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This chapter provides a critical perspective on neoliberalism rooted in theories of ‘performativity’ – a term in contemporary social theory that argues the use of language is a form of social action with material consequences (Loxley 2006; Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014; Butler 1993). Neoliberalism is considered a defining feature of late capitalist society, serving as a political-economic concept that interprets policies and practices on specific scales from the individual body to the supra-national. Performative discourse holds that, as with any concept, neoliberalism was not discovered as a fully formed subject for scholarly analysis, nor can it ‘do’ anything without actants – that is, those people, creatures, or objects that play active roles in a process or event. There are multiple actants at play here who produce and perform neoliberalism, including those who define and carry out the political and economic policies considered neoliberal, those recipients of policy who must determine how to respond, and those who assess the influences of neoliberalism and make claims about its value. These sets of actants are discussed with reference to three key issues used by scholars in research on neoliberalism: practices, power, and subject formation. Through this survey, I emphasize how the concept of neoliberalism is produced in scholarly and policy discourse and is transferred and resisted in specific contexts. I conclude by arguing this production can never be completed, creating the space for resistance.

**Political performativity and neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is generally defined as a political-economic position maintaining that market-based solutions are the optimal arrangements for political and social life in modern economies. Neoliberal doctrine centres around two tenets: that capitalist markets are beneficial and beneficent, and that state control of economies (for instance, through regulations or direct ownership) must be minimized to enable the full effect of market economies. The entries in this volume make clear that neoliberalism has material consequences for societies across all geographic scales, and these consequences are not consistent – the impacts of neoliberalism are historically and spatially contingent because the ideology and practice of neoliberal doctrine metastasizes in different contexts. A nagging question therefore remains about this system of political and economic governance. If neoliberalism is a pervading and hegemonic discourse that shapes the economic, social, and political world, then how are we to understand...
its diffusion, metamorphosis and practice? Rossi and Vanolo (2012) point to three ways of understanding neoliberalism: ideologically, economically, and politically. The ideological approach to neoliberalism engages with its philosophical foundations, with research focusing on the presumption that reducing regulatory constraints leads to more efficient socio-political and economic relationships. The economic approach to neoliberalism considers the doctrine as a policy toolkit that promotes the spread of market-based solutions across the globe, and deepens their penetration through increasing commodification through the economy. The political approach to neoliberalism evaluates how political systems and coalitions are formulated around a collective rationality that presumes government regulation inhibits personal freedom and the common good. Inherent within all three of these approaches is a sense of who creates neoliberalism, and how.

The questions of who and how are important, because neoliberalism cannot do anything by itself. Without agents, neoliberalism couldn’t develop into such a significant ideological feature on the landscape of late capitalism. Neoliberalism – whether perceived ideologically, economically, or politically – is the consequence of practices and actions conducted by specific individuals that support or contest its tenets. In other words, neoliberalism is produced by material and non-material actions that are repeated over time and across space by actors and organizations. It is this iteration and reiteration of neoliberal philosophy and practice that grants power to the discourse, and that reshapes the way neoliberalism manifests in different contexts. The mobility and mutability of neoliberalism is reflected in scholarship such as Aihwa Ong’s analysis that uses an assemblage approach to consider the regional variations of neoliberal policy (Ong 2007), or Jamie Peck’s state-centric assessment of policy transfer (Peck 2002). This scholarship points out the flaw in considering neoliberalism to be a totalizing or universal project, yet it does less to reveal how neoliberalism is made through discourse, signs and authority. For this, we can turn to performativity for analysis of the economy, and how markets are made.

