

Why neoliberal approaches to policy are detrimental to democratic participation

*The neoliberal introduction of market principles to the governance of public institutions has eroded faith in more democratic forms of deliberation and decision-making, argues **Bradley Allsop**. Our response should be to encourage greater workplace democracy and more collective, cooperative forms of local participation.*



Picture: by [Karine Germain](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Neoliberalism. It's a word that is seemingly everywhere these days, responsible, apparently, for everything from the financial crisis to ecological collapse and rises in the cost of living. But what, exactly, is it?

Neoliberalism, in essence, can be viewed as a governmentality (governing rationality) under which the 'market becomes the principle upon which the whole rest of society is remodelled' (see Chris Byrne's [paper](#) for this quote, where he discusses Foucault's conception of neoliberalism). Gone is the classical liberal assumption of the naturalness of markets, operating as the institutional flourishing of innate human drives, and instead what we have is an ambitious, invasive political project aimed at cultivating markets and market-like systems, and the behaviours they require from individuals, in as many spheres of human activity as possible (extending such logics beyond formal economic spheres into cultural, educational and political ones too). Neoliberalism is most emphatically not what it is often mistaken as – a revival of laissez-faire economics – but something much more subtle and sophisticated.

As a way of approaching governing it has come to infect traditional social democratic parties as well as those on the right – simply painting it as right-wing free-marketeering misses its reach and effect. Whilst the deregulation and privatisation of public services and companies during the Thatcher years are perhaps the most infamous examples of neoliberalism in action, extending market logics does not always have to entail these policies – indeed, creating a new market system often requires an ambitious project of re-regulation, rather than 'cutting red tape'. A key area where this has been evident in recent years is higher education, where a large and invasive package of reforms introduced over the past eight years in particular has resulted in much more intense competition both *between* institutions (university vs university in the form of league tables) and *within* institutions (constant appraisal and incentivising of staff on narrow, quantifiable measures). The debt burden has been shifted from government to students, who are now increasingly treated as consumers or customers, and corporate structures and cultures are more evident in HE governance.

The question becomes no longer *whether* the state should intervene in the economy but *how*. Human activity, in as many spheres as possible, is to be remodelled, from the state itself to individual subjectivity; citizens, organisations and institutions are disciplined, nudged and coerced into acting in self-optimising, competitive and individualistic ways, with the state also promoting competition as the universal value by which to order human life and society. As Jeremy Gilbert [puts it](#), 'neoliberalism, from the moment of its inception, advocates a programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens'.

In a [recent paper](#) with Ben Kisby and Jacqueline Briggs, we theorise that neoliberal policies appear to be eroding faith in many forms of collective decision-making and traditional politics, whilst potentially offering the market as a new site of political contestation. We argue this by looking at the personal experiences of citizens living in a political system shaped by neoliberal policies. We identify declines in internal and external political efficacy – the confidence one has in one's own political abilities and in the responsiveness of the system respectively – and an increase in individualism as key psychological changes that are triggering changes in our political behaviour.

Neoliberalism brings about these psychological changes about in a number of ways. The obvious, explicit project of marketisation is one: the process of creating markets or market-like systems in new places previously untouched by these logics. Marketisation encourages us to act and think like consumers, and challenges democratic norms of compromise and collective decision-making (the UK higher education sector, discussed above is a perfect example of this process in action). Accompanying this is 'responsibilisation', an increased, almost obsessive, self-reliance. This is particularly evident in New Labour's approaches to state aid, such as the introduction of tuition fees (introducing personal responsibility for your education), as well as additional conditions, workfare requirements and sanctions attached to welfare support. Over the same time period we have seen repressive labour policies, such as a raft of [trade union restrictions](#), that rob us of a source of collective solidarity and feed into a more 'flexibilised', precarious work landscape. This makes it harder for people to put down roots as they have to constantly mould, shape and reinvent their skills and very identities in order to continue to compete (i.e. live) in the globalised marketplace.

Spiking inequality is another legacy of neoliberalism, one that has [been linked](#) to fragmented societies where trust and civic and political engagement are declining. Linked to this process is the changing character of the state through privatisation and deregulation, directly eroding the number of areas that are under the control of government and so reducing its ability to act and aid citizens.

Finally, we are witnessing increasing areas of 'expert rule' whereby markets and competitive systems need experts to create and maintain them, and democracy can be perceived as threatening such systems. In this process, knowledge (particularly narrow, assumption-ridden economic expertise), not citizenship or accountability, becomes *the* important requirement for decision-making. In the words of the authors of [The Econocracy](#) this 'devalues citizenship' and leaves many citizens feeling simply unable to engage in the discourse that now surrounds politics. As Aditya Chakraborty, in his [review](#) of their book, argues: 'By making their discipline all-pervasive, and pretending it is the physics of social science, economists have turned much of our democracy into a no-go zone for the public.' It also, of course, again removes options from the hands of elected representatives, by narrowing the policy areas they have direct control over.

The result is that there is little scope or hope for collective change – as Wendy Brown [states](#),

'the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action [...]. Correspondingly, a "mismanaged life" becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency [...] The body politic ceases to be a body but is rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers'.

A democracy without a properly engaged and empowered citizenry – not to mention accountable decision-making and genuine variety in political choices – is really one in name only. The impact of neoliberal ascendancy has been to require individuals to compete with one another, to constantly become more resilient, more flexible, more inward-looking and less trustful of government and less hopeful in collective action. More and more as market logics encroach into public policy areas, it becomes harder and harder to imagine forms of expression, of organising, of *being*, that do not conform to them too.

There are, however, plenty of other ways that we can choose to organise our society. Neoliberal politics has led us to the brink: ecological collapse, near-unparalleled inequality, deep democratic crises... a system rooted in growth, competition and selfishness that is clearly unsustainable. Radical democratic experiments that allow for diversity and local decision-making, without the distortions of wealth inherent in market systems, are an alternative way to start to structure society. Greater workplace democracy, strengthened trade unions, local cooperative movements and nationalised key industries – all of these are rooted in collective, cooperative forms of decision-making, allowing us control over and security in our lives. We are what systems make us: craft a system based on competition and individualism and you'll get people that act accordingly. If we craft a system that allows citizens to act in more cooperative contexts, and to give each mutual respect and support, we might find we also have a more politically engaged culture too.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit.

*It draws on a recent article by [Bradley Allsop](#), [Jacqueline Briggs](#) and [Ben Kisby](#), 'Market Values and Youth Political Engagement in the UK: Towards an Agenda for Exploring the Psychological Impacts of Neo-Liberalism' published in *Societies*.*

About the author

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