

Has the Time Come for New Starting Points? Reply to David Hess' "Neoliberalism and the history of STS Theory: Toward a Reflexive Sociology"

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A certain man once made a virulent attack on another man for falsely assuming the title of philosopher more in order to satisfy his overweening pride than to practice virtue, and added that he would accept that the title was justified if the man could suffer attacks upon him with patience and composure. For a time he did assume patience and after accepting the insults asked with a sneer whether the other now agreed that he was a philosopher. 'I would,' came the reply, 'if you had not spoken' (Boethius 2003, 43).

Introduction

In *Neoliberalism and the History of STS Theory: Toward a Reflexive Sociology*, David Hess (2013) paints a picture of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as a path toward critical understanding of the linkages between “neoliberalism” and science and technology. Indeed, for this approach, STS would be uniquely situated in offering up interdisciplinary insight relating to these linkages and could, therefore, provide better answers than other approaches. Hess’ summary of the history of the development of social thought within STS is an excellent one, and educates readers with a better understanding of how STS came of age as a field of inquiry and the current possibilities present within it for better understanding many of the critical issues the world currently faces. Some difficulties still exist within this approach, as I will attempt to bring forward. The largest difficulty, as I see it, is the usage of “neoliberalism” as a starting point.

This brief reply explores the usage of neoliberalism and its likely turn as a Zeno’s paradox of infinite regression that displays the impossibility of movement. The largest problem with neoliberalism is that it has been largely undefined and is itself heavily laden with loose pejorative understanding, much less any rigorous definition. Instead of neoliberalism, I will propose a greater foray into the usage of understandings of complex systems, chaos, and randomness, in terms of causelessness, spontaneous change, and indecision coupled with momentum as rendering greater explanatory power, in many contexts, than the blanket term of neoliberalism.

Hess’ starting point of neoliberalism encodes what complexity theorists call a “dominant logic,” from which a discipline is hard-pressed to escape. Such a dominant logic oftentimes creates institutional momentum and, ultimately, groupthink. A putatively interdisciplinary approach such as STS should defy such dominant logics. Indeed, an interdisciplinary approach must be more than the sum of its parts, and willingness to expand beyond definitions as set by the disciplines assembled in such an STS approach should be carefully considered; after all, to do the opposite is to be internally balkanized and to lose all synergy. The field then becomes less than the sum of its parts. It may well be that field sociology, as Hess proposes, potentially offers fine insights into science and

technology; it is my contention that substituting a more politically neutral term will help generate new insights.

Neoliberalism

As a philosophically inclined lawyer, I tend to seek to define terms used in work and inquiry at the outset. Hess obliges, supplying the reader with the definition of neoliberalism used in his piece: “both public policies and economic thought that have guided a transition in many of the world’s economies toward the liberalization of financial and other markets, the privatization of public enterprises, and the retrenchment of government commitments to social programs” (178). This is indeed a start of a definition, though one could ask, in the same sense, which economies, what other markets, how privatization is defined, what constitutes a public enterprise, and what exact retrenchments are encompassed in this broad definition. Are they applicable to all countries at the same time? Different times? What is the order? Is it the assertion that China’s and India’s economic policy shift mirrored similar changes in the United States? Between France and Germany? The rise of Brazil? Has this direction been uniform across all economies over the period of time? Assuming a more generous definition, perhaps it can be defined as “world economic history since 1950” with the decade of the 1970s being much of the formation of STS, as Hess ably recounts in the piece. As we will note, however, the term “neoliberalism” actually had its genesis prior to the Second World War.

More importantly, however, Hess states, “my sense of interacting with and learning from STS social scientists over many decades is that most are social liberals or even democratic socialists, and they reject at least some of the changes in our economies, governments, and universities that are associated with neoliberal political ideologies” (186). Perhaps this is the orthodox starting point for STS social scientists to begin analysis and critique, but this also may well act to foreclose lines of inquiry which fail to comport with an agreement on neoliberalism as a background condition.