Performativity describes a post-structural approach to knowledge focusing on how material and non-material practices can sustain or challenge aspects of the world around us. These approaches are related to the mid-twentieth century speech act theory commonly associated with J.L. Austin (1962). In the original form, speech act theory maintained that certain words have the power and opportunity to create new realities, as long as the speaker has the appropriate authority. Classic examples of this approach include the ‘I dos’ and ‘I pronounce you married’ statements in a Christian marriage ceremony, or the naming of a newly launched ship by an appropriate dignitary. Neither the marriage act nor the act of naming something would bring about a new reality without the appropriate parties being involved in the act. Rose-Redwood and Glass note that this theory is highly conservative, since the capacity for a speech act to succeed is constrained by the social role of the speaker – those without the sovereign authority lack the ability to influence the declarative utterances of those with power (Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014). While it is true that particular authority grants the ability to name or claim something, it is equally true that these claims may be subverted, or that the speaker’s authority might be challenged over time – this is the basis for modern strands of performativity developed by two influential theorists: Judith Butler and Michel Callon.

For Butler, performativity involves examining the ‘power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration’ (1993: 20). This draws on Jacques Derrida’s concept of citationality that states speech acts gain their performative force through repetition of prior speech acts – and that there is no guarantee that the repeated act will succeed (Derrida 1986). Butler developed her ideas about performativity and citationality by considering how normative gender roles are challenged by the embodied discursive practices of actors lacking sovereign authority. She claimed that,
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agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset.

(Butler 1997: 16)

In essence, prevailing social relations and the agency of given actors interact to either reinforce or change the meaning of given concepts. This view of performative agency meant that, for Butler, concepts like gender cannot be understood as neutral or pre-given attributes, but instead are brought about through performative practices; what this means for understanding neoliberalism will be described in later paragraphs.

The economic sociologist Michel Callon developed a more directly economic strand of performativity during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Callon’s work on economic performativity is based on the claim that ‘economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions’ (Callon 1998: 2). This framework implies that economic models and rhetoric do more than simply describe the world: they bring about material effects that change or sustain the world. This occurs through processes of framing and claiming aspects of the economic world that can be used critically to stabilize or destabilize the established economic order (Gibson-Graham 2008; Berndt and Boeckler 2009). For instance, describing a market as ‘bullish’ or ‘bearish’ is a discursive act that will subsequently affect that market. It remakes the world as a consequence of the performative practices of those associated with the market – such as economic reporters, individual investors, economists, and the programmers who set the parameters for electronic market transactions. Economic sociologists interested in economic performativity consider the extent to which these effects can be observed to have either benign or substantive effects (Mackenzie et al. 2007).

While there are differences between Butler and Callon’s approaches to performativity that are based in their respective emphasis on theoretical or empirical content, there are similarities in their use of performativity. Each eschews the notion of essentialism in the observable world; whether discussing gender or the economy, both versions of performativity described above allow for the possibility of effects in the world reflecting discourse (Du Gay 2010). These two approaches have led to a burgeoning interest in performativity across several academic disciplines. Scholars are attracted by the notion that hegemonic or normative categories are not immutable, and that discourse and material practices provide a pathway to challenging social, economic and political structures.

For neoliberalism, in particular, the consequences of performative discourse are profound. First, performativity holds that there is no pre-existing or stable category known as neoliberalism, and that it is instead created and recreated as the consequence of active and embodied practices. Second, given the citational practice of repeatedly bringing about that (neoliberal) subject through practices operating in its name, there is a very slight chance that neoliberalism is transferred across geographic contexts and over time in an unchanged manner – the real potential for conceptual redefinition occurs and means that neoliberalism cannot be considered as a monolithic subject, despite claims to its hegemonic global status. Third, performative effects are only possible through their continual reassertion. As Butler states, ‘[t]here is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability’ (1993: 9). This suggests that neoliberalism, as with any subject, risks subversion by alternate projects or definitions.

The discursive instability of neoliberalism means that proponents and opponents of the ideology must continuously engage in embodied practices that either support or subvert the concept. For proponents of neoliberalism, this means assembling and using policies and practices that can convince stakeholders of the merits of free market capitalism and limited government
regulation. The next section uses a performative lens to examine some of these practices, including the rhetoric of neoliberalism disseminated by scholars, consultants and managers, and the spatial reproduction of neoliberal discourse that occurs through the media, legislation, and consumers. Performing neoliberalism also means struggles over power: whether it is the proponents of neoliberalism who claim the merit of the enterprise, or opponents who use the negative consequences of neoliberal policies to highlight its flaws. Neoliberalism also requires the formation of new subjects, through the repetition of neoliberal discourse over time and across space. This is countered by protest actions that continually seek to undermine the apparent stability and hegemony of neoliberal doctrine. In short, performativity can help to reveal those pathways wherein neoliberalism is reproduced, and alternate pathways that might lead to its disruption.

