

Michael Dawson

3 OF 10 THESES ON NEOLIBERALISM IN THE U.S. DURING THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY¹

INTRODUCTION

I am an Americanist. To be specific, a colleague during the early years of my career characterized me by saying that I was a fairly competent bean counter. Consequently, I concentrate on the pragmatic, political, and somewhat unusually for an Americanist, the normative aspects of neoliberalism. So to use the language of my tribe, I'm the outlier on this panel with respect to my involvement in political theory.

My work has become increasingly focused on how neoliberalism has shaped the economic and political terrain that black political movements must now navigate (pp. 97-98). I use my study of black politics as a lens that facilitates my study of democracy and a variety of forms of justice within the U.S. I focus on neoliberalism because what Lisa Wedeen, calls "the global processes of neoliberal reform" have profoundly shaped both black life chances and black politics.² Neoliberal processes, policies, as well as the elites that have embraced neoliberal ideology have all reshaped both the black political economy and black politics, including the relative and absolute economic status of African Americans. The argument I advance is that neoliberal processes have remade economic, political, and social orders on a global scale. The central point I want to make for

the American case is that these processes have also reshaped, even as they were in turn shaped by, the American racial order. I would add to the four processes Wedeen identifies a fifth critical feature of neoliberal regimes, this one involving neoliberal ideology, norms, and sets of practices that in turn justify the political use of the language of “rationality,” “efficiency,” and “technocratic expertise.” For this exercise, I have constructed a list of ten theses thinking about neoliberalism American politics. I will today, however, only briefly make comments about numbers 1, 2 & 6.

TEN THESES

1. Wedeen’s insight on variation is critical for understanding the impact of neoliberal processes and ideology within the U.S.
2. In the U.S. neoliberal processes and ideology hides and strengthens a racial order centered on white supremacy.
3. Neoliberalism accentuates class divisions among subordinate populations by offering not just a Faustian bargain, but a taste, often for the first time of the good life.
4. Ideological processes must also be considered an essential aspect of neoliberal regimes.
5. Neoliberalism and the killing the spirit of resistance.
6. Rancierre, neoliberalism, and the enemies of democracy.

7. What is to be Done? Part I. Utopian alternatives & the need for political programs to combat the pernicious effects of neoliberalism and to build toward a better future.
8. What is to be Done? Part II. Multiple levels and types of organization will be needed, to achieve these better futures.
9. What is to be Done? Part III. It's right to rebel, but it's also ok to be happy: Contestation & desire in modern politics.
10. What is to be Done? Part IV. Badiou—Betrayal is giving up.

1. Wedeen's insight on variation and neoliberalism is critical for understanding the impact of neoliberal processes and ideology within the U.S.

A key aspect of Wedeen's analysis has important lessons for the U.S. case. She emphasizes, in addition to the inter-state variation that is to be found in how neoliberal policies are implemented and the effects they have on the local society, economy, and politics, variation on the intra-state level.³ Local variation is also to be seen in the type and intensity of resistance to neoliberal policies, including whether resistance appears at all. Further, she makes the point that the shift to a neoliberal regime does not entail the stereotypical shift from the provision to the non-provision of welfare state services in all regions or localities, since in some states or regions within states such services were never provided in the first place. This regional variation is evidenced in the U.S. in that, with the very brief and

partial exceptions of the democratic governments of the Reconstruction era in the South after the Civil War, the participation of the South and Southwest in the American welfare state has consistently been at lower levels than the rest of the nation. Yet an even more marked pattern in the U.S. has been that groups, specifically racial groups, have been excluded explicitly and implicitly from the benefits of the welfare state.

This American version of the intrastate variation in the implementation and effect of neoliberal policies appears, for example, in New Orleans in Katrina's aftermath. The American racial order continues to take a somewhat different form in the South than in the rest of the country once again often under the rubric of "states' rights" justifying the truncation of human rights for blacks in the old Confederacy. In the aftermath of the storm, neoliberal policies and the justifications were offered for them blended with old-style, occasionally violent racist practices. Just as the American welfare state at the time of the New Deal was deformed and undermined in the South by legal requirements to conform to the racial order of Jim Crow, this southern variation involved imposing a neoliberal regime in particularly virulent form in the aftermath of Katrina.

Neoliberal economic transformations shape and reshape communities, life chances, and political conflict. The economic and/or political character of the physical space of the communities I discuss in my new book are transformed by neoliberal processes, which in turn transform the life chances of those communities' residents. Gentrification and the transformation of American cities along more European lines, where the once industrial and poor central city is now the site of new attractive and affluent neighborhoods with a complete array of services,

has transformed black electoral politics as seen in one district in Chicago. On the other end of the economic spectrum we will see that the deindustrialization and economic devastation induced by globalization made a very different Chicago community more vulnerable to economic “development” that no longer provided the living wages, affordable housing, and benefits that jobs in the community once provided. Spaces that had once been dedicated to manufacturing production, that provided communities good jobs, are now the sites of massive retail consumption where the only jobs provided do not pay a living wage. In New Orleans, as in Chicago, race-inflected neoliberal ideologies and technocratic practices transformed the political character of spaces, making it more difficult to build broad progressive coalitions capable of fighting for social justice. In New Orleans, I argue, the aftermath to Katrina provides a particularly vivid example how these neoliberal practices—combined with old-fashioned racism and racial terrorism—helped to radically alter the shape of the racial order and break the social compact that had been in place since the battles of the New Deal and Civil Rights Movement.

