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EDITORIAL/II

WHAT IS THE USE OF NEOLIBERALISM AND NEOLIBERALISATION?

Contentious concepts between description and explanation

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ABSTRACT: The growing interest in neoliberalism and neoliberalisation has produced a wave of academic production, but also criticisms toward these concepts. They concern the conditions under which they may actually work as both/either explanans and/or explanandum of transformations affecting contemporary societies. The main accusations made are presented and compared with the actual uses of these categories, building above all on the applications made in the articles that follow in this special issue.

It is argued that this pair of concepts may help to detect critical processes descriptively, but so far it has not been able to provide explanations. Working more as descriptors, or identifiers of processes and outcomes they, rather, provide indirect paths to explanation, by becoming explananda themselves. It is easier to understand the "why" of social processes and changes starting from these concepts and turning to other "real" theories than by direct use of them. In order to do that we need to operationalize neoliberalism and neoliberalisation as articulated ideal types, so as to take into account the existing varieties of policies, practices and relationships. This is still to be done and looks a lot like being a collective effort based on cumulative research and theorization

KEYWORDS: Description/explanation, ideal types, neoliberalism, neoliberalisation, public policy

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1. Introduction

The terms neoliberalism and neoliberalisation (N&N) form a pair of concepts whose ontological and epistemological meanings are strictly connected to each other as well as to concrete historical developments regarding the economic, political and cultural spheres of social life in contemporary capitalism. In heuristic terms it has been increasingly used to give an account of how these developments change the features of contemporary society, particularly as far as political economy is concerned. Not only have public policies carried out in various places since the 1970s been labeled as neoliberal, but they have also been considered as being part of wider and, according to some, historical processes of neoliberalisation affecting even economic and cultural spheres. A clearly normative use of this concept has also been made, although mainly charged with negative connotations inspired by the critical points of view of some politicians, activists and radical scholars. On the contrary, supporters of neoliberal policies and scholars in economics prefer to qualify these policies and the resulting characteristics of state-market relations using different labels.

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The convergence of interests in N&N from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives has produced not only a rather big surge of academic production, but also a further wave, of impatience and criticism regarding their epistemological value. Within the more general aim of this special issue the circumscribed and specific aim of this article is that of taking stock of this scientific debate. The challenge these concepts must face regards the theoretical and methodological conditions under which they may actually work as both/either explanans and/or explanandum of historic transformations affecting the basic components of society and the relationships between them. For this

reason the focus here is only on those meanings of N&N that emerge when they are used with descriptive and interpretive aims in the production of scientific knowledge, regardless of the translation of these categories into normative devices for policy making and rhetorical devices for critical thinking. The articles that follow in this special issue provide a good opportunity to discuss this them not only in the abstract, but also taking advantage of insights and evidence coming from updated analyses focussing on different sectors of policies and/or places.

In the following section we will start with alleged weaknesses, presenting the main academic criticisms and accusations faced by the concepts of N&N. In section 3 some of the actual uses of these concepts are presented and discussed, building above all on the applications made in the articles that follow in this special issue. The conclusion is that this pair of concepts is able to encompass actual and even preponderant trends, although they work more as descriptors, or identifiers of processes and outcomes affecting the economic, political and cultural spheres of society, as well as the intersections and interdependencies among them, than as basic components of causal theory. “Real” causal theories in social sciences are thus offered selected and rough-cut material to work on, as long as N&N is subject to a fruitful ideal typification and operationalisation for empirical research. Hence, in section 4 a provisional and illustrative list of the theories involved is provided, again mainly building on the articles that follow, while section 5 articulates some of the theoretical and analytical conditions under which N&N concepts can be indirectly useful for such explanatory purposes.

2. Criticisms and accusations: theoretical and methodological deficits of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation

Several scholars have dealt critically with neoliberalism as a concept, considered “a controversial, incoherent and crisis-ridden term” (Venugopal 2015, 166). Some authors conclude that it would be better to do without it (Barnett 2005; Ferguson 2010; Laidlaw 2010), as “removing the word neoliberalism from our analyses would force us all to produce more careful explanations” (Weller, O’Neil 2016). The main charges are those of it being confused and confusing, lacking descriptive specificity, being contradictory, having methodological fallacies and being affected by ideological biases. To these the charge of overestimating the role of ideas as instigators of structural change must be added (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016, 146-7). All the accusations presented below must be examined bearing in mind that they mostly refer to the claim to be able to

use N&N as an explanatory device, although the descriptive function is not immune from criticism.

The charge of being *confused and confusing*, along with those of *conceptual ambiguity and instability*, even to having become “a ‘rascal concept’ – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested” (Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010, 184), or a “chaotic concept” (Jessop 2013, 65), is motivated by the presumption that it serves too many different phenomena and theoretical conceptualizations, thus being a catch-all term (Venugopal 2015, 166). This is proved by the difficulty, or even refusal (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016), to achieve consensus over a stable conceptual definition of what this slippery concept actually means. Indeed, it seems to mean different things to different people (Springer et al. forthcoming), so that “bits of neoliberalism are everywhere and changing all the time” (Le Galès 2016, 158). Besides, “the meaning of the term can slip in the course of an argument being passed from author to reader” (Ferguson 2009, 171) and change from paper to paper (Castree 2006). For this reason “what it stands for and what it explains is both confused and confusing” (Turner, 2008, 2). This goes along with the charge of being often “general, imprecise, lacking discussion of any specific mechanisms, missing empirical data and marked by confusion between a number of processes” (Le Galès 2016, 156).

The multipurpose use of the concepts contributes to such a confusion. On one hand *neoliberalism* has been described – as reported for example by Venugopal (2015), although the following list is enriched with objects pointed out by other authors:

- as a paradigm, a set, or category of economic ideas or macro-economic doctrine, an intellectual-professional project or epistemic construction that has given rise to an orthodox ideology;
- as a wave or set of market-oriented public policies – thus implying a stronger and not weaker role of states – influenced by this set of ideas and kept more or less coherently together by a political project “justified on philosophical grounds and seeking to extend competitive market forces, consolidate a market-friendly constitution and promote individual freedom”, that is to dismantle redistributive Keynesian and welfare regimes. Such a project is “intended to modify the balance of forces in favour of capital” (Jessop 2013, 70-1), thus to reassert capitalist class power over organised labour and the corporatist compromise. From this same perspective neoliberalism is also understood as a political project that acts through paradoxically depoliticised and technocratic means. Sometimes it is also an externally imposed (by international power) agenda, “a codification of the prevailing rules of the globalizing-capitalist game” (Peck 2012, 134). As such, it is also a transnational response to the succession of crises within capitalist development models, aiming to create ever newer means of

capital accumulation. The outcome of such a project has also been depicted as an entirely new age of capitalism, characterised by globalisation and financialisation, by ad hoc regimes of governance, as well as by compatible styles of politics and the related forms and reforms of government, accompanied by a global meta-culture (Ferguson 2009, 171). As a consequence, analysing N&N according to such a “structural approach” should mean looking for similar patterns of regulation across sectors and places:

□ as a variable, contingent, migratory set of both discourses and practices more or less connected to public policies, a mobile, flexible and connective assemblage of technologies, techniques and practices that are decontextualised from their original sources and recontextualised (Ong 2006), but replying a rationality “linked less to economic dogmas or class projects than to specific mechanisms of government, and recognizable modes of creating subjects” (Ferguson 2009, 171) inducing market-responsive subjectivities. Coherent with such a definition, which recalls a Foucauldian regime of governmentality, this non-structural approach to neoliberalism considers it “one transformative pulse among many, and not necessarily the dominant one” (Peck 2012, 134). Analysing it should imply focusing on the diverse manifestations of such a regime.

