

NEF working paper

If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice?
Neoliberalism and the crisis of politics

Written by: Eliane Glaser with a response from Jane Franklin

New Economics Foundation

www.neweconomics.org

info@neweconomics.org

+44 (0)20 7820 6300

@nef

Registered charity number 1055254

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Towards a new social settlement

This working paper is part of a series of discussions, publications and blogs that explore ways of building a new social settlement for the UK. It is NEF's contribution to broader debates about the future of the welfare system and a new economics.

At the heart of our work is a quest for policies and practice that recognise the vital links between social justice and environmental sustainability. We celebrate and champion the best elements of our embattled welfare state. And we address new problems such as widening inequalities, climate change, and the prospect of little or no economic growth over the coming decade. By valuing our abundant human assets, our relationships and our time – and fostering collective policies and practice – we envisage a new settlement to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Our work on a new social settlement is jointly supported by NEF and Oxfam. Working papers, blogs and news of events will be posted on our website during 2014 with a final report published towards the end of the year.

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4. If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice?

If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice? Eliane Glaser

In this working paper, Eliane Glaser debates the role of neoliberal ideology in framing political ideas and activities. Rather than ideology being dead, the author argues, neoliberalism dominates politics across the political spectrum. Glaser explores neoliberal ideology, which she argues, needs to be understood as the first step in framing an alternative set of principles and policies.

Though neoliberalism represents only sectional economic interests in our society, it has come to govern mainstream and common sense beliefs about how society and economy work. The 'truths' at the heart of neoliberal ideology are that the free market is the fairest and most efficient means of organising human life; while the state undermines and gets in the way of the freedoms offered by the market. These taken for granted truths have come to dominate across the political spectrum, so that the Labour party, traditionally the party that recognised the detrimental effects of free market capitalism, now operates within the conceptual framework of an ideology that defends it. This being so, the author suggests, it is crucial for the those trying to forge a new politics to recognise the enemy within, so as to step outside and imagine politics beyond the boundaries of neoliberal ideology which contains, rather than releases, political activity.

To design this new politics, Glaser argues, we need to understand how ideology works, so as to articulate a clear alternative. To define an alternative political vision, in opposition to neoliberalism, we need to bring oppositional voices and ideas into play, to value real lives and experiences above abstract economic dogma, and to find ways to articulate and build an open, effective political alternative to neoliberalism. Hope lies in bringing history into the present, to recognise what oppositional movements have already achieved, to mount a critique of neoliberal and free market ideology, and to articulate the range of practical options for change available now. This way, the author suggests, we could more readily express core beliefs of equality, liberty and social justice; we could more easily connect with individuals, campaign groups and activists to recognise, listen to and include their voices and experiences. All these things are the makings of a new political agenda beyond the neoliberal frame.

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Introduction: the 'death' of ideology

Back in the old days of the twentieth century, it was commonplace – positive even – to espouse an ideology. Politicians and citizens alike wore their 'isms' with pride. Ideology was an expression of political allegiance and identity. According to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#), ideology is 'a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy'. How could anyone object to such a neutral and reasonable notion?

But over the last three decades or so, ideology has become an insult, only ever associated with the opposition. Ideology is sometimes regarded as naïvely utopian, and sometimes as a kind of sinister motivation. But it's nearly always denigrated as a rigid adherence to tribalism and dogma over empiricist optimisation.

Ideology is now a dinosaur concept, smacking of the old 'hard' Left and smoky 1980s seminar rooms. The recent deaths of Bob Crow and Tony Benn were presented as the end of an era: commentators described them as among the final representatives of a sharply delineated political culture. 'To the modern eye he broke the mould: a brazen, aristocratic ideologue in an age of middle class triangulation and third ways', [wrote](#) Mark Wallace, an editor at ConservativeHome, of Benn. 'But if those things seem so alien today, it's not because he was a one-off but because he was the last of his kind'.

Why has ideology become toxic? Why has it become a bad thing to believe in a set of political ideals? I think this shift is both seismic and hugely baffling, yet it is seldom really analysed. As I'll argue in this paper, the very fact that ideology seems outmoded goes to the heart of a set of key challenges for the emerging movement that I'll call, for the sake of convenience, the new Left.

This paper is about how political ideals can be expressed in the 21st century, now that the old political systems are breaking down; and about how the campaigns and groups that are coming together to resist austerity and neoliberalism can overcome the Right's attempts to silence them over the last 30 years.

I believe that only by looking head-on at what has happened to ideology can those trying to forge a new politics properly engage with the dominance of neoliberalism, widespread public disengagement from politics, and the question of how campaigning and activism can coalesce and endure. The fate of ideology is central to understanding politics as it currently is, and how it can be reimagined.

Twenty-five years ago this summer, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama published a seminal article entitled 'The End of History?'.¹ With the fall of Communism, he argued, the great ideological battles between East and West were

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over, and Western liberal democracy had triumphed. ‘What we are witnessing’, Fukuyama wrote, ‘is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’. Fukuyama was in part developing the work of the sociologist Daniel Bell, who published a collection of essays in 1960 entitled *The End of Ideology*.² Bell wrote that political society had rejected its ‘visions’; and that ‘in the West ... the old passions are spent’. Fukuyama was not claiming that nothing of significance would happen again, or that ideology *per se* was finished, but that the best possible ideology had evolved. Yet the ‘end of history’ and ‘the end of ideology’ arguments were driving at the same outcome: the silencing of debate about the best way to organise society.

Fukuyama’s and Bell’s theories have been dismissed as both sweeping and disingenuous, especially by those on the Left who detected under their apparent ‘liberal democratic’ reasonableness a distinct neocon allegiance. But they have been repeated enough to acquire the ring of truth; and in fact the direction that politics in the West has taken over the last thirty years has reproduced them pretty faithfully. John Major’s ‘back to basics’ campaign purported to be free of political motivation: Major insisted that he was simply advocating down-to-earth common sense. In recent [advice](#) to Conservative MPs, Major told them to focus less on ‘ideology’ and more on ‘issues that actually worry people in their daily lives’, as if these had nothing to do with ideology. ‘We are beyond ideology’, Tony Blair famously declared; ‘we are interested in whatever works’. Blair’s triangulations claimed to transcend Left and Right. Managerialism and technocracy have become the order of the day. Barack Obama’s presidency is thoroughly pragmatic and bipartisan: he has [declared](#) that ‘what is needed is a declaration of independence ... from ideology’.

