Faced with the bewildering variety of changes which are taking place, it is tempting to seize upon simple polemical contrasts… Inevitably we risk ending up with… overly elastic concepts. Worse, we invite a consequent diminution in the richness – and therefore the power – of our conceptual equipment.

(Sayer 1989: 666)

The question is: what is this neoliberalism? This book abounds with definitions – a motivating spirit, a theoretical approach, an internationalized policy framework, a mobile policy knowledge, a complex of regimes, a set of practices, a cultural orientation infiltrating contemporary life, and so on. This chapter, which takes its title from Andrew Sayer’s (1989) critique Post-Fordism in Question, challenges the usefulness of calling so many different ideas and practices neoliberalism. Our objective is to question the usefulness of the concept as a framework for explaining contemporary capitalism and the politics surrounding it, and to ask whether neoliberalism’s power to shape contemporary societies is overstated.

The next section fleshes out our central argument that definitions of neoliberalism have become so broad, so fluid and so multifaceted that the word may have become an obstacle to quality academic argument. It has become, for some, a crutch holding up weak analysis or a vague, insufficiently argued-for, one-size-fits-all explanation for a diverse range of events and circumstances. Its readily made assumptions press all manner of events into a single template and avoid detailed scrutiny of the real forces and processes driving economic, cultural and social change. Abstractions that better address and explain observed commonalities and differences, we argue, would enhance understandings and open up opportunities to develop more desirable alternative policies and practices. In a world of evidence-based policy, more rigorous analysis might also attract policymaker interest and expose mainstream politicians to policy alternatives. Going beyond these broad criticisms, section three identifies three varieties of neoliberalism. While distinctions between these types are not always clear in practice, our classification helps us analyse the diverse components of the idea. First are approaches defining neoliberalism as a set of theoretical propositions capable of enactment, with varying degrees of success, in actual contexts. We call these approaches ‘neoliberalism-in-theory’. Second are approaches that build the idea of neoliberalism from observed similarities in actual practices. We call these approaches ‘neoliberalism-in-general’. 

Phillip O’Neill and Sally Weller
Third are approaches that conceive of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality or a set of logics and practices that infiltrate everyday life. We call these ‘neoliberal governmentality’. We then examine the practical reunification of the three forms. The penultimate section advocates greater self-consciousness in the use of the term ‘neoliberalism’. Querying whether the idea of neoliberalism is the best way to pursue robust and inquisitive analysis of contemporary capitalism, and assessing the political utility of the term, are matters we discuss in our conclusion.

Questioning neoliberalisms

The term ‘neoliberalism’ refers to different types of phenomena from abstract ideas and ideologies to categories of occurrences, to sets of practices, and to forms of governmentality. It is sometimes positioned as a causal force, sometimes a process, sometimes a change agent, and sometimes an effect or outcome. Some see this multiplicity as a distinguishing characteristic of the concept. Springer (2015: 7), for example, rejects conferring a ‘thing-like’ status, insisting instead that neoliberalism ‘does not exist as a coherent and fixed edifice’. Yet can we afford to give such a mercurial position to an idea that purports to be a dominant societal force? Some authors have concerns. Collier (2015: n.p.), for instance, wonders about the ontological status of neoliberalism, about ‘how it can be constituted as an object of inquiry: How it can be made into something about which we can discover something new and unexpected?’ For Larner (2014: n.p.) neoliberalism has become a ‘preconstituted theoretical explanation and self-evident descriptor of contemporary forms of economic, political, social and environmental change’.

Our concern is that the word stands for too many things. Weiss (2012: 28) says that neoliberalism’s many definitions risk creating ‘one of those giant omnibus words that threaten to capsize with overstretched capacity’. Like other giant words – including, for example, ‘globalization’, ‘modernization’ and ‘sustainability’ – it presages important processes, and ideas that must be taken seriously, but is non-specific enough to mean different things to different audiences. Conflating multiple meanings in a single word makes precise analysis and quality debate difficult. Moreover, assigning the tag ‘neoliberal’ too often replaces close study of the relationships among state policies, economies, societies and developmental trajectories. Using one word to describe so many processes effectively flattens the ontological landscape in a way that disregards the important effects of interactions among scales of activity.

