**Theory Culture & Society**

**Review of Dardot & Laval’s The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society**

*By*[TCS](http://theoryculturesociety.org/author/simon-dawes/)*| Published: NOVEMBER 13, 2014*

**Pierre Dardot & Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society***

**Reviewed by Emanuele Leonardi**

**Abstract:** The review highlights how the new book by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval can be interpreted as a twofold contribution. On the one hand, it represents much-needed commentary to the lectures delivered by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France in 1978/1979, entitled *Birth of Biopolitics*. On the other one, it provides a compelling analysis of neoliberal governmentality in the era of capitalist financialization – which is also the epoch of a fully deployed crisis of Fordism. Whereas in the first part the authors elaborate a multifaceted and plural image of liberalism and a convincing reading of the emergence of neoliberal rationality, the second section assembles a critical genealogy of ‘entrepreneural governance’. This latter refers to a ‘neo-subject’ which functions according to a regime of ‘jouissance of oneself’ – whose deployment accounts for the incorporation of the *shareholder*logicand for the self-entrepreneur’s socio-clinical pathologies.

**Reviewed by Emanuele Leonardi**

To properly introduce a discussion around the recently translated work by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, it is important to start from an important premise: for the scholar interested in the Foucauldian analysis of the conceptual couple biopolitics/governmentality, this book is quite simply indispensable. Indeed, it can be conceived of as a shrewd, rich, and erudite commentary to the lectures delivered by Foucault at the Collège de France in 1978/1979, entitled *Birth of Biopolitics (BB)*. My conviction is that such a commentary was needed for at least two reasons. Firstly because BB was edited from a collection of lectures that were not planned for subsequent publication; it is a fragmentary text whose solid logical core is not consistently coupled with the usual Foucauldian precision in the use and selection of sources. Secondly, the translation of this bookshould be welcome because it precisely specifies the analytical limits of governmentality and, in so doing, reduces the semantic elasticity of the term. This is a truly significant achievement since the notion of biopolitics has been employed during the last decades in such different fashions and conceptual extensions that it has become almost impossible to clearly situate its theoretical borders, turning it into a sort of vague *passepartout* label.

Overall, *The New Way of the World* integrates and consolidates the research path undertaken by Foucault in the late Seventies in two main ways: i) through a detailed exploration of debates in political economy and philosophy which provide consistency to the concept of *liberalism*; ii) by means of a just as detailed scrutiny of those theoretical elements that frame the category of *neoliberalism* as an incoherent – and yet deeply effective – political constellation. Moreover, it seems to me that the second part of the volume goes *beyond*Foucault (while maintaining a deep proximity with his philosophical style) in delineating a critical analysis of neoliberal governmentality in the era of capitalist financialization – which is also the epoch of a fully deployed crisis of Fordism.

Let us start from the beginning: as is well known, Foucault conceives of liberalism in terms of political rationality rather than of an economic theory. From this perspective, its emergence (which is coeval with the disclosure of the biopolitical horizon) is read as a shift from the centrality of external legal limits to the absolute power of the sovereign, to the increasing importance of an art of government based on political economy. Liberalism, in other words, is seen as a *permanent governmental critique of sovereign power – through the market*. It had been noted – for example by Adelino Zanini (2010) – that the Foucauldian framework tends to confer to liberalism a tight internal coherence which, both in social practices and theoretical elaborations, would prove at the very least questionable. Dardot and Laval’s remarkable achievement lies precisely in this: they show how the invariance of liberalism as production of market-based limits to sovereign power not only does not deny its internal stratification, but even enriches it by highlighting the thickness – contradictory at times – of its historical development. One could say that, on the one hand, the conception of the self-interested man as a natural bearer of a set of limits to the sovereign defines the *unitary trait* of classical liberalism. On the other hand, however, the same classical liberalism ‘is far from having emerged as a monolith from perfectly univocal *oeuvres*. On the contrary, it is *from the very beginning* traversed by tensions and divisions which will later turn into open oppositions to the ideological, moral, political or even scientific terrains’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 34). Here, we witness a *multifaceted and plural image of liberalism*. My impression is that it provides an adequate, largely shareable rendition, whose sole defect may be located in the relatively small space dedicated to Keynes’ ‘new liberalism’, that appeared ‘at the crossroad between [English] radicalism and socialism’ (Dardot & Laval: 2014:157; My translation from the Italian edition).

