



On the (ab)use of the term ‘neoliberalism’: Reflections on Dutch political discourse

Lars Cornelissen

abstract

This article raises some questions about the role assumed by the methodological debate surrounding the usefulness of the term ‘neoliberalism’ in relation to the broader realm of political discourse. I contend that this debate cannot be settled on an *analytical* register and that questions surrounding the use and abuse of the term ‘neoliberalism’ must be situated carefully with regard to specific political contexts, literatures and organisations. When we fail to do so, we risk our words being mobilised by ideologically partisan intellectuals in an attempt to interrupt the critical analysis of neoliberalism. In order to argue my case I provide a detailed discussion of the history of Dutch neoliberal politics, followed by a discussion of the history of Dutch uses of the term ‘neoliberalism’. I demonstrate that, in the context of Dutch politics, neoliberal intellectuals have in recent years been able to mobilise the scholarly debate on the analytical value of the term ‘neoliberalism’ in order to deny the existence of their own ideology. I conclude that, in the Dutch context, the stakes of this debate are different from the Anglophone setting and that what is needed in the former is rigorous historical analysis rather than an abstract methodological discussion.

Introduction

For several years now, in the margins of the scholarly analysis of neoliberalism, a methodological debate has been waging about the analytical usefulness of the ‘concept’ of neoliberalism (see e.g. Birch, 2015, 2017; Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009; Flew, 2014; Garland and Harper, 2012; Hardin, 2014; Peck, 2013; Venugopal, 2015). The term neoliberalism, so the argument generally goes, has come ‘to mean almost anything bad or disagreeable’ (Birch, 2015: 573) and has therewith lost its historical specificity, its analytical potency, and its political

efficacy. Consequently, 'if the notion is to be of any use,' argues Mitchell Dean (2014: 150), 'it needs to be severely circumscribed'. What normally ensues is an attempt to clear the field of normative presuppositions or methodological tools that are deemed inappropriate or taken to clutter our analytical understanding, including (to give but a few examples) the 'strong normative connotations' often attached to the term 'neoliberalism' (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009: 138), the notion of ideology (Dean, 2014), or the conception of neoliberalism as 'a conspiracy of ruling elites' (Flew, 2014: 67). Notably, most contributions to this methodological debate are concerned with the use of the concept of neoliberalism in 'scholarly inquiry' (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009: 140), in 'critical discourse' (Flew, 2014: 49), in 'contemporary social and political analysis' (Dean, 2014: 161), or in 'critical scholarship' (Venugopal, 2015: 183).

In this paper I do not intend to enter this methodological debate, but to raise some questions instead about the role that may be assumed by this methodological debate in the broader realm of political discourse. That is to say, I seek to demonstrate that this debate does not exist in a position of exteriority with regard to the politico-discursive regimes it purports to comment upon but, rather, that it occupies a far more ambivalent position in relation to those regimes. I am specifically concerned with the potential of such debates to be mobilised in an ideologically partisan manner by authors who cannot straightforwardly be described as disinterested scholars. In such cases, what in a scholarly context may appear as an unassuming call for conceptual clarity and analytical soberness in the analysis of neoliberalism can come to function, in the arena of public opinion, as a weapon brandished by those seeking to disrupt critics of neoliberal politics and to safeguard the *status quo*.

My point is emphatically not that this methodological debate is of no use. Nor do I wish to deny that the indiscriminate use – by scholars and pundits alike – of the term 'neoliberalism' is problematic. Rather, my point is that this matter cannot finally be solved on an *analytical* register, because the use of the term 'neoliberalism' itself has a history and any (scholarly) reflection upon that use is itself an integral part of this history. I contend that this implies that methodological reflection upon our critical lexicon must be situated more specifically and more consciously. When we claim that the term 'neoliberalism' has been abused, upon which literatures are we reflecting? What is their history? How are they situated in relation to political discourse? How does their history map onto the history of neoliberal politics? To put the matter more concisely: when discussing the uses and abuses of the term 'neoliberalism', our focus should be on *this* use of the term in *this* context by *this* person for *this* reason. Situating our critique means documenting the history of a specific trajectory of neoliberal politics alongside the history of the various uses of the lexicon of

'neoliberalism' in response to this trajectory. If we fail to do so, and if we restrict ourselves to abstract claims about the use of the term 'neoliberalism' as such, we risk our words becoming tools in the hands of those who would use them precisely to hide neoliberal politics behind a meticulously deployed smokescreen.

The strategy of this article is the following. I shall offer a portrait of the history of neoliberal politics in the Netherlands, followed by an account of the way in which the term 'neoliberalism' is used – and has been used – in Dutch political and scholarly discourse.¹ I shall endeavour to demonstrate that Dutch civic life is marked by a paradox: on the one hand, the Netherlands is home both to a political party that was founded in 1948 on an *explicitly* neoliberal doctrine and to a network of neoliberal think tanks, whilst on the other, the term 'neoliberalism' has little purchase in Dutch political or scholarly discourse. Those who do use the term in a critical manner today tend to have a relatively weak grasp on the history of neoliberalism and tend to mean 'neoliberalism' to refer to a determinate tangle of policies – namely policies of privatisation, deregulation, and budget cuts – that Dutch politicians inherited from Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s.

This then is the paradox I am referring to: for a country with a strong and long-standing national neoliberal tradition, the Netherlands has produced very little in the way of critical engagements with neoliberal political economy. In recent years the paucity of these critical engagements has been seized upon by a group of intellectuals who may be considered the Dutch contingent of what Dieter Plehwe, Philip Mirowski, and numerous others call the 'neoliberal thought collective' (see Dean, 2014; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Mirowski, 2013). Across various publications these intellectuals have started denying that the term 'neoliberalism' refers to anything at all and that, in reality, neoliberalism is a spectre, summoned by the Left so that it can have someone or something to blame for its own inadequacies. In doing so they routinely draw upon the methodological debate surrounding the usefulness of 'neoliberalism' as a signifier. In the Dutch political context, then, this debate has come to function primarily as a means for representatives of Dutch neoliberalism to deny the existence of their own ideology.

