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The libidinal economy of common sense: What can psychology tell us about the endurance of neoliberalism?

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The notion of *ideology* is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance in the past decade as an explanatory concept in social and political critique. In this context ideology refers to "a web of ideas and beliefs that guide people as they give meaning to, make sense of, and evaluate the world and their connections with each other" (Coakley, 2011, p.69). Crucially, ideology is an *implicit* theory about human nature and society that becomes widely accepted as common sense. This renewed interest in the potential of *ideology* as a critical concept opens up a space where psychology can contribute to a more thorough investigation of how neoliberal meaning-making frameworks come to be accepted as common sense.

Neoliberalism itself is a very contested and notoriously elusive term (e.g. Chari, 2015), but will be understood here as a twofold phenomenon: (a) as "an all-embracing economic and political ideology that advocates the supremacy of the market over any alternative social arrangements" (Mahone, 2005, p.1626) of decision making, including in the allocation of resources; (b) as a cultural project which sees the freedom of the Individual as antithetical to any form of collective organisation; as described by Bourdieu (1998), its aim is the empowerment of the individual through the systematic destruction of collectives. Competition is elevated to a generalised principle to be applied at all levels of society as the form of social organisation that is most conducive to the values of self-

reliance, responsibility and entrepreneurship. Crucially, this project entails the creation of a particular form of subjectivity (or experiencing of the self in society): the neoliberal subject internalises this philosophy as common sense (Figure 1), and experiences their own life as an economic enterprise requiring constant investment and competition.
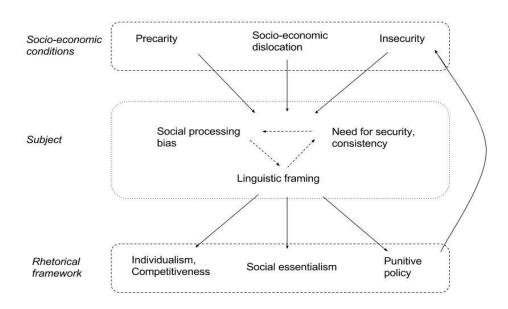

Figure 1. Diagrammatic formulation of a psychological approach to understanding the establishment of neoliberal common sense

The cognitive approach

One possible approach to the question of how common sense is established comes from the integration of insights from cognitive linguistics (Koller, 2005) into Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Van Dijk, 1993; 2001; Hart, 2014). At the core of this approach is the hypothesis that complex social cognitions rely on cognitive systems evolved for the processing of spatial location and physical objects (Hart, 2014, pp.164-167), and that discourses have the power to define and locate social agents in an abstract mental space, which guides one's attitudes towards such agents. For example, the very use of the term 'immigrants' in public discourse can serve to amalgamate vastly different populations in the mind of the subject and reify them as a homogenous category. The unreflective use of dichotomies such as 'They/Us' opens up a mental space in which 'immigrants' is

juxtaposed to the Self in both spatial and moral terms – i.e., the Other is marked as being distant from the Self both spatially and morally (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Hart & Lukeš, 2009). In addition to defining Others in relation to the Self, discursive strategies can also affect the way the Self is defined in its own right – for example, Nafstad and Blakar (2012) argue that the rise of neoliberal individualism globally is accompanied by an increased usage of words reflecting individualism (*I, me, rights*) at the expense of ones reflecting communal values (*we, us, solidarity, duty*). According to cognitive CDA, this change in word choice reflects a new way of constructing the subject's self-concept as atomised and excluding alternative collective forms of identity.

Social essentialism

Social phenomena are often articulated in neoliberal rhetoric through a framework which privileges personal traits (resilience, adaptability) and downplays social factors. This kind of implicit theorising about human nature, called *psychological essentialism*, is a way of thinking about objects and social groups as belonging to fixed categories, membership in which is immutable and informative about their properties (Gelman & Legare, 2011); "to the question of nature or nurture, essentialism answers nature." (Smith, 2011, p.33). Human beings appear to be born as prolific and indiscriminate essentialists - young children tend to rely on a naïve essentialist ontology in which they see many everyday objects and "types" of people as natural kinds (Gelman, 2003), however, in many cases essentialist thinking persists well into adulthood in some isolated domains of thought. This is especially true for social cognition and reasoning about categories like race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality (e.g. Haslam et al., 2000; Bastian & Haslam, 2006) - people often intuitively attribute behaviours and personality characteristics to unseen or vaguely defined 'essences', and think about social categories as "natural kinds" – that is, as having an objective, 'material' reality independent of one's thinking about them (Gelman & Legare, 2011). For example, in a study by Meyer *et al.* (2013), both American and Indian participants expressed an implicit belief that the recipient of an organ transplant will somehow inherit some of the personality traits or 'essence' of the organ donor, while the physical mechanism behind the transfer could not be easily articulated. Dar-Nimrod and Heine (2011) also argue that 'nativist' lay theories are enjoying a renewed mass popularity over 'environmentalist'

ones, not least due to skewed media portrayals of genetic research – for example in over-simplified, one-gene explanations for complex social phenomena. Genetics are thus "being endowed with an almost mystical ability to shape individual and group characteristics, and sociocultural and environmental elements largely being ignored" (*ibid.*, p.24).

