The Politics of Precarity
A Discussion of Sanford Schram’s
The Return of Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy

Sanford Schram’s *The Return of Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy* (Oxford University Press, 2015) is an ambitious effort to link together three important political realities of our time: the rise of new forms of neoliberal governance, the associated rise of new forms of social and economic insecurity, and the recent development of organized forms of political resistance symbolized by the figure of “Occupy.” The argument is relevant to all subfields of political science. And so we have invited a range of experts across the discipline to comment on the book and on the broader question the book poses: Are we confronting a new form of capitalism that engenders new forms of politics, and if so, what does this mean for political science?

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The end of the Great Recession, writes Sanford Schram, brought a “return to ordinary capitalism” and, perhaps, a new political moment. By “ordinary capitalism” he refers (following Thomas Piketty) to the pattern of economic growth that produces rising inequality and wealth concentration, a pattern that has characterized U.S. capitalist development for most of the past two centuries, with the notable exception of the post–World War II period. In the U.S. context, the shift has occurred in an increasingly neoliberal policy environment.

Schram reminds us that neoliberalism’s drive to “restructure the state to operate consistently with market logic” is both an economic and political project (p. 25). In social policy, for example, neoliberal practices not only open new markets by commodifying forms of social provision, but also drive market logic and market actors deep into the process of making and implementing policy. In recent years, the neoliberal turn has produced both organizational reforms (such as privatization, devolution, and new strategies for performance management) and a heightened emphasis on policy tools (sanctions and subsidies) that impose a disciplinary regime on noncompliant members of the populations being served, particularly the poor. The book examines a number of policy areas to demonstrate the trend, including social welfare (the use of financial sanctions and personal responsibility contracts for welfare recipients), education (performance measurement through high-stakes testing, market choice through charter schools and vouchers), and criminal justice (behavioral contracts for drug-treatment clients).

How new is this trend? Neoliberalism dates back decades, emerging through a slow and uneven “wave of structural adjustment,” as Schram notes (p. 13). He zeroes in, more specifically, on the rise of personal economic insecurity, or precarity, among growing numbers in the U.S. economy. Economic precarity among workers is not new; like inequality, it is built into the very logic of (and is a necessary condition for) capitalist expansion. Yet the sources and impact of precarity today are markedly different from those of previous eras, in ways that matter for politics. And on this point, Schram’s analysis is rich and insightful.

What drives and defines the precarity of today’s capitalism, he argues, is not only a growing low-wage sector but also a more heavily financialized economy and an increasingly neoliberal policy response. Beginning before and accelerated by the Great Recession, the economy has produced income for those at the top and debt for everyone else, from mortgages to student loans, credit cards, and medical debt: “We have shifted from ‘public Keynesianism’ where the government takes on...
debt to stimulate the economy to a ‘privatized Keynesianism’ where the government’s job is to encourage everyone else to take on personal debt in order to sustain the economy” (p. 11). This means that low-wage workers and the poor (who have always known precarity and economic hardship) are now being joined by “a growing number of different types of people [confronting] a widening variety of forms of precarity: students with debt and no job prospects; the long-term unemployed, who were increasingly just plain unemployable; homeowners whose homes could only be sold at a massive loss” (pp. 23–24).

The predominant neoliberal policy response has been to marketize social welfare functions, turning to private service providers where possible and aligning public programs more closely with market logic. Clients seeking services are transformed into consumers who are both expected and “empowered” to make choices. Both service providers and consumer-clients are held accountable to market-based objectives, through performance measurement. The drive to generate “market-compliant behavior by as many people as possible” (p. 25) in turn “creates the need to increase discipline on those who do not fit in, cannot participate, or will not benefit” (p. 30). Individuals are expected to assume and even internalize the burden of addressing their own economic insecurity. Precarity today is not just income instability; it extends to “how people are subjectified as citizens who must accept responsibility for handling the shocks of marketization” (p. 71). Particularly for those who are marginalized, the impact has been not only destabilizing but also “de-democratizing.”