In the remainder of this article I offer a detailed account of the history of Dutch neoliberalism and of the uses of the term 'neoliberalism' in Dutch public

1 By which I specifically mean the political discourse pertaining to the Netherlands, not *Dutch-speaking* discourse in general. As I shall have the opportunity to discuss in some more detail below, critical reflection on neoliberalism in *Flemish* political discourse and scholarly analysis is very different from such reflection in the Netherlands.

discourse. In developing this account I rely upon a variety of sources, including scholarly and semi-scholarly texts, political speeches, manifestoes, and Parliamentary debates, which, taken together, give a sense of the various meanings attached, over a long period of time, to the term ‘neoliberalism’ in the Dutch civic and public realm. The somewhat belaboured histories offered are necessary for two separate but related reasons: first, only such historical work can help us understand how it became possible, in recent years, for Dutch neoliberal intellectuals to weaponise scholarly debates surrounding the term ‘neoliberalism’. Second, as I shall show, the weaponisation of these debates was possible precisely because, at the present juncture, Dutch critics lack a thorough *historical* understanding of neoliberalism. In the concluding section I return to the question of the political stakes of methodology, arguing that the Dutch case makes clear that the struggle over the signifier ‘neoliberalism’ is itself irrevocably a political struggle. What is needed, in the context of Dutch politics, is neither a condemnation of those who abuse our analytical lexicon nor an abstract *call* for a more historically oriented critique; what is needed is *actual* historically oriented critique.

A concise history of Dutch neoliberalism

In the present section I will contextualise neoliberalism’s presence in Dutch politics by offering a concise history of the country’s foremost neoliberal party, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*; hereafter: VVD). Before I do so, however, I wish to make a few remarks on the nature of Dutch politics in general.

Dutch politics: A highly legible landscape

Speaking very generally, it may be said that Dutch parliamentary politics is characterised by a high degree of legibility. That is to say, it is a scene that has traditionally been marked by a high tolerance for a large number of different parties, each of which represents a relatively clear-cut socio-political agenda. This is in no small part due to that fact that, from the late 19th century until roughly the 1960s, the Dutch socio-political landscape was divided into so-called ‘pillars’ (*zuilen*): societal segments, divided from one another along cultural, political, and denominational lines (see also Andeweg and Irwin, 2009: 28-33). Traditionally, there were four major pillars – Catholic, Protestant, social-democrat, and liberal – and each of these had its own news outlets, broadcasting corporations, labour unions, schools, universities, hospitals, and political parties. The result was a cultural and political landscape fractured by ideological, religious, and cultural differences; differences that were accurately reflected in Parliament because the

country's various parties were expected to represent only their respective particular pillars, not to persuade members of other pillars to vote for them.

Historically speaking, then, the Dutch 'party system reflected the subcultural composition of Dutch society' (*ibid.*: 52). As the representatives of their respective subcultures, these parties tended to have well-established organisational mechanisms in place for the intellectual exploration of their own ideological foundations – such as think tanks and scientific institutes. As a result, Dutch parties tended to enjoy considerable ideological stability over time, being subject to fewer pressures to adapt their ideology than parties in a two-party system such as the British or US-American model. The upshot of all of these factors is that the Dutch political landscape traditionally was – and continues to be – highly representative of the country's various socio-political currents and that, accordingly, it is comparatively easy to reconstruct the history of any given ideological current: one commences by tracing the way it has been represented by its particular party.

The history of Dutch neoliberalism provides a paradigmatic example of the legibility of Dutch politics. Indeed, when studying the history of Dutch neoliberalism, one particular political party occupies a privileged analytical position: the VVD. As I shall show in the remainder of the present section, the VVD has, from its founding moment, always maintained a strong – if heterogeneous and contested – ideological connection to the various instantiations of neoliberal thought.

The VVD: A neoliberal alternative

Whilst, as many scholars have pointed out, there have existed many varieties of neoliberal thought, which cannot be reduced to a singular, pure doctrine (e.g. Audier, 2012; Birch, 2017; Foucault, 2008; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009), and whilst the dissemination of neoliberalism across the globe has followed multiple trajectories (e.g. Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010), it is nevertheless possible to speak of neoliberalism as a more or less coherent ideological and political tradition. Indeed, for all of their differences, the various existing strands of neoliberal thought are tied together first and foremost by their shared genealogy, which unifies them in a collective objective: the restatement, and the subsequent dissemination, of the liberal political-economic tradition (Biebricher, 2013). In the remainder of this section, I will seek to show that there exists a Dutch political tradition that can (and indeed should) be understood as prototypically neoliberal, not because it adopts certain quintessential neoliberal principles, but because it actively and self-consciously partakes in this genealogy.

Of particular importance to the genealogy of neoliberalism is the year 1947, which is when F.A. Hayek organised the first conference for what was – at that very meeting – to be baptised the Mont Pèlerin Society (hereafter: MPS); an organisation that Hayek had a clear purpose in mind for: the MPS was to be an avant-garde network of philosophers, economists, and policymakers, tasked with the articulation and dissemination of neoliberal knowledge. But the MPS was meant to be only the tip of the iceberg: parallel to the MPS a vast network of think tanks was to be erected; a network that would communicate the doctrine forged by the MPS elite to governments and policymakers worldwide. The MPS was, in other words, consciously designed to be the animating force behind the international neoliberal project. Its successes in spreading neoliberal doctrine have been documented rigorously by critics (Burgin, 2012; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010; Stedman Jones, 2012) and enthusiasts alike (Hartwell, 1995) and I shall leave it aside for now. I want to draw attention to a different history; one that runs parallel to the history of the MPS and that is meaningfully similar but that, curiously, rarely intersects with it.

In January 1948, approximately nine months after the MPS had come into being, a group of Dutch liberal-minded politicians gathered together to breathe life into a new political party: the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, or VVD. The driving force behind this group was Pieter Oud, a professor in Dutch parliamentary history with a rich political career, having served as Finance Minister in the 1930s and as the mayor of Rotterdam during the Nazi occupation in the early 1940s. Oud not only brought the first generation of VVD-liberals together; he also singlehandedly authored the VVD's founding manifesto. Let me consider the birth of this party in some more detail.

