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Canonical critiques and geopolitical shifts: Addressing the neoliberalism/collective dichotomy in social work

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This paper takes up the speculative question of "social work futures?" by problematizing Western traditions of critical social work scholarship that conclude an oppressive neoliberal/authentic community dichotomy can adequately represent the major problems and solutions facing professional social work today. This reduction of the term neoliberalism, as a catch-all for the economic turn in the 80s and its legacies into the present, does not just belong to social work scholarship (Best, 2020; Peck, 2010) but it is expressed through critical social work in particular and pervasive ways. By revisiting the term and its reductive use we aim to advocate a more nuanced understanding, and in doing so expose the problematic translations from thought to action, and the need for vigilance around the gap between aspiration and situated realities. Attention to this gap is essential to the scrutiny of contemporary ideas that hope to achieve better futures.

We are concerned that neoliberalism has become a "political swear word" (Peck, 2010) in social work, and that the concomitant idealization of community or collective, does not adequately capture a range of shifts noticeable at least since the Brexit vote of 2016, the election of Donald Trump in 2017 and the ongoing rise of the right across Europe, and indeed beyond. These shifts include *anti*-neoliberal policies like economic protectionism, limitations in the movement of people, disinvestment in international treaties and organisations, and an upswell in right-affiliated populist collectives. We, therefore, revisit the analytic category "neoliberalism" and reintroduce some of the complexity that has been stripped from the idea over time to show that social work must move beyond reinstating neoliberalism as the generic bogeyman of the profession, and community as the generic solution, if we are to respond to contemporary challenges in more meaningful ways.

We begin by briefly outlining common depictions of neoliberalism within the social work scholarship and then contrast this with some of the central ideas and historical and regional context of select original neoliberal thinkers notably Friedrich von Hayek, and Milton Friedman. This provides a more nuanced account of neoliberalism and troubles its indiscriminate positioning in critical social work literature as an evil that must be countered by the virtuous collective. Next, we analyse the contrasting antidote of 'good community' and identify three increasingly evident limits with these representations. Finally, we conclude with several suggestions for future scholarship, namely greater engagement with the politics of implementation, the tensions between redistribution and freedom, and the politics of the collective. Overall, our purpose is not to revitalise neoliberal thought, but rather a plea for more situated and thoughtful analysis that is mindful of complex and changing circumstances, and that does not take major organizing concepts for granted.

1 Social Work's Critique of Neoliberalism

In social work, neoliberalism is commonly understood as a form of free market fundamentalism that has framed all aspects of life through the lens of economic worth. The word 'neoliberalism' is regularly used in our scholarship as shorthand for a range of unwanted changes in governance and culture that (1) individualise social issues; (2) erode state welfare systems, and (3) impact relations between workers and users of social work services through dynamic processes of governmentality. Social work scholars and practitioners have a consequent duty to resist these unwelcome trends, and this proposed resistance generally takes the form of fostering a "new" collective or community as a counterweight to neoliberal tendencies (Gray & Webb, 2013, 2014; Kenkel, 2020; Lorenz, 2005, 2016; Webb, 2010).

1.1 Responsibilisation of Individuals

The social work critique of individualisation argues neoliberalism promotes a neoliberal subject that is entrepreneurial and self-motivating. Those who do not or cannot conform to this ideal are understood as lacking in some fashion and held responsible for their status, whilst the structures that advantage some and disadvantage others are ignored. For example, Schram critiques the 'general orientation of neoliberalisation' which insists on 'personal responsibility' and then blames and punishes the poor when they fail or are unable to effectively comply' (Schram, 2019, p. 18) and Cummins (2018) argues neoliberalism creates a 'war on the poor' rather than one on poverty. Similarly, Rogowski (2021) draws on the narratives of social workers who work with children and families in the UK to argue that those disadvantaged by neoliberal policies are found responsible for their impoverished circumstances, when in fact, the blame should be placed on the policies that generated disadvantage in the first place. In a study of Norwegian young people not in education, employment or training, Juberg and Skjefstad (2019) find that people unable to function in the neoliberal marketplace are stigmatised and blamed for their circumstances. Such neoliberal societies 'take exception' to people who cannot control their drug and alcohol intake. Similarly, Lazăr et al. (2019) argue that since the fall of the Soviet regime and the reinstatement of social work in Romania, social workers have increasingly been encouraged to position service users as responsible for their own circumstances, thus detrimentally impacting social worker-service user relations. They also note that these relations are framed by restrictive regulations. Arce (2019) makes a similar point when she discusses the impact of the Chilean neoliberal regime. She acknowledges that this is very different compared to other states that have adopted such policies but makes the point that this system assumes 'that risks and mechanisms of protection against them are individual responsibilities' (p. 294). Central to this criticism is that neoliberalism relies on a negative conception of freedom which fails to acknowledge the unequal circumstances and differential access to resources experienced by 'free' individuals.

