

Title

Assembling schools as organisations: On the limits and contradictions of neoliberalism

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Short bio

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Abstract

In this chapter I draw on diverse theories and literatures to explore the various ways education researchers employ the term 'neoliberalism' to situate and enrich their analyses of the relationship between school organisation, statecraft and the wider economy. Understood as a first approximation, neoliberalism is significant as a provisional starting point to making sense of the discourses, technologies and logics of domination/empowerment shaping the internal operation of schools. But more patient critical-theoretical work is needed to move beyond a view of school organisation as tidy expressions of routines of neoliberalism. A key focus of the chapter therefore concerns the limits of neoliberalism as a normative description to capturing the complex terrain on which school organisation is overlaid and aligned with local projects and politics. In this chapter, I draw on elements of 'assemblage thinking' to conceptualise schools as *fields of contestation* where different interests and motives conflict, collide and sometimes converge to produce locally adapted translations and refusals of neoliberalism. Rather than assume that school organisation flows uniformly from the singular project of neoliberalism, here it is conceptualised as something that is mediated and struggled over in the context of locally situated dilemmas, obligations, normative commitments and dispositions.

Introduction

Neoliberalism has emerged as a broad descriptor or master narrative for situating education settings and processes within wider political and economic trends linked to the expansion of certain policy paradigms shaping public sector reform, namely marketisation, privatisation, competition, and de-democratisation. The aim of this chapter is to explore a range of arguments and perspectives that make use of neoliberalism as a conceptual tool and normative description to theorising schools as organisations and school systems more generally, while at the same time pointing to the complications and limitations inherent to such theorising.

There is no doubt that neoliberalism is a seductive signifier. It provides researchers with a conceptual apparatus for tracing empirically the relationships between micro changes in the development of value systems and institutional orders and macro changes occurring nationally and globally. But neoliberalism is more than a heuristic device for some – it is elevated to something normative, intuitive and ordinary ('we are all neoliberal now'). Some critics go so far as to declare neoliberalism a threat to 'common sense' itself (Hall and O'Shea 2013: 11) since it functions not only as an economic (or 'restorative') project (see Harvey 2005) but a social and cultural one shaping moral judgements about what it means to be 'good', 'fair' or 'just'.

Therefore, the same critics warn of the dangers of certain species of and appeals to common-sense thinking about the economy, welfare and politics, and the need to reclaim 'common sense' from its neoliberal appropriation. Similarly, among researchers, neoliberalism is mobilised to signify a dominant discourse, and

therefore suffers from 'omnipresence (treated as a universal or global phenomenon) and omnipotence (identified as the cause of a wide variety of social, political and economic changes)' (Clarke 2008: 135). The effect is that neoliberalism is transformed from a potent analytic tool into a detached signifier. This partly explains why neoliberalism is more often asserted than it is critiqued in education research.

Another reason why neoliberalism as a conceptual apparatus has not received sufficient critique in education research is perhaps because it operates as a powerful vehicle for mobilising new political imaginaries and collectivities, including 'consolation' for researchers keen to align their 'professional roles with the activities of various actors "out there", who are always framed as engaging in resistance or contestation' (Barnett 2005: 10). From the standpoint of social justice activists and those broadly on 'the Left', neoliberalism gives coherence to various grievances and discontents as well as specific objects, relations and processes to rage against (Davies 2014). Some researchers therefore gravitate to neoliberalism for cognitive and practical reasons – to define objectively that which they are against. But neoliberalism loses some of its critical edge when it becomes a psychological mechanism for coping with complexity, including elements of 'the social'. Barnett (2005: 7) for example is critical of the way neoliberalism is sometimes used to reduce 'the social' to a 'residual effect of hegemonic projects and/or governmental rationalities'. This is evident in some governmentality studies of neoliberalism where the social (those contingent, historically conditioned spaces in which subjects can be found answering back) is eclipsed by a rigid focus on the governmental techniques and practices that go into making-up ethical and economic selves. These studies appear to assume 'that governmental practice in a plurality of sites flows uniformly

from the big transformations produced by neoliberalism' (Newman 2007: 54), and therefore neglect the excess or surplus that often exceeds neoliberal capture. This does not mean we should abandon neoliberalism as a conceptual apparatus for modelling correlation or correspondence between what happens 'in here' and what occurs 'out there'. Rather, it means operationalising neoliberalism as something instrumental and tentative to capturing the 'in-between'. As Hall (2011: 9) argued, 'I think there are enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity, provided this is understood as a first approximation'.

