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Edited by Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont

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## Introduction

### *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*<sup>1</sup>

Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont

This book is an effort to assess developments in a neoliberal era spanning the past three decades of global history. Although social science examines many phenomena, it looks only rarely at what Pierson (2003) calls “big, slow-moving processes.” We are often not aware of the sands shifting beneath our feet as events change the character of the times in diffuse ways. Beginning in the 1980s, the growing influence of market-oriented ideas constituted just such a process, global in scope, pervasive in effects. We want to know what consequences neoliberal ideas and policies had for social, economic, and political life. But even more central to this inquiry is a desire to understand the process whereby neoliberal ideas worked their way into the policies of governments, the operation of organizations, and the lives of ordinary people. In that respect, this volume is an investigation into the dynamics of social change.

Compared with many studies, this one involves a shift in optics. Neoliberalism is often analyzed as a set of policy reforms reflecting a class politics that ranges capital against labor (Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005). Although that approach has some validity, such perspectives tend to treat a multidimensional set of developments in largely economic terms and sometimes overemphasize the negative effects of neoliberalism. Perspectives that treat neoliberalism as a cultural phenomenon offer a useful corrective but often overstate the domination of neoliberal ideas over social life. In this volume, we try to integrate economic, political, and cultural analyses of neoliberalism, and instead of seeing it as a development with homogenous effects across space and time, we view it as a more open-ended stimulus that provoked a diversity of responses.

<sup>1</sup> For their comments and suggestions, we thank the members of the Successful Societies program, particularly William Sewell, Jr., as well as Mary Brinton, Paul Leduc Browne, Mazen Elfakhani, Robert Fishman, Marion Fourcade, François Harelimana, Devesh Kapur, Robert Sampson, Jennifer Silva, and Martin Schröder.

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Developments associated with neoliberalism, such as the opening of markets and new policy regimes, put important constraints on many people, usually linked to their social positions. But it also offered opportunities and new tools from which a response to such developments could be fashioned. In short, one of the core arguments of this book is that neoliberalism brought forth various types of creative responses. The results were far from similar across populations and national settings, not only because neoliberal initiatives were more intense in some times and places but also because people responded to them differently, drawing upon cultural and institutional resources distinctive to those settings. The effects of neoliberalism must be seen as the product of syncretic social processes that engaged many actors mobilizing multiple instruments in the social, economic, and political environment.

This is also a book about social resilience. Although neoliberal initiatives improved the lives of some people, it also posed profound challenges to the well-being of many groups, communities, and individuals as more intense market competition reallocated resources and market logics worked their way into ever more spheres of social life. We are interested in the ways in which groups sustained their well-being in the face of such challenges, and we see this as a problem of social resilience. We use the term “social resilience” to refer to the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it. Although our focus here is on the response to neoliberalism, we conceptualize social resilience broadly to encompass the capacities of societies to cope with many kinds of challenges.

Social resilience is an essential characteristic of what we call successful societies – namely, societies that provide their members with the resources to live healthy, secure, and fulfilling lives. We are especially interested in understanding the sources of social resilience, and we look for them in the *institutional* and *cultural* resources that groups and individuals mobilize to sustain their well-being. In that respect, this book builds on our previous endeavor, *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Affect Health* (Hall and Lamont 2009), which was also concerned with the resources that sustain people’s capabilities for coping with challenges. Both books are the product of intensive intellectual collaboration over several years among a group of scholars drawn from a wide range of disciplines.

Our approach to social resilience can be contrasted with influential perspectives that emphasize the psychological qualities needed to cope with various types of shocks. We are less interested in individual traits than in the social and cultural frameworks underpinning resilience, and we are skeptical about the efforts of some governments to find in individual resilience the solution to social problems.<sup>2</sup> Even though many working class Americans believe they should find within themselves the psychological energy and resources to deal

<sup>2</sup> On resilience as an object of government policy and sponsored research, see <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ukresilience> and <http://www.amiando.com/WLVKYLQ.html>.

