Disciplinary Neo-liberalisation and the New Politics of Inequality

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# Abstract

Overlaps exist between critical Criminology and critical International Political Economy (IPE). However, while criminologists are keen to engage with political economy, there has been less interest in criminology from scholars in IPE. Recently, though, a literature started to emerge within IPE that focusses on discipline, including research which focusses on ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ yet without explicitly engaging with the criminological literature. This paper engages with criminological research to demonstrate areas of shared interest, particularly in understanding the role of discipline and consent in the structuring of the ‘social ensemble’ thereby offering something of a corrective to the literature on ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’. We argue that combining insights from Gramscian and (critical) Feminist social theory can help to explain the social reproduction of ‘hegemony’ in which discipline – including self-discipline – plays an important role. Long-term trends in the fracturing of the hegemonic post-war social ensemble were displaced by temporary ‘fixes’ related to consumerism, credit and discipline (including in state institutions, changing economic and ideological structures). However, in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 – the limits of these fixes are revealed and social polarisation is the result. In this context, disciplinary processes in and beyond state institutions are becoming more visible.

# Keywords

Discipline, Critical Political Economy, Hegemony, Social Reproduction, Neoliberalism

# Introduction: Critical International Political Economy, Critical Criminology and Disciplinary Neoliberalism

Both co-authors hail from the home discipline of International Political Economy (IPE) and are now based in interdisciplinary departmental contexts that combine Social Policy and Criminology. Inspired by this experience, the topic of this special issue offers a vehicle to explore the potential contributions of IPE to Criminology. The ‘critical Criminology’ literature confirms that the path from Criminology to Political Economy is well trodden. But what of the reverse journey? Does travelling in the opposite direction from IPE toward crime/Criminology/social harm (or even ‘Zemiology’) reveal a slightly different perspective on the scenery that one passes?

For critical Criminologists and those who want to move ‘beyond criminology’, there is a great deal of commonality with the concerns of ‘critical’ IPE[[1]](#footnote-2) in particular (for an introduction, see Shields et al., 2011a). For example, critical Criminologists tend to see crime as a product of social inequality (Donnermeyer, 2012, p. 289; Hillyard & Tombs, 2007; Young, 1988), as a social construction related to the distribution of power in society; many critical Criminologists have been influenced in some way by Marxist scholarship, even if they would not define themselves as ‘Marxist’ (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2019, p. 4); and it is common to emphasise political economy factors (including within mainstream Criminology (Farrall et al., 2020) as influencing crime, penal responses to it (De Giorgi, 2007) and the distribution of ‘social harm’ (Canning & Tombs, 2021; Hillyard & Tombs, 2004; Pemberton, 2016; Reiner, 2019, p. 19). While critical IPE scholars are also concerned with inequalities in the distribution of resources, opportunities and harms, there has hitherto been relatively little engagement with crime. Recently, however a small number of authors have placed emphasis on social and state discipline as part of neoliberalisation (Bruff and Tansel, 2019; Elias & Rai, 2019; LeBaron & Roberts, 2010; Roberts, 2014, 2017).

A focus on ‘neoliberalism’ is also a common referent for understanding the way that ‘politics’ shapes social outcomes in ways that criminalise and direct state discipline towards specific sections of the population. These are shared concerns between critical Criminology and IPE. While the term ‘neoliberalism’ usually infers critique of the status quo and direction of political, economic and social reform (Venugopal, 2015) it is often used ambiguously (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). Several IPE authors have sought to bring greater clarity (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Gamble, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Overbeek & van der Pijl, 1993) with Brenner, Peck and Theodore having perhaps gone furthest. They focus on neoliberal*isation* as a process, arguing that a focus on a static end point adds to the confusion noted above. They define that process as “politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification” (2010, p. 184) which is also ‘variegated’ in that it is “a historically specific, unevenly developed, hybrid, patterned tendency of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring” (Peck *et al*., 2012, p. 169). The implications of this are that while neoliberalisation may have the common effect of redistributing power and resources upwards and towards financial interests in particular, the process is not the same in all places, or at all times. Travelling *via* this understanding of neoliberalisation to Criminology we argue that social discipline is central to the process and that discipline extends far beyond the remit of the criminal justice system or even state policy; it is embedded in a wider state-society complex or ‘social ensemble’. However, the features of that social discipline will be different for different people and follow varied trajectories in different places/times.

