

On Rationality

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On Rationality

Rationality is an enduring topic of interest across the disciplines and has become even more so given the current crises that are unfolding in our society. The four books reviewed here, which are written by academics working in economics, political science, political theory and philosophy, provide an interdisciplinary engagement with the idea of rationality and the way it has shaped the institutional frameworks, and global political economy of our time. Rational choice theory has certainly proved to be a useful analytic tool in certain contexts, and instrumental reason has been a key tenet of human progress in several periods of history, including the industrial revolution and the modernity that emerged in the 19th century. Given the complexity of our current challenges, however, is it time to ask whether this paradigm might be better complemented by more holistic and heterodox approaches?

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Introduction

How we choose to read and respond to the big problems of our times such as the crash of financial markets or environmental destruction poignantly reveals our priorities and the values which we want society to be most characterised by. Rationality has been instrumental in policy design, from the target culture introduced in the public sector to maximise efficiency, to the way in which we conceptualise individual freedom, and the rise of certain political ideologies that emphasise technocratic and allegedly value neutral forms of governance based on data collection, feedback loops and algorithmic evaluation: an ideology Evgeny Morozov has dubbed 'solutionism' (Morozov, 2013).

The books under review offer different perspectives on how rationality has been shaped, how it functions in our economy, and what it is or can be used for. In this sense, all offer themselves as works that might be organised differently in another essay review with other texts, perhaps as meditations on the method and philosophy of science, or as contributions of political theory and neoliberalism. Taken together, however, they range from offering a balanced and thorough introduction to the heated topic area of rational choice theory (Hindmoor & Taylor, 2015), to trying to sketch out the invidious effects of neoliberal political rationality on democratic political institutions (Brown, 2015), to a philosophical critique of key premises underlying rational choice and the emotive aspects in the contemporary neoliberal socioeconomic framework (Massumi, 2015), to an attempt to reawaken critical theory as a tool to rethink a valid alternative rationality that does not put the domination of nature at its centre (Ludovisi, 2015). Although these books have different aims, what binds them together is that the assumptions and judgements which are made about the applicability of a type of rationality, shapes the way we conceive of society, our

role in it, and how we might respond in the future. This is as much true for someone trying to offer reasons for the current authoritarian populist surges in Western democracies, to those effective altruists arguing about the role evidence-based policy should play in directing governments, philanthropists and individuals in giving effectively to charity. These debates greatly shape our idea of political science as a richly contested discipline, as well illustrated by the outputs in this journal responding to a symposium on Keith Dowding's work (see PSR, May 2017; Dowding, 2017). By implication, however, the dominant social science conceived as *techné* contributes widely to a context-dependent, social development and organisation of our political and social institutions, that can work either to emancipate or to control (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 62). And as such, the question of rationality will always pose itself as an enduring topic and one which needs serious consideration and robust reflection from as many angles as possible.

Rational choice

Rational choice is undoubtedly one of the key concepts of political science and has stirred some of the most bitter debates and controversies in the field. As Frank Lovett put it: any self-respecting social scientist has to have an opinion on rational choice, and debates surrounding this framework continue to be 'something of a *cause-célèbre* (Lovett, 2006, p. 237). It is rare, then, to find an account of the intellectual history of rational choice that is so balanced and that provides such a succinct introduction to the historical development of this powerful idea as the one provided by Hindmoor and Taylor. Though the absence of a discussion about the way in which the Cold War influenced some of its development is perhaps a notable omission.

Delving deeper into the big questions of political philosophy, the second chapter focuses on James Buchanan and his normative political theory on the legitimacy of the state and the implications on what sort of state this should be, thus allowing for a clear summary of Buchanan and Tullock's important contribution *The Calculus of Consent* to emerge. Furthermore, Hindmoor and Taylor offer a brief summary and assessment of alternative critical views, for instance, that cooperation between actors is possible without resorting to the state, as well as how Buchanan's analytical framework may help us understand certain political developments such as centralisation of power in American federalism.

