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## **ABSTRACT**

Control and legitimacy struggles between expert occupational groups and organizations have become more intense and protracted due to the policy and governance regimes that neoliberal state elites have imposed over the last four decades. As a result, the contested terrain on and over which professions and other expert occupational groups contend to establish, defend, and enhance jurisdictional domains has become more unstable and complex. To understand the underlying dynamics and outcomes of the process of neo-liberalization, we need to develop an analytical framework through which we can identify and explore the critical points of intersection and contention between elites, professions, and the neoliberal state structures and regimes in which they are embedded. By focussing on the emergence of the neoliberal state and the core governance and policy regimes through which elite power blocs acting in its name have attempted to impose market dominance and discipline over the organization of professional jurisdictional domains, this article offers an interpretation of the current condition of and prospects for professional work in the twenty first century.

## INTRODUCTION

Expert professional elites play a vital role in sustaining the structure of power relations through which neo-liberalization has been made possible as a ‘stealth revolution from above’ (Brown 2015) working its way through Anglo-American political economies and societies over the last four decades (Swarts 2013). By designing, fabricating and operating the mobile organizational technologies through which neo-liberalization has been, however imperfectly and partially, translated from a ‘theoretical imaginary’ into a ‘practical imaginary’ (Fairclough 2010), expert professional elites have interpolated themselves into strategic positions and roles within neoliberal governance regimes (Peck 2010; Peck and Theodore 2015). They perform vital intermediary and brokerage roles within the complex, hybridized administrative regimes by which neoliberal governance is practiced and legitimated (Wedel 2011; Savage and Williams 2008; Davis and Williams 2017).

Yet, the enhanced power and status enjoyed by certain expert occupational groups and elite factions within the latter, resulting from their critical roles in facilitating neo-liberalization and neoliberal governance, has also impacted on the institutional landscape of contemporary professionalism in major ways (Leicht 2015; Muzio, Kirpatrick and Kipping 2011; Larson 1990, 2013). Under the structural and political pressures of neo-liberalization, the expert division of labour in Anglo-American political economies has fragmented and fractured so the contradictions between and within expert groups claiming professional authority have become more intense and polarized. Expert occupational groups, the institutional sites within which they are embedded and operate, and the internal authority and status hierarchies through which they regulate and manage themselves have all come under escalating stresses and strains. Ongoing power struggles to capture, colonize, and control the jurisdictional work

domains and labour market shelters through which professionalization projects are collectively mobilized and sustained take on an increasingly frenetic and desperate quality (Freidson 2001; Johnson 1994; Kirkpatrick and Noordegraaf 2016; Spence, Voulgaris and MacLean 2017). The quest to secure the support and patronage of dominant economic, political, and administrative elites, occupying ruling positions within the governance regimes through which the neoliberal state conducts its business, becomes vital to the future of those expert occupational groups and expert elites mounting defensive or offensive professionalization projects.

This article develops an analysis and evaluation of the underlying structural mechanisms and extant political dynamics of the process of neo-liberalization as it has impacted on the organization and legitimation of expert work and power in Anglo-American political economies since the early 1980s. It argues that a *fusion of 'state-corporate-professional interests'* has been achieved through five interrelated structural and discursive mechanisms by means of which neoliberalism sustains itself as viable policy and governance regime. These mechanisms – enhanced and streamlined executive power, technocratic management, hybridized private/public governance, elite expert/professional intermediation, and depoliticized political discourse – provide the administrative means and modes through which the neoliberal state is made possible.

However, this fusion of 'state-corporate-professional interests' has fractured and polarized the collective interests, values, and organization of elite professional groups in ways that threaten to emasculate professionalism as the 'third logic' of work organization in modern capitalist societies' (Freidson 2001). It has generated a much more intensely contested terrain of expert occupational power struggles in which 'corporate professionals' have emerged as the dominant group within an expert division of labour characterized by internecine conflicts undermining the coherence and relevance of established professional authority and status.

The article opens with an overview of the ‘contested terrains’ that characterize the contemporary institutional landscape of expert work in those liberal market, capitalist political economies which have embraced and experienced neo-liberalization in its most virulent and intense forms. This is followed by a consideration of the key structural features of the elite power blocks and factions (Scott 1991, 2008; Useem 1984, 2015) which have driven the process of neo-liberalization forward over the last forty years and how the latter has transformed the relationship between neoliberal state elites and, both established and emergent, expert professional groups. The emergence of a distinctive neoliberal state form that translates an ideological vision into a rolling programme of policy initiatives where various elite groups play a central role is also considered in this section of the article. In the final section, the narrative moves on to evaluate the longer-term implications of the preceding analysis for professionalism as the ‘third logic’ for organizing and legitimating expert work in twenty first century liberal market, capitalist political economies.

In this way, the article provides an integrated theoretical analysis of the complex and dynamic networks of political and expert power through which neoliberal governance regimes have been constructed and stabilized. It also assesses the long-term impact of the latter on contemporary modes of expert occupational closure and control as they struggle to cope with the much more ‘disorganized’ professional division of labour that neo-liberalization has produced. Viewed through this analytical lens, *the hybridization and fragmentation of professional services and the expert occupational groups which provide them can now be explained as an outcome of the new elite power structures and governance regimes through which neo-liberalization has been mobilized and sustained as a long-term political project.*

## **CONTESTED PROFESSIONAL TERRAINS**

Professionalization projects are driven by the organizational imperative to capture and control expert work domains in order to secure the economic, political and cultural rewards which flows from them. Professionalism has always been a 'contested terrain' on which a plethora of expert occupational groups have struggled to close off the specialist services which they provide from any, actual or potential , external threat and to derive the material and symbolic advantages that these constructed labour market shelters generate (Abbott 1988; Larson 2013; Macdonald 2006).