On the other hand *neoliberalisation* has been defined in structural terms as the political processes of regulatory change inspired by neoliberal ideas (Brenner, Theodore 2002), taking place by way of an inter jurisdictional policy transfer and the consequent formation of transnational rule-regime (Brenner et al. 2010) through which neoliberalism becomes institutionalized (Moini 2015). On the contrary, corresponding to the idea of neoliberalism as a plastic constellation is that of neoliberalisation as a decentralized and deeply contextualized force that produces very heterogeneous outcomes, a set of processes in which imposition, negotiation, learning and even seduction can be found.

These (out of many other possible ones on which it would have been possible to report) different definitions have paved the way for charges of a *lack of specificity* and an “overstretching of the concept and a blurring of the capacity to identify specific mechanisms” (Le Galès 2016, 159). Accordingly, “the capaciousness of the neoliberalism concept means that if one looks for the signs of neoliberalism, one is sure to find them” (Mair 2015, 918). Pretended neoliberal phenomena, taking place at the local, national and global scale are so many and different that the concept is at risk of over-identifying them under a single, unstable and ambiguous label (Rose et al. 2006; Venugopal 2015). Besides, such a “giant package” connects different objects although they are not necessarily connected (Ferguson 2009, 171). Hence, this lack of specificity reduces its ca-

capacity as an analytical frame”, so that “the concept is in need of unpacking” (Springer et al. forthcoming).

According to Wacquant (2009, p.306) “neoliberalism is an elusive and contested notion, a hybrid term (...) often invoked without clear referent. For some, it designates a hard-wired reality... while others view it as a doctrine ... It is alternately depicted as a tight, fixed, and monolithic set of principles and programs that tend to homogenize societies, or as a loose, mobile, and plastic constellation of concepts and institutions adaptable to variegated strands of capitalism”.

Considering these vast and heterogeneous set of outcomes, Clarke (2008, 138) proposed a

probably non exhaustive list of sites, institutions, processes, and practices that were identified as neo-liberal: states, spaces, logics, techniques, technologies, discourses, discursive framework, ideologies, ways of thinking, projects, agendas, programs, governmentality, measures, regimes, development, ethnodevelopment, development imaginaries, global forms of control, social policies, multiculturalism, audit cultures, managerialism, restructuring, reform, privatization, regulatory frameworks, governance, good governance, NGOs, third sector, subjects, subjectivities, individualization, professionalization, normalization, market logics, market forms of calculation, the destatalization of government and the degovernmentalization of the state.

This list confirms that the concept subsumes a widening array of disparate features under an overarching neoliberal ensemble (Collier 2002), lumping together “too many things to merit a single identity; it is reductive, sacrificing attention to internal complexities and geo-historical specificity” (Hall 2011, 706), “explaining all sort of transformations in different places” (Le Galès 2016, 156). This risks weakening its ability to identify specific and unambiguous objects. There is agreement on neoliberalism not being a monolith but a hybrid – as neoliberalism does not, and cannot, exist in a pure form, but only manifests itself in hybrid formations (Peck 2004, 403) – and the fact that “everywhere is neoliberal even if the local forms vary somewhat” gives rise to variegation and hybridity (Clarke 2008, 137). But this makes things even worse, especially when hybridity corresponds to a deliberate “strategy to give a vague, ever-changing non-definition” that, according to Le Galès (2016, 168), is present in the argument of variegated neoliberalism.

The “omnipresence” of N&N (Clarke 2008), treated as a universal or global phenomena makes these concepts catch-all terms, as was before that of “function: “there is pretty well nothing and no place on earth not encompassed by this phenomenon (...) so apparently, everywhere, everything is neoliberal”, (Laidlaw 2015, 912). If development of political economies (almost) all around the world has been neoliberal, the use of

N&N for comparing neoliberal and non-neoliberal experiences is severely reduced to minority cases such as some countries in Latin America. But neither is this the case, since for example in many European cities according to Pinson and Journal Morel (2016) “there have been absolutely no signs of any kind of a ‘roll-back’ phase”, whereas changes in urban policy that have actually occurred “often have nothing to do with neoliberalism”. Besides, the affirmation that there have been processes such as “withdrawal of public action from the contemporary cities, deregulation and reduction of public good” is simply not empirically proven and derives from a normative bias (Storper 2016). Therefore, neoliberalism is not even pertinent as a descriptor, at least as concerns Western Europe. Relating to this, one could even consider the malicious thesis according to which the propensity to infer the generality of processes that are likely to be very specific to the US and UK is due to traces of academic Anglo ethnocentrism that can be found in the neoliberalisation thesis (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016).

To the lack of specificity and the failure in identifying actually existing phenomena is associated an *explanatory capacity* of this omnipotent *independent variable* that is presumed to be so high... that it ends up being *weak* and over-simplifying the genealogy of phenomena of social change and processes of policy reform (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016, 149). According to Ferguson (2009, 171), “such an all-encompassing entity can easily come to appear as a kind of gigantic, all-powerful first cause (as categories like “Modernity” or “Capitalism” have done before it)—that malevolent force that causes everything else to happen”. Nevertheless, such a feeling of omnipresence is reinforced by the fact that there are both situations in which neoliberalism is the dominant or organising principle and others in which neoliberal rearticulation of pre-existing principles, policies and practices can be found (Clarke 2008, 138). On the same wavelength is Collier when asking whether neoliberalism should be analyzed as a “big Leviathan”, a “macro-structure or explanatory background against which other things are understood”, designating “phenomena at the level of structure, context of context or the macro-context”, so that “it becomes more structural and structuring than other things in the field” (2012, 186, 189). Le Galès (2016) argues that (for example) cities and urban policies change for many reasons, neoliberalism being only one of them (alongside liberalism and non-market forms of governance).

Another serious charge is that of telling *contradictory stories*, or giving contradictory accounts of the same processes. According to Venugopal (2015, 166) an extraordinary number of different and often contradictory phenomena have come to be identified as neoliberal, such as contraction of the state vis-à-vis the market, or just a different kind of state that promotes markets? A depoliticized and technocratic fetishisation of the market, or a deeply political agenda of class rule and neo-colonial domination? A radi-

cal, 'paradigmatic' departure, or a far more modest recalibration of state-market relations with more continuities than discontinuities with the pre-neoliberal past?

