

We are seeing the onset of a new logic of government, which promises to alleviate many of the symptoms and crises of our age

Many commentators greeted the onset of the financial crisis with the expectation that this heralded the end of the neoliberal era. Yet four years later, the 'neoliberal' model of policy-making has exhibited a resilience which such people would not have predicted.

***William Davies** argues that this increasingly common framing looks at the problem in the wrong way and that we are instead witnessing the emergence of what he terms 'neocommunitarianism'.*



When the magnitude of the current economic crisis became apparent in September 2008, many observers believed that they were witnessing an entire governing economic paradigm collapse in a matter of days. The BBC's business editor, Robert Peston, has said that, at the time, he assumed that 2008 would come to symbolise for Western capitalism what 1989 symbolised for state socialism. The question of what would come after capitalism, or at least after neoliberalism, provoked excited debate.

Four years later, the resilience of the 'neoliberal' model of policy-making provokes a certain confusion and some dismay amongst many people. Surely some sort of 'paradigm shift' ought to have occurred by now? The template of economic policy-making appears largely unchanged.

Or maybe we're just approaching this problem in the wrong way. If we understand neoliberalism a little more precisely and philosophically, we might also begin to identify ways in which it is being usurped by a new logic of government, which promises to alleviate many of the symptoms and crises of our age. In an article published in the new edition of *Political Quarterly*, I refer to this logic as 'neocommunitarianism'.

One of the startling things about so many contemporary upheavals, from the banking crisis to the riots of 2011 to the apparent obesity epidemic, is how much they are interpreted as *psychological* in character. Individuals are assumed to be incapable of acting quite as rationally or as self-interestedly as policy-makers might once have hoped. This emphasis on psychology is both a legacy of neoliberalism, but also the path to a subtly different paradigm.

It is a legacy, inasmuch as neoliberalism is fundamentally about elevating the choosing, desiring mind to the status of society's ultimate barometer of value. Neoliberalism, not entirely unlike classical liberalism, was initially a project of enshrining a form of value relativism. For thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek, the chief virtue of markets was that they provide a peaceful means of coordinating the choices of millions of individuals, without any over-arching view of what a 'good' or 'correct' choice consists of.

Policy makers today show a growing interest in economic psychology, as advanced by behavioural and happiness economics. This is in keeping with the neoliberal obsession with choice. But in its empirical dimensions, it disrupts the fundamental value relativism that was so important to Hayek and his followers. Increasingly, governments *do* have a view on what a good choice consists of, and point to well-being surveys and experimental evidence in confirming it.

Where our health, mental health, environment and personal finances are concerned, evidence is gathered on which choices produce greater well-being or long-term cost efficiency. Bad choices need identifying, and the conditions (or 'choice architectures', as *Nudge* refers to them as) and influences behind them need addressing. A new vision of the individual is emerging, as governed as much by social norms as by incentives. New techniques, tests and data-gathering methods are emerging, through which policy-makers can trace behaviour and well-being.

In what sense is this 'neocommunitarian'? Certainly not in the ethical sense of communitarianism propagated by 'Red Tories' or 'Blue Labour'. But just as neoliberalism took a philosophical argument about justice and rights, and converted it into a technocratic policy toolkit, neocommunitarianism is effectively doing the same with respect to a philosophical argument about social relations and traditions. The pursuit of bodily, mental and collective 'wellbeing' takes the Aristotelian ethos of communitarianism, and rationalizes it to make it testable. Helping people pursue a healthy, financially stable life is now a job for public policy, in a way that the neoliberals never could have countenanced.

This is not how we imagine a paradigm shift. It is even less of an ideological shift. It is more diffuse and technical than that. But by paying attention to techniques of valuation and how the policy failures of neoliberalism are being interpreted, we get a glimpse of how contemporary crises becomes managed, if not quite resolved.

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