Some view the idea of neoliberalism as a frame or lens that captures sight of particular ideas and events and exposes them to scrutiny. This can have advantages, of course, if there is generated a ‘critical opening through which it becomes possible to see certain kinds of relationships and formations that were previously difficult to discern’ (Collier 2014: 20). But there are risks. On the one hand, overarching narratives can generate intellectual blind spots. Privileging the idea of neoliberalism as the driver of contemporary political thought and action tends to marginalize or exclude or de-value the examination of processes and events that merit analysis but are not seen as associated with neoliberalism. On the other hand, many observations seen as neoliberal tend to self-enroll as core elements of the political process, with new studies valued for how they confirm (rather than question) the narrative. What emerges is a patterned empiricism reinforcing the narrative of neoliberalism; it becomes omnipotent and increasingly impervious to criticism. Block and Somers (2014: 156–8) argue that inherently persuasive ideas gain a sort of ‘epistemic privilege’ that make them immune from refutation; they ‘come equipped with their own internal claims to veracity’. We think we need to be alert to a tendency to see everything as a facet of, or as evidence of, neoliberalism; indeed there may well be events taken as examples of neoliberalism which, by careful research, are revealed as having different or even opposing motivations (see Larner and Craig 2005).
We worry too about the way accounts of neoliberalism focus on similarities and overlook differences. Differences are too easily dismissed as anomalies of historical context, diminished as matters of lesser empirical substance, or excluded as being the result of some unusual circumstance. Yet neoliberalism scholarship can’t account adequately for the diverse ways things play out in different places; and can’t decide how much difference is tolerable before the label ‘neoliberal’ is abandoned (Collier 2012: 191). Elsewhere we (O’Neill and Weller 2013; Weller and O’Neill 2014) take up this question of difference in interrogating the case of Australia’s post-Keynesian economic trajectory and conclude that there are insufficient grounds to warrant the claim of neoliberalist ascendancy or neoliberal regime. While some disagree with this assessment (Argent 2014), others raise similar doubts in relation to their national contexts (Challies 2014; Benediktsson 2014; Hayter 2014). Such dissent, we think, shows two things: first, that the search for commonalities across a global neoliberal project has so far compiled incomplete evidence; and, second, that a neoliberalist framework of analysis lacks the means for accounting for difference across domains.

We also raise concern about neoliberalism’s relationship to notions of contemporary globalization and contemporary capitalism. We query the benefits of discussing varieties of neoliberalism rather than varieties of capitalism. Perhaps past discussions focused on capitalism have over-emphasized the economic dimension, making neoliberalism’s attention to social, political and governmental matters a much-needed corrective. But while accounts of neoliberalism bring in policy and social concerns, they often leave out detailed analysis of the economic relations and events that shape public policy and stimulate social change. And, often, these relationships are best analysed by frameworks that don’t call on the precepts of neoliberalism. For example, contrasting capitalist economic and social policy platforms – national interventionism, developmental statecraft, city-state projects or Scandinavian-style corporatism – warrant explicit analysis to determine the type of capitalism they create. These might contain elements of neoliberalism while not ever being defined by it (see also Hart-Landsberg 2006).

Varieties of neoliberalism

This section identifies and examines three ways neoliberalism is used in the literature to better understand the concept and better assess its usefulness as an explanatory and political mobilization device. Following Weller and O’Neill (2014), we call the three varieties neoliberalism-in-theory, neoliberalism-in-general, and neoliberal governmentality. It is important to emphasize that these varieties are abstractions created to isolate partial aspects of the concept (see Sayer 1984), and are not intended as a typology able to be mapped directly onto actual examples. In practice, accounts of neoliberalism often combine the elements of all three varieties, bleeding one into the others, sometimes culminating in a pervasive neoliberal universe (e.g. Hilgers 2011). Recognizing that neoliberalism is presented and interpreted in many different ways puts a brake on the omnibus use of the word and steers us instead towards more precise analyses and more useful interventions.

