



The limits of neoliberalism: An interview with Will Davies

Will Davies and Stephen Dunne

This is an edited transcript of a face-to-face interview that took place in London on 21st of January 2015.

Stephen Dunne (hereafter SD): Can I ask you to recount, when you set out on the book, what you were trying to do and in relation to what body of work?

Will Davies (hereafter WD): The main question I had, following on from my PhD, concerned competition and competitiveness as forms of justification, or as sources of political authority. It appeared to me that appealing to competitive processes, or claiming that certain actions were going to be good for competitiveness or improve competition, was a basis on which to win consent to certain things. It seemed to be a form of justification or a way of legitimating certain types of action. I was interested in the fact that it was almost not tenable in today's society and particularly in today's policy establishment to be against competition or against competitiveness in some way. It was almost that to be against those ideas was to put yourself in some sort of irrational or futile position. And that immediately concerned me because it made me think about where these ideas came from.

In that respect, discovering the work of Luc Boltanski and his co-authors, Eve Chiapello and Laurent Thévenot, was a massive moment for me because they are

precisely interested in that question of the modes of authority, the modes of legitimisation and justification that are at work within economic processes, in how certain types of economic rhetoric and economic valuation systems are used in a pragmatic way to win political and moral arguments. Boltanski's work connected with the instinct I had of interrogating how competition and competitiveness seemed to succeed as rhetorical and evaluative devices or discourses in the economy. Which of course links back, as you say in the review, to the work of Max Weber as well, because Max Weber's work on the spirit of capitalism, which Boltanski picks up in his book *The new spirit of capitalism*, is also about that question of how do certain types of moral and rhetorical and psychological forms of justification operate within capitalism. Also like Albert Hirschman, for Weber it's not self-evident that people will just behave in a calculative self-interested utilitarian fashion: they need to also have accompanying forms of justification and moral bases.

It was only later that I started to become interested in the notion of neoliberalism. In the space of about three years, there were a series of very good critical historical books on neoliberalism as a distinct tradition of thought. In 2008 Foucault's *The birth of biopolitics* was translated into English, then in the summer of 2009 Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe's *The road from Mont Pèlerin*, a series of articles on different aspects of what they call the neoliberal thought collective was also published. I think it was 2010 when Jamie Peck's *Constructions of neoliberal reason* came out and much more recently there was Angus Burgin's *The great persuasion*, the most historical and detailed history of the neoliberal intellectual movement, although probably also the least critical or theoretical.

Foucault points out that the key trait of markets from a neoliberal perspective is not that they facilitate exchange but that they facilitate competition. For liberals, the market is a space of equivalence in that two people come together and perform an act of exchange. Money is equivalent to a good or a service or a unit of labour. For neoliberals, the market is something which produces inequality between people. One person wins and another person loses and that is the key moral trait of markets for them. Suddenly I realised the reason I was interested in competitiveness was precisely this issue: competition as a mode of justification. This effectively means generating more inequality and preventing the push towards equality that was a trait of the socialists, Keynesians and social democrats: projects that initially prompted the creation of the neoliberal thought collectives as a critical response.

SD: So is it fair to say that Boltanski provided you with a conceptual or methodological framework which allowed you to intervene in these discussions?

WD: Boltanski provided me with a critical and empirical orientation which recognises that all actors interpret the world around them. That's obviously not specific to Boltanski but what I found particularly useful is the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of his work. There hasn't been much use of the Boltanskian approach to investigate state regulation and public policy. Applications of his work have tended to be more interested in micro-political, organisational and managerial forms of power and authority. If you take the Boltanskian approach and you apply it to state regulation you end up doing something quite similar to what the Regulation School has done since the 1970s: Robert Boyer, Michel Aglietta and others. The Regulation School tended to be quite macro, quite top down, however, always searching for the next version of the Keynesian welfare state or of the Schumpeterian workfare state. Boltanski encourages more attention to the detail and nuances of political and economic rhetoric.

