

Why France Isn't (Completely) Neoliberal

Michael C. Behrent

While France would appear to have all the conditions required to become a neoliberal country like any other, neoliberalism's roots are much shallower in France than elsewhere. Kevin Brookes argues that the uniqueness of France's trajectory can be explained by the "high ideological cost" of justifying neoliberalism.

Reviewed: Kevin Brookes, *Why Neo-Liberalism Failed in France : Political Sociology of the Spread of Neo-Liberal Ideas in France (1974-2012)*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2021.

Another world is possible--and according to the political scientist Kevin Brookes, this other world is France. His books as an in-depth explanation, drawing greatly (but not entirely) on quantitative methods used by political scientists (regression analysis and formal modelling), of the "French exception": that is, the fact that France has managed to resist neoliberalism more than most Western countries. According to the author, a public wary of the market and an instinctively *dirigiste* civil service constitute insurmountable barriers to any political or economic entrepreneur seeking to liberalize the French system. Though he only covers the period between 1974 and 2012, Brookes offers numerous perspectives for understanding the new phase in the history of neoliberalism inaugurated by Emmanuel Macron's presidency.

Brookes' book is a contribution to the flourishing literature on the history of neoliberalism considered as a philosophy, ideology, and movement.¹ Whereas many studies examine neoliberalism from the standpoint of the history of ideas or political theory, Brookes' analysis is rooted in political sociology. What interests him is less neoliberal thought and the policies it authorizes than the obstacles that prevented it from having a deep impact in France. While Brookes emphasizes the importance of ideas in the political realm, he illustrates their influence *a contrario*: its relatively weak footprint in France is the result of the *lack* of intellectual advocacy on behalf of its ideas.

The French system's paradoxes

Brookes begins his book by attempting to carefully circumscribe the French paradox relating to neoliberalism. In principle, France should hardly be ill-disposed to an ideology based on the free market. Not only does France have its own indigenous liberal tradition (Constant, Tocqueville, Bastiat), but it also contributed, over the course of the twentieth century, to the development of neoliberal economic thought, through figures belonging to the Mont Pelerin Society and the *nouveaux économistes*. Moreover, since the creation of the Fifth Republic, France has mainly had rightwing government who, in theory, were favorably disposed to neoliberal policies. Finally, French institutions are endowed with characteristics that tend to facilitate political ruptures (thus rendering a neoliberal transformation conceivable): a majoritarian electoral system (rather than proportional representation) and a powerful executive branch, subject to few "veto players" (that is, actors with the ability, whether formally or informally, to block executive-branch decisions). There are, in short, good reasons for assuming that France would embrace the same neoliberal tendencies found in other Western countries. Yet the fact remains, as Brookes demonstrates, that many indicators prove that France, compared to its neighbors, is among the least "neoliberalized" countries.

¹ These include, among others: François Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française: histoire d'une idéologie politique* (Paris: Demopolis, 2007); Serge Audier, *Néo-libéralisme(s): une archéologie intellectuelle* (Paris: Grasset, 2012); Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

A French exception?

How then should one explain this "French exception"? Brookes rejects "convergence theory," which attributes the onset of neoliberalism to international pressure, whether through coercion, competition, social learning, or emulation. Drawing on the work of the French economist François Facchini, Brookes maintains that neoliberalism's failure in France is due to the high cost of justifying it ideologically. To become effective, an ideology must justify itself, with the help of its own "knowledge regimes" as well as other institutions. But to succeed, this justification cannot be too costly, notably because of opposition it may face from public opinion, political parties, or state bureaucracies. In France, the cost of ideological justification has proven systematically very high--even too high.

Before considering the reasons for this ideological blockage, Brookes compares the progress of economic liberalization in France to that of other European countries. He distinguishes between economic liberalization as such, on the one hand, and the liberalization of social policy and welfare state benefits, on the other. Many indicators show that France has mostly followed other countries by liberalizing its economy since the 1980s. It cut taxes on corporations and reduced tax rates for the highest income brackets. It deregulated its labor market (albeit at a slower pace than its neighbors). While France has undergone enormous change since the *Trente Glorieuses* (the "thirty glorious years" of postwar growth), it is far from having become a "model of liberal Anglo-Saxon capitalism" (p. 75). Between 1974 and 2008, French public spending grew more than in any other European country. It is particularly in social policy that France stands out. According to Brookes, "France saw a greater overall rise in the generosity of its social system than other [European] countries and by 2008 was the third most generous welfare state in Western Europe," particularly due to growth in pension insurance (p. 116-117). Thus despite having considerably liberalized its economy, France remains a country in which the state is interventionist and in which social policy has yet to align itself on the neoliberal model.

Justifying neoliberalism: a costly enterprise

How does the high cost of justifying neoliberalism ideologically, which, according to Brookes, accounts for the French exception, manifest itself? Public

opinion plays a role, but not directly. Tracking the relationship between the course of public opinion and social spending, Brookes arrives at a striking conclusion: "the more citizens favour of neoliberalism, the more generous the welfare state gets" (p. 189). Public opinion has an impact, but only indirectly: by influencing the programs of political parties. Each time the program on which a government got itself elected was more liberal than that of the government before it, state spending declined (the most obvious example being Jacques Chirac's government of 1986-1988, which will be discussed later). In short: when political actors take the trouble to justify neoliberalism, their efforts are often successful. The conclusion Brookes draws from this insight is primarily negative: France's "political leaders did not sufficiently legitimise neoliberal ideology" (p. 194).