In this chapter I present both a critique and defence of neoliberalism by way of drawing on relevant theories and literatures to present competing, sometimes conflicting and irreconcilable, viewpoints and perspectives. My aim is to use these various literatures and theories to work with and against dominant understandings of neoliberalism and to think through possibilities for its continued use in studies of schools as organisations. In particular, I draw on elements of 'assemblage thinking' (Higgins and Larner 2017a) as tools for addressing the importance of 'the social' in studies of schools as organisations. Here 'the social' can be used to reference an active, dynamic space framed by locally situated dilemmas, obligations, normative commitments, and dispositions. As I will demonstrate, assemblage thinking offers education researchers a useful set of tools for tracing empirically the myriad of forces through which schools as organisations are continually shaped and laboured over in the context of 'the social'. In what follows I make use of relevant literature to outline a general theory of neoliberalism from different theoretical perspectives, specifically Marxist and Foucauldian, and point to the multiplicity of conceptual approaches secreted within its meaning. This includes tackling some of the contradictory forces

at work through neoliberalisation and its relationship to statecraft or state transformation. Following this I outline two dominant approaches to theorising and researching schools as organisations – positivist and ‘critical’ – as well as discuss the mediating structures and discourses that bear upon the development of schools as organisations – from New Public Management (NPM) and disintermediation to performativity and network governance. In the final section I outline a theory of assemblage thinking and demonstrate its analytical significance to navigating the complex terrain on which schools as organisations emerge through *fields of contestation* where different interests and motives conflict, collide and sometimes converge to produce locally adapted translations and refusals of neoliberalism.

Conceptualising neoliberalism

Like many popular ‘-isms’ – feminism, spiritualism and universalism – neoliberalism is used as a shorthand to describe a movement or ‘thought collective’ (Mirowski 2009: 428). While there is widespread agreement regarding some of the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism – key being marketisation, privatisation and possessive individualism or self-interest – neoliberalism can be differently conceptualised using specific theoretical lenses. Harvey (2005) for example best exemplifies a Marxist and political economy approach to neoliberalism. Here neoliberalism is characterised as a class-based hegemonic project driven by the interests and actions of elite groups of transnational actors pursuing new means of capital accumulation and class power. Understood from this perspective, neoliberalism signifies various interrelated patterns thought to be endemic to the

development of modern capitalism, namely the subordination of national economies to global patterns of deregulated labour, depleted trade union bargaining powers, deregulated markets, and decentralised authority. Similarly, Duménil and Lévy (2004) and others (Plehwe, Walpen and Neunhoffer 2006) have conceptualised neoliberalism as a class hegemony engineered to ensure concentration of wealth among the rich through sustaining patterns of consumption and debt as well as propping up corporate monopoly of industry. From a governmentality and Foucauldian perspective (Ong 2006; Rose 1999), neoliberalism represents a range of strategies or techniques utilised by government and non-government authorities for the purpose of managing populations and political structures and decisions in the absence of direct control. For Foucault (1982: 790), the term government should therefore be understood in the broadest sense to mean

legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action of others.

At the heart of neoliberalism is a commitment to certain economic and political theories and philosophical perspectives concerning the ontology of the subject (or 'subjectivity') and the relationship between the state and the economy. On the one hand, neoliberalism borrows from the moral philosophy of utilitarianism and elements of classical liberalism to advocate a view of the subject as a rational utility maximiser or 'homo economicus', and therefore strives for conditions in which the freedom of

the individual to pursue their own self-interest is not impeded by 'externalities' such as the authority of the state. However, unlike classical liberalism which held a strong belief in spontaneous order and the corrosive effects of state intervention on the naturally occurring formation of free, atomistic subjects, neoliberalism is not totally indifferent to the state and its capacity to help others realise and advance their private interests. It is certainly opposed to certain configurations or species of state intervention – such as top-down bureaucracy and welfarism in general. This includes government programs designed to lower taxes, stabilise pensions, increase spending, and protect individuals and groups against some of the unintended consequences of the capitalism. But neoliberalism gives the legitimacy to the state insofar as it performs the role of 'a market-maker, as initiator of opportunities, as remodeller and moderniser' (Ball 2007: 82). It therefore favours the creation of 'space[s] for a new conception of the role of government in the macroeconomy' (McNamara 1998: 5).

