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## Freedom After Neoliberalism

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## FREEDOM AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

# Freedom after Neoliberalism

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Over the last four decades, the rise of the socio-political formation widely referred to as neoliberalism has seen a particular model of freedom – the freedom of free markets, property rights, and entrepreneurial self-ownership – gain prominence in a variety of ways around the globe. More recently, there has been a surge in critical activity around neoliberalism, which has led to the emergence of an increasingly settled understanding of its political, economic, and cultural mechanics. Most critiques, however, have proven reluctant to engage neoliberalism on the territory that it has conspicuously made its own: namely, freedom. This special collection aims to rethink, re-evaluate, and renovate the many meanings of freedom beyond its limited economic function in neoliberal theory and practice, and to imagine what freedom might look like in a world beyond neoliberalism. The introduction provides an overview of the current conjuncture, in which there is a growing realisation that neoliberal governance has failed to deliver on its promises of freedom. We argue that this realisation has made possible, and necessary, the exploration of new histories and new futures of freedom. The introduction concludes with a brief summary of the articles that comprise this special collection.

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If in the first attempt to create a world of free men we have failed, we must try again. The guiding principle that a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy remains as true today as it was in the nineteenth century.

– F. A. Hayek

People were in prison so that prices could be free.

– Eduardo Galeano

In 1973, which on many accounts represents the year zero of the neoliberal era, the American prison population reached its post-war low. At about 360,000 inmates in total, or roughly 100 convicts per 100,000 residents, the rate of imprisonment had been relatively stable for decades at what was increasingly being viewed by criminologists as its 'normal' social level (Wacquant, 2009: 115, 117). With this stability in mind, a 1973 report submitted to President Richard Nixon by a national criminal justice body recommended freezing prison construction for a decade. In addition to a spare capacity of beds, the report cited 'overwhelming evidence' that incarceration did not lead to reform or rehabilitation, 'that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it' (qtd in Wacquant, 2009: 113). Two years later, French sociologist Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison)* unveiled a historical narrative whereby the physical prison—which emerged in its modern form in the 17th century and whose social centrality was consolidated in the early 19th century—could now be considered the relic of a prior age. The prison had lost its preeminent purpose, according to Foucault (1977: 298), owing to the diffusion of modern forms of institutional control across 'all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society'. Over the latter half of the 1970s, in a series of lecture courses that would not be published until long after his death, Foucault (2008: 27) went on to revise and supplement this disciplinary narrative, constructing a history of 'the liberal art of government' focused around the concept of freedom. In an unusual step for him, Foucault brought this history explicitly up to date, devoting his lectures in the Spring of 1979

to the work of 'neo-liberal' thinkers in Europe and America in the period since World War II. It was in the ideas of these figures that Foucault located the outline of a post-disciplinary society. Neoliberalism would represent a governmental order in which the mechanisms of the market replaced the controlling apparatus of the state, and in which 'action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players ... in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals' (Foucault, 2008: 260).

Foucault's intellectual dalliance with neoliberal ideas—was he, wasn't he, a neoliberal sympathiser?—has been the subject of much recent scholarly fascination (Mirowski, 2013; Dean, 2014; Zamora and Behrent, 2016). Far less attention has been paid, however, to the fact that Foucault's overarching story about the intertwining fates of the prison, the disciplinary state, and freedom in late modernity—written avowedly as a 'history of the present' (Foucault, 1977: 31)—turned out to be quite misleading in its implications for his time and our own. Indeed, at the very moment *Discipline and Punish* appeared, incarceration rates in the United States shifted abruptly onto a steep upward curve. By 2000, the prison population had increased fivefold to almost two million inmates, many of them held in 'conditions of overpopulation that defy understanding' (Wacquant, 2009: xv). The correctional industry had become the third-largest employer in a country that otherwise saw social expenditure slashed. Under the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, welfare was transformed into 'workfare', the obligation for unemployed citizens to accept any job offered to them, no matter how demeaning, underpaid, or unskilled. For the penal theorist Loïc Wacquant (2009: 292), the closing decades of the 20th century witnessed nothing less than a wholesale transformation in the ideology and practice of welfare and 'prisonfare':

The operant purpose of welfare has shifted from passive 'people processing' to active 'people changing' ... while the prison has traveled in the other direction, from aiming to reform inmates (under the philosophy of rehabilitation, hegemonic from the 1920s to the mid-1970s) to merely warehousing them (as the function of punishment was downgraded to retribution and neutralization).

This retributive turn, over a period during which crime itself was not increasing, should be seen as part of a coherent governing philosophy, a ‘new politics and policy of poverty’ (Wacquant, 2009: 287). In the American context, this constituted a politics of racial and class warfare, since it was precisely those lower-class citizens (mostly black and Latino) who had formerly been on welfare rolls who were now being sent to prison instead.<sup>1</sup>

The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously remarked that ‘economics are the method: the object is to change the heart and soul’ (Thatcher, 1981: n. pag.). In the US, Britain, and many other societies in the Global North, those hearts and souls that could not be changed by neoliberalism’s economic methods were, it seems, made unfree by its punitive ones.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in the Global South, neoliberalism and unfreedom were even more deeply intertwined in practice. As Naomi Klein outlines in her bestselling book *The Shock Doctrine*, the imposition of neoliberal ‘reforms’ in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa came about not through the decisions of free democracies, but through the actions of dictatorships, nondemocratic governments, and international non-governmental organisations—the IMF, the World Bank—all underpinned by ‘a powerful ruling alliance between a few very large corporations and a class of mostly wealthy politicians’ (Klein, 2009: 15). The ‘shock therapy’ involved in the capitalist makeovers of countries including Chile, Bolivia, Poland, Russia, South Africa, and Iraq was the