Some recent critical IPE literature has argued that there is a novel and general tendency towards ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff, 2014; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Tansel, 2017); a term used to “…highlight how contemporary capitalism is governed in a way which tends to reinforce and rely upon practices that seek to marginalize, discipline and control dissenting social groups and oppositional politics rather than strive for their explicit consent or co-optation” (Bruff & Tansel, 2019). This again suggests a shared concern between IPE and critical Criminology; where there is a particular emphasis on neoliberalism and post-Fordism as generating a push for the ‘penal’ or ‘carceral state’ to enforce discipline among marginal or surplus sections of the population (De Giorgi & Fleury-Steiner, 2017). That said, the interpretation that follows involves several important points of differentiation with these accounts: (1) we prefer the term ‘disciplinary neoliberalisation’ to the invocation of ‘authoritarianism’, (2) we see discipline as a *social* rather than merely a top-down aspect of the ‘narrow state’ or wider carceral state, transcarcerality (Lowman et al., 1987) or even ‘confinement’ (Foucault, 2003), (3) we do not share the notion that this is a recent phenomenon *per se*; but (4) empirical inquiry into the historical process of struggle around discipline is necessary to understand the more abstract conceptual framing, and (5) we see this discipline as not merely targeted at the ‘poor’ or marginal class factions but as a wider social phenomena affecting all sections of the population, albeit in vastly unequal ways.

First, on the perhaps trivial definitional point, we prefer to think about *disciplinary* as opposed to *authoritarian* neoliberalisation because the latter suggests a lack of concern with consent and the use of the criminal justice system to repress dissent. Here, we clearly take inspiration from Waquant’s (2009) seminal work whose insights into the dual processes of welfare reform and penal reform to regulate the poor under neoliberalisation help to show how the penal mode of regulation has become hegemonic.

Second, though, this is because we see discipline as a broader social phenomenon embedded partly in a politics of consent. Even Wacquant often reverted to an account of ‘punishing the poor’ which emphasised the direction of state instructions, albeit recognising penal or carceral agency beyond the criminal justice system. The work inspired by Foucault first on punishment and then on governmentality and biopower is helpful here, showing how governing structures extend into providing humans with security and subsistence through mechanisms of biopower and enabling their consent for disadvantageous outcomes (Moisander et al. 2007), as well as the popular interest in witnessing discipline and punishment as social phenomena. Moreover, as political economists, we would start from the economic discipline of market competition before considering the ways that this is augmented by the ‘extra-economic’ discipline of the state (Glassman, 2006). Further still, we see discipline also as a societal response to both state and market discipline in that sections of society explicitly support the extension of further discipline toward other people and social groups, as well as opting into it for themselves and their families. In these ways, it is not appropriate to regard discipline – including the definition of ‘crime’ and/or ‘deviant’ behaviour – as primarily a top-down function of authoritarianism but as a working through of the power relations embedded in the ever-changing ‘social ensemble’, of which the state is but one part (Bonefeld, 2016). The term ‘social ensemble’ helps to direct our attention to the way that society is constructed as ‘a whole’ rather than seeing neoliberalisation, increasing discipline, and so on, as the result of distinct agency in only one part of the whole (as ‘state directed’ etc). Rather it asks us to think more deeply about the ways in which discipline or neoliberalisation are social phenomena and how they are ‘hegemonic’ as opposed to merely imposed.

Third, the assertion that discipline is a *new* component of neoliberalisation is particularly perplexing. Thinking in progressively larger temporal frames, the political economy literature theorised neoliberalisation to be disciplinary from the outset (Gamble, 1979; Hall, 1985; Jessop et al., 1984). Some of the founding ideologues for what would become neoliberalisation – the German Ordoliberals - talked openly of the need to marry market ‘freedoms’ with strong state discipline (and even used the phrase ‘authoritarian liberalism’) as early as the 1930s (Bonefeld, 2012). Critical IPE literature also tends to regard both capitalism and the modern state themselves as inherently disciplinary (Bonefeld, 2016; Roberts, 2017) regardless of any temporal or spatial ‘varieties of capitalism’. The point was not lost on early Criminologists either (Rusche & Kirchheimer, 1939). This is significant because both critical IPE and critical Criminology often include an (at least implicit) emphasis on change away from Fordist social democracy as if this was the norm and neoliberalisation was somehow the aberrant phenomena to be theorised. We see neoliberalisation in large part as a return to ‘capitalism as normal’ and the post-war period as exceptional in that the geopolitics of the Cold War and the drive for post-WW2 reconstruction and recovery helped to create a form of international political economy that allowed an unusual period of social stability in ‘the West’. This common misreading of the relationship between Fordism and neoliberalisation is more curious because our understanding is that ‘Critical’ theory from Marx to the Frankfurt School tended to regard all processes of social organisation as to some extent disciplinary. Indeed, while his relationship to the ‘Critical Theory’ tradition may be somewhat problematic for some, Foucault’s (1975) account in *Discipline and Punishment* demonstrates that there is nothing new about the operation or spectacle of social discipline. Benhabib (2018) makes the general point concisely:

“Human mastery over [non human] nature came at the expense of internal repression; civilization was not a process of humanization but instead a dark development of repressing and disciplining the psyche that would then manifest itself in bursts of violent aggression toward those ‘others’ that are threatening the already fragile integrity of the civilised self.”