1.2 Welfare State Erosion

Numerous articles point to neoliberalism's hallowing of the welfare state (Roberts & Devine, 2003), with differing classic types of welfare state having eroded in different ways (Schram, (2019). For example, Ferguson (2007) points to the 'attacks' on the UK welfare state through a succession of neoliberally minded governments, and Ferguson and Lavalette (2013) frame the austerity programme of the UK government as an extension of an ideological project that seeks to shrink the welfare state. Cummins (2016) draws on Wacquant to claim that 'welfare systems' have been replaced by 'workfare' and a disciplinary rather than compassionate society. He suggests that this reduction in the collective project of welfare places the necessity to change on the individual, not where in his view it should rest, society. For social

work, this, he argues, has precipitated a focus on individual risk management in preference to community building. In agreement with Ferguson (2007), he indicates that the withdrawal of the state has created a space for an increase in private welfare provision. Criticism of the contraction of state welfare by critical social work scholarship points to the problematic ways that those in need of welfare support are positioned as morally lacking. This shrinking of state welfare is the underside of individualisation. It sits in opposition to the positive freedom promoted by critical social work scholarship that desires a state that creates an equal distribution of resources, even at the expense of individual freedom.

1.3 Neoliberal Governmentality

Critical social work scholarship understands neoliberalism as a new form of governance that shows up in part as a management system named New Public Management (NPM) (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Lane (2000) outlines the principles of NPM as a radical approach to government that aims to decentralise Weberian bureaucratic systems in favour of a more efficient and creative market-based form of management. Adopting an NPM approach involves adopting a welfare society model that prioritises economic growth as opposed to the centralised welfare state that prioritises equal distribution of resources. This precipitates a trade-off between a low-growth, low-inequality welfare state or a high-growth, high-inequality welfare state. Noted effects of this shift in management style include cuts to welfare provision (Baines, 2021), the taming of critique from NGOs now incorporated into state-funded 'care markets' (Spolander et al., (2014), and new time constraints on service provision that weaken relationships with users of services (Lee et al., 2019; Marthinsen, 2019). Shifts such as these have also created an identity crisis for social workers who no longer feel able to promote welfare in a 'weakened' social support system (Jönsson (2015). Of note, this new NPM-style governmentality goes beyond classic bureaucratic norms as, according to several social work scholars (Bay, 2019; Garrett, 2019; Hyslop, 2018; Jönsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019), it has produced people in its own image, as neoliberal subjects. Social work critics of NPM frequently invoke Foucault's idea of governmentality. For example, Garrett (2019) charts neoliberalism's new regulations that channel particular 'highways' and remake the state as a 'market economy'. Marthinsen (2019, p. 353) sees this as a form of pastoral power 'linked to socialisation in general under neoliberal conditions.' Baines (2021) uses Foucault to discuss the way that neoliberal forms of technocratic governance have changed the status of the social worker and placed the burden of responsibility on them. Lauri (2019) draws on Foucault to analyse his empirical work with social workers to argue that the economic constraints within welfare systems and associated competition for funding have led to the production of individualised competitive social worker subjectivity (see also Bay, 2019). Their general argument is that neoliberal governmentality is producing social workers and service users locked into its systems and its logic, and therefore unable to generate alternatives.

These three concerns, which frequently surface across critical social work texts, operate on the fault line between the collective and the individual. Social work scholars regularly cite leftists Harvey (2005) and Wacquant (2009) who place neoliberalism within a conservative camp that serves elites. For example, Harvey states 'the divide and rule politics of ruling class elites must be confronted with alliance politics on the left' (2005, p. 203). This leads to the conclusion that resistance to neoliberalism can only be found in new collectives as the antidote to individualism. These arguments are commonplace in critical social work scholarship and can be implied simply by deploying the term, 'neoliberal'. However, a closer reading of those early neoliberal thinkers suggests that neoliberal thought is much more

complex than suggested by its detractors and that it emerged at a point in history that has some similarities with the current situation—a situation where liberal democratic norms are under threat from an increasing turn to authoritarian forms of governance. This is, then, a moment to ponder the nuance of neoliberal thought as a means to reinvigorate attention to the complexity and unintended effects inherent in any attempt to imagine and enact different worlds.