Schram’s analysis raises serious questions for politics and policy. What are the political prospects for mobilizing people whose economic positions and experiences of precarity vary so greatly? What policy or institutional changes can blunt the impact of what Schram calls the neoliberal “juggernaut” (p. 71), to address the underlying structural sources of economic insecurity for these disparate groups? To his credit, he takes these questions on directly, though the larger issues remain unsettled and in some cases underdeveloped.

The Return of Ordinary Capitalism briefly examines the Tea Party and the Occupy movement as contrasting political responses to precarity: Both are largely comprised of self-identified members of the middle class reacting in part to economic uncertainty and the threat of downward mobility. Schram then turns to a closer analysis of Occupy and the issue of political strategy. Occupy has drawn withering criticism from some on the left who argue that the movement’s impact has been limited and its opportunities squandered by the lack of traditional political organization and a coherent agenda for policy change. Schram counters that the critical role of protest movements like Occupy is to expose and frame an understanding of submerged issues (such as inequality and precarity) in order to widen the discourse and create possibilities for political mobilization and policy or electoral change. If Occupy’s protests are understood as a politics of resistance with transformative potential, he argues, then precarity can be a unifying rather than depoliticizing force.

Perhaps, but the question remains: Can the “precariat” be considered—or be expected to act as—a collective political agent, or a class for itself? Will the shared sense of precarity create enough common ground to overcome major and material differences in the economic positions and prospects of homeowners, day laborers, and debt-burdened students—and if so, what strategies are needed? Will it unite these disparate groups behind a vision for change, or divide them as they scramble to protect their positions against the threat of downward mobility? If the rise and spread of the Occupy protests affirm the former, the Tea Party and the bitter and divisive politics of the 2016 election may point to the latter conclusion.

Schram argues in broad terms for mobilization or resistance at multiple levels, including protests (such as Occupy), party politics, policy advocacy, the creation of alternative local institutions, and pressure on existing government programs to more adequately serve those in need. More interesting is his argument for a radical incrementalism, one that can “work through rather than around neoliberal policies” (p. 174). As he develops the point, his meaning becomes clearer. Given existing constraints, those seeking change must move incrementally. This does not mean “tinkering with the existing system”; doing so is likely to further entrench market logic and perpetuate current policies. Rather, the aim is to identify and pursue incremental changes that will “lay the groundwork for further changes that over time can help build to a transformation of the existing structure of power, the source of the problems” (p. 184).

Building on the work of Andre Gorz and David Harvey, Schram recognizes that this strategy rests on the capacity to distinguish between incremental policies that lay a foundation for fundamental change and those that reinforce the status quo. This is a difficult and complex task, made more so by the policy compromises and interaction effects that often result from hard-fought political struggles. Consider the Affordable Care Act, a landmark achievement but the product of much legislative compromise: Certain components of the original legislation (such as the public option and the expansion of Medicaid) promised to set U.S. health care on a new foundation; others (preserving the principle of competition and the role of private insurers) not only reinforced but strengthened the market-based status quo. Or consider the interactions between various policies to support low-wage workers: Does a sizable minimum wage hike that is not indexed for inflation reflect pathbreaking reform? What about an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit in lieu of a minimum wage increase? There is a role for scholars as well as advocates in answering these
Schram has written an ambitious and important book. Readers will disagree on whether the evidence he provides in his sober assessment of our current economic and political circumstances supports his more hopeful conclusions about the prospects for change. But few will come away unmoved or unprovoked by the argument. Perhaps the most valuable contribution he has made is to open a much-needed and multilayered conversation about how economic insecurity and the neoliberal response are reshaping the nation’s political life—on the left and on the right—and redefining both the limits and possibilities for change.
In America, government officials increasingly think and talk like liberal economists. Terms like “incentives” and “outcome-based assessment” are now common. Striving to operate more like businesses, government agencies have adopted the organizational strategies, management styles, and corporate cultures of the for-profit sector. Sanford Schram’s *The Return of Ordinary Capitalism* laments the rise of this neoliberal ethos. Schram sees this shift as socially harmful and anti-democratic. He believes it has contributed to precarious living conditions for ordinary Americans.