Such an overall fluidity in the definitions of neoliberalism, which enables the authors using such a concept to incorporate a range of policy actions and outcomes, is considered as dulling academic argument (Weller, O'Neil 2016). There are both *logical and methodological fallacies* here. On one hand neoliberalism fails to account for contingency, or for its wide contextual variance and contradictory types of outcomes (Venugopal 2015, 170). On the other hand, the idea of neoliberalism as a pervasive abstract causal force that comes along and assimilates local ways of life, but also an all-encompassing global system that is not structurally uniform, but malleable, whose parts are not systematically related, is not only logically confused but also empirically quite un-falsifiable" (Laidlaw 2015, 912). While in definitional terms neoliberalism seems unstable, in descriptive ones it is very hard to achieve a satisfactory operationalisation of this concept, even because it is affected by a constructivist bias or, better, an overestimated emphasis on the role of ideas in political and economic processes.

Last but not least, the charge of being *ideologically biased*. Considering neoliberalism a cognitively empty concept leads to ascribing it "the merely rhetorical function of signalling the author's political affiliation and moral disapproval of any unhappy situation whatsoever, and of implying that the latter vindicates the former" (Laidlaw 2015, 913). Accordingly, neoliberalism "is an artifice willed into existence not by its theorists but by its critics" (Venugopal 2015, 181), whose discourse "is nothing but the discourse of the academic proponents of neoliberalism – but with the signs reversed" (Mair 2015, 918). These signs concern the balance between the moral (local sociality, loyalty) and the instrumental (trans-local networks in which social relationships charged with values are based on instrumental reason, profit maximization, and efficacy) spheres of life, mirroring the opposition between "equally compelling values of individualism and collectivism, autonomy and responsibility, freedom and obligation" (Barnett 2005, 3).

The fact of being affected by such ideological biases, which are probably to be considered as affecting all "critical" approaches (Le Galès 2016), makes the concepts of N&N unsuitable for value-free analysis and for understanding those that instead of being the outcomes of intentional projects should be regarded as "objective" factors behind "unavoidable" or unwanted processes such as, for example, the "crisis" of welfare states and its specific components. In this case, N&N is accused of overestimating agency (political willingness, strategy, projects) in comparison with structural factors. Conversely, N&N is also accused of giving too much importance to material interests and structural aspects – when political and cultural processes are seen as functional to economic interests – underestimating the role of subjectivity and culture. Paradoxical-

ly, depicting neoliberalism as lacking ideological and political alternatives also inhibits the emergence of alternative wisdom (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016) that could be used instead in order to cognitively base practical alternatives.

Those listed above are serious accusations, which concern the legitimization itself of N&N as a scientific category. No wonder that, according to several authors, these concepts should even be replaced by others, But are all these allegations well founded? Do they properly address the shortcomings of N&N as interpretive and even descriptive concepts? A purely theoretical opposition between prosecution and defense, which would purely focus on the relationships between N&N as epistemology and empirically unproved ontology, is at risk of remaining abstract. So, in the following section an attempt is made to base the search for a productive use of N&N that is also compatible with basic scientific criteria on the uses made of it in the articles that follow.

3. How can neoliberalism and neoliberalisation be used? Objects and theories in this special issue

Despite all the criticisms mentioned above, N&N is considered by the academics who use them to have provided not only powerful descriptions, but also critical problematisation, if not valid explanation of changes that have occurred over the last four decades in the political, economic and cultural spheres of society, as well as of entanglement and interdependence between these spheres, across different spatial scales. The following articles in this special issue¹ seem to confirm that neoliberalism is not “a set of fully developed theories”, but a “characteristic way of problematising social reality” (Palma 2009, 840). Such a problematisation usually results from a sort of ideal typical procedure. When N&N concepts are employed as explanatory tools in empirical research the deductive and ideal typical use of these concepts is preponderant, although it sometimes seems to lack rigorous definition. Also in this issue researchers start from existing or adapted definitions of N&N and try to identify evidence of such a state of things or processes in case studies, sometimes through ad hoc operationalisation. Once the characteristics of neoliberalism or neoliberalised “objects” are identified, the facts and processes analysed are classified deductively as pertaining to this wide class of phenomena. This may regard world-views, policy frames, policy instruments and their effects, including unintended consequences, thus practically all changes affecting social and cultural life that have been selected and focused on in case studies. This is so be-

¹ When quoted without year, sources refer to this special issue.

cause it is possible to identify neoliberal ways of thinking, measuring, evaluating, criticizing, judging and knowing" (Davies 2014, 23, *quoted in Giannone*). In this way things are given a (sometimes) new name, through a sort of reclassification that may imply important critical redefinitions, as well as potentially revealing relationships between public rhetoric and the actual goals of economic and political actions, not to speak of their impacts. A side effect is that N&N concepts widen their own coverage, as regards not only themes, but also scale. But this happens in quite an incremental and disorderly way.

The next step is usually that of using this classification to give each of these objects a meaning, trying in most cases to explain the *functions* performed by each process or instrument. In other words, the *forms* taken by economic, cultural and social facts, as well as the *meaning* of public policies, political changes, forms of governing and a variety of social practices and techniques should become understandable through the role they play in the emergence and evolution of neoliberalisation. As we will see more clearly later, this procedure does not provide explanation *per se* but, at the very least, it provides *descriptive evidence* about the "how" of a number of categories (or the "values of qualitative variables") concerning concrete material and immaterial social objects and subjectivities, which pre-existed neoliberalism and will presumably exist after it. In other words, being historical categories N&N may help us to understand how the political, economic and cultural aspects of society develop and interact with each other during a specific period of time. For example, the initial phase of neoliberalisation and the radical policy change implying creative destruction (Harvey 2007) – brought about the need to create and then adjust the concept of roll-back neoliberalism in order to give an account of what was going on, while the roll-out concept is more appropriate for describing the subsequent steps of pro-market re-regulation.

Although such a "use of neoliberalism as a descriptor of observed changes" has been considered "lazy" and too often replacing "close study of the relationships among state policies, economies, societies and developmental trajectories" (Weller, O'Neil 2016), in this way critical perspectives can be at least explored concerning the characteristics, if not yet the causes, of these objects and processes. Let us now see how this happens in the articles which follow in this special issue. The articles deal with processes concerning both specific sectors of public policy and cross-sector issues. The former regard the restructuring of the welfare state (Caselli), public utilities (Iacovino), privatisation, the liberalisation of transportation and railways (Salento, Pesare), and education (Gremigni), as well as the issue of urban mega-events (Leonardi, Secchi), anti-crisis strategies for economic recovery (Lastrico) and the production of space and security in urban policy (Ricotta). The latter regard various types of cross-sector innovation introduced into

public systems, such as open government data (Franceschetti), organisational processes, measurement of standards and evaluation of performance (Giannone), forms of governance, participatory practices and civic engagement (Colombo, Gargiulo).