In 1946, the Dutch Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*; hereafter: PvdA) was founded, which Oud joined almost immediately, albeit reluctantly. However, as the PvdA's political-economic agenda rapidly moved in an increasingly pronounced social-democratic direction, Oud quickly became uncomfortable. Within a year of joining the PvdA he left again, announcing in a national newspaper that he was intent upon founding a new party that would serve as a liberal alternative to social democracy (see Oud, 1947). Oud had two crucial reasons for leaving the PvdA and establishing a new, liberal party (see Vermeulen, 2013: ch. 1). The first was that the PvdA, then in government, was willing to cede sovereignty of Indonesia, which was agitating for decolonisation in the wake of the world wars. Oud, however, was fervently opposed to Indonesian independence, primarily because he felt that the Dutch state was in need of colonial income in order to finance post-war reconstruction. Under his leadership the VVD repeatedly urged for military intervention in Indonesia, continuing to do so even *after* two bloody military campaigns – in 1947 and in

1948 – prompted widespread condemnation in the international community, forcing the Dutch to recognise Indonesian independence in 1949.²

The second reason for Oud's departure from the PvdA was his disapproval of the Party's political-economic position. Despite his attempts to steer his fellow party members in a different, more liberal direction (see Oud, 1946; cf. Oud, 1947), the PvdA ended up embracing a socialist outlook on matters economic and political. For Oud, however, socialism amounted to oppression because its political economy requires an all-powerful state. He formulated this critique concisely in 1952 during his opening address to the VVD's annual party conference. There, in a discussion of the PvdA, he condemned the socialist doctrine underpinning it in no uncertain terms. Such a doctrine, for him, was defined 'by its wish to give an all-powerful position [*allesoverheersende positie*] to the State' (Oud, 1952: 4).³ What socialists call 'freedom', he went on, is nothing but 'the freedom of the under-aged [*onmondige*] child in the care of a well-meaning father' – that is, for Oud, no freedom at all (*ibid.*). He went on to contend that the primary task of government is the 'preservation [*handhaving*] of freedom', not control of the economy, adding that his own party:

will not tire of continuing to assert this idea... It gives us courage that people are starting to notice the neoliberalism that we advocate [*het neo-liberalisme dat wij voorstaan*] more and more. (*ibid.*: 6)⁴

He used the term 'neoliberal' to distinguish it from 19th-century liberalism:

Presently people are beginning to recognise that our foundation [*beginsel*] is not antiquated. Especially not now that people recognise that the old foundation has been fitted with new clothes [*een nieuw gewaad*], befitting our times. (*ibid.*)⁵

2 It would lead me too far afield to discuss Oud's colonial politics in any more detail. For a discussion of the VVD's position on Indonesian independence see (Vermeulen, 2013: 13ff).

3 Translations of all quotes from Dutch sources are my own.

4 It is unclear why exactly Oud chose to adopt the term 'neoliberal' to describe the VVD. However, it is safe to assume that he meant for that term to refer specifically to German ordoliberalism, which, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, had become widely known as a 'neoliberal' (or *neoliberal*) school of thought, including amongst MPS members themselves. (For contemporary uses of the term 'neoliberal' by MPS members to refer to MPS liberalism more broadly and ordoliberalism specifically see, for instance, Friedman, 1951; Hayek, 1954; Hayek, 1978: 146; Mötelli, 1951). In Dutch public discourse at the time, the term 'neoliberal' was similarly used to refer to ordoliberalism, as evidenced by various sources I discuss in detail in the next section.

5 See Oud (1958) for a more systematic account of his understanding of neoliberalism and its relation to 19th century liberalism.

Here, then, one encounters Oud's objective in the starkest possible terms: he had sought to establish a party that could function as a counterpoint to the PvdA's social-democratic programme (cf. Oudenampsen, 2016), without thereby relying on the old liberal model. When drafting the VVD's founding manifesto in 1948, Oud made sure to instil this position into the Party's very ideological fabric. Thus the fifth article of this manifesto reads as follows:

In the field of material welfare, the Party rejects both socialist and individualist economies, and strives for societal relations [*maatschappelijke verhoudingen*] that are socially justified and economically responsible. It therefore rejects the doctrine of *laissez faire, laissez passer*, which aims to grant everyone the freedom to act according to their discretion [*goeddunken*]. That doctrine may have been acceptable for a previous epoch of societal development, but in today's world, freedom for the individual [*enkeling*] who knows no responsibility towards others can no longer be accepted. Equally unacceptable, however, is a society where the State has appropriated all power and where the individual person has been deprived of all freedom. The Party therefore desires to strive for the middle ground, for a balance between societal and individual factors, because only there does it see the opportunity for the realisation of true freedom [*ware vrijheid*]. (VVD, 1948: §5)

This understanding of a new political economy situated between socialist and classical liberal political economy – one that emphasises the need for a legal and organisational framework to create market conditions – comes straight from the neoliberal playbook and mirrors, term by term, countless neoliberal writings of the time. Take, for example, Walter Eucken's 1950 text, *This unsuccessful age*, which seeks to document the failings both of 19th-century liberal politics and of contemporary social-democratic alternatives. In seeking to resolve the problem of economic control, Eucken argues that:

[t]here is no question of return to *laissez-faire*, but the policy of full employment is inadequate. It is not enough merely to restore equilibrium to the labour market. But the achievement of general equilibrium requires the establishment of certain market forms and monetary systems; and this is the primary task of economic policy. (Eucken, 1951: 68)

Ideological reproduction

When the VVD is thus located in its own historical context, it is evident that it was consciously designed to be a neoliberal alternative both to social democracy and to classical liberalism. However, there is more than merely a structural correspondence between the VVD's founding manifesto and neoliberal thought; there is also a direct genealogical connection. That is to say, the Party's governmental philosophy was, from the first, directly inspired by neoliberal thinkers. Thus one prominent party ideologue wrote in 1958 (in a volume edited by none other than Oud) that his party's political economy was based upon the

works of 'Hayek and Röpke, two neoliberals [*neo-liberalen*], who have erected a very logical economic edifice' (Alers, 1958: 50).