To enter into a discussion of Schram’s argument, there are some facts we must set aside: 1) As recently as 1980 nearly half of the global population starved on a few dollars a day, while today fewer than ten percent of human beings live similarly; and 2) while the American middle class is shrinking, the number of those earning twice the median income has risen seven percent since 1970 and basic goods, services, and living space have never been so affordable to so many Americans. So, on a variety of dimensions, our world is arguably becoming less precarious. Still, we wish to cede to Schram the conspicuous nature of corporate management styles in government services; indeed, we applaud him for emphasizing this point. We invite readers to consider an alternative explanation for the rise and domination of neoliberalism.

Contemporary academics typically assume that the governmental provision of social goods and services is necessary and justified. They forget that the provision of these services by real governments is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the wake of the Great Depression and WWII, the American federal government expanded, both in fiscal size and in scope of operation. Previously, diverse American citizens participated in their local communities and cultivated what Alexis De Tocqueville referred to as a “delicate art of civil association.” Local community groups, churches, clubs, and other civic organizations thrived in early American society. This decentralized network of civic organizations provided, though indirectly, a relatively vibrant and robust system of mutual aid and social services.

From this wider historical perspective, the recent trends of welfare reform, privatization, and curtailing of entitlements should not be seen as a deviation from an otherwise ideally functioning system of government services. Instead, these developments are merely one type of adaptive reaction to the imperfections and administrative failures that came along with taking large swaths of American society under bureaucratic administration.

The New Deal was aptly named—it newly established formal governmental programs in transportation, education, housing, and other public services that simply had not existed before. Whether under Bismarck in Germany, Beveridge in England, or Roosevelt in America, the creation of government programs entailed the displacement of a once-vibrant civil sector. By governmentalizing these facets of society, in all three cases, citizens increasingly became residual claimants in one another’s lives. In America, as these new institutions grew in size and scope, the population also grew and diversified. With this size and diversity came an increase in reasonable disagreement and scarcity driven conflict.

The unique ideological assumption of the twentieth century, captured in the rhetoric of the New Deal, is that collective governance is normatively and practically superior to a disjointed liberalism. In transportation, education, criminal justice, and social service provisions, it was (and remains) commonly assumed that the central driver should be government. Yet the ideological assumption that social tasks must be accomplished collectively through political action, in itself, provides no practical explanation about how this can actually be done. Who should get priority services, of what quality, how should they be produced, distributed, and administered?

To us, the popularity of neoliberal management styles across different governmental sectors is more of a feature than a bug of the American system. In large groups of diverse agents, some disagreements and conflicts are inevitable. By subsuming social services under more formally governmentalized purviews, the New Deal and subsequent twentieth century federal expansions sent the several bureaucratic agencies of social service provision down similar paths. They all continuously sought to appease a growing variety of sometimes-exclusive aspirations while maintaining voter support.

We share Schram’s concerns about “suboptimization,” where decision makers focus so intently on performance measures that they compromise more foundational margins of social welfare. Schram’s discussion of this important problem reminds us of F. A. Hayek’s critique of market socialism. As Hayek demonstrated, standards of quantification and incentive structuring do not operate akin to markets when applied within governmental bureaucracies. This is not because numbers and incentives are inherently pernicious. It is because the bureaucratic context and informational feedback therein are differently structured from markets.

When customers perceive low quality products, or when private donors perceive poor results, they are free to go elsewhere and invest in alternative institutions with perhaps better management standards. Potential innovators are free...
to enter, and inferior practices free to exit. The proxies of success are defined within a context of continual competition, trial, error, updating, adaptation, and innovation. But when a state’s bureaucratic network of public housing implements a managerial scheme detrimental to social welfare, political incentives reaffirm more funding, more professional advising, and more extended oversight. Bureaucracy begets bureaucracy, far more than neoliberalism begets neoliberalism.

Why do we get stuck with neoliberal bureaucracies? Quantified reports and outcome-based strategies have proven manifestly unable to accomplish abstract political ideals (consider the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, or No Child Left Behind). Still, these styles of measurement provide an appearance of tractable performance in terms that political decision makers and voters can understand and appreciate.

