neoliberal political project is mutating and evolving in a dynamic of multiplying crises. State activism and the rise of right-wing populism are not new nor are they evidence of a terminal crisis of neoliberalism. They are examples of experimentation, mutation, and adaptability. The task for critical education policy analysis is not to travel down speculative rabbit holes asking if neoliberalism is in crisis or why it did not die. The question that we need to ask is: 'What makes neoliberalism resilient?' Answering this question requires materialist analyses that map the terrain of the conjuncture in order to better understand the context in which the neoliberal political project works and to understand the processes of its metamorphosis. It requires analyses that demonstrate how specific policies and practices are entangled and bound up with the movement of forces at work in specific contexts in the contemporary conjuncture and that open up new spaces that challenge the hegemonic order of the post-1970s social formation.

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