Fourth, while discipline *per se* is not new, we do agree that the specific character of that discipline is subject to contested processes of reproduction over time. Again, a commonality between critical IPE (Shields et al., 2011b) and critical criminologists is a shared antipathy toward empirical research, especially drawing on quantitative data (Young, 2011). For instance, Bruff and Tansel (2019) argue for a ‘political’ reading and object to ‘empiricist’ accounts of current disciplinary conditions. By contrast, we argue that the variegated, path dependent and dynamic nature of neoliberalisation means that the best way to understand these intersections is precisely through empirical investigation of the historical role discipline plays in the social ensemble; a summary version applied to the UK is what follows. We pick up the challenge of critical Criminologists (Canning & Tombs, 2021) keen to engage with wider social theory, to develop a theoretically informed empirical account of the ways that (including but not only state directed) discipline and co-option is evolving as a step toward contesting them. In the subsequent discussion we draw a link between discipline and the ‘social reproduction’ of the ‘hegemonic’ social ensemble. This is also where we add most explicitly to the critical Criminology literature, allowing for an empirical way to capture discipline beyond state enforced welfare and penal processes.

Finally, in our understanding discipline is not merely targeted at the poor, marginal or ‘surplus’ populations. By which we do not mean at all to contest that this targeting is present. Clearly, discipline *is* targeted *via* a range of state institutions including and beyond the criminal justice system at those who are either unable or unwilling to compete in the formal economy, with notable class and racial characteristics (De Giorgi, 2015). Prison and wider penal punishments are targeted at this group and the even wider ‘carceral mesh’ (Wacquant, 2001) of welfare, social work, schools and other institutions mean that penality is much wider than the Criminal Justice System. That carceral mesh also includes the public opprobrium of poverty porn, social media disgust and media commentary on the undeserving poor (Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2015). However, if being unable or unwilling to be an ideal competitive subject suited to the needs of the national economy is to call on this social discipline, to try (with varying degrees of success) to be that ideal subject is to willingly opt-in to social discipline (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, 2019). This presents itself very clearly in the ‘deferred pleasures’ of prolonged education and training, in the form of (credit fuelled) consumerism to satisfy status anxiety and the various incarnations of virtue signalling from social media behaviour through to the presentation of body image. In this sense, while the experience of discipline and its harms are vastly unequal, discipline itself is a universal social phenomenon.

After establishing some conceptual terms, we proceed to a historical discussion of structural change in the UK social ensemble which first helped to sustain hegemony, but which also had specific limits which are currently looming into view. We show that debt-fuelled consumerism helped to offset those limits for a while; effectively displacing them into the future, at the same time containing within it the discipline of credit. We then follow Nancy Fraser’s recent arguments that some aspects of that hegemonic compromise might now finally be unravelling and some emergent evidence in support of them. That said, rather than collapsing, we see the hegemonic compromise becoming more factional and disciplinary. In the conclusion we draw on Shilliam’s (2020) recent tantalising suggestion that contemporary campaigns to contest social discipline (e.g., ‘defund’ or ‘abolish’ the police/prisons) might learn from the unrealised potential of the abolition of slavery, to pose some questions about how the emancipatory intent of any social theory that prefaces itself with ‘critical’ might be advanced.

One important implication of this is to redirect our attention to the foundations of political, economic and disciplinary processes in the household and community. This is the key benefit of pursuing a critical IPE path toward Criminology rather than the other way around. Criminologists seeing the construction of crime, criminality and harm in political economy processes might look further still to the household and community. Seeing discipline as occurring in a wider range of forms and embedded in the inequalities and insecurities of social reproduction, encourages us to focus also on this site as a means of countering inequality, social harm and discipline. Perhaps by marshalling collective resources for alternative, more sustainable, cohesive and equitable social reproduction we might realise greater potential than either focussing on ‘the economy’ or ‘crime’ or even the political economy of crime and social harm.