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with structural insecurity and rising inequality (e.g., Silva 2012; Sharone 2013), we look for the institutional and cultural resources that underpin resilience in the wider social environment.

Studying social resilience entails making linkages between the micro, meso, and macro levels of inquiry. Therefore, drawing on a range of analytical and disciplinary tools, we integrate accounts of the shifts in macro and meso contexts associated with neoliberalism with an examination of the impact those shifts had on what is perceived, conceived, and experienced at the individual level (Lefebvre 1974). Although the emphasis of each chapter varies, our focus is not only on the institutional and cultural changes structuring the contexts in which people live but on self-concepts, orders of worth and criteria of evaluation linked to the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont 1992, 2000; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Foucault 2008).

**The Challenges and Impact of the Neoliberal Era**

The past three decades, which we term the “neoliberal era,” have seen profound economic, political, and cultural changes with global reach. We are most interested in those associated with neoliberalism, understood as a wide-ranging shift in prevalent ideas and social relationships privileging more intense market competition, less state intervention, and an entrepreneurial orientation to action (Harvey 2005). To some extent, of course, these are longstanding features of capitalism, whose prominence has ebbed and flowed over time (Sewell 2008). But we see the recent period as one in which they have come to the fore again with a new intensity.

Although there are important economic dimensions to these developments, including heightened competition in more open markets for goods, capital, and labor, at their heart was a series of shifts in thinking and discourse among ordinary citizens and elites. Some of these developments are bound up with globalization, but even the opening of global markets was contingent on changes in policy inspired by neoliberal paradigms. Therefore, we group a wide range of developments together under the rubric of neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> Many are described in more detail in the next chapter by Peter Evans and William Sewell, which also describes the historical emergence of neoliberalism, initially as an economic ideology and then as a social and political phenomenon inspired, at least in part, by the economic crises of the 1970s. However, we begin with a brief summary of what we mean by the term.

***Neoliberalism***

The defining feature of the neoliberal age has been the rise of market ideologies that, at their apogee, approached the “market fundamentalism” Somers (2008) has described. They were marked by a resurgent faith in the power of markets

<sup>3</sup> Of course, many elements of neoliberalism are closely tied to the history of capitalism itself (see Harvey 2005; Jobert and Théret 1994; and Centeno and Cohen 2012).

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to secure efficient outcomes, whose corollary was declining confidence in the capacity of states to allocate resources efficiently. As such ideologies gained traction in domestic politics and the international sphere, they called into question the principles used to justify many kinds of state intervention, forcing governments to reconsider how they delivered public services and the division of labor between the public and private sectors (Blyth 2002; Prasad 2006).

Such issues are central to the collective imaginary of a society. We use the term “collective imaginary” to describe the overarching narratives that tell people what their society is about, what its past embodies and its future portends, who belongs to it, and what kinds of behavior merit social respect. Although there are distinctive features to every national imaginary, the latter also draw on international imaginaries, considered in chapters by Will Kymlicka, Jane Jensen, and Ron Levi on human rights, social rights, and multiculturalism. In line with other analyses, we see the neoliberal era as one defined, not only by a new set of policy regimes but also by a collective reimagining of communities (Anderson 1983). The effects were far reaching and multifaceted. Governments and international agencies were called upon to rethink their missions, and individuals faced profound redefinitions in the criteria for social worth as economic performance and market status became more central markers for social and cultural membership.<sup>4</sup>

This process of change was never simple or seamless. Even in the most settled of times, people subscribe with varying degrees of enthusiasm to some elements in the collective imaginary while rejecting others. As neoliberal narratives came to prominence, they were taken up with fervor by some groups and stoutly resisted by others. Neoliberalism did not impose a new framework of ideas so much as set in motion a series of contests over ideological and material resources – inside societies and states. It shifted the context in which everyone had to operate, generating new opportunities and constraints that are the focal points of our analysis.

