

Book Review

Jeremy Gilbert (ed) *Neoliberal Culture*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2016, 292 pp, £12.60

The contributors to this collection of essays, speaking from a broad range of perspectives and each with a distinct voice, are brought together here to critically reflect on ways in which contemporary culture can be shown to bear out the hallmarks of a distinctly neoliberal character. Drawing from a mixed bag of cultural sites, ranging from the development of optical technologies, the porn industry, a history of self-help within black and migrant communities and emergent strains of new-right feminism, each writer examines connections between these disparate subject areas and the commonality with which they can be shown to authenticate, and reflect what Gilbert describes as an ideology of competitive individualism.

Within this premise a fundamental question posed to the reader is what kind of thing is neoliberalism? If it can encompass such a broad critique and include various interpretations of meaning and significance, is it then a catch-all concept for left-wing discontent which is everything to everyone? This collection of work convincingly argues the case, to the contrary, that there is a consistency and regularity with which neoliberalism is manifest which make it an objective, distinct and analysable phenomenon. Not necessarily a fully formed project, but nonetheless a coherent assemblage, neoliberal ideas create a discursive formation or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as an 'abstract machine'.

The tenacious belief in Adam Smith's invisible hand, releasing the power of the market in all aspects of life, and any concession to public or collective action as a step on Hayek's 'road to serfdom', are familiar tropes within the New Right critique. Neoliberalism, however, represents a further remodelling of this belief in the self-regulating properties of capital. Several contributions draw directly on Foucault and *The Birth of Biopolitics* in their writing. An insight of Foucault's which is drawn out,

particularly by Patton, Littler and McRobbie, is that, in contrast to the ‘night-watchman’ state associated with classic liberalism, i.e. *laissez-faire* and passive, the neoliberal state is inherently interventionist: an active governmental programme in which competitive, self-interested subjects must be produced. This is a ‘technical assemblage’ which intrudes not so much into the minutiae of our daily lives as it comes increasingly to construct our sense of self, identity and social fabric. It is with an interest in this assemblage, or what Dean describes as ‘the broader cloud of distributed suppositions and practices’ with which this collection of essays helps us consider ways in which cultural spheres act to produce in us the model of a particular type of subject.

Within her analysis of the emergence of meritocracy as a dominant political discourse, Littler, for example, unpicks fallacies at the heart of this new ideal. She makes the argument that while the rhetoric of aspiration offers equality of opportunity for all, in effect it works to obfuscate asymmetric social relations, valorise inequality and legitimate hierarchy. As she points out, ‘There is far more talent, intelligence, hard work and ability in the population than there are people lucky enough to find themselves in a position to exploit them’. Meritocracy then acts as a distorting lens through which we see the world: a common sense understanding in which we believe that with effort and ability each of us have the chance to climb the ladder - but only one at a time, on our own, individually.

Westall alternatively looks at the UK’s austerity foodscape. In her work she draws out contradictions behind the twee and nostalgic aesthetic deployed around the production and consumption of food in post-recession Britain, and the underlying neoliberal response. While public bodies are subject to thrift and efficiency savings, individuals are not in effect compelled to consume less or more frugally. There is an ambivalence between demands for austere living and the benchmarks of consumer confidence, and economic growth with which recovery is measured. Despite a rhetoric of self-restraint posed through affective cultural imagery, good and active citizenship remains to be enacted through unequal distributions of consumer purchasing power. As Westall

highlights, within austerity Britain questions of food poverty are answered only with promises of inflation avoidance and business development.

Another contribution to this volume which brings into focus harsh realities of neoliberalism is Dean's analysis of the finance industry and its response to crisis, as understood in psychodynamic terms of 'drive'. Dean argues that, despite the evident collapse of speculative lending markets, those that were deeply entrenched in the inner complex trading systems of bonds, derivatives and CDOs became entrapped in a reflexive loop. She quotes one analyst and short-seller: 'it was like watching an unthinking machine that could not stop itself'. This complexification of the economic and social worlds beyond the reach of any organised political challenge or intervention is encapsulated neatly in the most frequently pronounced of neoliberal mantras - there is no alternative.

While all the contributions to this collection offer insightful critique of the ways in which cultural spheres are prescribed within a neoliberal logic and constrained within an ethic of 'greed is good', as Gramsci teaches us, hegemony is never complete. Since the publication of this book in the UK in 2013, increasingly events seem to question the legitimacy of such a dominant ideology. The rise of populist politics in the form of Brexit and Trump, and even Corbyn and Sanders, seem to suggest that large numbers of people in the UK and USA believe to some extent that alternatives are possible. Questions about how unregulated markets can address issues like climate change, for example, are increasingly prescient in the aftermath of record hurricanes and floods. How do we, as self-interested individuals, address these issues? With Grenfell Tower looming over London, the stark realities of inequality and discrimination are unavoidable. Big questions are re-emerging and finding alternatives to a neoliberal disposition seems to be not only possible and necessary but increasingly inevitable.

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