Building on Goodrich's (1975) concept of 'the frontier of control', Edwards (1979) develops the concept of 'contested terrain' to analyse the dynamics of workplace control of the capitalist labour process in the twentieth century with particular reference to the emergence and expansion of multinational corporations in the US economy during the first part of that century. Over time, the concept of 'contested terrain' has been analytically expanded and empirically extended to focus on a much wider range of occupational groups located at various levels within the skills/job hierarchy and the longer-term impact of their control strategies and tactics on labour markets and class structures (Derber, Schwartz and Magrass 1990).

In relation to the professionalization projects mobilized by expert groups seeking to carve out and close off areas of specialist work which can provide the organizational power base from which labour market advantages and social status mobility prospects can be secured, Larson's work (1990, 2013) provides an analytical model for, and an historical account of, the key structural mechanisms and political processes through which these projects are pursued

Larson (2013:51) identifies three, interrelated structural mechanisms in any professionalization project aimed at securing effective closure of and control over

jurisdictional work domains through which ‘the monopolization of competence and the demonstration that this competence is superior to others’ can have any realistic expectations of being achieved. First, *the construction and protection of a cognitive/knowledge base* which, theoretically and practically, demonstrates relatively high levels of abstraction, indeterminacy, and exclusivity conducive to the colonization and policing of specialist services unavailable by any other mode of service delivery. Second, *a legitimation strategy* focused around normative control over this cognitive/knowledge base such that only, usually state-accredited and/or licensed, experts are allowed to negotiate the terms on which they draw boundaries around specific jurisdictional domains within the social division of labour. Thirdly, *an organizational strategy* through which experts attain a sufficient degree of internal unification and external recognition in order to secure the protections and privileges which professionalization bestows and to continue to regulate themselves with minimum interference from external agencies.

Her historical account of the two most successful professionalization projects in Anglo-American political economies and welfare systems, medicine and law - as compared to say, engineering and teaching - also demonstrates how complex, difficult, and contentious it is for expert groups to establish and retain effective market control over the specialist services which they provide and organizational control over the work domains in which the latter are provided.. She also maintains that subsequent moves towards full professionalization for law and medicine only began to achieve sufficient institutional support and organizational traction when the wider political and ideological context developed in a meritocratic direction supported by dominant elites occupying key power positions within an embryonic social democratic state.

This latter point also illustrates the absolutely pivotal role that Larson (2013: xii) assigns to dominant economic, political, and social elites located and operating within the central state apparatus in supporting, or conversely obstructing, professionalization projects:

‘Professions ultimately depend on the power of the state, and they originally emerge by the grace of powerful protectors. The privileged position of a profession is thus secured by the political and economic influence of the elite which sponsors it. ....an account of the process by which professions emerge illuminates the fact that professions gain autonomy; in this protected position, they can develop with increasing independence from the ideology of the dominant social elites. ...The fact remains, however, that their privileges can always be lost’.

Larson is emphasizing a number of crucial aspects of the process of professionalization which will remain central to the analysis developed in subsequent sections of this article. First, professionalization is a process by which producers of specialist services strive to constitute and control a market for their expertise and to replicate the latter within the workplaces where they operate through jurisdictional capture and closure of bounded work domains. Secondly, professionalization occurs in a contested terrain of control and legitimation struggles within and between professional groups whose advantage depends on a complex interplay between structural movements, the wider political economies in which they are embedded, and organizational changes to their workplaces. Thirdly, the most crucial mechanism in determining the relative success and/or failure of any expert occupational group engaged in a professionalization project is its relationship with dominant economic, political, and administrative elites with the capacity to sponsor and/or block their aspirations through the power which their access to and control over state-derived resources gives them.

Succeeding sections of this article will trace the ways in which the process of neo-liberalization and the neoliberal state governance regime within which dominant ruling elites currently operate have transformed the contested terrain on which contemporary expert occupational groups engaged in, defensive or offensive, professionalization projects now struggle to impose market control and organizational closure over their specialist services.

## **NEO-LIBERALIZATION AND THE NEOLIBERAL STATE**

### **Neo-Liberalization and Expert Power**

Neo-liberalization consists of three, interrelated, analytical elements. First, a policy paradigm shift rejecting neo-Keynesian economic policy and the neo-corporatist governance regimes through which it was implemented in favour of free-market liberalism, financialization, profit and market-driven forms of capital accumulation, and the technocratic governance regime by means of which this ideology could be represented as a neutral functional necessity (Harvey 2005; Peck 2010; Blyth 2013; Lapavistas 2013; Seymour 2014). Second, a fundamental restructuring of elite power relations in which a core alliance between financial, business, political, and media ruling elite factions come to occupy dominant positions with a hybridized ‘polyarchical’ power structure recombining selected elements of oligarchical rule and pluralistic stakeholder engagement (Dahl 1971; Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006; Higley and Burton 2006; Savage and Williams 2008; Reed and Wallace 2015). Third, the emergence of a distinctive state regime which facilitates and protects financialized modes of capital accumulation by re-engineering the organized power through which markets are constructed and can function in ways that favour the long-term interests of corporate capitalism (Davis 2009; Lapavistas 2013; Davis and Williams 2017; Vogl 2017).