Practices

Neoliberalism cannot do anything by itself, and instead requires an assemblage of actors willing and capable of promoting the discourse through embodied practices. In recent years, research on the agents of neoliberalism has focused on how experts, consultants and managers reinforce the tenets of neoliberal theory through their actions. Weber and O’Neill-Kohl (2013) point out the necessity of focusing on human agency, arguing that aside from some attention paid to the marquee names of mayors and developers, critical political economy accounts of urban policy tended to obscure the role of individual actors behind the veil of highly scripted structuralism. In contrast, their account focuses closely on the experience of real estate consultants in Illinois who advocated for public subsidization of real estate development. The paper focuses on tax increment financing (TIF) – a form of neoliberal ‘do-it-yourself’ urban policy whereby the financing for local developments is raised by assessments on the affected geographic area, and not by the city at large (Squires and Lord 2012). Weber and O’Neill-Kohl found that the consultants were not passively receiving policies from elected officials, but instead shaped those policies through social and professional interactions, and consequently added to their own power, noting how ‘their professional practices provide the mortar that holds together the complex networks governing contemporary urban development’ (Weber and O’Neill-Kohl 2013: 198).

Lee provides a finer-scale analysis of consultants by examining the performative practices used by consultants when facilitating public engagements (Lee 2014). She found that different embodied practices were used by consultants to reinforce the validity of their arguments to the audience. Glass also notes the use of embodied practices by planners engaged in a consultative process to garner support for a new form of regional governance in the Midwestern USA (Glass 2014). He traced a series of performative acts that were used to ostensibly create a platform for consultative dialogue between citizens and planners, although they eventually became coopted by the regional narrative promoted by the initiative’s leaders. These leaders were associated with the traditional wielders of political power in the region, and so the consultative process was less transformative than it originally appeared. Lansing’s research into global commodity logics and practices draws upon Callon’s approach to performativity and looks at how international experts verify the presence of carbon offsets in rural Costa Rica (Lansing 2012). Through close analysis of interactions between local and foreign actors, Lansing indicates the instability of what might appear from afar to be fixed or neutral commodities. What links this research is a sense that engaging with the interpersonal practices of actors can provide a sense of how neoliberalism’s structures are created or sustained.

Agents are also required to reproduce neoliberal policies and processes – both across space and over time. Some of the key research using performativity examines the reproduction of
neoliberal processes from housing policy. For instance, both Smith et al. (2006) and Wallace (2008) draw on Callon’s theory of the development of markets to discuss how housing markets are understood and enacted by their participants. Smith et al. researched the role of actors in the housing market who function as intermediaries, making and remaking housing markets over time (2006). They find that housing professionals embodied the language of economic rationality in their decision-making, yet also engaged in place-specific practices that created and sustained different types of market. Wallace argued that business decisions were based on information accruing from an actors’ interpersonal networks, and that these decisions were frequently invested with emotional or psychological components, rather than simply being the consequence of rational economic behaviour. She found through field interviews that:

‘[t]he Market’ was always seen as outside the actions of individuals, certainly beyond their control, and more often than not beyond their influence. However, in these examples the market can be seen as a product of multiple actions, market demand and the emergent properties of complementary or undermining behavior of the people managing or operating it.

(Wallace 2008: 266)

Wallace notes that study participants felt it necessary to adhere to market models of housing behaviour, even in circumstances where it was unwarranted because of city’s economic circumstances. Farías also researches the behaviour of market agents, claiming that they can engage in economic improvisation in cases where economic policies require adjustment and no guidelines exist for how to proceed (2014). Testing this concept in the Chilean context, Farías finds that local actors reacted to two moments of great economic uncertainty by improvising courses of action to stabilize the economy. He considers this process of improvisation to be distinct from Callon’s performativity because it did not represent the performance of existing economic models, but instead urgent interventions that were subsequently evaluated against prevailing economic knowledge.

