Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time.

(McChesney 1999: 7)

There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s.

(Harvey 2005: 2)

Neoliberalism defines a certain existential norm.

(Dardot and Laval 2014: 3)

So, here we are again then! Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose! Over ten years ago the two of us were brought together by an early attempt to construct an infrastructure to support the internationalization agenda that is now such an important element of higher educational reform in many counties around the world. The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) now claims to be ‘a leading global higher education and research network made up of 19 universities, spanning 11 countries on five continents’ (WUN 2015: n.p.). Back in the early 2000s it was altogether smaller operation. When WUN was just starting out, one of its flagship initiatives was a seminar series involving human geography graduate students and faculty. We met in 2002 at the first WUN sponsored faculty workshop on neoliberalism, and, after that, organized sessions at the annual conferences of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) and Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) (RGS-IBG). For a few years a broader group from the universities of Bristol, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield and Southampton in the UK and from the universities of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Madison-Wisconsin, Penn State and Washington in the USA convened to discuss contemporary issues in the sub-discipline under the designation Horizons in Human Geography. In badly lit rooms of varying sizes, often via slightly sketchy connections, presentations would be given, questions asked and geographically distant parts of the world would be brought closer together, albeit temporally.

While Horizons in Human Geography only lasted a few years (brought down by institutional politics in a number of participating universities), together with a couple of associated face-to-face meetings, it provided the impetus for a series of academic endeavours around neoliberalism (Leitner et al. 2007; Tickell et al. 2007), including our own Neoliberalization: States, Networks,
Peoples (England and Ward 2007). The aim of our book was to bring together some of those writing from a number of disciplines on what was then referred to as ‘neoliberalism’. It was one of a number of authored and edited monographs at the time and in subsequent years that spoke to the ongoing intellectual project of theorizing neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Macdonald and Ruckert 2009; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Birch and Mykhenko 2010; Peck 2010).

Fast-forward to 2016. For almost two decades, human geographers and other social scientists have been naming and writing about something called ‘neoliberalism’, working on a range of substantive topics – citizenship, climate change, crime, drugs, education, labour markets, migration, security, the environment, urban redevelopment, welfare reform – and from across the spectrum of epistemological, methodological and theoretical stances, to which we turn later in this chapter. Such has been the growth in the use of the term and the work it has been asked to do that it has become something of a ‘rascal concept’ (Smith 1987; Peck et al. 2009). For some, the focus has been on exploring its policy and programmatic implications. For others, the challenge has been to reveal the etymology of the word: its histories and its geographies. Still others have sought to unpack it, to consider whether it should be regarded as something that does the explaining of something – an explanatory concept – or that needs explaining – a descriptive concept. In these examples, and there are very many, studies of, for instance, environmental politics, or urban renewal are useful on their own terms as well as saying something about the wider processes of neoliberalization. And here our choice of words is deliberate. We use the term ‘neoliberalization’, emphasizing the processual, relational and variegated nature of regulatory restructuring and subject-making (Brenner et al. 2010a, 2010b). This distinction matters. Why? Well, because, as Springer (2015: 7) argues:

In utilizing this dynamic conception of neoliberalism-as-a-verb over static notions of neoliberalism-as-a-noun we arrive at the conclusion that while particular social spaces, regulatory networks, sectoral fields, local formations, and so forth will frequently be hampered by crises, this does not necessarily imply that they will resonate throughout an entire aggregation of neoliberalism. In other words, because ‘neoliberalism’ indeed does not exist as a coherent and fixed edifice, as an equilibrial complex, or as a finite end-state, it is consequently unlikely to fail in a totalizing moment of collapse.