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<sup>1</sup> The racial dimension of American mass incarceration is likewise emphasised in recent popular accounts such as Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and Ava DuVernay’s Oscar-nominated documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016). For a summary of scholarship in this area, see Berger (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Although the ‘generalized carceral hyperinflation’ that characterizes the US example has not been as stark in other advanced democracies—only Russia, the subject of radical neoliberal reforms following the collapse of Communism, has outstripped the US, having doubled its incarceration rate between 1989 and 1999—the trends in Western Europe have also been upwards (Wacquant, 2009: 12, 119). The post-Thatcher UK is a standout case, with Tony Blair ‘presiding over the single largest increase of the convict population in the country’s history’ (Wacquant, 2009: 309). As well as challenging Foucault’s history of the prison, this upsurge in incarceration also places in question Gilles Deleuze’s (1992: 3–4) much-cited claim that the transition from *disciplinary societies* to *societies of control* means an end to ‘environments of enclosure’ like the prison: ‘everyone knows that these institutions are finished ... It’s only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking on the door’.

original brainchild, according to Klein, of the University of Chicago economics professor Milton Friedman, author of *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). The so-called 'Chicago Boys' who assisted the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in revamping that country's economy following his coup in 1973 were products of Friedman's 'Chicago School', also the institutional home of other key neoliberal thinkers including Gary Becker, Ronald Coase, Aaron Director, Robert Lucas, and George Stigler. What Foucault (2008: 161) dubbed Friedman's 'anarcho-liberalism' was characterised in the Chilean case by 'a rapid-fire transformation of the economy—tax cuts, free trade, privatized services, cuts to social spending and deregulation' (Klein, 2009: 7). The social costs of such a transformation—including incarceration, torture, and execution—would simply have to be borne in the service of economic liberalisation, as the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano pithily explained in a line that provides this introductory essay with its second epigraph (qtd in Weschler, 1998: 147).

*Freedom After Neoliberalism*, the title and topic of our special collection, thus emerges against the material background of high levels of unfreedom among populations subjected to neoliberal reforms over the last four decades and more. But our collection also—and perhaps more centrally—responds to the fact that this account of unfreedom is far from the official story told about this period. Incarceration rates, dictatorships, and nondemocratic decision-making have for a long time been rendered opaque and often invisible through a rhetoric of freedom on the political right that has proven astonishingly resilient, at least until very recent times. Indeed, David Harvey (2005: 5, 7) begins and ends his influential *Brief History of Neoliberalism* by highlighting the ideological centrality of freedom to neoliberalism, noting that while '[c]oncepts of dignity and individual freedom are powerful and appealing in their own right', the assumption that they are 'guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking'. The key political claim of thinkers such as Friedman and Friedrich Hayek is that personal freedom can only be vouchsafed by a state that is organised around the protection of individual property rights, the promotion of competition, and the maintenance of 'free markets'. In reality, as Harvey and others have argued, the economic consequences of neoliberalism ultimately trumped any of the political aims it may in theory have been organised around. Far

from functioning primarily in the service of personal liberty, the neoliberal state's fundamental role became the extrication of capital from the various constraints that were erected around it during the immediate post-war period, when the maintenance of peace and prosperity in Western societies was perceived to depend upon a social contract that regulated the market and formalised the bargaining power of labour within a substantial welfare system.

This post-war context was marked in many societies by dramatically increased access to educational and parliamentary institutions for the lower and working classes. In 1942, the British reformer William Beveridge characterised his call for a comprehensive welfare state—significant parts of which were implemented by Clement Attlee's Labour government after World War II—as 'The Way to Freedom from Want' (British Government, 1942: 7). Yet, only two years later, Friedrich Hayek would characterise Beveridge's way as *The Road to Serfdom* (1944).<sup>3</sup> One measure of neoliberalism's political success lies in the extent to which Hayek's roadmap—based on freedom from coercion—would in the late 20th century come to displace the one espoused by Beveridge, founded on freedom from want. This emphasis on freedom from coercion over liberation from want was bound up with the global victory of capitalist ideals over socialist ones. For Hayek, as for Friedman, capitalism and freedom were inextricably linked. The historical basis for this claim is important to recognise: although Hayek does not discuss feudalism directly in *The Road to Serfdom*, it is clear (not least from the book's title) that he viewed all forms of contemporary political collectivism—whether totalitarian, socialist, or social democratic—as marking a reversion to relations of hierarchical dependency that had existed through the medieval period right up to the French Revolution in 1789 (and in Russia, to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861). The rise of the bourgeois class of small property owners, and their political breakthrough in North America, France, and Britain over the course of the 18th century, resulted in new formal legal and political freedoms as well as the capacity to sell one's labour power in the competitive marketplace. The

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<sup>3</sup> *The Road to Serfdom* in fact began life as a memo written to Beveridge in 1933, when both he and Hayek were working at the London School of Economics. The memo is reproduced in Hayek (2007: 245–48). The concluding lines of *The Road to Serfdom* provide us with our first epigraph (Hayek, 2007: 238).



latter was a form of freedom—freedom of contract—that, as Karl Marx was among the first to recognise and theorise, had not been available to those born into dependency under feudalism.<sup>4</sup> Hence Hayek's (1938: 438) statement (which in Marx is a historical claim, in Hayek a normative one) that 'only capitalism makes democracy possible'.