# Coercion, Consent and the Social Reproduction of Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1971)[[2]](#footnote-3) sketched out a conceptualisation of ‘hegemony’ that shows why empirical historical analysis is necessary and provides a conceptual apparatus to understand the way that discipline operates both through the institutional structures of the state but also that this is just one part of the wider social ensemble. Starting with the problematic of explaining why fascism thrived in Germany and Italy instead of the socialist revolution that many Marxists expected to result from urbanisation and industrialisation, Gramsci placed more emphasis than had Marx on the role of culture and ideology in understanding the structure of the social ensemble. He focussed on an ‘expanded state’ and argued that the sorts of revolutionary tactics that had been employed by the Bolsheviks in Russia (where the state was everything) would not be successful in Western Europe. This was because West European state structures and capitalist social relations were more deeply embedded in their social ensemble; supported by a set of foundations in wider social institutions, ideological and cultural norms, and civil society. He argued that this represented a ‘hegemonic’ situation; in which the power relations of the status quo and the inequalities involved in it were hidden from view and widely understood as the natural order of things.

For Gramsci then, capitalist hegemony was widely embedded in the structure of society and held together by a mix of coercion and consent. Coercion was ever present, but often latent. Weaker – or ‘subaltern’ – social groups internalised self-discipline. A hegemonic compromise could be unequal and consensual, rather than authoritarian, but always disciplinary.

Furthermore, hegemony is constantly rearticulated and remade (Shields, 2021). Because remaking hegemony is not merely about coercion and dominance, and because it is at once an economic, political, cultural and ideological process (Cox, 1981), this is always complex and multi-faceted. It is important to track evolving social relations, the various ways that they are institutionalised in economic institutions such as labour, product and credit markets and state regulation of these markets through to a range of social policies. It is also important to understand how ideology must shift and evolve to legitimate and obfuscate the power relations inherent within that institutionalisation. Ideology here operates at multiple levels; from the relatively ephemeral trends in public opinion in favour of this or that policy, through to the more deeply embedded ideas that see relations of inequality (of class, gender, race or other) as part of the natural order. Zizek[[3]](#footnote-4) makes the point well when he speaks of these deeper ideational structures of hegemony, commenting that we collectively find it easier to envisage the end of the world than the end of capitalist social relations that have been in place for only a few hundred years.

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony remains useful to explore how social organisation works in practice across time and space. Feminist social theorists coined the term ‘social reproduction’ to capture the ongoing work of reproducing unequal power structures on a day-to-day and inter-generational basis. Social reproduction refers to the biological process of reproduction, the domestic labour of care and provisioning and also the ways in which social norms are transferred from one generation to the next (Steans and Tepe, 2010:809).

Convincingly, feminist work on social reproduction suggests that it is a process and site in the ongoing and contested reproduction of hegemony. Social reproduction is variegated and multi-scalar involving the reproduction of individual bodies and lives but also communities and national societies and involving interaction between the global and very micro-scale (Bakker, 2020; Bakker & Gill, 2019; Shields, 2021). It is spatially variegated in that different reproductive conditions pertain in path-dependent and contested ways in different places and it is a temporal process having different rhythms in the everyday and across generations.

The social reproduction of hegemony is always a disciplinary process in that there are different costs and benefits distributed to people and categories of people based on their gender, ethnicity, class, spatial location and so on (Elias & Rai, 2019). Feminist analyses of social reproduction have frequently shown how the challenge of reproducing a more competitive and productive national economy has involved the direction of state discipline at groups defined as problematic in this process, often including women and young people (Gillies, 2013). Social policy is intimately linked to criminal justice policy here (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, 2017). As Angela Davis (2016, p. 25) puts it: “…all over the world now the institution of the prison serves as a place to warehouse people who represent major social problems…” because they are seen as undermining social cohesion or competitiveness and therefore criminal justice serves as a foil for the failure of wider social policy: “…the prison serves as an institution that consolidates the state’s inability and refusal to address the most pressing social problems…” that are thrown up by its wider neoliberalising restructuring of the social ensemble. Davis may stretch the point here - there are variations in prison use globally and most countries incarcerate people who would be regarded as dangerous in most social contexts. But the point she makes about the expansion of the prison population to house people who are at the harsh end of ‘social harm’ in their lives prior to, during and after incarceration is persuasive.