Whether you understand the world as witnessing some version of post-neoliberalism (Brand and Sekler 2009; Springer 2015), or its unfolding ‘zombie’ condition (Peck 2014), attempting to review the ways that neoliberalism/neoliberalization has been defined and theorized is a daunting task. Some might even suggest it is a foolhardy one. Over a decade ago McCarthy and Prudham (2004: 276) noted that ‘defining neo-liberalism is no straightforward task’. In the ten years since we began working on Neoliberalization: States, Networks, Peoples it is a task that has probably got harder, not easier. And that is despite the continuously growing volume of words dedicated to its defining and analysis. Or, perhaps it is precisely because of the generation of so many words that agreement and clarity have been in relatively short supply (Brenner et al. 2010a). You don’t have to be ‘in denial’ (Springer 2014: 154) to acknowledge the different uses of the term ‘neoliberalism’. Moving away from the most basic text book-like definitions, as most social scientists have over the last decade, it becomes quickly apparent that there is very little agreement on a number of fairly fundamental matters.

For example, what is meant by ‘neoliberalism’, where did it start, where does it stop, has it ended, what are its edges, what status does ‘neoliberalism’ have in the intellectual-cum-theoretical vocabulary and what extra-theoretical purchase do academics gain (or lose) when using the term ‘neoliberalism’? In the years in which we have worked together and individually

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on grappling with the politics, processes and practices of neoliberalization it is clear to us that as
the use of the term has escalated, so have the number of ways it is used and the meanings
invested in it. It has become ‘oft-invoked but ill-defined’ (Mudge 2008: 703), its upsurge in
usage accompanied ‘by considerable imprecision, confusion and controversy’ (Brenner et al.
2010a: 328). There remains disagreement over what is meant by the term ‘neoliberalism’ and
how best to conceptualize and to study ‘it’, even if ‘it’ can be thought of as an ‘it’. Is it a cultural,
economic, political or social formation, or all four and more besides? Is it a hegemonic ‘big pic-
ture’ project? Or is it a set of experiments, without a common objective, largely disconnected,
and malleable in the extreme? Does it constitute less, more or a new form of state regulation?
What gets included or seen in its usage and what does not and what are the consequences for
the imagining and realising of potential futures?

Despite all the complexity that exists around the intellectual genealogy of neoliberalism/
neoliberalization, the focus of the remainder of this chapter is quite simple. First, it outlines the
two dominant approaches to theorizing neoliberalization: those from political economy and
post-structural approaches. While both act as a short-hand for more internally heterogeneous
contributions, there are, nevertheless, some commonalities around which contributions in the
two approaches coalesce. Second, the chapter turns to four ways in which the term has been
used to refer to particular ‘formations’ (Larner 2003). These are an ideological hegemonic
project, as policy and programme, as statecraft and as governmentality. This builds upon our
earlier work.

In conclusion, and as if to reinforce the plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose sentiment
with which we began our chapter, we make a similar set of points to those we made almost a
decade ago. For, while it may have been ‘on the ropes’ (Peck et al. 2009: 94), those with a stake
in neoliberalization have, to continue with the boxing analogy, come out swinging. The onset
of the financial crisis in late 2008 appeared to at least pose the question: are we about to witness
the slow and geographically uneven unravelling of neoliberalization? Not overnight and not
everywhere at once. For neoliberalization is not ‘an all-encompassing global totality’
(Brenner et al. 2010a: 342) and hence evidence of any ‘ending’ was always likely to be incre-
mental and partial. However, while the financial crisis has led to more mature and nuanced
theorizations of neoliberalization, particularly those which situate contestation and resistance as
a co-presence in its origins, the emergences, the circulations and the consolidations (Feather-
stone et al. 2015), in many countries of the world its presence remains. What we have witnessed
is the emergence of what Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010: 2037) have termed ‘neoliberalism 3.0’.
While there may be future arguments to be had with neoliberalism (Weller and O’Neill 2014),
for now at least any alternative political futures are going to be forged along with it, not instead
of it.