To us, the rise of neoliberal management styles in government operations is not the result of a directed effort (or conspiracy) to marketize social services. It is, more profoundly, an inevitable by-product of managerial trial and error within a bureaucratic context. The more complex and abstract the political aspirations that are attached to governmental programs, the more likely that bureaucratic attempts to realize those aspirations will misfire. Venues of repeated failure are likely to cycle management styles until some minimal common denominator is reached that at least appears to do least harm. Thus, we aspire to a schooling system that is vibrant, equal, and respectful of different forms of intelligence. But in fact our public school system segregates children, requires educators to teach to tests that deny differences, and instills mindless lessons about submission to authority. Thus, we aim for rehabilitation and justified retribution within an enlightened criminal justice system, but we end up merely warehousing human beings.

Schram derides the pernicious role of neoliberalism: He calls for activism and solidarity as alternatives. It is unclear how those alternatives will actually work. We invite readers to consider an alternative inference from the pernicious tendency of bureaucracies to converge on neoliberal management styles. To us, the governmental trends that Schram describes suggest a more radical remedy—perhaps we should reconsider the scope of social activities that we entrust to bureaucratic governance.
Sanford Schram offers an important, mostly clear, and often compelling critique of the penetration of market logic into nearly every corner of our lives, which he characterizes as “the new normal” of “ordinary capitalism.” He masterfully weaves together concepts from several disciplines to understand the emergence of a new “precariat” class, the political manifestations of “middle-class melancholia” on the right (Tea Party) and the left (Occupy), and the marketization of social welfare policy. His book is relevant to any political scientist concerned with the politics of inequality and social welfare reform, although its impact may be limited by its almost exclusive focus on the United States and its periodic descent into opaque jargon, particularly in the first half.

As someone who studies the political economy of development, I found the second half of the book to be the most compelling. Using case studies of welfare-to-work, drug treatment reform, school reform, and social impact bonds in the United States, Schram develops a detailed critique of business models of service delivery, measurable performance standards, the drive to transform everyone into an “entrepreneur of oneself,” and the use of market-based innovations to solve the very problems created by marketization. His incisive analysis of the perverse outcomes associated with these “ neoliberalized” approaches to social welfare could just as well be directed at international development assistance.

Schram’s proposed response is “radical incrementalism,” which he offers as an alternative to the traditional approaches of the organized Left. Recognizing that coalition-building and piecemeal reform run the risk of legitimating the status quo, he encourages progressives to choose battles that can be won and help those in need while leading to subtle shifts in power relations. His refreshingly pragmatic approach makes sense not only for U.S. social welfare policy but also for foreign aid and development work.

I do, however, take issue with some aspects of the book. Let me start with the title, which suggests that we have returned to some earlier, pre-New Deal form of capitalism. While the balance between states and markets has certainly shifted back to the latter, states are much more institutionalized and possess far more tools for intervening in our daily lives than they did a hundred years ago. I would therefore argue that we have entered a qualitatively new phase of capitalism that may be the new normal but is anything but ordinary.

More seriously, the book’s analytical power is weakened by a few unexamined assumptions. On several occasions, Schram seems to suggest that there is a cabal of evil neoliberalists cynically plotting to enrich themselves by marketizing everything as a way to discipline the poor and turn them into “market compliant” actors. I do not dispute that our democracy is seriously compromised by a small group of multi-millionaires who are distorting the political process through lobbying, campaign financing, and the media. But I am less convinced that “ neoliberalization” is a conscious, coordinated plot; rather, as Schram acknowledges toward the end of the book, it is yet another example of incrementalism, often in response not just to national pressures but also to global ones, which the book almost completely neglects.

Schram also appears to suggest that realigning incentives, building human capital, and monitoring outcomes are necessarily dehumanizing and oppressive. This view strikes me as throwing the baby out with the bathwater. First, we have abundant evidence, including some provided by Schram, that we ignore or misunderstand incentives at our own peril. I believe it is appropriate for public policy to try to align these incentives in such a way as to produce socially beneficial outcomes, even if it means rewarding some behaviors and penalizing others. Most of the perverse effects that Schram rightly identifies result from privileging the short-term over the long-term and prioritizing quantifiable outcomes over qualitative ones. While market pressures make these tendencies more difficult to resist, I remain convinced that they can be overcome, and, in the spirit of radical incrementalism, would suggest restructuring rather than abandoning incentive-based programs.