Another consequence of the transformations analyzed early in my chapter on neoliberalism and highlighted in the vignettes I provided is the importance of the spatial dimension—the way that the racial and economic orders categorize places—in marking neighborhoods, individuals, and entire groups as the inferior and despised other. Loïc Wacquant outlines how the embracing of neoliberal economic and social policies by the nation’s elites had multiple critical effects on poor blacks. First, as I argued in *Black Visions*, these policies served to de-proletarianize working-class black youth by sepa-

rating them from the labor market both through deindustrialization and the stigmatization described by Wacquant, as well as Pager and Western. Second, according to Wacquant, these policies brought about three interrelated blights: massive unemployment, the relegation of entire communities to decaying neighborhoods as private and public services were withdrawn as part of the neoliberal turn, and the intensification of stigmatization, as already described.⁴ David Harvey amplifies the latter point when he argues that neoliberal apologists “see [some] geographies and spatialities (and local loyalties) not only as disrupting order and rational universal discourse, but as potentially undermining universal morality and goodness, much as they undermine the basic foundational propositions of economic theory.”⁵ Thus through a neoliberal inversion, black ghettos and Latino barrios are viewed not as places of oppression but of immorality and inefficiency. We saw in some of the vignettes that the new spatial, political and economic realities are resisted by urban political activism. Politically active ghettos and barrios are, as Harvey argues, particularly prime targets for demonization. America’s ghettos and barrios are the domestic equivalent of countries which are marked by international neoliberal regimes as immature, ungovernable, and the site of battles between Good and Evil.

2. In the U.S. neoliberal processes and ideology hides and strengthens a racial order centered on white supremacy.

Race-inflected neoliberalism structures the political terrain, actors’ ideologies, and citizens’ perceptions of what is “possible” and what are “acceptable actions and policies.” What Harvey and others overlook is the central role that the

mobilization of white racism, the resurgence and reformation of white supremacy, played—and plays—in securing the victory of neoliberalism in its rawest, most vicious, powerful, and imperialist form in the United States.⁶ Harvey himself points out that a key aspect of neoliberalism as it appears in the U.S. concerns the way it is able to resuscitate racist appeals to convince white workers in particular, but even large segments of the white middle class, to “vote against its material, economic, and class interests.”⁷ What he and others, such as William Connolly, miss is not only how race is deeply implicated in the mobilization of white working-class support for a reactionary economic agenda, but also how it structures the very nature of capitalism in the U.S., including its current neoliberal incarnation.

For blacks, my current work demonstrates how neoliberalism’s restructuring of the economy has sharpened already existing class cleavages, further undermining the myth of a “monolithic” black community, and by extension making even more difficult the task of building unified black political movements. Neoliberalism ideological orientations provide a temptation for the new growing black middle class to abandon traditional notions of a black politics centered on mass mobilization and egalitarian, state-centered, and contentious politics. Further, neoliberalism offers the new black middle class the promise of riches and status in return for adopting neoliberal conceptions of a sterile and extremely limited notion of politics, and agreeing to the premise that poverty is primarily the result of pathological behaviors of communities and individuals. A battle is being fought for the political and moral soul of the new black middle class.

6. Rancière, neoliberalism and the enemies of democracy.

Jacques Rancière’s description of republican discourse in France during the 1990s is an apt description of contemporary neoliberal hegemony in the United States and its attacks on domestic democratic movements:

The government of science will always end up a government of “natural elites,” in which the social power of those with expert competences is combined with the power of wealth, at the cost once more of provoking a democratic disorder.... [Neoliberal discourse has] served to support governmental decisions, even when they signaled effacing the political under the exigencies of the limitlessness of global Capital, and to stigmatize as “populist” backwardness any political struggle against that effacement. The only task outstanding was to attribute, ingenuously or cynically, the limitlessness of wealth to the voracious appetites of democratic individuals, and to make this voracious democracy the major catastrophe by which humanity shall destroy itself.⁸

The unholy alliance of experts and “voracious capital” has led to much misery — especially for those already disadvantaged. And it is also at the root of the financial collapse that plunged the globe into a deep economic crisis in 2008.

In the face of neoliberal hegemony, we once again need a politics that can generate what Rancière, following Arendt, labels “democratic disorder.” The call for “democratic disorder” can be found in many left traditions. There was more than a hint of anarchy, ironically, in the Red Guards’ infamous echo of Mao’s injunction that “it’s right to rebel.” But the call for

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democratic disorder need not be an invitation to anarchy. Like the slogan drawn from our own modern African American political tradition—“No justice, no peace!”—the promise is simply that there will be no business as usual as long as the injustice bred by neoliberal regimes remains the order of the day.

*3 of 10 Theses on Neoliberalism in the U.S. During the
Early 21st Century*

NOTES

- 1 I conceived of this title before I ran into Rancière's "Ten Theses on Politics." While as some German said, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.
- 2 Wedeen, Lisa. 2008. *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 187.
- 3 Ibid., p. 193.
- 4 Wacquant, Loïc. 2008. *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advance Marginality*. Malden: Polity.
- 5 Harvey, David. 2009. *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 118.
- 6 In noting others, I have in mind primarily William Connolly in his otherwise excellent book on the twin rise of the right-wing and evangelical movements in the U.S., two movements that in tandem were responsible for the triumphant instantiation of the neoliberal state in the U.S. Connolly, William E. 2007. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 7 Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 50.
- 8 Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. by Steve Corcoran. London: Verso. pp. 69–70.