**Conceptualizing neoliberalization: political
economy, post-structuralism, or both?**

There is no shortage of those who would take on the intellectual challenge of conceptualizing
neoliberalization (Harvey 2005; Macdonald and Ruckert 2009; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009;
Birch and Mykhnenko 2010; Peck 2010; Springer 2015). From across the social sciences, the last
two decades has witnessed a quickening of the pace of theoretical offerings. While this literature
has a number of discernible characteristics, in this chapter we want briefly to focus on the two
conceptual approaches that have contributed most to contemporary understandings of neoliber-
alization. These are those from a political economy and from a post-structural approach. We do
not wish to overdraw this division (a binary even) between these two ‘camps’ by counter-posing
Theorizing neoliberalization

one against the other, not least because these camps themselves are far from unified and monolithic, but instead consist of several co-existing (and not always comfortable) approaches. Instead we outline each one’s defining features.

So, for those working within the broadly political economy tradition, grappling with neoliberalization can be characterized as part of a longer-term intellectual programme examining the ongoing and qualitative restructuring of the spatial, scalar and temporal co-ordinates of the state. The focus is on its macro-political, contextual and inter-institutional logic (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002). Proponents of this position would likely deny they are arguing for a monolithic conceptualization of neoliberalization that suggests the processes are the same everywhere, undifferentiated, or even that there is a universal convergence of historically different state formations and models of capitalism. Rather the emphasis is, nevertheless, on shared features, on generic characteristics and on family resemblances. The essence of this approach is nicely laid out in the following quote:

In our conceptualization, neoliberalization is not an all-encompassing global totality but an unevenly developed pattern of restructuring that has been produced through a succession of path-dependent collisions between emergent, market-disciplinary regulatory projects and inherited landscapes across places, territories and scales.

(Brenner et al. 2010a: 342, original emphasis)

It is possible to further disaggregate this formulation into three analytical dimensions (Brenner et al. 2010a: 335): (1) regulatory experiments which consist of ‘place-, territory- and scale-specific projects designed to impose, intensify or reproduce market-disciplinary modalities of governance’; (2) systems of inter-jurisdictional policy transfer through which ‘neoliberal policy prototypes are circulated across places, territories, and scales, generally transnationally, for redeployment elsewhere’; and (3) transnational rule regimes which ‘impose determinate ‘rules of the game’ on contextually specific forms of policy experimentation and regulatory reorganization, thereby enframing the activities of actors and institutions within specific politico-institutional parameters.’ Taken together, a variegated notion of neoliberalization with ‘regulatory uneven development’ (Brenner et al. 2010b: 217) at its explanatory core underscores the political economy approach.

For those working primarily from post-colonial/post-structural perspectives (and we acknowledge significant differences between the two), the focus is on the junking of ‘grand narratives’. Instead attention is on situated experiences, meanings and representations and explorations of neoliberalism as a cultural project (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hall and Lamont 2013). Power is understood ‘as a relational concept that has repressive and productive consequences’ (Prince and Dufty 2009: 1746). Drawing on interdisciplinary work on classic and advanced liberalism, the project, subjects and techniques involved in neoliberalization are theorized as a means to highlight complexities, tensions and contradictions. This approach to conceptualizing neoliberalization owes an intellectual debt to the far wider critique of political economy, and its proponents argue for a more situated analysis of contemporary geo-economical and geo-political processes, rationalities and technologies.

Neoliberalization is theorized as culturally produced and spatially contextual, constituted with a range of social relations and materialized through socio-spatial processes and practices in a range of scales, sites and spaces (Larner 2000, 2003; Kingfisher 2013; Springer 2012). An aspect of this approach is challenging the notion of the state as autonomous from society, and emphasizing the active remaking and redeployment of the state in creating the political subjectivities and enabling the conditions for marketization. It includes Foucauldian tracings of the specificities of
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elements associated with neoliberalisms such as the technologies of the enrolment and regulation of subjectivities, and the calculative and self-enterprising forms of conduct (Dardot and Laval 2014).

