

WIKTOR MARZEC

Neoliberalism as big pipeline network.
 Review of Steven J. Collier's *Post-Soviet
 Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Bio-
 politics*

Neoliberalism has become one of most widely discussed terms in recent critical social science research, yet remains somehow elusive as an object of empirical research. The proliferating debate on the very nature of neoliberalism, its historical emergence, and its reference to various social actors still does not come out of the agenda in a clear fashion. Scholars and critics attempt to flesh out the term in order to assess one of the most profound historical changes in recent decades. Apart from more publicist interventions (N. Klein, P. Mason)¹ and Marxist-oriented diatribes (D. Harvey, G. Duménil, D. Lévy)², there is also a growing tradition of more discursively-oriented research done within the framework of “governmentality,” (M. Foucault, N. Rose)³, as well as a growing literature on the state-centred anthropology of neoliberalism

The proliferating debate on the very nature of neoliberalism, its historical emergence, and its reference to various social actors still does not come out of the agenda in a clear fashion

1 N. Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Toronto 2007; P. Mason, *Meltdown: The End of the Age of Greed*, London-New York 2009.

2 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford 2005; G. Duménil, D. Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, MA 2011.

3 N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge 1999; M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. G. Burchell, New York 2007; M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. G. Burchell, New York 2008.

(L. Wacquant)⁴. Although these traditions seem to be rather distinct from each other, or maybe even to some extent incommensurable, Steven J. Collier has entered into the heated debate with his carefully tailored, empirical research-based book: *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*⁵. His attempt is to execute a powerful attack on “critical conventional wisdom”, which in his opinion obscures rather than reveals anything meaningful about neoliberalism. A tool to achieve this is a kind of peripheral test, scrutinising the neoliberalism embodied in the market reforms in post-Soviet Russia. This is supposed to provide sufficient testimony of how neoliberalism “hits the ground” and, therefore, how it can be empirically carved out as research problem. Indeed, careful research is needed to reveal the real operation of neoliberalism, aimed at explaining it rather than taking it as an explanation.

The declared aim of the *Post-Soviet Social* is precisely to readdress the question of neoliberalism in these terms. Scholars and popular critics too easily take for granted the simplistic picture of neoliberalisation, which is seen as liquidation of the social and replacement of governmental authority by free market rules. In opposition to this common critical approach, represented, according to Collier, by Naomi Klein and David Harvey among others, Collier adopts the Foucauldian framework, developed during his lectures at the Collège de France (*Security, Territory, Population*, and above all, *The Birth of Biopolitics*)⁶. Neoliberalism was seen there as merely critical reflection on established governmental practices “distinguished by an attempt to reanimate the principles of classical liberalism in light of new circumstances—most centrally [...] the rise of the social state”⁷. Thus, it was situated not beyond, but inside the biopolitical paradigm, as a certain form of governmentality and management of population.

To shed light on this management on the ground level, a method partially inspired by Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory is utilised. It is constituted by an “anti-sociological” examination of the various entities understood as assemblages, and careful tracing of non-discursive, material infrastructure embodying certain norms and rationales of social order. This supplements the investigation into how various problems are rendered as technical objects of governmental practices.

4 L. Wacquant, *Three steps to a Historical Anthropology of Actually Existing Neoliberalism*, “Social Anthropology” 2012, vol. 20, no. 1, 66–79.

5 S. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*, Princeton 2011.

6 M Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, op. cit.; *The Birth of Biopolitics*, op. cit.

7 S. Collier, “Post-Soviet”, 2.

Therefore, Latourian's network-sensible anthropology and the late-Foucauldian reflections on neoliberalism constitute two main conceptual reservoirs of this book⁸. To transform such principles into research practice, Collier undertook an anthropological case study of a middle-sized industrial city in central Russia. His aim was to carefully trace the remoulding of the social, rendering anew the domain of the governable and the imposition of a different – partially market-led and individual actor-centred – rationality. The study of the reforms introduced to post-Soviet Russia in two cities – Belaya Kalitva (the main empirical case in the book) and Rodniki (an additional comparative context) reveals the multi-layered and entangled picture of how certain ways of thinking about reform were re-articulated after “hitting the ground”. It shows also how rules and principles were negotiated, reflects a new rationale combined with previous substantial claims about social tissue and the obligations of various actors and institutions, and last but not least, illustrates how the existing infrastructure, stubbornly material and lasting, reshaped the reform practices.

