Chapter 7: From Competition to Collaboration to Cooperation?
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Introduction

Neoliberalism is not, as is sometimes asserted, mainly about the removal or reduction of the state, the anti-state rhetoric of some of its adherents notwithstanding: "it is more accurately defined as a certain type of interventionism intended politically to fashion economic and social relations governed by competition" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 46). In order to promote the governance of society and regulation of social relations by the market, the state "has to intervene in society so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and in every point in society" (Foucault, 2008, p. 145). Indeed, it is the presence of competition that differentiates markets from trade per se, which can occur on a non-competitive basis (Aspers, 2011). But though it is frequently conceived in elemental terms, it is important to remember that, like the markets through which it operates in neoliberalised economies, competition – think here of the rules and rituals framing competition in sport, along with the specialized coaches, trainers, judges and umpires – is always already legally, institutionally and socially embedded. That is to say, we are always talking about organized rather than 'natural' forms of competition.

Herein lies one source of the fundamental enigma of competition as conceived in neoliberalism – even more so than in classic liberalism, since it is much more actively promoted in the former than the latter – insofar as competition is viewed as at once a natural, emergent behaviour, reflecting the psychological makeup of individuals and society confronting an unpredictable and constantly changing environment; yet is also seen as something that needs to be managed, governed, nurtured and protected, by rules, regulations and structures, as well as promoted by gurus, strategists and other experts (see Davies, 2014, pp. 28-30, for a fuller discussion). As we will see below, however, this tension between the purportedly 'natural' status of competition and the need for it to be promoted and protected is but one of a number of fundamental enigmas characterising competition.

The enigmas of competition

Competition has long been associated with and indeed regarded as what drives capitalism where the hope of winning provides the necessary incentive to ensure the optimum and efficient allocation of resources amongst competing ends. Increasingly, from the 1980s, the discourses of the market and competition have infiltrated the public sector domains generally and in particular, education, as a means to 'drive up standards' as endlessly claimed in the rhetoric of neoliberal policy makers. Following their free market logic, they see competition between schools, colleges and universities as the optimal means to ensure the benefits of education are delivered to increasing numbers of individuals regardless of background so that each and every person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential: "As a bare minimum, organising social relations in terms of 'competition' means that individuals, organisations, cities, regions and nations [and schools, teachers and students] are to be tested in terms of their capacity to out-do each other … When applied to individuals, this ideology is often known as meritocracy" (Davies, 2017, p. xvi). However, the view of competition offered by neoliberalism is both one-sided and disingenuous. It seems to offer the hope – the bait some might call it - that everyone can be a winner. The downside of course is the hard, cold reality that for every winner, there are many more losers. Thus as Davies puts it, neoliberal policy contains "a major defect: it consigns the majority of people, places, businesses and institutions to the status of 'losers'" (ibid). In short, far from raising 'standards', given that the individuals who are relentless and ruthlessly pitted one against the other start from different levels of wealth and access to resources the result both reinforces inequality and widens the gap between the successful and the failures

In its starkest terms, by piling rewards onto winners, those winners when it comes to new bouts of competition then start from an advantage as against those who previously failed, or indeed, against newcomers into the field of competition. Competition, far from cultivating potential fairly and equally, can be utilised as a driver of inequality, where those who start with the most take more just as those with the least lose more. Indeed, a vote for competition is a vote for inequality (Davies, 2014, p. 30). Neverhteless, those enamoured of competition can always argue: things are more complicated than this. They regard competition as involving a paradoxical mix of equality *and* inequality. As the theory has it, under conditions of perfect competition, competitors must be formally equal at the outset. Only in this way can the rewards for the winners. Hence, the more talented you are, the harder you work,