Ever since it was founded in 1948, the VVD has retained its genealogical connection to neoliberal thought. Although the Party has stopped referring to itself as 'neoliberal', it has never ceased to understand itself as an inheritor of, and contributor to, neoliberal political and economic philosophy. The Party's official think tank, the Telders Foundation, has been of central importance in establishing and re-establishing this genealogical link. Founded in 1954, the Telders Foundation has served as the VVD's primary ideological machine, routinely publishing studies in the history of liberal thought, the history of liberal politics, (economic) policy proposals, and – most interestingly for my present purposes – reflections on the VVD's philosophical foundations. It was primarily through publications of this latter type that the Party retained its genealogical connection to neoliberal thought in its various iterations.

A diptych of studies published by the Telders Foundation in the latter half of the 1980s can serve as an excellent example. The first of these studies, written by two prominent members of the Telders Foundation, Andreas Kinning and Klaas Groenveld, was entitled *Liberalism and political economy* and was published in 1985. This study aimed to 'take a stance on the *foundations* [grondslagen] of liberal economic policy' so that these might be used in contemporary questions of economic policy (Groenveld and Kinning, 1985: v). The study proceeded to outline the history of liberal political economy, focusing in particular upon 20th century neoliberal thought, including Hayek's oeuvre, the ordoliberalism associated with Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, and Alexander Rüstow (which the authors explicitly referred to as 'neoliberalism'), and the Chicago School of Milton Friedman and Gary Becker. It concluded by contending that contemporary economic policy should be based on the political-economic thought of these neoliberal thinkers; which, for the authors, concretely implied economic policy focused on 'cutbacks, deregulation and privatisation' (*ibid.*: 95).

This study was followed by a second one in 1988, which, although it was likewise authored by Kinning, was based upon the intellectual labour of a larger group of prominent party members, including Frits Bolkestein, who was to become leader of the VVD in 1990. This second study, entitled *Liberalism: An inquiry into its philosophical principles*, was a thinly veiled attempt to articulate a Hayekian understanding of order and to pitch it against a more progressive variant of liberalism (associated at the time with the thought of John Rawls) (see also Van der List, 2004; Oudenampsen, 2016: 138). By mobilising Hayek's understanding of 'spontaneous order' this study ended up articulating an unmistakably neoliberal position:

Self-regulating order [*zelfregulerende ordening*] must be accompanied by certain regulations and moral traditions for it to be desirable for liberals.

This requires, amongst other things, a state. The primary task of the state is therefore the formulation and enforcement of the regulations necessary to lead self-regulating order [*zelfregulerende orde*] in the right direction. (Kinneking, 1988: 28)

In an exemplary essay on the intimate relationship between Dutch neoliberalism and cultural conservatism, Merijn Oudenampsen (2016) has demonstrated that, around the time these studies were being conducted, the VVD was caught up in an internal struggle. The struggle revolved around the type of liberalism that the Party was to espouse: a Hayekian, conservative liberalism or a Rawlsian, progressive liberalism. The group behind these two studies represented the Hayekian camp, and they evidently sought to re-establish the neoliberal foundations of the VVD, lavishly drawing upon a variety of neoliberal thinkers both to articulate the Party's philosophical foundations and to justify economic policy now widely regarded as neoliberal. As Oudenampsen shows, the Hayekians emerged victorious, and the Party's progressive elements were largely silenced.⁶ This episode demonstrates that, primarily through the Telders Foundation, the VVD continually renewed its attachment to its own neoliberal genealogy. This is not to say that its philosophical commitments never shifted, or indeed that there was no internal struggle over the Party's ideological course. Rather, it is to say that these shifts and struggles precisely revolved around the Party's neoliberal inheritance, where attempts to steer the VVD into a more progressive direction were met with – ultimately more successful – efforts to establish its neoliberal pedigree.

Neoliberal policies applied: The 1980s

It is now a commonplace that a neoliberal wave swept across Western governments in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as they were reeling from two oil shocks that had crippled the global economy, leaving high unemployment rates in their wake. The respective governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are normally cited as the paradigmatic examples of this brand of politics, marking the point when most Western nations finally embraced neoliberal rationality (e.g. Harvey, 2005). The central characteristics of neoliberal politics, this standard account tends to go on, were privatisation, deregulation, spending cuts, and union busting.

6 There was a brief resurgence of progressive liberalism in the VVD in the early 2000s, but this moment, too, passed and once more gave way to a more explicitly neoliberal doctrine (see Oudenampsen, 2016).

Although it is historically incorrect to suggest that neoliberalism first emerged on the stage of world politics with Thatcher and Reagan – as such an account effaces the various neoliberalisms of Ludwig Erhard, Luigi Einaudi, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and, of course, Augusto Pinochet⁷ – it is certainly by and large correct to argue that theirs was a version of neoliberal politics. The Netherlands was similarly swept up by this international wave of neoliberalisation. Dutch Neoliberalism, in Oudenampsen's (2016: 147) words, 'experienced its breakthrough only in the eighties, in the aftermath of the crisis of Keynesianism' (cf. Storm and Naastepad, 2003). In the case of the Dutch, two successive coalition governments consisting of the Christian Democrats and the VVD commenced the overthrow of Keynesian policies, replacing them with a programme inspired by Thatcherism. Central to this programme were policies of privatisation and deregulation, as well as cuts to government spending – policies that, it bears repeating, were justified by the VVD's ideologues on the basis of neoliberal economic thought. In the second half of the 1990s, neoliberal reforms were further accelerated by the PvdA, the Dutch Labour Party (though in cooperation with the VVD), which – likewise in keeping with international trends – had explicitly abandoned its social-democratic inheritance, instead turning to 'third way' pragmatism (see Oudenampsen, 2016; Storm and Naastepad, 2003).