# The Material Basis of Consensual Hegemony and limits to its Reproduction in Post-War Britain?

The successful attempt among political elites to negotiate a hegemonic social compromise at the end of WW2 rested on several factors, one of which was the gradual expansion of the ‘New Middle Class’ (NMC), generated by the growth of jobs in corporate administration and the expanding state. This NMC lived in improved housing[[4]](#footnote-5) and was able to benefit from consumerism, technology and the public services of the expanded state to make life demonstrably easier. Thus, the harsh edge of exploitation was smoothed by improving wages and generally (and noticeably) improving living standards. Yet, direct participation in this NMC was far from universal. Large-scale working-class communities, ethnic minorities and women were excluded. For example, most women’s class position was determined by their marriage and familial association with men. Given the lack of universality of the NMC, its significance for hegemony was its promise – in both class and gender terms.[[5]](#footnote-6) Here, even those that did not directly move into the NMC could look forward to a future in which they or their children *could* do so, shifting the responsibility for remaining inequalities to individuals. The overlap between race and class (Shilliam, 2018) is equally evident here, in that the reality of under-used skills and socio-economic hardship in one generation was often traded-off against the potential for subsequent generations to ‘do better’, especially among recent migrant communities. In this sense, politicians’ increasing preference for discussion of equality of opportunity made sense. The promise of social mobility became ingrained in the social reproduction of lives ever since, narratives told to children and central in public and private educational ideals. This promise is crucial to understanding the social reproduction of the consensual element of hegemony in the UK, and its limits. Here, self-discipline is strongly required not just in terms of accepting deferred material rewards but also to accept ‘Middle Class’ behavioural codes and norms, or what Bourdieu labelled ‘misrecognition’ (e.g. see Bowers-Brown, 2016, 2018) and ‘symbolic violence’ (Burke, 2017).

Of course, there were times in the immediate post-War era in which the smooth expansion of the NMC was interrupted, and it is noticeable that these coincided with weaknesses in the hegemonic compromise. Periods of enhanced insecurity among the NMC (Farrall et al., 2021) were met with increased state discipline, both through and outside of the criminal justice system (Farrall & Jennings, 2012). For example, the initial neoliberalising reform period from the early 1970s onwards saw a wavering of consent, illustrated by industrial discontent, rising crime, social violence (e.g., football hooliganism) and fear of crime (Farrall & Jennings, 2012). In response to failing consent[[6]](#footnote-7), the state became more visibly coercive, such as in the mobilisation of public fears around particular forms of crime and the quasi-militarised policing of industrial disputes, urban and ethnic minority communities in the 1980s (Hall *et al*., 1983).[[7]](#footnote-8) Discipline then was not just physically coercive but also economically and ideologically disciplinary, such as in the famed ‘cold bath’ labour policies[[8]](#footnote-9), public spending cuts and monetary policy which disproportionately affected heavily unionised manufacturing and public sector workforces (and related spatial communities) (Coates, 1994; Gamble, 1990; Hutton, 1995), or the narratives of demonising ‘scroungers’, hooligans and ‘failures’ (Morris, 1994).

The state also responded through new strategies to broker consent, relative to the material promise of the NMC. Jettisoning the notion of ‘one-nation’ conservatism, the Thatcher government sought instead a two-nation state; of those willing to make the jump to the new property-owning individualism and those unwilling or unable to do so. While the latter were subject to both economic and state discipline, the former were offered material incentives in service-sector industries, tax breaks and incentives to purchase their own homes for the first time, though of course some of this meant consensually accepting the discipline of long-term debt. Similarly, the New Labour government which emerged from the weakening consent of the early to mid-1990s, worked hard to establish a new politics of consent, aware of the risks of letting coercive control become too dominant. Confronting what had become structural unemployment (Figure 2B) and financial insecurities for those who had opted in to Thatcher’s property owning democracy (Figure 2C shows the spike in mortgage repossessions for instance), they attempted to draw greater sections of the population into the supportive neoliberal coalition *via* programmes of support for targeted groups of the unemployed (in the various ‘New Deals’[[9]](#footnote-10)), Area Based Initiatives in the most deprived communities and significant increases in public spending on health and education in particular. The party focussed its social inclusion agenda on extending banking and credit in ‘financial inclusion’, extending the privatisation of public housing in new forms, and extended a message of ‘education, education, education’. Work was the preferred route out of poverty (e.g., the ‘Welfare to Work’ agenda (see Nunn and Johnson, 2008)), limits on low pay and stealth redistribution to those who managed this (in work tax credits[[10]](#footnote-11)) helped to strengthen the financial incentives (Nunn, 2014). Again, buying into New Labour’s support for meritocracy meant accepting the self-discipline of striving for entry to, or progress within, the NMC.

Wide-ranging disciplinary initiatives continued however, for those unwilling or unable to grasp new ladders of opportunity. This included continued support for tough policing, new legal instruments to regulate public space such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and welfare conditionality that would be gradually tightened from the early 2000s in a continuous arc to the current roll-out of Universal Credit. Social programmes began to increasingly target those families and communities deemed problematic for their lack of aspiration and self-discipline to join the NMC. Area Based Initiatives focussed in on very specific individuals and communities using very fine-grained data – such as that provided to Sure Start[[11]](#footnote-12) Centres and schools to identify specific families and resulted in Family Intervention Projects (Parr & Nixon, 2008) that would be the forerunner to the Tories’ widely criticised Troubled Families Programme (Crossley & Lambert, 2017).[[12]](#footnote-13)

# Papering over the Cracks in the Social Reproduction of Hegemony

If the growth in the NMC provided the material base for the reproduction of hegemony, albeit punctuated by periods of crisis, it is also true that this material basis has been eroding as a direct result of neoliberalisation. This has been bound up in increased international competitiveness (Figure 2A illustrates the way that UK productivity has fallen over the period of neoliberalisation), declining material rewards for a position in the NMC (see Figure 1A for long term wages) and again targeted discipline for those unable or unwilling to enter the NMC.