Of course, the precise ways in which these three analytical elements come together to form ‘embedded neoliberalism’, as it operates in particular socio-historical and spatial contexts, are

highly contingent and necessarily contain a number of internal ideological, political, and organizational contradictions and tensions which have to be managed in some way or another. As Peck (2010:3) suggests:

‘As a mobile technology of governance [neoliberalism], must always cohabit with others. The project is destined to remain incomplete, even if it aspires to remake the world in its own image. In political terms, neoliberalism needs coalition partners, allies and supporters; in system-theoretic terms, [it] spans a range of hybrid species under coalitions of contingent and conjunctural specificity .....neo-liberalism has become omnipresent but it is a complex, mediated and heterogeneous kind of omnipresence and not a state of blanket conformity’.

However, whatever the structural constraints and ideological contingencies which it faces, neo-liberalization and the forms of policy and governance regimes that it generates, legitimates, and reproduces creates very clear patterns of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. New configurations of political and economic opportunity open-up for a multiplicity of interest groups with the strategic and organizational capacity to take advantage of them. This is very much the case for expert occupational groups, including those claiming, or at least aspiring to, professional authority and status whom are able to exploit the creative opportunities for jurisdictional challenge, capture, and control that neo-liberalization generates as a result of the innovative ‘technologies of governance’ which it makes available.

Indeed, neo-liberalization makes the state even more crucial for the prosecution of defensive or offensive strategies of labour market and jurisdictional workplace closure. It becomes of even greater significance in promoting new modes of policy innovation and regulative governance at the very same time that it weakens, if not destroys, pre-existing policy and regulative regimes not conforming to the ideological imperatives and organizational maxims of a universalized market order (Mirowski 2013; Swartz 2013; Davies 2014; Raco 2016).

Professionalizing strategies have conventionally relied on securing occupational closure and control of expert jurisdictional work domains through formal certification, licensing, and other forms of credentialization (Collins 1990; Abbott 1988; Macdonald 2006). Neo-liberalization undermines these forms of expert monopolization through state-sponsored policies and programmes geared to marketization, deregulation, and financialization that make specialized knowledge and skill subject to competitive pressures and the new inspection and monitoring regimes that necessarily come with them (Crouch 2016). It also promotes alternative, market-based forms of re-regulation in which the power of the state, often administered by private corporations empowered to act as its agents, to direct and coordinate the provision of expert services is considerably enhanced (Wilks 2013). Those expert elites most closely aligned with the gradual shift towards the innovative policy and governance paradigms that neo-liberalization promotes and legitimates are drawn into the much more complex and hybridized elite power structures through which the neoliberal state gets its work done.

### **Neo-Liberal State as an Ideal Type**

It is possible to identify a number of interrelated analytical elements which define the 'neoliberal state' in terms of a general theoretical model or ideal type. First, in relation to how it resets the relationship between the executive and legislative components of the administrative and law-making systems through which it governs and rules. Second, in terms of how it recomposes the state apparatus through which socio-political order and control are to be achieved on a continuing basis. Third, in relation to the various incorporation and enrolment strategies that it fashions and depends on to bring key 'external' ruling factions and actors into its core decision-taking processes and practices. Fourth, through the ways it appropriates and deploys the expert technocratic knowledge and skill which it requires to formulate, develop, and justify the policies and programmes through which it seeks to secure

its strategic goals and their operational implementation. Finally, in regard to the mechanisms through which it strategically mobilizes key media, communications, and intellectual organizations to support its ideological commitments and the policy narratives and programme initiatives through which the latter are ‘made real’.

The neoliberal state consists of a highly centralized and tightly integrated executive apparatus supported by an extended and complex network of subordinate agencies through which its policies are to be legitimated and implemented (Harvey 2005; Jessop 2008, 2010, 2016; Seymour 2014; Peck and Theodore 2015; Hurt and Lipschutz 2016). As Jessop (2008: 131-32) puts it:

‘.....power shifts from the legislature to the executive and is even concentrated within the latter....the fusion of the legislature, executive, and judiciary branches accelerates, and a decline in the rule of law occurs in favour of particularistic, discretionary regulation....Linked to these shifts is the growth of new plebiscitary and populist forms of consent alongside new technocratic forms of legitimation’.

Such a concentration of executive power and control is facilitated by the re-composition of the administrative apparatus through which the neoliberal state functions in relation to the systems and technologies by means of which general order and continuity are secured. This entails an overall movement away from semi-independent governance and administrative systems based on formalized ‘negotiated consent’ and contested public scrutiny towards highly discretionary technocratic regimes based on informal understandings between specialist ‘elite insiders’ embedded in policy formulating and brokering networks operating within the institutional interstices between public and private power.

Both of these structural movements (the concentration of executive power and its fusion with technocratic modes of administration and regulation) are complemented by a third

structural movement constitutive of the neoliberal state – that is, the incorporation, by both direct/formal and indirect/informal mechanisms, of private corporate power into the core decision-making and taking processes through which state policy is generated, legitimated, and implemented. Private corporate power, particularly that of global financial, business, and professional corporate elites who benefit most from the policy and governance regimes through which the neoliberal state becomes an organizational reality, secures the political sponsorship and protection it requires from the neoliberal state by ensuring its increasing dependency on the resources and technologies that only transnational capitalist corporations can provide.