SD: If we're going to write about economics though not necessarily within economics, how much are we required to be technically proficient in the language of economics? This book isn't primarily aimed at economists, or practising economists. Yet you really get under the bonnet of economics and become conversant within the technical language of economics, though only up to a certain point. What is going on there?

WD: Although it doesn't really end up appearing in the book, Michel Callon's work has also had a huge influence on me. He starts from the premise that economics is performative in the economy. When he initially started developing that argument, sociologists became more interested in what economists were saying: not guessing but actually listening. Twenty years ago, I probably would never have thought to go and read Chicago School economics: Marxist theories of neoliberalism or something like that would have provided me with all I needed. Callon's notion that economics actually does something in the world changed all that. That in turn takes you into the history of economics and the work of Philip Mirowski, which has been effectively peerless.

What also prompted me to dig around in economics as much as I did was that I was doing interviews with economic policy makers and experts in Brussels and Washington DC. I found that if I didn't understand what the hell was going on then I wasn't going to be taken very seriously. They kept making distinctions between the Chicago School and the ordoliberal approach. I had to read a lot about the history of competition economics and business strategy just to be able to undertake my empirical work.

SD: You say early in the introduction that this is primarily an historical study. The earlier sections of the book chart epochal developments, different ways of thinking about the economy and the role competition is said to play within it. Is the structure you adopted important for the argument you wanted to make?

WD: I didn't want to have to choose between writing a piece of sociology of the present day and writing a history of ideas. I wanted to be able to do both at once and in this I'm inspired by Foucault's famous line about the history of the present. So the first chapter lays out quite a lot of ground work in terms of how I understand neoliberalism and what approach I'm taking. Then there's a chapter which is very influenced by Boltanski's work which seeks to demonstrate how competitiveness became an ethical ideal. Then there are three partly historical chapters which delineate different sources of political authority made available within the logic of neoliberalism. First – the liberal spirit of economics – holds that economics allows human beings to be governed with some kind of spirit of fairness, as if they are all capable of a similar mode of rationality. Second – the violent threat of management – locates the principal authority in the moment of decision in a manner reminiscent of Carl Schmitt. Finally, something which emerges after 2008 – contingent neoliberalism – a form of neoliberal government which lacks higher order principles of adjudication and collapses into contingent acts of rescue.

SD: What seems to happen as we move forward historically is that the basis for fairness starts to become less universal. We may not like competitiveness, but we can all imagine it as a demand on us. We may not like efficiency, but we can all imagine it as demand on us. When we come to the discussion of violence, however, it seems to require some actors to embrace a position of subservience and other actors to quite happily embrace a position of power. Is neoliberalism shedding the possibility of its legitimacy, is that what you're trying to get at?

WD: This has been something which has had a very long history. There's a period between the early 1920s and, say, the 1950s, where neoliberals were quite idealistic types. People like Henry Simons were utopians, they thought that the classical socialist zeal had to be re-channelled into the creation of a beautiful competitive society governed by the rule of law, strong antitrust and monopoly decomposition. The price system would end up being the arbiter of all disputes. This was not liberal in the classical economic sense of *laissez faire* but very much liberal in a normative and philosophical sense, driven by some ideal of what freedom should look like. What makes this utopianism sociologically naïve was that there was no legitimate space for corporations or hierarchies within it. In the 1950s the Chicago School became increasingly sceptical of the notion that law or regulation could actually achieve this kind of outcome. Large corporations, in

their pursuit of profits and efficiency, oust their competitors: maybe that's part of competition. The fact that the small guy's getting trampled on is also maybe what competition requires. This can be understood in the terms of Braudel's distinction between 'markets' and 'capitalism': the transition that happens in the course of twentieth century neoliberal thought is the shift from the justification of markets to a justification of capitalism. If we understand capitalism as politically mandated exploitation then – according to Chicago neoliberalism – someone who is very good at exploiting people, nature, technology, and so on, deserves to get rich and deserves to be celebrated. That is what we call competition or competitiveness and it is opposed to the notion that everyone has to have an equal stake in the game.

