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Damien Cahill

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a glimpse at the process of discovery

Damien Cahill
SCHOOL of HISTORY & POLITICS

When asked to contribute an article to this inaugural edition of *Rhizome* I felt a certain hesitancy. What, I wondered, would be an appropriate offering to a postgraduate journal from someone who has already graduated? This led me to decide upon an approach which is unusual for a scholarly journal. What follows is an outline of the central findings of my recently completed PhD thesis. This is done by guiding the reader through the process of discovery I underwent during my candidature. My hope is that students and educators will recognise the messy, uneven and often unpredictable process of academic research, and also that the necessarily specialised and sometimes abstruse contributions of a PhD thesis can be communicated to a cross-disciplinary audience. Such an approach fits nicely with this edition's theme of 'emergence'. Not only does the following article discuss the emergence of my own research conclusions, but the subject matter is the emergence of a particular political movement in Australian society.

My PhD research examined the impact of what is commonly called the 'new right' during the last two decades of the 20th Century. The new right refers to that group of academics, journalists, politicians and businesspeople who congregated around think tanks and forums such as the Institute of Public Affairs, the Centre for Independent Studies and the H R Nicholls Society. They shot to prominence in the mid 1980s for their strident calls to dismantle the system of arbitration in Australia, dramatically cut state spending and implement a radical program of deregulation, privatisation and marketisation. Given the prevalence of new right commentators in the Australian media today, and given the noticeable right-ward drift of Australian politics in recent years, my research has turned out to be highly relevant to current public debates.

Defining the terms

When I began my PhD research I had only a general idea as to what my ultimate focus would be. My honours thesis examined the ways in which the intellectual Right in Australia, during the 1980s and 1990s, had mobilised terms such as 'political correctness', the 'new class', the 'Aboriginal industry' and 'special interests' to demonise the Left and social justice claims in general. I found the insight into people with views quite different and opposed to my own to be fascinating. I also thought that critiquing such notions was a useful undertaking in itself, given that it had formed part of the rhetorical arsenal of the then newly elected Howard government.

When it came to thinking about my PhD topic, I was keen to pursue this group of intellectuals a bit further. I wanted to look at the battle of ideas in Australia more broadly, and examine it in the context of the major changes in state and economy that had occurred in Australia during the last two decades of the 20th Century. I had the vague notion that I would investigate the role of some of the right wing intellectuals I had examined in my honours thesis and the changes in Australian capitalism that had occurred over the last two decades. Although I hadn't articulated it as such, I wanted to explore the relationship between ideology and interests.

My initial research into this group found that little analysis existed, of a scholarly nature, into the new right in Australia. I found this surprising given that many articles had been written about the new right and many on the Left, at least, have considered corporate funded think tanks one of the main enemies of democracy. This meant there was little in the way of a theoretical or analytical framework to inform my thesis.

What I did find was that what constituted the new right varied considerably

according to the author. Many cast the net very wide indeed, including amongst the new right such groups as the Business Council of Australia, such intellectuals as B. A. Santamaria and politicians such as Joh Bjelke Petersen. This didn't help me much. Some seemed to be talking about neo-liberalism, some about conservatism and others about a free-market populism. I came to the conclusion that the term new right was imprecise and not especially helpful in identifying the groups that I wanted to look at.