*Crucial to this process of neoliberal state incorporation has been the co-optation of elite representatives of leading professional, technocratic, and managerial occupational groups into a rolling programme of organizational reforms.* Through the latter, public bureaucracies are gradually transformed into hybrid agencies selectively recombining dimensions of public authority and private control in ways that by-pass, and ultimately weaken, traditional channels of democratic accountability in favour of secondary legislation, executive orders, private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships (Peck and Theodore 2015; Hibou 2016). Thus, the legitimation and diffusion of neoliberal policy paradigms through the neoliberal state apparatus is dependent upon a complex, multi-level process:

‘...initiated, energized and reproduced by a wide range of actors and institutions, drawing variously on territorial and transnational networks, including the diasporic community of Chicago School economists, management consultants, ideologically attuned technocrats in countries like Chile and New Zealand, members of the Mount Pelerin Society, vanguardist politicians like Reagan and Thatcher, and think tanks in London, Washington, D.C. and elsewhere’ (Peck the Theodore 2015:25-6).

The underlying ideological mission of this transnational cadre of expert elite groups and organizations was, and still is, to design and operate the administrative technologies through which market-based principles and techniques of policy evaluation and implementation could be *raised to the level of state-endorsed norms protected from external scrutiny and challenge by 'outsider' groups and organizations* (Cahill 2014; Davies 2014; Dardot and Laval 2014; Ban 2016).

### **Neo-Liberal State and 'Enduring Austerity'**

Complementing each of these 'structural movements' constitutive of the neoliberal state lies the mobilization, by its inner circle of political, financial, business, and professional elites, of key media, communications, and intellectual organizations and groups. Their key role is to ensure that the strategic ideological preferences of ruling elites are transformed from 'theoretical imaginaries' into 'practical imaginaries' – that is, into taken-for-granted common sense presuppositions dominating the public political discourse through which policy and practice are framed and debated (Fairclough 2010; Swartz 2013; Bowman et al., 2015). Any 'theoretical imaginary' such as neoliberal ideology must be translated into a 'practical imaginary' that convinces most people that repairs can be made when the new system fails to deliver so that the next phase of neo-liberalization can be prosecuted. Media, communications, and intellectual organizations and agencies, as well as the elite groups that run them, play a critical role in ensuring that the, rather abstract and remote, policy offers and governance regimes through which the neoliberal state legitimates and regulates itself are translated into meaningful and sustainable collective understandings of 'what needs to be done', 'how it needs to be done', and 'why it needs to be done' in order to move ever closer to the nirvana of a market society.

As Jessop (2016:233-37) notes, one of the, if not ‘the’, most crucial common sense understandings that media, communications, and intellectual organizations sympathetic to neoliberal ideology and supportive of neoliberal state policy and governance regimes have promoted, is *the notion of ‘permanent’, or at least ‘enduring’, austerity*. The latter entails sustained, if not escalating, reductions in public expenditure required by state fiscal rectitude and financial restraint in an initial context of putative economic crisis and financial meltdown that subsequently becomes the taken-for-granted ideological default position against which political debate over policy change and practice innovation has to be evaluated. Yet, for ‘enduring austerity’ to be widely accepted and retained as a ‘practical imaginary’ a great deal of discursive and interpretive work has to be done – in which elite corporate professionals and experts embedded in global and national organizations play a pivotal role. They translate ‘austerity’ from an ideologically-driven ‘theoretical imaginary’ into a depoliticised, technical, and operational necessity immune to criticism, much less challenge, from alternative ‘theoretical imaginaries’ and their supporters (Blyth 2013; Swarts 2013; Seymour 2014; Peck and Theodore 2015).

These five, interrelated structural and discursive mechanisms – concentrated and sealed-off executive power, technocratic governance, private/public symbiosis, elite professional/expert co-operation, and depoliticised translation – compromise the core administrative means and organizational modes through which the neoliberal state is constituted and sustained as a viable regime. Any understanding of how the neoliberal state apparatus and the policy and governance regimes that it has facilitated have been made possible raises vital questions about the political and administrative agencies through which they have been mobilized and sustained – even in the face of repeated strategic failure and operational breakdown. It demands that we examine the underlying elite power relations and alliances through which the liberal state has emerged and how they reshape the contested terrain upon which intra and

inter-professional legitimacy and control struggles to capture and control vital labour market shelters and jurisdictional workplace domains are conducted.

## **NEOLIBERAL ELITES AND PROFESSIONAL ELITES**

As a hybrid form of state rule and strategy, the emergence, elaboration, and transformation of the neoliberal state has been shaped by a dynamic set of inter-elite interactions and relations between ruling factions occupying top level positions within the political and administrative core of its formal institutional structures and a wide range of supporting professional, managerial, and technical elites. Professional elites informally negotiate and broker the ‘fixes’ and ‘deals’ which the ‘core or inner circle’ rely on to absorb the allocative problems and authoritative crises and challenges they inevitably encounter (Useem 1984, 2015; Derber, Schwartz and Magrass 1990; Morgan 2015). This ‘core or inner circle’ of ruling groups constitutes what Mills (2000) called the ‘power elite’ located at the structural epicentre of the neoliberal state who ‘command and control’ the strategic heights of the political, economic, military, security and media power hierarchies through which a universalized market order is to be established and sustained. The formal hierarchical power and control of this ‘power elite’ is supported and complemented by a ‘shadow elite’ of expert ruling groups operating within a complex web of informal, horizontal power and influence networks. They provide the specialist knowledges, skills, and technologies whereby the core or inner circle attempt to protect themselves from serious external scrutiny and accountability by sealing-off their activities and deliberations from ‘intrusive external attention’ (Wedel 2011; Savage and Williams 2008; Hibou 2008). Professional, and other expert, elites, are simultaneously members of this ‘outer/inner core’ and occupy key boundary-spanning nodes and brokering roles within the policy-making networks that bring members of the ‘power’ and ‘shadow’ elites together in order to smooth over, or at least contain, the conflicts and tensions which

inevitably emerge as policy evolves into something resembling a coherent narrative potentially translatable into practical programmes.