2 Early Neoliberal Thought

> "What has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven. —Hölderlin" (Hayek quotes Holderin)(Hayek, 2007)

The political thought that came to be known as 'neoliberalism' developed in the aftermath of WWI and continued beyond WWI. A variety of schools of thought from across Europe and the US were involved under this wide umbrella. Central to the principal neoliberal forum called the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) were Friedrich von Hayek, Karl Popper and Ludwig von Mises from Austria, Wilhelm Röpke from Germany's Frieberg School, Henry Simons and Milton Friedman from the Chicago School in the US. As we will discuss, this disparate collective often conflicted and pulling in different directions found a shared interest in the need to reform classic liberalism. They recognised that laissez-faire liberal ideology had generated huge inequalities which in turn had fueled rising totalitarianism from both left and right. Their project sought to develop a political means of securing the individual freedoms that would surely be lost under any form of totalitarian regime, without replicating the problems of classic liberalism. Understanding this motivation is vital to a comprehension of the neoliberal project. Of note, these conditions are uncomfortably close to those of progressive thinkers of the present moment (Laruelle, 2022). Hayek was troubled that the liberal project was lost, and worse, that the problems of the time were blamed on liberal ideas. The rise of the utopian projects of Hitler's National Socialism and the widening adoption of communism deeply troubled him as groups sought to impose their ideals on all (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). Aware that the economic rationale of classic liberalism had led to monopolies that created disadvantage, he aimed to reform liberalism as a means of opposing oppressive state ideologies.

Such thinking was not unique to Hayek and his colleagues Karl Popper and Ludwig von Mises in Austria, as a similar need was being explored across Europe and the US. The Freiburg School in Germany was the first to coin the term 'neoliberal'. A similar movement developed in France, the Societé Libre, which brought together neoliberals with socialists opposed to both 'collectivist and laissez-faire' forms of governance (Mirowski, 2009). Relations between European groups and the Chicago School in the US were generated through Hayek's friend Henry Simons, who published 'A Positive Program for Laissez Faire' (Simons, 1934). In this paper Simons rails against all forms of concentrated power, including, state and corporations, as well as trade unions. Van Horn and Mirowski (2009) state that 'Simons' "Positive Program" reads today more like a left-leaning attack on corporate prerogatives than anything we might associate with a neoconservative agenda." (p. 383). Encouraged by Hayek, Simons set up the Chicago Institute which 'should be mainly concerned with political philosophy and with major practical problems of economic policy' (p. 391). Hayek was pivotal in bringing these scholars from across Europe and Chicago together to form the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS). This group did not attempt to refine an ideal form of neoliberalism or orthodoxy. Mirowski (2009) describes the Mont Pèlerin Society as a 'networked collective' whose members frequently disagreed with each other. They were not a school of economic thought but a transdisciplinary scholarly movement that

was continually adapting, opposing, and responding to the initiatives that they created. There was as much disagreement as agreement on, for example, the extent and mode of state intervention. This disagreement was celebrated because the purpose of MPS was not to generate a new orthodoxy, as such an ambition would counter the premise of the basic tenets of free thought, on which they agreed. Notwithstanding the well-charted problems in how neoliberal ideas have been translated into policy, as noted by social work scholars cited in the present article, there is a contradiction within the offer of an anti-utopian system of governance. Dario Gentili (2021) articulates this contradiction as a system that opposes any universal system. While this is a convincing argument, it does not detract from the ambition of MPS scholars to avoid all forms of totalitarianism, and maintaining difference across the group was a facet of this determination not to be consumed by any single ideology.