To flesh out such an analytical ambition, a diachronic dimension is indispensable. Therefore, a significant part of the book is dedicated to the emergence of a Soviet governmental paradigm for shaping forms of collective life – especially middle-sized cities – as a crucial part of the Soviet post-war urbanisation scheme, with their habits, principles and routines materially delegated to the infrastructural, material scaffolding of pipes, transport nodes and blocks of flats. Urbanisation was thought of as population management subordinated to industrialisation. Nevertheless, productivity goals brought about a relatively well balanced distribution of population density and the provision of subsistence needs. Primary biopolitical adjustment – accommodation of the growing population to cities due to migration or rising birth-rates – was accomplished. The industrial establishment, the ultimate rationale for population management, was also a backbone of the whole construction of the social. It was used to provide not only wage labour, but also almost any kind of social welfare, from a medical coverage to heating, and was literally connected – through administration con-

8 It is somehow baffling that Collier didn't use the Foucauldian notion of dispositive, which could provide him with a useful framework precisely for scrutinising the “heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” – which is exactly what Collier is attempting to do here. See M. Foucault, *The Confession of the Flesh*, interview in *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (ed Colin Gordon), 1980.

trol, flow of funds and infrastructure – to almost every realm of life. Only later did this pattern turn out to be completely inefficient, and production became secondary to the social welfare provided by the factories.

Examining the reforms, Collier provides insights into the particular biopolitical paradigm and convincingly shows the various tensions connected with Soviet social modernity and its post-Soviet transformation. For example, in the Soviet period plans for development of production and city structure were successful, and the goals met (far from the usual narratives on the topic). Real socialism in Soviet Russia did not fail; rather it became a victim of its own success. As the plan was the only point of reference, there was no influence exerted by external pressures and, after harsh confrontation with the world market, post-Soviet industry was not able to adjust to the new circumstances, being too strongly stuck in the old paradigm. That was the situation the reformers faced and attempted to change. The transformation toward liberal governance in the dawn of Russian capitalism was the main challenge. Moreover, following the collapse of the Soviet state and de-industrialisation, the biggest problem was not unemployment but a decline of the social welfare previously provided by the factory. The narrative presented questions not only the “critical conventional wisdom” on neoliberalism, but also widely-held assumptions concerning the collapse of various institutions during transformation. Although industry – previously being a backbone of economic and social life – was often in ruins, social services and the overall tissue of social life somehow stubbornly prevailed. Material infrastructure and routine continued to hold the municipal society together. Communities and local governments kept heating pipes and cash-flows for other services running through the harshest period of the 1990s, however much in a distorted, not well maintained, and heavily reduced manner.

What did this longitudinal process of reprogramming and introducing liberal forms of governance (along with the market economy spreading to almost every realm of social life) look like? Remoulding the social in a post-Soviet middle-sized city was a particular outcome of the conflicting assumptions of the reform program itself and those held by the people actually realising it – local government, directors of enterprises, or even lower rank welfare staff. Reform had to be imposed on a given substantive city material structure, and serious modifications of the measures undertaken was indispensable. The formal rationality of monetary constraints clashed with assumption of substantial provisions for social welfare. These two logics were constantly opposing each other at the levels of budgeting or resource allocation

in the local government. However the aim of the reform was, among others, “to constitute local governments as loci of calculated choice, where scarce resources have to be rationally apportioned among diverse ends”⁹. In practice it appeared that local budgetary units didn’t act as calculative actors and the “budgetisation” didn’t work in the direction of equalisation (i.e. balancing revenues and expenditures in accordance with the calculated basic needs of citizens). The budget was still thought of a list of needs and local spending as a transfer of assets from the budget to fulfil the needs, rather than as an operative means to optimise distribution of the (very) limited resources. Although microeconomic devices depending “on formal mechanisms of free choice, calculation, and enterprise” were introduced, states Collier, “their aggregate functioning does not add up to a market, in which allocations are driven by mechanisms of supply and demand. Rather, we have a complex ensemble of material structures, allocative principles, and value-generating mechanisms”¹⁰.

The most revealing example involved the management of the heating system, the analysis of which is also the most detailed, empirical part of the book. The pipes and nodes of the heating system appeared to be the most “intransigent things”, opposing with stubborn materiality any attempt at neoliberal reform. Infrastructure resembles and deploys a certain form of power and political goals, expresses the form of collective life and provides material framework for a particular type of society¹¹. The previous, long buried paradigm of power and resources’ circulation was materialised in the infrastructure and lasted long after its demise. In Soviet times cheap and abundant heat was seen as a priority, and the fact that the network was one of the least efficient realms of the economy was not questioned. As Collier soberly notes “indeed—Russia, as such, is still pretty cold”¹², so it is no surprise that heating was considered as a basic biopolitical problem and elementary responsibility of the administration. Moreover, “the heat apparatus ‘bundled’ the Soviet social, not only linking the production, distribution, and consumption of heat in a common regulatory regime but also binding together the industrial enterprises, social welfare systems, and material conditions of habitation”¹³.