This is an important point of departure. The term neoliberalism has no great economic meaning. All the meaning appears to be placed into it by scholars who wish to show their disapproval of market operations. Indeed, Hess’ definition of neoliberalism may be as good as any other, as it has not been defined in any sense other than by those who express political opposition to markets. Boas and Gans-Morse, in a 2009 study, studied the use of the word “neoliberalism” and its placement within the scholarly literature. Several critical measures should be noted, and more than a few telling conclusions can be derived, particularly when viewed in light of the concerns that Hess underscores.

First, according to Boas and Gans-Morse, neoliberalism has never been adequately defined in the literature; over the several decades since its first use, it has taken on the opposite meaning of its original definition, first formulated by the Freiburg School in the 1930s (which embraced a market-based economic approach that accounted for robust state-based assistance and public works.) This is not to say that definitions must be hidebound and unchanging, but the methods by which the change has occurred over the decades should be better understood. With the realization that the term is almost never

used in conjunction with a positive assessment of a market-based approach, one catches the glimpse of political desire rather than the usage of terms common across disciplines, missing an opportunity for STS to be truly interdisciplinary.

Boas and Gans-Morse identify other potentially problematic outcomes with “neoliberalism” as well. “First, its negative normative valence and connotations of radicalism have produced asymmetric patterns of use across ideological divides ... In present usage, neoliberalism conveys little common substantive meaning but serves as a clear indicator that one does not evaluate free markets positively” (146). In short, because it has little substantive value in terms of actual description or understanding, it acts as a signal for group membership. This bolsters Hess’ anecdotal note, recounted above, that the bulk of his interactions with scholarly colleagues have been within a shared framework of the social liberal/democratic socialist. In this sense, Hess uses the term “neoliberalism” as it is the audience that would appear to be most receptive to his ideas, in much the same way a business will supply a reliable product to a customer.

In other respects, the Boas, Gans-Morse piece indicates that the usage of neoliberalism as a background condition rather than a dependent or independent variable leads to less problematic conclusions. This is the sense in which Hess uses neoliberalism, as a way of describing what he views as a shared, worldwide condition in which all actions occur. The difficulty here, however, is that it explains less than what it purports to when better understanding is not so far away.

When Hess states that scholars all share this political starting point, one can also point to a different dominant logic, albeit one more concerning than an ill-defined term such as neoliberalism. One can presume that if retrenchment of the “state” is indeed the signature aspect of neoliberalism, this suggests that the same scholars believe that expansion of the state is laudable. Scholars such as James C. Scott caution such an approach, however, in that the historically dominant logic of the state means to “naturalize the progression and necessity of the state in general and the nation-state in particular” (34). It is an outgrowth of its own construct. Paul Feyerabend (2010) would note that the methodology one uses to understand phenomena is responsible for eliciting those facts. One finds what one is looking for; this is the essence of a dominant logic and, at least to me, is something to be avoided as much as possible.

It may be that the usage of the term neoliberalism is inherently necessary in STS. Indeed, after reading Hess’ work, it seems to be the *sine qua non* shared as a starting point in scholarship within the STS community. But it also suggests that this is not truly an interdisciplinary approach; indeed, it seems to be cast as a singular path from which deviation is viewed, at best, as unhelpful. Striving toward a more nuanced and, indeed, *complex* STS would offer even greater opportunities to move in new, unheralded, and potentially very useful directions.

Complexity Theory and Possibilities for STS

While political discussions about the necessity and usage of “neoliberalism,” therefore, may be rewarding for some, finding a larger common ground of shared interest in similar

issues would seem at least more diverting, if not wholly more satisfying and revealing. Complexity, along with studies of random events and chaos, has its own complications when examined. This is, however, the entire point: the uncertainty unleashed by such rigorous examination and comparison is something to be understood and appreciated. Ultimately, once this is established in a way so as to include uncertainty, one will gain a sounder epistemological basis for knowledge. Being unsure suggests an altogether more natural and likely state than certainty, or acceptance of such an ill-defined background condition as a given.

While I am not an acolyte of the concept of neoliberalism, I do agree that economic systems have areas of overlap and interconnectedness. These overlaps and interconnectedness have existed for centuries, directly involved in questions of the raising and collisions of empires and colonialism since at least the 15th century. Exploitation of mineral resources from the New World created economic dynamics never before seen in Europe, and the collisions and warfare (not to mention the extermination or near-extermination of millions of indigenous peoples). Trade in silver created economic dynamics ranging from China across Europe and back to the New World, with ebbs and flows not dissimilar from those we are familiar with today (Mann 2011).