Notwithstanding the range of interests and disagreements, MPS members agreed to a set of six core principles. These focused on understanding the ‘moral and economic origins’ of the ‘present crisis’; distinguishing the ‘totalitarian and liberal order’; reasserting the rule of law so that ‘private rights are not allowed to become the basis for predatory power’; ‘establishing minimum standards’ that underpin the market ‘combating the misuse of history’; work on the ‘problem of creating an international order conducive to the safeguarding of peace’(Hartwell 1995, p. 41–42). As these principles illustrate, MPS was born of its particular time, its moment of crisis. While neoliberalism can be understood as an economic project, the market is mentioned only once in these principles and is positioned as a means of generating innovation, ‘a product of human action but not of human design’ and as a means of generating ‘harmonious, international relations’. In deploying the economy as a means of generating human freedom, neoliberalism is a development of the trajectory of modern thought that flows through Descartes, Hobbes, Lock and Smith. Key principles of this are to value individual humans as ends in their own right and therefore their freedom. This is a rejection of the feudal inequalities of medieval societies built on monarchical and religious hierarchies (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015; Sonenscher, 2022; Wolf, 2023). Michael Sonenscher discusses capitalism and socialism as two systems that seek to offer very different forms of economic organisation, but that share a rejection of feudalism. While capitalism favours private ownership, socialism prefers state ownership and where capitalism promotes individual freedom or freedom from state intervention, termed negative freedom in Berlin’s classic model, socialism finds freedom in the collective, or positive freedom. Sonenscher does not see these as oppositional as neither exists in absolute form. The neoliberal scholars of MPS critiqued more extreme unfettered libertarianism, or negative freedom, in favour of wider forms of state regulation that curtail its potential excesses. (Brown, 2006) Hayek states:

> “An effective competitive system needs an intelligently designed and continuously adjusted legal framework as much as any other. Even the most essential prerequisite of its proper functioning, the prevention of fraud and deception (including exploitation of ignorance), provides a great and by no means yet fully accomplished object of legislative activity.” (2007, p. 36)

MPS scholars disagree with each other over the extent and form of regulation but agree that an optimal form of capitalism is preferable to socialism. There is of course no one definition of capitalism any more than there is socialism (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015; Sonenscher, 2022) but for MPS an economy built around private markets and regulated through the state offers the best chance of freedom. They viewed the collectives of both fascism and socialism as oppressive to the creative individual. Opposed to this, proponents of socialism argue that freedom can only be realised through the collective (Van Parijs, 1997). It is not the purpose of

this article to debate the various conflicts between capitalisms and socialisms. However, to understand the motivations for neoliberal thought it is vital to grasp that the economy is not an end in itself but a mechanism that should promote freedom. This was a radical movement that opposed both classic liberalism and leftist collectivism, attempting to create a liberalism fit for the challenges of the time. Like classic liberalism before it, it was never settled and cannot be understood outside of its historical moment (Dardot and Larvel, 2013).

3 Canonical Critiques of Neoliberalism

In the social work literature, David Harvey's (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* is given foundational or canonical status as an explanation of neoliberalism and its various harms (Garrett, 2019; Hyslop, 2018; Kenkel, 2020; Rogowski, 2021). Harvey argues neoliberalism is a mode of capitalism that sustains class oppression. It is in his view 'deeply opposed to state interventionist theories, such as those of John Maynard Keynes' (2005, p. 56). Harvey proposes that neoliberalism is either 'a utopian project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites' (p. 52). There are several issues with Harvey's polemic analysis. First, he spends little time understanding the nuance and variety of thought that might be considered under the heading 'neoliberal'. Instead, his view is based on how neoliberal thought has been operationalised through politicians such as Pinochet, Reagan, and Thatcher. In his more recent Anti-capitalist Chronicles (2020) he pursues this focus on neoliberalism as the policies of the aforementioned political leaders of the 80s rather than engage with the texts of those who developed the concept of neoliberalism. Moreover, he misreads the basic premise of early neoliberal thought which was to restrain the excesses of laissez-faire market monopolies and prioritise human freedom. As a project of liberal reform neoliberal theory was not so far from Keynes and far from being 'deeply opposed', Keynes noted on first reading that Hayek's *Road from Serfdom* was a 'grand book' and that 'morally and philosophically I find myself in agreement with virtually the whole of it, not only agreement but deeply moved agreement'(Bruce Caldwell in Hayek, 2007, p. 87). While Keynes represents a more interventionist approach to capitalism than MPS, he also favours capitalism over absolute socialism. To reinstate Sonenscher's point that socialism and capitalism are not dichotomous. Finally, Harvey presents neoliberalism as dogma, 'a theoretical design' when in fact it is an umbrella term for an expanse of ideas from the Frieberg School to the Friedmanite Chicago School.