Neoliberalism-in-theory

Neoliberalism-in-theory begins with a set of propositions that together create a normative vision of the conduct of human society and a blueprint for governance (see Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism-in-theory is motivated by, and made coherent by, a set of ideological or philosophical propositions about human nature, freedom, individuality and reward. These seemingly universal truths animate neoliberal ideas, imbuing them with an evangelistic spirit in a manner
Neoliberalism in question

akin to the *pneuma* (breath) animating some versions of Christian faith (see Carroll 2001). As a set of higher-order ideas or abstractions, this neoliberalism can be spoken about in ways removed from the complexities and histories of the actually existing world. The advantage of this detachment is that it enables the concept to have a clear definition open to comparison with other world views and ideologies, and therefore able to be discussed, and criticized, and proselytized relatively freely.

Six principal dimensions can be derived from these motivating ideas. First, the preference for private forms of property ownership over mutual, common or public forms of ownership enables self-interested behaviour to become society’s driving force. All manner of things and activities are commodified to feed the accumulation of private wealth. Second, market-based mechanisms of exchange and for-profit transactions are promoted as the most efficient means of allocating resources, and for distributing the income generated by production. Third, economic growth proceeds by intensifying and extending the reach of markets, especially by promoting the global integration of trade and the free movement of capital, goods, people and ideas. Fifth, market logics are extended to human behaviours, insisting that the interests of workers are best served when labour arrangements are individualized and transacted in markets, and when collective forms of labour organization are suppressed. Fifth, individuals and their immediate households acting in their own interests become the primary subjects of social organization: society becomes no more than an aggregate of individuals and their partisan interests. Sixth, state-led attempts to steer productive resources into particular areas, or to redistribute incomes in favour of particular groups, are deemed counterproductive because they pervert the economic signals governing markets. The overarching assumption is that, when all actors act self-interestedly in the exchange of private property, the collective interest is also secured. Fortuitously, as market-based processes shift costs and economic value among actors, they also resolve society-wide economic crises. Like them or not, it is easy to see the consistency of the market logic working across these six dimensions.

This form of neoliberalism offers a set of ideas available for propagation and adoption. The propositions are relatively easy to understand and identify with, which, in large part, explains the popularity of neoliberalism’s foundational texts, at least among those with private property to defend (see Hayek 1944, 1960; Friedman and Friedman, 1980). However, enunciating a set of propositions does not guarantee their translation into material existence in actual observable political and economic circumstances. While its tenets translate into a coherent logic that can underpin policy development, the capacity of neoliberalism—in-theory to guide economic systems and shape events is indeterminate. There is no guarantee that actualizations will resemble the theoretical shape or intent. Neoliberalism’s founding texts are vague about what drives its installation in the material world, save that implementation requires some sort of transformative agent and perhaps some motivating vision. Not surprisingly, empirical studies show that enactments are invariably partial and incomplete; they occur through processes of experiment, learning and knowledge exchanges in which idealized objectives are inevitably transformed or mutated by their confrontations with historically produced realities (Peck 2011). The point to be made here is that an abstraction can never anticipate or determine the actual form of a thing or an event. Reality is always the play-out of contingent things.

**Neoliberalism-in-general**

The approach we call neoliberalism-in-general takes a different view of how neoliberalism is constituted and how its actual world existences are produced. In this grounded form, the word ‘neoliberalism’ stands for a category produced by observed commonalities among policies and
events. The word thus becomes a summary, uniting a variety of policies and practices that have sufficient qualities in common to allow them to be grouped; like the category ‘furniture’ refers rather neatly to a class of constructed items inside homes and offices; or ‘emotions’ refers to a set of physiological, behavioural and psychological responses and feelings. The point is that furniture and emotions only have meaning in so far as they capture essential or general features of observed phenomena. The major benefit of thinking in generalized rather than in theoretical categories is that the absence of a theory of furniture or emotion does not prevent the tagging of actual, existing things as pieces of furniture or as emotions. They are what they are seen to be.