The other strand to my account of legitimacy comes from Schumpeter. He was an Austrian economist yet always rather snotty about neoliberalism. Schumpeter had quite a different vision of humanity from that held by the more idealistic neoliberals in that he believed some people were born to lead and most people were born to follow. The problem with capitalism was that the follower mentality was beginning to usurp that of the leaders. It was becoming bureaucratized and leaders, entrepreneurs and heroes were being submerged. Schumpeter provides justifications for the freedom of the leaders to lead, to dominate. This mentality feeds into discussions of business strategy and the work of people like Michael Porter. The 1980s heralded Schumpeter's valorisation of innovation, high tech and value start up being the basis for wealth creation and it is here that Bob Jessop identifies the birth of the Schumpeterian workfare state.

SD: What happens to those who are not born leaders or who are not winners of the market game? How does the game become justified to its losers within this Schumpeterian framework?

WD: I don't think that my book really addresses this question but there are things we could say about it anyway. One thing I would say, following Dardot and Laval's *The new way of the world*, is that the former socialist parties such as New Labour, the SPD in Germany and the Socialist Party in France have ended up being better neoliberals than the Conservative right. The reason for this is they recognised society as something which needs to be constantly acted upon. The sense of a level playing field needs to be constantly created. The French neoliberal Louis Rougier and a later tradition of neoliberalism in France were all about trying to help people back into the labour market. That was also the New Labour vision: through things like tax credits, free childcare and workfare policies, as well as an active labour market policy, whenever anyone looked like they were falling out of the game, you'd sort of dust them down send them back into again. There was a logic of 'social exclusion' accompanying this vision of the

'level playing field'. The crisis of 2008 onwards has destroyed the coherence or the credibility of those earlier projects. Now in Britain when people say we're all in it together and Ian Duncan Smith says everyone has a chance, people just laugh. If you'd said that in 2004 you could have done so with some credibility.

There is also the account of the creation of a form of neoliberal subjectivity that we get in Foucault, as well as Dardot and Laval, which is instructive here. Foucault's famous phrase about people becoming 'entrepreneurs of the self' bears out when so many 16-year-old British children think that they're waiting to be discovered by talent-spotters. Beyond the X Factor there's pop-up business culture, competitive cookery programmes, Dragon's Den, and so on. We live in a culture where we are either trying to be the winner or we're suffering a personal collapse which we blame on ourselves, suffering mental illness or depression – manifestly neoliberal phenomena. That sense that you're either trying to be the winner or accepting you're a loser is the symptom of this obsession with competition and competitiveness. It's not a situation where there are lots of rivals all having a go at the same time, it's a situation where, through a competitive process, one person is discovered to be the best and they are then entitled to all of the riches or glory while everybody else has to accept their inferiority or maybe have another go tomorrow. It is a very harsh, very brutal vision of competition rather than one which might be called a pluralist vision of competition in which you have to constantly have lots of choice and lots of actors in the game all at once. This is what Hayek meant when he described competition as a discovery process. The reason it's a discovery process is that, through the act of competing, rather like how scientists are involved in a discovery process, eventually you'll hit on the truth and then it is settled, at least until a new challenger appears. The Chicago School could not understand why, if a particular firm were dominating a market, anyone would have a problem with that: surely they were dominating it because they were the best.

SD: Concerning the internalisation of this entrepreneurial view of the self: has it survived the economic crisis, has it prospered since it?

WD: Certainly policy makers and elites are rather trapped by the neoliberal view of the world. I don't think this is simply their dogma, I think they genuinely do not have an alternative in the way that Milton Friedman was offering an alternative in the mid-seventies. Take something like the NHS for example: I'm not sure that you could simply kick the private sector out of the NHS right now and not do huge damage both to it and the patients it treats. Politics is a web of very complex technologies, techniques and instruments, as they evolve in a certain direction they can't simply be reversed at a drop of a hat in the way that I think a lot of the left would like.