I was interested in those intellectuals, politicians, businesspeople and journalists who, from the late 1970s onwards promoted a radical neo-liberal agenda – that the market, free from state-imposed constraints, was the best and most moral way of providing most goods in societies, whether consumer items or public goods such as education and healthcare.¹ Whilst many of these people were socially conservative, some were more libertarian. What distinguished the new right, I thought, what made it new, was its neo-liberalism, and so lumping conservatives like Santamaria (who, in fact, had a socialistic economic agenda) in with them didn't help. And not just any neo-liberalism: I discovered, as I will explain later, that there were many people—primarily business leaders, bureaucrats and politicians—who whilst professing neo-liberal world views of one variety or another, wanted nothing to do with the new right. Within the broad spectrum of neo-liberal opinion, for example, there were some such as the Business Council of Australia (BCA) which advocated, in the 1980s and early 1990s at least, a more moderate neo-liberalism—one that proposed gradual changes that were in keeping with political realities under a federal Labor government. The BCA, for example, was the group that was perhaps most responsible for the policy of enterprise bargaining, and this and other BCA policies were a far cry from the 'dismantle the state now!' rhetoric of think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies, the Institute of Public Affairs and the H. R. Nicholls Society. Clearly there was something that had distinguished these think tanks and individuals from other neo-liberals as well as from others on the Right of Australian politics.

The term I settled upon for describing this group is the 'radical neo-liberal movement'. This term is the product of the development of my thinking on the subject. In fact, it is possible to trace the evolution of the term through my own papers and publications.² Initially I used the term new right, which, for reasons already stated, I found to be inadequate. I then toyed with the idea of labelling them 'organic intellectuals' of capital—drawing on the work on Italian Communist and theoretician Antonio Gramsci—but in doing this I found myself making the evidence fit the theory. I later came up with the term 'neo-liberal intellectual movement', which captured their broad ideological features and identified them as part of a movement of intellectuals, however the more I researched the

issue the more I found people who could be described as broadly neo-liberal in ideology, yet, as already mentioned, who wanted little to do with the group I was studying. So, I finally settled on the 'radical neo-liberal movement'.

This term captures the key features of the group I am studying: its ideology—neo-liberalism—the character of this ideology—radical—and its organisational form: a movement. The notion of a right wing movement I took from overseas literature, particularly studies of 20th Century conservative movements in the United States.³ Probably the most common image and understanding of movements is the new social movements—the peace, feminist, Land Rights, gay rights and environment movements. The radical neo-liberal movement shares many of the qualities of these movements. It is a movement because it is organised primarily around ideas, rather than around political parties or interest groups. Think tanks provide the movement with its organisational backbone, and are the vehicles through which the movement disseminates its ideas, but memberships of these are by no means exclusive. Like other movements, within the radical neo-liberal movement there are debates, conflicts and differences of opinion. However, also like other movements, the radical neo-liberals are united behind core strongly held ideas, as well as being united on who their enemies are. As Sean Scalmer argues; 'The basis of a social movement lies in the acknowledgement of a common interest between a specific group of people against another (and equally defined) group of people.'⁴

The movement comes together at conferences, forums seminars and dinners. It contests broader societal power relations, but rarely exerts direct influence in the same ways as do interest groups or stakeholder groups—involvement in the drafting of legislation, for example. The radical neo-liberals rarely engage in lobbying. Rather, they try to shift the goalposts of political debate. The key difference between this movement other social movements is that the radical neo-liberal movement is small and, unlike other social movements, it does not have a broad support base within society. It is comprised primarily of elites (academics, bureaucrats, journalists, politicians and businesspeople). Unlike traditional social movements the power of the radical neo-liberals lies not in their popular support base, but in the ties that they have to the capitalist class. Indeed, the radical neo-liberal movement is best described as an 'elite social movement'.⁵

Considering counter-factuals and overcoming intuitive hypotheses

When I began I made the mistake that I think many people make, and that is to assume that it was the radical neo-liberal movement which directly influenced

the restructuring of the state and which drove the major changes in Australian capitalism that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. It is a simple error and quite an understandable one to make: one looks at the ideology of the radical neo-liberals and what they advocate – deregulation, privatisation, the creation of markets in education, health care, welfare etc. One then looks at the major changes that occurred under the Hawke and Keating federal governments between 1983 and 1996, and one discovers that these governments implemented deregulation, privatisation and marketisation: ipso facto, the former influenced the latter. Not surprisingly, the reality turned out to be a bit more complex.