In Hayek's view, not only was the free market the great economic and political achievement of the 19th century, it was also the most advanced epistemological system available to humans. The price mechanism, he argued, combined the knowledge of countless individual minds into a spontaneous, organic, and efficient system of resource allocation. If we understand economic freedom to be the principal mode of individual freedom, then the free market constitutes the only bulwark against the neo-feudalist threat of contemporary 'planning'.<sup>5</sup> Even with the best intentions, planning must lead to the concentration of power in few hands and eventually to totalitarianism, a process Hayek (2007: 57) claimed to have witnessed in his native Austria and was now observing again in Britain and elsewhere. 'So long as property is divided among many owners', Hayek (2007: 136) contended, 'none of them acting independently has exclusive power to determine the income and position of particular people—nobody is tied to any one property owner except by the fact that he may offer better terms than anybody else'. This formal freedom from coercion—the ability, at least in theory, to escape from ties to any instance of hierarchical power—clearly trumped in Hayek's view the importance of freedom from

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<sup>4</sup> Freedom of contract was of course a double-edged kind of freedom that, as Karl Polanyi (2001: 171) famously argued, led to the 'great transformation' of the 19th century: 'In practice [freedom of contract] meant that the noncontractual organizations of kinship, neighborhood, profession, and creed were to be liquidated since they claimed the allegiance of the individual and thus restrained his freedom'. In Polanyi's (2001: 88) narrative, the new science of political economy was tasked with reimagining freedom in line with this new way of life: 'The stubborn facts and the inexorable brute laws that appeared to abolish our freedom had in one way or another to be reconciled to freedom'.

<sup>5</sup> The identification of *economic* freedom as the paradigmatic mode of freedom, and the consequent extension of economic models into previously non-economic spheres of life, is a key distinguishing factor between classical liberalism (in which spheres of social reproduction were understood to exist outside the market) and neoliberalism (in which markets should operate in virtually every sphere). See Brown (2015). The centrality of *individual* freedom to the neoliberal worldview is defended as a higher form of intellectual insight in Milton Friedman's introduction to the 1971 edition of *The Road to Serfdom*: 'The argument for collectivism is simple if false; it is an immediate emotional argument. The argument for individualism is subtle and sophisticated; it is an indirect rational argument' (qtd in Hayek, 2007: 260).

want. 'The fact that the opportunities open to the poor in a competitive society are much more restricted than those open to the rich', he averred in one of *The Road to Serfdom's* most telling formulations, 'does not make it less true that in such a society the poor are much more free than a person commanding much greater material comfort in a different type of society' (Hayek, 2007: 135).<sup>6</sup>

Of Hayek's influence on the present character of neoliberal society, one recent journalistic account has remarked that '[w]e live in a paradise built by his Big Idea' (Metcalf, 2017: n. pag.). But how has this 'paradise' been brought to bear? How has want—that is, a life driven by the ongoing necessity of meeting basic material needs—come to be positioned not as a form of bondage but as an index of freedom? One way to answer these questions is to point to structural transformations in the capitalist economy—and policy responses to those transformations—underpinning the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist order, an order organised around flexible entrepreneurialism and financial responsabilisation. Melinda Cooper (2017: 21) has argued that the response of the neoliberal right in the US to the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s 'was not a return to the Fordist family wage (that particular nostalgia would be a hallmark of the left), but rather the strategic reinvention of a much older, poor-law tradition of private family responsibility, using the combined instruments of

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<sup>6</sup> Hayek's vision of freedom as non-coercion can also usefully be contrasted with the republican conception of freedom as non-domination, as influentially theorised by Philip Pettit. For the classical liberal, it is only direct interference in the basic choices of a person that can deny them freedom, and thus any imbalance in power or wealth between contracting parties does not impinge on the freedom enjoyed by each party. For the classical republican, by contrast, a person who is subject privately to a master, or publicly to an arbitrary power—say, the despotism of a prince or party; or the colonial rule of an imperial power—is considered unfree, regardless of how much or little interference that person encounters in practice (Pettit, 2016: 7). Domination can also be established through want: Pettit (2016: 14) cites a statement by Thomas Jefferson as the *locus classicus* of the republican critique of liberal freedom of contract: 'And with the laborers of England generally, does not the moral coercion of want subject their will as despotically to that of their employer, as the physical constraint does the soldier, the seaman, or the slave?' Despite his emphasis on coercion over want, Hayek's argument in *The Road to Serfdom* does shade into a critique of domination when the power in question is the socialist 'planner'. He is much more sanguine when it comes to capitalist modes of domination, arguing that for the losers in a competitive market society, their inequality is easier to accept 'if it is due to impersonal forces than when it is due to design' (Hayek, 2007: 137). For more on Hayek's conception of freedom, and its relationship to his epistemology of the market, see Paul (1980).

welfare reform, changes to taxation, and monetary policy'. The effect of these policy shifts has been to entangle the contemporary subject with capitalist financialisation in a way that ultimately undermines the very freedom in whose name these policies have been adopted. David Graeber (2013: 376) has connected the promise of home ownership, a central plank in the neoliberal reforms of Thatcher and Reagan, to the vast expansion of mortgage-refinancing schemes and consumer credit since the 1970s, commenting that 'for many, "buying a piece of capitalism" slithered undetectably into something indistinguishable from those familiar scourges of the working poor: the loan shark and the pawnbroker'. Even for those who could afford to save rather than borrow, a heightened engagement with financial markets became inescapable. Christian Marazzi (2008: 38), for instance, notes that 'the diversion of savings to securities markets, initiated by the "silent revolution" in pension funds', had as its aim 'to eliminate the separation between capital and labour implicit in the Fordist salary relationship by strictly tying workers' savings to processes of capitalist transformation/restructuring'.