In the next chapter Hindmoor and Taylor look at the way in which rational choice (in particular spatial theory of party competition) can contribute to our understanding of politics and party behaviour in two party systems such as the UK. The chapter focuses on the contributions made by Anthony Downs, who is interestingly interpreted as providing a normative defence of representative democracy, and in so doing, discusses the way in which our understanding of democracy has changed, as well as varying accounts of democratic legitimacy. Here, Hindmoor and Taylor provide a particularly relevant and timely discussion on more recent contributions to rational choice literature.

In the following chapter, they focus their attention on countries like Germany and Belgium, where multiparty coalition-building is the norm. Central to this chapter is the work of William Riker and a discussion of the tenability of key assumptions such as whether parties do converge on the median voter and whether politicians formulate policy to win elections, rather than the other way around.

In the remaining chapters, the authors focus on major exponents of rational choice such as Kenneth Arrow and social choice theory, and Mancur Olson and the logic of collective

action. It is here that they briefly discuss Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom and her research on *polycentric* governance of common pool resources, demonstrating how the governance of resources by communities can often effectively eschew the traditional binary solutions to such problems of allocating private property rights via the market, or nationalisation by the state. They then discuss rational choice in relation to government failure with particular emphasis on Gordon Tullock, before returning to Anthony Downs, this time in relation to the economics of information and voter choice.

In the last chapter, Hindmoor and Taylor discuss the nature of rational choice explanations in a wider context in the philosophy of science, discussing positivism, which places emphasis on the predictive qualities of theories (which rational choice is deemed to perform quite poorly in), and scientific realism, which emphasises the identification of causal mechanisms on the other (which rational choice is much better at). They discuss the contemporary role of rational choice in light of what appears to be more modest adaptations of rational choice theory, which may account for why the intensity of the debate has slightly waned in recent years. The question arises, whether we can accept a 'partial universalism' of rational choice, meaning that it is a useful analytic tool when certain conditions are present, but cannot be used to explain any and all political developments and events.

Regarding rational choice, a more specific question is to what extent one can meaningfully speak of economics as producing scientific results, and how accurate a representation of certain social phenomenon can be drawn based upon them. One obvious problem is the fact that the assumption of *ceteris paribus* rarely holds in the social world, and therefore is not easily reduced to an observable nexus of effects. Rational choice theorists would do well to consider carefully the way they frame their questions: for instance, rather than

asking why does X happen if Y and why is that the case, a question which tries to establish a law, it might be better to ask why does X seem to happen if Y in some cases and not in others. In other words, rational choice theorists are engaged in the pursuit of demi regularities rather than laws of social physics. This also means that a lot of the criticisms regarding excessive instrumentality of rational choice can be mitigated by pointing out that perhaps too much emphasis has been put on the content of the sometimes seemingly rigid assumptions of rational choice, rather than the axiomatic structure of preferences. Hindmoor and Taylor give a variety of examples to demonstrate that one can coherently integrate non instrumental preferences, for instance the aforementioned approaches of Elinor Ostrom.

However, Ostrom's Nobel Prize winning research (incidentally awarded a year after the 2008 financial crisis) which powerfully debunks the myth of the tragedy of the commons, and undermines certain tenets of neoclassical economics and key aspects of rational choice, does beg the question how broad a family rational choice theorists can be, while still maintaining a recognisable identity. If rational choice theory encapsulates human decision making, from the governance of the commons to hedge fund managers, does the target of rational choice not become increasingly vague? As the authors point out, first generation and second generation rational choice theorists and revisionist public choice theorists are far less narrow in their assumptions and less imperialistic in their ambition. The main question for social science and its uses of rational choice theory seems then to be, what conditions have to be present in order for rational choice theory to be effectively applied, and which questions of social science are most closely related these situations? For instance, from a rational choice point of view, one could well provide an analysis which

suggests the following: the EU and the UK have a preference ranking that is adverse to the national and public interest on both sides of the channel (Varoufakis, 2017). This is because the EU, as a conscious optimiser of its own institutional stability and power in self-interest of the bureaucrats and politicians who benefit from it, does not want to seek a mutually beneficial deal for fear of contagion. On the other hand, the UK under Theresa May has seemingly prioritised the ending of free movement, as this policy objective has been identified as optimising voter support, thus riding on the tailwind of perceived public opinion.

