

The European Political Economy in Uncertain Times: Change and Continuity in Neoliberalism, June 9-10 2011 University of Manchester

The workshop held at the University of Manchester explored the impact of the recent (and ongoing) financial crisis on neoliberal forms of governance in the European political economy. The central question the papers were asked to address was whether the crisis had resulted in a rejection of or a reinforcement of neoliberalism. Are we witnessing a window of opportunity for change in the European political economy, or will it be a return to business as usual?

In the first panel the papers addressed the future of neoliberal governance in Europe. Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Nana de Graaf from the Vrije University in Amsterdam queried the continuing role of the US as single hegemony in the contemporary international system and the implications this raised for Europe and the rest of the world. Jonathan Louth of the University of Chester showed how neoliberalism was able to maintain its position as common sense in economic and social policy through its ability to mutate into different formulations. The final paper for the first session from Stuart Shields of Manchester and Sara Wallin of Sheffield used the example of post communist transition in Eastern Europe to explore how neoliberalism has reconstituted itself on numerous occasions despite the ostensible failure to deliver successful development in the former Soviet bloc. All three papers cautioned any expectation that neoliberalism was old news.

Panel 2 looked at how alternative forms of political economic organisation might be developed by contesting neoliberal strategies for privatising development. Sophie Harman of City University explored how the discourse of privatisation had evolved into an emphasis on innovation. Using the provision of healthcare as an example she argued that we often miss what innovation is really about: the privatisation of health and the rebranding and reloading of neoliberalism. This embedded neoliberal approaches and practices to doing global health to the detriment of health for all. Zoe Pflaeger, a PhD student from Birmingham discussed the impact of Fair Trade as a strategy for reconfiguring neoliberal policies. She noted how European consumers have a significant role to play in progressive alternatives to neoliberalism and revealed how fair trade initiatives can take seriously the issues of power and ownership in their approach to poverty alleviation. The final paper on panel 2 was presented by Bryan Mabee of Queen Mary, London who explored non-state actors as agents of resistance to neoliberalism. His paper used Somali piracy as a case study to illustrate the links between piracy and broader trends in the global political economy that are often left underplayed. While current piracy is mainly linked to organized crime, it also has a lineage with past expressions of anti-statism and resistance.

On the second day panel 3 focused on the role of the EU in neoliberalism. Angela Wigger from Radboud University maintained how in few other policy areas has the political response to the global economic crisis been as visible as in EU competition regulation. She cautioned that despite the irrationalities and contradictions of neoliberalism, there is no radical break with the neoliberal-type of competition regulation and that the social matrix in support of neoliberal competition regulation has remained unaltered. In the second paper Laura Horn from VU Amsterdam argued that marketisation of corporate control is part of a political project at the EU level. By considering the EU as a terrain of social struggle she explored the question of the agency of organized labour seeking to respond to neoliberalism and build strategic alliances of trade unions at the EU level. The panel's final paper from Huw Macartney of Manchester discussed the increasingly neoliberal orientation of EU states in their responses to the crisis. Far from the EU being a bastion against neoliberalism,

member states were further embedding neoliberalism as the common sense policy response in the financial sector.

The final substantive panel of the workshop pushed the discussion beyond national-state centrism with all of the papers urging consideration of other scales rather than just the national and the regional. Ben Rosamond from University of Copenhagen explored how the European space was being reconfigured following the crisis showing how neoliberal modes of governance had shifted both upscale to the supranational but also downscale to the sub-national level. Japhy Wilson, a PhD student from Manchester focused on the urban implications of neoliberalism by investigating the current vogue for new towns and model villages propagated by development institutions throughout the world. However the paper showed that despite the resurgence in forms of planning to encourage deeper neoliberalism local populations disrupt the plans by reconstituting their traditional modes of social and housing organisation. In the final paper Jamie Gough of Sheffield interrogated the often under-explored impact of neoliberalism during the Major government years for the UK's urban-regional spaces. The paper concluded by warning of the dangers started in that period and that have persisted since then as the hollowing out of central state activity continues unabated.

Overall, the workshop was an excellent event for paper givers and external participants to discuss issues relate to the European political economy (and beyond). In terms of outputs, an edited volume and a journal special issue are currently being negotiated.