The areas of connectedness, overlap, exchange, and fluctuation are all areas which may, for some, represent failures of state, market, or society. For others, these may represent phenomena that should be studied in and of themselves, or with an eye toward improvement either through state mandate or other social action. Neoliberalism, by contrast, is a far broader brush and seems to avoid critical distinctions. This is not to say that complexity, as a concept, is not without its own problems, with adequate definitions of complexity and its various components being foremost among the controversies. Some may criticize it as being excessively mathematized or as being a captured subdiscipline of economics. This would be, however, not dissimilar from the use of other economic concepts as either explanation or metaphor — such as neoliberalism.

Definitions of complexity, by Scott Page and Melanie Mitchell in their respective works, do vary. Mitchell's (2009) approach for defining it is based on network conceptions, ranging in fields as diverse as neural networks, epidemiology, and, of course, sociology and psychology in terms of social networks (3819). For Mitchell, the advantage of thinking in terms of networks and interrelatedness is in making connections and insights between phenomena that appear unrelated. This understanding of complexity fits well within STS's putative purpose: to explore the connections between and among diverse events.

Scott Page (2010) takes a similar approach. Some of the signature phenomena associated with complex systems are what he and others term "rugged landscapes" which "dance." These represent uneven distributions of events that are ever-changing and sometimes unpredictable. The latter represent situations of true randomness, those large events which have been termed by Nassim Taleb (2010) as "Black Swan" events. But with Page's characterization, events which show diversity and interdependence display complexity, and entirely different constructs and rules apply. Painting with a broad brush while in the presence of complex events results not only in a superficial interpretation,

but is instead a gross error. Of course, complexity itself could also fall into the trap of a dominant logic of its own, where every event is deemed to be complex. Greater clarity regarding definitions and how it best fits within the context of STS discourse is foundationally important.

Fine, one may say, but why would this concern STS social science scholars? What does complexity suggest that would make one skeptical of terms like “neoliberalism” in establishing a background condition for analysis? Complexity is about interdependence, communications, and relationships between disparate events and conditions. It can pull such relationships into sharper focus, rather than assuming that scholarship relies on a vague conception of neoliberalism. After all, most of the conditions and events that STS purports to study belong to other disciplines ... other disciplines that, ultimately, do not have such a shared understanding.

Conclusions

Even with the advantage of construing the term neoliberalism in the broadest possible sense — that it encompasses randomness, complexity, and chaos inhering in itself as concept — is to lose sight of the possibilities present in alternative conceptions. Indeed, at a high enough level of generalization, no distinctions or differences exist and the resolution of the scrutiny itself is low enough to lose all meaning. Perhaps the problem doesn't inhere in the concept of neoliberalism; perhaps the problem is that everybody seems to be repeating the same thing. To use a complexity term, the discourse lacks diversity.

Neoliberalism as a background condition may be an anchor by which the conceptual milieu of STS social science withstands changing winds and shifting currents. But when other disciplines are finding new ways of gaining knowledge and understanding the world, an interdisciplinary approach such as STS must absorb at least some of these approaches, or be threatened with irrelevance. My own limited experience within my STS studies would also suggest that a truly interdisciplinary approach is the rarest of gems; the balkanization of the approach is far more readily apparent and common.

The world is oftentimes random and chaotic. These situations must be appreciated for what they are; on occasion, great acts of stupidity and cruelty occur without any true reason. Other situations and systems are wild but understandable; while control may not be an option — the extent that any such control, particularly by the state, is desirable at all is readily debatable — understanding is incumbent. This is where STS can offer enormous value; connection, communication, diversity, and interrelatedness. These are all attributes of complexity. Hess' excellent history recounting the development of social theory within STS is a powerful and thorough tour of how we've arrived at our current spot, in addition to carrying the torch of interdisciplinary approaches. It is my hope that STS can indeed live up to its potential as an interdisciplinary approach that can generate great insight into the world and its marvelous diversity and complexity.

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