A strategic focus of neoliberalism therefore is 'the active destruction and discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions' (Peck and Tickell 2002: 384) and the privatisation and depoliticisation of public powers and utilities more generally, namely the transfer of ownership of publicly-owned services into private hands. Where wholesale privatisation is not possible, a species of active government is necessary to facilitate the subordination of public services to the rationality of the market and the logic of Capital (of profitability, surplus extraction and exchange value). This occurs either through contracting out services to private providers or subsuming existing (publicly-run) services within an economic logic or enterprise form that compels service providers to behave as businesses and rewards

individuals who act competitively and 'rationally', i.e. in their own self-interest and above or in contradistinction to the interests of others (Marquand 2004). Under neoliberalism, therefore, 'the market produces legitimacy for the state, which in turn becomes its 'guarantor'' (Gane 2012: 626).

Here the term neoliberalism can be used to condense a heterogeneity of complex forms and formations originating in the design of new technologies of government and governance introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Western economies were gripped by high inflation and economic stagnation during this time, which many liberal economists and political conservatives attributed to Keynesian economics designed to artificially stabilise the economic cycle through cutting tax and increasing spending (Hirschman 1991). Interventions from right-wing think tanks – namely the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) and Adam Smith Institute (ASI) – would later successfully purge the government of its Keynesian-welfarist champions and lay the path for the rise of Thatcherism in the UK (Hall 1979) and Reganism in the US (Brown 2006). These 'diverse skirmishes were rationalized within a relatively coherent mentality of government that came to be termed neo-liberalism' (Miller and Rose 2008: 211).

A genealogy of neoliberalism suggests that neoliberalism began as early as the 1920s and 1930s when economists Friedrich Von Hayek and Ludwig Von Mises engaged in the 'intellectual project of reinventing liberalism' with the ambitious aim to 'replace political judgement with economic evaluation' (Davies 2014: 3). For Hayek and Mises, a political economy that works to design or predict collective solutions to

individual problems, namely state socialism, has dangerous consequences for the moral, intellectual and economic development of a nation and its peoples. Unlike classical liberals, however, Hayek and Mises did not fully embrace a view of the subject as spontaneously rational or a view of the economy as a natural entity that effortlessly and efficiently self-regulates. Hayek, Mises and other critics of socialism at the time (George Stigler and Henry Simons in particular) did share the classical liberal vision of the moral and ontological primacy of the individual as distinct from and superior to the moral status of 'society' and the construction of agreed public purpose. However, they were not committed to a vision of laissez-faire capitalism but instead developed a vision of advanced liberalism (or 'neoliberalism') in which government intervenes to determine agendas and priorities. This includes activating and compelling certain behaviours (market-ready, market-responsive or 'rational' behaviour for example) where it does not exist or requires support (see Jones, Pykett and Whitehead 2013 on 'nudge' tactics). As Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009: 51) show,

While neoliberalism aspires to create a utopia of free markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, it has in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose versions of market rule.

The rise of 'policy networks' (Rhodes 2007: 1244) certainly undermines the notion of a sovereign government capable of exercising a monopoly of control over its various constituent parts. This is evident by the generation of new 'policy communities' and

'heterarchical relationships' (Ball and Junemann 2012: 137) made possible by new philanthropic, charity and private sector actors replacing established policy actors and agencies. Yet, as Taylor (2000: 69) observes, 'government is being redefined and reshaped from the centre outwards rather than being hollowed out' (also see Holliday 2000). Government under neoliberalism shifts responsibility towards citizens, communities and organisations to govern themselves, and therefore relinquishes some of its direct control. At the same time, government is no less active in 'setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system's constituent institutions, instruments and markets' (Spotton 1999: 971). Thus, the regulation-deregulation dichotomy is a misleading one (Aalbers 2016).

Take academies and free schools in England for example. These schools are granted 'autonomy' (or, to be more precise, professional discretion) to govern themselves strategically, financially and operationally. Yet a condition of that autonomy is that school leaders, governors and trustees adopt certain risks, responsibilities and liabilities formerly managed by traditional structures of government. Under conditions of devolved management schools are required to be active in their own government as consumer-responsive, market-conforming organisations. Hence regulation is not restricted to parastatal bodies like the school's inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), calling to schools to make themselves publicly accountable. Regulation is exercised through agents themselves: parents are addressed as consumers (Wilkins 2012); head teachers are activated as 'transformational leaders' (Leithwood and Jantzi 2005); and governors are activated as 'professionals' (Wilkins

2016). What is specific to neoliberalism is 'the proliferation of mechanisms of self-regulation in the shadow of the state' (Levi-Faur 2005: 13), taken to be essential to 'linking political objectives and person conduct' (Rose 1999: 149) in the absence of direct government intervention. On this account, neoliberalism does not entail the 'hollowing out' of the state or 'institutional retreat' (Panitch and Konings 2009: 68) since deregulation produces fragmentation and complexity that requires greater steering from the centre in terms of agenda and priority setting. According to Levi-Faur (2005: 12), 'Governance through regulation (that is, via rule making and rule enforcement) is at the same time both constraining and encouraging the spread of neoliberal reforms'.