Having thus become hegemonic, it became ever harder to identify neoliberal reasoning with one party only. With the exception of a few parties on the (far) left and a few traditional confessional parties, almost every Dutch political party came to embrace some form of neoliberalism, a state of affairs that continues to this day. Yet, the VVD stands alone in claiming the neoliberal tradition and its various iterations as its philosophical and ideological ground. Indeed, the Telders Foundation continues to publish books eulogising key neoliberal thinkers such as Eucken, Hayek and Friedman (e.g. Van de Velde, 2004) or mobilising their thought in expanding upon the ideological foundations of the VVD (e.g. Dupuis and Van Schie, 2013; Wissenburg et al., 2011). Equally revealing is the fact that Mark Rutte, the party's current leader and the country's current Prime Minister,

7 Erhard (1897-1977) was West Germany's Minister of Economics in the immediate post-war period, deploying neoliberal policies that precipitated what is now widely known as the 'German economic miracle' (on Erhard's neoliberal connection see Foucault, 2008). Einaudi (1874-1961) was a member of the MPS and served as President of Italy between 1948 and 1955 (see also Birch, 2017: 25-26). Giscard d'Estaing (1926), son of prominent MPS member Edmond Giscard d'Estaing, was the president of France between 1974 and 1981, and is known for his neoliberal policy (see Foucault, 2008). Pinochet (1915-2006) led the Chilean *coup d'état* of 1973 and then presided over the country's junta government until 1981, during which time he applied so-called neoliberal 'shock therapy' to the Chilean economy, reforming it on the basis of Chicago School economic theory (see Klein, 2007).

has openly named Hayek as his major politico-philosophical inspiration (see Rutte, 2007).

To summarise this all-too-brief history of Dutch neoliberalism: the Netherlands has had a strong, dedicated, and explicit neoliberal presence since 1948. Since its founding moment the VVD has served as the flagship for Dutch neoliberalism. It was established on philosophical grounds taken directly from neoliberal authors, and its founding manifesto was neoliberal in structure and rationale. Since then the Telders Foundation has laboured to uphold the Party's connection to neoliberal thought, and whilst its precise commitments have shifted and morphed over time, the VVD remains to this day anchored in a philosophical conception of societal organisation and the market that, broadly speaking, comes from Hayek and the ordoliberals.

The poverty of criticism

Given that the Dutch political scene is home to such a pronounced and long-standing neoliberal tradition, one would expect to find similarly pronounced critical engagement with neoliberalism. This makes it all the more curious that the Dutch have developed no thorough critique of neoliberalism to speak of. This, however, is not to say that neoliberalism has never been subjected to scholarly analysis or to critical scrutiny. Rather, my claim is twofold: first, the Dutch have as yet failed to develop a comprehensive, historically oriented critique of neoliberalism; one that would trace the genealogy of Dutch neoliberalism and investigate its complex relationship to the neoliberal tradition at large. Second and related, the Dutch have failed to articulate a convincing critique of the VVD as the flagship of Dutch neoliberalism.

In the present section I map the history of Dutch scholarly literature on neoliberalism (leaving aside publications by the Telders Foundation). I identify two phases in this history. The first, ranging from the immediate post-war period to the late 1980s, saw various studies represent neoliberalism as a distinct school of political economy, that, however, remained altogether uncritical of its basic tenets. The second, ranging from the 1990s to the present, consists almost exclusively of critical analyses that confuse neoliberalism with Thatcherism and that, as a result, misrepresent neoliberalism's history.⁸ This overview leads to me

8 Whilst the account offered here shows significant overlap with Rajesh Venugopal's (2015) exemplary study of the history of the term 'neoliberalism,' one major difference is that, in the context of Dutch politics, a major shift in the common meaning of the term occurs in the 1990s, whereas Venugopal locates this shift in the 1980s.

conclude that although studies undertaken in the first phase were historically informed, and studies undertaken in the second were critical of neoliberalism, a *genealogical critique* of Dutch neoliberalism and the VVD that combines historical analysis with a critical attitude has yet to be articulated.

Before I commence I should like to emphasise that I have deliberately and consciously excluded Belgian analyses and critiques of neoliberalism from this overview. The fact is that neoliberalism has had a very different history in Belgian politics and that, owing to a variety of reasons, there does exist a long-standing history of convincing critical engagements with Belgium's specific version of neoliberalism (see, for instance, Mommen, 1987; Witte et al., 2009: ch. 9).

Studies of neoliberal political economy: 1951-1988

Neoliberal thought bloomed in the immediate post-war period, at which point it was largely a Germano-Austrian affair. That is, whilst Hayek, Eucken, and Röpke had all garnered international fame in the 1930s and 1940s, a distinct US-American school of neoliberal thought had yet to emerge. Politically, too, neoliberalism had already made itself felt in West-German politics through the policies of Ludwig Erhard and others.

This brand of neoliberalism, philosophically elaborated and subsequently politically practiced by their neighbours, quickly grabbed the attention of the Dutch. The year 1951 saw the publication of two texts that, in remarkably similar ways, sought to grapple with this novel political phenomenon. The first of these was a voluminous manifesto authored by prominent members of the PvdA, entitled *The road to freedom* (PvdA, 1951) – a title that, as Oudenampsen (2016: 128) points out, is a direct reference to Hayek's famous wartime polemic. This text spoke of neoliberalism as a recent political movement that sought to save liberalism from the socio-economic crises it had itself produced. Neoliberal politics, in this account, 'aims to restore complete freedom of competition by eliminating existing governmental intervention [*overheidsbemoeiing*] in economic life and concentrations of economic power' (PvdA, 1951: 54). The authors of the manifesto brusquely rejected neoliberal politics as 'exceptionally unwieldy and complicated'. The intervention it requires, they went on, 'would have to be at least as extensive as currently existing intervention [*ingrijpen*], which this neoliberal current finds so objectionable' (*ibid.*: 55).

The second text from 1951 was a public lecture given by Jelle Zijlstra, who was then a professor of theoretical economics but who would go on to lead a major confessional party and to become Minister of Finance in 1952 and in 1958, and Prime Minister in 1966. In this lecture Zijlstra offered a detailed portrait of

neoliberal political-economic theory, dealing primarily with Eucken's writings, but also discussing Röpke, Hayek, Henry Simons, and Lionel Robbins. By comparing neoliberal doctrine to the classical liberalism of Adam Smith and his followers, Zijlstra was able to explain competently what was specific about neoliberalism:

The major *difference* with the classics (hence *neo-liberalism*) lies in the fact that, according to this new doctrine, very conscious governmental policy [*overheidspolitiek*] will be necessary to allow ... economic order to function. (Zijlstra, 1956: 71)

Zijlstra felt sincere admiration for neoliberal theory, but ultimately considered it too utopian to be of any practical use. Neoliberal philosophy, he asserted, 'sounds like a fairy tale Is it not too good to be true? The answer to this last question must unfortunately be affirmative.' (*ibid.*: 75)

His critique was effectively the same as the critique developed in the PvdA manifesto, focusing as it did on the enormous amount of governmental intervention the neoliberal programme would require.