People are natural essentialists – when we are forced to navigate a complex social environment populated by a multitude of social groups with a myriad different ways of categorising others, we are often inclined to construct simplistic naïve models of social interaction. Such models are more likely to rely on innate personal characteristics as a key explanatory mechanism, and therefore the essentialist bias in social cognition can provide a stable foundation for the neoliberal common sense of personal responsibility. This does not mean that our social intuition is necessarily politically biased, or that we are 'primed' for the culture of neoliberalism – essentialist thinking is, by itself, politically neutral; rather, neoliberal governmentality is so easily accepted and maintained partly because it provides us with a theory of the world that is intuitively appealing and can be accepted without engaging in conscious analysis. Or, as Smith (2011) argues,

> *"a neo-liberal/neoconservative framing of the individual supports essentialist thinking in a subtle way that is easily overlooked [...]. Neo-liberalism must locate characteristic features of an individual within the individual because there is, logically, no other place to locate them. The possibility that the feature or characteristic is a social artefact that might be changed by altered circumstances is unexplored because society is left largely unexplored"* (p.33).

The concept of psychological essentialism can therefore be indispensable for understanding how neoliberal rhetoric about personal responsibility or the inherent superiority of one stratum of society over another becomes embedded in the collective common sense. In short, the power of psychological essentialism is rooted in its intuitive appeal and its ability to produce simplified maps of social reality.

The dialectics of anxiety: Terror Management Theory

Social and political scientists have commented extensively on one of the central paradoxes of neoliberalism – that of the retreat of the State in welfare provision and the simultaneous expansion of its disciplinary programmes and penal functions (Wacquant, 2009). The two prongs of this contradiction are typically explained from a neo-Marxist perspective as "two components of a single apparatus for the management of poverty" (*ibid.*, p.14), i.e., as a method for controlling recalcitrant surplus populations. However, psychology can provide an additional perspective on the functional position of such punitive policies in the neoliberal dialectic, particularly with the use of the research literature on Terror Management Theory (TMT; Solomon *et al.,* 1991; Greenberg *et al.,* 2010).

Terror Management Theorists propose that human beings are tormented by a unique existential anxiety stemming from the conflict between two basic, irreconcilable principles: the imperative of self-preservation on the one hand, and the awareness that mortality is inevitable, and that our capacity for control over our environment is extremely limited (Becker, 1973; Solomon *et al.,* 1991). The primary aim of TMT is to explain how certain aspects of human culture arise out of the need to manage such fears related to mortality and to maintain a sense of permanence, order and meaning in life - for example by building a *cultural anxiety buffer*, or a set of institutions and beliefs that will guarantee them some degree of symbolic 'immortality' and will keep anxiety outside conscious awareness (Burke, Martens & Faucher, 2010).

In order to function in an uncertain world people need the assumption that its basic structure – the rules governing social interaction, their own identity and that of others – is stable and reliable, and that their environment and their own being in the world are to some degree predictable, and hence – in their control. When the perceived stability of one's social world is undermined, this creates a deep sense of *ontological insecurity,* or "the loss of confidence in the continuity of one's own self-identity and in the shared norms and values of society" (van Marle & Maruna, 2010, p.8). In other words, a vague sense of existential anxiety can emerge out of the loss of one's social roles, relationships, financial stability and a coherent life narrative that are fundamental for meaning-making.

Studying people's responses to situations characterised by high ontological insecurity is particularly instructive for understanding how neoliberal culture becomes dispersed in everyday life. The consensus among scholars of late capitalism is that one of its major consequences (indeed, one of the main forces behind its internal dynamism) is the state of increased insecurity, precarity and instability for large segments of the workforce (Harvey, 2005; Brown, 2015) – expressed, for example, in the decline of secure long-term employment and the rise in its place of short-term, precarious work. Apart from its purely financial consequences, this state of permanent flux can give rise to a sense of existential anxiety through the loss of stable identities previously guaranteed by long-term employment, the loss of social ties and the de-centring of one's biography and sense of life-trajectory (e.g. Bluck & Habermas, 2000; McAdams et al., 2001). It is precisely here that the concept of ontological security can be located in the dialectics of neoliberal subjectivity: for, as a system of socio-political transformations and a set of discourses, neoliberalism simultaneously creates uncertainty and provides a mechanism for re-establishing certainty; its ideology offers its own version of the anxiety buffer. The social identity that is lost in the dissolution of collectives can be reconstructed anew through lifestyle and market choices, and through acts of conspicuous consumption (Kleine et al., 1993; Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008; Shankar *et al.*, 2009). Ontological insecurity – e.g., anxiety related to social cohesion, traditional values and population diversity – fosters punitive attitudes and increases support for punitive, even vindictive policies (van Marle & Maruna, 2010), and has also been linked with increased reliance on social essentialism - one that sees a fundamental 'otherness' in socially excluded groups, and thus contributes further towards their marginalisation (Young, 2003).

The crucial insight that psychology can offer us in this case is that the expansion of the neoliberal penal state is not simply a top-down institutional process. It is also echoed in the active endorsement of this expansion on behalf of large segments of the population, as well as in the widespread acceptance of a more essentialist philosophy of human nature.

Conclusion

Ideology functions not merely to win support for and to justify a set of policies; rather, it provides the individual subject with a framework for engaging dynamically with such policies and the societal transformations they bring. The neoliberal subject is not a passive recipient of rhetoric; rather, this rhetoric forms the basis of his/her worldview, the platform for an active engagement with neoliberal society. In order to perform its functions, ideology must appeal to the subject's fundamental psychological needs – for example by providing a sense of ontological security, a way to construct a stable self-concept, and a social order that appears stable, natural and just. Psychology can be indispensable for understanding how the neoliberal worldview becomes internalised and established as common sense, by mapping out the complex interaction between such deep needs and the solutions offered in the ideological space of late modernity.

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