

Neoliberal affects

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Abstract

Claims about neoliberalism and its geographies frequently involve assumptions about the affective life of neoliberalism and/or neoliberal societies. However, existing cultural approaches to neoliberalism as a discursive formation, an ideology or governmentality collapse a concern with affect into a focus on the operation of signifying-subjectifying processes that make 'neoliberal subjects'. Political economy approaches only make implicit claims about the 'mood' of neoliberal societies. In this paper, I argue that collective affects are part of the conditions of formation for particular neoliberalisms and therefore understanding the affective life of neoliberalism is critical to explaining how it emerges, forms and changes. Through examples including The Mont Pelerin Society, the Chicago School of Economics and Thatcherism, I propose a vocabulary that supplements existing approaches by focusing on affective conditions for neoliberalism, specifically the atmospheres that are part of the formation of neoliberal reason and the structures of feeling that condition how particular neoliberalisms actualize in the midst of other things. The result is a way of discerning neoliberalisms as both conditioned by affects and 'actually existing' affectively – as dispersed affective 'qualities' or 'senses'.

Keywords

affect, atmospheres, Foucault, neoliberalism, structures of feeling

I Introduction: 'A climate'

After returning from the 50th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society, Milton Friedman reflects on 'victory' in the war of ideas. Whilst the 'regulatory and welfare state' remained a 'threat to freedom' (Friedman and Friedman, 1998: 582), Friedman notes a change in the 'climate of opinion' between 1997 and the founding of the Society in 1947. He writes:

To judge from the climate of opinion, we have won the war of ideas. Everyone – left or right –

change in 'climate'. In his influential 1979 analysis of the UK's 'swing to the right', Stuart Hall points to a vague, indefinite, change in 'climate' that, for him, accompanies the incorporation of neoliberal themes of anti-collectivism and anti-statism into Thatcherism. In this climate monetarist economic thought grows in acceptability:

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Gradually, in the more hospitable climate of the 1970s, these seeds began to bear fruit. First in the learned journals, then in the senior common rooms, and finally in informal exchanges between the 'new academics' and the more 'sensitive' senior civil servants, a monetarist version of neo-classical economics came to provide the accepted frame for economic debate. (Hall, 1988: 47)

Friedman and Hall are but two examples of occasions in which collective affects are taken to be part of neoliberalisms – ambiguous affects named vaguely as a gradual 'change in the climate of opinion' or a more 'hospitable climate' for ideas – affects that are also and at the same time part of other partially connected formations (the series of geo-political shocks and transformations named by Friedman, for example). In this paper I develop this intuition that affects matter to neoliberalism. I argue that collective affects are part of the sites, networks, and flows of neoliberalism – and that, consequently, any attempt to understand 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 353) must learn to sense neoliberalism's affective spaces. For what is at stake is discerning the *... ..* for particular neoliberalisms and the continual *()* of emerged but still in formation neoliberalisms. Neoliberalisms are, then, at once conditioned by multiple collective affects and 'actually exist' affectively – they are present as dispersed affective 'qualities' or 'senses' such as a 'climate of opinion' or a 'more hospitable climate'.

Attending to neoliberalism's affective life is one way, then, Halle'9yalitihow229yale

so neoliberal affects will coexist and blur with neoliberal reason. Here I distinguish my the affects of weak reciprocity that animated the emphasis on affect from other ways of doing a European liberal welfare state, for example, a cultural analysis of neoliberalism. Through the promise of a normative good life that suexamples including the Mont Pelerin Society, tained social democracy (Berlant, 2011) the Chicago School of Economics and Thatcher-

This means that we should treat the terrorism, the remainder of the paper proposes a 'neoliberal affects' with caution. Neoliberalism vocabulary for understanding neoliberalism as is not a catch-all designator for contemporary conditioned by, and actually existing as, - capitalism and 'neoliberal affects' do not simply . . . that are part of the formation of neoliberalism name a set of identifiable collective emotions neoliberal reason (Section III) and . . . Nor are 'neoliberal affects' the point of contact that fold into how neoliberalisms actualize in between structure and subject, in which an althe midst of other things (Section IV). powerful and already-constituted neoliberalism The paper aims to supplement cultural analysis-determines what is felt. Rather, I use the terms of neoliberalism. Whilst there are significant 'neoliberal affects' in two ways, both of which differences and tensions in how representation involve particular translations of my starting and signification are understood, cultural work definition of affect as the 'feeling of existence'. on neoliberalism has been primarily concerned First, 'neoliberal affects' refer to the - with specifying the effects of signifying- . . . that envelope and animate neoliberal subjectifying processes. The emphasis has been reason as it emerges, circulates and changes. how neoliberalism as an economic-political Second, 'neoliberal affects' refer to the - formation is discursively or ideologically . . . that in enigmatic ways accom-articulated and expressed, in part through the pany the translation of neoliberal reason into semantic construction of various supposedly policies and projects. Whilst this begs the question neoliberal things (bodies, identities, subjectiv- tion of what neoliberal reason is, which I will ities, and so on). This is important and necessary come to in the next section, what it does is to work. A concern with affect is not other to a make affects parts of . conditions for neoliberal concern with signifying-subjectifying mechan- eral reason. My aim, in short, is to articulate isms. But, it is to recognize them as but one some of the collective affects of/for neoliberal form/process of mediation, inseparable from a ism specific to the UK and USA, without repro-Euro-Modern version of 'culture'. What a con- ducting a totalizing account of the omnipresence concern with neoliberal affects does, then, is to of neoliberalism, and whilst offering a concept multiple the forms/processes of mediation by tual vocabulary designed to enable a conjunct attending to how the 'feel of existence' is condi- tional analysis of how neoliberal affects varied conditioned and conditions. in neoliberalism's 'other birthplaces' (Peck, 2010: 39) and differ across its current 'socio-spatial frontiers' (2010: 6).