From this approach, we can identify economic and political changes to capitalism since the 1970s that have many things in common – including being undesirable socially – that are not necessarily connected to the marketization or individualizing logics of neoliberalism-in-theory. These might include: a technological and communications revolution; the expansion of money credit, the empowerment of financial services, and accelerated financial flows; a new spatial organization of production and the expansion of transnational firms; the containment of wages, the suppression of organized labour and the retrenchment of welfare entitlements; the emergence of multi-scalar forms of governance; invigorated capitalist competition and the recovery of the rate of profit; and, increased tolerance of inequality, both within and between national jurisdictions. These developments could be incorporated into neoliberalism-in-general, regardless of theoretical match, as it transforms its identity by absorbing emerging innovations.

Neoliberalism-in-general, then, constructs neoliberalism not as a set of principles in abstract but as observed commonalities across collections of practices and strategies. The things, events or circumstances it embraces are capable of existing independently, and are not necessarily dependent on attempts to implement a set of ideological principles. In neoliberalism-in-general there are only observable practices in the first instance. Their grouping into a general category and its assignment to a portfolio we might call neoliberalism occurs subsequently. This definition of neoliberalism is agile, able to identify emerging policy initiatives that enact or extend neoliberal ideas in novel ways. It lends neoliberalism a tendential rather than a deterministic character (Peck 2006).

But things get difficult when neoliberalism-in-general includes events or activities that could not be anticipated from neoliberalism-in-theory. We readily understand what it is that makes a chair a piece of furniture, because the definition of furniture is stable and clear. It is more difficult to categorize events and practices as neoliberal, however, because neoliberal-in-general definitions are necessarily fluid. What is missing is a criterion for inclusion and exclusion. Two examples highlight the problem. Suppose, on the one hand, that a novel reform rewards wealthy people over ordinary people and is classified as neoliberal, even though the particular policy is foreign to the family of interventions familiar to the neoliberalism-in-theory repertoire. Is the classification correct? We can only trust the classifier, and that may not be enough. On the other hand, suppose a government assisted the trade position of a friendly nation by making a regulatory change that contained identifiably neoliberal elements, but did so without any recognizably neoliberal motivation. Is this neoliberalism? Perhaps to qualify a policy or response needs to emerge and be observed in multiple sites independently? But would that criterion exclude policies that for local reasons only emerge in one location? These difficulties arise because of the way neoliberalism-in-general often relies on the presence of narrow and shallow commonalities; for example, noting the common existence of markets (rather than making detailed comparison of their competitive structure). The merits of comparative political analyses are clear, but the strongest and most enduring generalizations are produced when the range of investigative questions is wide, the approach open to unanticipated answers and observations, and the analysis deep enough to be alert to the unspoken assumptions, values and beliefs motivating actual events and
practices (see Castree 2015). We worry when the category of occurrences identified by neoliberalism-in-general is elevated to the status of a hybrid, variegated theoretical construct when the construct is based on chaotic collections of only partially similar things.

**Neoliberalism as governmentality**

When neoliberalism is understood as a form of governmentality, definitions take a different tack again. The concept of governmentality draws on Foucault's studies of discipline and biopolitics to link neoliberalism's celebration of individuality to the self-disciplining internalization of identifiable neoliberal logics and rationalities. Here the word neoliberalism describes an amalgam of social, economic and cultural technologies that seek to govern everyday lives. Neoliberalism as governmentality infiltrates the practices and technologies of living, especially those that produce and reproduce autonomous beings capable of strategizing for success and accumulating rewards. Neoliberal logics become so ingrained they become ordinary common sense. The logics build legitimacy for disciplining those who resist and for dismantling institutions established for collective ends. These acts are made possible by imposing surveillance, imaginings, calculative devices and micro-scale technologies that control space at a distance to create complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The strength of the governmentality approach, as we see it, is its recognition that neoliberalism has to play out in everyday, observable practices; which means, inevitably, that acceptance can never be guaranteed. There is no outside pervasive force leveraging neoliberal logics into daily life, but nor is there a docile human population; people are endlessly capable of resistance or creative diversion.