As to the internalisation of subjectivity, the notion that we each should be the best, to push ourselves further, to make our bodies more beautiful and to be rich has gone a long way. Still, for those who are suffering at the moment, I don't think that those normative forms of justification are working very successfully: it's just that there are no alternatives in their place. There isn't a socialist movement to harness some of that unhappiness and anger. If you're someone who's having to spend every day at a Job Centre and has applied for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of jobs and done exactly what the Job Centre has told you to do and still things aren't working out for you, you're not able to take all of that responsibility upon yourself. Mental illness seems much more likely.

SD: You announce that your take on critique is likely to annoy some people. Why did you think that?

WD: I suppose what I wondered is whether by trying to excavate the appeals to justice and the appeals to political authority that I argue lie dormant within certain sort of technocratic discourses, it might look like I was trying to explain why neoliberalism might be a good thing in some way. That would be quite a crude reading of it, but there are people that have read Boltanski like that. I know sociologists who think that, after Bruno Latour, Boltanski is the worst thing that's happened to sociology in recent decades. Some believed that The new spirit of capitalism sought to render contemporary power acceptable. I wondered if there might be some people who would make me guilty by association with such a misreading, as if I was letting neoliberalism off the hook. There's also an absence of hard realism in the book, what could be perceived as a slightly idealistic concern with ideas, discourses and ideal types in a Weberian sense. Thankfully, the people on the left and Marxists who I have had responses from haven't reacted that way. Renewal, for example, did a round table symposium on the book which invited three pieces and a response from me. Bob Jessop was one of the three, and seemed to really like the book, recognising it was also making a contribution to state theory.

SD: You point out that Boltanski has a critical project which tends to be overlooked by people committed to a peculiar reading of The new spirit of capitalism. Somewhere in *On critique* there's a phrase which goes something like 'critique renders reality unacceptable' which has stayed with me.¹ Do you think that with Boltanski it is possible to do descriptive historical work for the purpose of making a critical intervention?

1 This sentiment runs throughout Boltanski's (2011) *On critique: A sociology of emancipation* (London: Blackwell). See my review of the book in *Organization*, 19(4): 525-527.

WD: There's another reason why Boltanski annoys people and it is his very high profile departure from Bourdieu in the early 1980s. It wasn't until Bourdieu's death that he wrote *On critique* which came on the back of an invitation from Axel Honneth. One of the reasons Bourdieusians and Marxists dislike Boltanski is that a lot of his work is interested in consensus formation, as if what goes on in a workplace involves a nice kind of pragmatic agreement formation process. There are other works of Boltanski's that haven't been as influential, however, within which he considers forms of action which don't involve justice, critique or consensus. I'm thinking especially of *Love and justice as competences*, where he talks about love and violence as forms of action which are non-critical in the sense they don't involve the attempt to stand outside a situation in pursuit of consensus, in the way of critique and justice. What I took from that was an interest in forms of political authority which are non-judicial, non-critical and in some sense violent: in Boltanski's work violence is the ability to act as you please without having to explain anything at any point. So if a manager says 'you failed this audit and therefore I'm afraid I have to let you go', that is a juridical type of action. If a manager just says 'get out of here', on the other hand, that is a violent action because there's an absence of any discernible grounds for debate.

Pointing out the moments within neoliberalism where things are going on in an unjustified way is to highlight their violence. That's one of the things I try to do with the book: not defend neoliberal justification but to delineate what it can't achieve, without violence. Boltanski was a bit unfairly maligned by the notion that he's only interested in consensus formation because he has studied violence as well. I don't use *On critique*: it's an important moment in his trajectory but it isn't so important within my book.

SD: Do you think Foucault was engaged in a critique of neoliberalism or a description of neoliberalism? Or do you find the critique/description distinction unhelpful? I'm partially referring here to a recent controversy over an interview published in the *Jacobin* magazine which makes the argument that Foucault was neither criticising nor describing neoliberalism but affirming it. In the aftermath of this debate your work – though not this book – was positively referred to by Colin Gordon. Have you any thoughts on the matter?