In particular, as concerns the political sphere, questions asked regard various dimensions of policy, relationships between policy and politics, the forms and role of the state and governing processes. In particular. The policies analysed in this issue serve as an example of the capacity of neoliberalism as a concept to identify specific connotations of policy paradigms, policy beliefs, cognitive and normative frames and *référentiels* (Caselli; Iacovino), Advocacy Coalitions (Lastrico) The neoliberal reframing of policy issues also turns out to be a specific way of getting them onto political agendas, as such a dominant framework offers an umbrella under which coherent framings of specific issues gain legitimacy (Leonardi, Secchi; Ricotta). While research into N&N focused for a long time on the origin and development of neoliberalism, so that radical policy changes were the objects of analysis, more recent use of the concept take into account the advanced degree of institutionalisation of neoliberal ideas, which has also been proposed as an interpretation of their resilience (Schmidt, Thatcher 2014). Articles in this special issue show how neoliberal principles easily spill-over from the sectors or places in which they are institutionalised to others, since new decisions are legitimated by beliefs that have already spread, such as those about the primacy of the market as an effective source of incentives for individual strategies and behaviour and the supposed capacity of economics to explain social behaviour in general. Once considered to be factors that explained differences in the pace and depth of neoliberalisation, both path dependency (in the sense of the legacy of already implemented reforms) and isomorphism have become later factors that may explain the spread of neoliberal recipes from sector to sector. This regards not only those fields in which the persuasiveness of the language of economics could easily be taken for granted – liberalisation and privatisation of public services in the name of competition and efficiency – but also, for example, the basic tenets of urban security policies, which have become increasingly coherent with a central cognitive assumption of neoliberalism.

Evaluation and technical expertise, particularly if expressed in quantitative forms, are devices to implement and support neoliberal policies and programs (Giannone), since they bring into effect values and principles such as productivity, competition and meritocracy (Gremigni). They are also a source of legitimation for public choices whose effectiveness in shaping political processes through the imaginary of evidence-based policy making is considered to have become more important after the neoliberal turn than it was in the past (Lastrico). The adaptability and variegation of neoliberal ideas and of their translation into policy recipes makes such a use of technicalities easier,

both for policy maker and for scholars who want to identify the influence of neoliberal principles through policy discourses and practices (Giannone). In particular, variegation helps to identify the coexistence of global convergence and variety in policy and administration practices, both across countries, within countries and across policy domains (Franceschetti).

Implementation gaps are also focused on in order to find out whether there is coherence or otherwise between neoliberal discourses, actions and effects. This especially regards privatisation policies, whose outcomes may result in limited competition (Salento, Pesare), or the predominance of monopolistic and oligopolistic powers. In these cases N&N is used in order to provide a framework within which to interpret the relationships between private interests and regulatory changes.

Neoliberal policy is also used as a factor that helps to identify the “how” and the “why” of depoliticisation processes, interpreted as institutional and discursive resources that actors can use to steer public action towards a neoliberal orientation (Franceschetti). The “how” may imply specific processes that are focused on in the articles that follow, such as: “technical or ‘unelected’ governments, parliament emptying, loss of sovereignty in favour of international organizations not controlled by people”. During a period in which the social legitimation of politics and policy decisions through democratic means (the so called “input legitimacy”: Schmidt 2012) is declining, such a legitimation, particularly for centralised decision-making, can be achieved through depoliticised representations of the collective problems states have to deal with. Depoliticised representations that are typical of neoliberal frames, empirically detected in the articles that follow, are provided either by presenting situations as exceptional, that is imposing the idea that we are in a state of exception (Lastrico), or through the persuasiveness of rational “imaginaries” and “knowledge brands” (Sum, Jessop 2013), such as those provided by evaluation, standards, numbers, etc., often resulting in benchmarks. These are coherent with the unquestionable nature of technical choices when faced with partisan irrationality (Lastrico). Similar effects are produced by the use of devices of quantification (Giannone) and such discursive processes as – “the end of the world as we knew it. Everything has changed, so: change, transformation or death” (Caselli) – which the semiotic dimension of policy restructuring is based on.

Governance has also been frequently associated with N&N. In this issue emerging and changing forms of governance are considered, in terms of both “horizontal” and “vertical” arrangements. As far as the former are concerned, public-private partnerships and their legal forms are focused on (Leonardi, Secchi). The idea of a space of public action where state actors are forced to compete with private ones is considered inherently neoliberal (Franceschetti), as well as participation and deliberative practices,

that are regarded as part of obfuscation and compensation strategies, aimed at neutralising conflicts and protests against the privatisation of public services and goods (Colombo, Gargiulo), in addition to being a tool to maintain the status quo by using rhetoric (Lastrico). As concerns “vertical” governance, some articles in this issue focus on the role of supranational public action level in the formulation of policy, multilevel governance and the role of the European union and Europeanisation process. Similarly, and along with depoliticisation, the EU and Europeanisation are seen as instruments for the final consolidation of those liberalist principles (Lamattina) through which a “straitjacketing of the state”, allows the penetration of the market into every area of public services.

Turning to the economic sphere, which is almost always analysed focusing on its relationships with the political one, the characteristics of regulation to benefit private interests is seen as another “typical” aspect of neoliberal policies. Contemporary political economies result from political projects aimed at making economic systems of various scales thrive and providing a variety of spaces for private accumulation, including the financialisation of the economy. Homogenizing tendencies coexist with variegation as far as forms of regulation and relationships between state and the market are concerned. Evidence of these processes is provided, for example, by the transformation of public services into devices for accumulation (Salento, Pesare), but this is only one out of many possible examples that discredit the outdated representation of N&N as a simple withdrawal of the state. Under neoliberalism state intervention in social and economic matters is important, as the case studies analysed show that the focus has shifted from deregulation to “better regulation”, based on better knowledge (Lastrico), which takes place “not in the market (to fix negative outcomes or unexpected side-effects), but rather within its conditions of possibility” (Leonardi, Secchi). The possibility of identifying such shifts of state intervention in social life and the critical unveiling of relationships between discourses and interests is presented as a specific added value of an approach to political economy in terms of N&N. Besides, these processes are seen as catalysed and accelerated by the economic crisis as a “creative moment for the emergence of new actors and paradigms and for the implementation of processes of re-regulation and further market influence” (Caselli), legitimizing both extraordinary measures and the pre-eminence of economic necessity over standard institutional procedures (Lastrico; see above about depoliticisation).

As concerns the socio-cultural sphere, N&N is used in the articles that follow on one hand to identify the dynamics of consent and dissent in contemporary societies and on the other hand to focus on the issue of inequality as either dealt with or provoked by N&N. Relationships between consensus and neoliberalism evoke the concept of he-

gemony, an association that is frequent in the literature. The articles that follow make use of N&N to give an account of consensus reached by neoliberal policy frames (see above), as well as by the related forms of governance, neo-communitarian discourses and restructuring of the state. Consent about neoliberal governance regards an image of how to deal successfully with collective challenges through harmonic and collaborative behaviour (Caselli), which is easier to achieve with incentives provided by market-oriented measures. Consent about neo-communitarian discourses sheds light on how ideas “expressed in distant contexts and for different purposes are re-articulated and absorbed within the dominant ideology” (Colombo, Gargiulo), which in turn is an important element of hegemonic processes.