We see two problems with neoliberalism as governmentality. The first is that many of the practices this version of neoliberalism describes have been made possible by, or are the effects of, changes that have revolutionized human behaviour, especially those associated with digitization and high-speed telecommunications. Human creativity, not ‘neoliberalism’, assembled the communications and surveillance capacities needed to produce the outcomes described in neoliberalism as governmentality approaches. The idea of hands-off government at a distance, for example, might be explained simply as a response to complexity. The point is that these changes are not necessarily associated with any particular form of social or economic organization and are likely to appear – with greater or lesser intensity – in all locations reached by technology. This is not to deny the importance of governmentality research or to sanction the oppressive ways institutions and governments use the digital traces of human behaviour for nefarious ends. Our argument is that governmentality, as a heuristic device to guide analysis of such oppressions, isn’t added to by modifying it with the word ‘neoliberalism’. The second problem is rather straightforward: that the meaning of the word, when used in its governmentality sense, does not refer to the same things as in neoliberalism’s other forms.

**Enactments**

Our approach to varieties of neoliberalism produces three separate abstractions: the first derives neoliberalism from philosophical arguments, the second imputes neoliberalism from observed practices and the third deduces neoliberalism from Foucauldian analyses of power. Collier (2014: 5) understands neoliberalism as a ‘style and practice of thinking’, but here we have three different styles of thinking. In practice, the three are generally conflated, concealing the different understandings they produce.

We think the relationship between neoliberalism-in-theory and neoliberalism-in-general is best understood by their different orientations with respect to the periodization of history.
The logics and propositions of neoliberalism-in-theory can be identified with regimes that have attempted, with various degrees of success, to implement a neoliberal vision. Thatcherism is an obvious example (see Peck and Tickell 2002). Following a broadly regulationist understanding of political-economic change, it can be argued that regimes guided by the foundational principles of neoliberalism-in-theory endured because they offered workable solutions to the contradictions that disabled Keynesian forms of organization from the 1970s. Like all regimes of accumulation, however, neoliberal regimes contain contradictions that become the seeds of regime downfall. Hence we saw debates about whether the global financial crisis would destabilize neoliberalism and trigger the dawn of a post-neoliberal era. Neoliberalism-in-theory invites this sort of episodic thinking. But this is not the case with the more agile orientation of neoliberalism-in-general, given its limitless capacity to incorporate emerging conditions. This approach dissolves the need to declare a crisis for neoliberalism and denies the possibility of a post-neoliberal outcome. Broader mutations of the typology of government (Collier 2014) are, in fact, out of sight. Moreover, here, a regime might be adjudged to be neoliberal – by virtue of evolving similarities to other regimes – without any local political will to pursue neoliberal ideals. In practice, we think, this isn’t possible: neoliberalism-in-general cannot be endlessly pragmatic and must continue to be guided by the durable tenets of neoliberalism-in-theory (contrast Peck and Theodore 2012).