One reason we emphasize the neoliberal imaginary is the range of its import. In their most familiar forms, neoliberal ideas endorsed the value of market competition. They called for a rearrangement of state-market relations and, in some guises, for a shift to more robust civil societies that could perform the tasks at which states were no longer thought to be efficient. Where others had once seen families or communities, growing numbers of economists and policymakers began to posit congeries of economic actors driven by a market calculus. In some instances, market competition was deliberately extended to new spheres, including the delivery of health care and public services. In others, the growing popularity of market logics altered the *modus operandi* of organizations through ancillary processes, such as the adoption of ranking systems that promote competitive behavior (Espeland and Sauder 2007).

These developments can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of the dictum that different historical periods typically authorize different modes of action. Ours is a period that has authorized self-interested market behavior in

<sup>4</sup> On social and cultural membership, see Lamont (1992, 2000) and Ong (2006)

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settings where it might once not have been legitimate. That in turn has inspired some reconfiguration in social relationships. If never freeing people completely from the restraining bonds of moral sentiment, neoliberal ways of thinking often led to a decline in the respect accorded to norms of communal solidarity (Streeck 2009). In many parts of the world, the growth of markets in goods for which people once depended on local patrons or personal relationships could be liberating (Kapur et al. 2010). People's choices often increased, although with redistributive consequences as the availability of some goods became more dependent on income. In some cases, such developments may be altering local social orders by shifting people's willingness to invest in certain kinds of communal relationships.

In much the same way, neoliberalism inspired changes in the dominant scripts of personhood toward ones more focused on a person's individuality and productivity (Greenhouse 2009). It promoted new criteria of worth that encouraged many people to approach their lives as if they were "projects" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). As more value was attached to the capacity to prosper on competitive markets, people who had once derived self-respect from being "hard workers" found that was no longer enough: one now had to be a worker with high productivity deploying skills validated by the market, signaling worth and social membership through consumption (Lamont and Molnár 2001). Developments such as these have a bearing on the terms in which social recognition is granted and self-concepts formed. Over time, the narratives people used to describe themselves changed, with implications for what they thought they could do and how they saw themselves as acting in the world (Abelmann 2003; Polletta et al. 2011). Socioeconomic status, often intertwined with notions of moral status, became more central to the matrix through which individuals conceived their self-worth – although with notable cross-national variations (Lamont 1992, 2000).

In some cases, these developments may have been emancipatory and in others not. Although it is difficult to establish how far reaching such changes have been, some of the most consequential aspects of neoliberalism lie in its implications for human subjectivities (Greenhouse 2009; Ong 2006).<sup>5</sup> Again, however, these changes cannot be understood as the imposition of neoliberal modes of thinking on entirely plastic individuals. People responded to neoliberal values with varying degrees of enthusiasm and resistance, and many people turned neoliberal ideas to their own purposes (to establish racial equality, for instance, as noted in Chapter 4 by Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming on African Americans' responses to stigmatization). There is wide variation in the extent to which neoliberalism inspired new visions of agency.

*Neoliberal Reform in the Economic and Political Realms*

The concrete impact of neoliberal ideas is most obvious, of course, in the political realm, where they altered prevailing views about the appropriate relationship between the public and private sectors. In Chapter 1, Evans and Sewell

<sup>5</sup> On the gendered dimensions of subjectivity promoted by neoliberalism, see Walkerdine (2003).

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provide a sweeping survey of these developments notable for its attention to the cultural as well as the political plane. Mainstream party platforms moved in neoliberal directions on both sides of the political spectrum and in many parts of the developed and developing world (Iversen 2006; Mudge 2011). As a result, the cultural matrix defining the “center of gravity” of political discourse was transformed. In the United States, for instance, the term “liberal” took on a negative valence, as the success of neoconservative movements altered the terms in which even their opponents characterized their own positions (Gross, Medvetz, and Russell 2011).<sup>6</sup> Encouraged by international agencies, governments across the world privatized public services (including public utilities, highways, prisons, schools, and hospitals) and “deregulated” markets with a view to promoting competition (Vogel 1996). Welfare programs were reconfigured into “workfare” programs to push recipients into employment under the guise of making them more “self-reliant” (Miller and Rose 2008; Duvoux 2009; Guetzkow 2010).