Consent is also thematised as an internalized self-discipline, following a path that has sought to reconcile a Marxist understanding of hegemony with poststructuralist ideas of discourse and governmentality, derived from Foucault (for two opposing accounts of such attempts see Barnett 2005 vs. Sum, Jessop 2013). It is clearly the case of evaluation practices, through which neoliberal ideas and state transformations are legitimized (Giannone). This is an example of how “neoliberal (recipes) were successful at occupying the spaces of common sense” producing a “tacit social acceptance of a neoliberal master-frame in its implicit and explicit form” (Lastrico). Such an outcome is facilitated by presenting in public discourse these recipes as obvious and unavoidable solutions (Iacovino). When such a process also regards collective actors who for reasons of interest or negatively affected identity are supposed to oppose neoliberal solutions and the frame they are based on, the actual possibility for resistance efforts and social movements to influence reality is drastically weakened (Lastrico). This role does not seem so different from that played by neo-communitarianism and its like in neoliberal discourses, although such a differentiation has been interpreted differently, in terms of a “liberal capitalist order” ideal typically opposed to neoliberalism, in which concerns for inequalities due to market failure, climate change, health issues and gender equality are compatible with the market (Le Galès 2016, 165). Hence, appropriation, reworking (Clarke 2008, 139), co-optation, or embedding of alternative or critical discourses and practices within the neoliberal agendas open a specific perspective from which to look at some important objects of inquiry for the social sciences, such as those innovations embedded in social practices that replace citizenship based on state welfare with one based on civil society (neo-communitarianism, the “common goods” principle, practices based on sharing and participation). In this way N&N can help to identify, select and empirically analyse several contemporary semiotic mechanisms for the reframing and re-signification of social practices, which often also offer the possibility to focus on the role played by public regulation in these processes.

N&N has also been used to give an account of changes concerning both the material and intangible aspects of everyday social life, which has also been focused on in terms of the financialization of everyday life in the hyperfinancialised neoliberal economies (Sum, Jessop 2013, 406). In the articles that follow this regards the consumer phenomenon and the regulatory role of the market in people's daily lives (Lamattina), the economic colonization and commodification of all spheres of social life – including spatiality/territoriality and processes of transforming space (Leonardi, Secchi) – based on the premises of the rational choice theory of human behaviour. This is particularly visible in processes fuelled by the privatisation of utilities and outsourcing of public services (Salento, Pesare). But everyday life and even the moral life of individuals are also colonised by the economy through a capitalist responsabilisation of social actors – e.g. the imaginary of “human capital” makes it possible for workers to be conceived of as self-entrepreneurs (Leonardi, Secchi). In school systems the neoliberal frame compels the premature selection of students, directing disadvantaged ones to a lower form of education (Gremigni).

4. Understanding society starting from neoliberalism as an object of wider approaches and theories

We have seen how, despite criticisms, N&N may help to detect critical processes, particularly as regards change, by descriptively making them fall within the scope of neoliberalism. But explanation is a different matter, implying tracing causal relationships, in this case related to those factors that may explain the development (or otherwise) of neoliberalisation processes. In that respect N&N *per se* has not so far been able to provide *explanation of phenomena* in these spheres that are *as powerful as descriptions are*. For example, the governmentality approach provides a description of the content of the neoliberal ideology and of how the projection of the principles of a market economy onto the arts of governing took place, but this is not necessarily an explanation of why this ideology became hegemonic (Palma 2009, 840). In other words N&N concepts are not *directly explanans* of the economic, cultural and political processes in contemporary capitalism. The fact of being ontologically a “structuring background” (...), “determinative of all things and processes” (Collier 2012, 191) is not proved *per se*. They rather provide *indirect paths to explanation*, by becoming explananda themselves. In other words, it is easier to understand the “why” of social processes and changes *starting from* the concepts of N&N than by direct use of them.

Incidentally, (old) liberalism, as well as Keynesianism and the interventionist Welfare state made it possible to identify the characteristics of respective political economies and how they were based on ideological assumptions and beliefs about the higher or lower ability and desirability of political regulation of the market. But in order to provide explanations about transitions from one kind of political economy to another, identify what these depend on and how they impact on society, economy and culture, other theories have been used. N&N is no exception.

Once the existence of (at least some of) the characteristics of neoliberalism have been ascertained through the ideal types mentioned above, a better definition of which should be assumed as a prime methodological challenge (see section 5), other conceptual instruments are needed to explain why processes of neoliberalisation have taken place and how have they influenced social (economic, political and cultural) change. Again, this should be better understood by considering how the articles that follow deal with processes that require theoretical explanation. Just to give some examples, the table below lists the main themes, approaches and theories that are explicitly or implicitly evoked by the articles when focusing on specific facets (objects and processes) of N&N. Some of the theories are even challenged by neoliberalism as an object that needs theoretical and methodological adjustments, as every one can see going through the list. For the sake of brevity just few of them – namely policy change, agenda setting, depoliticisation, hegemony and the Cultural Political Economy approach, governmentality and political rescaling – are briefly summarized below.

Table 1 - Neoliberalism and neoliberalisation as objects and some related themes, approaches and theories

<i>Themes, approaches and theories</i>	<i>Aspects of neoliberalism and/or neoliberalisation</i>
Policy change	Neoliberalism as a variety/variegation of policy paradigms with important common elements
Policy frames	Neoliberalism as a variety of policy frames with important common elements
Advocacy Coalition Framework	Neoliberalism as a deep core belief
Référentiels theory	Neoliberal référentiels and attuned algorithms
Policy discourses	Neoliberalism as a variety of policy discourses with important common elements
Multiple Streams Approach and other approaches to agenda setting	Neoliberalism providing the basic elements of policy stream, as well as the identification of problems as decisive aspects of agenda setting processes
Relations between policy and	Neoliberalism as a political project

politics; the politics of policy making	
Policy instruments	Neoliberalism providing criteria for policy instruments coherent with market oriented policies (e.g. numbers, standards, evaluation, rating and ranking, competition)
Policy transfer	Neoliberalism is mobile and translated into various contexts and settings. This makes it possible to focus on the how and why of specific relocations and translations
Implementation	Degrees of coherence between neoliberal discourses, actions and effects (expected, unexpected)
Depoliticisation	Neoliberal policies and practices as both content and motive for societal, governmental or discursive depoliticisation
Governmentality	Neoliberalism makes it possible to identify the objects through which the internalisation of self-discipline work
Neo-institutionalist approaches to institutions and institutionalisation processes	Neoliberalism as a definition of what: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gets easily institutionalised, or encounters resistance; - may be taken for granted or otherwise - is or becomes an object of various kinds of isomorphism processes - collides with path dependency or generates such legacies once institutionalised
Governance and metagovernance	Neoliberalism providing cognitive and normative frames for arranging (regulating) governance and make governance network work
Approaches to political economy from a perspective of methodological nationalism, such as Varieties of capitalism and Welfare regimes	Differentiation within neoliberalism(s) and neoliberalisation processes (spatial, scalar, sectorial) causing variegation in regulatory experiments
Europeanisation	Neoliberalism as a definition of how objects (policies, governance) get Europeanised
Political economy	Neoliberalism providing regulation criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - for the respective roles of state and market regulation - that make globalisation processes easier - that make financialisation easier - that make accumulation by dispossession easier
Theory of hegemony and the Cultural Political Economy approach	Neoliberalism providing an explanation for private firms as producers of public regulation Neoliberalism from counter-hegemony until the 1970s to a hegemonic constellation or through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the social acceptance of (even single elements of) the neoliberal paradigm - the appropriation, co-option etc. of compatible alternative discourses and/or practices - neoliberal imaginaries and knowledge brands