Positivist and critical approaches

Neoliberalism is one of the most cited and contested concepts in contemporary studies of education. It describes an analytical tool and policy strategy but is used more generally as a normative description for denoting specific trends in the development of Western economies and politics since the late 1970s. These trends include the rise of finance (or speculative) capitalism; the privatisation and marketisation of public welfare; the curtailing of trade union bargaining powers and deregulation of labour; the entrenchment of national economies and political structures within the grip of global forces; the valorisation of self-interest and competitive individualism; the shift from hierarchy to 'heterarchy' or self-organisation as principles of government; and the intensification of risk, dispossession and insecurity as factors of everyday life. Various researchers (Hatcher 2006;

Papanastasiou 2017; Saltman 2014; Stahl 2017; Wilkins 2016) have sought to understand the development of education through the lens of these wider political and economic trends, and therefore use neoliberalism as a conceptual apparatus for mapping the connections and disjunctions between micro relations, processes and structures and macro changes occurring nationally and globally.

Research on schools and school systems employ specific modes of critique to draw out these connections and disjunctions. They include, on the one hand, 'assessing the empirical validity of factual analysis or the technical-instrumental practicality of specific social arrangements' (Jessop and Sum 2016: 105). This is typical of research commissioned by governments, private industry and some charities where the preferred outcome is criticism leading to 'impact' and 'improvement' of system design and service delivery. These types of research – sometimes called 'school effectiveness' research – tend to operate under positivist assurances that there is unmediated access to 'truth' and reality can be grasped empirically at the level of 'representation' and 'meta-analyses', such as metrics and algorithms. Intervention is justified as neutral, value-free or 'non-ideological' since it is driven by evidence that is automatic and identical to reality. But measurements are not neutral descriptions of properties of reality. They are produced through normative assumptions, value systems and the identification of 'problems', and therefore implicated in the very properties they claim to represent or capture (Beer 2015). Data use and data production is a social creation and mode of politics (Johnson 2015).

Positivist thinking is complementary to research that strives to bring about greater forms of system coherence and control, and therefore at odds with the idea that schools and school systems produce imaginaries that can only be grasped as partial and provisional. For Jessop and Sum (2016), a critical approach to research entails more than just criticism. It involves 'critiques of ideology and domination' (ibid: 105) with a specific focus on semiosis and 'its articulation into specific imaginaries, discourses and discursive practices or with structuration in the form of specific sets of social relations, institutional orders or broader social arrangements' (ibid: 106). Such an approach is useful to situating and analysing schools and school systems as the socio-material effects of broader discursive patterns and mediating structures, including discourses and practices of neoliberalism. At the same time, it recognises 'the scope for disjunctions between empirical evidence, actual events and processes' (ibid: 106), and the importance of methodological reflexivity more generally. A critical approach to school organisation entails documenting the different mediating structures and discourses guiding the development of schools and school systems as well as pointing to any theoretical inconsistencies and anomalies arising from the situated analysis of neoliberalism in practice ('neoliberalisation').

Mediating structures and discourses

A useful starting point for thinking about schools and school systems more generally is to trace the mediating structures and discourses that bear upon their development. In England for example publicly-funded schools are required to fulfil certain contractual obligations to the government, namely funding agreements. This strictly

applies to academies and free schools with responsibilities for the financial and educational performance of the school as well as responsibility for management overheads in the form of employment disputes, contractual issues and premises management. Academies and free schools therefore differ from other publicly-funded schools – local government ‘maintained’ schools for example – in that they possess freedoms to determine their own budget spending, curriculum, admissions (subject to the admissions code), staff pay and conditions, and length of school day and term. A condition of these freedoms and flexibilities is that academies and free schools are auditable and workable as ‘high-reliability’ organisations (Reynolds 2010: 18) or businesses (Wilkins 2016). Operationally and strategically, these freedoms and flexibilities demand schools adopt specific modes of co-ordination and their formal operations or activities to ensure continuous self-monitoring, compliance checking, risk assessment, performance evaluation, succession planning, and target setting.