The transition of rational choice towards becoming a more flexible normative tool rather than a set of rigid assumptions (as highlighted in chapters four, five and eight especially) that produce predictive power is not without its issues. If empirical success is not the standard of proof—if as some defenders have claimed rational choice is like the ambiguous lessons one may learn from literature, readily available to apply in one's life when similar contexts or dynamics arise—both proponents and critics of rational choice may feel too much of its ambition is shorn with this interpretation. Indeed for the latter a sense of triumphant irony will not escape them, for Adorno and Horkheimer had made clear that the ubiquity of positivism had all but been achieved by the 1940s: 'that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately the one, becomes illusion: modern positivism writes it off as literature' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 7). Nevertheless, this is perhaps a much more fruitful way of looking at the way in which social science, especially economics, seeks to encapsulate an understanding of human action.

Evidence based policy exercises entail forms of quantification—often in the form of risk analysis or cost benefit analyses, which aim to optimize one among a set of policy options

corresponding to a generally single framing of the issue under consideration. This entails not just asymmetries of information but asymmetries of impact, weighted impact that often falls hardest on marginalized groups. For example, by utilising performance metrics, governments have pursued policies of parental ‘choice’ over school places the past three decades, which has resulted in school quality being capitalised in house prices. But making schools compete in this way drives up house prices which in turn prohibits any *real* access for disadvantaged pupils (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2011), and more likely only allows affluent groups to take advantage¹ (Gibbons & Machin, 2006). This can become perverse when these same metrics are used to compare these schools (those maintaining a catchment area criterion in their admission policy), to faith schools which are not bound by it. It is no secret that successive governments, taking note of their above average results, have long been enthralled by the faith school ‘silver bullet’.

This exemplifies that economics is not an exact science but a tool to consolidate or undermine political ideologies and power—which links to a distinction made by Hindmoor and Taylor about the relatively recent separation between political economy and economics. For instance, whether one thinks that economic growth comes from savings, or stimulating aggregate demand matters because it determines whether a government gives a tax cut to corporations and “savvy investors”, or the broader public. It is not clear that there is a scientific finding in economics that can sway government policy one way or another.

¹ Butler et al give an example where a middle class family, ideologically opposed to private education, ended up buying an investment home in their preferred comprehensive school’s catchment area in order to send their child there (Butler, Hamnett, & Ramsden, 2013).

Affect meets rational choice

If Hindmoor and Taylor's book is a relatively well-balanced overview of rational choice and its discontents, Brian Massumi's *The Power at the End of the Economy* is a scathing critique of the neoliberal political economy: 'a rabbit hole appears at the heart of the market. It plummets from the apparently solid ground of rational choice to a wonderland where nothing appears the same. Affect is its name' (2015, p. 4). His analysis is not just a critique of a particular political or economic regime as such, but it can be seen as a philosophical reflection on the emotional fabric of capitalism; the inner dynamics of what Keynes famously dubbed the 'animal spirits', and the formation of the subject in relation to a socioeconomic structure within. Rooted in constructivism, poststructuralist thought, systems theory, and cognitive psychology, readers familiar with Gilles Deleuze will no doubt recognise the theoretical debt owed to him, and the way in which he draws from similar sources such as Michel Foucault, David Hume, Gilbert Simondon and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. On the other hand, readers less familiar with this theoretical framework may find it difficult to untangle the, at times, opaque postmodern prose.

A key starting point for him is Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, from which he analyses how neoliberalism pushes discipline beyond the individual subject to construct new forms of control. Massumi argues that the perpetual tension between seeking trust in a system, (a secure ground), and the ever-present knowledge in the back of one's mind that precisely this trust is absent, creates the conditions of possibility for a pre-emptive Foucauldian biopolitics, that 'primes' the subject into a condition of passive receptiveness.

The power of the political regime then, resides in relational stability, which is a key condition necessary for socioeconomic structures to reproduce themselves. This is brought

about by what Massumi calls 'ontopower', which is characterised by the complex web of interrelated human choices and the constant back-and-forth dynamic of affect and rationality. Indeed, a key argument of the book is that affect and rationality cannot be genuinely separated in any meaningful way.