A similar antipathy – or at least a deep ambivalence – towards ideology also characterises many of the groups that are associated with new politics: post-crash and anti-austerity movements such as Occupy, UK Uncut and the People’s Assembly; and online initiatives such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees. While many activists and campaigners are deeply informed by theory – for example by the neo-anarchism of David Graeber and the autonomism of Antonio Negri and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, there is a broad tendency to associate ideology with the old, broken, party system.³ Many believe that there is strength in decentralised structures and in the absence of a single master plan. There is an explicit focus now on process over programme; of enacting better ways of being with each other and making decisions as a form of democracy in action. It’s true that the move away from formal hierarchies and one-size-fits-all manifestos is often theoretically grounded, and it is

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of course difficult to generalise about the beliefs of all activists, campaigners and commentators; but in a sense that is my point: the Left has fragmented into single-issue campaigns rather than a joined up 'ology'. With the multiplication of transition towns, community currency schemes, timebanks and other community and grassroots initiatives, it's clear that something major is happening, but it's not clear whether and how these individual projects will add up to a new political paradigm. Partly as a result of the centrifugal, atomised character of the Internet, where a lot of campaigning now resides, there is a trend towards a dispersal of messages, viewpoints and affiliations. Furthermore, many on the Left now – quite rightly – prioritise environmentalism; but it's not clear whether environmentalism is ideological, or simply an existential challenge to which the appropriate response is logistical and technical.⁴

The general public, too, is turning against politics as a contestation of ideologies represented by parties: this manifests, for example, as profound [distaste](#) for the confrontational style of Prime Minister's Questions. Party membership has collapsed. MPs' expenses scandals, and Russell Brand's much-hyped [Newsnight interview](#) with Jeremy Paxman, have served as recent condensation points for mass dissatisfaction with politics as it is currently practised and expressed.

Is ideology dead or just buried?

The problem with the death of ideology thesis is that, in some ways, ideology clearly has not died. Under the guise of claims that Right and Left are no longer meaningful categories, politics in the UK and the US has moved to the Right.

No matter how much we describe them as defunct, Right and Left do still have clear meanings to me. In his book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, George Lakoff provides a useful thumbnail sketch. The Right is associated with the primacy of the market, individualism, a small state, the rights of employers, traditional family values, low taxes, and liberty over equality. The Left is associated with strong public services, the rights of workers, redistribution, and equality over freedom.⁵

The full political spectrum still exists in principle, but it is no longer reflected in what the mainstream parties have to offer. As society becomes more and more divided socio-economically, political choices become ever more narrow. George Osborne and Ed Balls make political debate look angry and adversarial, but the content of their policy differences is hair-splittingly slight. All the main parties have embraced neoliberal values: they all prioritise the economy over people, and talk about the need to reduce the debt by cutting public spending, particularly benefits.

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Yet if all the main parties have shifted rightwards, they have done so not as the result of taking an explicit policy direction, but by claiming that they are simply obeying the dictates of 'the market'. As Mark Fisher notes in *Capitalist Realism*, capitalism denies that it is an 'ism', a belief system among others. It portrays itself as unavoidable necessity and basic common sense.⁶ The market is talked about as if it were a force of nature, like gravity or Darwinian evolution. One of neoliberalism's great successes has been to persuade the public that its policies are constrained by the 'public purse'. Politicians' speeches are judged by the reaction of the markets, which impose 'realistic' limits on politics as the art of the possible. After George Osborne delivered his 2010 budget, Alan Clarke, UK economist at BNP Paribas [said](#) that 'if the austerity measures had not been delivered the markets would have gone mad'. In this sense, neoliberalism's emphasis on economics, with all its reductive realism, is itself a veil: it's actually political after all.

Economics doesn't purport to come in different flavours: it presents itself as transparent and non-partisan. Policy decisions have been reframed as fiscal decisions, and everything is now given a monetary value in order to be deemed important, or even to exist at all: from the cost of crime to bio-credits. In the absence of political projects, the only way politicians have of articulating value is through price. But politics as economics is not neutral: it's partisan. It's neoliberal. The crucial point here is that the death of ideology thesis conceals and naturalises the dominance of a particular ideology: neoliberalism. Talking in terms of 'what works' distracts people from asking 'for whom?'.

Both Right and Left claim to be ideology-free, but it's the Left that really has a problem with it. If anyone accuses the Right of being ideological, the response is that they are simply dealing in hard truths. If the Left are accused of being ideological, it hits a nerve. Because traditionally, it's the Left that's been regarded as ideological, dreaming of pie-in-the-sky Marxist utopias. In response, the Left has resorted to data and facts. So in an unfortunate irony, the Right pretends to deal only in facts, but is actually thoroughly ideological, using facts to suit its purposes at the time. The Left is too nervous to have an ideology, so it sticks to facts, failing to come up with an alternative narrative. All sides disavow ideology, but the Right does so on the offensive; the Left on the defensive. This suggests that those trying to forge a new politics should be wary of the urge to make its points through economic data and infographics alone. It's important to critique the Coalition's fiscal sleights of hand, as well as to design the economic architecture of a better world. But it's also important to resist the neoliberal prioritising of economics over politics.

The claim that 'ideology is dead' is, therefore, supremely ideological. But that's according to a different meaning of the word ideology than the one in everyday

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circulation. In 1845, Marx and Engels [wrote](#) that ‘In all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura.’ They meant that ideology produces a peculiar topsy-turvy effect, where reality is the opposite of appearance. In this upside-down world, powerful elites project a false version of reality which serves to uphold their own interests: by claiming for example that success is always the product of hard work, or that rewards are within everyone’s reach, if they just work hard enough. Louis Althusser [wrote](#) that ideology ‘represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’. If that relationship is imaginary, it can be manipulated.