Neoliberalizations (in the plural) are conceptualized as sets of hybrid processes and situated meanings, with the emphasis on exploring their different features, distinctive characteristics and veritable uniqueness. Neoliberalizations involve actually existing people engaged in situated, grounded practices and governmental technologies that produce particular places and particular outcomes in those places. By extension, neoliberalism is spatially varied, playing out differently in different places in articulation with the particular cultural, economic and political trajectories in those places.

While there appears to remain an intellectual appetite for ‘the potential reconcilability of the different approaches’ (Springer 2012: 143), these differences persist. For us, the most fruitful intellectual manoeuvre is to acknowledge the power of neoliberalization without re-inscribing ‘it’ as a unitary hegemonic project. J.K. Gibson-Graham’s (2006: 1) caution about the efforts to understand capitalism as an object of analysis can also be applied to neoliberalism: be alert, because all too easily ‘the project of understanding the beast has itself produced a beast’. We therefore agree with Sparke (2006: 11) that the way foreword is ‘to nuance rather than abandon our analyses of neoliberalism’. While there is, of course, much that distinguishes the two bodies of work – their intellectual referents, ontological categories, and epistemological assumptions to name but three – we still see many points of connection that mean the two can be held in productive tension. For instance, Larner et al. (2013: 21) offer the following provocative observation regarding gendered transformations of governance, economy, and citizenship:

juxtaposing states and subjectivities, production and social reproduction, market, and culture, we can reveal not only more about how new gendered formations are emerging but also underline the need for a wider conceptual repertoire than has often previously been the case.

A process of dialogues, engagements and reflections is, in and of itself, incredibly useful, even if there remain some irreconcilable differences. Debates and disagreements are intellectually fruitful. Indeed, our current understanding of neoliberalization would not have been generated, we would argue, were it not for the intellectual differences that continue to characterize the writings in this field. Contributions and counter-contributions have proved academically nourishing and stimulating and we hope to see the lively discussions about the complexities and contingencies of neoliberalization continue.

Understandings of neoliberalization

It is almost a cliché to claim that neoliberalism is a difficult concept to pin down. Despite the work that has been spent apparently doing just that – pinning it down – only recently Weller and O’Neill (2014: 107) were still compelled to ask ‘What is neoliberalism?’ Of course, their question was not asked from a neutral standpoint. Questions rarely are. Rather, Weller and O’Neill’s query came out of a concern to challenge whether Australia had ever been neoliberal, as had been claimed by some. Leaving aside the rights or wrongs of this particular ‘argument’ and its potentially more significant implications for the relationship between ‘theory’ and the ‘world’, the ‘meteoric’ (Springer 2012: 135) expansion of work on neoliberalism/neoliberalization has not yet led to the emergence of a consensus on its meaning. Rather, a cursory scanning of the pages of blogs, books, journals and websites reveals the myriad ways that
neoliberalism/neoliberalization continues to be used. Some of these reflect disciplinary differences (such as that between economics and human geography, for example), while other differences are born out of some combination of the geographic location of authors (that is, from where on the map work is being generated) and the particular geographies about which are being written. The slipperiness of neoliberalism/neoliberalization’s defining and usage means that it is frequently used as a proxy for a dizzying range of outcomes, processes and things. Bundled together and objectified, given a sense of coherence, the important distinctions between processes of state-market entanglements such as marketization and privatization have sometimes tended to be lost or subsumed in the rush to identify patterns and regularities (Larner 2003; Birch and Siemiatycki 2015).

In this light, the focus of this section is to unbundle and to reflect upon the different understandings of neoliberalization. Our identification of them rested on a method of aggregation. That is looking for similarities in the range of ways in which human geographers and others were defining and using at first the term ‘neoliberalism’ and then, as an outcome of some of this work, more latterly, the term ‘neoliberalization’ (Peck and Tickell 2002; Tickell and Peck 2003). These intellectual exercises often say as much about those undertaking them as they do about the fields they purport to represent. That was a charge that could have been levied against us a decade ago (but it wasn’t!). It is one against which our defence would be weak today. Nevertheless, in the absence of a consensus on ‘What is neoliberalism?’, there thus remain important variations in the using of the verb ‘neoliberalization’. Four, in particular, stand out.