Neoliberalism also travels from context to context (McCann and Ward 2011; Peck and Theodore 2010), facilitated by actors that promote and legitimize free market policies across space. One leading mechanism for this transfer are non-governmental organizations such as the World Bank; Henriksen (2013) researches the role performed by the World Bank in developing a new market for microfinance. He does so by drawing on Callon’s approach to performativity, arguing that it is ‘important in drawing attention to the specific framing of information in a manner which promotes the widespread acceptance and standardization of specific modes of reporting, comparison, and calculation’ (ibid.: 407). The value of this analysis is in understanding how market actions are defined and enacted at a ‘capillary level’, rather than via the exaggerated abstraction of structural accounts. This fine-grain account of networks of practice and rhetoric shows the ecology of practice that leads to the spread of neoliberal policies, and hints at the capacity for new networks that could destabilize this dominant narrative. Lee et al. also look at the spread of neoliberal discourse in their research on the deliberation industry (2013). They engage with this industry to look at how consultants employed to offer public forums for deliberation in different communities are selling the notion that deliberation will lead a community to forms of civic engagement that carry inherently neoliberal values (a ‘moralized market’). Lee et al. conclude that:

[wh]en communities accept such framings, political empowerment is effectively divorced from organized challenges to structural inequalities. In this sense, deliberation
may be engaging more citizens in more discussion than ever before, but the results of that engagement may be discursively limited and unlikely to produce collective action beyond behavioral accommodations to the harsh realities of retrenchment.  

(Ibid.: 101)

thereby effectively contributing to the diffusion of neoliberal policy across contexts.

Power

As a post-structural theory, performativity follows the position that power is not a commodity or a thing that can be possessed, but is rather the active consequence of relations between networked subjects. These subjects constitute the terms of power relations by the discursive force of specific claims they make to authority (Sarup 1993). This position is closely associated with Michel Foucault’s work (Foucault 1980), and can be contrasted to structuralist positions in which power is considered the attribute of a hegemonic class that imposes it wherever and whenever possible. Indeed, Barnett makes the strong claim that Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives on neoliberalism should remain distinct, given the different ontological positions of these approaches (Barnett 2005). For instance, rather than focusing on top-down hegemony, performative analysis of power instead attends to the practices and routines that enact or subvert power.

This attention to practices can lead to research on neoliberalism and economies that occurs at a very intimate scale, such as Garmany’s ethnographic depiction of the economic lives of residents in a Brazilian favela. Describing the self-reported activities of these residents, Garmany argues that the language and practices of these residents show that the prevailing economic relations is not so much the consequence of repressive state apparatuses, but is instead ‘maintained by self-disciplining individuals who enact the state in their daily routines and discourses, producing it through practice as a constituted, socially constructed reality’ (Garmany 2009: 729). In other words, rather than the situation of favela residents being the simply consequence of external forces, the residents also shape the conditions they experience.

Similarly, Waquar Ahmed’s research on the role of Enron in India emphasizes the discursive production of power through an assemblage of practices since 1991 (Ahmed 2010). He argues that India’s ‘neoliberal transformation’ was the consequence of power exercised by actors including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the USA. In this context, neoliberal rhetoric valorizing inward foreign direct investment (FDI) led to the local political environment being shaped to favour foreign corporations. Enron exerted influence through direct lobbying and market manipulation in order to shift the Indian energy market in directions favourable to the company, and the co-dependence between Enron and other corporations along with political elites within India led to further entrenchment of neoliberal policies. Rather than claiming a solely structural explanation for this situation, Ahmed concludes that:

[T]he power of economic and policy transformation unleashed by neoliberalism found willing subjects in India because it preserved and protected the subjects’ own precarious positions. The willing subjects were able to ‘sell’ neoliberalism as a policy that would eventually benefit all, in the face of the balance of payments crisis that India had just undergone.  