The point of these shifts away from the Fordist social order is to produce workers and citizens who are invested in the success of capitalism not only insofar as it guarantees the income they receive in the form of wages, but also to the extent that the financial mechanics through which capitalism operates underpin any future prosperity. Their freedom thus becomes dependent not only upon economic growth—as was also the case during the various Keynesian settlements of the post-war period—but on a growth that can only be guaranteed through a reorientation of life towards the management of credit and debt. For the working and middle classes in the era of neoliberal financialisation, freedom has thus become hedged all around by virtually unavoidable entanglement with indebtedness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On the rise of indebtedness over the neoliberal period, see Streeck (2014). See also Wendy Brown's (2015: 84) distinction between the liberal model of the market and the neoliberal scenario: 'Rather than each individual pursuing his or her own interest and unwittingly generating collective benefit [as in Adam Smith's invisible hand theory], today, it is the project of macroeconomic growth and credit enhancement to which neoliberal individuals are tethered and with which their existence as human capital must align if they are to thrive'.

When it comes to shackling neoliberal subjects to an understanding of freedom that appears to require their accommodation to structures of debt, no less important than these structural and policy shifts have been the ideological shifts that accompanied them. Remarking on the neoliberal 'exaltation of a life in uncertainty as a life in liberty', Wolfgang Streeck (2017: 46) suggests that:

[n]eoliberal ideological narratives offer a euphemistic reinterpretation of the breakdown of structured order as the arrival of a free society built on individual autonomy, and of de-institutionalization as historical progress out of an *empire of necessity* into an *empire of freedom*. (Italics in original)

Such 'neoliberal ideological narratives' have emerged from the realm of culture. In places where the 'liberation' of capital was not (or not wholly) performed using the brute force of the state, neoliberal restructuring was instead enabled by a powerful cultural appeal to individual freedom. This appeal represented a particular challenge for the left, resulting in a longstanding and ongoing debate concerning the relationship between solidarity and difference. As Harvey (2005: 41) remarks, '[a]ny political movement that holds individual freedoms to be sacrosanct is vulnerable to incorporation into the neoliberal fold'. Thus, despite the real social and political advances secured by the various countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, the identity movements of the New Left and the revolutionary fervour of the *soixante huitardes* have all ended up providing grist to neoliberalism's mill in one way or another.<sup>8</sup> According to Harvey (2005: 41–2), this was because it proved difficult, within the context of such movements, to 'forge the collective discipline required for political action to achieve social justice without offending the desire of political actors for individual freedom'. While neoliberalism's conceptualisation of liberty was, in theory, really quite minimal, in practice it was sufficiently diffuse and pragmatic as to be capable of neutralising and even arrogating movements that had the potential to challenge it. From our historical vantage point, it seems clear that neoliberalism has, in Adam Tooze's (2018: n. pag.) words, repressed 'the impulse to know, the will to intervene, the freedom to choose not privately but as a political body'.

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<sup>8</sup> As Melinda Cooper (2017: 8) remarks, 'There is no form of social liberation, it would seem, that the neoliberal economist cannot incorporate within a new market for contractual services or high-risk credit'.

From here it is a short step to Harvey's more brazen contention that the retreat from a class-based politics was ultimately the handmaiden of neoliberalisation. Yet it should be noted that he is emphatic in arguing that it is pointless to 'wax nostalgic for some lost golden age when some fictional category like "the proletariat" was in motion'; the conditions of class formation are—just as they always have been—'full of the complexities that arise out of race, gender, and ethnic distinctions that are closely interwoven with class identities' (Harvey, 2005: 202). Efforts to distinguish between what Harvey calls mid-century 'embedded liberalism' and late-century neoliberalism have sometimes prompted unwarranted nostalgia for an earlier brand of capitalism whose benefits were more evenly spread, but in which basic inequalities (not least on a global level) still existed as a motor of the system.<sup>9</sup> But, just as the route towards a renewed social solidarity will not be identified by pining for the lost stability of the Fordist family unit, so it will not arise through the straightforward renunciation of identity politics counselled by some commentators (Lilla, 2017; Luce, 2017). Instead, this special collection claims, it is more likely to emerge from a project that seeks to reimagine freedom in new and rich ways.