WD: First of all, I have never read Foucault as someone who's promoting neoliberalism. The controversy strikes me as a fairly tribal attack on somebody who has always annoyed the socialist left. What is more, to read something non-critical or non-evaluative as therefore affirmative is just not very intelligent. To give a non-critical description of things is partly what good social science has always aspired to do. All narratives have a politics of a sort and you could claim the fact that Foucault doesn't talk about neoliberalism as a system of domination,

exploitation or dehumanisation, for example, means he's not sufficiently political for your taste. That's one thing but it is another thing altogether to mistake this lack of a stated politics as an implicit endorsement of what he is analysing. He's trying to do history in a way that takes how ideas are productive of embodied technical material and contemporary lived existence seriously. That is at the heart of most of Foucault's work, certainly his genealogical work.

So what can we say about Foucault and neoliberalism? Clearly Foucault was not a socialist: in his lectures on neoliberalism he makes the remark that socialism lacks a governmentality of its own, whereas neoliberalism does have a governmental rationality. That doesn't make him a critic of socialism or a fan of neo-liberalism. It's just his assessment of socialism, that it lacks a paradigm for political rationalisation and so becomes too dependent on centralised plans. There may be reasons to suspect that the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurship and the neoliberal critique of centralised social science, which are absolutely central in the work of Hayek and others, has certain resonances with Foucault's own historical critique of the social sciences and his ethical support for acts of self-authorship and self-creation, an ethics which he calls the care of the self or what Nikolas Rose has called the living of a responsible life. Maybe there are resonances between some of those claims and the critical arguments made by people like Hayek. Even that doesn't make Foucault neoliberal. Post structuralism and neoliberalism have a shared historical trajectory that has come to be called post-modernism. If you want to say what is post-modernism, well, it's a kind of neoliberal celebration of money combined with a post-structuralist suspicion of objective knowledge. It's not Foucault's fault that there are historical entanglements between epistemology and political economy.

SD: Foucault's account of the human sciences in *The order of things* is predated by Hayek's epistemological account of the social sciences by quite a bit. I don't know of any studies of this, because I suspect Foucault wasn't yet reading Hayek at that stage, but there does seem to be an interesting set of parallels coming out of very different contexts and responding to very different questions which might be worth considering.

WD: Absolutely. Hayek was developing his critique of what he called scientism in the late 1930s and on into his most famous work in the mid-1940s. There were other members of the neoliberal thought collective – as Mirowski calls it – such as Michael Polanyi and Karl Popper, who were also very fearful of what they saw as the Platonist pretensions of social theory. The notion that history had a purpose and a system could be put to all sorts of tyrannical ends and that is what they sought to avoid. A common ancestor of all of those people would be

Nietzsche. I don't know to what extent Popper engaged with Nietzsche's work but there's some sort of a deconstructive ethos which flows from Nietzsche and then goes into neoliberal epistemology where liberalism must be reinvented as a form of relativism.

What that relativist position hopes to identify is certain ground rules for an open society or for a market which must be held beyond the limits of dispute or debate. You have to have certain things outside the realm of deliberation, in other words, which is partly why neoliberalism believes so much in things like centralised independent central banking or competitiveness commissions composed of appointed experts. Foucault, on the other hand, was not trying to come up with anything like a new technocratic framework for a relativist self-authoring society. The politics of the two projects, despite the formal resonances, could scarcely be more different.

SD: What you're doing here is what many people would be quite happy to label as critical management studies in that you demonstrate how business and management can be described without necessarily being endorsed. So still with this notion of critique as description versus critique as intervention or delimitation, I want to talk about the role you grant to Michael Porter. The tone seems notably less appreciative, for one thing. Indeed, when we get to Porter there almost seems to be this gesture being made to the reader that this is someone who we should be more wary or even disdainful of. Is that the case? Is Porter of a different nature to, for example, Hayek?