(Ibid.: 635)

The practices of power are also at the forefront of research by Brett Christophers that evaluates how economic models are performative. Christophers’ main argument is that models have the
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power to enact significant political-economic transformation, although the results of these models remain highly contingent. For example, he explains that broader processes of capitalist market relations under neoliberalism influenced the uptake of housing viability models in the UK: ‘[p]ower flows through these models (some get selected, others do not), structuring their use and allowing them to perform’ (Christophers 2014b: 81). In related research, Christophers examined the prevalence of tiered pricing models in the pharmaceutical industry, whereby different market segments are charged separate prices for the same good. Whereas this model did not appear to have economic benefits, he concluded that it remains useful to the industry for its political effects: it is a practice that suggests the pharmaceutical industry has ethical standards and a commitment to balancing profits with human rights to health. Therefore, it is one of many practices that help to protect the power of large pharmaceutical companies against potential criticism (Christophers 2014a).

What links these examples of performative research on the power of neoliberal policies is a focus on the social and technical pathways that make neoliberalism breathe. These researchers do not consider neoliberalism to be a thing that is external from the social context that it is affecting; instead, it is a consequence of agents who adhere to the central philosophical tenets of neoliberalism, yet implement it based on the networks, knowledge and contingencies that exist in specific places. Lasse Henriksen is clear about this focus when he examines the role performed by international organizations like the World Bank that promote policies associated with neoliberal goals. He looks at the agency of this organization, arguing that the power of the World Bank to shape microfinance policy was helped by establishing local offices that could disseminate policy while accumulating information. He argues that performativity is a key framework for understanding this process, as it draws attention to how information is developed, shared, and promoted by particular economic agents, enabling the spreading of ‘socio-technical networks of governance’ (Henriksen 2013: 407).

Subject formation

A final question that performativity can address about neoliberalism is: where do neoliberal subjects come from? Do the actors that promote neoliberal policies and benefit from them spring forth from the earth or from putative social classes, and do the actors affected negatively by neoliberalism lack any agency to resist or otherwise affect their situation under neoliberalism? Research on subjectivity and subject formation ignores or diminishes such structural presumptions about the composition of society, and accepts the possibility that incremental or radical change through performative acts can challenge normative conditions like neoliberalism. Rejecting notions of stable and pre-discursive sovereign subjects (i.e. autonomous actors with the authority and recognition to act), scholars including Judith Butler and Merje Kuus argue that subjects do not arrive as fully formed actors, and are instead the consequence of past and present mediations of power structures and context (Butler 1993; Kuus 2007). As with other post-structuralist perspectives, performative discourse argues that there is no such thing as a stable, pre-discursive subject: there is only the repeated performance of subjects-information that continually reiterate their agency and identities through rhetoric, policy, and everyday practices (Jackson 2004). This raises the prospect that most people are intentionally or unintentionally responsible for the replication of neoliberalism – not necessarily because of their social class, but rather because of the practices we perform every day. Without this reiteration, subjects could replace society with an alternative vision. This also means that, regardless of how dominant a position like neoliberalism might appear to be, the space for resistance can always occur.
In her more recent work, Judith Butler recognizes the potential counter-performances that challenge hegemonic discourse regarding citizenship. For instance, in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (Butler and Spivak 2007), Butler evaluates the 2006 demonstrations by illegal immigrants in Los Angeles. At different protest locations the demonstrators sang the US national anthem in Spanish, marking an attempt to redefine what is seen as normative about citizenship by repeatedly making an alternative statement. The demands for freedom made by a subaltern group in the city is picked up by Amin and Thrift, when they suggest the significance of urban citizenship for the enactment of democracy:

[The city] offers a practical and material means of meeting social needs (‘use value’). And more. It is a place of becoming, and the fulfillment of social potential, of democratic experimentation through the efforts of citizens themselves, as free and socialized agents… [t]his is the sense of urban citizenship we wish to develop: the idea of democracy as access, mutuality, fulfillment of potential. We see the city, more specifically its institutions, providing the opportunity for citizens to become something else and for mutuality to be strengthened. 