Second, I would argue that personal responsibility and discipline are not, in and of themselves, bad. The problem is that they are unfairly applied and/or enforced (e.g., for the poor but not the rich) and without the proper support systems (e.g., adequate child care, decent jobs) to enable people to make meaningful choices. Thus, while these concepts have, indeed, been appropriated to serve the narrative of “deservingness” and facilitate marketization, they can also be empowering for individuals and communities under the proper circumstances.

Returning to radical incrementalism, I wish Schram has paid more attention to the discursive aspects of his proposed strategy. A case in point is “ neoliberalization,” which is a useful concept in theory but has two downsides as a frame for pragmatic change: (1) unlike capitalism or market reform or even marketization, it is highly normative and therefore used only by its critics; and (2) it is particularly ill-suited to the United States where “ liberal” has a different meaning than in the European tradition. A more concrete example is the style of the Occupy Movement, which has struggled to appeal to segments of the precariat who view tent cities, performative protest, and “bodies in alliance” with suspicion, even if they share many of the same concerns.
Finally, I do not think Schram gives enough credit to identity politics. He provides a fascinating discussion of the loss of middle-class identity, but he emphasizes economic rather than identity-based cleavages such as race and ethnicity. For example, he presents Black Lives Matter as a critique of how racialized policing has been used to discipline the poor. True enough, but I would argue that its broad resonance is partly because racialized policing (and, relatedly, white privilege) transcends class. Likewise, he interprets the Tea Party as an attempt to protect an idealized “self-sufficient self” that is incompatible with high levels of debt and social spending. But I would posit that this argument has been trumped by Trump, who has decoded “self-sufficiency” and laid bare the real concern of his supporters: losing ground to “the other.” Once decoded, the puzzling demand by Tea Partiers that the government keep its hands off “my” Medicare makes more sense. Given these realities, the defining challenge for U.S. progressives may be to build a broad-based movement of the precariat that goes through rather than around identity-based cleavages to arrive at their shared economic grievances.
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Inequality is on the rise in advanced capitalist countries. While the rich are getting ever richer, the number of people living in precarious circumstances is growing, and the middle class is increasingly worried about becoming a thing of the past. This changing economic situation also influences politics, as the precarious and the worried have grown angry or alienated. Protest movements on the political left and the political right are emerging, expressing their discontent, but they are seldom heard. What are the alternatives to the current economic orthodoxy? What can be done to help people in need? How can people negatively affected by ordinary capitalism change their situation? These are some of the most fundamental questions of our time.

In his rich book, Sanford Schram identifies neoliberalism as the main culprit for these “dark times” (p. 173). Under neoliberalism, the economic logic of markets is expected to enter every aspect of human life, be it welfare, education, or philanthropy. However, neoliberalism is more than just the reliance on market forces to organize social and economic life. It also entails what Schram calls “neoliberal governmentality,” which refers to the insistence that “people adhere to the standard of the self-sufficient individual all the more intensively just at the moment it begins to fade away as a credible ideal” (p. 37).

In this dark world, we are on our own. If we cannot cope with market forces and the survival of the fittest, then it is because we are not trying hard enough and need to be disciplined. And if this is not enough, there is always a solution: more market and more discipline.

Schram substantiates his unsettling account by numerous examples from the U.S. context. Although The Return of Ordinary Capitalism provides more of an overview of research (including his own) than a rigorous empirical analysis, the narrative is convincing and some of the examples are stunning. Ultimately, it is the sum of examples of neoliberal governmentality and their skillful deconstruction that make the book almost overwhelming.

Ambitious books are never without problems. Generally, I find Schram to be too dismissive of markets, public—private partnerships, or private-interest governments. Markets are not always bad. In fact, markets can be highly efficient ways of coordinating supply and demand. The problem is that markets are the one-size-fits-all solution provided by neoliberal ideologues and lazy thinkers. These people rarely think about how to create a functioning market, possibly because the fact that markets need to be embedded in society in order to work properly is still not taught in mainstream economics courses at universities. Markets do not always work, and if we want them to work, they need to be properly regulated and embedded. However, it would be wrong to dismiss markets out of principle.