WD: He's a different type of intellectual, that much is clear. It's difficult to look at some of the ideas circulated by business gurus, the content of the reports they produce and the fees that they charge for their insights, without becoming a little bit scornful. Some of it's just so vacuous and therefore extremely difficult to take entirely seriously...

SD: Which couldn't be said of Hayek...

WD: No, of course. So this wasn't really a sort of conscious choice. In addition to Porter I also looked at gurus of regional and urban competitiveness such as Richard Florida. Just to be clear about what I'm arguing in relation to such management gurus, the facts of what is going on in a competitive situation depend on what your stance is in relation to it. So if you're watching a game of tennis, your view would be different if you're the umpire, one of the players, a coach, etc. There are different perspectives on a dynamic competitive situation, each of which requires certain facts. CEOs, senior policy makers or people in an executive branch of government, suffer from problems of existential anxiety

where they wonder what's going on in the world and what they should do. Schumpeter thought this a good thing: some people thrive in this rare position of being thrown into a situation and having to decide in a way that will be obeyed. Nevertheless, they require certain types of knowledge, certain types of facts about the world. To try to understand why Michael Porter has the influence that he has, you need to understand the contexts within which his intended audience operates.

When you read what's in the World Economic Forum Competitiveness Yearbooks, you think this is just sort simplistic, arbitrary and vague. Nevertheless, these are also comfort blankets for high-level executives, it gives them what they need, hence commanding such fees. So if I am a bit scornful it is only because people like Michael Porter are manifestly and deliberately in the business of over-simplification. He did it for Ronald Regan in the mid-1980s, he's been doing it for corporations since the 1970s, and he's been doing it ever since. He produces methodological tools through which the world gets governed. There are thinkers, theorists and philosophers who have been important to the development of neoliberalism. There are also people, like Porter, who facilitate in what I call, borrowing from Boltanski, making the shift from political metaphysics to political physics. Considerations regarding what would be 'good' or 'just' in a situation becomes a technocratic matter of GDP enhancement, competitiveness facilitation, or efficiency maximisation. Gurus facilitate the shift of political discourse away from the realm of philosophy and politics and into the realm of economic, technique and managerialism. Whereas Hayek sought to remind us that the world cannot be easily reduced to a set of simple facts, Porter has built his career on seeking to demonstrate precisely the opposite.

SD: So with Porter and with this more general guru period, the base for legitimate authority is largely down to a matter of opportunism, that is, of the ability to reduce the world into simplistic frameworks?

WD: We could, following Weber, call it charismatic authority rather than bureaucratic authority. The guru doesn't aspire to empirical validity or epistemological objectivity. This is where Boltanski is again useful because he invites us to recognise that knowledge has to do certain things. The job of the knowledge of the guru is to achieve certain types of emotional impact as much as anything else. On the one hand, it has to frighten its audience about what lies just around the corner: Frank Knight's unknown unknowns. It also has to provide some existential security concerning how that corner might successfully be taken. This quest for a shared narrative formation is a big part of why the guru has succeeded. The notion of national competitiveness, while epistemologically and methodologically banal, by the end of the 1980s had nevertheless become a

tool which organised the anxieties of the elite. The fact that it's not actually a very sophisticated way of analysing capitalism is entirely beside the point.

SD: It makes the role of the scholar – critical, or otherwise, management, or otherwise – particularly difficult because if we have an acceptance of, let's say, a Popperian framework, it's possible to demystify practices with recourse to evidence or with recourse to some sort of demonstration. What we have now seems to be a situation where guru promises can be made effectively without any pretence towards objectivity, yet also without any repercussions upon authority. The classical weapon of demystification, in other words, doesn't seem particularly powerful any more.

WD: Yes – but this sort of thing has been around for quite a while now. Management has for quite a long time needed affective, normative and political resources as a means of survival. It has always suffered from the fact that it's not able to fully account for itself. This, I guess, is an insight which a lot of critical management studies is effectively predicated on. Porter represents a key moment where management discourse turned into political theory. At the same time that he was encouraging prime ministers and presidents to view themselves like CEOs and their nations as brands, new public management was also rising to prominence. It might be very attractive to have someone come in and hold your hand along the five steps which will bring you from nineteenth most competitive country in the world to fifteenth. That is surely more seductive than having an economist coming in and doing a regression analysis while talking about the labour market and commodity price fluctuations.

