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The neoliberal challenge  
to practice-oriented social science

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## Praxis, practice and critique

For practice-oriented social science the 'social' is neither in mental structures, nor in signs and texts, nor in intersubjectivity, but in 'practices'.

- Praxis = sphere of human action, as contrasted to theory or pure thinking
  - Centrality of theme of power as domination
  - Focus on rational-normatively oriented action
  - Relationship with matter: transformative, productive
  - Situatedness of action as historical contingency
  - *Critique means behavioral tactic aimed ad subverting domination according to holistic understanding*
- Practice = routinized behavior, where bodily and mental activities, 'things' and their use, background knowledge (understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge) are interconnected
  - Centrality of theme of creativity, i.e. power as productive capacity
  - Focus on cognitive-symbolic work: making sense, problematizing and transcending lived situations
  - Relationship with matter: interactive, mutually constitutive
  - Situatedness of action as everyday contingency
  - *Critique means overcoming routines and adaptation according to localized understanding*

# Neoliberalism

A complex, contested, contradictory assemblage of policies, practices and discourses, entailing a major project of social change, focused on 'intensification' of existing patterns in liberal democracies which lead to qualitative changes, namely:

- Assumption of rational, self-interested individuals
- Expansion of idea of self-entrepreneurship in any field of action
- Competition as core driver of social change and well-being: a natural feature to be purposefully promoted
- Market as main – yet never self-regulating – social institution: place of social veridiction
- Norm (advice, ethical interpellation etc.) increasingly replacing law (=governmentality vs. sovereignty in Foucauldian terms)

*Question: does a practice-oriented approach have any decisive advantage in the critical analysis of neoliberalized society?*

Strengths and weaknesses: three examples

1. Deliberative forums
2. Political consumerism
3. Science and technology regulation

# Example 1 – Deliberative forums

## **Approaches**

Opinion-oriented deliberation (OOD): mainstream, RCT/norms base => e.g. deliberative poll, citizen jury

- *basic purpose: to build and express individual preferences or opinions as an **alternative** to surveys and elections*
- legitimation grounds: political obligation (open inclusion) or statistic representativeness ('science-based' legitimacy)
- focus: mechanisms of individual will formation
- role of public discussion: functional to aggregation of individual views in a majority or consensual opinion
- democratic added value: more 'authentic' and 'mindful' individual will
- deliberative setting: input-centered ('negative' equalization: 'purified' individuals ultimately talking to themselves)

Inquiry-oriented deliberation: (IOD), minority, pragmatist base => e.g. focus group, scenario workshop

- *basic purpose: to carry out public inquiries **beside** surveys and elections*
- legitimation grounds: 'exemplary representation' of salient stakes and concerns
- focus: conditions for enacting collective inquiry laboratories
- role of public discussion: functional to achieving 'team thinking'
- democratic added value: 'better' problem understanding and (possibly) solving
- deliberative setting: output-centered ('positive' equalization, developing learning and worldview-sharing abilities).

## **Theoretical grounds and concrete application: emerging problems**

- Critique of traditional democracy and its hollowing out: 'legitimacy crisis'
- New social formations and demands: risk society, globalization, intractable problems
- Regulated discussion beneficial to democracy, beside public sphere and other forms of participation
- Against rational choice and 'public management' policies

### **Yet**

- Deliberative arenas begin to spread in the 1990s, i.e. precisely when neoliberalization enters its 'roll-out' phase
- Managerial-technocratic policy styles make large recourse to public deliberation at different scales, from EU regulation to urban planning
- Widespread appeal to citizen 'empowerment' and replacement of conflict with reflective consensus

# Deliberative forums: scale of problems and bulk of literature

- **Process** > fixed standpoints, uncertainties, group dynamics (polarization, spiral of silence), hidden strategies, manipulation, information and argumentative asymmetries, 'quality of deliberation'  
Issue: 'did we perform well? should we accept (open) interest-seeking?'  
> e.g. *Steiner's Deliberative Quality Index*
- **Design** > roles, rules and concrete set up of the process (information background, selection of 'innocent/active' 'citizen/stakeholder' participants and of experts/informants)  
Issue: 'did we organize it "properly" (=no bias, "correct" role assignment)?'  
> *debate on deliberative models and on structure of concrete forums*
- **Policy-making** > problem-setting and link deliberation-decision, the problem of externalities  
Issue: 'did we put the "right" question? does it make any difference?'  
> e.g. *Rowe & Frewer's criteria*
- **Politics** > goals and outcomes in the context of political conflicts (impact on group struggles, on relations with political constituencies, on political systems)  
Issue: 'in whose (hidden) interest? For what (hidden) purposes?' 'What balance with broader institutional set-up?'  
> e.g. *Mansbridge et al.'s 'deliberative system'*
- **'The political'** > overall impact on the body politic, its self-understanding and articulations  
Issue: 'how does it affect the political configuration and life of a community?'  
> *debate on neoliberalism and post-politics*