With this in mind, and given that appeals to freedom have been far from uncommon in the history of left, left-liberal, and progressive thought, the circumspect, provisional, and even suspicious way in which the left has engaged with the concept of freedom over recent years and even decades becomes notable and disappointing. One plausible reason for the resilience of neoliberalism's ideological monopoly on freedom is the earnestness with which a philosophically narrow conceptualisation of liberty deriving from the libertarian right (and combined with stylistic trappings from the New Left) has been espoused by leaders—and major shareholders—of the information technologies industry, an industry which dominates the means of communication and, increasingly, exchange.<sup>10</sup> But beyond these tiny elites, the

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<sup>9</sup> Even an otherwise harsh critic of neoliberalism's erosion of democracy such as Wendy Brown (2015) has been taken to task by others on the left for her perceived lionisation of mid-century democratic capitalism as an alternative to the contemporary status quo (Brouillette, 2017: 277–81; McClanahan, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Philip Mirowski (2013: 107) goes so far as to argue that the products of the technology industry have altered the very notion of a consistent self, making a more embedded and temporally extended conception of freedom—which could challenge neoliberalism's minimal model of freedom from

ability of neoliberal ideologues to reposition precarity as freedom in a way that is ideologically persuasive across a broad cross-section of political constituencies continues to be remarkable, and may explain why so few critics have been fully willing to claim the concept of freedom for the left.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and certainly since the economic crisis of 2008, neoliberalism's manifest failure to bring about the very thing around which it is organised—freedom—has been remarked upon with growing frequency.<sup>12</sup> Responding to Harvey's (2005: 184) prompting that 'the meaning of this word should be subjected to the deepest scrutiny', some critics on the left—including those associated with the social movements alluded to above—have sought with growing trenchancy to question the role and status of freedom under neoliberalism. The poststructuralist critique of the voluntarist subject of liberalism has, of course, been in motion for decades. In recent years, however, this critique has become increasingly pointed, with scholars addressing the affective mechanisms by which

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coercion—increasingly into an impossibility: 'The key to comprehension of the neutralization of time-honored traditions of positive liberty comes with the progressive fragmentation of the self, both in economic theory and in everyday life. ... Absent such a self, there is nothing left of a "positive" notion of freedom to preserve and protect'. For the classic articulation of the distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom, see Berlin (1969).

<sup>11</sup> The ability of regimes to instrumentalise freedom as a technique of governance has been noted for a while: see, for instance, Rose's *Powers of Freedom* (2012) and Dean's *Governmentality* (2009), both first published in 1999. The connection between freedom and precarity has recently been explored by Isabell Lorey (2015: 64), who examines the rise of 'precarization as an instrument of governing' and argues that '[w]hen domestic security discourses are correlated with normalized social insecurity in neoliberalism, then the fundamental dispositive of liberalism shifts. Instead of freedom and security, freedom and insecurity now form the new couple in neoliberal governmentality'.

<sup>12</sup> In South America, the association between neoliberal economics and the tyranny of state violence never really disappeared, since the latter was so visibly the means by which the former was instantiated in this part of the world. In Africa, the apparent failure of IMF-sanctioned structural adjustment programmes to fulfil Amartya Sen's (2001) prospectus of development as freedom has resulted in a growing number of critiques. In Europe, a combination of asset-inflating quantitative easing and deep cuts to social provision under the governing economic rubric of 'austerity' has produced a profound set of legitimacy crises at both national and supranational levels, considered below. And in the United States, scholars and activists have continued to question the neoliberal 'centre' ground, while there has emerged an increasingly visible division between right-wing libertarian and populist movements — the Tea Party and Donald Trump — and left-wing social justice and democratic socialist movements — Black Lives Matter and Bernie Sanders.

neoliberal subjects are encouraged to cathect to a promise of freedom that cannot possibly be delivered upon. For instance, Sara Ahmed (2010: 234) argues that 'the freedom to be happy is a fantasy of freedom that conceals how happiness directs us towards some life choices and not others'. This affective logic has been harnessed to discipline and quiesce subjects who might otherwise begin to question it, an insight that underpins Lauren Berlant's influential concept of 'cruel optimism'. 'Why', Berlant (2011: 2) asks, 'do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear costs abounds?' One answer she points to concerns the 'gaps of disappointment' that opened up when '[f]lexibility was sold as a freedom both for corporations responding to an increasingly dynamic or unstable economy and for people who saw being tied down to jobs as a hindrance both to pleasure and to upwards mobility' (Berlant, 2011: 169, 201). Harvey's call for us to be sceptical about neoliberalism's claims regarding freedom was, in fact, being answered even before he articulated it; what has changed in recent years is the precision with which these answers have been attached, within cultural discourse, to the failure of neoliberalism to realise its own promises.

Ahmed's and Berlant's critiques are among the signs that the long-established ideological alignment among capitalism, freedom, and democracy is beginning to unravel. We can witness this unravelling even within narratives emerging from outposts of the traditional centre ground. Though it does not deal expressly with the question of freedom, a key text in this shifting alignment—read and remarked on in a wide array of venues—is Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013). Authored by a neoclassical economist, the book has nonetheless been crucial in reviving an interest in the distributional questions raised by Keynesian macroeconomics. But commentators' preoccupation with the key economic dynamic identified by Piketty—that the rate of return on capital tends to outpace the rate of growth of income in a way that deepens structural inequality over the *longue durée*—has sometimes led to the book's accompanying political logic being overlooked. As Piketty (2013: 1) argues, in circumstances marked by this economic dynamic, 'capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable

inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based'. It should not be surprising, therefore, that technical questions of economic management have recently ballooned, particularly in Europe, into much larger questions of political legitimacy. Streeck (2014: 14–15) goes so far as to characterise the situation since the 2008 financial crisis as a 'delayed crisis of democratic capitalism', and calls for the revival of the Marxist crisis theory of the 1960s and 1970s in order to understand it fully.<sup>13</sup> His core insight is that, far from resolving the legitimisation crisis that was wrestled with by Western states during the *trente glorieuse* following World War II, the neoliberal experiments of the following forty years simply delayed it. In Europe today, the economic challenge of managing sovereign debt within the institutional structures of the EU masks a much deeper and potentially much more destabilising phenomenon, in which the key mechanism by which capitalism had managed to justify itself for decades—its association with democratic forms of freedom—appears to have been exhausted.