II Affect and theories of neoliberalism

The paper proceeds in three sections. Through a reading of Michel Foucault's 1978-9 lecture series . . . , I be (Gilbert, 2013), claims are frequently made emphasize in Section II how neoliberal reason about the connection between it and contempo- exists and happens in the midst of a range of affective life. Very often, this involves affects. My emphasis is on the life of neoliberal claims that the neoliberal present has something reason, that is, those affects that saturate the folk a commonly felt and identifiable mood, mation, circulation, articulation and translationormally of fear and anxiety aligned to the

insecurities of lives lived precariously amidst a 'generalised and heightened sense of expectancy of what has not yet come' (Clough and Wise, 2011: 2). Typically, neoliberalism is equated with the contemporary moment/form of capitalism. This has led to a flurry of attempts to diagnose an affective economy in which intensive capacities are captured within a new regime of capital accumulation oriented to 'affect itself' and characterized by the dominance of 'affective labour' (Clough, 2008). Whilst these diagnoses remind us of the patterning of affective life and its imbrication with processes of commodification (Nast, 2006), they nevertheless risk reproducing what Larner (2003) and others have identified as the totalizing effect of the neoliberal formulation. A variant of this approach, that likewise presumes the existence and coherence of neoliberalism, attempts to map its affective damages. Consider, for example, the following claim by Hall and O'Shea (2013: 6, emphasis in original):

The consequences of neoliberalism – the individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn – has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression.

In these analyses, attempts are made to establish a relation between neoliberalism as economic-political formation and changes over time in the occurrence of individually felt but shared moods (e.g. Dardot and Laval [2014] on the relation between depression and the naturalization of competition). Whilst this research is timely and important, neoliberalism acts as the starting point of analysis, is given a causal role, and becomes the dominant framing context. Neo-

diagnoses of neoliberalism's exclusionary mechanisms and damages. For example, Tyler (2013) shows how stigma is used to justify punitive state intervention over raced and classed peoples who are abandoned by, excluded from or otherwise cast out of the market. Likewise, Wacquant (2010) ties the ascent of restrictive workfare and expansive prisonfare to a complex translation of various senses of social and economic insecurity into forms of resentment. 'Punitive containment' resonates with a specific affective condition:

It taps the *disaffection*, coursing through the middle and lower regions of social space in reaction to the splintering of wage work and the resurgence of inequality, and converts it into - *disaffection* towards welfare recipients and street criminals. (Wacquant, 2010: 204, emphasis

neoliberal reason and particular actualizations of neoliberalism.

Let's turn, first, to some of the occasions through which neoliberal reason emerged. My emphasis will be on the atmospheres that

The Mont Pelerin Society is one of a number of origins for neoliberalism, as long as we use the term 'origin' advisedly to refer to what Bennett (2010: 33) terms a 'complex, mobile, and heteronomous enjoiner of forces'. As is now well known, neoliberal reason is mutable, as it is formulated, circulated and reworked through partially connected transnational networks of exchanges. We might think of the meeting as one forum where the 'inflationary' anti-state suspicion that Foucault (2008: 187) writes of intensifies and from which it circulates alongside a fierce belief in liberalism, even if neither originates there. The meetings are occasions for the reconstruction of liberalism, as part of what Peck (2010: 40) terms 'an insistent search for intellectual amity at a distance'. And key to that reconstruction in the early meetings was a mode of speech and encounter – a 'privatised, strategic, elite deliberation' (2010: 49) as Peck describes it – that was consensual on the threat to liberalism but was not 'harmonious' (Stigler, 1988) on how the state should intervene in society to create a market order (see Hartwell, 1995). The style and tone of speech being one element, amongst others, in the (re)making of an intimate atmosphere that countered the 'isolation' and 'despair' members shared – other elements being the geographic remoteness and separation of the mountain setting, the closed