(*Amin and Thrift 2002: 143*)

For Amin and Thrift, fulfilling social potential arises through confident citizens using urban areas as sites for practising a more participatory, rights-based, and experimental democracy. This type of participation is exemplified in a different context by Carolin Schurr’s research on political emancipation in Ecuador. Schurr (2014) examines a situation where speakers of the native kichwa language use it for what she terms performative practices that create the space for a new politics. This activism de-naturalizes hegemonic conditions standing in the way of more participatory political geographies, hence opening up a space for change. Whereas it is unclear whether this discursive resistance will have lasting consequences for the material condition of this community, Schurr sees value in performative acts that can articulate new collective demands and bring about alternative imaginaries to existing power structures.

One of the clearest expressions of how performative practices might enable resistance to neoliberal economic principles is given by J.K. Gibson-Graham’s influential paper on ‘performative practices for other worlds’. In this paper, the author describes a personal transition from a structuralist prescription of ‘understanding the world in order to change it’ towards a post-structuralist perspective that theorized ‘the contingency of social outcomes rather than the unfolding of structural logics’ (Gibson-Graham 2008: 615). It considered the work of Callon, Butler, and others to be effective means for reconsidering the seemingly intractable logics of neoliberalism, and reframed their questions to challenge those aspects of society that were considered unjust or unsustainable. The research indicated three dimensions (transactions, labour, and enterprise) along which alternative market and non-market transactions were challenging neoliberal capitalism; for instance, through barter transactions, reciprocal labour arrangements, or communal forms of enterprise. Through a global scan of practices, Gibson-Graham indicated the possibilities for resistance, regardless of whether the agents saw their roles as such:

We would imagine that not all of these people see themselves engaged in a performative ontological politics – such a politics is a potentiality we are attempting to call into being. But all are contributing in some way to making economic diversity more credible. They are resisting the discursive erasure threatened by neoliberal theory, drawing
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attention to and thereby strengthening a range of economic practices that exist outside the purview of this paper.

(Ibid.: 620)

These practices are expanded upon in *A Postcapitalist Politics*, where Gibson-Graham consider challenging neoliberal hegemony through creating a new 'language of economic diversity' seen as a 'crucial prerequisite to the project of cultivating different subjects of economy' (Gibson-Graham 2006: 56). This research approach has generated considerable attention, including work on how scholar-activism can function (Taylor 2014; Delaney 2014) as well as case studies on alternative systems of economics and governance (Wright 2014; Brownlow 2011).

**Conclusion: perpetually incomplete neoliberalism**

This chapter has presented performativity as a theory that has a lot to say about the production, reproduction, and subversion of neoliberalism. Performative approaches based upon a classic poststructuralist stance (such as Judith Butler) or from science and technology studies (such as Michel Callon) each speak to the power of discourse to bring about material effects that are necessarily incomplete and always being brought into being. Neoliberalism would not exist as a hegemonic structure in the contemporary world without agents considered to have the requisite authority to act, and who are capable of declaring a particular rationality and performing it through words and deeds. Similarly, the performative declaration of neoliberal proponents must be performed by other agents willing to engage in the ensuing power relationships constructed by neoliberal practice.

Performative approaches to knowledge stress that a single utterance is not sufficient to bring about a new social reality. Instead, such a reality is only possible so long as repeated performances reiterate the nature of that reality. In theoretical terms, Derrida and others define this as citationality: without the repeated reinforcement of particular claims, any structure (regardless of its apparent solidity or permanence) runs the risk of falling prey to counter-narratives and alternatives that may supplant it. This circumstance can explain the historical ebb and flow of philosophical positions including classic liberalism, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism, and it also predicts that neoliberalism does not reflect the end of history. Without the potential for discursive closure, the door is always open for alternative visions for society to arise.

**References**


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