As I collected more evidence I began to have doubts about the influence of the radical neo-liberals. Whilst some of the radical neo-liberal activists waxed lyrical about how they'd been primarily responsible for much of the embrace by business, the bureaucracy and the Labor and Liberal Parties of neo-liberalism, others were much more cautious and circumspect in their conclusions—'another straw on the camel's back'⁶ was the assessment of their influence by one prominent movement activist.

When I talked to policy-makers from the 1980s and early 1990s about the influence of the radical neo-liberal movement the common assessment was that it was negligible. This isn't to say that there were not bureaucrats who, during the Labor years, were influenced by the radical neo-liberal movement, who were participants in the movement, and who would draw inspiration from the movement. Through the movement they would be provided with confirmation of the correctness of their own radical neo-liberal philosophy and given the strength to maintain and pursue these convictions within the public service. Prominent movement activists John Stone and Des Moore were senior bureaucrats in the early years of the Hawke era. These people, however, formed a minority, and those bureaucrats, advisers and politicians who were driving the neo-liberal legislative process had little time for the radical neo-liberal movement. With their strident anti-union rhetoric the radical neo-liberals directly threatened trade unions in Australia—the financial support base of the Labor Party—and Bob Hawke publicly described them as 'troglodytes',⁷ so it is little wonder that many within the ALP wanted little to do with the radical neo-liberals—at least during the 1980s.

Furthermore, the group outside of the ALP and apparatuses of the state that probably exerted most influence upon the broad direction of the restructuring of the state was not the radical neo-liberals, not the ACTU, but the Business Council of Australia—and industrial relations is no exception to this. As much was acknowledged by former Treasurer John Dawkins after he left politics.⁸ As my research progressed my intuitive formulations of the impact of the radical neo-

liberals became less tenable. In short, my initial hypotheses were confounded by the evidence and, in considering counter-factual explanations, there turned out to be numerous more important sources of policy influence at the federal level during the years under study.

Assessing influence

If the radical neo-liberals weren't a major direct influence on the neo-liberal transformation of the state during the 1980s and early to mid 1990s, that is if they weren't a major source of the ideas behind this transformation, then what was their impact and influence?

Measuring influence is an endeavour fraught with difficulties. In my thesis I examine the impact and influence of the radical neo-liberal movement through the lens of hegemony. The notion of hegemony as it is used today is drawn primarily from the prison writings of Italian communist and theoretician Antonio Gramsci, although in Marxist theory its origins can be traced earlier. Writing from inside one of Mussolini's prisons, Gramsci sought to identify the relationships and practices through which consent to the capitalist organization of society is secured, as well as the means for constructing and winning active support for viable alternatives.⁹

Put simply, hegemony refers to the organisation of consent in society—specifically, the organisation of consent to a particular set of class relations. It is a useful way of examining the radical restructuring of the Australian state and economy that took place from the 1970s onwards. In order to be successful, and in order not to rely upon mere force for its imposition, any such restructuring requires a concomitant reorganisation of social relations. It requires the disorganisation, or neutering, of major opposition and the construction of an alliance of social forces committed to its continuation or maintenance. The legitimacy of such a restructuring also entails a reorganisation of 'common sense': the discursive arrangements that mediate people's understanding of the world, and their understanding of the roles of themselves and others within it. In other words, the neo-liberal restructuring of the state and economy that occurred in Australia from the 1970s onwards entailed a corresponding attempt to secure hegemony.

Where do the radical neo-liberals fit into this attempt to secure hegemony?

Australian political economist, Stephen Bell, writes of a 'neo-liberal coalition' and Ed Kaptein of a 'neo-liberal power-bloc'¹⁰ which mobilised from the 1970s onwards to bring about a restructuring of the Australian state. This coalition

consisted predominantly of finance capital, mining capital, farming capital, other export oriented sectors (such as tourism) and small business. It also included big capital in Australia, which was represented by the Business Council of Australia.