Due to this connectivity (heat was for example going to the end users

9 S. Collier, “Post-Soviet”, 188.

10 Ibid, 242.

11 Ibid, 206.

12 Ibid, 203.

13 Ibid, 208.

literally through the main industrial plant in the city), and the technical specificity of network (i.e. the impossibility of turning it off without heavy and irreversible damage), its construction (no valves on the radiators, little possibility to regulate output) and the assumed position of the end user (defined as an abstract quantity of stable needs without supply-demand calculations and cost management) the heating system was not only resistant to change, but also to liquidation. After surviving the harshest years, it was still seen (for example by World Bank experts) as the biggest obstacle to fully transforming Russia into a market economy, thus various additional measures were taken to, at least partially, restructure it.

The microeconomics of regulation, with a new programming through the microeconomic means used in non-market settings, provided the framework for this restructuring. This meant inducing calculative choice, partial market competition, and the like. Restructuring brought about unbundling – i.e. separating municipalities from heat production and limiting their role to administration. Communal service enterprises were supposed to focus on competitive and high quality provision, and receivers were supposed to be transformed from passive recipients with unified needs to consumers capable of and responsible for choice and calculation of their demands. Due to the infrastructural limitations mentioned above, and without huge investment projects, the success of such a reprogramming was destined to be fairly limited. The limited case of the heating system shows that there was no neoliberalisation as a coherent and rigid program (as we often imagine it). There was no privatisation, but rather a certain remodelling of networks and actors, and new configurations in a complicated material and discursive ensemble.

This seemingly convincing narrative about the “neoliberal” transformation (for Collier the very notion could be kept, but “for a high price” of reformulating “popular” narrative on the issue) in Russia is the ground on which the author develops his critique of the “critical conventional wisdom”. The outline of it is as follows: there is no coherent set of neoliberal views, but all of them are practically shaped as a critique of and answer to the constraints of reality. Thus, neoliberalism is what is constituted as the practice of government on the level of concrete operations, re-articulating and reshaping general doctrine (however, for Collier, its existence is also doubtful, as a self-proclaimed neoliberal theory is rather heterogeneous and not reducible to Chicago boys’ enunciations and the like). Neoliberalism hitting the ground appeared to be a path dependent on some prior sedimentary practices and infrastructure. Therefore, nice as the story about Chicago Boys is, sometimes being close to some kind of plot theory,

it is implausible in terms of explaining the institutional change¹⁴. If any coherent body of neoliberal thought was a direct inspiration for reforms, it was rather the “minor literature” of neoliberalism. Here Collier refers to concrete, technocratic analyses designed as reformulations of neoliberalism in the light of existing social states posing a challenge to liberalism as such. Such traditions were also, according to Collier, a direct reservoir of governmental techniques and principles of reprogramming for the reformers. Above all, the author means the fiscal federal theory of James Buchanan and George Stigler’s new economics of regulation. These two contributions played a key role in restructuring inter-municipal cash flows and taxation models, and introducing micro-economical stimuli for partial marketisation and rationalisation of the provision of welfare services.

Up to this point argumentative structure of Collier’s book and his referential chain are perfectly well-tailored. However, the promise of well-grounded actor-network analysis is to some extent not fulfilled when it comes to more general claims about the neoliberal agenda. In his introduction, Collier complains that in the research on neoliberalism “after beginning on solid ground, we observe [usually – WM] what Bruno Latour calls an acceleration”¹⁵. Paradoxically, precisely at the point when Collier tries to build a more general argument against the predominating knowledge on the topic, he falls victim to the same temptation.

His perspective on the inconsistency of neoliberal thought, the internal splits and controversies, the historically contingent genesis of certain measures undertaken (as SAP’s), and constant re-articulation of the doctrinal corpus in the face of particular circumstances is quite convincing. However, he fails to prove its relevance to the structural argument at the level of the empirical analysis provided in the book. Even though carefully constructed, his analysis of problems with restructuring heating pipes does not enable one to say anything about the relation of SAP’s to neoliberal doctrine, or the precise genesis of neoliberal hegemony.