Those responsible for ensuring the smooth functioning of the school as a ‘high-reliability organisation’ – school leaders, school business managers and school governors in particular – emerge as technicians of NPM. This is particularly striking in the case of head teachers and other school leaders who face huge pressure from central government and the school’s inspectorate, Ofsted (2001, 2011), to maximise delivery of quantifiable outcomes through effective and continuous monitoring and appraisal of staff and student performance (Gunter 2012). This includes enhancing upward accountability to central government in the case of academies and free schools (‘state-funded independent schools’) who are required to fulfil the obligations of their funding agreement with the Secretary of State. Algorithmic governance

linked to the production and analysis of pupil attainment data, financial data and staff performance data therefore tends to dominate the everyday work performed by head teachers as well as school governors and trustees (those with responsibility for holding senior school leaders to account for the educational and financial performance of schools). Increasingly school governors and trustees in England are harnessing the algorithmic power of digital data technologies (the Department for Education's school comparison tool, Analyse School Performance (ASP), and the FFT (Fischer Family Trust) Governor Dashboard, among others) to meet these expectations and enhance their organisational preparedness and answerability (Wilkins 2016).

Central to NPM as an organising principle of public service organisation is the idea that service providers share characteristics which can be evaluated, measured and compared to determine their effectiveness, efficiency and continuous improvement (Clarke and Newman 1997). Although NPM tends to be confined to the school, it gives rise to wider systems of 'commensurability, equivalence and comparative performance' (Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2016: 542). In effect, NPM helps to produce schools as navigable spaces of replicable and measurable 'quality' so that they are amenable to the scrutiny and statistical mapping of external regulators and funders, and therefore more visible or 'appropriable' as deliverers of a standardised product. NPM therefore signifies increased devolved management of education but also the marketisation of education more generally and a shift from 'welfarism' to 'post-welfarism' (Gewirtz 2002).

As Gewirtz (2002) observes, schools in England have undergone significant changes to their internal structures and practices due to a major shift in the politics of education policy making since the late 1970s. Since this time there has been a persistent derisive government rhetoric designed to undermine the relatively autonomous position of teachers and school leaders as ‘professionals’ and the role of local governments as administrators of school bureaucracy and oversight. These kinds of institutional orders and social arrangements were integral to the development of post-war social policy and the political settlement known as ‘welfarism’, but which came under increased pressure to reform following interventions by economic liberals and political conservatives during the late 1970s – otherwise known as the ‘New Right’. Borrowing from elements of public choice theory and neo-classical economics, the New Right excoriated state intervention in the economy and welfare as authoritarian, demoralising and inefficient (Gamble 1986), and instead championed the role of market concepts of supply and demand, competition and choice to ensure ‘allocative efficiency’ (Boyne 1996: 704) in the funding and delivery of education. Rate-capping on provision was introduced to ensure that school budget levels were linked to student intake, for example. This included summoning parents in the role of consumers to create structured incentives for schools to respond to parents as discriminating ‘choosers’ or ‘rational utility maximisers’ (Wilkins 2012). Parents would also be supported in their choice making by league tables, school visits and school brochures, thereby making service providers more responsive and transparent.

Gewirtz (2002: 3) refers to this paradigmatic shift in education policy as the ‘post-welfarist education policy complex (PWEPC)’. The PWEPC points to a decisive

break from post-war social policy, namely the administration of 'needs' through bureaucratic centralism and rationalist social planning, and the construction of agreed social purposes. For Ranson (2003: 460), the shift from a welfarist to a post-welfarist paradigm has not only intensified concerns with 'accountability' but reimagined and reoriented relations of accountability to 'strengthen corporate power at the expense of the public sphere'. Corporate power and private sector involvement in public sector organisation is closely linked to NPM as it relies on the development of depoliticised systems of devolved management removed from traditional structures of government, including local government interference, union bargaining and forms of 'deliberative democracy' or stakeholder participation (Wilkins 2016). Under these conditions governments appear to more trustful of 'nonhuman agents' as arbitrators of educational excellence – digital data, real-time analytics and machine intelligence (Williamson 2015) – than they are of teachers, head teachers and middle leaders as professionals. This includes auditing techniques, performance appraisals and standard evaluation frameworks – what Peck and Tickell (2002: 384) call the 'technocratic embedding of routines of neoliberal governance'. Moreover, private sector takeover or sponsorship in public education is intimately linked to the proliferation of these technologies and techniques of government.