It is these groups which formed the capitalist support base for the radical neo-liberal movement, and crucially, which funded the movement. The reasons they supported the movement were that the movement furthered their interests. Funding the movement allowed these capitalists to ensure that radical neo-liberal ideas would be taken up with vigour by groups other than themselves, leaving the capitalists to pursue their own interests in a more favourable intellectual and political climate. In short, these capitalists supported the movement because the movement played a crucial hegemonic role.

Despite the lack of direct policy influence at the federal level up to 1996, the radical neo-liberal movement has played an important vanguard role in the battles over the neo-liberal restructuring of the Australian state and economy during the last three decades. Four main aspects of this vanguard role can be identified.

First, the movement played a crucial role in disorganising the opposition to neo-liberalism and in breaking the old alliances underpinning the hegemony of welfare capitalism and the 'Australian Settlement'. The radical neo-liberal movement is composed of ideological warriors who have been relentless in their assault upon the Left, upon notions of social justice and upon those groups tied to the institutions of arbitration and protection. Through forums, movement publications and a largely sympathetic media, movement activists mobilised terms such as 'political correctness', 'special interests', the 'new class', the 'guilt industry' and the 'industrial relations club' to demonise as elitist and self-interested potential opponents of the state project of neo-liberalism. Success in this venture can be measured by the degree to which such terms and frames have entered mainstream media discourse.¹¹ Not only have those on the Left of the political spectrum been on the receiving end of radical neo-liberal attacks, but those capitalists, primarily from within the manufacturing sector, still wedded to the institutions of arbitration and tariff protections, suffered a sustained assault from the radical neo-liberal movement. Movement activists thus became players in conflicts within the capitalist class itself.

Second, the radical neo-liberal movement provided a language and conceptual arsenal from which those attempting to secure the hegemony of neo-liberalism have drawn. The movement provided the forces of neo-liberal hegemony with critiques of welfare capitalism as well as comprehensive alternatives which purported to be both more efficient and more moral. With its fundamentalist

ideology, the movement offered a justificatory framework for neo-liberalism, portraying what is essentially the sectional interest of particular factions of capital as a universal interest. Not only have movement activists demonised the Left, social justice advocates and those tied to the older order of welfare capitalism, but others have enthusiastically mobilised this language for the same purpose. Perhaps the best contemporary example of this is John Howard's attacks upon 'political correctness', 'special interests' and the 'Aboriginal Industry', particularly in the lead up to, and during the years immediately following, the 1996 federal election. Howard's boast that 'I'm the prime minister who took money out of the ATSIC budget ... any suggestion that we have perpetuated the Aboriginal industry is wrong'¹² is striking in its resemblance to the movement's rhetoric.

Third, the radical neo-liberal movement was instrumental in shifting the goalposts of elite political debate in Australia further to the Right. As a group of fundamentalists convinced of the absolute correctness of their own ideology, radical neo-liberal activists had little concern for the compromises and pragmatic considerations that characterise the political policy-making process. Rather, the public discourse of the movement has been characterised by its radical and dogmatic character. Relatively good access to, and generally sympathetic treatment by, the mainstream commercial news media gave such radical neo-liberal discourse a public platform and lent it a certain legitimacy. Such radical discourse helped to draw the centre of debate to a position more favourable to neo-liberalism. For example, the radical neo-liberal movement's calls for the abolition of the industrial relations system in Australia created, as Sheldon and Thornwaite argue, a 'favourable intellectual climate' in which the Business Council's less radical agenda of enterprise bargaining was politically palatable.¹³