**Neoliberalization as an ideological hegemonic project**

This understanding refers to the places and the peoples behind its origins and that are involved in its apparent uptake in geographically discrete but socially connected parts of the world. So, around differing views of neoliberalizations are ‘homelands’ of connections and relations between countries in the global North and South and chronologies of ‘shock’ and ‘therapy’. An important strand in the more general growth in social science work on neoliberalism/neoliberalization has been on its genealogies, geographies and histories (and pre-histories). These are multiple and relational. Some are known, others less so. Substantive contributions by Harvey (2005), Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) and Peck (2010) have taken aim directly at those involved and the work they have done in the emergence of neoliberalization. This includes detailing agencies and institutions of differing geographical reach and their roles. This has generated an understanding of a landscape consisting of a criss-crossing and overlapping lattice of differently headquartered consultants, lobbyists, state actors and think tanks. Experimental, incremental, opportunistic, as likely to fail as to succeed, this is an image of a ‘project’ that emerged over decades without a blueprint, without a map.

In much of this work, political dominance is often seen to emerge and be exercised through the formation of class-based alliances – elite actors, institutions and other representatives of capital – at a variety of spatial scales, who produce and circulate what appear to be a reasonably coherent programme of ideas and images about the world, its problems and how these are best addressed. All of these are, of course, deeply interwoven with ageist, gendered and racialized power hierarchies (Gibson-Graham 2006; Kofman 2007). Certainly, hegemony is not only political and economic control, it is also the capacity of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing onto the world so that those who are subordinated by it view it as ‘common sense’, even ‘natural’ (see Plehwe 2016). For example, the notion of the ‘free market’ is represented as naturally occurring. This is not just about imposition, but also about the willing ‘consent’ by those being subordinated, so that ‘common sense’ becomes how the subordinate class lives its
subordination (Harvey 2005). Among the ‘definitional families’ of neoliberal analysis, Weller and O’Neill (2014: 107) argue that the neoliberalization as ideology perspective is the ‘most stable’ and they label it as ‘neoliberalism-in-theory’.

**Neoliberalization as policy, practice and programme**

This understanding refers to the transfer of ownership from the public or state sector to the private or corporate sector, and in the process often involves a reworking of what these categories might mean (including what they mean for the communities and households left to fill the gaps, again all of which is over-determined by social relations of difference). It is possible to distinguish between four elements of this use: the context to which the policy is a response, the logic underpinning the policy, the agencies and institutions involved in the doing and evaluation of policy, and the intended audiences for the policy (see Slater 2016). Generally, policies involve replacing state ownership with private ownership, the logic underpinning this transformation being that transferring ownership to the market creates a more efficient system. However, evidence suggests that matters are rarely this straightforward.

Ownership is rendered more complicated through the various types of contractual relationships in which are located states and markets. Moreover, while in legal terms ownership may, in some cases, remain unchanged, governance and management (sometimes at a distance) challenges the logics, norms and understandings around notions of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’. What emerges is a sense of engagements and entanglements. Examples include policies pursued under the banners of ‘de-regulation’, ‘liberalization’, ‘marketization’ and ‘privatization’. These have taken place in a number of fields of policy-making, including in crime, drugs, economic development, education, and transportation.

In the words of Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010: 39) the relationship between states and markets becomes reconfigured so that ‘they become more thoroughly intermeshed’. Those involved in authoring and orchestrating this shift include a range of socially and spatially situated actors – nation-states and their various agencies and branches, as well as a whole range of others such as community groups, consultants, labour unions, NGOs and think tanks. This reflects the work that argues for the co-constitution of neoliberalization involving the presence of those seeking to make and unmake policy. For Mudge (2008: 704) this is the ‘bureaucratic face’ of neoliberalism, while for Weller and O’Neill (2014: 108) it might usefully be labelled as ‘neoliberalism-in-general’, in reference to a ‘globally interconnected and constantly reworked set of policies and practices’.