Ball (2008) argues that network governance and venture philanthropy are key to understanding the design and operation of contemporary schools and school systems. Network governance is used here to capture the emergence of new policy communities 'which 'catalyses' business in the delivery of education services and reconfigures and disseminates education policy discourses' (ibid: 749). Related to

this shift from government to governance is the expansion of public-private partnerships and private sector participation in education (Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo 2016). The exponential rise of private sector actors and agencies as deliverers of public services points to a shift away from hierarchy and top-heavy bureaucracy as models for steering the organisation of schools and school systems. A key consequence of this shift is the dispersal and disaggregation of state power facilitated by increased decentralisation and 'disintermediation'. Disintermediation describes 'the withdrawal of power and influence from intermediate or 'meso-level' educational authorities that operate between local schools and national entities' (Lubienski 2014: 424), such as local government and municipal authorities.

As Gunter, Hall and Mills (2015) observe, the active discreditation of the bureau-professionalism of local government has cultivated opportunities for private sector management of public services and expanded opportunities for the involvement new knowledge actors and parastatal agencies in the business of monitoring and running schools. Specifically, they document the role and contribution of consultants 'who trade knowledge, expertise and experience, and through consultancy as a relational transfer process they impact on structures, systems and organisational goals' (ibid: 519). Other knowledge actors include school inspectors who assist and compel schools to realise the ambitions of the state and therefore enhance the legitimacy of government. Similar to consultants and other 'experts' involved in practices of credentialing, mediation and monitoring, school inspectors constitute a community of policy actors or 'policy brokers' (Baxter 2017: 3) with significant influence on the strategy and operation of schools and the ends and outcomes of school systems more generally. But the ends and outcomes of school systems are not only shaped

by the professional judgements and evaluation criteria of school inspectors operating within a national framework of education governance. School organisation is shaped by global testing regimes facilitated by international programmes conducted by big supraorganisations (Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2016), such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Assessment (PISA).

The purpose of the OECD's PISA and other programmes is to collect and compare data on student achievement from different countries across the globe, to indicate the effectiveness of those national education systems in terms of supporting academic performance, and to use that data to generate a flattened comparison model that allows national governments to determine their international economic competitiveness. As Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2016: 540) observe, these global testing regimes constitute a new form of biopolitics and 'metapolicy, steering educational systems in particular directions with great effects in schools and on teacher practices, on curricula, as well as upon student learning and experiences of school'. More importantly, they compel the acceleration and expansion of new infrastructures of accountability in which 'human capital formation has become a central economic focus of national policy, resulting in the economisation of education policy' (ibid: 541).

In this section I have outlined some of the mediating structures and discourses guiding the development of schools and school systems. In some cases, education researchers mobilise neoliberalism as a broad descriptor for linking these discursive

practices and institutional orders to wider macro processes, specifically a hegemonic project or dominant social arrangement in which the ontology of the subject (or subjectivity, sometimes called ‘the social’, see Barnett 2005) is taken to be the residual effect of specific political and economic tendencies linked to processes of marketisation, competition, de-democratisation, and privatisation. Here neoliberalism functions as an analytical framework for tracing interrelationships between school organisation, statecraft (or state transformation) and the wider economy. However, some education researchers appear to be less discriminate in their use of neoliberalism compared to others, or at least do not engage sufficiently with the limits of neoliberalism as a normative description to capturing the complex terrain on which school organisation is overlaid and aligned with local projects and politics. In what follows I draw on elements of ‘assemblage thinking’ (Higgins and Larner 2017a) as tools and practices for thinking through the possibilities and implications of such work, namely situating schools as organisations within a ‘matrix of dependencies, reciprocities, and obligations’ (Trnka and Trundle 2014: 150).

Assemblage thinking

Understood as a first approximation, neoliberalism is significant as a provisional starting point to making sense of the discourses, technologies and logics of domination/empowerment shaping the internal operation of schools. Schools and school systems in the grip of advanced liberalism tend to be defined by managerial deference, technocratic efficiency, upward accountability, and performativity. Yet despite the consistency of its economic objectives, neoliberalism remains,

ideologically and logically, internally divided and contradictory (Hall 2005). As Clarke (2008: 135) argues, 'Neoliberalism suffers from 'promiscuity' (hanging out with various theoretical perspectives)'. But such promiscuity extends to political formations and politics itself (the ways in which actors labour to form new collectivities and counter-conducts). This is evident in the multiplicity of forms and expressions neoliberalism takes as it is co-articulated with other political movements and ideologies (from neo-conservatism and social rights activism to feminism and the Third Way) (see Higgs and Larner 2017b). This explains the unevenness, unpredictability and variegation or 'messy actualities' of neoliberalism across geo-political contexts (Brown 2006: 14). As Ong (2006: 13) suggests,

It therefore seems appropriate to study neoliberalism not as a 'culture' or a 'structure' but as mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually constitutive and contingent relations.