A variety of texts (Dardot & Larval, 2009, 2019; Dean & Zamora, 2021; Mirowski, 2013; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Stedman Jones, 2012; Zamora & Behrent, 2016) offer more detail on the range of thought that comes under the heading of neoliberalism, and importantly, how the idea has been shaped through policymakers' interpretations of it. Peck (2010) summarises the paradox at the heart of neoliberal thought. Freedom by definition is unavailable, yet the need to continually search for it created a different form of teleological project than those that MPS scholars were trying to escape. There is an acknowledgement of the laudable intention of these thinkers but problems with putting these ideas into practice. The texts elaborate on how these early aspirations of neoliberal thinkers, untethered from ideals and concerned with the operations of a politically benign economy, came into being as a monstrous distortion. Wendy Brown calls this (2018) 'neoliberalism's Frankenstein'. Peck claims by 'its nature as an oxymoronic form of 'market rule' neoliberalism is contradictory and polymorphic'(2010, p. 7).

This monstrous distortion extends from the neoliberal-inspired policies of Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in the UK, as well as Pinochet's Chile during the 80s. In popular parlance, the use of the term 'neoliberalism' has come to signify the practical implementation of neoliberal ideas through right-wing economic policy. It is important to note several issues that this simple account of neoliberalism in practice hides. First, Thatcher and Reagan selected three focal ideas from the broad and conflicted terrain of neoliberal thought. These are Friedman's monetarism, supply-side economics, and rational expectations theory (Best, 2020). This focus on the economy does ascribe the broad belief that economic management is the path to societal flourishing, however, classic neoliberal thinkers centred human freedom as their aim, not simply a well-run economy. These policies led to highly un-neoliberal policy decisions. Prasad (2006, p. 43) notes that Thatcher turned 'the idea of "monetarism" into the very un-monetarist idea of "balanced budgets"'. Best (2020) claims that the problem came with the translation of abstract and simplistic ideas into practice. Reagan and Thatcher pursued very different economic models, Reagan implemented low taxation while Thatcher concentrated on fiscal prudence and inflation management. Best (2020) further concludes that both Thatcher and Reagan dispensed with their neoliberal economic experiments quite quickly as they did not achieve the effect that they hoped for. Moreover, both Hayek and Friedman critiqued the implementation of neoliberal ideas across these different states. Friedman and Hayek have been subjected to particular criticism for their involvement with Pinochet's government in Chile in the 70's (Birsen, 2018). Friedman's defence was that while he condemned the Chilean regime he firmly believed that the Chilean people have more freedom because of the adoption of capitalism than they would have had under communism. This is a point that cannot be disproved although many disagree as the Chilean experiment attracts much criticism.

As should be clear, neoliberalism is not a prescriptive set of ideas. It is a value position that emphasises individual freedom and opposes totalitarian rule. The expanse of neoliberal thought is contradictory, and the operationalisation of these ideas is even more so, as it has been shaped by circumstance and the predilections of the policymakers in context rather than in doctrine. As such, we suggest neoliberalism lacks traction as an analytical category that can adequately capture the major challenges facing social work today, particularly as what calls itself neoliberal has morphed and distorted over 100 years. Neoliberal thought cannot be held entirely accountable for the problems of individualisation, welfare erosion and governmentality that critical social work scholarship points toward. The range of thought itself is too disparate and a reading of some neoliberal thinkers suggests that they might find themselves in agreement with the problems identified. As a thought experiment, neoliberal thinkers did not foresee and did not want the types of problems generated by the politicians inspired to create policy based on their ideas in different contexts, in different ways, and to different ends. Thus, there is a need for social work scholars to focus on the situated question of implementation: How were these ideas were put into practice? And, what was gained and lost when they encountered the messy complexity of real life?

