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Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian and Philip  
Mirowski (eds), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*

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# Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian and Philip Mirowski (eds), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*

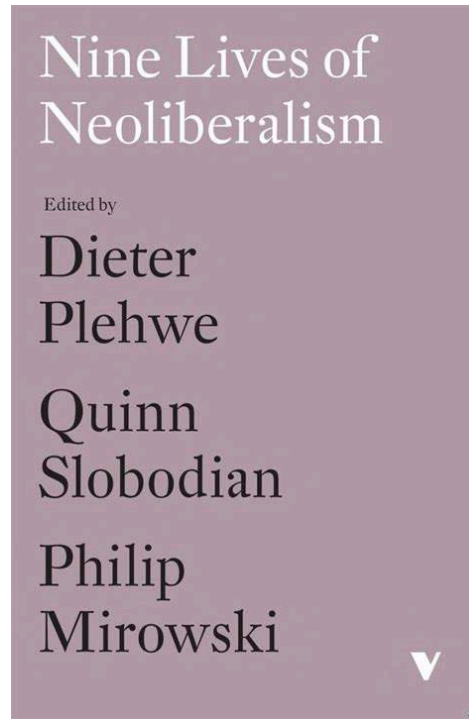
Matthew Eagleton-Pierce

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Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian and Philip Mirowski (eds), *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, London: Verso, 2020, 368 pages, 978-178873253-6

- 1 In the context of the ongoing social ruptures generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Biden Administration in the United States, some authors have proposed that neoliberalism has been significantly reformulated compared to previous decades or, more strongly, has been undermined to the point that its collapse is in motion (Saad-Filho, 2020; Tharoor, 2021). In conceptual debates, the notion of neoliberalism has in recent years been placed under sustained scrutiny as a reference point for modern capitalism (Clarke, 2008; Venugopal, 2015). When an expression is stretched and applied to so many objects—from sovereign debt management in Argentina to reduced state subsidies in Zimbabwe—its analytical value to enlighten seems in doubt. Thus, neoliberalism often appears a kind of amorphous Lacanian big Other which, in one sense, makes dialogue possible (as a widely used concept), but also implies that this ‘thing’ is a trans-subjective set of assumed rules governing social behaviour. If we can still hold on to the term, what is called ‘neoliberalism’ is clearly not a neatly chiselled ‘ideological system’, driving forward a distinct ‘project’, but is often messy, opportunistic and contradictory. Indeed, for some, this disorderliness and capacity for incorporating or repelling challenges is precisely what makes neoliberalism ‘resilient’, increasing its longevity (Peck 2010; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013; Eagleton-Pierce 2016).
- 2 Yet there is one sense of neoliberalism that—while still layered with variegated meanings and points of contention—arguably offers a more coherent scholarly agenda: the intellectual history of social networks surrounding the idea. As is increasingly appreciated in relevant literatures on economic ideas and economic history, from the 1930s ‘neoliberalism’ had an earlier gestation when the label was often used as a positive badge of identity by a loosely organised ‘thought collective’ of economists and philosophers, including figures such as Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke, and Milton Friedman (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Such thinkers, many of whom gathered around the Mont Pèlerin Society founded in 1947, were initially viewed as marginal and unorthodox, before gradually acquiring greater influence via academia, think tanks, along with political and business elites. Strongly supportive of capitalism, but alert to some of its major faults, they drew inspiration from Victorian liberalism yet, in the same move, sought a need to manage so-called ‘collectivist threats’ which animated their era, notably state socialism and Nazism, as well as corporate monopolies which impeded their vision of economic and political ‘freedom’ (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Jackson, 2010; Slobodian, 2018).
- 3 *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, edited by Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski, forms part of this growing cluster of research into neoliberalism as an