The theoretical and practical aspects of neoliberalism can be united using Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Gramsci posited that theory and practice are inextricably intertwined, and that principles drawn from an ideology are enacted and reproduced in daily practices so they become naturalized, a common sense. For neoliberalism to achieve hegemonic status would require, therefore, the widespread social acceptance of, and compliance with, recognizable neoliberal ideas, logics and expectations, as anticipated by neoliberal governmentality. Jackson Lears (1985) doubts that could be possible, since it would require ordinary people to agree with arrangements that are contrary to their own self-interest (which would be contrary to neoliberal thought). Still, Margaret Thatcher was an elected prime minister, so the possibility of acting contrary to self-interest needs explaining. Dean (2014: 154) usefully observes that neoliberalism is a ‘doctrine of double truths’, constructing one truth – about freedom, self-expression, self-reliance, and so on – for general public consumption; and another truth – about the means to expand capital at the expense of working people – for its privileged knowledge community. This duality enables authoritarianism to thrive in the name of freedom. Another plausible proposition is to assert a partial hegemony, whereby the penetration of neoliberal ideas and logics is limited to elites in business, government and social institutions.

Beyond hegemony, however, there are also instances where the different aspects of neoliberalism are rolled into a single, multifaceted, and multi-scalar ‘explanatory repertoire’ (Hilgers 2011: 361). Neoliberalism thus solidifies into an entity or power, becoming the driving causal force of major political, social and economic change, empowered to reach into all facets of governance and policy. When category mutates into power, its imagined affectivity blurs the boundaries between practices that are identifiably neoliberal and practices that are not recognizable as such. It is only a short step then for neoliberalism to become the totality, the major determinant of nearly everything. Needless to say, we are not impressed by such brave accounts of the world.

**Conclusion: be wary of undifferentiated neoliberalism**

The analysis of neoliberalism and its effects is important. But rather than treating neoliberalism as many undifferentiated things simultaneously, we aspire to clarity about what is being looked
Neoliberalism in question

for and how it can be explained. The core of our argument is that we need to be wary of what sort of neoliberalism we are talking about and to be careful about shifting among meanings inadvertently. For example, carefully defining neoliberalism at the outset enabled Sheppard and Leitner (2010) to bring clarity to their subsequent evidence and argument. In many other cases, where the word is used without clear definition, we think that removing it from the analyses might help to produce more careful explanations. Following Sayer (1984), research targeting realities, like the spatial influences on the relationship between markets and monopolies, is more likely to create knowledge than research focused on stretching the boundaries of a construct.

Still, given the contemporary pervasiveness of this way of seeing the world, we think it worthwhile to ask if something is neoliberal or not. We should be arguing about which aspects of neoliberalism are influential at particular places and times, in what way, and why difference persists. As social researchers, we recognize that facts are laden with politics and with values that influence what evidence counts and how much it counts. That means we need to be more conscious of how we build descriptions, abstractions and generalizations about the observed world. We need to take differences across political territories seriously and into account, cognizant of the fact that ideologies or ways of governing cannot simply migrate, colonize and occupy. We need to recognize both the interdependence and independence of multiple forces, allowing the possibility of both mutually reinforcing tendencies and incontrovertible incompatibilities. We need to be open to possibilities: to appreciate that some times and places produce hybrids and mutant forms, or create completely new effects, but other times and places seem impervious to both the ideas and their practices. We need to spend more time studying these exceptions; they hold the clues to our liberation. We need to think more about the vast domains of human activity where neoliberalism remains largely irrelevant: where the idea’s expansionary energy flags and expires.

We conclude by recognizing the relationship between research into neoliberalism and the propagation of disruptive political projects. But we baulk at the elevation of opposition to neoliberalism into an (the) object of protest, to its establishment as the enemy, as the thing we are fighting against, as the political project that overwhelms all others. Effective political activism must target actual events and occurrences that affect ordinary people’s lives, and engage in ways that mobilize their interests, preferably in opposition to solid things that you can metaphorically throw a rock at, not imaginary things that defy definition. Even when ideas, processes and events are recognizably neoliberal, it may be more politically efficacious to afford them provisional status, to view them as trial-and-error experiments riven with contradictions, and to work at opening up their spaces in ways that create more desirable outcomes.

Acknowledgements

We thank the editors for their helpful comments. Phillip O’Neill would like to thank the Bartlett School of Planning at University College London for its generosity during the time this chapter was written.

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