First, the growth of the NMC has run alongside a range of changes such as offshoring, de-industrialisation and a shift toward the service sector. This involved a complex distribution of reward and harm. Men benefited initially from the expansion of professional service sector work. Women also benefitted materially from increased paid employment but also from changing roles in the home. But neither set of benefits were on an equal basis to men; they have continued to suffer from considerable (if narrowing) gender pay gaps and from the ‘double’ and even triple burden of paid employment, disproportionate domestic responsibilities, and care work. These factors have also increased competition within professional and managerial occupations and caused widespread casualisation of service sector employment outside of them. Casualisation is increasingly also penetrating the professional and managerial occupations. Overall, the neoliberalisation of the labour market has led to a decreasing wage share of overall economic output and falling household earnings (especially after the 2008 GFC) (see Figure 1A and C) and combined with increased female labour market participation and assortative mating, a concomitant increase in inter-household inequality (see Figure 1B). As these changes took hold, the NMC became increasingly stratified (Green & Owen, 2003; Halsey et al., 1980; Heath & Payne, 1999) as labour market rewards (Goos & Manning, 2003) and security polarized (Gallie, 1998, 2002).

Second, recent studies show that the growth of the NMC may be nearing its completion in the UK (Goldthorpe, 2004) and that upward absolute mobility will be more difficult in the future (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). In fact, there is now evidence of growing downward intergenerational mobility for some young workers from professional family backgrounds (about 21% of men and 24% of women) (The Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Younger people are finding it harder to enter secure professional employment, despite having accepted the self-discipline of extended education and are increasingly affected by casualization, especially following the rise in youth unemployment after the GFC (Hills et al., 2015).

These factors might understandably have an impact on self-perceived insecurities. This is especially so given the nature of the discipline experienced by those outside of the NMC. De-industrialisation, increased precarity, reduced Employment Protection Legislation, and increased economic competitiveness have resulted in a cheapening of the labour market outside of the NMC, illustrated in an upward trend in the proportion of the population experiencing relative poverty (see Figure 1D). There is also an increased disciplinary rhetoric and practice toward those in poverty, born partly out of the development of neoliberalised sensibilities among ‘Thatcher’s Children’ (Farrall, Gray, Jones, et al., 2021; Farrall et al., 2020; Grasso et al., 2019), egged on by punitive political rhetoric (Nunn, 2014) welfare and penal reform (Bambra & Eikemo, 2009).

All this might indicate tensions in the hegemonic order, but several factors have helped to ‘paper over the cracks’. One example is increased household debt (Froud et al., 2010; Montgomerie, 2006, 2007) (see Figure 2D) which has helped to ensure that declining real wages have not interrupted consumption. Increased indebtedness has also enabled some NMC households to provide for their own long-term security through asset accumulation (Seabrooke, 2010), though at the expense of other younger/poorer households, (Montgomerie & Young, 2010; Nunn, 2016), undermining intergenerational social cohesion.

Figure 1: Selected Economic Indicators of Poverty and Inequality



Source: Compiled from A: ONS Time Series (DTWM/YBHA); B-D: IFS Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK Database (GB Data).

Figure 2: Productivity change, Unemployment Rate, Mortgage Arrears and Repossessions and Total Household Debt



Source: A: ONS TimeSeries LNNP; B: Labour Force Survey Series LF2Q and MGWY; C: Council of Mortgage Lenders and Ministry of Justice; D: ONS Time Series NNPP and YBHA, Current Prices.

Figure : British Social Attitudes Survey Data on Attitudes to Inequality and Government Action

Graphical user interface, chart, line chart

Description automatically generated

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1983-2019, Percentages are those who strongly or agree with the statement. NB the question for Panel D. changed in 2015 to remove the statement ‘…. Even if it creates higher taxes’.