This was true within the Labor Party as well as within the broader Australian political class. Although the radical neo-liberal movement did not exert direct policy influence upon federal Labor between 1983-1996, the movement was a catalyst for Labor's embrace of neo-liberalism. On the one hand, the radical neo-liberal movement was constructed as a threat by the Party's dominant Right faction in order to neutralise opposition to its program of neo-liberal restructuring. The aforementioned attacks upon the H. R. Nicholls Society by Prime Minister Hawke, or John Dawkins' description of the 'new right' as 'treasonous',¹⁴ are examples of the construction of this threat. By promoting the radical neo-liberal movement as a very real threat, the right-wing and moderate Labor leadership had extra evidence with which to persuade the Left-Labor factions to acquiesce to a less radical, but nonetheless neo-liberal, policy agenda. The ALP National President and Special Minister for State, Mick Young, employed such a tactic in 1986 when he implored the party to put aside its differences and unite against the common

enemy in the form of the 'new right'.¹⁵ On the other hand, the movement's alliance with key fractions of capital represented a perceived threat to Labor which could only be headed off through the adoption of policies which incorporated some of the values being espoused by the radical neo-liberals.

Fourth, the movement was at the forefront of the Liberal Party's embrace of neo-liberalism. Of all the political parties in Australia, the radical neo-liberal movement has been closest to the Liberals. Given the integral links between the radical neo-liberal movement and particular fractions of capital it is little wonder that the Liberal Party has been one terrain for movement activism. Furthermore, the Institute of Public Affairs, which was to become a key movement organisation, was crucial in the formation of the Liberal Party in the 1940s and in the articulation of early Liberal Party policy—although, at the time, the IPA and the Liberal Party were very much part of the Keynesian consensus.

In order to bring about their desired changes the radical neo-liberals worked aggressively, both within and outside of the Liberal Party. Numerous movement activists occupied leading positions within the Liberal Party. Publicly, movement activists attacked the 'Wets' in the Party and called on Liberals to embrace a radical neo-liberal policy agenda. On occasion these calls were backed up with threats of electoral pressure. For example, in 1986 movement activist Andrew Hay publicly warned that the Coalition had 12 months to shift to the Right or the new right would form a new party.¹⁶ There is also evidence to suggest that movement activists were involved in attempts to remove sitting Wet MPs and replace them with radical neo-liberal candidates—the ousting of Ian Macphee from the seat of Goldstein and his replacement by movement activist David Kemp is perhaps the best example.¹⁷ Within the Liberal Party, radical neo-liberal activists worked and fought through the Party structures to reorient Liberal Party policy. The establishment of the Dries and the Society for Modest Members were both led by movement activists such as John Hyde and Jim Carlton.¹⁸ For the Liberals, the radical neo-liberal movement provided a discursive underpinning for the electoral strategy, gradually articulated during its years in Opposition, which led to its victory in 1996. The radical neo-liberals equipped the federal Liberal Party with a framework—both conceptual and moral—for the commodification of public goods and, through new class discourse, a discursive arsenal which focussed working class anxieties about neo-liberal restructuring onto the Liberals' opponents: the Left, trade unions and the new social movements. Since 1996, the movement has enjoyed greater direct influence upon government because of its close relationship and sometimes overlapping membership with the Liberal Party. For example, a number of Howard Government ministers such as Peter Costello, Rod Kemp, David Kemp and Ian McLachlan had been movement activists, and

the Centre for Independent Studies' Andrew Norton was briefly employed as an adviser to Minister for Education David Kemp.

Conclusion

Clearly, these conclusions are a long way from, and much more detailed than, the simple notions I arrived with at the beginning of my candidature. In 'The Sociological Imagination', C. Wright Mills, during a discussion of 'Intellectual Craftsmanship', advises aspiring scholars to 'avoid any rigid set of procedures... Avoid the fetishism of method and technique.'¹⁹ The process of discovery I underwent during my PhD candidature certainly did not follow a neat, pre-ordained model. As will have become clear, my own conclusions emerged out of a complex and uneven process of critical reflection and investigation. Perhaps these insights will be of use for other scholars. At the very least they should contribute to the context for speculation about the research process itself.

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