**Neoliberalization as statecraft**

This understanding refers to the quantitative and qualitative restructuring of nation-states, involving redrawing the boundaries between civil society, market and state, and sometimes their territorial borders (Brenner et al. 2010a, 2010b; also see Jessop 2016). Most often this has involved fiscal austerity efforts by the state to ‘solve’ the tensions between commitments to a territorialized political system and remaining economically competitive in a globalizing economy (Cowen and Smith 2009). Neoliberalization as statecraft involves an agenda aimed at reducing government spending while increasing economic efficiency and competitiveness, an agenda steeped in the rhetoric of free markets, privatization and marketization, along with ‘the multidimensional rooting of the neoliberal state in the global economy’ (ibid.: 41). The state is transformed into a model of governance underpinned by economic liberalism that calls for privileging the market and limiting government spending, especially on social welfare programmes, but perhaps not on the military.
This understanding of neoliberalism involves the ‘rolling back’ and the ‘rolling out’ (Peck and Tickell 2002) of state formations, with the reconfiguration of the scalar, spatial and temporal selectivities. Included here is a redrawing of where the state starts and stops – its edges – as well as a reorganization of its internal spaces and its institutional architecture. The ‘rolling back’ mantra of ‘less government’ translates into stemming the growth of the state (especially social programmes), limiting taxes, and ‘the destruction and discrediting of Keynesian welfarist and social-collectivist institutions (broadly defined)’ (MacLeavy 2012: 251). This unfolds alongside a qualitative shift to active state-building, often of an authoritarian penal sort, via rolling out new institutions and new (de)regulatory reforms around, for instance, social assistance, immigration, international investment and foreign policy. In fact, neoliberalization often means more not less state intervention and, as Julie MacLeavy remarks (ibid.: 252), ‘rather than simply encouraging the withering away of the state, neoliberal programmes of government have instead entailed reconstitution of state capacities and political subjectivities across different spatial contexts’.

This redrawing and reorganization of the state is associated with different implications according to hierarchies of gender, race and so on, because the state is a set of gendered (as well as ableist, heterosexed and raced) institutions with spatialized social practices that differently situate and impact women compared with men (Kofman 2007; Kingfisher 2013). Neoliberalization as statecraft includes recasting the state’s responsibilities to civil society, for the collective well-being of its citizens and, as such, there is a shift in the responsibilities between the state, the market, communities and families. In the process, the parameters of the role of the state, citizenship and popular understandings about the public/private and collective/individual relations have altered significantly.

Neoliberalization as governmentality

Taking its cue from Foucault (1980), this understanding pivots on neoliberalism as processual, and, as Weller and O’Neill (20014: 109) describe, ‘operates through a range of practices and processes that combine social, cultural and economic domains to constitute new spaces and subjects’ (also see Lewis 2016). This gets at the ways in which the relations among and between peoples and things might be imagined, assembled and translated (and, indeed, reimagined, reassembled and retranslated) that induce self-regulating subjectivities, thus enabling a form of power that governs at a distance (Larner 2000, 2003; Sparke 2006). Neoliberalization as governmentality means that the state, rather than being something ‘out there’ acting upon society and individuals, is mutually constituted in and through an assortment of social relations and materialized through innumerable socio-spatial practices in innumerable spaces (Larner, 2000; Crampton 2012; Kingfisher, 2013).

In this framing both the economy and the state are involved in economic calculative practices that construct autonomous, responsibilized ‘neoliberal subjects’. For instance, in the global North, social policy has been rebuilt to encourage a culture of surveillance and self-regulation. The individual is ‘responsibilized’ as a self-sufficient moral agent and social problems become failures of the individual, which require individual, ‘private’ solutions, not collective, public solutions like public assistance and social insurance (Kingfisher 2013; also see Peters 2016).