*Bulk of literature*

## Critical issues of deliberative forums (for a critique of neoliberalism): a tentative list

Feature	Problematic effect	Mostly problematic for
Focus on problem solving	Post-politics	IOD
Citizen empowerment and responsabilization	Entrepreneurial understanding of actor: conduct of conduct, self-disciplining	OOD + IOD
Consensual orientation	Post-politics	OOD + IOD
Prominent stakeholder language	Market as hidden model	OOD
Prominent ethical/scientific framework	Post-politics	OOD + IOD
Prominent reactive/defensive orientation	Post-politics (esp. in the sense of Rosanvallon's counter-democracy: surveillance, veto and judicialization)	OOD + IOD
Generally top-down	Conduct of conduct	OOD + IOD
Machineries for making publics	Social constructionism (polity, issue, stakes, externalities etc.)	OOD + IOD
Judicial assessment (interests of all) vs. political judgment (general interest)	Post-politics: TINA and all-encompassing commonly defined problems (reflexivity as naturalization of inequalities)	OOD

## Example 2 – Political consumerism

PC=consumer choice beyond self-interest. Boycotts, ‘buycotts’, symbolic actions

### **Governmentality approach. Regimes of power-knowledge define, or limit, people’s sense-making**

- Strength: Neoliberalism as framework that constitutes practices, institutions and identities
  - Choice as part of a broad hegemonic agenda of neoliberal restructuring and depoliticization. Can individual agents distance themselves sufficiently from their interpretive and motivational frameworks to really innovate them? The lexicon by which ethical selfhood is reflexively constructed is limited by a horizon of meaning that cannot be transcended by a deliberate individual act of will
- Weakness: inextricable knot of subjectivation and subjection
  - Because governmentality requires for its very functioning an alignment of rationalities and technologies of subjectivation and subjection, the direction of this alignment and the implications of its possible incompleteness ultimately depend on the eye of the beholder

### **Practice-oriented approach. Beyond ‘republican’ model of citizenship, RCT and agency as compliance with social norms**

- Strength: Conduct never entirely dependent on context
  - ‘People always adopt beliefs against the background [...] of a social tradition, [yet] can act in novel ways for reasons of their own so as to transform both themselves and this background’ (Bevir, 2007: 38). ‘Recursive, reflexive relationship between habitual practices and capacities to deliberate reasonably’ (Barnett et al. 2008: 646-648)
- Weakness: ‘Nudge’
  - Libertarian paternalism (Thaler and Sunstein 2008): forging people’s habits (rather than attitudes and values, given the notorious gap with behavior) helping them make the ‘right choice’ (for their health, wealth and happiness)

## Example 3 – Science and technology regulation

### **Actor-network theory, the idiom of co-production and new materialism**

#### Strength: effective reading of scientific practices, expert work and technology-related politics

- Principle of generalized symmetry: against unwarranted separation of social and natural (neither can explain the latter; they co-constitute themselves: associations, mangle of practices, gatherings...)
- Agency expanded to nonhuman actants
- Objects as emerge from encounter of actants or networks of relations. Facts require concerns (matter never passive and indifferent, human agency never fully determined)
- Renewing empiricism through ontological constructivism or plasticism. From correlationism to new materialism: performative materiality as asymmetry; indistinctiveness of matter and text

#### Weakness: realism-constructionism debate included in neoliberal rationality

- (traditional objection) ANT is descriptive, critically weak, it has problems in accounting for imbalances in power (in Foucauldian terms: it accounts for power but has problems in accounting for domination)
- Uncertainty, contingency and speculation as central to neoliberal agency
- Full pliancy of materiality: patented genes or global warming potential are more than traditional capitalist abstraction; they are oscillating between materiality and virtuality, substance and information, equivalence and difference
- Neoliberal endorsement of post-structuralist deconstruction and new materialities: indeterminacy and fluidity of things – relational or asymmetric – as a basis for expanding accumulation and appropriation in a depoliticized framework
- Manufactured uncertainty as a technology of government: evidence of no problems (so green lights for new technologies and markets, as with genetically modified food), or no evidence of problems (so no restrictive measures whatsoever, for example regarding greenhouse gas emissions), or else ‘precaution’ i.e. no evidence of no problems (see pre-emptive strategies)



## Conclusion: hot spots for a practice-oriented social critique

- Connecting different practice 'locales'
- Reinterpreting public engagement as 'problem-solving' and citizen 'empowerment'
- Reassessing the role of 'things' vis-à-vis human agency
- Deepening the connection between 'practice' and 'the political'
- Building bridges between different intellectual traditions (esp. Foucault, Critical Theory, neo-Marxism and STS)

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