In the second chapter, Massumi reinforces this philosophical insight with empirical results from cognitive psychology. The point is that decisions emerge from a specific context of choice, and not the autonomous rationality we have learned to hail since the Enlightenment. Decisions are therefore intuitive rather than a rational calculus. The parallel here to the pandemonium of finance capital and its ravaging strides of irrational exuberance, flying in the in face of the alleged rational market coordination of human actions via price signals and markets, is clear. Massumi wants us to transcend this binary opposition between intuition and rational choice and instead envision ourselves as simultaneously thinking-feeling, fully embodied beings. In some ways, the creative impulse embodied joy and human connection of affect, are compressed out of existence by the corset of instrumental reason, to which our affective energies are increasingly channelled towards: 'figures are released monthly and, in the case of the most affectively weighted and eagerly awaited, quarterly' (Massumi, 2015, p. 12).

In the third chapter, drawing on Alfred North Whitehead, Massumi tries to envision, or indeed asks, how a political regime might emerge in which the 'affective event' can grow on fertile ground. In this event, rather than disrupting from the outside like Alain Badiou's militant, Massumi places emphasis on the 'activist', who forges trans-individual sympathy, and whose momentum can (he hopes) resonate with wider society.

Neoliberal rationality

Wendy Brown situates her *Undoing the Demos* as a work of political theory elucidating the ‘arc and mechanisms through which neoliberalism’s novel construction of persons and states are evacuating democratic principles, eroding democratic institutions and eviscerating the democratic imaginary’ (Brown, 2015, pp. 27–28). She is principally concerned for the prospects of popular democracy when neoliberal reason ‘configures both soul and city as contemporary firms, rather than as polities’, and for the health of democracy’s constituent components of culture, subjects, principles and institutions (p. 27). Following a substantive introduction, the book is split into three theoretical chapters and a further two examples of neoliberal practice emptying the core features of democratic civic life. The first of these case-studies is a consideration of the legal system and free speech, and the second is about the decimation of liberal arts courses in US higher education. This is followed by an epilogue that provides a *positive* case for popular democracy given its contingent and precarious arrangement in our current society.

Like Massumi, Brown finds much resource in Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*, in crafting neoliberalism as a comprehensive political rationality and not just an economic policy. Chapter two, in particular, is heavily indebted to Foucault’s insight of neoliberalism as a remaking of the liberal *art of government*. Foucault allows one to make the point that the full-throated lilt of neoliberalist policy in the 1980s was not simply an overturning of Keynesian welfare economics, but rather the seeds for a powerful governing rationality had been established through the fact ‘its worms lived in the bowels of hegemonic Keynesianism’ (Brown, 2015, p. 51). It is possible to think of Roosevelt’s welfare policy in the 1930s which pursued economic ‘artificial voluntarist interventions’ into the market

to guarantee democratic freedoms such as consumption and political freedom, which was threatened by unemployment (Foucault, 2008, p. 68).

Chapter three revises Foucault's conception of the modern subjectivity of man. Foucault confirms a double-persona made up of *economic* and *juridical-legal* (p. 85): namely a subject of *interest* and of *right*. Brown contends that this story eclipses *homo politicus*, an enduring and present feature throughout political theory from Aristotle, to Smith, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and even Freud, and only conspicuously batted away with the neoliberal conversion of 'citizen-subject' to 'economic-being' (p. 108). Hindmoor and Taylor themselves, for instance, begin their book by acknowledging it was *political* economy that generated such classic texts as *Wealth of the Nations* and *Utilitarianism* (2015, p. 7), and that the separation of politics and economics is only a recent division.