The other factor contributing to the excessive cost of justifying neoliberalism in France pertains to "knowledge regimes," beginning with the state and its personnel. Not only does economic knowledge in France remain a quasi-state monopoly, but the training of high-level civil servants bolsters their *dirigiste* instincts and renders them unresponsive to civil society. Comparing the US Treasury Department and France's Ministry of the Economy and Finances (also known as "Bercy"), Brookes observes that the French civil service is more educationally homogeneous (61% of its members were trained at six *grandes écoles*, i.e., top state schools), while also having fewer doctorates (notably in economics) and little private-sector experience. French high-level civil servants share a homogenous worldview (known in France as *la pensée unique*, an inflexible way of thinking), reinforced by the fact that it organized on guild principles. Their professional--almost congenital--*dirigisme* makes them ill-suited to provide the justification neoliberalism requires to become effective. The norms and recruitment methods of high-level civil servants strengthen their relatively *dirigiste* "path dependency." Consequently, the rare think tanks and academics to favor neoliberalism find their ability to "advise the prince" stymied by the state.

The main example that Brookes analyzes in support of his argument is that of the Chirac government (1986-1988). This moment, Brookes maintains, was one when a neoliberal turn was a real possibility. The right, consisting of an alliance between two parties, the RPR and the UDF, had campaigned against the socialist government (despite its own liberal turn in 1983). The Republican Party, one of the UDF's components, and especially the so-called "Léo's band," a group of politicians close to the Republican leader, François Léotard, were particularly enthusiastic about free-market ideology (especially Alain Madelin, who became industry minister). Yet while this faction was represented in the government, it remained in the minority and its

members were supervised by more conventional rightwing figures. In the wake of popular opposition to a university reform plan (the so-called "Devaquet Law" of 1986), the Chirac government was eager to avoid being accused of "ultraliberalism." Most importantly, even as the government cooked up liberal reforms, it coated them with a *dirigiste* sauce: for instance, the privatizations it adopted gave the government the right to select the shareholders of companies transitioning to the private sector. For Brookes, the Chirac government was a "neoliberal spring" that never became a summer.

Brookes' book thus offers a convincing explanation of neoliberalism's role in France, recognizing, on the one hand, that it has had a real impact, particularly in the economic realm (primarily due to European integration and the technical adjustments it requires), while also acknowledging, on the other, that neoliberalism has never benefited from the kind of political momentum seen in other western countries. Yet while he does emphasize the central role of ideas and ideology in politics, Brookes does not really explore the properly ideational character of the debates surrounding neoliberalism. Brookes speaks of "justification," but in a way that means little more than "political influence." He does not consider, for example, the kind of analysis proposed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in *On Justification*², in which justification is conceived as a response to criticism and one that necessarily involves a sense of justice and a hierarchy of values.

Consequently, the reasons the neoliberal ideas of 1986 did not prevail remain obscure. Why did this moment not lend itself to a more robust neoliberal critique? Did high-level civil servants and ministerial staffs block proposals by the "Léo's band" for purely ideological reasons? How is one to measure the relative weight of ideas and power politics?

Brookes' book can be usefully compared to another recent analysis of French neoliberalism, *Structural Crisis and Institutional Change in Modern Capitalism* by Bruno Amable (see *Books & Ideas*' review [here](#)). Where Amable sees an emergent consensus around neoliberalism over the past forty years, Brookes emphasizes the elite's reluctance to justify neoliberalism and their efforts to accommodate a public that is increasingly wary of the market. Amable's concern is the way that leftwing governments have rallied behind "supply-side economics"; what preoccupies Brookes is rather the right's lack of enthusiasm for policies that their counterparts in other

² Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *De la justification : les économies de la grandeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991); *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

western countries have embraced with gusto. Moreover, Brookes realizes that French governments have often adopted (frequently because of their European obligations) supply-side policies. Yet he shows that, despite these choices, France continues to pursue statist solutions and extensive redistribution, notably in the realm of social policy. Though the emphasis of their books is different--Amable stresses neoliberalism's breakthrough, Brookes the obstacles to its implementation--their work sheds light on the particularities of neoliberalism's emergence in France and the hybrid forms it has taken.

Despite its relevance to contemporary France, Brookes is silent on political developments since Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. In this well-researched study, the name "Emmanuel Macron" does not once appear. On the one hand, Macron represents a new attempt to justify a kind of neoliberalism, with his goal of turning France into a "startup nation" and his support for the entrepreneurial spirit--particularly since he links the latter to a defense of European integration and optimism in the future. But on the other hand, Macron perfectly exemplifies the dynamics Brookes analyzes, insofar as he was forced to slow down the pace of his reforms when confronted with opposition from the *gilets jaunes*, cultivated ambiguity about his plans to raise the retirement age during the recent presidential campaign, and seems to prefer neoliberalism achieved through technical adjustments rather than ideological breakthroughs. In any case, Brookes's analysis helps us understand how the significance of the phrase "*en même temps*" ("at the same time," which Macron has popularized) extends well beyond the current president and is deeply embedded in the history of the French appropriation of neoliberalism.

Published in Booksandideas.com, 29 June 2022.