The two meanings of ideology are curiously contradictory. One refers to overt political positions, the other to hidden agendas that are concealed through spin, through presenting things as the inverse of what they actually are. An example of this is the way in which the Right – as with ‘blue-collar Republicans’ in the US – have co-opted the metaphors and imagery of the left.⁷ The Conservative party chairman Grant Shapps announced in February 2014 that the Tories are now the real Workers’ Party. The two meanings of the word can also be illustrated by the Coalition’s spending cuts. They are often denounced by critics as motivated by ideology, by the belief in a ‘leaner’ state. This is the first, overt meaning of the word, echoed in Cameron’s [defence](#) that ‘We are not doing this because we want to. We are not driven by some theory or ideology. We are doing this ... because we have to’. But here we can also see ideology at work in its other, underhand guise.

Because it’s now toxic, and because politicians want to achieve their objectives without showing their cards, ideology has been driven underground, where it operates as a set of disguised and euphemistic motivations. The rhetoric of aspiration and expediency alike serve to naturalise inequality and the domination of the majority by elites. Overt ideology is dead; long live covert ideology.

Why I still miss ideology

All this presents a dilemma, in my view, for the Left. By giving up on ideology, regarding it as a thing of the past, is the Left not falling for neoliberalism’s con trick? If, as I’ve been arguing, everybody is still actually ideological, even – and especially – if they hide it, should we not all declare our motivations; get it all out on the table?

Even if it were actually true or possible, I find the idea of living in a post-ideological era profoundly troubling. For a start, ‘divisive’ has become a dirty word; but surely political division is a prerequisite for democracy? Bipartisan consensus is talked about in positive terms as if it were benign and cooperative, but an absence of political choice is also called totalitarianism. I want politicians and activists alike to make a case, to argue their position, to try to persuade me that their vision is best. I

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want passionate argument and sharply divided debate. Furthermore, just as economic 'reality' conceals the promotion of elite priorities, denouncing 'divisiveness' enables the construction of a neoliberal consensus. An example of this is the Coalition's Blitz-echoing boast that they are 'working together in the national interest'.

The 'divisiveness' critique also prevents politicians and those who are still invested in mainstream politics from identifying one of the primary reasons why the public has become disenchanted with traditional democracy. Since we have come to regard political division as something to be avoided, we do not identify the absence of political choice as a factor in voters' disaffection. The refrain of the non-voter – 'They're all the same' – is understood as referring to self-serving and corrupt behaviour, rather than the real problem: the absence of political alternatives.

In part as a response to these attacks on politics, politicians are becoming increasingly self-undermining in a bid to be popular. Not only are they attempting to present themselves as 'ordinary', but they are also lopping off the limbs of government: through privatisation, and also by eroding the very principle of the state. As part of his spurious devolution of power from Westminster campaign, which included a reduction in the number of MPs, Cameron [announced](#) in 2010 a 'massive, sweeping, radical redistribution of power ... away from the political elite and ... to the man and woman in the street'. Thus a process that undermines the fabric of representative democracy is also a partisan win for the Right. It should give pause to those who seek the overthrow of politics as it currently exists. Whose interests does this really serve? Political power proceeds regardless of whether or not we intervene in it. The Right is very good at attacking politics while keeping a tight grip on it. The wholesale rejection of the party system leads to a quiet form of despotism. In the figures of Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, we are seeing the emergence of demagogues who step into the void created by the waning of traditional politics and in so doing move the popular consensus even further to the Right.

It's complicated. Mainstream politics as it stands is dominated by right-wing politicians who have themselves become puppets of global corporate interests. Politics seems broken, lifeless, done for. But by bowing out, the new Left will hand a victory to the Right.

Furthermore, I believe that those on the Left who are rejecting mainstream politics need to recognise that they are part of a broader trend, possibly instigated by the Right; that they risk replicating, for example, the Tea Party movement in the US, with its decentralised structure and small-state, anti-Washington agenda.

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The head of Ed Miliband's policy review, Jon Cruddas, [said](#) in March 2014 that 'the real divide within Labour is no longer between left and right, but between those that centralise power and those that devolve it', and a similar point is often made about the changing political spectrum as a whole. But there are crucial differences between neo-Marxist autonomists and Right-wing libertarians. New progressive thinkers and activists who wish to challenge the big state, with its associations with the dinosaur Left, risk overlooking a myriad of social functions that are as necessary to the social fabric and the public good as they are invisible.

The anti-politics stance of the Tea Party is a sham, designed to conceal both a tightly organised identity and strategy and the powerful influence they exert over the Republican Party. Their lack of political success in recent years is, I believe, the result of a paradox: how do you run the system if you're anti-system? My pessimistic prediction is that a viable demagogue will eventually appear on the scene.

That paradox is pertinent to the Left in Britain, too. Not only does the new Left's ambivalence towards the state mean a possible abandonment of the theatre of competing ideas and the only framework we have for seeing them realised, but its suspicion of leadership and coordinated action can make it harder to construct a better society. New forms of direct participation are emerging which are genuinely exciting and productive, most notably those that involve face-to-face contact, such as the new 'Barnet Participates' initiative, which employs innovative facilitation techniques to bring citizens together with local councillors and community groups to make collective decisions for the borough. But I find the digital horizontalism that characterises much of the new Left problematic. There is a danger that the distrust of authority and the proliferation of individual online campaigns work against the construction of a connected, coherent vision. It may be kicking off everywhere, but what comes after that?

I understand that being kind and respectful is in itself a way of building change. Lakoff is right: the Right subscribes to the 'strict father' model of human nature, where politics is about fending for yourself and just deserts, and the Left subscribes to a 'nurturing parent' model, where politics is about supporting one another to achieve our potential. Those values can be advocated through enactment. And it's true that the Left is scarred by a history of bitter divisions that have compromised its impact.