Similarly, public—private partnerships and private-interest governments can be used for good. Consider, for instance, skill-formation policies in Western Europe. In so-called collectively organized training systems, which can be found in countries such as Denmark, Germany, or Switzerland, firms, state agencies, and intermediary organizations of both business and labor cooperate in skill formation. Among others, employers and their associations are involved in the financing and administration of training, meaning that collective skill-formation regimes presuppose public—private partnerships and employers that are willing to participate in collective action. Still, the system works. In countries with collectively organized training systems, workers are skilled, unemployment is low, and wages are high. However, in these systems, employers are not free to do whatever they want. Rather, employers’ behavior is constrained by institutional regulations and normative arrangements. Put differently, state and society have imposed what Wolfgang Streeck has called “beneficial constraints.”

In fact, although Schram claims to target markets and public—private partnerships, the real culprits seem to be austerity and a hostility to state intervention. His dismissive discussion of attempts to improve people’s human capital is telling in this regard. I can see no wrong if people are encouraged to invest in their human capital. But acquiring skills should empower rather than discipline them. Consider, for instance, active labor-market policies. Anglo-Saxon-style active labor-market policies try to pressure the unemployed into accepting any job, while Scandinavian-style active labor-market policies try to support the unemployed in acquiring the skills necessary to find a good job. Both forms of active labor-market policies are perfectly compatible with market logic, but they differ with regard to costs. While the former type is cheap in the short run (but potentially disastrous in the long run), the latter entails a costly public investment in the short run in the hope of reaping a decent return in the future (in the form of an employed tax payer). In this process, cooperation with employers can help to ensure that there is a market for the newly trained worker.

Hence, in my opinion, the problem is not markets or public—private partnerships (broadly understood) per se but, rather, attempts to “starve the beast.” When reforms are first and foremost about saving money and minimizing state intervention, goals other than austerity are (unsurprisingly) likely to suffer. Of course, part of the reason why the beast is being starved is some of the very people Schram identifies as the victims of neoliberalism. Although for Schram the private investor class dominates

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the public policymaking process to an ever-greater extent (p. 170), the real problem is that some of the victims of neoliberalism, in particular the adherents of the Tea Party movement, in fact support policies that seem to go against their economic and social interests.

Two questions thus arise, and here I found Schram wanting. First, what is the alternative to the neoliberal and austerity narrative? And second, how can we build a large coalition that is able to feed this counternarrative into the public policymaking process? The first calls for more (rather than less, p. 179) research on the (perilous) effects of austerity, on the (necessary) embeddedness of markets, or on the (imagined) structural power of business. Just look at what the research by nongovernmental organizations such as the Tax Justice Network has done to further the cause of tax justice.

The second calls for narratives that allow reaching out to other groups, trying to convince them that a less austere state is in fact in their interest. However, to convince a middle class worried about loss of social status, we must engage in discussion and compromises. Occupy Wall Street may be able to bring issues onto the agenda, but if they cannot build bridges and form large coalitions, there will be no change. Here, the two questions come back together because good research can provide convincing arguments that may also convince skeptics.

We may “live in dark times” (p. 173), but there is still room for politics. Alternative ideas about what to do and a large coalition to support them are what is needed. It is too early to resort to the “guerillas of the bureaucracy” (p. 196). What we truly need are better arguments.
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The essays gathered together in this book are extraordinarily useful for change makers who seek to understand what it is they are up against in twenty-first-century America that has made effectively altering the status quo and rebalancing the relations of power more and more difficult to achieve. Sanford Schram’s terrific and necessary book, seemingly written in dialogue with Occupy as a flesh-and-blood movement as well as a discursive community, engages in questions and draws upon literatures that social justice activists want to explore but seldom find in digestible forms. Deploying social and political theory in an accessible way, the chapters take on epistemic questions such as what accounts for the consistency of public policy even in the face of partisan realignment (he tackles Hegelian and Marxist dialectics on p. 66, and path dependence, policy feedbacks, and policy drift on p. 21), as well as more existential questions that tackle why working and middle-class people reeling from the economic recession are turning against government rather than big business and embracing the Tea Party doctrine (middle-class melancholia à la Freud [p. 32], neoliberal governmentality à la Foucault [p. 60]). He packs in—and un packs—a lot!