4 Rethinking the Social Work Critique

A closer analysis of the two thinkers most influential in the 80's era of Thatcher and Reagan's economics suggests that they would for the most part not oppose the social work policy critiques listed above. Hayek (1899-1992) was not against community, but he was concerned that living in a world where life is planned based on absolutist notions of the good life would limit freedom and creativity. In this passage from his seminal text. *The Road from Serfdom* he worries that all centralised projects lead to totalitarianism:

> "The various kinds of collectivism, communism, fascism, etc., differ among themselves in the nature of the goal toward which they want to direct the efforts of society. But they all differ from liberalism and individualism in wanting to organize the whole of society and all its resources for this unitary end." (Hayek, 2007, p. 393)

He also advocated collective action but only that which is driven from the ground up. He says:

> 'Common action is thus limited to the fields where people agree on common ends. Very frequently these common ends will not be ultimate ends to the individuals but means which different persons can use for different purposes.'(Hayek, 2007, p. 403)

He fully recognised the value and necessity of collective purpose, but with the prerequisite that it should arise from the intersection of localised needs, not a given transcendent ideal. Hayek was not against the state, but against a state that wanted to control the conditions of life in pursuit of a utopian ideal. Nor was he against the social justice sought by socialists. Rather, what troubled Hayek was the means involved in achieving this; as he claims, 'socialism can be put into practice only by methods which most socialists disapprove' (p. 104). Hayek's endeavour was therefore to imagine the conditions for freedom, the conditions that generated multiple and contradictory opportunities, without preordained ends. In his schema, the state has a role to play but not one that determines outcomes. Instead, the state facilitates opportunities for personal and social invention. Unlike classic laissez-faire liberalism, Hayek believed that these conditions would not be created by leaving well alone but through state and legal structures that make it possible. He acknowledged that not all services could be provided by markets. He says that it is:

> "unquestionable that in an advanced society government ought to use its power of raising funds by taxation to provide a "number of services which for various reasons cannot be provided, or cannot be provided adequately, by the market." (Hayek, 1979, p. 41)

While along with most in MPS, he was against a welfare state that prescribed the desires of the populace and overly determined the conditions in which they might live, he was not against the welfare state. In Capitalism and Society (2002) Friedman, the most right-leaning of the MPS group, argued that the state should provide the basic supports that would alleviate poverty. His prerequisite is that this should be in the form of cash, not any system that requires particular behaviours, as this would limit freedom. As a migrant whose family arrived in the US with little, Friedman was against communities built around ascribed status. He wanted equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome. This is premised on an argument that claims that policy directed toward equality of outcome determines outcomes and such constraint opposes the ambition for freedom at the heart of neoliberalism. Friedman's (2002) educational voucher system was designed to provide equitable education for all, where the voucher aspect offered a choice as to how and where this education should be offered. His negative tax proposition was a means of sharing wealth and keeping people out of poverty without determining how they should live. While the evidence suggests that inequality has risen since the 80s in step with the neoliberal-inspired policymaking of Thatcher and Reagan (*How Has Inequality Changed*, n.d.), this is not what the original thinkers had in mind, quite the opposite.

Finally, on governmentality. As noted above, Friedman and Hayek were against a centralised welfare state as they saw this as a means of limiting freedom. The idea of producing

neoliberal subjects, shaped by economic policy that produces citizens in its own image is as far from their central beliefs as is possible to imagine. While Foucault is frequently employed in critical social work literature as a means of critiquing neoliberalism, he was, by most authorities, positive toward neoliberal ideas. Like early neoliberal scholars, he viewed the welfare state as a constraint on freedom, that restricted creative possibilities. He worried that the welfare state goes further than the disciplinary society and argues against its 'potentially authoritarian…therapeutics of the soul' (Dean and Zamora, 2021, p. 30). His student Ewald declares that 'the welfare state fulfils the dream of biopower' (Ewald quoted in Zamora and Behrent, 2016, p. 165). The point is that Foucault was drawn toward neoliberal scholars' suspicion of the welfare state as a mechanism that seeks to shape individuals in its desired image, and that far from denigrating neoliberalism as a problem governmentality he saw it as a better alternative to dominant welfare state models.

While social work scholarship does present compelling issues, the causes are much more complex than can be explained by neoliberalism and indeed, at least some neoliberal proponents would also find these issues problematic. But what of the solution consistently offered through critical social work scholarship? Is community a viable response to neoliberalism if neoliberalism is not a simple source of the problems raised? In this final section, we summarise how community is presented as the antidote to neoliberalism and set out three key problems with investing in community as a concept untethered from notions of how it might be operationalised.