But the emphasis on process has its downsides. Firstly, power relationships pertain in every organisation of the new Left I have had contact with, but the professed belief in equality of participation actually serves to mask those hierarchies. In fact, they are often far less visible than in more traditional organisations, which set out their

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structures up front. Secondly, leadership is arguably essential to getting anything done: the neo-anarchism which many people on the new Left are adopting does not have a reliable record of achieving success, and many activists are not aware of this history; in this sense, as the cultural theorists Jeremy Gilbert and Mark Fisher have noted, neo-anarchism isn't so much a challenge to capitalist realism as it is one of its effects. Most importantly for my purposes here, the focus on process constitutes a rejection of ideology, a replacement of ideas with practice. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive, but the turn towards enactment in the here-and-now is a key element of the turn away from ideology which, as I am arguing, has troubling ramifications.

The End Times or a new era?

It's perhaps too early to tell whether what's happened to ideology is just a right-wing ruse, designed to convince the Left that neoliberalism is the only game in town, or if it's evidence of a more fundamental shift; a historical transformation affecting both Right and Left. Are we simply dealing with the fact that the Right has dominated for the last thirty years, systematically instituting a political campaign that presents itself as anything but systematic, anything but political, anything but a campaign? Or is the political crossroads at which we find ourselves at the start of the 21st century just one aspect of a much broader juncture, whose contours are only just becoming visible?

The grand political movements of the 20th century have given way to an era of collage and combination: a little bit of this and a little bit of that. The history of art and music have followed a similar trajectory: from classicism, to modernism and then postmodernism; and we are now in a possibly apocalyptic age of the mashup. It feels as if we have lost the linear progression of time's arrow, and have entered a permanent present in which news events feel all-encompassing in the moment before disappearing without trace. In our disorienting Twittersphere of absorption and erasure it feels very difficult for us to consider ourselves to be in the age of anything, and for any coherent movement to take hold. We seem to be losing both our history and our future, forgetting that change happened in the past and that future alternatives are therefore possible.

As the Brazilian philosopher Roberto Unger [noted](#) in January 2014, 'we have ceased to have faith in any understanding of how structural change takes place in history ... And as a result ... we fall back on a bastardised conception of political realism ... we suppose that something is realistic if it's close to what already exists'. Indeed, any contemporary politician who departs from the arbitrary consensus of what's 'realistic' is deemed a fantasist. When Unite's Len McCluskey criticised Ed Miliband for refusing to condemn the Coalition's spending cuts, the former home secretary Alan

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Johnson [said](#) McCluskey was on the 'delusional left'. 'Miliband is the only ... leader capable of bringing a new morality to our ... society', Johnson said. 'But he'll only do it by living in the real world, not some fantasy utopia based on outdated ideology'. In a Westminster culture increasingly cut off from the actual realities of ordinary lives, 'realism' has come to signal political credibility. Only the credulous would believe in genuine progress, we are told. But this is itself an illusion.

Fukuyama's 'end of history' essay concludes with a poignant passage:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.⁸

This sounds worryingly resonant to me, and I think those that consider themselves idealists need to take it seriously. But is it really right? The *Guardian* journalist Seamus Milne in his 2012 collection *The Revenge of History: The Battle for the 21st Century* and the French philosopher Alain Badiou in *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (also 2012) have both argued that with the reemergence of Left wing protest, history appears to be on the march once again.⁹

Yet it's difficult to completely dismiss Fukuyama's sense that we in the West have passed the moment of great political idealism. 'The modern age was a time when human beings, alone or together, could sculpt the marble of history with the hammer of will', writes the writer and activist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. 'Today, both ... have vanished from sight. There is no longer ... a progressive temporal dimension, nor the possibility of reducing countless micro-changes to a prevailing tendency'.¹⁰ This predicament is compounded, as Slavoj Žižek notes in *Living in the End Times*, by the prospect of environmental catastrophe.¹¹ Bifo elaborated on this theme in a [YouTube video](#) of 2007: 'Before the tsunami arrives ... You know how it works ... It leaves a huge feeling of depression... The sense that everything is finished/And that it may never begin again ... You can feel it around/ On the train/ On the bus... This sense of every energy receding... The sense of not being able to coordinate will and action anymore'.

So has history ended, or not? Is it a particular ideology – liberal democracy, or rather neoliberalism – that has triumphed, or is ideology itself beyond use? Are we irrevocably in the age of post-politics? And where does that leave our vision for a better future?

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New words for a new world

As I've argued in this paper, we have reached a turning point in the history of political articulation and action, and I believe it's essential to examine it if we are to emerge from the trap of neoliberalism and transform society. I think we need to get to grips with some central questions: whether political categories and allegiances still pertain, or if they have to be rethought; and whether the post-political landscape we inhabit is an illusion created by neoliberalism, designed to protect its own concealed ideology as the only available reality.

If the latter is true, then the new Left is operating unawares within the conceptual framework of neoliberalism, implicitly accepting that the Right has stolen its power to speak. But if the death of ideology is the result of a broader historical shift, then that still leaves us with the question of how to express our plans and ideals.

It's important for the new Left to understand its enemy, and know what that enemy is up to. Many thinkers and commentators are currently attempting to work out whether or not the Right still has an ideology in the traditional sense, and if it does have one, to what extent it is underpinned by a value system of aspiration or striving or rewards for good behaviour, or if it's just contingently self-serving. A recent issue of *New Formations* was devoted to analysing what exactly neoliberalism is.

There's a tendency on the Left to underestimate the extent to which the Right is underpinned by a set of values; but at the same time, neoliberalism does seem to represent the mutation of the Right into something new, something weirdly diffuse. Neoliberalism has a concerted direction of travel, but the very clumsiness of the word suggests that it's made itself very difficult to pin down as a specific programme: it manifests as an association of processes that work to protect the status of elites, changing form to suit whatever's advantageous.

The new Left faces a crux here and the more clearly defined it is, the more effective the movement will be. Many campaigners and activists are, as I've noted, advocating a dispersed mode of action that does not announce its objective overtly. Perhaps this is the new way that things must be done. But it's important to reflect on this issue explicitly to ensure that this pragmatic, supple, many-headed campaigning that fights on a myriad of fronts is not an unwitting reflection and product of neoliberalism. Surely the purpose of social movements should be to create a space of action that resists the neoliberal conceptual world rather than mirroring it, even as it sees itself as creating that new space.