Space and scale	Neoliberalism providing a causal perspective on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emerging relationships between space and scale - globalisation, glocalisation, glurbanisation, intermestic affairs, trans-scalarity and multi-scalarity of economic and political processes - rescaling of state spaces, leading to transnational regimes of regulation and the metropolitanisation of policies and governance
Approaches to organisational processes	Neoliberalism providing cognitive and normative frames for reorganisation processes in state and non-state organisations involved in public action
Sociology of everyday life	Neoliberalism as a normative source for the introjection of the regulatory and moral role of the market and financialisation in people's daily lives
Cultural change	Anthropological use of neoliberalism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identification of a neoliberal culture, or cultural form transmitted by the classical means of socialisation - identification of neoliberalism as a system or structure constituting a networks of relations between different positions in the social space. - Neoliberalism as a technique of government, a practice, a way of doing, regulating itself through continuous reflection (neoliberal governmentality and the technologies of subjectivity and/or subjection, individualisation, competitiveness, self as enterprise...):

As concerns public policies, Hall's (1993) theory of policy paradigms and different orders of change, Sabatier's and Jenkins-Smith's (1993) advocacy coalition framework, Campbell's (2002) model on the role of ideas and politics in public policy, Sural's (2000) elements of cognitive and normative frames, Jobert's and Muller's (1987) theory of *référentiels* have all identified different orders of changes affecting policies. In particular, Hall identified the "third order change", concerning radical policy paradigm shifts, that is "the hierarchy of goals and set of instruments employed to guide policy" just focusing on "the movement from a Keynesian mode of policy making to one based on monetarist economic theory", as quintessential examples of policy paradigms (1993, 283). Policy frames are at the same level of paradigms and *référentiels*, as they regard basic beliefs, norms and practices, based on values and knowledge, which provide policy makers with cognitive and normative resources to make sense of collective problems perceived and to couple them with solutions (Rein, Schön 1994). In all these cases neoliberalism provides specific connotations of paradigms, policy beliefs, cognitive and normative frames and *référentiels*, as well as of policy discourses (Peck, J. A. Tickell

2002), which are the basic ingredients and carriers of ideas in policy making. Taken as a whole, this perspective is coherent with the alleged move of intellectual supporters of the N&N thesis from a structuralist political economy approach to one that is more constructivist and sensitive to the role of agency, ideologies and “thought collectives” (Pinson, *Journal Morel* 2016, 146-7).

Such a connotation is evident also if we use the existing theories explaining agenda setting processes, such as Kingdon’s (1984) Multiple Streams Approach. In this case it is possible to identify a neoliberal character both in “policy streams” and in the identification of collective problems as decisive components of agenda setting processes. Theories of policy instruments assert that they are not neutral. Instrumentation has its own effects, but “the importation and use of a whole series of public policy instruments are determined by the fact that the state is restructuring, moving toward becoming a regulatory state and/or influenced by neoliberal ideas” (Le Galès, *Lascoumes* 2007, 17).

Relationships between policy and politics are a classic theme of public policy analysis. Recent developments have regarded depoliticisation even as an emerging face of such relationships, as well as a product of metagovernance processes (Jessop 2014). Two generations of debates on depoliticisation (Hay 2014) have explored and even classified its main aspects into a “governmental”, “social” and “discursive” typology (Hay 2007). In depoliticised contexts politics do not disappear (Flinders and Buller 2006), neither does public policy. On the contrary, roll-out neoliberalism in particular requires regulation and allocation of resources to be performed through collective actions producing outputs that are to some extent compelling, but “placing at one remove the political character of decision making” (Burnham 2001, 128). In this case neoliberalisation of policy provides a “functional” motive for the depoliticisation of policy making.

As concerns governance, we would not be even talking in these terms about relationships among actors involved in policy making at its various scales (global, multi-level, European, urban, metropolitan) if ontological changes in governing processes and structures had not been brought about which are coherent with neoliberalisation. They can be represented as institutional and organizational accessories of neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism has been considered by many authors as the content of contemporary cultural and political hegemony and this also regards some of the articles that follow. The Cultural Political Economy Approach (Jessop 2009; Sum 2009; Sum and Jessop 2013) explains power as hegemony in contemporary capitalism considering the role of agency and structural factors (strategic-relational approach), as well as the role of sense- and meaning-making (semiosis) as constitutive moments of interest-based in-

fluence over political processes and of complexity reduction through meaning-making. Concepts as imaginaries and knowledge brands help to explain how hegemony is produced by actors that pursue interest-based strategies manipulating knowledge and technology in order to influence the politics of policies and consolidating taken-for-granted interpretations of the social world (Sum, Jessop 2013,150). Imaginaries “include neoliberal narratives such as flexibility, privatization, deregulation, globalization, export orientation, innovation, competitiveness, and so on” (Sum, Jessop 2013, 315). Although they are not explicitly mentioned as such, the articles that follow focus on the role played by specifically neoliberal imaginaries and knowledge brands, such as those concerning models of development and the role of “technical” devices and practices in the legitimation of market-oriented policy. Closely related to the question of hegemony is the interpretation of “progressive narratives” as part of political and cultural processes that take place under the ideological umbrella of neoliberalism. Some apparently progressive discourses are easily reframed into imaginaries and rhetoric that are compatible with accumulation regimes regulated by roll-out neoliberalism, so that updated accumulation strategies can gather wider consent. This also happens when potentially transformative or counter-hegemonic political projects are appropriated and reworked according to a neo-liberal frame. This may regard imaginaries such as that of sustainability, as well as community-based answers to the retrenchment of the welfare state, since “neoliberal policy discourses promote neighborhood or community development, rather than interaction with the state, as the main channel of political engagement” (Ghose, Pettygrove 2014). Even participation has become a hegemonic discursive resource of a neoliberalisation process (Moini 2011).

The theory of governmentality tries to answer questions regarding the relationships between power as social control and the internalisation of discourses and norms by individuals. In the articles that follow, just as in various other contributions, the role of social and “technical” practices, especially those based on knowledge is described as proposing specifically neoliberal values and codes of conduct that are introjected by individuals. Neoliberalism itself is depicted as a set of governmental techniques, a mode of governance through the economization of the calculating self. In this sense neo-liberal governmentality has even been considered as constructing itself as non-political (Clarke 2008), so that governmentality and depoliticisation are connected to each other under the umbrella of N&N.