In the remaining chapters, Brown focuses her attention on the deleterious effects of neoliberal rationality on higher education and free speech. She laments that liberal arts programmes are increasingly difficult to argue for as public goods, and the language embedded in these courses such as 'equality', 'autonomy' and 'freedom' are 'giving way to economic valences of these terms' (p. 177). Graduates are conceived as investing in their human capital, rather than developing as scholars or public citizens, and subject knowledge is sought primarily for capital advancement. In the broader polity, speech becomes conceived as unregulated capital which best serves members of a political market when it is freely available. Brown draws on the *Citizens United* case where the Supreme Court ruled corporations as citizens. Such a move takes speech away from the process of deliberation and judgement, to a place where 'ideas, opinions and ultimately, votes are generated by speech', just as marketplace goods are generated by capital (p. 158).

Brown is fond of her ‘hollowing out’ metaphor to characterise neoliberalism’s assault on the civic and the political institutions. ‘Hollowing out’ places much emphasis on the capacity to leave nothing but a fragile outer shell—no doubt an apt summation of the state of many of our democratic institutions. This image, however, underplays neoliberalism’s malleability in reconfiguring itself within institutional domains in more complex ways, such as when social actors are actively *responsibilised* and asked to negotiate conflicting worldviews. Brown does gesture to this point in her discussion of Rowen Shamir’s work on the economisation of the moral (chapter 4). In such a wide-ranging book, however, even more could be said about the way neoliberalism often sustains itself by reconfiguring the language of social justice and equity, rather than simply diminishing it.

Critical theory and praxis

Whereas Brown situates her book as a theoretical contribution to the critique of neoliberalist rationality, Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi’s collected volume puts the question of praxis at its centre. The book is compiled of chapters developed in the context of a series of *International Critical Theory Conferences* held in Rome since 2010, which have endeavoured to construct a ‘new political reality’ grounded on the early Frankfurt School, as a way of ‘originating alternative models of political praxis’ (Ludovisi, 2015, p. 3). The book is organised into three sections. Firstly, Adorno and his works, are addressed in relation to their potential convergence with political praxis. This is followed by sections on reconciling critical theory with ‘normativity and a theory of rights and justice’ (p. 3) and a final two chapters discuss the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

The book devotes five chapters in attempting to reconcile Adorno’s theory with a potential praxis: a labour that falls short of offering the reader a procedural, programmatic form of

praxis. A substantial re-reading of Adorno is produced by Ludovisi himself who states that through his radical critique of alienation and reification, Adorno's theory fosters a 'critical consciousness that can lead us to the refusal of complicity in domination' (Ludovisi, 2015, p. 35). Critical thought is thus conceived as practice: a 'transformative' and 'practical productive force' (p. 35). Overall, Adorno's 'dialectics' is understood in these chapters to provide us with an invaluable way to raise consciousness through reflection 'against the administered world', or even the current 'anti-Jewish rabble' found in Europe (chapter by Dobbs-Weinstein, p. 87), even though this cannot constitute a programmatic form of praxis. In spite of all the risks Adorno took in 'affirming absolute autonomy of thought', a 'solid political theory' for social change, transformed by praxis, is unlikely to ever emerge (Ludovisi, 2015, p. 60).

The latter chapters position critical theory as an explanatory tool for thinking about the issue of institutional transformation rights and justice. Habermas is a key figure here in mobilising the normativity needed to positively discuss such issues with his communicative discourse, and he appears in a number of chapters. Rocio Zambrana's chapter begins by drawing on Habermas' belief that *Dialectics of Enlightenment* had formed an ambiguity, or still worse a political pessimism in critical theory (p. 101). This was something established by the 1940s, when neither Adorno or Horkheimer believed that social science methods could 'fulfil the promises of critical social theory', thus leading to the radicalisation and totalisation of their critique of ideology that is found in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Habermas & Levin, 1982, p. 21). Zambrana's chapter thus reinstates a 'normative ambivalence', firstly, through her reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as 'a powerful perspective' for analysing the paradoxical logic of capitalist modernisation (p.

102) and via a decolonial critique of reason provided by Columbian scholar Santiago Castro-Gómez, whose work introduces *heterogeneity* and *cultural negotiation* into the fray, thus breaking the Weberian conception of one rationality and one modernity. In rejecting the opposition between traditional and popular culture in Latin America, this allows for a reading of rationalisation unfolding ‘in a different way in a particular context’, and where Latin American identities are a result of multiple rationalities that transform one another (p. 110).