For Wendy Brown (2005: 40), neoliberalization as a form of governmentality involves ‘extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action’. The market is not merely self-perpetuating but a normative outcome of particular sorts of social policies. Market-logic rationalities of efficiency, choice and possessive individualism permeate multiple aspects of life and become the normative criteria for valuing people. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011: 22) takes this further, arguing:
Any form of life that (can) not produce values according to market logic would not merely be allowed to die, but, in situations in which the security of the market (and since the market was now the raison d’être of the state) seemed at stake, ferreted out and strangled.

In addition, viewing governmentality conceptualizations of neoliberalism as a spatial imaginary – in and through which peoples and places are understood in particular ways – opens up room to address neoliberalization’s possible regressive and progressive elements. Understanding neoliberalism as a process involves acknowledging successes and failures, intended and unintended consequences and that the end results of policies and programmes are not defined by design, nor enviable, but are open to all manner of manipulations.

While there is much that distinguishes these four definitions and understandings of neoliberalism, in epistemological, methodological and ontological terms, there are also points of overlap and of connection. Our attempt to unpack and ‘pin down’ the multiple meanings and understandings of neoliberalization may raise analytical and conceptual problems for some. But our goal is not to merely describe neoliberalism, but also to identify the factors that systemically bring it into being, be that as an intellectual project or as a governing philosophy.

**Conclusion**

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. In part it depends on who you are and where you are. Armed with a processual and relational understanding of neoliberalization, did we ever really think that the financial crisis of the late 2000s would mark the end of neoliberalism? Probably not! However, what was already a lively field of intellectual endeavour was given an extra academic frisson with the significant changes in the real urban and national economies of the world. Not only was the notion of ‘post’-neoliberalism considered, but understandings of the constitution of neoliberalism were reconsidered, offering a tantalising glimpse of a ‘very different political cartography of the present’ (Featherstone 2015: 5). For some ‘its [i.e. neoliberalism’s] growing inability to deal with the upcoming contradictions and crises’ (Brand and Sekler 2009: 6) did constitute a space to imagine alternatives. Not because it was believed that it would suddenly cease to exist. Rather, because ‘moments of crisis always reveal a great deal about the nature of neoliberalization as an adaptive regime of socioeconomic governance’ (Peck et al. 2009: 95). Almost a decade on from the first signs of the financial crisis in late 2007, and in much of the world, neoliberalization continues to cast a long shadow over matters of economic and social justice. That is certainly not to say there are not visions of another future being imagined and put to work. There are. Rather, it is to underscore the incredible adaptability and durability of neoliberalization.

Given this context, we discussed two quite different ontological positions on neoliberalization. The political economy and post-structural orientations are those that have been present in the field since the upsurge of interest in the phenomenon by human geographers almost two decades ago. A rapprochement shows no sign of emerging, despite some attempts to ‘destabilize the ostensible incompatibility that some scholars undertaking their separate usage seem keen to assume’ (Springer 2012: 143). Whether one is possible is a moot point. Whether one is preferable is also questionable. Some of the insights that have been generated, particularly over the last decade, have come about, we would argue, precisely because of foundational disagreements. An attempt to bring dissenters together would have run the risk of closing down matters.

Our chapter has also focused on the different understandings and theorizations of neoliberalization. These, we hope, will be picked up on and extended, stretched and transformed over the
course of this collection. Four were outlined that we believe continue to characterize much of the still growing literature from across the social sciences. A method of simplification and aggregation underpins their generation, with some work transcending any single ‘formation’ (Springer 2012: 1031). Others might disagree with our assessment, but then our view is that continued constructive disagreement and engagement promises to be both fruitful and to continue to reveal much about neoliberalization’s past, its presents and its various possible futures.

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