Rescaling of political institutions has been a constant feature of capitalism. For example, that of the nation state was the spatial form taken in Europe by the correspondence between the geographic scales of markets, accumulation processes and those of statehood, which replaced the previous more fragmented ones. Neoliberalism

has been used as a key to understanding the emergence of “new state spaces” (Brenner 2004) and the changing relationships between the local, national and supra-national scales of politics. In this perspective political regulation and related decision-making are to take place at scales that are coherent with those of economic processes. The latter mostly refer to multiple scales simultaneously. Neologisms such as glocalization, glurbanization, intermestic affairs, multilevel governance, trans-scalarity, multi-scalarity and the like have come into use because of the ontological characteristics of scale that have been brought about by neoliberal policy and governance.

5. The need to operationalize neoliberalism: lowest common denominators and the hypothesis of variegation

So, N&N as heuristic concepts do not provide (least of all effective and complete) explanations, but offer specific and selected material to approaches and theories in the social sciences that, starting from evidence of neoliberalisation, can better explain processes and changes taking place at the intersection between the economic, political and cultural spheres. In other words, “citing the process of neoliberalization must not be a substitute for explanation; it should be an occasion for explanation” (...) “the concept does define a problem space and a zone of (possible) pertinence, and as such represents the beginning of a process of analysis” (Peck 2012, 153).

For example, according to Peck et al. (2013, 1094)

If the goal is to explain, say, the privatization of urban infrastructure development in Chicago or Johannesburg or Bangkok or Moscow, then to tag these policy outcomes as ‘neoliberal’ is no more than an initial analytical orientation (neoliberalism as a general classificatory schema) on the path to understanding and explaining such phenomena in relation to both contextually specific developments and more-than-local institutional, spatial and policy transformations (neoliberalization as a cross-case process)

Such a path cannot be travelled without conditions, which should serve to overcome the flaws retraced in section 1 and make the effective use of N&N as heuristic tools possible. Two important conditions among others regard, on one hand, (i) a basic definition of N&N concepts as ideal types – that is a “minimal set of defining common characteristics” (Venugopal 2015, 15) – and on the other hand its complementary opposite, that is (ii) an articulation of these ideal types that makes it possible to take into account the existing varieties of policies, practices and relationships, also with the aim of comparing them with those objects that should not be considered neoliberal. In-

deed, this will probably be a long lasting effort, which should not only take advantage of empirical control, but also take into account and try to balance and make complementary those opposite accentuations that provoke tensions between existing “different ontological and epistemological understandings of neoliberalism” (Peck 2012, 149). Such an opposition between the structural analysis of neoliberalism as the “context of context” vs. non-structuralist approaches such as governmentality, or those based on discourses, which obviously recalls wider oppositions in the social sciences between structuralism and constructivism, results in what has been synthesized as a “Big-N vs. small-n” neoliberalism (see Ong 2007). As far as N&N is concerned there is “a fork in the road, between those who would take (macro) political-economic or macroinstitutionalist path (extra-local disciplines and ‘out there’ forces) and those post-structuralist approaches pursuing more particularized approaches (micro), often in a poststructuralist and/or ethnographic vein” (Peck 2012, 141). The latter approach sees neoliberalism “as though it were the same size as other things” (ibidem, 148). Both conditions (minimum common definition and articulation) are important if one wants to compose into a coherent system the heuristic potential of the structural and post-structural approaches, which are by their nature respectively keen to insulate convergence toward similar patterns of regulation vs. diverse manifestations of neoliberalism.

(i) Defining neoliberalism through lower common denominators, or ideal types

Although it has been affirmed that “there is no ideal type or institutional template against which hybrids can be singularly evaluated”, neither a “transcendental essence”, or “global template” of neoliberalism (Peck 2012, 144, 150), diverse ideal types are used *de facto* when analysing neoliberal objects, intentionally or unwittingly, properly or improperly. One problem with the construction and fine-tuning of ideal types of N&N, which paradoxically seems to contain its own solution, is that it is impossible to find a pure, original and certified version of “neoliberalism-in-general”, or an *Urtext* (Jessop 2013, 67). This is due to various factors: firstly, there is no self-declared neoliberal knowledge or recipe, except for something that dates back to almost one hundred years ago; secondly, neoliberalism is heartless because of the (sometimes contradictory) variation of discourses and technologies, changing repertoire and the effects of appropriation of alternatives (Clarke 2008, 140) that keep taking place in various sectors or localities, and on various scales.

Ideal types of neoliberal or neoliberalised objects and processes can then only with difficulty be as stable as requested by Le Galès (2016), because neoliberalism refers to continuous transformation in the way global capitalism is working (Harvey 2007). So, in order to operationalise N&N we need a definition that makes a trade-off between gen-

erality and specificity and also is handle for empirical control. A consequence of such an effort is that the resulting concept is in and of itself ontologically and to some extent empirically based.

The core principles of neoliberalism pointed out by Moini (2016, in this issue) – such as privatization, liberalization, focus on inflation control and supply-side dynamics, reducing regulatory constraints on business, a marketization of society, commodification of services and personal lives, regulation inspired to competition – are a good starting point. To these we should add some elements proposed by Le Galès (2016, 156) when trying, along with Storper (2016), to “be clearer about the content of neoliberalism” contrasting it with liberalism. Just like those listed above, all these elements are empirically verifiable when analysing public policy in terms of measures, instruments, aims, beliefs and frames. They regard the crucial role of the state in the making of a market society, the idea that maximization of individual interest results in the maximization of general interest, universal competition in all domains, less preoccupation with big monopolistic firms than in the liberal paradigm, no real concern beyond rhetoric for equality in income distribution or wealth as core beliefs of (neoliberal) policy and the use of metrics of measurement of individual and organisational performances as a device of (neoliberal) policy.

Neoliberalisation processes are often innovations that reorganise existing principles, policies and practices. Besides, forms of neoliberalism derive from various combinations of the logic of market rationality, a calculating framework of efficiency and a view of authority as a fundamental social and political bond (Clarke 2008). These specific processes, which can be “sites of contradiction, strain, antagonism and ambivalence” (2008, 140), should be specifically focused on insulating their main factors. In this regard regulation having as its object the “making of a market society” helps to go beyond what was a fruitful initial conceptualisation of neoliberalism which nowadays is at risk of being a blind alley: explaining what happens now (in terms of policy and regulatory frameworks) only highlighting the differences with what used to happen in the (Keynesian Welfare) past. Analysing neoliberalisation by building on a continuous transformation of already neoliberalised objects seems just more promising, although the risk remains that of just adding elements that, in the end, when added together will form something resembling the “giant package” feared by Ferguson (2009).

(ii) Unpacking neoliberalism: the variegation hypothesis

A macro-model of neoliberalism to be used as a lowest common denominator, revealing the presence or otherwise of market-oriented strategies, regulation or behaviour would be a good starting point. But it is also at risk of being too generic and inclu-

sive, since nowadays practically every kind of public policy, social practice form of governance reveals at least a trace of such an orientation. For this reason the articulating or “unpacking” (Springer et al. forthcoming) of neoliberalism and processes of neoliberalisation is a complementary goal to that of extracting from such complex and multifaceted phenomena minimum common aspects.