On this account, the 'success' of neoliberalism is contingent on 'how these selectivities reproduce specific semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes that support the reproduction of economic, political and social domination' (Jessop and Sum 2016: 108). From this perspective, neoliberalism does not only operate through 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2007: 34) but also through strategies of reorientation, reculturing and 're-agenting' (Hatcher 2006: 599) in order to rebuff local politics and local culture. Neoliberalism involves experimentation and adaption (Peck and Theodore 2015). Such a view of neoliberalism means refusing

‘reified and homogenous accounts of modern power’ which portray ‘forms of power/knowledge as monolithic, with state practices fitting seamlessly with practices of self-creation’ (Bevir 2010: 425). Moreover, it means ‘foregrounding processes of composition and the heterogeneous actants involved’ (Higgins and Larnier 2017b: 4) with a focus on the labour of socially situated actors engaged in everyday dilemmas of grafting and holding together disparate elements to forge new hegemonic alignments and forms of agency (Newman 2017). As Li (2007: 13) observes, ‘what appears to be rational landscape design or ‘management’ is the serendipitous outcome of everyday practices that have quite disparate motives’.

‘Assemblage thinking’ (Higgins and Larnier 2017b: 3) offers a useful set of analytical tools and perspectives for tracing empirically ‘the complicated distribution of neo-liberal governmentality’ (Clarke 2008: 138) and grappling with the complexities of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ through a focus on the ‘mundane practices through which neoliberal spaces, states, and subjects are being constituted in particular forms’ (Larnier 2003: 511). Instead of focusing exclusively on the ‘resultant formation’ or sedimenting domination, assemblage thinking prioritises the ‘processes of assembly’ (Higgins and Larnier 2017b: 4) through which neoliberalism is grafted onto other elements and entities. This type of relational-processual thinking is critical to moving beyond a view of neoliberalism as naturally tending towards structural coherence and unity. More importantly, it sustains a critique of neoliberalism as always provisional, unfinished and partial given the ‘contingent assembly work’ involved (Higgins and Larnier 2017b: 5) and calls attention to the ways in which ‘particular relations are held stable, fall apart, are contested and are reassembled’ (Anderson et al, 2012: 180).

In terms of education research into schools as organisations, there is a growing body of literature that is attentive to the dynamic assembly work underpinning the formation of schools as organisations, even if the authors do not explicitly identify 'assembly thinking' as their primary analytical framework and theoretical orientation. What this literature shares with assembly thinking is a 'processual' or 'relational' perspective that focuses on context, materiality and socially situated performances to disrupt conventional 'synchronic', institutionalist' or 'structuralist' accounts of social change. In their research on policy enactments in schools, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012: 3) analyse the 'creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation' through which policy discourse is translated and implemented. The point here is that policy discourse is not the 'closed preserve of the formal government apparatus of policy making' (Ozga 2000: 42) nor it is the preserve of implementers (school leaders, teachers and governors) and their strict traditions and value systems. Rather, policy discourse is a messy hotchpotch of disparate elements that are grafted together to produce situated, sometimes problematic alignments between the demands of government and parastatal authorities and the interests and motives of school actors. On this account, the relationship between school organisation and neoliberalism is not linear, predictable or deterministic since this carries the assumption that human action and response are the residual effects of rational consensus, perfect control and system design. As Mitchell and Lizotte (2016: 224) remind us, it is important to remain circumspect of the 'apparent seamlessness' with which policy is translated into the 'consciousness and practices of individuals and groups'.