5 Community as Neoliberal Antidote

Critical social work scholarship frequently sets out an ambition to 'rediscover collective solidarity' (Kenkel, 2020, p. 242) as a response that will counter the ills of neoliberalism. Baines (2021) frames a radical social work response to the Black Lives Matter movement's call to defund the police as resistance to neoliberal governance. What is needed, she argues are community development approaches led by social workers who are independent of the state. Cummins (2018) holds neoliberal policies responsible for increased inequality and the stigmatisation of the poor. In response he claims, 'social work needs to discover new forms of community and individual engagement.'(np). In his attempt to scope out what this might mean he traverses the modern American liberalism of Rawls and Dworkin; the American communitarianism of Sandel and Taylor, Badiou's post-Marxist thought, Fraser's third-way approach and Levinas's ethics of the other. This invocation of these very different and conflicted seams of thought arrives in a place where the critical social worker must develop relationships with the service users based on shared citizenship. With this non-specific train of thought he attempts to hold onto both liberal and communitarian perspectives without resolving either. He does acknowledge that this will be difficult to realise in practice. Gray and Webb (2013) state that a new social work left must generate a 'political community' that involves social workers alongside the 'excluded' 'slum dwellers' 'migrant workers' and 'the precariat' (214). Just in case their readers were in any doubt they hammer home the need for community in the final words of this book which they leave to Badiou (2010) 'we know that communism is the right hypothesis…'.

In another paper, Gray and Webb (2014) critique the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development as steeped in neoliberalism and abstract from the grounded contexts where social work takes place. Citing many of the social work scholars referenced in the current paper they proclaim that the root cause of the problem that social workers face is what they refer to as 'neoliberal economics and state capitalism' (p. 349). They go on to promote the need for 'publics' to spontaneously organise around specific objects. They look to

Marres's (2007) work from science and technology studies to propose issue-driven collectives that are generated through shared issues rather than democratic values. Such publics, they claim, might challenge political elites. An example of such a movement might be the social worker activists in Glasgow who were involved in a mobilisation of a community against UK Home Office removals of asylum seekers (Jarvis & Anderson, 2021). Such self-organising publics are not the idealised communities of identity, but temporal collectives called into presence by, what appears to be the *invisible hand* of community.

In addition to spontaneous organising, a variety of means of developing these communities are proposed. Rodríguez and Ferreria (2018) suggest building social capital in the face of technologies that threaten face-to-face relations. Margaret Malloch (2021, p. 442) argues the benefits of 'community-based mutual aid groups in which people receive support from other people who have gone through the same, or similar, issues and problems.' Gojava et al. (2021) propose a form of social pedagogy that is European but they argue similar to Jane Addams's Hill House settlement community. Indeed, over the past five years, Addams's approach has been frequently cited as a way of undertaking ethical social work in a neoliberal context (Fenton, 2014; Misheva, 2019; Nam, 2022; Spolander et al., 2014). Smith and Whyte (2008) trace the history of the Scottish Enlightenment and argue that social work in Scotland was found in values of social context, attuned to social pedagogy and that it should build on these, rather than, what they argue, are Kantian universal principles that are applied to the individual. Das et al. (2018) similarly argue for social work to reclaim a prior interest in community development approaches that have been lost since the 80s when neoliberal policies gained ground. While Boone et al. (2019) make the case for a more radical social work from 'below'. Boone et al. (2019) argue that grassroots collectives are capable of overthrowing dominant neoliberal structures. Roets et al (2012), set out a more structured approach to policy-making that harnesses the insights of those who have experienced poverty through participatory policy-making collectives. In these various accounts, the collective is reclaimed as a force capable of challenging the perceived hegemony of individualism ushered in by neoliberalism. These celebrations of a new solidarity do not explore the limits of community. The risks of which MPS scholars were acutely aware. There are at least three limits to these common representations of community: Community is not essentially free, it cannot be claimed as 'good', and nor can the 'grassroots' be essentialised as an authentic good.

On the first of these points, **the free collective** is as impossible as the free individual. Polarisation within democratic politics is a huge concern for those interested in the health of democracy. This is widely associated with social media that has galvanised and fuelled collectives bound by beliefs that defy reason. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in the UK and the worries over Russian cyber warfare were seminal moments in the dawning realisation of the post-truth era. An overriding worry in political scholarship is the way that collectives can be generated and manipulated (Cassidy, 2021). Collectives are productions of their social, material, and political moments as much as maligned subjects of neoliberalism. Social work must grapple more directly with the ways in which the happenings of specific places and times converge to produce notions of reality, and in so doing, shape our ability to participate in it.