SD: If we can no longer rely on a strict demarcation between the evidence and the ideology, the contemporary critique of neoliberalism cannot rely on naïve appeals to facts alone. Yet Thomas Piketty's work seems to suggest otherwise. He almost takes a few steps backwards for the sake of leaving the evidence to describe the situation as if, on the strength of objective research alone, the policy will catch up. His concern isn't with neoliberalism as such, but with contemporary capitalism's tendency to exacerbate inequality. Can facts really no longer cut it?

WD: I don't want to sort of inflate my own significance in all this, but it's interesting how Piketty said in one of his interviews that we have come to accept this rising inequality over the last thirty years and that this is a crucial matter for sociologists to investigate. And that's partly what my book tried to do, to show how people have tried to justify inequality because it fostered competitiveness. You don't play football in order to have a draw: you might have a draw but that's not why you do it. Sympathetic readings of Piketty by sociologists such as Mike

Savage argue that we should relish his lack of theory because it opens up territory for us to explain the economic data which he has provided.

I think that in some ways Piketty is also a symptom of financialisation because he has no theory of where money comes from or where capital comes from. This is what really annoys Marxists and others who have attacked him for having no theory of capital, but simply tracking its flows. This notion that wealth has now become autonomous from the productive economy, or separate from politics and culture is very problematic for sociology. The notion that you should study flows and movements of capital as if it were all of capitalism excludes human capital. Deirdre McCloskey, for example, attacks him by saying that if he included human capital in his analysis the picture he painted wouldn't have been nearly as dreary.

Piketty tells us something about both how capitalism is, but also about how critique is. His book is probably the most significant contribution to social science while I've been studying it and yet it involved no attempt to explain. It's so utterly descriptive that it doesn't mobilise political action in any discernible way, wealth and inheritance tax policy apart. This has excited some people while leaving particular institutions more or less intact. It is both inspiring and disappointing.

SD: Last question. One definition of neoliberalism you put forward in the book is that it is the disenchantment of politics by economics. Has that disenchantment persevered beyond the crisis, or is there a re-emergence of the idea that the economy, or economics, can be politicised or is becoming politicised?

WD: We have witnessed democratic counter-movements against neoliberalism in certain respects and people like Paul Mason have written very well about how the Scottish Referendum, Podemos or the uncertainty concerning the forthcoming general election gives cause for optimism. It's exactly the sort of thing that people like Milton Friedman would have been pretty terrified of. Markets are uncertain in a way that is amenable to a sort of calculation, risk modelling and entrepreneurial behaviour. But political uncertainty can, he thought, get very nasty. The neoliberals have quite a pessimistic view of politics which owes more to Schmitt than to, say, Arendt. If we are to follow Arendt then some of these movements might signify the birth pangs of creation, a new politics which needs to be safeguarded from economic rationalisation.

The best book I've read on this matter is Wolfgang Streeck's *Buying time*. He has a very pessimistic take about the split between processes of instantiating the market as the constitutional framework of Europe and a democratic alternative.

He stops just short of suggesting that almost any violent response to the technocratic constraints of democracy built into central bank led projects of austerity and market governance is now justified. Some people might say that the London riots of 2011 were a manifestation of this being played out on the ground. One of the points that I make in the book is that when economics becomes a procedure through which politics gets done, it ceases to understand itself, breeding crisis. Donald MacKenzie has argued similarly in relation to the performativity of calculative devices in banks. Economics itself becomes a political language and then attempts to disenchant politics. This fails precisely because you cannot achieve the required level of technocratic positivist disenchantment. I don't see politics in any sort of hopeful sense, certainly not with respect to the higher reaches of power, partly because the majority of elites have been excused from the realm of public deliberation.

the discussants

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