source: <https://www.montpelerin.org/> (accessed 11/05/2018)

extend beyond enclosed sites (the meeting or workshop) to constitute a 'society' or a 'school' as a transnational, mutable space of affective belonging and attachment (that may be enacted by acts of recalling/reliving atmospheres). For example, perhaps the Mont Pelerin Society and Chicago School connect at the level of affective tendencies, or what Connolly (2008) terms 'affinities of sensibility' which cross ideational differences and overlaps of personnel (Van Horn and Mirowski, 2009). Atmospheres also live on, in changed form, through dispositions, habits, memories and styles. Without using those terms, Peck (2010: 102) gestures towards the fluid topology of atmospheres when describing 'Chicago types':

While Chicago types remained a small minority, they were emboldened both by the strength of their convictions and by a sustaining belief that the collectivist-interventionist tide would eventually turn, the fervency of which has been likened to religious forms of devotion. (Peck, 2010: 102)

What animates 'Chicago types' is, in part, a 'fervency' and 'belief' in the market. 'Belief in the market', the 'threat of collectivism' or other atmospheres may be amplified as they are carried by networks of neoliberal reason. Those who encounter those networks may be assailed by neoliberal atmospheres, may happen across them, may be gently nudged by them, or may otherwise be affected.

The spatiality of neoliberal atmospheres is doubled, then. Atmospheres come and go in particular enclosures that they emanate from and temporarily envelope. But atmospheres or traces of atmospheres also live on, move and change form, becoming 'capacities to affect and be affected' such as a 'sustaining belief' or the feeling of being 'emboldened'. For example, Mirowski (2013) stresses the 'belligerence6 (ampl)-353.3 (by)-355.3 (atmospt5)-353970.6 (tok5ellig

pressures and set effective limits on experience differently, there is not and cannot be a single and on action' (Williams, 1977: 132). Structures typically 'neoliberal' structure of feeling. of feeling and atmospheres orientate inquiry to instead, the task for analysis is to sense and different, . . . of affective life. Atmospheres grasp the effects of the always particular tangle are ephemeral affective impressions that envelop structures of feeling at play as part of specific open particular enclosed forms (in the above circumstances or contexts. Because structures examples an occasion, a network, and then part of feeling are particularizing, I stay longer with ticular bodies). Structures of feeling return us to the example of Thatcherism by way of Stuart the idea of dispersed moods discussed in Sedgwick's work in order to hold onto how structures tion II. A structure of feeling is best thought of of feeling are 'in solution' (Williams, 1977: as a set of distributed 'forming and formative' (1977: 133) . . . 'formalised, classified, and . . . built processes' (1977: 128) constitutive of a 'specific present' (1977: 129). What is forming is a 'particular quality' of experience that gives a 'sense' of what Williams (1977: 131) describes as a 'generation or a period'. The 'particular quality' and 'sense' constitute an experience of the present that both extends beyond particular sites/occasions . . . is shared across otherwise separate sites/occasions. Let's illustrate this formal distinction by returning to the Mont Pelerin Society. The 'collegiate atmosphere' that enveloped the initial meeting is not equivalent to, but happens in the midst of, a more durable, distributed 'sense' of post-war 'crisis'.

My examples here are some of the moods that pressed and limited 1970s British 'Thatcherism'. Understood as distributed affective qualities that bestow an 'enigmatic coherence' (Pfau, 2005) across differences, the structures of feeling I describe do not add up to a totality that could exhaust what can be said of 1970s Britain or any other affective present. Their coherence is, at best, a disjunctive synthesis that folds with and into the particular actualization of neoliberalism to which Stuart Hall (1988) gave the name 'Thatcherism'. What this means, though, is that particular neoliberalisms will be actualized in relation to and through structures of feeling that are always-already more than neoliberal. The 'structures of feeling' that are part of neoliberalisms other than Thatcherism – say the mix with evangelical Christianity in the USA (Connolly, 2008) or 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey, 2005) – will likely vary. Or, put

longer provides the ground for fantasies that feeling may be present atmospherically – people, nevertheless, cling to. Optimism, even through affective impressions that envelope if often cruel, makes life liveable amid scenes, political movements and figures. of neoliberal restructuring that Berlant (2011: 11) claims ‘create manifest crisis situations in dispersion/intensification than the formation of ordinary existence for more kinds of people’: neoliberal subjects’. So, as well as the cluster Compare with Fisher (2009) on ‘capitalist reas of structures of feeling named above, the partilism’: a sense of capitalism’s inevitability amidcular actualization that is ‘Thatcherism’ was the loss of other sources of hope that accompanseparable from the intensifications of a kind nies some actualizations of neoliberalism. A of ‘anxiety’ that temporarily attached to various ‘pragmatic adjustment’ to neoliberalism (Fisherothered’ objects/figures/scenes before moving and Gilbert, 2013: 90), capitalist realismto new ones. Take race: involves resignation, fatalism, acquiescence and apathy.