In clarifying the conceptual fuzziness surrounding neoliberalism, The Return of Ordinary Capitalism performs an important public service, boiling it down to “a new liberalism that restructures the state to operate consistently with market logic in order to better promote market compliant behavior by as many people as possible. . . . Neoliberalism most fundamentally is about making economic rationality the basic ethos for everyday living in all areas of life” (p. 25). Building out from this conceptual framework in later essays, Schram illuminates the radical changes that neoliberalism has wrought for social welfare programs as well as public education: “The marketization of social welfare policies actually has been the most noteworthy development under neoliberalism. In policy after policy, there has been a dramatic shift to relying on private providers, where clients are turned into consumers who get to make choices, and both are held accountable via performance measurement systems that indicate whether market-based objectives have been met” (p. 136). Under cover of seemingly benign and sensible performance measurements, neoliberalism substitutes numbers for harder-to-measure results leading to suboptimization (when outcome goals are achieved in name only and the full spirit of the goal is lost or forgotten in the process) and instrumentalization (where the performance measurement benchmark or target becomes the end in itself) (p. 120). Schram’s discussion of social-impact bonds as the final step in the marketization of welfare-state functions is harrowingly fascinating.

Over the course of these essays, Schram conscientiously wrestles with the strategy and legacy of the Occupy movement, at first strongly disagreeing with the critique that it faltered in some measure due to an unwillingness to put forth specific demands (pp. 50–55), and dismissing this criticism as a consequence of “left melancholia” over the loss of traditional class-based, organized, political action. He argues, in my view, incorrectly, that at its root, much of the criticism stemmed from Occupy’s “inability to continue to adhere to the classic standard for left anti-capitalist organizing for revolutionary change” (p. 50). He further argues that Occupy’s purpose was not to make demands but to bring together and mobilize diverse members of the precariat rather than the class-unified members of the proletariat: “In the process, its job was to resist being coopted into making public policy proposals that would only serve to undermine its main mission—to mobilize as many different people as possible by raising consciousness about the injustice of protecting the 1% at the expense of ordinary people. In other words, Occupy’s critics conflated the different roles of protest and electoral politics for achieving political change today” (p. 50). He asserts that Occupy’s most important role was to allow a broad range of participants to come together to engage in the constructive work of public mourning of their precariatization, holding external factors responsible for their plight, rather than the destructive, self-blaming, melancholic approach of the Tea Partiers, who have instead internalized the loss of the self-sufficient self, chalking it up to the moral failings of deficient citizen-subjects who could not adhere to the standard of middle-class values of personal responsibility. From my perspective, Schram is setting forth a straw man (person?) here.

Many of those who bemoaned Occupy’s unwillingness to put forward specific demands were not coming from the “left anti-capitalist organizing for revolutionary change” position, to which Schram refers. Rather, they (we) were coming from the more pragmatic branches of the movement tree that have long engaged in campaigns with specific demands. Community, labor, antiracist, environmental justice, feminist, LGBT, immigrant, antiviolence, Civil Rights, civil liberties, democracy, and other issue organizers have a long tradition, stretching from Frederick Douglas to Ella Baker and John Lewis, from Sidney Hillman, Walter Reuther, and Randi Weingarten to Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez, Gary Delgado, Heather Booth, and Rincu Sen, from the Grimke sisters and Harvey Milk to Alicia Garza, who have long understood and taken to heart that “power concedes nothing without a demand”

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“West India Emancipation” speech by Frederick Douglass, August 3, 1857). Likewise, many movements, most notably Civil Rights, feminist, gay and lesbian, immigrant rights and most recently Black Lives Matter, have combined consciousness raising, sharing of personal stories, and public mourning with putting forward specific demands without viewing these activities as contradictory. I also disagree with Schram’s proposition that Occupy’s critics conflate the role of protest and electoral politics. Rather, it would seem that at least in this instance, he is conflating public policy fights with electoral politics—connected but quite discrete strategies.