The edited collection is rounded up with two chapters that discuss the relationship between aesthetics and politics. One deals with Adorno’s relationship with Benjamin, the other draws on his critical engagement with Hegel. This latter chapter discusses a recent video installation by the German filmmaker Hito Steyerl’s entitled *Adorno’s Grey*, a title alluding to the (probably) apocryphal story that Adorno had his lecture hall painted grey to allow his students to better concentrate. Adorno is notoriously read as proclaiming that philosophy could only be realised ‘via unremitting negativity’, via art that refused to be made ‘a functional part of the existing order’ (p. 202). Hito Steyerl’s exhibit supposedly brings us away from this. Adorno’s retreat away from any radical politics to theory might support this reading further. Samir Gandesha’s chapter however, contends that the radical student’s actions during the 1960s, although wrong in their use of violence, actually followed literally the logic of wanting to smash reified consciousness, an idea captured by Adorno’s belief that aesthetic theory could provide the ‘explosive Dionysian impulse’ when it aims to ‘express the inexpressible’ (p. 203). In completing the circle, the exhibition ends with film footage of a student using Adorno’s book *Negative Dialectics*, to break out

of the police line. Rather than suppressing praxis, philosophy and politics are given expression through their intertwinement of art.

In fact, this ‘Dionysian impulse’ seems also to be present in Brian Massumi’s ‘activist’, who surrenders himself artfully to ‘the event’ and in relation to others, thus combating liberal individualism by creating broader channels of solidarity and sympathy that go beyond interest. He cites the Arab Spring, the Quebec student movement, and Occupy Wall Street as potential examples. But he is also acutely aware that the affective life cycles of these moments of revolutionary potential mean that their momentum can always be subdued or appropriated by the existing regime, most poignantly demonstrated by the appropriation of the 1960s counter culture. Perhaps then, one should not primarily focus on these explosive events which always leaves the perpetually unanswered question of what to do the morning after, but instead, identify sites which broader subjectivities of solidarity can emerge and whose moral and political demands may resonate with wider society.

As David Graeber (2014) has pointed out, many people in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US were workers in the care sector who were not making ends meet, and were inhibited from contributing to doing what they wanted to do, in providing an invaluable service to society—something which should surely be a political and moral end worth striving for regardless of ones’ position on the spatial voting grid. We can see here how the marginalisation of affective labour, (either through lack of valuation or in the ‘taken-for-granted’ in the case of domestic labour on which the entire reproduction of the economy depends), discloses a systemic inequality. Thus, affect becomes the locus of a political demand which is specific enough, but has a potential to trigger wider political

friction given it calls into question some of the key structural mechanisms of capital valuation chains. In some ways, Obamacare did something very similar: a modest demand triggered a much bigger ethico-political debate with potential larger implications for the US economy. This is perhaps the art of politics today.

Rational choice in our time

Ideas often capture the public and policy-makers and are more powerful than is commonly understood. As Keynes famously wrote: ‘practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some *defunct economist*’. This is certainly true for rational choice’s enthusiastic take up by politicians. It is worth reminding ourselves that during what Hindmoor and Taylor characterise as rational choice’s ‘difficult decade’ (1994-2004), third-way politicians such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair were busy enacting its very tenets more than ever as guides for delivering ‘effective’ evidence-based policy, something the former UK government advisor Michael Barber characterised as the science of ‘policy deliverology’. New Labour embodied that ever-increasing move towards a rationalist, apolitical form of policy-making, which fixated on ‘what works’, at the expense of arguing what politics might be for. This piecemeal approach to politics, however, arguably seeps its way further down the chain to institutional practices too.

For instance, during many of his speeches as UK Education Secretary, Michael Gove referred to the art of teaching, asking how one might ‘quantify good citizenship’, ‘calibrate team spirit’ or ‘measure enthusiasm or love of learning’ (Gove, 2011a). In the same year, however, he recounted a visit to an academy chain that routinely measured each child’s progress every half-term to see where they ranked in relation to the rest of their peers, in

their subjects, for their sporting and cultural achievement and effort overall (Gove, 2011b). This is done first in private, giving each pupil a chance to improve their standing, before being made public to the other pupils and parents. This logic is reminiscent of national performance tables and the ‘intelligent accountability’ systems that have become a ubiquitous feature of schooling infrastructures nowadays.