To shift the focus away from economic management and towards legitimisation in this manner—thereby reversing the polarities in William Davies's (2014: 6) definition of neoliberalism as 'the disenchantment of politics by economics'—is necessarily to generate opportunities for political contestation. Quite suddenly, ground has opened up on either side of the 'centrist' neoliberal doxa that previously dominated the political arena. On the right, new forms of cultural revanchism are propelling political parties into power whose presence in national assemblies would have been unthinkable during the 1990s. And while centre-left parties have borne a great deal of political pain in the decade since the financial crisis, it is also the case that opportunities have opened up for the reinvigoration of leftist politics. According to some commentators, 'freedom' is not the keyword for this new era of turbulence and possibility. In his keynote contribution to the 'Freedom After Neoliberalism' conference hosted at the University of York in June 2017, Nikolas Rose (2017: 319)

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<sup>13</sup> 'Rather than the production of surplus-value', Streeck (2014: 14–15) writes, 'the problem was the legitimacy of capitalism as a social system; not whether capital, converted into the economy of the society, would be able to keep society supplied, but whether what it was able to supply would be enough to make its recipients continue playing the game. Thus, for the crisis theories of the 1960s and 1970s, the impending crisis of capitalism was not one of *production* but of *legitimation*'.



revisited his earlier work on governing through freedom only to end his paper by arguing that the most important concept for the contemporary moment is not 'freedom' but 'security'.<sup>14</sup> In making the case for the continued significance of freedom, we therefore find ourselves—rather unusually—positioned against a high-profile contributor to the very project we ourselves have established. Yet we remain convinced—and this collection takes as its point of departure—that reconsidering and re-evaluating the meaning of freedom in a contemporary setting can provide a way not only to explore, in Rose's (2017: 318, 319) words, the 'new rationalities' of the present, but also to locate 'their potential for progressive re-articulation'.

Before moving to describe the essays in this special collection that seek to reconsider and re-evaluate the meaning of freedom, it is important to clarify that we are not arguing that the present era exists 'after' neoliberalism in any clear temporal sense. Rather, the essays included here constitute acts of historical imagination, conducted in the main through the study of recent literary texts that themselves stage imaginative projects in which the idea of an 'after' is engaged—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively—while proceeding from the recognition of contemporary neoliberal conditions. Rather than attempt to summarise what this 'after' signifies, then, we leave it to the individual essays to make their own arguments via their own aesthetic engagements.

But this aesthetic element may also need some explanation: why should we look to literature (or to cognate aesthetic fields) in order to imagine freedom after neoliberalism? We have already acknowledged that culture is one of the means by which neoliberalism established its 'empire of freedom', so it stands to reason that cultural texts—including literature, film, and even popular examples of 'theory'—played a significant role in this process. There has long existed a body of critical material that positions 'the cultural turn' in the humanities and social sciences as a left-neoliberal canard which substituted a depoliticised identitarianism

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<sup>14</sup> The conference—which emerged from a project run by the co-editors of this special collection between 2015 and 2017—was organised by three PhD students at the University of York, Adam Bristow-Smith, Harriet Neal, and Joe Rollins. Details of the conference and the wider project are available at: [freedomafterneoliberalism.wordpress.com](http://freedomafterneoliberalism.wordpress.com).

for substantive ideological disagreement (Badiou, 2001; Michaels, 2004). More recently, some on the left have condemned 'cultural' Marxism as a profound historical error, sought to renounce its origins in the poststructuralist inheritance of phenomenology, and called for the development of an 'ultra-realism' in its stead (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Yet it is notable that, even where scepticism regarding the cultural turn is heard, literary studies and its cognate fields continue to produce some of the most robust and productive critiques of capitalism broadly and neoliberalism in particular. If, as Sarah Brouillette (2015: 5, 14) argues, literature of the neoliberal period has been complicit in valorising 'the reflexive individual's enterprising and expressive labor', it has also offered us 'more tangled forms of self-consciousness, far distant from any celebratory self-appreciation'. And if cultural production under neoliberalism has incubated the paradigmatic post-Fordist labourers of the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), it is aesthetic criticism that has tended to offer the most subtle, sustained, and responsive critiques of not only the cultural products in question but also the economy from which they emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, over recent years, a growing body of scholarship has emerged that works to explore and establish the relationship(s) between neoliberalism and contemporary aesthetics. One aspect that unites this work is a concern about the validity and precision of the category of 'neoliberalism' itself. In their introduction to a 2013 special issue on *Genres of Neoliberalism*, Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins (2013: 1) were already worrying about academic 'neoliberalism fatigue', that the contemporary proliferation of the term now 'signals the absence of a specific political economic, historical, or cultural critique rather than a precise engagement with the conditions of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries'. Emily Johansen and Alissa Karl (2015: 202) likewise acknowledge early in their introduction to *Neoliberalism and the Novel* that '[i]t is now fairly routine to note that neoliberal capitalism, or neoliberalism plain and simple, is a notoriously slippery and capacious signifier'. Noting this slipperiness, and distinguishing between neoliberalism as a *period*, a *doctrine of governance*, a *movement*,