This interlocking and overlapping set of power relations and dynamics within and between the ‘power elite’ and the ‘shadow elite’ – both in their ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ dimensions – has shaped, and will continue to shape, the development of the neoliberal state apparatus and the policy and governance regimes that it promotes in its restless search of a universalized market order. Rotating ruling groups and factions embedded within the power elite and shadow elite have come together to form and reform the ‘power blocs’ (Scott 1991, 2008) through which neoliberal state power is to be harnessed and deployed in the service of ‘a stealth revolution from above’ (Brown 2015) ensuring that financialization, marketization, and privatization become the ideological lodestones of the policy making and implementing process. These inter-elite ‘power blocs’ facilitate ‘an alignment of divergent and partially conflicting groups which are united through a common focus on the exercise of state power’ (Scott 1991:33-37).

A number of contemporary social and organizational analysts have argued (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2006; Courpasson and Clegg 2012) that the dynamic power blocs of ‘power’ and ‘shadow’ elite coalitions which have driven neo-liberalization in Anglo-American political economies over the last four decades or so have been brought together and sustained through a ‘polyarchic’ elite power structure first identified by Dahl (1971) and further developed as the central element of his ‘theory of democratic elitism’ (Higley and Burton 2006). Polyarchy is a hybridized form of elite rule consisting of a recombination of selected components of oligarchic domination and pluralistic delegation within an innovative elite power structure. It synthesizes vertically integrated, but streamlined, mechanisms of command and control with a range of horizontally co-ordinated ‘stakeholder co-optation and engagement’ processes through which potentially destabilizing conflicts can be managed. As

a hybrid of oligarchic rule and pluralistic stakeholder participation, polyarchy establishes a viable, if inherently complex and crisis-prone, system of elite ruling required for the sustainability of the neoliberal state as a governance and policy regime within which dynamic elite power blocs contend to access state power.

Professional, managerial, and technocratic elites play a vital role in formulating and servicing the policy and governance technologies through which political, financial, business and media factions within the ruling ‘power elite’ attempt to promote and stabilize the theoretical legitimacy and practical viability of the neo-liberalization project. Within the polyarchic elite power structure through which neo-liberalization is to be prosecuted, expert elites are the key groups linking the various neoliberal elite factions together to form reasonably cohesive and sustainable power blocs. They also act as the crucial conduits through which the latter’s, often divergent and volatile, collective interests remain aligned long enough to control state strategy and policy.

As Savage and Williams (2008: 12-17) suggest, in relation specifically to financial elites, expert elites form ‘loose distributive coalitions’ of intermediaries that span the policy and governance regimes through which the ruling power elites within the neoliberal state retain their structural dominance and strategic control. Their analysis has wider significance for our understanding of the position and role of expert elites within the polyarchical elite power structures and networks through which the neoliberal state has emerged as a sustainable policy and governance regime - especially when the latter experiences repeated failure to deliver on its promises of increased public prosperity and security. In a world in which elite power structures are becoming more fragmented and fluid, as well as more streamlined and concentrated (Mizruchi 2013; Davies 2017; Navidi 2017), *expert elites play an increasingly vital role in providing the specialist knowledges, skills, and technologies through which they*

*can mediate, absorb, and contain the challenges which the neoliberal state inevitably encounters.*

Based on extensive anthropological, historical, and investigative journalistic research into major domestic and foreign policies and programmes initiated by successive US federal administrations over a number of years, Wedel (2011: 20-40) conceptualizes this ‘shadow elite’ of expert professionals, managers, and technocrats in the following terms:

‘Emergent forms of governing, power and influence play out not in formal organizations or among stable elites, but in social networks that operate within and among organizations at the nexus of official and private power. The players in the system are less stable, less visible, and more global than their forbears ....The new breed of players – today’s ‘shadow elite’ – are as elusive as they are ubiquitous....They dilute effective monitoring, criticism, and consideration of alternative policies and, wherever they operate, have the potential to reshape governing’.

Structurally located within the political nexus within which ‘official/institutional’ power and ‘private/network’ power come together within the neoliberal state, the shadow elite of experts does not simply ‘oil the wheels’ through which neoliberal statecraft is carried out but it also shapes the substantive policy outcomes which that statecraft strives to realize. Operating on a multi-level, multi-dimensional ‘contested terrain’ of competing, if not conflicting, interests and priorities, and the inter-elite control and legitimacy struggles which they generate, expert elites now find themselves caught-up in a high level political game that is likely to have fateful consequences for their attempts to colonize and manage the jurisdictional work domains on which their authority and status ultimately depends.

## **CONTESTED PROFESSIONAL FUTURES**

A number of researchers and commentators have suggested that it is, primarily, private-sector based ‘corporate professional elites’ who have benefited most from neo-liberalization and the neoliberal state-supported policy and governance regimes it has promoted and legitimated. This has usually been at the expense of, largely, public sector-based organizational professions and liberal independent professionals who both increasingly find themselves subject to the new competitive, audit, and accountability regimes and technologies which corporate professional elites operating within and/or on behalf of the neoliberal state have imposed on them (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008; Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock and Hall 2011; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby 2013; Raco 2013; Sturdy, Wright and Wylie 2016).