These two texts are ample proof that, in the early 1950s, Dutch political discourse was very aware of the recent emergence of neoliberal doctrine. What is remarkable, however, is that neither text connects neoliberalism to the VVD. Zijlstra even observed, in the concluding passage of his lecture, that:

... neoliberalism ... is nowhere near being ripe to serve as a basis for practical politics. The theoretical problems that are connected to it have been insufficiently analysed. For electoral speeches etc. it is thus not yet ripe. (*ibid.*: 77)

These words were spoken but a year prior to Oud's description of his own party as 'neoliberal' in what was, essentially, an electoral speech.

In the 1950s the term 'neoliberalism' similarly started being used in parliamentary debates.⁹ On October 30, 1953, e.g., in a debate on economic policy, none other than Zijlstra – then Minister of Finance – criticised what he called 'the neoliberal school' for oversimplifying economic reality, and on March 8, 1956, in a debate on economic competition, he similarly discussed neoliberalism in some depth. Even more curious was a debate on November 19, 1958, in which a member of the VVD was challenged, by one of Zijlstra's fellow

9 The Dutch States General – comprising both Parliament and the Senate – has two extensive digital archives of parliamentary debates held from 1814 onwards. I have used these archives for all references to Dutch parliamentary debates. They can be found at <http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl/> (for debates between 1814 and 1995) and <http://www.overheid.nl> (for debates from 1995 onwards).

party members, on his understanding of neoliberalism. The former denied being familiar with, let alone adhering to, any *neoliberal* doctrine and instead characterised his party as a liberal party plain and simple. In thus denying the existence of neoliberalism, he – no doubt unwittingly – foreshadowed the exact rhetorical strategy that, as I shall discuss in detail below, contemporary members of the VVD are wont to deploy.

Although, in the decades to follow, the term 'neoliberalism' disappeared from parliamentary debates, the topic was nonetheless frequently discussed in textbooks dealing with the history of economic thought (e.g. De Jong, 1957: app. 7; Pen, 1962: 125-132; Hartog, 1970: 79-85). These also presented neoliberalism as a political-economic doctrine pioneered by Hayek and his ordoliberal colleagues and practiced by Erhard's ministry. Such analyses were, however, intended to be introductory and therefore lacked analytical rigour. Furthermore, where they developed critical appraisals these tended to be in line with Zijlstra's and the PvdA's critique: neoliberalism, one of them argues, 'is too ambitious and is therefore illusory' (Pen, 1962: 126).

This range of historical studies of neoliberal political-economic thought came to an end with Gerrit Meijer's 1988 *Neoliberalism*, a thorough study of neoliberal political economy that, to this day, remains the only book-length analysis of neoliberal thought to have been published in the Netherlands. This book, based on Meijer's doctoral thesis, offered a rigorous discussion of neoliberal doctrine, by which, following Zijlstra, Meijer primarily meant Hayek's and the ordoliberals' political-economic thought. Whilst Meijer's volume included reference to neoliberal thought in the Netherlands, this discussion was limited to a range of Dutch members of the MPS who had been especially active in spreading neoliberal ideas in the 1940s and 1950s (Meijer, 1988: 44-45); Meijer did not reflect upon the neoliberal roots of the VVD. Although the book was – and remains – unparalleled in its meticulousness, what *Neoliberalism* lacked was a critical voice. This is unsurprising, as the author was in fact entirely persuaded by neoliberal thought. Indeed, a few years after publishing this study, Meijer joined the MPS and since then he has continued to author various pieces piously celebrating neoliberal thinkers (e.g. Meijer, 1994, 2004, 2005).

Critiques of neoliberal politics: 1990s-2017

As observed above, in the 1980s Dutch politics followed the international trend of neoliberalisation. When such neoliberal policies as privatisation, deregulation, and spending cuts started making themselves felt, voices critical of neoliberalism also started rising in number. These voices, however, came with a significant delay: it would take until the 1990s until the term 'neoliberalism' started being

associated with these governmental practices. Since then literature dealing with neoliberalism has grown – although even today it is by no means big. Indeed, the term has never had much purchase in the Dutch public sphere, as born witness by the fact that it would not be until a decade into the 21st century that neoliberalism became an object of serious academic scrutiny. Let me briefly trace these various developments.

One early and prominent critic of neoliberal policy was Jan Marijnissen, leader of the Socialist Party from 1988 onwards. In the early 1990s, he started taking aim at neoliberalism in a series of columns published in his party's newsletter. 'America', he wrote in an early piece on the topic:

shows where neoliberalism's 'more market, less government' leads in practice. We must absolutely avoid this American Way. (Marijnissen, 1993: n.p.)

In the years to follow he published a myriad of columns as well as several books that contained similar critiques of neoliberalism. For Marijnissen (1996: ch. 1), 'the core of neoliberalism' is 'the wish to rid the capitalist system as much as possible of social-democratic influences'. In this view, neoliberalism started with Thatcher and Reagan, only to be exported to the rest of the world in the decade to follow:

The neoliberal process of increasing inequality [*denivellering*], privatisation, and individualisation gradually crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, from America and England, to Europe. (Marijnissen, 2003: n.p.; cf. Marijnissen, 1996: ch. 1)

Around this time, the term 'neoliberalism' was reintroduced in Parliament after an absence of almost four decades. However, whereas Zijlstra and his contemporaries had used that term to refer to the German ordoliberal model associated with Hayek, Eucken, and Erhard, in the 1990s it came to be associated with Anglo-American economic policy. Members of Parliament would routinely speak of 'the Anglo-Saxon neoliberal model' (e.g. on May 14, 1996 and on March 6, 1997) and Marijnissen would frequently expound the critique he had offered in his various writings (e.g. on August 25, 1998, on September 22, 1999, and on September 21, 2005). The term had ceased to refer to a school of political-economic thought and had come, rather loosely, to signify both a certain type of policy aimed at trimming the state and a more general process of 'individualisation'. This way of referring to neoliberalism continued into the early 2000s, after which it once again largely disappeared from Parliamentary debates.