Jane Jenson and Ron Levi (in Chapter 2) see the political significance of neoliberalism in three developments affecting many spheres of policymaking. These include a shift in scale, as functions formerly performed by national states were passed to lower levels of government or to international regimes (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). Policies put a new emphasis on the individualization of risk, responsibility, and reward, and governments pursued a “new public management” that built market competition into the delivery of public services accompanied by “technologies of performance” based on monitoring, ranking, and benchmarking (Lascombes and Le Galès 2004; Miller and Rose 2008).

Corresponding economic developments have been equally consequential. Accelerated by technological developments and rising demand for services, the opening of world markets, made possible by neoliberal policies, shifted relative prices and the feasibility of producing some kinds of goods in particular countries. The results were a shift in the economic opportunity structures facing many workers, rising levels of national income inequality, and rapid rates of growth in many parts of the developing world.

However, liberalization was not a monolithic process. One of the striking observations of Evans and Sewell (in Chapter 1) is that governments embraced neoliberal policies with widely varying degrees of enthusiasm and implemented them in terms adapted to local contexts. The form of neoliberal policies also changed over time (Peck and Tickell 2002). The picture that emerges from this study is not one in which neoliberal discourse achieves complete dominance but one in which countercurrents are engaged wherever neoliberal initiatives are proposed, often producing a fragmentation of discourses and diversities in policy. Hall and Thelen (2009) underline this point when they note that many of the initiatives often described as “neoliberal” have very different effects

<sup>6</sup> In the United States, the positions we characterize as neoliberal were often adopted by organizations described there as neoconservative. See Vaisse (2010).

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and that the effects even of similar policies vary by national context (see also Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002).

Much the same can be said about the impact of neoliberal policies on overall economic well-being. Evans and Sewell (see Chapter 1) observe that the economic effects of neoliberal reform varied with the context into which it was introduced. In countries where markets had been highly restricted, as in China and the postcommunist states of Eastern Europe, neoliberal reform brought real benefits, such as increased trade and greater access to consumption goods. By contrast, such reforms rarely inspired the high rates of growth once promised in the developed economies. The most favorable aggregate effects seem to have come in the developing world. Rapid economic growth in the emerging economies of Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe owes much to neoliberal policies. Economic reform provided new opportunities to many people otherwise earning a subsistence living in rural communities (Collier and Dollar 2002: 49). International trade brought them new markets and products, and global communication opened up new vistas on life. People locked into traditional communities found in market logics a new basis from which to mount claims for equality, much as eighteenth-century Europeans once had (Kapur et al. 2010; Sewell 2010). In terms of its aggregate economic and political effects, neoliberalism has been far from a purely negative phenomenon.

*New Inequalities*

However, neoliberal reform has also had profound distributive effects. When markets are made more open or competitive, the opportunity structure changes and some people gain, but others lose. In general, those with the resources and skills to prosper on competitive markets do well, but those lacking in such resources are disadvantaged even if they had the right skill sets for a previous era. This redistribution of opportunity has been reflected in rising levels of income inequality in both developed and developing countries. Thus, neoliberal reform has posed stringent challenges to specific social groups.

How widespread these challenges are varies by national context. In the emerging economies where neoliberal reform inspired rapid rates of growth, new markets have offered opportunities to many people aspiring to middle-class positions (Ravallion 2009; Kharas 2010). By contrast, in most of the developed democracies, even the middle class has seen its well-being stagnate in recent decades, as Lucy Barnes and Peter Hall note in Chapter 7. Large gains at the top of the earnings distribution have not been matched in the lower half (Fischer et al. 1996; Piketty and Saez 2003; Bartels 2008). The result has been an unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the corporate class in the United States and United Kingdom and rising intergenerational inequality in many countries (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Chauvel 2010).