In part, this is due to the fact that the policy strategies and programmes initiated by the ‘power and shadow elite’ nexus within the neoliberal state apparatus – privatization, marketization, financialization, franchising and outsourcing – have led to the creation of new jurisdictional domains which require innovative administrative technologies and systems to make them viable as sustainable sources of power and authority. Additionally, the ‘internal’ power and status of corporate professional elites has been considerably enhanced through the multiplicity of strategic roles which they now play in maintaining the polyarchical elite power structure on which that state depends for its legitimacy as a governing regime.

This can be seen in relation to three, overlapping jurisdictional domains in which elite corporate professionals now play a central role in sustaining the neoliberal state. First, in relation to the ‘*mediating and distributing role*’ which they play in smoothing-over latent pressures and tensions within the public/private power nexus and/or preventing them from escalating into manifest conflicts endangering the viability of emergent power blocs driving forward particular policy strategies and programme initiatives (Savage and Williams 2008; Wedel 2011; Kennedy 2016). Second, in relation to the ‘*mobilizing and lobbying role*’ which

they perform, of both an ‘offensive’ and ‘defensive’ kind, to ensure that key policies and programmes ‘stay on track’ long enough to become political realities from which incumbent administrations can accrue political capital (Barley 2010; Wedel 2011). Third, in relation to the ‘*sealing-off and protecting role*’ which they enact as they engage, both overtly and covertly, in various tactical manoeuvres geared to ensuring that core policy commitments and their long-term resource implications are hidden from hostile external scrutiny and the potential threat which it poses to the regime’s credibility and competency.

Considered in these terms, elite corporate professionals – in law, accounting and finance, management and business consultancy, mass media and communications, wealth management (Harrington 2016) and warfare management (McCann 2017) – emerge as central political players generating, negotiating, co-ordinating and justifying the policy narratives and programme technologies through which elite power blocs engage in the statecraft required to get the work of the neoliberal state done. However fragmented and fractured elite power structures and blocs may become, elite corporate professionals are there to act as a centrifugal force striving to reconfigure political alignment and technocratic closure in the face of centripetal forces that threaten to tear apart whatever deals and fixes they have brokered in order to transact the administrative business of the neoliberal state and to protect its viability as the dominant policy and governance regime. As Davies (2017) suggests, they constitute an emergent ‘consultocracy’ which performs crucial intermediary and translation roles operating in spheres of governance embedded in the interstices between the state and the market (Reed 2012) under conditions of ‘advanced financialized neoliberalism’. Within the latter, they design, operate, and mediate between the complex technologies through which global finance is managed and construct strategic narratives confirming the primacy of international financial markets for the formulation and implementation of government policy. Thus, the ‘powers of translation and mediation’ which

elite corporate professionals provide are crucial to the viability of the neoliberal state and the policy regimes and administrative technologies through which it governs – even if these are periodically subject to bouts of severe instability and the disruption it creates.

The emerging power of this ‘consultocracy’ can be clearly seen in the way that the ‘Big 4’ global accounting and auditing firms and the ‘magic circle’ of professional legal services firms are embedded within the national and transnational elite expert power networks which indelibly shape the ‘travelling organizational technologies’ through which neo-liberalization is translated into sustainable policy and governance regimes (Wilks 2013; Morgan 2013; Boussebba and Morgan 2015; Kennedy 2016; Ashley and Empson 2016). This elite cadre of professional service firms, and the elite professionals who manage and control them, have large governmental and powerful private sector corporate clients on a global scale. They provide the core systems and technologies through which abstract ideologies are turned into practical reform programmes that mobilize public support for neo-liberalization as a ‘technical’ set of organizational innovations transforming bureaucratized public services into privatized commodities subject to market competition and the efficiencies which it guarantees. As Brooks (2018:6) argues, ‘the Big Four’s consultants counsel ministers and officials on everything from healthcare to nuclear power. Although their advice is always labelled ‘independent’, it invariably suits a raft of corporate clients with direct interests in it...the Big Four have become a solvent dissolving the boundary between public and private interests’.

In addition to elite corporate professionals, one can also identify an inner circle of elite professional economists and financial experts, embedded in key positions within the neo-liberal state apparatus where government policy is gestated, who have played a key role as ‘norm entrepreneurs’ driving the neoliberal vision and the policy initiatives that it legitimates (Swartz 2013:122-154; Davies 2017; Earle, Moran and Ward-Perkins 2017; Christensen

2017). This ‘econocracy’ of elite economists, financial specialists, and policy advisors provide the intellectual justification and technical instrumentation through which the neoliberal policy programme required to normalize ‘enduring austerity’ as an overarching theoretical imaginary can be sustained in the face of repeated failure to deliver on its promises.

Nevertheless, the power and influence of elite corporate professionals and policy advisors are by no means untouchable, much less impregnable. Apart from the intense rivalry between professional service firms embedded within the global cartels that dominate the provision of elite expert services, the majority of elite corporate professionals find themselves increasingly dependent on their corporate employers and exposed to the intrusive and pervasive surveillance and control micro-management regimes which the latter routinely impose on their working lives (Cooper and Robson 2006; Kirkpatrick and Noordegraaf 2016). In turn, professional associations containing and regulating these elite corporate professionals are forced to embrace, or at least adapt to, the interests and values of large private corporations effectively acting as the delegated agents of the neoliberal state. These global capitalist corporations become both the major employers of and/or clients for the elite corporate professionals who design, operate, and evaluate the administrative technologies through which the neoliberal state’s policies and programmes are enacted (Ashley and Empson 2017). They also embody the organizational reality of that state ‘in action’ across a wide spectrum of public services relating to health, welfare, justice, employment, and recreation.

