

Book Review**Neoliberal Scotland:
class and society in a stateless nation**

Edited by Neil Davidson, Patricia McCafferty and David Miller
Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2010, 459 pp ISBN 1-4438-1675-2 (pbk)

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This is a heavy tome, weighing in at not far under five hundred pages all in. It is the first specific and lengthy consideration of the ideology and practice of neo-liberalism within Scotland. As the primary editor, Neil Davidson, makes clear in his introduction, this state of affairs of the absence of such consideration (and especially by those from within Scotland itself) is indicative of what can be expected to flow from this – namely, that neo-liberalism is either seen as having no specific bearing in, on or to Scotland or that it is seen as being present (in whatever degree and form) but this is as un-remark-able (sic) as it is in the case of any other advanced economy in the world. In other words, neo-liberalism is now the uncontested, hegemonic common sense and practice of our age. To exaggerate somewhat to make the point, for a ‘country’ as ‘different’ as Scotland is with its egalitarian and social democratic welfarist historic trajectory as well as its developed organs of civic society, this must strike the informed observer as odd and wanting for many reasons and on many levels. *Neoliberal Scotland* stakes its claim to remedy this wilful omission from a critical radical perspective. It offers the reader ten substantive chapters on neo-liberalism, the ruling class, social stratification, marketisation of public services, the environment, gentrification, migration, criminal justice, well-being, and politics from academics who are also engaged as critical commentators and activists. The chapters mainly emerge from a conference held in 2006 at Strathclyde University called *Neo-Liberal Scotland? Rethinking Scotland in a Global Context*.

In order to deliver upon its promise to correct the omission, the edited collection begins with a key chapter on neo-liberalism by Neil Davidson. It defines and elaborates its subject in a detailed and robust way. For example, the point is driven home that neo-liberalism should not be simply defined as the deregulation of ‘let the market rip’ but as re-regulation and reconfiguration of market relations, led by the state. Elsewhere, we are eloquently reminded that the emergence of neo-liberalism was more pragmatic and opportunistic than is often assumed or remembered. It was a work-in-progress long before it was given the appellation we now give it today of ‘neo-liberalism’ as denoting a coherent body of ideas and an ideology. However, what was less satisfactory about this chapter (and when take alongside the introduction) is that there was no consideration given to whether the neo-liberalism applied to and experienced in Scotland has been a variant form, and if so, what the likely ramifications were. The possibility exists because neo-liberalism is discussed in only generic terms, because there are differences (whether qualitative or quantitative) between different types such as those of ‘shock therapy’ and social liberalism, and because society in Scotland is not just another society. This sense of the dialectic of

the general and particular was missing with the consequence that half the platform that was needed for the other chapters in the collection to stand on was not constructed. Ironically, the last chapter does go a long way to addressing what was missing but it was rather late in the day. The cumulative impact is the book misses a trick and lays itself open to the paradox that it ends up doing, in effect, what it levelled at some of the writers it criticised.

That said, the last chapter (also by Neil Davidson) does analyse the views and logic of neo-liberals towards devolution and independence, finding that whatever these are, they are based on tactical, not strategic or principled, considerations. Thus, they can vary across time and space, with the consequence that there is fluidity to the political process within Scotland and to which Scotland is subject. A main part of this chapter is given over to examining how all the main parties in Scotland have been colonised by neo-liberalism so that the sense of devolution as a 'dented shield' strategy against neo-liberalism is rather misplaced. The sense in which we have a Tartan (non-kitsch) variant or colouring of neo-liberalism is then open to some scrutiny and debate because the colonisation is neither total nor wholly uncontested. But such variance also has to be held in regard of the limitations of the Scottish Parliament, the maintenance of reserved business, and influence of the main cross-Britain political parties (which the chapter does). Nonetheless, Neil Davidson's opportunity to end by laying out the social forces and processes that may be capable of turning the neo-liberal tide is not taken. That was a pity given the audience the book seeks to have.

In the second chapter, David Miller provides an illuminating analysis of not just the ruling class who are Scottish but those who are not Scottish. In an era of transnational capital and spatial mobility as well as economic inter-dependence, this could not be otherwise (*cf.* the Scottish ruling class). Through painstaking mapping out, Miller demonstrates two key aspects of ruling class presence. The first is the inter-linkages between individuals, providing some basis for the sense of class as a distinctive collectivised social group. The second is penetration and implantation into the state of the talons and personnel of the ruling class. And, of course, this power and influence has been used for ideological and material ends, reflecting the interests of the ruling class. In the following chapter, Patricia McCafferty and Gerry Mooney examine the deleterious impact of neo-liberalism on public service workers, and outline the contours of their defensive struggles against this. Eurig Scandrett, in an innovative chapter, provides a fascinating study of how the relatively radical concept of environmental justice has become incorporated and reframed by the dominant forces in the policy process in Scotland into a safe, insubstantial, narrowed and non-interventionist creed. Again the hand of neo-liberals and neo-liberalism can be detected to be at work.

In the next chapter, Kirsteen Paton argues the case for why we should regard gentrification as a form of neo-liberalism which is especially pernicious as not only is it backed by the state in terms of the ideology of 'growing economy' (and without heed to distributive aspects) but it also seeks to mould citizens into consumers. Two unsatisfactory chapters come next. The one by Colin Clark is interesting and well-documented but its relationship to neo-liberalism as the thread of this volume is unelaborated so it could have been a chapter in many a different number of books. The second by Susan Wiltshire provides a surfeit of detail on how neo-liberalism has affected the criminal justice system in Scotland, and yet, it is left strangely adrift by both its subtitle ('A test of Scottish distinctiveness') and the lacking of grounding in

the first two aforementioned chapters of the book. Despite the neo-liberal onslaught on the purpose and practice of criminal justice, it seems the evidence of the chapter still grudgingly points to something left which is still different – if not Scottish-ly different – from that which exists in others parts of Britain. The penultimate chapter by Iain Ferguson focuses on the recently emerged phenomenon that Scots (and Scotland) experience a so-called ‘crisis of confidence’ and it is this which explains why they are unhappy, poor and underperform. As he points out this attitudinal rather than structural explanation, essentially, blames individuals for their own blight while at the same time bestowing upon them the capacity to escape their own plight through preferred forms of individual effort and action. This, it is argued, is a classic example of how neo-liberalism privatises social problems.

Whilst one could think of other content that could have been covered by additional chapters, and notwithstanding some significant weaknesses, for those not of a faint reading heart, *Neoliberal Scotland* sets down an admirable standard for the examination of the impact of neo-liberalism in and on Scotland and its society. There is no doubt all those that reside in Scotland live under neo-liberal capitalism – and continue to do so despite its ideological and economic crisis - rather than some social democratic paradise that some south of the border assume that we do.