I believe it should be possible for the new Left to be an inclusive, diverse campaign, but still articulate our objectives. Just as neoliberalism has objectives, even if it is shape-shifting in its approach, then so does the Left, and these should be declared if

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the Left is to avoid replicating the Right's disavowal and deceit. A useful model is perhaps Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's 'chain of equivalence' – where different groups retain their identities and specific agendas but are able to come together in a tolerant and forward-looking alliance. It seems clear to me that the new Left has enough to agree on; enough of a common goal.

It's true that there's a real need to find a way to avoid the divisions that have hobbled the Left in the past, but that history shouldn't be a prompt for simply giving up on articulating what we believe in. It helps, I think, to look squarely at the reasons for those divisions: they were, in part, the result of a sense of impotence in the face of a seemingly invincible enemy and a turning of that anger back on each other. I'd like the new emphasis on accommodating diversity and on modes of interaction to be accompanied by an open discussion of aims – this is, I believe, essential to achieving solidarity and lasting change.

It's as a result of the issues I've been discussing that 'framing' has burst onto the scene in recent years: for example, the admirable [Common Cause](#) project devised by the Public Interest Research Centre. The explosion of interest in framing – among politicians, think tanks and NGOs – is indicative of a thirst for critique of covert neoliberal ideology and also for progressive ideological commitment. But in a sense framing is an aspect of the turn away from ideology, because it does not mention it explicitly.

Framing is a highly effective tool for influencing hearts and minds. But it's not clear to me whether framing is primarily a strategic way of matching the Right's expertise in message-making, or if it's an attempt to craft a whole new value system from the ground up. Advocates of framing and the 'values and frames approach' draw on scientific research which is not itself immune to ideology – cognitive neuroscience in the case of George Lakoff and Drew Westen, and social psychology in the case of American Israeli political psychologists Milton Rokeach and Shalom Schwartz – and address moral rather than political values.¹² Although it comes from a different tradition, therefore, framing is intimately bound up with the issues of language and idealism I'm addressing here, and I'd like to see more joined-up discussion between the two areas.¹³ I believe that only by working out the relationship between values and frames on the one hand and what's happened to ideology on the other can we decide if framing is a symptom of our predicament or a way out.

I'd love to say let's bring back ideology. But perhaps we've reached a point of no return. Public antibodies to overt ideologies seem to have been irreversibly activated. Politicians, activists and the public are giving up on Left and Right. The words we used in the past no longer work. But there is clear evidence that we do still need

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political words. In response to three decades of rampant capitalism and burgeoning inequality, political divisions are deepening: Fukuyama's prediction that global calm would descend as everyone accepted that Western capitalism was the best possible system has, unsurprisingly, not come to pass.

If we are to design a new politics from scratch, using people and their lives as building blocks rather than the economy, we need to find new ways to articulate this vision, and build a joined up, effective political alternative to neoliberalism. How do we scale up concrete observations and recommendations about people's everyday realities into a political blueprint? How do we move from critiquing the dominant economic world view towards constructing an alternative political architecture, in which the economy occupies the secondary position of supporting human needs? As well as talking about people, we need to talk about power. We can't escape politics. But we probably need to reinvent it.

Neoliberalism's obsession with 'modernisation' is not idealistic; it's a grim form of determinism that erases history and limits our horizon. We need to be able to look back to look forwards: both to see the range of options available to us and also to see what work the Left has already done. We find it easy to talk about abstract virtues such as equality and fairness on the one hand, or specific policies such as a 50% tax rate on the other. But it's the bit in the middle, the politics bit, the path from here to there, that often leaves us tongue-tied. But the Left has spent decades coming up with ways of articulating and solving many of our current problems. What of the old Left can we still use, and what do we need to make anew? I'd like to see more intergenerational political dialogue, so young activists don't spend their lives craving the old Left without realising it, and reinventing the wheel.

I see hope in the fact that there are discussions happening right now on the new Left about what to call ourselves and whether we should pursue a mosaic of local projects or produce an overarching manifesto. New names are being invented and contested all the time: as well as NEF's [New Social Settlement](#), there's the 'relational society', [developed](#) by Michael Rustin in the journal *Soundings* in September 2013, and current debates about the value of words and phrases such as 'common good', 'democratic' and 'progressive' – whether these terms are idealistic and inclusive or inadequate euphemisms for 'Left wing'. Alongside the emphasis on process, I see a powerful yearning for definition and declaration. Rustin's approach mentioned above is part of *Soundings*' ['Kilburn Manifesto' series](#), with contributions by Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, Michael Rustin and others. *Adbusters* magazine is producing a series of ['Blueprints for a New World'](#). The writer and columnist Owen Jones recently produced his ['Agenda for Hope' manifesto](#) in the *Independent* newspaper, prompting a lively New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) [email thread](#) that produced

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questions that are being asked by activists and thinkers everywhere. As NEF's Dan Vockins put it, 'What are we talking about when we say 'our movement'? ... What brings us together as a group of people and what are we all aiming towards?'

We should nurture and encourage these political phoenixes emerging out of the ashes of ideology, and not regard them as a distraction, a disturbing sign of division, or an abstract waste of time. It's early days in the new fightback. Neoliberalism wasn't built in a day.

I am grateful to Jane Franklin, Anna Coote, and other readers at NEF who have provided valuable feedback on this paper.

Neoliberalism and the crisis of politics

Jane Franklin

This working paper is written in conversation with Eliane Glaser's working paper *If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice?* in which she draws attention to the political effects of neoliberalism: the primacy of economic or market interests in public life, and the quieting and controlling of civil society and public dissent. Glaser explores how the left might re-imagine or construct an alternative politics to challenge the dominance of neoliberal ideology. In this response, Jane Franklin focuses on the central question of politics to ask: What is really going on here? And what strategies do the Left need to give more space to the political sensibility of citizens and social movements, to invigorate a politics that bubbles beneath the surface of public inertia where it is dulled by neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism takes the political out of politics. Under recent governments, politics has come to mean the management of society, and increasingly of individual psychology, so that it provides a stable and passive context for the economy. But politics is not the same as economics. It is the means through which disagreement is negotiated and decisions are made about the sharing out of social, environmental and economic resources. Politics concerns questions of power, how is it distributed, on what is it based, whose interests does it serve, how does power operate and how can it be organized or managed, how can what I think and do count? Mainstream politics is at a low ebb in Britain. It has come to be something that other people do, something to do with government and political parties. The public appear to be increasingly disenchanted with mainstream politicians and political parties, and marginal right wing parties are steadily recruiting members.