and the better your performance justifies the higher rewards. In its most ruthless terms, the inequalities that result are due to the 'faults' of the failures and are thus 'deserved'. As Davies (2014: 54) argues: "It is meaningless to speak of 'competition' unless there is not only some sense of equivalence amongst those deemed to be the competitors, but also some outlet for contingent differences to be represented. The very notion of 'inequality' as an outcome assumes that there must be *something* equal about those whose difference is being measured, proven, justified or criticised". If they start equal but end up unequal, then it can only be due to the fault of the losers. Indeed, this provides a way to read the shift from the old style democrat and labour parties in the US and UK to their new democrat and new labour versions that held sway from around the mid 1990s until the rise of the populist right under Trump and the Brexit campaigns of 2016. In each case one can read a movement from a concern with trying to ensure more equal outcomes towards a tolerance for significantly different outcomes. This included the often extraordinary increases in rewards for those in the upper reaches of the pay scale – as Peter Mandelson, former New Labour cabinet member and subsequent European Commissioner notoriously stated, "we are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich as long as they pay their taxes". This intense relaxation was implicitly justified therefore on the assumption that somehow at the outset the conditions at play were fair and meritocratic (Davies, 2014; Hutton, 2015). Competition, however, requires not only the presence of equality and inequality but also a state of balance involving the maintenance of tension between these two poles. Too much *equality* and there is the anti-capitalist slide towards peaceful cooperation; too much *inequality* and the result is domination by the few or indeed, the tyrant. In fact, as a capitalist – and anti-democrat - Peter Thiel considers competition for losers. What he wants is a monopoly (Thiel 2014). Hence, if competition is to persist, it must have rules and mechanisms, paraphrasing Machiavelli (McCormick 2011) against the insolence of the monopolists (see chapter 6). Competition is thus typically governed by rules and norms, which is one of the ways in which fairness and equality are established, as well as a feature distinguishing competition from anarchy in its pejorative sense or unprovoked attack. Indeed, one of the reasons we describe the latter as 'senseless' is that such incidents don't seem to fit within recognised rules or respectable norms. Anarchy in its more philosophical sense of being without a leader, still draws upon a sense of freedom depending upon equality (Bakunin 1971) and what can be negotiated as a 'mutual' interest (Kropotkin

1904) where ‘rules’ are explored for their effectiveness in promoting freedom with equality or *égaliberté* (Balibar 1994, 2010 see also chapter 2). However, competition as distinct from mutual aid, or cooperation, requires that there be a tension between the adherence to rules in the name of fairness and their subversion or abandonment in the search for competitive advantage, that is, the form of advantage that exploits another. Too much adherence to the rules and we end up with polite interchange under competition or mutual aid under anarchism, democracy and co-operative forms of organisation; too much abandonment and we find ourselves in situations of mortal combat - the fight to the death between would-be masters in the Hegelian sense. Rules thus have different functions according to the prevailing social, political, market regime. In preserving competition, on the one hand, they must prohibit ‘anti-competitive’ collaboration or collusion; but, on the other hand, they also need to establish boundaries and limits to acceptable competitive behaviour (Davies, 2014). In promoting democratic forms of mutual aid, any advantage competitively gained by one over another is seen as reducing the benefits that accrue from ensuring that all individuals contribute to their fullest potential. Thus, if one individual through competitive advantage stops another from engaging in a given activity, then the benefits that would have been contributed by the productive activities of that individual to a community are lost. Overall aggregate benefits fall. The logic of cooperation is quite different to that of competition.

The Competing Logics of Competition

Under the classical conception of perfect competition there should be nothing that prevents the free play of supply and demand from setting the price that allocates *scarce* goods and services optimally between competing ends. Its logic is simply to identify the price that consumers are willing and able to pay that equals the price at which suppliers are willing and able to satisfy demand. To this end there should be no barriers for firms to enter or to leave a market, no monopolies of any kind and everyone has to have perfect knowledge of all market conditions and each individual needs to be a profit maximiser. In this way everything will work perfectly rationally. The great flaw of course is that this bears no resemblance to real world conditions. Thus economists relax the rules of perfect competition to develop theories of oligopoly and monopoly where people do not have perfect knowledge nor are they motivated solely by maximising profit. However, it is perfectly possible to believe