Recent research on the changing matrix of power relations in which many elite corporate professionals employed in global professional service firms now operate, indicates that they are increasingly subject to external, market-driven profit imperatives and the consequent dilution of internal, quasi-independent occupational regulation which this often entails (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2008; Kirkpatrick and Noordegraaf 2016). A four decade-long

rolling neoliberal state programme has produced an institutional environment in which elite corporate professionals and professions have come to dominate the contest terrain of expert occupational power and control struggles but at the political and symbolic cost of seriously questioning, if not compromising, their professional autonomy and cultural status. The 'Faustian pact' between the neoliberal state and those elite corporate professionals/professions which have been most prominent in helping it to deliver on its promise of a universalized market order may have effectively traded their 'professional souls' for the material and symbolic rewards which that pact has given them.

In comparison, organizational/managerial and independent/collegiate professionals have fared less much less well under the policy and governance regimes that neoliberal states have imposed. Organizational/managerial professionals have been relatively successful in adapting to the much more intensive and extensive surveillance technologies imposed by neoliberal states determined to subject public services to the unfettered rigours of market competition, contractual outsourcing, and service commodification. But the independent/collegiate professions find their very existence called into question in a world in which the demand for private professional practice is significantly weakened by a conjuncture of political, technological, and organizational rationalizing forces over which they have little or no influence, much less control. From the political and ideological perspective of neoliberal elites, the liberal/independent professions are an historical anachronism that cannot be allowed to stand in the way of free-market discipline and economic progress. They are viewed as obstacles to the practical realization of a universal market order insofar as they legitimate their power and status on the basis of an institutional logic which rejects unrestricted market competition in favour of collective, guild-like systems of occupational control and work organization ideologically anchored in autonomous regulation over the jurisdictional domains which they claim and police (Krause 1996).

Organizational/managerial professionals have engaged in a range of political manoeuvres and organizational improvisations in the face of the ‘neoliberal challenge’. These manoeuvrings have generated a much more complex pattern of ‘hybridized professionalism’ within the public sector in which selected elements of professional work organization and bureaucratic managerial control are synthesized to form innovative, but inherently unstable, systems incorporating contradictory sets of organizing principles and norms (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015; Noordegraaf and Steijn 2013; Noordegraaf and Kirkpatrick 2016). Noordegraaf’s (2015) most recent analysis of the hybridization of public service/sector professionalism emphasizes the impact of ‘New Public Management’ and its demand for more ‘business-like’ and ‘disciplined’ ways of professional working in times of permanent or continuing austerity. In the private sector, he argues, the impact of external forces such as globalization and corporatization are more important factors in driving the long-term trend towards hybridized forms of professional work practice and organization that accommodate competing modes of jurisdictional autonomy and control without fatally compromising the core principles of either ‘professionalism’ or ‘managerialism’.

However, this kind of analysis may underestimate both the extent to which public service/sector professionals, particularly in Anglo-American political economies, are increasingly subjected to globalizing and corporatizing dynamics – mediated by powerful private transnational corporations acting as delegated agents of neoliberal states – and the manifold ways in which private sector professions are being restructured as a result of the changing points of intersection between the state, market, and civil society. Increasingly, the jurisdictional work domains which both public and private sector professionals are struggling to capture, defend, and extend are being transformed by a conjuncture of elite-driven, neoliberal state policies, programmes, and technologies that fundamentally challenge the

need for, and indeed the right of, professional practice to continue to exist in anything resembling its ideal typical form.

From a continental/neo-corporatist viewpoint, public sector professionals may seem to be protected from the fundamental structural and ideological challenges that forty years of neo-liberalization have generated within Anglo-American political economies. They can still look to the central and regional/local state to defend the legal, social, and cultural infrastructure supportive of the core principles of 'professionalism' (Kirpatrick and Noordegraaf 2015; Adams 2017). Yet, professionals, located in either the public or private sectors, operating in the dominant, market-driven institutional structures and cultures of Anglo-American political economies have never received the same degree of central/regional/local state support as their continental counterparts embedded in neo-corporatist regimes and systems that have proved to be far more resilient in the face of neo-liberalization (Collins 1990; Kirpatrick and Noordegraaf 2015).

In this respect, the rise of the neoliberal state and the polyarchic elite power structures and blocs through which it is sustained present independent, organizational, and corporate professions and professionals with major existential challenges which are unlikely to be absorbed, diluted or deflected by evolutionary ecological adaptations that keep the core principles and practices of 'professionalism' in relatively good working order. Elite corporate professionals and professions which provide the expert knowledges and technologies that keep the wheels of the neoliberal state turning would seem to be the prime beneficiaries of the ideological and structural transformations set in motion by neo-liberalization. The independent/collegiate professions still remain highly significant in numerical and functional terms (Empson and Chapman 2006; Muzio and Ackroyd 2005), particularly in relation to the legal sector. But the drive towards 'managed professional businesses' (Smets, Morris, Nordeylych and Brock 2017) - in which the principles of 'private professional practice'

become so diluted as to become all but meaningless – under the combined pressures of global competition and market-led rationalization, would seem to indicate that this form of professionalism will increasingly give ground to organizational and corporate professionalism. Yet, this doesn't mean to say that more 'neoliberal friendly' forms of professionalism are safe from further interventions by a neoliberal state elite and their corporate agents, determined to subject even the most pivotal of private and public professions and professionals to more intense rounds of marketization, privatization and rationalization.

