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## **PRESENTATION**

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### **NEOLIBERALISM: THEORIES, PRACTICES AND CONFLICTS**

#### **Presentation of the special issue**

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The contemporary economic and financial crisis is giving rise to a wide debate about the future of the neo-liberal policy paradigm that, since the latter half of the XX century from the seventies on, has exerted hegemony on a global scale. Partly due to its own vagueness, the apparent theoretical abstraction of neoliberalism has influenced economic and political thought, social behavior, and the “public’s thinking”, along with public actions. The neoliberal paradigm has been driving national, local and transnational policies along with those changes affecting the political and institutional system that have made these policies possible. The neoliberal paradigm shows a historic resilience, which has been widely analyzed and discussed in the contemporary debate.

In the US, the bail-out of the banking system was initially interpreted as the launch of a new season of reforms, aimed at constructing new forms of neoliberal political economy. According to others, current responses to the economic and financial breakdown are making neo-liberalism even stronger and more powerful than before, as can be seen from the alternation of austerity and pro-growth measures in Europe, but still remaining within the neoliberal paradigm. Other authors, however, consider the crisis

a turning point, possibly leading to a post-neo-liberal phase, in which political, economic and social transformations make it possible for alternative strategies to be pursued.

In the field of social and economic sciences there has been a growing number of books, articles, symposia, conferences and the like on neoliberalism and neoliberalisation processes. Several perspectives – for example a “structural” and a “post-structuralist” one – have contributed to shed light on such a multifaceted phenomenon, also providing evidence about the entanglement between neoliberalism as a set of ontological phenomena and a bundle of different epistemological approaches. In fact, neoliberalism and the process of neo-liberalization are both historical processes affecting public actions and the analytical categories through which these processes can be explained.

This special issue of *Partecipazione & Conflitto*, dedicated to neoliberalism as a field of theories, practices and conflicts, has taken up the scientific challenge to further explore the variegation of those concrete shapes historically taken by the neoliberal paradigm of action and takes time to take part in the open debate on the real heuristic usefulness of concepts as neoliberalism and neoliberalisation. A special issue of the review *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2016), for example, has been recently published on this matter, especially focusing on the topic of urban neoliberalism. Some questions and an attempt to answer them from both theoretical and empirical perspectives keep the articles that follow in our special issue together. In particular, they regard the existence of both the shared characteristics and differences of neoliberalism and processes of neoliberalization on various scales of action (trans-national, national, local) and affecting various sectors of public action, the consequences of neoliberalism in various sectors of action, places and scales, the role played by scientific and technical knowledge in the diffusion, reproduction and naturalisation of neoliberal policy recipes, the relationships between neoliberalism and contemporary patterns of capitalist accumulation, in particular the processes of financialisation of the economy and the current global crisis, and those factors that make visible and may explain the hegemonic role of neoliberalism, as well as the concrete practices and the policy discourses of neoliberalism.

Other questions regard the relationships between neoliberalisation processes and those transformations affecting democracy and political participation, as well the depoliticisation of public policy. Also those collective actions and practices promoted by civil society or political actors aimed at bringing about innovation based on concerns that are apparently incompatible with neoliberalism, such as social and environmental concerns, commons & common good, proposing some questions that are not obvious about their compatibility with, or challenge to the neoliberal paradigm. The reader will

find some answers in the articles in this special issue, starting with the editors' contributions. These focus particularly on the usefulness of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation as concepts, as well as on the relationships between their epistemological and ontological dimensions. Both are actual historical processes which are worth analysing. In particular, from a theoretical point of view the relationship between neoliberalism and capitalism should be better explored, especially as concerns its characteristic of being the “connective tissue” of contemporary capitalism, which is able to shape historically significant links between processes, ideas and practices regarding not only different sub-social systems (political, economic, cultural, etc.), but also diverse scales of action (from global to local scale and vice versa). The epistemological relevance itself of neoliberalism rests on the capacity of this concept to disclose the interconnections not only between different phenomena, but also between each of them and a more general fabric of contemporary society. This regards especially functional relationships between the ontic and ontological dimensions of neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism.

Since the interpretive usefulness of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation has been questioned by several authors, the editorials in this special issue compare the main criticisms with actual uses of these categories, building above all on the applications made in the articles that follow in this special issue. These articles show how this pair of concepts may help to detect critical processes by descriptively making them fall within the scope of neoliberalism. Working as descriptor, or identifier of processes and outcomes, they provide indirect paths to explanation, by becoming explananda themselves. Hence, we need to better operationalize neoliberalism and neoliberalisation as articulated ideal types, so as to take into account the existing varieties of policies, practices and relationships. The results will provide theories in the social sciences with “raw material” to analyse and processes to explain.