Other dimensions of neoliberal policy also imposed hardships on people in the lower socioeconomic strata. Initiatives that weakened the labor movement undercut the organizations best placed to defend these people (Fantasia and Voss 2004). Changes to the benefit levels, duration, and eligibility requirements



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of social benefits reduced the level of social protection available to them, and ancillary developments privatized risk (Smith 2002; Uchitelle 2006; Hacker 2008; Jacobs and Newman 2008). Growing numbers of people have been forced into precarious positions marked by low pay and minimal social benefits, from which it is difficult to escape (Gautié and Schmitt 2010). In some countries, these developments have deepened social divisions, notably between labor-market insiders and outsiders (Palier and Thelen 2010). Despite the labor activation schemes that have been a hallmark of the neoliberal era, there are durable differences between those engaged in social networks through work and those suffering from insecurity and social isolation as a result of poverty or unemployment that limits their access to income, sociability, and in some cases even health care (Paugam, Gallie, and Jacob 2003; Palier et al. 2012). Many societies are now better described by frameworks of social exclusion than of social capital (Silver 1994; Castel 1995; Paugam 1996; Daly and Silver 2008).

Moreover, the effects of such developments are by no means entirely economic. The shifts in relative prices that accompany the opening of markets induce corresponding shifts in social status even when they enrich the community as a whole. The status of those with skills in higher demand increases, but people whose status was based on outmoded skills or older institutional orders are threatened, for instance, as the jobs they held move to the global South. Effects of this sort stretch into the family, where women called upon to work to support the household sometimes gain, but underemployed men who might once have been the principal breadwinners lose stature. In both developed and developing economies, therefore, the more intense market competition characteristic of the neoliberal age gives rise to heightened status anxieties.

As various forms of social protection, both traditional and modern, have fallen, rising levels of material insecurity have threatened everyone. Even affluent members of the middle class have developed new concerns about reproducing their class position. Growing numbers of middle-class parents are devoting increasing amounts of resources to improving the prospects for their children (Lareau 2003; Aurini, Dierkes, and Davies forthcoming). For ordinary workers already under pressure to demonstrate self-reliance in a neoliberal world, the presence of the poor in public spaces keeps alive a “fear of falling,” and rising competition for jobs intensifies people’s concerns about losing ground vis-à-vis lower status groups (Ehrenreich 1989; Newman 1989; Duvoux 2009). The result has been rising xenophobia and declining support for poor relief (Art 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Developments such as these have implications not only for individuals but also for national communities. Chauvel (2010) suggests, for instance, that long-term effects are likely to follow from the widespread fears market insecurity has induced in the younger generations. These fears are not only affecting self-concepts and levels of social engagement; they are also affecting their shared representations of the symbolic community (who cares for whom) in terms likely to be durable over the coming years (see also Brinton 2011). In much the same way, the shifts in self-concept associated with neoliberalism have political



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implications. Neoliberalism generally leads people to think of themselves as governed less by others and more by themselves (Greenhouse 2009). Although that has advantages for some individuals, it tends to feed declining levels of trust in the public authorities. Moreover, those suffering most from rising levels of inequality are most prone to distrust government and to doubt their capacities to influence it (Lascoumes and Bezes 2009). A self-perpetuating cycle is then set in motion as declining levels of civic engagement among these groups reduce electoral pressure on governments to redistribute resources (Anderson and Beramendi 2012).

Growing social divisions between insiders and outsiders also weaken the capacity of the public authorities to legitimate policies based on appeals to social solidarity (Palier et al. 2012). As we have noted, more intense competition for jobs and associated status anxieties feed a growing hostility toward immigrants. In France, for example, where southern European migrants were once regarded as contributors to the French economy (Noiriel 2006), non-European migrants are now more often resented as intruders (Bail 2008). In Chapter 5, Leanne Son Hing identifies a set of psychological dynamics that connect more intense market competition with more prejudice against outgroups; in Chapter 7, Barnes and Hall find more hostility to immigrants where the gap in well-being between the upper and lower middle class is larger. Although the meritocratic values promoted by neoliberalism should lead, in principle, to less discrimination, Son Hing notes that people primed by such values are more likely to express prejudice and people exposed to prejudice are more likely to suffer adverse effects if they subscribe to neoliberal values: they are more likely to blame themselves for their fate than to recognize structural discrimination. We see here that some of the most important effects of neoliberalism emerge from complex dynamics in which economic and political developments interact with shifting views of cultural membership and community.