Second, **collective does not equal good**. This turn to the collective is offered as an antidote to what is presented as the radical individualism of neoliberalism. These are appeals to the essential good of social solidarity. Examples such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Baines, 2021) or people in Glasgow gathering to defend migrant rights (Jarvis & Anderson,

2021) offer a compelling notion of the community as a defender of rights. However, these are not the only communities operating. In recent years the political right has been demonstrably more successful in organising and shaping publics that have precipitated the Trump presidency in the US and Brexit in the UK, both with divisive legacies that have set people against each other (Giusti and Piras, 2021). It is doubtful that social work proponents of community are as supportive of these right-leaning groups as they are of those that support the rights of marginal groups. Critical social work must engage with how community formations are as likely to cause harm as good.

Third, the appeal to **'grassroots' does not necessarily lead to better democracy**. The idea that avoiding state manipulation through forms of community organising will lead to more authentic politics is difficult to defend. New propositions of community, dubbed neo-communitarianism (Fyfe, 2005) also have problems. Critical scholars of community argue that third way neoliberal politicians have co-opted 'community' into serving their ideals and in doing so have left them politically inert. Putnam's (2000) model of social capital, advocated by various critical social work scholars, has been critiqued as a right-wing model of social management that makes communities responsible for their situation (Fyfe, 2005) and also responsible for organising their way out of it. Here, the critique of the responsibilised individual of neoliberalism can just as easily be levied at the responsibilised community. Left critics of the neoliberal turn promote the conflict politics of agnosim, which contests the power of the state. This, they argue, will lead to a more vibrant democracy. However, over the past six years, we have seen the return of conflict politics that has not come through progressive liberalism, but through a new grassroots authoritarianism set against remote political elites and opposed to democratic norms (Ife, 2018). Few would deny that grassroots suspicion of political elites had a significant role to play in the UK judiciary being proclaimed 'enemies of the people' and the attempted coup of 6th January 2021 on Capitol Hill. This turn to the grassroots to overturn neoliberal elites is a reimagining of the master/slave thesis at the heart of conflict theory. Moreover, both the grassroots collective and the liberal freeing of the individual share antagonism toward the state; toward elites that shape the possibilities to live. Many including David Harvey (2020, Piras, 2021) hold the 'neoliberal' project and the inequalities that followed, responsible for this anti-democratic, post-truth turn. It is clear that the causes are complex and include new technologies as much as the social and political context (Arias-Maldonado, 2020). Where MPS affiliates attempted to liberate through a possibly naïve idea of a politically benign economic system that is not based on identity, the current collective movements at play in the culture wars are firmly based on the politics of identity. Aside from Gray and Webb's (2014) spontaneous public, the good collective that will resist neoliberalism is not clearly defined in social work scholarship, and this is just as problematic as those early neoliberal scholars' lack of a grounded understanding of how their ideas of freedom would be implemented in practice.

6 Conclusion

We cannot know in advance how ideas put out in the world will adapt and be adapted in the dynamic contexts beyond the page. Part of the intergenerational work of scholarly work is to notice when particular concepts and critiques have achieved foundational or canonized status within a field and to consider how adequate these established ideas are for helping us understand and engage the world in different times and places. If too much of the world exceeds the scope of established ideas, then there is work to be done both to revisit our foundations for the complexity and nuance inevitably stripped from them over time and, to consider if there are alternative ideas we might fruitfully engage or develop.

Our point of departure for this paper is that the oppressive neoliberal/authentic community dichotomy common in Western traditions of critical social work is not able to represent enough of the contemporary moment. Claiming that all neoliberalism leads to the oppression of the poor is similar to claiming that all socialism leads to bloody Stalinism. Neoliberal ideas have doubtlessly influenced Western politics over the past 50 years but with very different effects, depending on where and how. A more fruitful avenue of inquiry, we suggest, would attend to the problems that occur when ideas are operationalized. That is, to articulate the specific ways in which abstract ideas are put into practice, and to understand the **politics of implementation**. Second, for those of us interested in liberatory politics, there is work to be done to take on board **neoliberal critiques of welfare and the trade-offs between equal distribution and freedom**. Finally, we must offer a more nuanced account of how **the politics of the collective** might be articulated and what the potential downsides are. The political present is fraught with material and conceptual challenges. In many ways, the turn to authoritarianism that so troubled the neoliberal MPS scholars has resonance now. Perhaps this is a time when, rather than damming their ideas as essentially bad there is a need to learn from what they hoped to achieve, and where, why and how these ideas failed or succeeded.

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