Thus, the precise analytical scrutiny doesn’t give us the means to challenge this broad “critical common knowledge” on the grounds where its main claims are formulated. The fact of re-articulation of principles, mediation through existing frames and so on, does not

14 For the contrary thesis see, for example: J. Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford 2010. It is worth noting that seeking the roots of neoliberal doctrine in the Chicago School’s legacy does not necessarily lead to a schematic and unified vision of neoliberalism. Quite the contrary – see N. Brenner, J. Peck, N. Theodore, *Variiegated Neoliberalization: Geographies, Modalities, Pathways*, “Global Networks” 2010, vol. 10, no. 2, 182-222

15 Ibid, 12.

call into question the (possible) genesis of neoliberal thinking as precisely directed to change the class distribution of wealth and as a form of class struggle from above (as Harvey puts it), or as a state, political project. Whether such a depiction is true and insightful cannot be investigated on the grounds of the analysis presented.

The source of the problem seems to be a particularly taken (post)positivist premise about single case falsification. Collier tends to assume that if, in a given case, things goes contrary to common knowledge, we can easily dismiss such knowledge. What is at stake here is not the cognitively overburdened case study. Choosing one or another city for anthropological scrutiny is not illegitimate¹⁶. The problem here is the level of analysis, and the designation of certain assemblages (such as the heating system) as “access gates” for understanding Soviet (neoliberal) transformation. Even worse, in the latter instance such an analysis is utilised to question the overall alternative comprehensions of neoliberalism. Moreover, Collier states that:

it was an assemblage of elements that combined policies oriented to correcting distortions in domestic economies with a particular lending modality that was initially forged as a pragmatic response to the debt crises of the 1970s and 1980s. This convergence emerged from a new problematization of economic crisis that focused not on 'external' balances but on the flexibility of domestic economies¹⁷.

But vast arrays of phenomena escape any coverage in this depiction. One will find not a single word on the deliberate project of oligarchisation of the Russian economy in attempt to keep it “national”, which certainly extended to and is reflected in outcomes in cities like Belaya Kalitva. “Heterogeneous assemblages” of local economy and government do not include the shady, half-legal network of business connections which probably shape social life – as well as the actually existing neoliberalism¹⁸ – in Russian cities of that kind presented. And last but

16 However, a rather apologetic and surprising position towards the Soviet urbanisation project, and its neoliberal transformation at the same time (sic!) may be connected with the case choice undertaken by Collier. The studies on demise of Soviet life based on the farther east, less developed rural regions presents a slightly different – and certainly more tremendous – picture. See C. Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism*, Ithaca 2002.

17 S. Collier, “Post-Soviet”, 159-160.

18 See N. Brenner, N. Theodore, *Cities and the Geographies of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism”*, “Antipode” 2002, vol. 34, no. 3, 349–379.

not least Collier does not provide any analysis of the outcome of privatisation on the level of national income distribution, the sky-rocketing polarisation of Russian society, new paths of class formation and the like. It's true that a single book on post-Soviet Russia couldn't cover all these topics, nevertheless, if *the Russian* neoliberalism is to be assessed in any meaningful manner, leaving out such factors would seem to be a major omission. Collier's neoliberalism is to a large extent "stateless", which he admits quite explicitly elsewhere¹⁹. It is not a matter of approaching the issue from the now largely-discredited perspective of assuming neoliberal transformation to be a simple withdrawing of the state²⁰. The reason is rather that the general assumption does not make the state and political power a level and object of analysis. Taking into consideration precisely this dimension, and additionally approaching the post-Soviet social from the angle of neoliberalism as a political project, could enrich the heuristic potential of the presented analysis, without simultaneously creating "the big Leviathan" of neoliberalism and obscuring particular specificity of the case.²¹ Pipes and welfare do not exhaust the neoliberal project, and the particular Russian case could be seen as an example of neoliberalism as "re-engineering of the state", not its "dismantling"²², especially in the later, post-1998 period²³.

Therefore, in the post-Soviet Russia case it seems critical to scrutinise the question of possible configurations, or deployments of power in neoliberalism. Dealing with pipes and infrastructural nodes, Collier only briefly refers to changes in the political sphere of power in Russia. Not only does power deployment affect the shapes of neoliberal transformations, but also it has severely alternated during the period Collier investigates, bringing about a significant shift in governmental rationality. The author refers to Vladimir Putin's strengthening of central power in only one place²⁴, and thus misses the chance to assess more broadly the very particular configuration of power relations in Russia. This certainly would be an advantage in scrutinising idiocentric variants of neoliberalism. Moreover, to do this one would need

19 S. Collier, *Neoliberalism as big Leviathan, or...? A response to Wacquant and Hilgers*, "Social Anthropology" 2012, vol. 20, no. 2, 186–195.