Although the term 'neoliberalism' made its way back into Dutch political discourse, Dutch scholarly analysis remained silent on the matter until after the financial crisis of 2007-08. Indeed, the first book-length critique of

neoliberalism, Hans Achterhuis' *Utopia of the free market*, was published only in 2010. This book, which became a national bestseller, is an attempt at reading Ayn Rand's literary work as belonging to the genre of utopian novels, thus uncovering the utopian impulse of neoliberalism. However, Achterhuis' depiction of neoliberalism falls into the same trap as did Marijnissen's in the early 90s: it sees neoliberalism as an Anglo-Saxon invention. In one of the only passages directly dealing with neoliberalism, Achterhuis argues:

Through leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan, who were directly inspired by Friedman, we increasingly came to be under the spell of the free market. Privatisation of state services and state companies, increasing deregulation of the economy, and the elimination of unions: these were the recipes that were also prescribed in West-European economies. (Achterhuis, 2010: 9-10)

This account of neoliberalism is almost universally echoed by recent Dutch scientific critiques (see, e.g., Ankersmit, 2008; Heeffter, 2015; van Rossem, 2011).

No better fares a 2012 essay on neoliberalism by Rutger Claassen, included in a textbook aimed at students of political philosophy. Claassen (2012: 513-516) opens by noting that neoliberalism came into being in the 1980s and proceeds to associate it with policies of deregulation, privatisation, and spending cuts. The analysis gets more problematic from there: in Claassen's reading, neoliberals advocate 'a minimal state' whose sole task is maintaining a police, a justice system, and a military (*ibid.*: 517). He then proceeds to argue that neoliberal philosophy is no different from Adam Smith's, going so far as to say that, for neoliberals, Smith's notion of the invisible hand functioned as 'an archetype' and that Hayek contended that '[s]ocietal order does not require central oversight', but that it emerges spontaneously as long as the state limits itself solely to the defence of private property (*ibid.*: 521). By thus representing neoliberalism as nothing but a revival of classical liberalism, Claassen entirely effaces the fundamental critique of Smith and his followers upon which neoliberal doctrine is grounded (see Foucault, 2008).

There are, in summary, two clearly identifiable phases in the analysis and critique of neoliberalism in Dutch political and academic discourse: the first, spanning the 1950s to the 1980s, saw an attempt at understanding neoliberal political-economic thought in its historical context; during the second, spanning the 1990s to the present, neoliberalism came to be seen as an Anglo-American economic model that is poisonous to civic life. Whereas studies from the first phase lacked criticality, those from the second lack a rigorous understanding of neoliberalism and its history. Peculiarly, during neither phase the connection between neoliberalism and the VVD was explored in any systematic manner.

Neoliberal denial

Neoliberals of all nations have a tendency to deny the existence of neoliberalism. As Mirowski writes:

All manner of commentators, including, significantly, no small number of neoliberals, have insisted that the theory behind the label never really existed; if they happen to be preternaturally pugnacious, they tend to dismiss it as a swearword emitted by addled denizens of the left. (2013: 27)

This is no less true of Dutch neoliberals, who started denying that neoliberalism exists around the time that authors such as Achterhuis began publicly criticising its tenets. Several prominent authors allied to the VVD have in recent years attempted to argue, in various national media outlets as well as in scholarly publications, that neoliberalism is a spectre that never truly existed (e.g. Bolkestein, 2009; Van de Haar, 2012). Most prolific – and indeed most ‘preternaturally pugnacious’ – in this endeavour, however, has been Patrick van Schie, the current director of the Telders Foundation, who, in recent years, has scrambled to argue that neoliberalism is a left-wing phantasm (see Dupuis and Van Schie, 2013: 43; Van Schie, 2013; 2014; Van Schie and Kalma, 2014).

Neoliberals’ denial of the existence of neoliberalism reached a climax when, in 2014, Van Schie and two fellow Telders Foundation members published a short book called *Neoliberalism: A political illusion*, which takes aim at contemporary critics of neoliberalism, including Marijnissen and Achterhuis. The authors sketch an historical portrait of neoliberal thought (treating Hayek, Friedman, Eucken, Röpke, etc.) only to then contend that this historical school of thought has nothing to do with those policies that are normally associated with neoliberalism – that is, privatisation, deregulation and cutbacks – because the latter were never prescribed by neoliberal authors. Their conclusion is that, in the present moment, neoliberalism ‘does not exist’ and that ‘those phenomena that are associated with it either have nothing to do with liberalism or primarily demonstrate that the world not yet liberal *enough*’ (Van Hees et al., 2014: 9).

The crux of the argument made in *Neoliberalism* is that there exists a fundamental difference between the neoliberal moment, which peaked shortly after the Second World War, and the present moment, in which neoliberalism no longer exists.¹⁰ By focusing on neoliberal policy, rather than on the *political rationality* informing such policy (see Brown, 2015), Van Schie and colleagues are capable of denying the existence of a strong *genealogical* connection between

¹⁰ I have engaged with this argument elsewhere (see Cornelissen, 2018; see also Oudenampsen, 2014).

contemporary Dutch liberalism and the various neoliberalisms of Hayek, Eucken, and Friedman. Indeed, as shown in the previous section, in the mid 1980s VVD ideologues themselves were at pains to justify their party's economic policy by drawing extensively upon neoliberal ideas. Thus, whilst it is true that economic policy aimed at reducing the size and expenses of the State is not necessarily neoliberal, it is equally true that, in the hands of the VVD, this policy was justified on the basis of neoliberal reasoning.

In short, what makes this argument possible is the fact that Dutch critics of neoliberalism have as yet failed to develop a convincing account of the genealogy of their nation's brand of neoliberalism. Indeed, by focusing solely on neoliberal policy, such critics as Marijnissen and Achterhuis open themselves up to the charge that theirs is an ahistorical analysis, ignorant of neoliberalism's complex and layered history, its internal heterogeneity, and its many theoretical subtleties. By leaving the study of neoliberalism's history to scientists allied to the VVD, the Dutch Left has both weakened its own critique and failed to take (analytical or political) advantage of the fact that the Netherlands is home to what may well be the oldest explicitly neoliberal party in the world.