that one can ‘scare’ people into behaving ‘rationally’. For example, if one is made afraid of losing the major investment of their life - say their house - then they will ‘rationally’ choose an option that will enable them to keep it. Hence, Buchanon’s (Buchanan, and Tullock 1962) public choice theory that had a major influence on the Thatcher and Reagan governments placed at the centre of his theory a property owning citizenry. By creating the conditions whereby choices can be measured by the risks (as well as by the benefits) they entail people’s actions, or moves, can be gamed as in a game like poker or a game like chess. Depending upon the information available to people the economy is either more like a casino where outcomes are largely random or a complex field of probable strategies.

There is therefore a competing logics of competition. On the one hand for example there is the Hayekian perspective, which saw competition under the fading glow of classical economics as inherently desirable in itself, and hence in need of protection against misguided intentions of central planning *and* the predation of monopoly (Stedman Jones, 2012). On the Other, recent neoliberal polices and practices that are promoted and justified in the name of competition have been critiqued on the grounds that they are anti-competitive: “market competition means a process whereby the most successful firms either acquire their less successful rivals or drive them out of business. In other words the end point of the competitive process is the abolition of competition” (Crouch, 2013, p. 224). In this sense, contemporary neoliberalism might be described as a form of ‘thanato-politics’, whereby a social organism’s self-preservation strategies stifle, and eventually suffocate, the very vitality and values they were intended to sustain (Santner, 2011).

Indeed, Crouch (2011) argues that to talk of neoliberalism in terms of markets characterised by purportedly free competition ignores the massive economic and political power of large corporations. In response, he urges us “to confront honestly the fact that the political power of corporations constitutes a widely accepted but highly undemocratic feature of our de facto constitutions” (2011, p. 137). Such political power is exercised in a range of ways, including intensive lobbying, financial donations to individual politicians and political parties, the practice of appointing retiring politicians to lucrative corporate positions, and the relationship with government established by corporations holding large contracts for public services, as well as the significant political influence accruing from media control. In this sense, any simple opposition between ‘state’ and ‘market’, competition and domination,

politics and economics, is fatally undermined as evident in the contradictions between *ideals* of free-market competition as the essence of the market and the *reality* of the political influence/dominance of the corporation. The intensification of the competitive ethic that has occurred as part of the neoliberalisation of society may not have had the impact at the level of the firm and its senior management that the media and politicians would have us believe; but it has 'percolated' down to influence and shape the practices and conditions of institutions in all walks of life, including, as noted already, schools. This has partly been achieved via the discipline of short–term contracts, job insecurity and potential unemployment, justified in terms of globalization and competitive pressures for excellence and continual quality improvement, but also modeled on the great social theatre of competitive sport, which "has diffused to the masses a normativity centred on generalized competition" and which "establishes competition as the general norm of individual and collective existence, of national and international life alike" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 35 & p. 281). For schools this great social theatre has involved the spectacle of league tables and the creation of a competitive climate in which failure to achieve sufficiently strong results, and hence to attract and retain pupils, entails the risk of being branded as inadequate and facing closure.

It is important to note, however, that in competition rules on ever serve as partial determinants of action (Cavell, 2002; Davies, 2014; Wittgenstein, 1953). They are essential but they always require interpretation from an outsider, or from the participants voicing their protest along the lines of 'that's not cricket'. The inevitable gap between rules and practice might be described as the 'spirit' of the game or the competition. In relation to the poles of fairness and 'anything goes', or equality and inequality, we can say that the rules function to maximise equality, whereas the role of the competitors, driven by the competitive urge, is to maximise inequality (Davies, 2014, p. 64).