The challenge for the Left is to think and act politically, beginning with a strong statement of how the *political* character of British society is being eroded. The next step, the author argues, is to generate public conversations about politics: to question the nature of government and the role of political parties; to debate the kind of politics we need to challenge neoliberalism in government, policy and in everyday life; about what kind of state, what kind of democracy do we need to deal with problems of inequality and climate change. These questions for public debate should be the starting point for, thread through, and frame discussion about any new political agenda or narrative. This is just a beginning. The Left needs to be political: to challenge dominant power; to question how it is folded into government politics,

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and to stimulate public debate about where power lies and how it can be acknowledged and distributed differently.

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Introduction

Neoliberalism is a powerful ideology, a flexible logic of ideas and values which support free market economics. These ideas and values are put into words by politicians and policy makers and filter through everyday conversations to become commonly spoken phrases and beliefs. Spoken in public this language is taken up by the media, journalists, think tanks, public sector workers who have to interpret policy, and in the ways people describe their own lives. With constant repetition ideas are translated into taken for granted realities, where the market appears a natural process and inequality is seen the inevitable consequence of individual choice. Many critiques of these ideas circulate in the public domain: academics, opposition groups, think tanks and individuals work to undermine these common sense assumptions but don't disrupt them enough. This is because neoliberal ideology represents powerful interests: it is powerful because it is powerful.

In her paper ***If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice?***¹⁴ Eliane Glaser draws attention to the political impact of neoliberalism: the primacy of economic or market interests in public life, and the quieting and controlling of civil society and public dissent. She explores how the left might re-imagine or construct an alternative politics to challenge the dominance of neoliberal ideology. In this paper I focus on the question of politics to ask: what is really going on here? And what strategies do we need to give more space to the political sensibility of citizens and social movements, to invigorate a politics that bubbles beneath the surface of public inertia dulled by neoliberal hegemony.

Three political strategies are needed in opposition to neoliberal ideology. The first is to recognise that something seriously *political* is going on here, and to draw on the wealth of detailed research and analysis of just how neoliberalism orders and controls public life. This knowledge is power, since it identifies conceptual and real spaces where neoliberal power operates and is contested. The second strategy is to recognise, and link with, the political sensibilities of citizens in their everyday struggle, anger and dissent, and to engage in open debate with social movements. This is the way to recognize and draw on already existing opposition, to bring people together and to value civil society politics. The third strategy is to work with this knowledge and grass roots activism to identify where neoliberal power operates and is contested, so as to bring this critical understanding and activity into public view and debate. Together these three political strategies provide knowledge about how neoliberal power takes hold and expands, and about the interchange between every day, social movement and intellectual knowledge: both provide a language and a narrative to counter the neoliberal story.

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What is politics?

Politics is not the same as economics or society. Politics is not necessarily partisan, but concerns power: the relationship between rulers and ruled. Democratic politics can provide mechanisms for managing conflict and opposing interests, allowing for disagreement, compromise and resolution. It is through politics that the diversity of social and economic interests can be negotiated and organized. Politics is the means through which decisions are made about governing and organising the distribution of social, environmental and economic resources. Politics concerns questions such as: how is power distributed, on what is it based, whose interests does it serve, how does power operate and how can it be organized or managed, how can what I think and do count? Politics, like democracy, is not a good in itself, but provides an arena where it is possible to question how things are, so as to change how things are. In a political economy, economics is governed by a broad political rationality. In an economic polity, such as the one we have now, politics is governed by economic rationality. In neoliberal states, where governments represent the interests of the free market above all others, politics dissolves into economics.

What is going on here?

Neoliberalism is a pragmatic ideology, a set of logics and truths that mediate and adapt to what works for free market economies. These truths have been introduced most visibly by New Labour in the 1990s. They continue in the Coalition Government's efforts to reconfigure the relationship between individuals, society and the state, and between society and economy. In the social democratic politics of the welfare state, it was understood that capitalism, if left to its own devices, had detrimental social effects leading to social and economic inequalities, and a growing gap between rich and poor. The purpose of the welfare state was to alleviate those effects, manage class conflict and balance the interests of society and economy. Within neoliberal logic society has detrimental effects on the economy, particularly through what is seen as the burden of taxation and welfare. The prime concern of neoliberal states is not inequality but creating conditions for free market capitalism; the key problem is not capitalism but dependency on the state. With all this attention fixed on the relationship between society and economy, public understanding of politics alters. Language slips from talk of class inequality, social and economic rights and redistribution of wealth, towards the problems of community breakdown or cohesion, and individual responsibility and resilience. Social change happens, but the world today is not that different from how it was fifty years ago. We still have poverty and inequality, we still exploit our environment, we still have wars, we still need to work to live, care for loved ones and to have a home to live in. We just have a different public understanding of why that is and what we do about it.

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In altering public understanding of political action and the constitution and dynamic of civil society and political institutions, neoliberalism alters our understanding of democracy. As C. B. Macpherson wrote in 1977:

.. in looking at models of democracy, past, present and prospective – we should keep a sharp look out for two things: their assumptions about the whole society in which the democratic political system is to operate, and their assumptions about the essential nature of the people who are to make the system work (which of course, for a democratic system, means the people in general, not just a ruling or leading class)¹⁵.