As the example suggests, when pupils and teachers fall into this rationalist domain, it reminds us of one of the criticisms that Massumi makes when he laments that the affective and relational potential of humans is restricted, in order to maximise their effective, measurable outputs. This seems ironic given that neoliberalism champions an autonomy for the individual and freedom of choice: including greater freedom for public servants to realise their goals. This is symptomatic of a wider trend in neoliberalist rationality, that while we are given an even greater freedom of choice, the ways in which these decisions are framed, are increasingly becoming less transparent and less democratic. Whilst the teacher might be given more choice about how to achieve certain ends, the choices available become limited within a framework of ‘professional autonomy’. Once again though, it is important to ask whether one can separate the aim of methodological soundness with the knock-on effect rational choice has had on institutional contexts. Our more general point is that rational choice has at least been a key component of the promise of political atheism. Rational choice may often be framed as a methodological choice, but its adoption must ultimately be conceived as a political choice or is at least appropriated by those who have clear policy agendas. The separation between political economy and economics can be seen as an attempt to disguise the political power and ideology entailed within economic models and theory. If one follows the neoclassical economics school,

inflation is the key variable that has to be stabilised. If one follows the Keynesian school, unemployment is the key policy objective. In many ways, the current crises of neoliberalism and the rise of populism on the left and the right, that ride on the wave of anti-globalisation sentiment, can in part be explained by the ‘great transformation’ from a political economy that was centred around labour, to one that increasingly protected inflation. That is, the move towards protecting financial assets, setting up global supply chains that further weakened the position of labour, and ultimately the deregulation of financial markets as a key ingredient to providing economic prosperity.

The technocratic depersonalising rational calculus governmentality that has been characterised in this article is growing ever stronger, and more libertarian than before (see Finlayson, 2017). Both Brexit and Trump strengthened a small minority with a very strong ideology (as John Major, in reference to former put it). Their agenda can be summarised as opposing public service professionals, public choice style scepticism of public servants and politicians, thus seeking to ‘hollow out’ (as Brown might put it) axiological political considerations and ideas, with mechanistic, self-optimising technocratic solutions, that all too often are reliant on data. Of course, there is nothing politically neutral about this ideology; it is quite clear that the championing of the entrepreneurial society, (one only has to look at some of the key individuals behind Brexit and Trump: Arron Banks, Dominic Cummings and Trump advisor and billionaire Peter Thiel) is anything but politically atheistic (Dowd, 2017). The most recent tax cuts of Trump show that he is not representing the interests of those who were key to his electoral success, despite resonating on traditional leftist themes such as anti-globalisation. In the UK, reports of stripping work time directives (O’Grady, 2017), embedding EU law into UK law will surely result in the

diminishing of the European legacy of social democracy in favour of greater economic liberalization (Fox, 2017) and implementation of a more libertarian worldview, even if the European Commission and Franco-German concerns over the power of the city as well as basic economic and geo-political realities may make the hard Brexit that these proponents of a 'Shanghai on the edge of Europe' difficult to achieve.

In 1979, Michel Foucault remarked that there were 'many signs' that we were living under a new form of governing rationality in the form of Liberalism, 'a new calculation on the scale of the world' (Foucault, 2008, p. 20). Whatever discipline an author writes from, it would be hard to deny that for the past thirty years that this Liberalism has been *the* backdrop. In the context of a complexification as a result of the financial crisis and our endeavour to fix the other big challenges of our time, these books combined, provide us with many interesting angles for better understanding the consequences of this fact (whether they may be positive or negative). In turn, they help us to think about what this has meant for our politics, our economics (or rather our political economy) and the organisation of our institutions. They help us ask the question, whether we as embodied beings can even divide affect and rationality as cleanly as we often imagine, and to ask ourselves how much of our social life we want to be thoroughly characterised by a rationality that seeks to measure and quantify.

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