To take another classic example, in many countries, rising levels of economic inequality have been accompanied by increasing spatial segregation in housing between income and ethnic groups (Massey and Denton 1994; Préteceille 2009). That segregation then narrows prevailing definitions of the symbolic community (namely, those with whom we feel a sense of solidarity or responsibility as part of “us”), which in turn encourages further segregation (Lamont 2000). Neoliberal schemata also encourage people to be more mobile in social and spatial terms (Jasper 2002) and thus more disconnected from any particular community (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006, but cf. Fischer 2011). Although that might promote intergroup interchanges, it can also make people feel more vulnerable and defensive vis-à-vis other social groups.

Our broad point is that the redistribution of advantage and disadvantage associated with neoliberalism follows not only from how markets reallocate resources but from how neoliberalism shifts discursive structures. Of central importance are the categories people use to assess worth. Neoliberal ideas promote particular frames used by people to define how they should live their lives, what they are capable of, and for what they can hope. These are constitutive

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elements of horizons of possibility and of the contours of symbolic communities. A discourse that elevates market criteria of worth tends to classify people who are affluent into a bounded community and to marginalize those with fewer economic resources. Corresponding ideas about productivity are often used to draw rigid moral boundaries around people who are unemployed, low skilled, or low paid, thereby narrowing the circle of people to whom citizens feel a sense of responsibility. Moreover, by defining worth in terms of levels of income or productivity they can never attain, neoliberal schemata can be disabling for people with low levels of income or skill. They come to be defined (and often self-define) as “losers” – especially in societies that do not support varied matrices of worth based on morality, solidarity, or other attributes unrelated to income (Lamont 2000).

The precise impact of developments such as these is hard to assess, of course, and they are to some extent part of an older story about capitalism. Over history, as markets expanded, consumption came to be viewed more widely as a marker of cultural membership, often in competition with notions grounding cultural membership in citizenship rights (Marshall 1950). Galbraith (1958) and Marcuse (1964) saw such processes at work in the 1950s, but they may have been intensified under the influence of a highly commercial media during the 1980s and 1990s (Schor 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Commercial considerations are certainly penetrating more deeply into spheres of life once construed as autonomous from them (Zelizer 2010). Such tendencies are especially marked in countries such as China (Davis 2000; Hanser 2008) and Russia (Shevchenko 2001), which moved from command to market economies. However, Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue that even long-established market economies have seen the rise of a new model of individuality that views the most valued social actor as a networking entrepreneur developing his or her human capital for the purpose of achieving individual success. Barnes and Hall find some evidence for such shifts in attitudes (see Chapter 7), and, in Chapter 6, James Dunn charts changes in housing policy based on corresponding shifts in premises about how actors will behave.

### *A Syncretic Social Process*

Neoliberalism must not be seen, however, as a blanket laid over the world. The process whereby neoliberal schemas acquired influence over policymaking and popular beliefs is ultimately best described as a syncretic social process. Neoliberal schemas had significant effects on the course of events: they were not simply a smokescreen behind which a politics driven by material or ideal interests went on exactly as before. But their social impact was inflected by the creativity with which political actors used them and conditioned by the contexts into which they were introduced. In many cases, actors devoted to a particular cause found they could pursue it by adopting the language made widely available in the neoliberal era (with references to benchmarking, return on investment, social entrepreneurship, best practices, and the like). By framing their demands in new terms, many groups could advance longstanding purposes. Over time,