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<sup>15</sup> One notable development within recent literary criticism is a return to the modernist preoccupation with the autonomy and exceptionality of art. See, for example, Pendakis et al. (2014) and Beech (2015).

and an *order of normative reason*, Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian (2017: 603) remark in a review essay that '[w]hich definition will come to dominate in literary and cultural studies remains an open question, as does the question of what literary studies will itself offer'.<sup>16</sup> In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (2017: 2) express more confidence that 'literature can help us better understand some of the more confounding contradictions that appear to exist within theories of neoliberalism'. These introductions to, and overviews of, the relationship between neoliberalism and culture are thus much taken up with establishing the conceptual validity of the neoliberal paradigm and with exploring, on that basis, how neoliberalism influences, or is influenced by, literary and cultural texts. Our aim is to build on these valuable critical precursors by engaging with contemporary texts as a resource for new critical possibilities and new visions of freedom *after* neoliberalism.

The essays in this special collection thus examine the ways in which literature, film, and theory of the 21st century offer an understanding of the ongoing resonance of freedom as a multivalent and promissory political concept. The overall aim of *Freedom After Neoliberalism* is to suggest that 'freedom' continues to provide opportunities for the development of new political imaginaries, and to highlight how and when the notion of freedom has been misaligned with neoliberal projects that have in reality produced forms of unfreedom at an economic, political, and affective level.

We begin with two case studies that characterise the historical arrival of neoliberalism not as a rediscovery of freedom, but either as a catastrophic episode of violence directed by the state against the lives and livelihoods of its own citizens, or as a capitulation to the imperatives of a market society that commodifies cultural production and erodes the public sphere. Interestingly, these essays reverse the accepted geography for these two dynamics: the latter, peaceful and cultural capitulation to neoliberal hegemony takes place in post-dictatorship Chile, while the former—violent, militarised, and profoundly undemocratic—is located in the UK. Christopher Vardy's opening article positions *GB84* (2004), David Peace's

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<sup>16</sup> For a still more thorough taxonomy of neoliberalism, see Gilbert (2013).

dramatisation of the UK miners' strike, as the very opposite of the hopeful defeat that concludes Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1894). For Peace, the victory of Margaret Thatcher's government in this industrial dispute represents the terminal episode in a millennium-long project of violent subjugation and class war that has seen the denizens of his native Yorkshire denied even a scintilla of freedom. Vardy interrogates the meaning of such *longue durée* historicising: on the one hand, Peace's novel powerfully mourns the singularity of the miners' conflict with a Leviathan that deprives its subjects of liberty; on the other, *GB84* struggles to avoid a historical determinism—the flipside of Fukuyama's neoliberal end-of-history thesis—that would make impossible the imagining of alternative forms of freedom.

The 1988 referendum on Chile's transition to democracy—represented in Pablo Larraín's film *No* (2012)—was a relatively peaceful affair, not only by comparison with the 1984 British miner's strike but more pertinently with the post-1973 regime of neoliberal dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. Indeed, Chile under Pinochet is perhaps the premier historical example that gives the lie to neoliberalism's sanctification of liberty as a primary virtue and end. But while the 1988 plebiscite might easily be positioned as marking the arrival of freedom, Eugenio Di Stefano argues in our second article that '*No* is less about a break than a continuation of neoliberal policies that make Chile one of the most unequal countries on earth'. Larraín's film is another 21st-century historicisation that seeks to explain the way in which neoliberalism's relationship with freedom became attenuated as it established itself as a governing logic. But whereas for Peace this attenuation is total—never again will England enjoy liberty—Larraín's films identify a new opportunity to locate freedom in the logic of mimesis itself. In his reading of Larraín's more recent film *Neruda* (2016), Di Stefano explores how Larraín's art creates an autonomous space beyond the marketplace where freedom might be located and harnessed to ends that are not just aesthetic but political too.

Vardy's and Di Stefano's focus on the historical origins of actually existing neoliberalism is continued in the third article in the collection. Adam Kelly's exploration of the changing role played by the idea of freedom in the fiction of Colson Whitehead begins by outlining some of the significations of 'freedom' within

American—and particularly African American—culture before and during the period of neoliberal hegemony. Via an extended comparison between Whitehead's novels *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), the essay then moves to considering the author's shifting engagement with freedom in his work. In *Apex*—published against the background of the Bush doctrine and the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—Whitehead treats freedom ironically. *The Underground Railroad*, by contrast, emerges in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and a growing public awareness of the implications of mass incarceration policies for African Americans, and seems to call for a more sincere reckoning with the notion of freedom. The article concludes with a discussion of time in Whitehead, arguing that his fiction's distinctive temporal structures lie at the heart of the vision of freedom after neoliberalism offered by his writing. Kelly's reading thus offers a hinge between the broadly historiographic focus of the first two essays in the collection, and the more concerted engagement with the 'after' of neoliberalism that marks the following four essays.