In later chapters, and especially the final one entitled “Getting Beyond Neoliberalism,” Schram makes a dramatic shift from his earlier position, arguing that naming the problem is not enough and that strategy is what is needed. Specifically, he argues strongly for what Andre Gorz once memorably labeled "non-reformist reforms" or his own preferred moniker, “radical incrementalism,” where “we push for as much change as possible recognizing that elites will at best offer limited concessions that can nonetheless, we hope, be used to lay the groundwork for more ambitious transformations down the road” (p. 174). Is this not precisely what Occupy’s critics were arguing for when they were voicing frustration over its unwillingness to put forward concrete demands? In truth, it seemed to me that the lack of specific demands arose not out of some overarching and broadly shared philosophical principle but because participants were hamstrung by their much-observed and celebrated but maddeningly cumbersome formal decision-making process, and were simply unable to agree on what the demands should be. It is not surprising that it was through subcommittees and working groups of Occupy that more specific campaigns (with demands and targets) took shape.

Finally, Schram is overly dismissive of the enduring relevance of the labor movement even in its beleaguered state, and a little naive about the origins and foundation of the very protests he lauds, when he says: “While it is commonplace to emphasize the importance of labor unions in working on behalf of improving the well-being of ordinary people, the lack of labor militancy over time is itself a sign of how unlikely labor organizing is as a site for a sustained movement for political change today. . . . The most promising labor actions in recent years have been the wildcat strikes by ununionized fast-food workers, the sporadic efforts to unionize graduate students and the initiation of attempts to give college athletes the right to form unions” (p. 176). Where does he think these promising labor actions came from? There was nothing “wildcat” about the strikes by ununionized fast-food workers; they were financially supported to the tune of tens of millions of dollars as well as carefully orchestrated by Service Employees International Union. Graduate students have long organized with the support of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees and the United Auto Workers unions, and who helped those college athletes in their quixotic quest to unionize? The United Steelworkers of America! Institutions matter, and the relationship between movements and institutions has often been far more complicated-and connected-than we care to admit.
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This book analyzes growing inequality within the context of American society and resistance to neoliberal economic restructuring. It begins by providing us with a basic primer on transformations in the U.S. and global political economy post—World War II. Sanford Schram rightly points out that after the war and until 1973, there was an unprecedented compression in the U.S. economy, and that this process built the middle class as we know or imagine it. Like Ira Katznelson in When Affirmative Action Was White (2005), Schram shows here that contrary to the myth that white children of early twentieth-century immigrants made it to the middle class by dint of their hard work alone, public policy during the New Deal and post-World War II periods helped create the success of the middle class. He then demonstrates how economic restructuring based upon the logic of neoliberalism reversed that trend and has since produced an economy that has led to greater and greater inequality.

Schram argues that neoliberal economic restructuring has hit a middle and working class in the United States that are entranced by the myth of self-sufficiency as a product of the pre-1973 period. Economic life for the vast majority of Americans has been rendered precarious as most of the income and wealth are captured by the upper 1%. Neoliberal ideology has remade institutions, ideologies, and general life far beyond the simply economic, as the discipline of the marketplace, rather than helping professions, has reconstituted the way African Americans understand their lives, Schram’s book shows how services like education and social work have been converted by neoliberal reforms into merely case management and the imposition of the harsh discipline of performance metrics. Schram uses the analysis of discourse in order to capture the semiotic structure of welfare recipients as undeserving. This was the underlying discourse that supported the move to Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), away from the more generous and consistent Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Schram moves seamlessly between American political development, path dependence, political economy, social movement analysis, and discourse analysis to develop a powerful argument about our current political and economic moment. He offers us a balanced view of the nature of the current problem of income inequality that avoids reductionism, and he is both prescriptive and dutifully humble in his offerings.

Schram avoids some of the pathologies of left thinkers who are too enamored with revolution to act. He argues that the working and middle classes—the “precariat”—are fragmented. Thus, the precariat cannot wait for large-scale international mobilization. Instead, people must engage in multilevel mobilizing on manageable issues. He rejects all-or-nothing revolutionary change and argues for “radical incrementalism” that operates “rhizomatically” rather than vertically. One of the very best lines in the book is that “[a]ctivism must be more humble.” As Schram calls for his brand of radical incrementalism, he suggests that activism must not make claims beyond what it can deliver.

The Return of Ordinary Capitalism is an illuminating book that ought to be read by all those interested in the Left, the politics of inequality, and indeed contemporary politics in general.

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