## **DISCUSSION**

At the end of the 1980s, Abbott (1988) argued that professionalism was just about 'holding its own' within the contested terrain of expert jurisdictional domains by keeping the forces of commodification and rationalization at bay. By the mid/late 1990s and early noughties, Freidson (1994, 2001) was advancing a much more pessimistic scenario of 'professional futures' in which established professions and professionals would increasingly find themselves under attack from marketization, rationalization, and corporatization. In many cases, such as in relation to the future of the academic profession, he paints a very bleak picture in which 'professionals will indeed become merely technical experts in the service of the political and cultural economy' (Freidson 2001:212). Fifteen years later, Leicht (2015) sees professional power and authority being assaulted on all sides by economic, political, and cultural forces – as ideologically embodied in market fundamentalism and its pervasive impact on government policy and managerial practice across the globe – that radically undermine the scientific rationalism and occupational meritocracy which have lain at the intellectual core of professionalism since the second-half of the nineteenth century. Even a relative optimist such as Adams (2017) suggests that the long-term resilience of professional self-regulation, however significant currently, may prove to be somewhat brittle in the face of

either state-driven or corporate-driven control strategies aimed at containing professional autonomy within governance regimes dominated by marketization and corporatization.

These underlying structural and ideological shifts have been accelerated and deepened by the process of neo-liberalization and the neoliberal state policy and governance regimes which it has generated and sustained. Neoliberal policy and governance regimes have been constructed and legitimated by the various elite power blocs, aligned and embedded within a polyarchical elite power structure, driving the process of neo-liberalization as it has cut a swathe through the neo-Keynesian/neo-corporatist institutional architecture that the post-1945 social democratic/welfare state settlement ushered into existence. Contemporary professionals, managers, and technocrats are now embedded within an expert division of labour which is becoming increasingly fragmented, fractured and polarized as a consequence of the ‘neoliberal stealth revolution from above’ (Brown 2015) as it unrelentingly works its way through Anglo-American political economies over the last forty years or so and the global reverberations it has generated.

However, looked at within a longer-term historical perspective the fundamental threat which neo-liberalization poses to professionalism and professionals should come as no surprise. As Krause (1996:22) reminds us in his prescient historical and comparative survey of professionalization:

‘.....guild power- the control of these factors by professions – is declining as state power and capitalist power encroach upon it. Where state and capitalist power have won out, they and not the profession control the aspects of professional life that we call ‘the workplace’ and ‘the market’ and determine to a large extent how much associational group power the profession has left vis-à-vis the state and capitalism’.

Of course, it is this *fusion of state and corporate power within neo-liberalization and the hybridized policy and governance regimes that its dominant elite power blocs construct and legitimate* which defines the contemporary contested terrain on which professions and professionals struggle to retain effective closure of and control over the labour market shelters and workplace jurisdictional domains on which their power and authority depend. The hybridization of state and capitalist power within neo-liberalization intensifies the endemic tension between the ‘communal’ and ‘associational’ institutional logics embodied in the guild power on which professional project has depended. By demanding the adaptation of professions to the intensification of private corporate domination and control, neo-liberalization threatens to weaken, if not eradicate, the ‘civilizing’, ‘protecting’, and ‘communal’ functions inherent in guild power. This is realized through the imposition of a system of ‘private government’ (Anderson 2017) in which professionals become subject to the policy and governance regimes imposed by elite blocs acting on behalf of the neoliberal state.

Nevertheless, the polyarchical elite power blocs and networks that have driven neo-liberalization in Anglo-American political economies for more than four decades seem to be increasingly fractious, divided, and polarized. Professions and professionals are inevitably caught-up in this contemporary turn towards more populist, even authoritarian, forms of neoliberal power bloc realignment insofar as their claims to ‘expert’ authority and status become weaker and less politically tractable, not to say tendentious and open to direct challenge (Nichols 2017).

In Gramsci’s terms, professionals under neo-liberalization are transformed from ‘traditional’ into ‘organic’ intellectuals (Scott 1991, 2008); they have little or no choice but to align themselves with the elite power blocs through which neoliberal state policy is made and implemented. As ‘organic intellectuals’, professionals become dependent technical advisors

to the neoliberal state elite rather than independent thinkers or experts who speak to universal problems and dilemmas unconstrained by sectional political interests and values.

Contemporary forms of neoliberal elite power-dependency may be materially rewarding for some professions and professionals – particularly corporate professionals whose globally-marketable technical expertise and skills sustains the policy and governance regimes through which neoliberal power blocs govern (Morgan 2015) – but the question persists as to the potential long-term damage this ‘Faustian pact’ with the neoliberal state order inflicts on whatever reserves of public trust in and recognition for professional authority and status remain.

## **CONCLUSION**

The central argument developed in this article is that a fusion of ‘state-corporate-professional interests’ has occurred under neo-liberalization and the neoliberal state policy and governance regimes through which it has been advanced that undermines professionalism as the third logic of work organization in Anglo-American political economies. This fusion entails the integration of ‘[expert] knowledge, power and networks....to support the modern power elite and their flex nets...the big intermediate professions make elite networks tick’ (Davis 2018: 128-39). But in making the power elite networks tick, elite corporate professions and professionals have shaped the dynamics and structures through which the neoliberal state is sustained in ways that have divided and polarized the configuration of specialist occupational groups constituting the expert division of labour today.

The ideological patina of professionalism may remain, indeed may very well become even more lustrous, within a neoliberal dominated context in which the clamour for power, control, and status amongst a cacophony of expert occupational groups gets even shriller and more

raucous. Yet, the organizational reality of increasingly marketized, rationalized, and standardized work roles and relations is likely to define the working lives of the majority of professional workers, whatever their institutional location and occupational form, in the early decades of the twenty first century.

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