Other education researchers (Johnson 2004; Keddie 2013; Prieto-Flores et al. 2017; Wilkins 2017) have adopted similar approaches to unravel the micropolitics of policy enactments in schools and their subsumption or accommodation with neoliberalism. These accounts capture the entanglement of disparate elements that make up schools as organisations, including agendas or priorities, laws, socially circulating discourses, knowledges, and regulatory regimes. Moreover, they reveal moments of disjuncture, contestation, negotiation and repair – when meanings are transposed and refracted through seemingly conflicting sets of interests and motives to produce contradictory practices and crosscutting impulses and goals. Wilkins (2017) for example demonstrates the messy, complicated governance work entered into by school leaders and governors running co-operative academies. Like all publicly-funded schools in England, co-operative academies are accountable to central government and the school's inspectorate, Ofsted, among other stakeholders, but which have co-operative principles at the heart of their values system, namely 'mutual support through sharing good practice' and 'good governance through sound membership based structures that guarantee involvement for all the key stakeholders' (The Schools Co-operative Society 2016). Aptly described by Woodin (2015: 6) as 'hybrid' organisations, co-operative academies appear to work both with and against the grain of marketisation, competition and individualisation that saturates public education in England. Wilkins (2017) details the ways in which co-operative academies appear to successfully resist certain elements of 'neoliberalism' (legal instruments and schemes of delegation designed to shift power away from students, parents and teachers as stakeholders in the school) in order to make themselves democratically accountable. At the same time, co-operative academies are compelled to accommodate certain elements of neoliberalism due to government

pressure to remain economically sustainable and competitively viable in the local education market. Co-operative academies therefore engage simultaneously in upward accountability and downward accountability, competition and collaboration, in order to achieve partial congruence of multiple stakes, interests and objectives. What emerges from these accounts is the contingency and congruence of neoliberalism in the context of locally situated dilemmas, obligations, normative commitments, and dispositions.

In terms of conceptualising schools as organisations, assemblage thinking brings into focus the ‘inherited institutional landscape’ on which neoliberalism as the ‘politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification’ is always patterned and layered (Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010: 3-4). Here, then, we are encouraged to think about the ‘the different modes of insertion into “global” neo-liberalism that are experienced by different regions, nations, and more local places’ (Clarke 2008: 137). Thus it is possible to identify a ‘variety of neoliberalisms’ (Plehwe 2009: 3) rather than view neoliberalism-in-practice (or neoliberalisation) as ‘always and everywhere in the same homogenous and singular outcome as the sequencing is predefined’ (Springer 2015: 7).

Conclusion

This chapter has made use of various theories and literatures to offer a comprehensive overview of some of the challenges and opportunities to theorising school as organisations in the neoliberal state. Despite the omnipresence of the

term neoliberalism both in popular and academic jargon, the literature reviewed in this chapter points to a lack of 'conceptual specification' (Castree 2006: 1). This is due to the different ways neoliberalism has been translated and adapted within and across academic disciplines. From a Marxist and political economy perspective, neoliberalism is an ideological hegemonic project designed to maintain new means of capital accumulation and class power among groups of elite transnational actors (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism can also be viewed from a Foucauldian and governmentality perspective to denote a governmental field of power in which subjects are summoned and activated to behave in certain ways, normally concomitant with the political ends of government (Dean 1999; Rose 1999). In both cases, however, neoliberalism is in danger of becoming a detached signifier where there is not focused attention on the interconnections between the whole (the abstraction we might provisionally term neoliberalism) and the part (the day to day organisation of schools and school systems more generally). One of the ways in which this problem can be redressed without moving beyond neoliberalism as a normative description and analytical framework for our work is through thick description of the ground logics and deeper frames shaping the development of schools as organisations.

The aim of this chapter has been to sketch some of the limitations and contradictions of neoliberalism, especially the critical gap in our thinking about its application and utility to making sense of the complexities of school organisation in the modern era. What is not being proposed here is a move beyond neoliberalism, although significant critical literature looking at 'after neoliberalism' and 'post-neoliberalism' (Springer 2015) warrant further discussion and debate. Rather, what this chapter is

calling for is a critical-reflexive space in which education researchers continually work with and against concepts of neoliberalism in order to confidently attest to their analytic value. Assemblage thinking offers a useful toolkit for doing this, as do other approaches no doubt. What is unique to assemblage thinking and already pervasive in some of the education literature is a refusal to presuppose the effortless translation of policy into practice. This includes resisting binary language that comfortably bifurcates meanings (public/private, state/market, citizen/consumer, local/global, power/resistance) or privileges discourse over materiality and vice versa. Instead assemblage thinking is attentive to the blurred boundaries, interrelated vocabularies, crosscutting impulses, and intersecting positions that characterise seemingly 'neoliberal' work. This means examining the tensions and struggles that arise when schools as organisations align themselves with the neoliberal work of marketisation, commodification and privatisation, rather than become subsumed by them.

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