In moving to explore new horizons for freedom in the literature of the new millennium, the collection first examines an existing debate that has been the focus of much energy on the academic left. Over the last two decades, cosmopolitanism has provided some of the most fertile ground for identifying and critiquing the depredations of emergency biopolitics; thus, we devote two articles to excavating this area of critical enquiry so as to identify emancipatory opportunities that might not have been fully realised or reckoned with in the existing scholarship. David Mitchell's 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas* is a text that has been widely celebrated for its fractious aesthetic of cosmopolitan belonging that gestures beyond teleological accounts of citizenship inherited from the European Enlightenment. Yet, as Alexander Beaumont argues, critics have tended to overlook the ways in which *Cloud Atlas's* cosmopolitan imaginary actually serves to limit a contrasting emancipatory imaginary which would seek to locate a route beyond neoliberal unfreedom. Although the novel cannot quite resolve the tension between these two imaginaries, in its failures and near-successes *Cloud Atlas* provides a useful insight, Beaumont contends, into how cosmopolitan thought might be reconfigured so as to place political action—and not an ethical account of human ontology—at the heart of contemporary praxis.

Emily Johansen's article likewise engages cosmopolitan discourses, arguing that they dovetail with neoliberal imaginaries in their understanding of risk. The liberal inheritance of cosmopolitanism, Johansen contends, can be understood to provide the basis for neoliberalism's speculative and entrepreneurial logics. Yet just as the emancipatory imaginary of *Cloud Atlas* offers an opportunity to identify, rethink, and refurbish key elements of its cosmopolitan commitments, so, in a countervailing manoeuvre, Johansen argues that cosmopolitanism offers an opportunity to reconfigure iniquitous dynamics within neoliberal thought. Through an analysis of John le Carré's 2001 novel *The Constant Gardener*, Johansen suggests that a vision of 'risky cosmopolitanism' provides the basis for radically rethinking the uneven distribution of risk within neoliberal globalisation. This vision necessitates an active valorisation of neoliberal unfreedom as cosmopolitan freedom, alongside a thoroughgoing critique of the ways in which neoliberalism's fetishisation of liberty has served to perpetuate colonial logics that continue to subjugate populations in the Global South. Read together, Beaumont and Johansen's articles seek to identify the limits and opportunities of cosmopolitanism in 21st-century literary culture, and how cosmopolitan thinking provides a site for reengaging the concept of freedom beyond its narrow understanding within neoliberal discourse.

The final articles in the collection set out more positive accounts of what freedom after neoliberalism might look and feel like. Although Ralph Clare is emphatic in arguing that we do not today live in a period after neoliberalism, he nonetheless uses the collection's title as an occasion to critique neoliberalism's 'cynical presentism[,] in which time seems to stand still and change seems impossible'. For Clare, the temporality hinted at by our title resonates with the temporality of Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04*, a text that offers an immanent critique of neoliberal time by emphasising the ways in which the everyday present, 'if properly attended to', functions as a reservoir of affective potentiality. The identification of such a form of potentiality, Clare argues, undermines the temporality of neoliberalism—most visible in the temporality of debt—wherein freedom is made equivalent to a future of dramatically limited options that, in reality, are so limited as to represent no freedom at all. What is most promising about this critique is that, in order to locate freedom after

neoliberalism, it suggests that it is not actually necessary to be 'after' neoliberalism at all: what is more important—and what literature can offer us uniquely—is an account of temporality that makes the imagination of such a freedom possible in the face of the remorseless presentism of neoliberalism itself.

Finally, in a similar vein of immanent critique, Matthew Mullins argues from a quite different perspective that neoliberalism contains within it the seeds of its own overcoming. Engaging in a sustained analysis of political economy and critical theory over the *longue durée*, Mullins suggests that, in the same way that Marxism offered a materialist critique of liberalism that shared the latter's humanism, so the new materialism of object-oriented ontology critiques neoliberalism by weaponising the latter's theoretical decentering of the human subject. What is at stake in this manoeuvre is a thoroughgoing revision of the meaning of freedom itself. Where the primacy of the human subject under the liberal moral economy causes freedom to be equated with the absence of coercion, under the neoliberal economy freedom is equated instead with the absence of impediments to economisation. This permits a dramatic recalibration of the concept of freedom, because while neoliberalism maintains the essential separateness of the subject and the world in which the subject lives, it no longer treats the subject as sacred: 'Neoliberal humanism conforms the human to the market, rather than orbiting the market around the human.' The result is what new materialists call a 'flattened ontology', a refusal to 'imagine the human as ontologically distinct from nature'. Thus, what new materialism's immanent critique of neoliberalism offers is an antihumanist recalibration of freedom that is no longer centred upon the human subject but rather upon the world itself, and that emphasises 'a politics that can account for the freedom of things, from rivers, to pipelines, to waste-water treatment plants'.

*Freedom After Neoliberalism* thus ends with a fundamental rethinking of the concept of freedom that nonetheless insists upon the ongoing importance of this term to any critical left politics. As a whole, this special collection first historicises the bankruptcy of neoliberal freedoms in reality; it then identifies the promise of freedom still living, subterraneously, within the critical manoeuvres of the intellectual left; and finally it offers a route to the affirmation of what David Harvey (2005: 183)

describes as 'freedom's prospect' in and for our current moment. In a recent account of what he terms the 'punitive neoliberalism' of the post-2008 period, William Davies (2016: 134) argues that '[n]eoliberalism has become incredible, but that is partly because it is a system that no longer seeks credibility in the way that hegemonies used to do, through a degree of cultural or normative consensus'. 'Freedom' was the term that underpinned the credibility and hegemony of neoliberalism in its ascendant phase. Our collection contends that it is high time to recapture this key idea as a resource for immanent critique and a route to a different future.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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