The articles that follow provide interesting and stimulating insights, regarding both the ontological and the epistemological dimensions of neoliberalism. A deductive and ideal typical use of these concepts is preponderant. Researchers start from existing or adapted definitions and try to identify evidence of such a state of things or processes using case studies, and if necessary ad hoc operationalization. The next step is that of using this classification to give each of these objects a meaning, trying in most cases to explain the related political, economic and/or cultural processes. The articles deal with problems and processes concerning both specific sectors of public policy and cross-sector issues. The former regard the restructuring of the welfare state, public utilities, privatisation and liberalisation of transportation and railways, education, as well as the issues of mega-events, and the production of space and security in urban policy. The

latter regard various types of cross-sector innovation introduced into public systems, such as open government data, organisational processes, measurement of standards and evaluation of performance (especially in education), forms of governance, participatory practices and civic engagement, as well as the importance of neoliberalisation in the agenda of social movements. So the articles address several theoretical fields and sets of conceptual problems evoked by neoliberalism and neoliberalisation, such as policy, governance, political economy and the cultural dimension of social processes.

Various dimensions of policy are focused on, such as the relationships between policy and politics, the forms and role of the state and governing processes, policy changes, policy paradigms, policy beliefs, cognitive and normative frames, the spill-over of neoliberal principles from those sectors or places in which they are institutionalised to others, path dependencies and isomorphism. Specific importance is given to evaluation and technical expertise as devices. On one hand their use is made easier by the adaptability and variegation of neoliberal ideas. On the other hand neoliberal policies and programs are both implemented and legitimated through technicalities that also create the conditions for depoliticization processes and substantiate those discursive processes that the semiotic dimension of policy restructuring is based on. Emerging and changing forms of governance are also considered in the articles, in terms of both "horizontal" arrangements (spaces of public action where the state is no more the prevalent actor and state actors are also forced to compete with private ones) and "vertical" ones (role of the European union and Europeanisation processes).

Turning to the economic sphere, which is almost always analyzed by focusing on its relationships with the sphere of politics, the characteristics of regulation to benefit private interests is seen as another "typical" aspect of policies that can be labeled as neoliberal. Homogenizing tendencies coexist with variegation as far as the forms of regulation and relationships between state and the market are concerned. The latter are also considered in terms of relationships between discourses and interests, which emerge as a specific added value to an approach to political economy in terms of neoliberalization. As concerns culture, several articles identify the dynamics of consent and dissent evoking both the concept of hegemony and that of governmentality, showing how neoliberal recipes were successful in occupying the spaces of common sense and the self, often as obvious and unavoidable solutions. Appropriation, reworking, co-optation, or embedding of alternative or critical discourses and practices within the neoliberal agendas open a specific perspective from which to look at some important objects of inquiry for the social sciences, such as those innovations embedded in social practices and social movements.

Such a rich plurality of uses and meanings seems to prove the continuing vitality of neoliberalism, both as a concrete paradigm inspiring public policies and influencing people's lives and as a concept. Many articles in this special issue highlight, directly or indirectly, that warnings about the usefulness of these concepts must be taken seriously, but they also show that theoretical and methodological precautions are not only needed, but can also be the objective of collective and cumulative efforts. In so doing some topics that are not present in this special issue, or are present only marginally, should be also focused on, such as the social (economic and cultural) impacts and consequences of neoliberalisation, the existence and the characteristics of resistance and the articulation of state regulatory experiments in various fields that so far seem under-explored. For example, on the one hand corporate governance and financialisation as objects of problematic multiscale political regulation, on the other hand those practices of social resilience and innovation, which seem to stand in an ambiguous position towards neoliberalism, between resistance and adaptation, hegemony and counter-hegemony.

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### **Articles published in this Special Issue:**

- Caselli D. (2016), "Between the Invisible hand and the Invisible Heart. Italian Welfare Restructuring and the Quest for a New Neoliberal Hegemony", *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 9(2): 387-413.
- Colombo D., E. Gargiulo (2016), "Participation and Privatisation in Neoliberal Policies: The Case of Italian Planes of Zone", *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 9(2): 414-440.
- D'Abergo E. (2016), "What is the Use of Neoliberalism and Neoliberalisation? Contentious Concepts between Description and Explanation", *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 9(2): 308-338.
- Franceschetti L. (2016), "The Open Government Data Policy as a Strategic Use of Information to Entrench Neoliberalism? The Case of Italy", *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 9(2): 517-542.
- Giannone D. (2016), "Neoliberalization by Evaluation: Explaining the Making of Neoliberal Evaluative State", *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 9(2): 495-516.

- Gremigni E. (2016), "The "Misère de l'éducation" in the Age of Crisis", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 441-465.
- Iacovino R. (2016), "Restructuring Public Action in Rome. Neoliberalization and the Relationships between Public and Private Actors", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 595-612.
- Lamattina V. (2016), "The Old Neo-Liberalism. The Neo-Liberalist Germ in Mises' and Hayek's Theories", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 339-357.
- Lastrico V. (2016), "Power and Resistance in the Neoliberal Age", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 358-386.
- Leonardi E., M. Secchi (2016), "EXPO 2015 as a Laboratory for Neoliberalization. Great Exhibitions, Urban Value Dispossession and New Labor Relations", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 566-594.
- Moini G. (2016), "Neoliberalism. The "Connective Tissue" of Contemporary Capitalism", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 278-307.
- Ricotta G. (2016), "Neoliberalism and Control Strategies: the Urban Security Policies in Italy", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 543-565.
- Salento A., G. Pesare (2016), "Liberalisation and Value Extraction. The Trajectory of Railways in the Neoliberal State", *Partecipazione e confitto*, 9(2): 466-494.