intellectual movement. Each of the editors are well positioned to advance such a volume: Mirowski and Plehwe as editors of the previous path-breaking study, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin* (2009), and Slobodian as the author of the much-debated *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018). Evolving out of a conference at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center in 2016, the book seeks to chart and map ‘more roads’ to and from Mont Pèlerin. Arguing against the notion that neoliberalism is ‘dead, defunct, or a diversion’ (5), the volume seeks to make three macro contributions. First, it aims to uncover the institutional embedding of neoliberal thought via a variety of sites, including transnational, country, and organisation-specific mutations. Second, the volume has a particular focus on individuals, notably experts, who have helped to create, test, and defend the neoliberal worldview across a range of initiatives and struggles. There remains a centre of gravity around the Western networks and policy tracks that have been spawned from Mont Pèlerin, including attention to lesser known but still important figures, such as Herbert Giersch, a highly influential economist advising German governments from the 1960s, or George Stigler, who is often overlooked in the study of the Chicago School. Third, across the chapters, there is an interest in uncovering both the diversity and heterogeneity in neoliberal thought, as well as how to better grasp the ways in which neoliberal ideas have fused with other ideological systems and political interests.

- 4 The book contains twelve chapters and is structured into four parts. The first part tackles themes related to the epistemology of neoliberalism. For instance, Martin Beddeleem’s chapter on how early neoliberal thinkers tried to distance themselves from rationalism and empiricism within the classical liberal tradition and, in turn, propose a new epistemology of critical constructivism is an interesting re-examination of how a sceptical view of the social sciences took hold, a theme that would echo in appeals to morality as an alternative approach for popular justification. The second part groups three chapters which cover themes linked to neoliberal subjectivity behind *homo economicus*. Melinda Cooper’s chapter explores the US case of how social conservatism around family responsibility combined with neoliberal policymaking—a story which is well told—but she nuances via the deeper context of the American poor laws and the contributions of Friedman and Gary Becker. Elsewhere, Dieter Plehwe’s piece is a valuable corrective history on the idea of entrepreneurship, for many a paradigmatic topic of neoliberalism. He makes the crucial point that the now pervasive ideological model of the entrepreneur as potentially found in any individual does not fit the Schumpeterian sense of the exclusive revolutionary innovator, but is much closer to the writings of Mises and Israel Kirzner, among others.
- 5 The third part of the volume moves to address questions regarding the internationalisation of neoliberalism beyond a standard focus on the so-called Washington Consensus. Here, there is a revealing chapter by Hagan Schulz-Forberg on the history of neoliberalism before the Walter Lippman Colloquium (WLC) in 1938, often considered by many to be the institutional starting point of neoliberalism. In a fresh analysis, he documents how thinkers surrounding the WLC embedded their ideas via a number of transnational networks, including notable efforts through the League of Nations and some of its key consultative bodies. The final part of *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* continues the story on the spatial ripple effects of neoliberal ideas, but addresses the particular role of think tanks, an organisational form that still remains understudied, not only for the dissection of neoliberalism but more broadly in the social sciences. To this end, Marie Laure Djelic and Reza Mousavi’s focus on the

importance of the Atlas Network over the past forty years does a service for many scholars of neoliberalism by detailing how mechanisms of ideological transmission worked via educational practices and seemingly mundane social networking. The final chapter by Stephan Pühringer—and one of the best in the volume—continues the story through a very carefully researched and presented argument on how German think tanks influenced economic policymaking in the postwar period.

- 6 Overall, *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* does a highly commendable job at charting new intellectual terrain, astutely recognising its object as a kaleidoscopic phenomenon which needs careful viewing to capture all its colours. The book brings together a first-class group of authors to excavate a range of institutional and ideological trajectories of neoliberalism. The work is particularly valuable for further exploring how to grasp the ‘elasticity of neoliberal norms and principles’ (11), a dimension which arguably requires further study in the analysis of contemporary capitalism. On this note, part of the cunningness of capitalist ideology lies in how it encroaches towards non-capitalist objects or, at the very least, those practices that have some degree of insulation from commodification processes (for instance, human rights or broader ethics of care). Like a racing car seeking to reduce atmospheric drag by slipstreaming behind a rival driver, capitalism tries to find ways to minimise resistance to ideas that are potentially threatening. The ceaseless labour of incorporating notions that capitalism views as ‘useful’ is carried out by armies of cultural producers, from intellectuals documented in this volume here to media scribes, marketers, social influencers and many more. Understanding this massive labour process requires grappling with how neoliberal capitalism is inherently adaptable, within and beyond its expert communities, and seeks nothing less than to create the appearance of being eternal, forever able to find another nine lives when needed.

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