It is with this fragile coexistence of conceptual *unity* and historical *multiplicity* that the new form of governmentality called *neoliberalism* breaks. According to Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism represents a sharp rupture with regard to its predecessor. Foucault had been a little less categorical: in his view, what does *not* change in the shift from liberalism to neoliberalism is the function of the market as a site of veridiction. Thus, neoliberalism also is concerned with the construction of an economic naturalness which is enacted by a biopolitical regime of truth based on the market. In other words, what is constant concerning governmentality is the *production of limits to the exercise of power*. What, on the contrary, *does* change radically is the specific modality of that production, its historical contingency. In liberalism the naturalness of the market is centred around the notion of *exchange*and, as such, it is still clearly distinguished from the artificiality of fluxes of money, commodities and individuals it is supposed to rationally channel. Differently, in a neoliberal context the naturalness of the market is directly created in accordance with the artificial principle of formalization represented by*competition*. In other words, ‘nature’ has to be artificially constructed in order to practically allow the formal structure of economic competition to work. This is why neoliberal thinkers could accuse their liberal predecessors of ‘naturalistic naïveté’ (Foucault, 2008: 121). By explicitly emphasizing its*discontinuous side*, Dardot and Laval focus on a crucial feature of neoliberal rationality informing state policy, namely its *adaptation*-oriented strategy (or its *malleability*) within the logic of competition. Through an explicit reference to Walter Lippmann’s thought, the authors delineate the traits of a neoliberalism whose core is represented on the one hand by the need to produce a flexible conformity between humans and institutions, operationalized in terms of the ‘enterprise man’, and, on the other hand, an economic dynamics which is configured as intrinsically variable since it is shaped on the formal principle of competition.

This attention devoted to the *comprehensive dimension of rationality* which characterizes neoliberalism is what allows Dardot and Laval to elude some Marxist simplifications – according to which the great metamorphosis would be merely encapsulated in a set of policy interventions elaborated at the Chicago School of Economics – and to project its development against the background of the transformations of contemporary capitalism. In a highly remarkable passage, the authors write: ‘Neoliberalism is based on the twofold observation that, on the one hand, capitalism opened up an epoch of permanent revolution of the economic order. On the other hand, however, men do not spontaneously adapt to such a mutable market order, since they were born otherwise. On this basis a politics centered on *individual, social, and general life* is justified. Yet, adapting the social order to the division of labour is an immense task which consists [to recall Lippmann's words] “in finding a new life-system for humanity as a whole” ’ (Dardot & Laval, 2014: 187; My translation from the Italian edition).

The neoliberal turning point – whose extremes are in the Lippmann/von Hayek dyad from a theoretical perspective, and in the Thatcher/Reagan one from a political standpoint – implies nothing less than an upheaval with regard to the production of subjectivity. Such a transformation, based on an individual and collective internalization of the competitive enterprise as a behavioural model, is what Dardot and Laval investigate in the second section of the book, following a genealogical account of ‘entrepreneural governance’. In order to elucidate such a fundamental issue, it is worth quoting at length: ‘The new government of subjects presupposes that the enterprise is not in the first instance a site of human flourishing, but an instrument and space of competition. Above all, it is ideally depicted as the site of all innovation, constant change, continual adaptation to variations in market demand, the search for excellence, and “zero defects”. The subject is thereby enjoined to conform internally to this image by constant self-work or self-improvement. His or her own expert, own employer, own inventor, and own entrepreneur: neoliberal rationality encourages the ego to act to strengthen itself so as to survive competition […]. Margaret Thatcher provided the clearest formulation of this rationality: “Economics are the method. *The object is to change the soul*”’ (Dardot & Laval, e-flux, 2014).

Starting from this premise, the last chapter of the volume constitutes a compelling radiography of*homo neoliberalis* – defined as ‘neo-subject’ functioning according to a regime of ‘jouissance of oneself’ – which accounts for the incorporation of the *shareholder*logicand for the self-entrepreneur’s socio-clinical pathologies. These analyses represent an exemplary application of the Foucauldian approach to the challenges of our present time. As anticipated above, Dardot and Laval proceed *with*but *beyond* Foucault. It is not by chance that at this level the authors meet and enrich both the *post-Workerist* research on financialization as biopower (Marazzi, 2011; Lucarelli, 2010) and the *post-Lacanian* reflection on the so-called evaporation of the Father (Chicchi, 2012). Furthermore, the heuristic tools forged in this section provide promising lenses to read some of the most controversial processes we face on a regular basis. To mention but a few: the financialization of natural resources, the pillage of social commons via new enclosing mechanisms, the progressive commodification of practices traditionally categorized as pertaining to the sphere of reproduction. In conclusion, *The New Way of the World*is an extremely rich book whose most significant achievement is to incite further research into the neoliberal rationality remaking the world.