Neoliberal assumptions are discernable in the story told about how the state must release its hold on citizens, to transfer power and confer it on individuals to liberate themselves from dependency on state welfare and to realise their freedom through the market. What is less clear in public discourse is that as responsibility is deferred to individuals, citizens lose connection to the state and the political institutions that shape and guarantee citizenship. The so called freedom from state interference is actually the disassociation of individuals from freedoms hard fought and won, realised through social, economic and political rights upheld by constitutional states. Rather than conferring real political power, the Government is dismantling the political institutions through which power can be recognised, balanced and brought to account. The state distances itself from citizens by uncoupling local activity from political institutions that provide mechanisms of accountability, rights and democratic participation. Paradoxically, at the same time the state increasingly intervenes in personal life to nudge and cajole individuals into behaving more appropriately, in the interests of the economy. In this process the public sphere is stripped of the political functions of civil society, of dynamic contestation and debate, becoming instead the location of market and community activity. Meanwhile, private life is valued for its economic utility. As economic rather than political subjects, individuals are encouraged to orientate themselves towards working and consuming in the market, but also to draw on their skills, creativity and imagination in becoming independent, and thus disassociated from the state and politics.

Wendy Brown argues that in this we are witnessing the demise of liberal democracy¹⁶. The role of the state in a liberal democracy is to guarantee rights and securities of citizenship and to organise the distribution of social and economic resources, according to need and to the political agenda of democratically elected governments. This is politics, rather than economics: a recognition of the role of civil society in sustaining democracy, and of the structural basis of power as it operates in institutional and social life. How power operates at work, between workers and

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managers, between colleagues; how power works in social relationships and public institutions; how power works through divisions of labour and cultural norms and values – all these relationships of power need to be up for public debate.

The legitimacy of such a liberal democratic state rests in the power conferred by citizens to organize political, social and economic life in the interests of all. The state should provide the institutional basis for negotiating different kinds of power: corporate power, labour power, individual power; and different interests: individual; collective, economic, cultural and environmental. The rationale for these negotiations is that these relations of power are interdependent and complex. Democracy is messy, and these complexities are the purpose, or the stuff of politics and public debate. As Brown argues, in the interests of democracy:

We have to have some control over what and how things are produced, we have to have some control over the question of who we are as a people, what we stand for, what we think should be done, what should not be done, what levels of equality should we have, what liberties matter, and so forth¹⁷.

All of these are political not economic questions.

How neoliberal power operates

Neoliberal ideology is spread through discourse, the language and ideas that infuse everyday life, changing common sense about who we are, what we do and where we do it. Neoliberal discourse is economically inventive, constantly working through language to define new markets in public spaces. One of the ways it does this is to mimic the language of critical or oppositional movements, to sound as though economic interests coincide with what people want for themselves. With the rhetoric of Big Society, for example, it sounds as though the Government is interested in community action and local empowerment, and in policies that are designed to give power back to people to make choices about their lives. We are encouraged to believe that our capacity to be competitive in the labour force and to be active consumers is down to the choices we make, our skills and how hard we work. Surveys show that people tend to accept that they are individually responsible for their own circumstances along with a broad acceptance that this is a solid reality rather than made up in the interests of particular groups. Economist Meg Luxton argues that the 'extent to which people accept personal responsibility reveals the depth to which neoliberal ideologies have penetrated personal life and shows the centrality of such ideologies for the success of neoliberalism'¹⁸. Neoliberal discourse

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works to give capitalist economics what it needs to survive: a flexible, co-operative, consensual and resilient population that is as self-governing as possible.

Policies that seem to address social and economic issues are a key mechanism for skewing social life so that it works to the good of the economy, especially where economic and campaigning interests overlap. Campaigns for individual rights and autonomy in welfare services, for example, have stressed how individuals are not passive recipients of care but want to have an equal role with professionals in designing their care. These aims coincide with Government policy to shift health and social care from large scale institutions to locally based sites, so as to radically reduce welfare spending. The Government has introduced policies to support personalised services in health and social care, though the emphasis has been on individual or personal budgets. This is different to the expectations of individuals and campaigners whose claims for autonomy and resources are translated in policy terms into a type of market choice; and the movement for personal autonomy in public service delivery is depoliticised. A language of personal choice and freedom is flipped to redefine political claims as economic, so in effect, policies such as personalisation, which was meant to lead to individual autonomy in social care, ends up as personal budgets in a new personalised care market¹⁹. In this way, to re-iterate, political claims are turned into economic claims and depoliticised. But it is also here, at this point of de-politicisation where groups and individuals work to resist this economic logic and to articulate and clarify dissent and alternative ideas and practices²⁰. This politics in everyday life, where neoliberal power is most keenly experienced and resisted, is *the* politics of the moment.

Political strategy

Neoliberal ideology changes the language we use to describe social life. Changes in vocabulary filter into the public imagination as to how society is organised: we talk less now of conflicts between classes and more of how some communities are stronger and more resilient or active than others. Individuals tend to be described as people, as members of communities, and as either good or bad: valued responsible, flexible workers or caring individuals, but they are derided if they are in any way dependent on the state. Neoliberal policies thrive on this conception of people and society.

There is logic to these descriptions that people can buy into. Surely, the argument runs, society is potentially disorderly and disruptive, so it makes economic sense to foster social cohesion and workforce flexibility. It makes sense to remake society so that it is economically independent from the state, to dismantle costly welfare institutions and to emphasise that individuals should aspire to be responsible

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consumers/tax payers rather than citizens with social and economic needs and rights. We need a strong economy to prevent cumulative welfare spending, and this is what we elect our politicians to do for us. Through the lens of neoliberal common sense, public debate moves further to the right, and to blaming individuals for being dependent on benefits or food banks. There are multiple media and research reports documenting otherwise, but these don't seem to dent neoliberal hegemony which crosses mainstream political boundaries. The Coalition Government makes policies based on stories that do not reflect real lives. Ailsa McKay and Willie Sullivan argue that the neoliberal agenda 'promotes benefit withdrawal, aggressive means-testing and continual downward pressure on levels of benefit payment to 'incentivise' people to work', which is:

.. wilfully disconnected to the facts: most people in poverty are already working; most people out of work or facing under-employment say they want to work or work more; there is plentiful evidence that a punitive approach to welfare does not increase economic participation. It is also contains within its ideology an inherent inhumanity²¹.