# Is Hegemony Collapsing now?

The obvious problem with relying on the construction of consent through possessive individualism and self-discipline, undergirded by debt, consumerism and a particular position in the global economy, is that all aspects of this compromise are finite. In the wake of the GFC of 2007/08 there was no shortage of evidence about the resulting fragmentation of the hegemonic social compromise. Both the European Social Survey and the Eurobarometer demonstrated failing confidence and trust in political institutions including international organisations like the European Union and national governments in the wake of the crisis. Waves of protest with different proximal causes erupted such as *Occupy*, the *Indignados* or the *Arab Spring* (e.g. Charnock et al. 2012). The subsequent rise of populism, with ethno-nationalist undertones and (ironically) cross national connections, the Trump presidency, Brexit and its aftermath are also easily read as surface level manifestations of fragmenting consent and social division (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Shields, 2021).

It has become quite common place to speak of ‘Zombie’ neoliberalism, fatally wounded but staggering on regardless. Fraser (2017) offers an interesting way of thinking about the rival political movements that have accompanied these ‘morbid symptoms’. She argues that there is a weakening of popular satisfaction with distributional and representative justice which forms the core of any hegemonic social ensemble. The specific mechanism for securing this under ‘progressive neoliberalisation’ was, she argued, meritocracy as an apparent pathway into a position in the NMC. Her point here is that the rewards for self-discipline are breaking down and rival populisms of left (e.g., Corbyn, Momentum, supporters of Bernie Sanders) and right (e.g., Brexiteers, Trump supporters and a range of ethno-nationalist groups globally) were the direct result of this.

These weaknesses in hegemony and the inability of governments to respond to them to broker consent is illustrated by a range of different survey data. The British Social Attitudes Survey suggests there are sustained concerns about inequality (Figure 3A) and poverty and that poverty may increase into the future (Figure 3B). Similarly, repeat cross-sectional surveys on inequalities using a representative national sample show several consistent trends. A large majority – roughly 80% of people think that there is a large gap between social classes (Social Mobility Commission, 2019, 2020, 2021). Between 40-50% of people think that it is getting harder to ‘move up’ in society, with concerns being particularly pronounced among young people. Just under half of the population thinks that parental background is the main determination of life chances (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Job security is a particularly widespread concern, with only 13% of people thinking this has improved for those born after 1980. Additionally, Farrall *et al*.’s survey (2021) shows that nostalgia for a more stable past is related to fear of crime, itself an expression of wider anxiety about social change, and most acutely felt by working class communities negatively affected by economic change.

Public opinion may just reflect reality on these matters, but it is important for the question of hegemonic consent that insecurities are subjectively understood. Research (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2021; Duffy et al., 2021; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020) suggests a link between populism and self-recognition of low status. Farrall *et al.’s* (2020) survey data suggest that being ‘left behind’ by economic change may be fuelling dissatisfaction with the material rewards of neoliberalisation, especially for those whose position in the NMC is insecure, or who have failed to access it.

So, inequalities, insecurities and experiences of economic restructuring have a strong influence on political consent. But dissatisfaction with the level of inequality and status discontent have not shaken some neoliberal beliefs; especially regarding overt discipline for *other* *people* or the willingness to accept the self-discipline of competition. This is also causally associated with whether people have managed secure entry to the NMC; those outside or on the margins are more fearful, nostalgic (Farrall *et al*., 2021) and that nostalgia is linked to support for discipline (Farrall, *et al*., 2020). The same survey research that identifies dissatisfaction with inequality in the UK does not neatly suggest clear cut support for action. Despite charting long-term concerns with inequality, the BSA also highlights declining support for government redistribution (Figure 3C and D). Duffy et al. (2021) suggest continuing strong normative support for hard work, aspiration and education in determining the chances of ‘getting ahead’. This even extends to health and life expectancy with 93% of people identifying lifestyle choices and 86% parenting as determining this. Less than 50% overall support economic redistribution. Despite support for some of the UK government’s Coronavirus measures (principally furlough), the survey suggests that 47% think that individual performance shaped whether people lost their job in the pandemic. Roughly 25% contest the significance of racial inequalities, even if they become more pronounced. The Covid-19 pandemic also appears to have reduced key measures of perceived social cohesion (trust in others, whether people support one another and get along, whether people feel like others) for all groups but for those in deprived areas, low qualifications and ethnic minorities this change was even greater (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021). It is difficult not to draw the view from this data, that despite dissatisfaction with the extant outcomes of neoliberalisation, the popular response is for more of the same individualising, responsibilising and disciplinary change.