Governance by rules is also central to justice. But whereas the latter is universal, to the extent that all citizens are (in theory) equal before the law, competition is situated and hence limited, pertaining only a selection of individuals are equal before the relevant measure, be this profitability in business or points in tennis. In Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) terms, it might be argued that justice reflects a logic of difference, seeking to abolish or overcome contingent differences, whereas competition veers towards the logic of equivalence, involving the simplification and reduction of the

nuances and complexities of social reality and the consequent organisation of the latter into two opposing antagonistic chains, whose meaning is determined, not by the relations among elements within each chain, but purely on the basis of their constructed difference from, and hostility to, the oppositional chain. In addition, justice rests on moral criteria, whereas the competition may involve empirical or aesthetic, but never moral, criteria (Davies, 2014, p. 61). This distance from morality and ethics helps explain the links between competition and gaming behaviour, which seeks to exploit loopholes within the rules, pushing hard against, and sometimes transgressing, their limits. Indeed, in its pursuit of inequality, competition expresses an ethos of pure antagonism with no normative rationale or explanation beyond the will to triumph over one's opponents (Davies, 2014, p. 65).

In this sense, competition contains something of the fierce rivalry and zero sum logic characteristic of the Lacanian imaginary in which the existence of the mirror image serves as a source of threat to one's own status. Latent within these antagonistic, rivalrous relations is, of course, the threat of violence if necessity requires its use. In Lacanian terms, if the rules of competition represent the structuring role of the symbolic and antagonism reflects the rivalries of the imaginary, we might say that this threat of violence is symptomatic of the trauma of the real. This sense of trauma generates the cycles of crisis that are characteristic of capitalism and its discourses (see chapter 1). Games theory and the rules and norms of competition at least provided policy makers with a sense of being able to 'master' these crises. Clearly if one can control the rules and norms of competition on the one hand, or can create the appropriate conditions under which 'rational' choices must be made then policy makers can, at least feel, they are in charge and can make changes according to their political and ideological leanings. The financial crisis of 2007/8 seemed to blow that thinking out of the water. Indeed, as Davis (2018 :Kindle location 149) put it: "Often when talking to leaders, I have suddenly understood that they are not in control. I'm aware that I'm talking to someone plugged into power, money or both; someone who knows where their interests lie. But they are not really in charge."

Alternative Logics of Democratic Cooperation

Rather than putting each other into risk as a basis for competitive games of economic and political winners and losers, cooperation seeks mutuality: no one loses. This is quite different to the collaborative games of elite groups and corporations trying to control the field of play to their advantage against the mass and against innovative

interlopers. It is at this point that we enter the world of the Spinozan-like society of equals (see chapter 2) and the discourses and foundational infrastructures required to counter the discourses of the master that pervert the principles of freedom and equality upon which a democracy functioning fully to the equal benefit of all operates (see chapter 1).

Critically, the forms of social relationship change from seeking 'power over' to create vertical forms of hierarchy with the master at the top to seeking 'power with' in terms of horizontal forms of relationship where no one has the advantage over another in terms of compelling behaviour. This has implications for building facilitative infrastructures, the allocation of resources and the distribution of rewards. Where under competition the rewards of labour are split between the winner's take and the loser's take, under cooperation the rewards are shared. Where the winner regards the totality of the reward as his or hers to allocate under cooperation each contribution to the totality is like a facet of a crystal, distinct but not split from the whole. The move in logic is then away from a Cartesian and Lacanian[1] style split subject to a Spinozan 'materialism' that does not occasion a splitting of the mind (as I-think) from the body and thus a Deleuzian-like world of folds, forces, and facets. Where a wave does not split the ocean but can be distinguished as a moving event-like phenomenon that is associated with forces, so steam does not split from water and the relation between bee and flower can be seen as an evolutionary and dynamic 'unity' that grows from mutual benefit. The shift instantiated between the two logics is perceptual and has discursive and material consequences.