What does the Dutch context tell us about neoliberalism denial more generally? One of the central arguments developed by Van Schie and his companions – indeed, the reason they wrote the book – is that the term 'neoliberalism' has lost its coherence. 'Neoliberalism,' they contend, signified a clearly delineated school of thought in the post-war era (see Van Hees et al., 2014: ch. 2; Van Schie, 2013), but has been emptied of its content by recent critics and has come to mean anything deplorable. 'It remains remarkable', writes Van Schie:

that the term neoliberal is used today to express aversion to a presupposed understanding of society [*maatschappijbeschouwing*] and economic policy that are far removed from the currents of *new liberalism* and neoliberalism that actually existed historically. (2013: 75)

The concept of neoliberalism, in this view, has come to stand for 'a litany of miseries', but hardly any of its critics offer 'a clear definition' (Van Hees et al., 2014: 13, 8).

This point is eerily familiar. Indeed, it is the exact critique of the term 'neoliberalism' that has recently become so pervasive in methodological discussions surrounding the study of neoliberalism; discussions that, unsurprisingly, are mobilised by Van Schie *et al.* with palpable glee (see Van Hees et al., 2014: 13-14; Van Schie, 2013: 77n4, 78n14). In doing so, they pay particular attention to a 2009 paper by Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, which aimed to show that, in academic articles published between 1990 and

2004, the term ‘neoliberalism’ often remained undefined. Whilst Boas and Gans-Morse’s ultimate objective was to render ‘neoliberalism’ ‘a useful term’ once more (2009: 157), Van Schie does not hesitate to use their findings towards a different end. He hopes that the publication of the book *Neoliberalism* ‘marks the final word on contemporary ‘neoliberalism’ and that the term will ‘disappear from the public debate’ (Van Schie, 2014: n.p.).

Here, then, the scholarly observation that the term ‘neoliberalism’ has gradually been emptied of its analytical content meets with a political agenda that benefits from denying that neoliberalism continues to exist today, in that it provides the VVD with the tools to dismiss casually any left-leaning critiques of its market-oriented policies as ill-informed and largely inspired by rancour. Indeed, it comes as no surprise that, in the Dutch context, all authors who deny the existence of contemporary neoliberalism are closely tied to the VVD, to the Telders Foundation, or to both. Thus, what in scholarly circles is understood as a call to treat the concept of neoliberalism with more care has come to figure, in the Dutch public sphere, as a tool used by neoliberal ideologues to draw attention away from their own party’s genealogy.

Ironically, the publication of Van Schie’s various denials of the existence of neoliberalism has prompted a wave of critique and led various Dutch authors to start publishing historically oriented critiques of neoliberalism, producing, for instance, reflections on the general history of neoliberalism (Woltring, 2014), on neoliberalism in the Netherlands (Vliegthart, 2014), on the PvdA’s neoliberal tendencies (Woltring, 2012), and even, at long last, on the VVD’s neoliberal genealogy (Oudenampsen, 2017). It was, then, neoliberals’ denial that their ideology exists that has finally, after more than half a century of critical paucity, triggered serious critique. At present these critiques remain comparatively underdeveloped, but they may be presumed to be the preface to more extensive studies.

Conclusion

In the context of Dutch political and scholarly discourse, methodological concerns over the term ‘neoliberalism’ have combined with a notably weak critical understanding of the genealogy of Dutch neoliberalism to produce highly fertile grounds for a reactionary response by the most recent generation of Dutch neoliberals to critical studies of neoliberalism.

The Dutch case shows that there is no final answer to the abstract question, ‘Must we rethink the notion of neoliberalism?’, and that abstract answers to this

question, ironically enough, risk being utilised for the purposes of thwarting attempts at better understanding neoliberal politics. The lesson to be learned is that reflection upon a term so deeply political as 'neoliberalism' is itself invariably a *political* intervention. In order to avoid our words being mobilised by ideologues such as Van Schie, we would do well to specify carefully both the question and our answers. Must we, in current Dutch debates, rethink the notion of neoliberalism? Perhaps; but much more urgent is the task of articulating a rigorous historical critique of Dutch neoliberalism, its genealogy, and its complex, multiple, and heterogeneous relationships to the neoliberal tradition.

Speaking more generally, the debate concerning the usefulness of the concept of neoliberalism would doubtlessly benefit from a more acute awareness of the inevitable embeddedness of the uses and abuses of terms like 'neoliberalism.' That is to say that whilst vague, unreflexive, or all-too-general uses of the term 'neoliberal' may be irritating to scholars, the very fact that the term has begun to circulate more rapidly and more widely in recent years is itself indicative of certain shifts in political awareness, of changing worries about the present and the future, and of ongoing discursive contestations over the meaning of neoliberalism. When seen from this angle, the very circulation of this term comes to appear as an intriguing datum that scholars of neoliberalism should seek to interpret and explain rather than bemoan.

In this article I have sought to give an impression of what such interpretation might entail. It seems to me that the endeavour better to understand various (ab)uses of the concept of neoliberalism might start by paying attention to the specific contexts within which these (ab)uses emerge, to their regularity and their dispersion, to the heuristics and habits of thought they conceal, and to the discursive and ideological strategies underlying them. Such an endeavour would approach the concept of neoliberalism primarily as a fact of public life and, as such, is itself not dependent upon any specific conceptual definition of the neoliberal.

All of this, it bears repeating, is not to suggest that, in a scholarly setting, analytical clarity is an unworthy thing to strive for. Rather, it is to invite scholars of neoliberalism to meet their anxieties over the increasing analytical opacity of their subject matter by engaging in the archaeology of knowledge (as Foucault, 2002 or Mirowski, 2013 might say) rather than by erecting a tribunal of lucidity. Not only is the former less likely to be weaponised by representatives of the neoliberal thought collective, and not only would it be able to indicate new avenues of critical study (such as a more rigorous critique of the VVD), it is also less likely to collapse into conceptual purism. This seems to me the more fruitful

way of addressing the conceptual impasse that the critique of neoliberalism appears to find itself in.

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the author

Lars Cornelissen was awarded a doctorate at the School of Humanities, University of Brighton (UK) in 2018. His thesis offers an archaeological approach to the history and prehistory of neoliberalism.

Email: lars.cornelissen@isrf.org