20 See N. Brenner, *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*, New York 2004; L. Wacquant, op. cit.

21 Ibid.

22 See L. Wacquant, op. cit.

23 See B. Kagarlitsky, *Russia Under Yeltsin and Putin: Neo-liberal Autocracy*, London-Sterling, 2002.

24 S. Collier, "Post-Soviet", 160-161.

a political and state-centred approach to neoliberalism, which Collier tends to discard²⁵. The problem is even more baffling in the light of the capacities of the late Foucauldian framework, which Collier himself brilliantly re-interpreted in his earlier texts. Even the Physiocrats inscribed the “liberal” doctrine of *laissez faire* within the aims of sovereignty; their purpose was not to overturn but to preserve a sovereign power²⁶. Foucault dealt merely with reworking, re-approaching and redeploying existing political and governmental forms, not the successive overturning of power formations. Collier picked up on this issue in an article written few years ago, and proposed a different depiction of the general theory of power emerging from the late Foucault’s texts, which would be extraordinarily interesting in the context sketched above. Collier refuses to believe that the author of *Security, Territory, Population* utilised the same methods, on the one hand for studying biopolitics and the macro-physics of politics, and on the other, to research power, understood especially as a power-knowledge²⁷. According to Collier, the second and third cycle of lectures at the Collège de France brought a new methodological approach, which is no longer totalising. It has not enclosed the mechanisms of power in defined, more or less stable and internally coherent configurations or spatio-temporal entities. The observed elements are free from rigid architecture and should be understood as taking shape in different configurations, which emerge in relation to historically-based problems. This key issue, which Foucault attempted to grasp, was “a series of complex edifices in which, of course, the techniques themselves change and are perfected, or anyway become more complicated, but in which what changes above all is the dominant characteristic, or more exactly, the system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security”²⁸. There is no longer “a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear”²⁹. This topological analysis of mutual relations of interconnected but heterogeneous elements supersedes functional imperatives. Later studies do not treat biopolitics as a particular, localised technology of power, fulfilling the demands of the modern society, but as a certain topic, a field of interest of power. Biopolitics is rather “a problem space to be analysed

25 S. Collier, *Neoliberalism as big Leviathan*

26 M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 285.

27 S. Collier, *Topologies of Power. Foucault’s Analysis of Political Government beyond ‘Governmentality’*, Theory Culture & Society 2009, “vol. 26, no. 6”, 82.

28 M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 22.

29 Ibid.

by tracing the recombinatorial processes through which techniques and technologies are reworked and redeployed”³⁰.

It is easy to grasp how Collier’s earlier studies on Foucault’s lectures provided the basis for the overall design of the book on post-Soviet social. However, it also becomes striking that it is precisely this conceptual framework which not only enables, but even encourages, observers to undertake a broader scrutiny of the topology of Russian power, where biopolitics was articulated within peculiar forms of reinvigorated sovereign power. Neoliberalisation was not only about reprogramming communal services, but served also to build a very particular deployment of state power. The vast areas lacking state control created a hidden premise for the rebirth of sovereign rule, of a strong executive power somehow “hopping over” the neoliberalised social, reaching to and based on populations now even more vulnerable in the face of the new reign of the market.

Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011.

30 S. Collier, *Topologies of Power*, 93.

WIKTOR MARZEC – sociologist and philosopher. His principal research interests lie in the field of social theory and political philosophy. Currently his work concerns intellectual emancipation, political mobilization and conceptual innovation in the early 20th century Russian Poland, constituting the emergence of political modernity. His recent publications include Polish peripheral Marxism (Thesis Eleven 2013, 117(1)) and *The 1905-1907 Revolution in the Kingdom of Poland: Articulation Of Political Subjectivities Among Workers* (Contention, 2013, 1(1)). Currently he is pursuing a doctoral degree in sociology in Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Central European University in Budapest.

WIKTOR MARZEC (ur. 1985) – łódzianin, socjolog i filozof, do niedawna związany z Uniwersytetem Łódzkim. Obecnie przygotowuje rozprawę doktorską na Wydziale Socjologii i Antropologii Społecznej Uniwersytetu Środkowoeuropejskiego w Budapeszcie (CEU). Interesuje się kulturowymi aspektami metropolitalnej nowoczesności, kulturą nieponowoczesnej Łodzi, teorią społeczną, filozofią polityki oraz socjologią seksualności. Obecnie pracuje w przestrzeni pomiędzy socjologią historyczną, filozofią tego, co polityczne, i teorią dyskursu. Bada procesy mobilizacji politycznej i emancypacji intelektualnej w okresie rewolucji 1905 roku. Redaktor działu poświęconego krytycznym naukom społecznym czasopisma „Praktyka Teoretyczna”.

address data:

Wiktor Marzec

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

Central European University

Nador u. 9, 1051 Budapest, Hungary

e-mail: wiktormarzec@gmail.com