Having agency in the place of power, a distinction can be drawn in the political universe between friends and enemies on the one hand or say citizens open to cooperation. Rather than framing politics as a relation between friends and enemies

[1] Indeed, the Cartesian roots of Lacan's thinking are not often given enough weight but can be seen in his La Science et la Vérité published in 1965, in *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (archived: http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/pdf/cpa1.1.lacan.pdf). It can be argued rightly, however, there are many possible readings of Lacan and that concepts such as 'extimacy' blur the binaries. Language is 'external' in the sense of pre-existing the birth of individuals and yet, intimate – hence the neologism 'extimate'. Moreover the topologies used by Lacan to explore the relations between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary in constructing subjectivity seem to blow apart the binaries – however, it is true also, amongst all the most complex of entanglements, the most knotted of knots, the spits remain. In that sense, Lacan is the 'analyst' of modernities that draw from Cartesian frameworks rather than Spinozan.

as articulated by neoconservative political theorists (Schmitt 1996, Strauss 1988), billionaire activists (Mayer 2016) and national leaders who see the world torn by an axis of evil (Bush 2002) and under threat from the 'other' as 'enemies within' (Thatcher 1984) or as hostile invaders (Savage 2018), politics can be framed alternatively as collaborative alliances in agonistic politics (Mouffe 2018) or as co-operative moves to include differences as a way of finding more robust solutions to present issues. Each difference presents an opportunity. People with different views, forms of knowledge and abilities can contribute their different powers that in aggregation with others can be more productive than the competitively withheld powers of each individual working to gain a jealously guarded advantage over others. In principle anyone can enter into working associations with anyone else. They can work to collaborate in beating the opposition - forming a left populism in Mouffe's terms (2018) to beat the new right populists. Thus, employing such a principle of association and aggregating powers into unities of 'aggregated power' for mutual projects in a competitive environment becomes a game of winners and losers between political movements or business corporations. The losing organisation has a lot to lose for all its participating members. If it's a level playing field then it is a case of win some, lose some. But aggregations can begin to dominate if there are are no countervailing powers to stop them and then hundreds, even thousands can be put out of work, their livelihoods destroyed; or more devastatingly, their human and political rights taken away. The logic of cooperation seems to offer a way out but only if there is a supportive social, economic and political infrastructure enabling the choice. By and large, it is not part of the prevailing mainstream forms of delivering infrastructures. Mostly they are top down monopolies whether in the public or the private sector.

In a sense, there is no choice about entering into a competitive game when the major way of organising political, economic, social and educational life is by competition. Attempts at co-operation then are subjected to the demands of wider competitive environments. The two logics in lived realities only seem to offer a choice. What however is on offer is a paradox.

Paradox Looking For A Conclusion

The co-operative and democratic logics of freedom with equality do not simply vanish just because there is also competition. Rather like the oscillations between the

gestalt figure that can be seen either as a rabbit or a duck but not both lived experience is caught in an oscillation between competition and the cooperative democratic logics. Both exist as potential and practical ways of organising social, economic, political and educational activities. However, they perhaps exist only as ruins or as piecemeal and incompletely formed experiments. If democracy takes place, it does so most easily in the margins of school life not its mainstream activities that are shaped by the demands for increased profit for shareholders or examination excellence in schools.

Living paradox can be dispiriting. It seems neither one thing nor another. The paradoxical features of the contemporary scene as the politics of the far right wing rises in the ruins of an older consensus, is a:

> curious combination of libertarianism, moralism, authoritarianism, nationalism, hatred of the state, Christian conservatism, and racism. These new forces conjoin familiar elements of neoliberalism (licensing capital, leashing labor, demonising the social state and the political, attacking equality, promulgating freedom) with their seeming opposites (nationalism, enforcement of traditional morality, populist anti-elitism, and demands for state solutions to economic and social problems). They conjoin moral righteousness with nearly celebratory amoral and uncivil conduct. They endorse authority while featuring unprecedented public social disinhibition and aggression. They rage against relativism, but also against science and reason, and spurn evidence-based claims, rational argumentation, credibility, and accountability. They disdain politicians and politics while evincing a ferocious will to power and political ambition.
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> (Brown 2019: 2)

Brown has described it succinctly. Perhaps as Fraser (2019) puts it the solutions to such paradoxes and contradictions are not yet born. If that is so, where is the ground for the rebirth? In the remaining chapters of the book contributors variously explore their ways forward.