From a more detailed perspective it should be easier to detect specific qualities of neoliberalised objects, as well as the existence of both difference from and convergence toward normative neoliberal models and the clash or coexistence of evidently neoliberal strategies, projects or practices with others, which are apparently differently aimed. The main methodological goal of such articulation should be that of making comparison possible. Identifying different patterns of neoliberalism and neoliberalised objects should make it possible to distinguish (through comparison) what regulations, practices, etc. in different places or times look like, share or otherwise (Ferguson 2009, 173), and above all why. These patterns are of course not to be confused with neoliberal normative models. Nevertheless, explicit normative prescriptions can be used as raw material from which to distill descriptive propositions for analytical use.

For example, the role played by the idea of social resilience in the neoliberal era, as well as the influence of neoliberal schemas over policy-making and popular beliefs, conceptualized as “syncretic social processes” (Hall, Lamont 2013) fall within this range. Such models could both reveal and take advantage of the acknowledged processes of hybridisation and variegation of neoliberalism. There is a quite direct relationship between the epistemological and ontological dimensions here: neoliberalism is hybrid because it is mobile and subject to transmission, articulation (through practices of discursive negotiation), translation and recontextualisation into specific contexts (Ong 2006). Hence, ideal types of N&N can only be hybrid, since they must be extracted from “actually existing” patterns of neoliberalism, stratified over time through different phases, contextualised and embedded in numerous places, implemented by different governments and on various scales. Different moments and types of N&N have been identified, which can be an entry point to this theoretical and methodological task. For example:

- types of neoliberalism detected in: the neoliberal system transformation in the successor states that emerged from the former Soviet Bloc; neoliberal regime shifts occurred in advanced capitalist economies (Thatcherism and Reaganism, but also Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland and Iceland); economic restructuring processes and regime shifts imposed from outside by transnational economic institutions and organisations backed by leading capitalist powers and local partners (parts of Africa, Asia, Eastern and Central Europe and Latin America);

a more pragmatic, partial and potentially reversible set of neoliberal policy adjustments (Nordic social democracies and Rhenish capitalism) (Jessop 2013);

- components of roll-back, -out and -forward liberalism, still identifiable, though sometimes combining and overlapping in the same place, as components of neoliberalism's hybrid character (Brenner, Theodore 2002; Jessop 2010);
- those elements that the idea of “variegated neoliberalisation” is built on. This term should “capture the ‘systemically produced geo-institutional differentiation’ under neoliberalism and stress (...) the malleability and inherent unevenness of neoliberalism” along with “the constitutively incomplete, experimental and ultimately polymorphic character of neoliberalization processes, as well as their endemically path-dependent character” (Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2010, 26, 36).

So far the latter has been the most important, and contentious, proposal for articulating N&N, especially in geographic terms. For example, it revealed “convergent divergence” in neoliberalisation among EU member states (Macartney 2011), and more generally it has proposed a way of detecting and conceptualizing in terms of causal relationship the contextual specificities of neoliberalism and the “uneven geography of political economic influence” (...) “one of the foremost reasons why neoliberalization differs geographically” (Springer 2010, 1030). Such a concept has its own risks and warnings; firstly, it is useful as long as variation “is within some range of methodological tolerance and can still be captured by the term ‘neoliberal’” (Collier 2012, 194); secondly, it should be not only sensitive to “degrees” of neoliberalisation and rhythms of application of neoliberal reforms, but also to the presence of competing paradigms able to modify regulatory systems. In this way neoliberalisation would not necessarily result as the only force able to produce deep effects (Pinson, Journal Morel 2016, 146). Moreover, detecting variegation should neither mean emphasizing “endless diversity in local instantiations of neoliberalism” or looking “for patterns across cases and connections among them”, but showing how neoliberalism is specified in a variegated landscape of institutional, economic and political forms” (Collier 2012, 191).

The contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects is due to the fact that these projects “have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles” (Brenner, Theodore 2002). Thus, neoliberalisation's different paths should be traced on different scales. So far, analyses have focused more on trans-national (including international policies aimed at the developing countries and those resulting from the collapse of the Soviet bloc) and urban scales rather than on the national one. This finds an ontological and historical reason in the globalisation

and glocalisation processes to which categories of N&N had first been applied. As concerns the national scale, it is true that “varieties of capitalism” have experienced tensions deriving from regulatory restructuring, as well as the fact that national states have lost part of their sovereignty. But this does not mean that the national scale is not an appropriate one from which to look at transformations affecting the political economy (Moini 2015) using N&N as a descriptor even before being a “signifier” (Venugopal 2015). In particular, in the aftermath of the global crisis started in the late 2000s, when states have been playing a renewed role, comparison of national policies has become particularly relevant.

On the other hand, “an urgent need to bypass broad assertions that common features of a neoliberal order are disseminated country by country, and evenly across a nation state (...) but in the space of the assemblage” has been noticed. In such a way the space of analysis is defined “by the space configured through the intersection of global and situated elements” stressing “not structural hierarchy but an oblique point of entry into the asymmetrical unfolding of emerging milieus” (Ong 2007, 5). Local and extra-local should then be regarded as “empirically connecting and dialectically relating ‘in here’ conditions, projects, struggles, and alternatives with ‘out there’ (extra local) rule regimes, disciplinary pressures, competitive constraints”, assuming that the out-there and the in-here are jointly constituted (Peck 2013, 143-4).

Variation also occurs over time. Comparative analysis shows that components of neoliberalisation do not necessarily travel together, as is the case for economic deregulation, supervisory workfare and punitive criminal justice. Analysing state historicity is fundamental to explaining variations within the neoliberal framework through varieties of state trajectories (Hilgers 2012). Conversely, historical analysis may take a specific object of study from neoliberalisation.

Despite all these premises, the identification of both minimum common aspects and those through which N&N should be operationalized for empirical and theoretical purposes is still to be done and looks a lot like being a collective effort based on cumulative research and theorisation. A circular relationship emerges between N&N concepts being analytical categories and social facts, that is to say between their epistemological roots and ontological substance, or between them being explanans and/or explanandum. In other words the epistemological relevance of these concepts derives from the ontological reality they describe (see Moini, in this issue). Venugopal (2015, 182) has proposed critically to preserve of neoliberalism only its characteristic of “descriptive shell: a broad indicator of the historical turn in macropolitical economy”. Such a suggestion can be accepted and reinterpreted as a constructive purpose on two conditions: that this opens the way for explanation through (other) appropriate theoretical

and methodological instruments; that accusations against N&N synthetically reported in section 2, each of which is at least partially close to the mark, are faced up to by taking them seriously. Operationalising N&N as heuristic concepts may lead to these concepts becoming more precise about what should be meant by them, circumscribe their descriptive range, avoid contradictions – unless they are ontologically inherently part of neoliberal discourses, policies, practices or outcomes detected – and of course preventing further methodological fallacies.

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