Campaigners and activists recognise how public discourse is skewed in this way, and create alternative narratives to challenge neoliberal common sense about society and economy, and the relationship between them. Developing a critical and public conversation is crucial, but there is deeper work to do here. One of the ways that neoliberal discourse works its magic is through silently undermining the *political* character of everyday life. So to destabilise the power of neoliberal ideas and their public effect, it is also crucial to back up these critical conversations with a wider political strategy.

Politics is at low ebb in Britain. It has come to be something that other people do, and the meaning of politics, along with the difference between economics and politics, is obscured in public debate. This is useful to neoliberal economics. The more ordered, controlled and politically passive citizens are, the more alienated they are from the state, the more favourable are the conditions for markets to thrive. Lately political parties in Britain have played a role in undermining public engagement in politics. They have been inclined to skirt over changing structures of power and inequality, and the complexities in democratic life, preferring instead to engage public opinion using simple messages, delivered through sound bites tested in focus groups. Simple assertions about individuals and society might capture voter interest and support, but the kinds of governments we get are more like public relations machines than plural democratic bodies. The idea that the House of Commons should be the arena for meaningful debate so as to create legislation in the multiple interests of the whole of society rather than any particular group, sounds

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like a fantasy in our current situation. With public relations government comes public disassociation from national politics, along with the belief that all politicians are the same, they are all out for themselves, or they have no idea about real life.

To turn from public relations to democratic politics, political parties have to address the dulling effect of neoliberal hegemony on national politics, through engaging public debate as to the meaning and purpose of *politics*, as different from economics. This involves bringing into public debate the concept of the state as the holder of collective sovereignty, a kind of state that can only be legitimised through political representation. Our current state is not secured in this way, but through an economic legitimacy: it is judged primarily on its ability to manage the economy²². This also needs to be brought into public debate, so that people know what is happening and can think about what might have been lost. In the transition from political to economic legitimacy, the state evolves into the model of the firm, and democratic principles are replaced with entrepreneurial ones²³. Democracy loses its political form, and we are left with a financial plutocracy.

To oppose neoliberalism the challenge is to think and act politically, to identify and engage directly with neoliberal hegemony as it is exercised at strategic political points: the very point where mainstream political parties sign up to a neoliberal agenda; the juncture where political claims are hijacked by economic policies; those spaces carved out by groups and individuals who resist the economisation of society in everyday practice. At each point the challenge is to think about what kind of politics, what kind of state, what kind of democracy, is needed in today's world. Specifically, this means attending to the depletion of public political spaces; to the erosion of institutional guarantees of citizenship rights; to the political sensibility of citizens dulled by neoliberal hypnosis; and to the potential for political agency in spaces created by individuals and social movements. Unfortunately this is precisely what the opposition in mainstream politics is disinclined to do, since citizens are not the only ones dulled or seduced by neoliberal rationality.

Conclusion

An understanding of how and where neoliberal discourse operates, how politics is usurped by economic rationalities at various strategic points, and where neoliberal power is resisted, opens up a range of questions about power and strategy. These are questions about the nature of government, and the role of political parties, about what kind of politics we need to challenge neoliberalism in government, policy and in everyday life; what kind of state, what kind of democracy do we need to deal with problems of inequality, poverty and climate change. These are all questions for public debate and should be the starting point for, thread through, and frame

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discussion about any new political agenda or narrative. This is how to challenge the power of neoliberal hegemony in strategic ways and to stimulate public debate about where power lies and how it can be acknowledged and distributed differently.

Crucially, those concerned to challenge the neoliberal vision might connect with the political sensibilities of citizens, to be found in everyday dissent and the language of activism and social movements. Any alternative narrative or frame of ideas needs to be written in a language that is broadly situated in a dialogue between formal and everyday knowledge. And it needs to be part of a wider strategy for transforming the politics of this country.

Endnotes

¹ Fukuyama, F. (1989) 'The End of History?' *The National Interest*, Summer, pp 3-18.

² Bell, D. (1960) *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*. Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press.

³ See for example Jarvis Cocker on Occupy in *The Big Issue* (January 16, 2012): 'We are over leaders. We are not interested in ideology anymore – we just want things to work properly and fairly'. For David Graeber, see for example *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (2013). London: Allen Lane. For Negri, see for example Lotringer, S & Marazzi, C, eds. (2007) *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*. New York: Semiotext(e). For Berardi, see for example Berardi, F. (2009). *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

⁴ See for example relevant [work](#) by Erik Swyngedouw

⁵ Lakoff, G. (1990). *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green. See for example pp 40-1.

⁶ Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. Ropley, Hampshire: Zero Books.

⁷ For more on Republican co-option, see Frank, T. (2004). *What's the Matter with America?: The Resistable Rise of the American Right*. London: Secker.

⁸ Fukuyama, *ibid*.

⁹ Both books are published by Verso.

¹⁰ Berardi, F. (2013). Introduction to Campagna, F. *The Last Night: Anti-Work, Atheism, Adventure*. Ropley, Hampshire: Zero Books, p 1.

¹¹ Žižek, S. (2011). *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso.

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¹⁴ E. Glaser (2014) 'If ideology is dead, how can the new politics find its voice?' London: New Economics Foundation.

¹⁵ C.B. McPherson (1977) *Life and times of liberal democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: page 5.

¹⁶ W. Brown (2003) 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy', *Theory and Event*, 7(1): 1-25.

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¹⁹ T. Cutler, B. Waive & K. Brehony (2007) 'A new epoch of individualisation? Problems with the "personalisation" of public sector services', *Public Administration*, 85(3): 847-855.

²⁰ J. Slay & J. Penny (2013) 'Surviving Austerity: local voices and local action in England's poorest neighbourhoods', London: New Economics Foundation.

²¹ A. McKay & W. Sullivan (2014) 'In place of anxiety: social security for the common weal', The Jimmy Reid Foundation, *Compass*: page 1.

²² W. Brown (2003) 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy', *Theory and Event*, 7(1): 1-25.

²³ *Ibid*.