The fears about race are not explicated by a succession of panics about blacks, or catharsized by Powellite rhetoric, or calmed by tougher and

These examples remind us that structures of feeling the resonances that create a dispersed but shared ‘affective present’ felt across diverse phenomena (an ‘affective present’ that is multiple and will be differentially related to and lived). So Fisher (2009), for example, diagnoses how a ‘sense of inevitability’ infuses multiple spaces of neoliberal restructuring and, at the same time, connects those spaces. As well as existing as resonances, structures of feeling intensify around scenes/objects/figures through which people are pulled into the orbit of neoliberal reason. For example, the figure of the ‘welfare queen’ that I discussed earlier folds welfare policy into racist structures of feeling that associate threat with blackness, single mothers and ‘the ghetto’. Another example would be the presence of the ‘sense of inevitability’ that Fisher diagnoses. The ‘sense’ is present through the absence of the imagination of alternatives and is (re)enacted in resigned or fatalistic claims that, whether desirable or not, capitalism is the only system for the organization of today’s economy. It intensifies when alternatives are ignored, denounced, mocked, demonized and otherwise discredited through the charge of being ‘unrealistic’ or ‘utopian’. Consider, for example, the figures of the ‘extreme left’ in post-Thatcher UK politics who are discredited through the charge that they have failed to adjust to reality. In this process, structures of

spaces (the presence of the 'enemy'). Through intensifications and resonances, they condition and come to be present and felt. Consideratory hyper-vigilance that Thatcherism's doubled relation with the state – one that was slightly different to the strategic use of and disavowal of the state typically associated with neoliberalism. If one state effect is the authoritarian 'law-and-order' state, the other involved an intense critique of the state. In his essay on the shift to the right, Hall (1988) diagnosed an 'anti-state' mood that was one way in which a disintegration of the post-war social-democratic consensus was felt. Its basis was in a critique of the social democratic corporatist state that involved a particular iteration of 'state-phobia' refracted through the theme of conjuncture of crisis and intensified by experiences of numbing bureaucracy: a state that Hall (1988: 50) claims was massively present in everyday life – used to 'discipline, limit, and

police the very classes it claimed to represent'. My encounter with and rereading of Hall and He roots the gradual attachment to 'anti-statism' around a claim of how such a state had become felt in ordinary spaces of everyday life, what could term the 'state affects' (Woodward, 2014) of the corporatist state in and as part of crisis:

Whether in the growing dole queues or in the waiting-rooms of an over-burdened National Health Service, or suffering the indignities of Social Security, the corporatist state is increasingly experienced by them ['working people'] not as a benefice but as a powerful bureaucratic imposition on 'the people'. (Hall, 1988: 51)

Hall claims the state of social-democratic corporatism was no longer felt as 'neutral-benevolently', even if it was only ever felt as such between contexts, perhaps structures of feeling some. It was instead felt as imposition, present through the alienating affects of bureaucracy. As with Foucault's (2008) comments on how the singular phrase 'context of context' is not-state-phobia involves a 'disqualification by them', the Thatcherite critique works by rendering the 'state bureaucracy and collectivism' of the social-democratic corporatist state

an 'anxiety about the state' that become part of policies, programmes and projects that extend

6. Extract from Founding Statement of Aims: MontPelerin Society, Switzerland, 8 April 1947. tivity: Psychotherapeutic technologies, professionalization and counselling. *Journal of American Studies*, 37: 497–514.
7. This section reads Hall's work against the grain for affect, whilst attempting to follow his emphasis on understanding contexts and conjunctures (and as such of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34: 349–379. supplementing existing work on the politics of affect). Brenner N, Peck J and Theodore N (2010) After neoliberalism: As is typical of work influenced by ideology critique alization? *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27(3): 327–345.
- and Gramsci, something like affect is present but in the background throughout Hall's work (including through the phrase 'popular mood'). Given his attempt to understand the ambiguities of the popular, affect is not simply an occasion for the bodily inculcation of dominant ideas (and thus the affective accompaniment of 'false consciousness'). Nevertheless, affect is typically collapsed into a concern with signifying forms of mediation 'in and through the categories, classifications and frameworks of the culture' (Hall, 1980: 6). For example, when reflecting on the two versions of culture operative in cultural studies ('culturalist' and 'structuralist'), he is critical of what he argues is Williams' culturalist equation between culture and 'indissoluble real material practice-in-general' (Hall, 1980: 63). Despite this, I learn from Hall's attention to the ambiguities, over terminations and complexities of any formation.

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