Moreover, aside from political and social *beliefs*, when *behaviours* are considered there is little sense of a collapse in the hegemony of disciplinary neoliberalisation, and it is notable that structural and policy reform create behavioural incentives which further ‘lock-in’ or ‘compound’ competitive individualism. While voting behaviour may move around on short-term dynamics, the electoral realignments associated first with the birth of New Labour and then the reorientation of some working-class support to the Conservative party is illustrative of behavioural preferences for both discipline and individualism. Moreover, state retrenchment is associated with asset building behaviours to provide long-term individual, household and family protection, principally in relation to housing assets (Seabrooke, 2010). This reinforces the state’s attempts to promote housing acquisition but also reinforces inequalities between those who remain able and those who are not able to buy their own (and additional) home(s), with consequences for political polarisation (Hadziabdic & Kohl, 2021). Similarly, the long-term decline in Trade Union membership might easily be linked to increased preferences for promoting individually competitive behaviours, and that this spreads through the social structure. For instance, in some of our recent research we found that parental attitudes to promoting hard work at school, supporting children with homework and promoting higher education were all very similar throughout the class structure for the cohort of children born in 2000, even if the cultural and material resources to enact these preferences were unequal across class and income (Farrall *et al*., Forthcoming). Other evidence shows marked increases in the use of private and additional tutoring; again an indicator of competitive individualism and self-discipline (Jerrim, 2017).

Finally, data on long-term consumer and mortgage credit all indicate increased household indebtedness across the income distribution (albeit with fluctuations at crisis points, including during the 2020-1 pandemic).[[13]](#footnote-14) Again, this rising household debt is an indicator of accepting the further discipline of credit in order to cope with the extant effects of market discipline (in the form of falling real wage shares, poverty or inequality) or competition to secure relative social status associated with consumer goods (LeBaron & Roberts, 2010; Roberts, 2014; Roberts & Soederberg, 2014). Either way, the effect is to volunteer for additional market-based discipline. ‘Consent’ may be contingent here, but the effects are to double down on existing iniquitous and disciplinary social trends generating compound inequalities (Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, 2019). Everyone strives, but some are more able to strive successfully, increasing the harms of failure and adding further incentives to continue these disciplinary and neoliberalising behaviours.

The result of all this then may not be collapsing hegemony, but its fracturing into a more disciplinary social ensemble with a potentially ever stronger role for the penal state (Wacquant 2009), and reinforcing voluntary resort to disciplinary mechanisms such as individual responsibility and indebtedness to cope or compete in an unequal structure. Once again this reminds us that the historical epoch of post-War Fordist social democracy is the exception rather than the rule of capitalist social relations. Hegemony does not need universal consent to operate, and it appears from the data above that disciplinary neoliberal beliefs are widely embedded in the social ensemble. Consent in this sense is itself bound up in social discipline, and disciplinary behaviours.

# Conclusion

Much is to be gained from a deepened engagement between researchers in critical IPE and critical Criminology, and while the latter have been keen to take up a political economy analysis, the former have been reluctant to engage with issues of crime and discipline. The discussion above shows that one fruitful prospect for such an engagement is an improved understanding of the evolution of social discipline, broadly understood in Gramscian terms, rather than merely the operation of either the criminal justice system or ‘institutionalised violence’ (Cooper & Whyte, 2017). Those who would like to go further ‘beyond criminology’ might find that there is a whole tradition of research already focussed on the social reproduction of harmful inequalities in critical IPE.

The discussion above shows the way that discipline is inherent in capitalist social organisation and adds to the specificity of how disciplinary neoliberalisation might be understood. Importantly, and in a friendly rejoinder to the idea of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ we do not see this as a purely top-down authoritarian process, but one in which discipline is socially embedded, widely accepted and imposed in social structures beyond the state, as well as through institutionalised violence. While we take issue with the idea that there is a specifically *new* disciplinary turn underway, we do think that unfolding tensions in hegemony are likely to mean that discipline is reproduced in new ways.

Finally, some of those interested in moving ‘beyond criminology’ have articulated a normative desire for research-activism to actively contest neoliberalisation. While broadly supportive of this normative commitment, we would caution against the naivety of thinking this can be realised through pressing for ‘less harmful forms of capitalism’ (Pemberton, 2016, p. 8). Capitalist social organisation is always disciplinary and harmful, and the trajectory of change is not purely a function of state policies but is located in deeper political economy trends. We suggest a return to Fordist social democracy, is unlikely, and note both its historical and geographical exceptionalism.

Shilliam recently (2020) illustrated the reasons for such caution when engaging with contemporary calls for the ‘abolition’ of policing and prisons (e.g. Purnell, 2021) from the historical standpoint of the abolition of transatlantic slavery. Focussing on the abolition of formal slavery, instead of also recognising wider processes of servitude, meant that ‘abolition’ might have done away with particularly harmful legal categories, but it left deep and harmful inequalities in place, which remain to this day. We hope that the discussion of discipline in the context of the social reproduction of hegemony provides something of a starting point for identifying where shared research agendas between critical IPE and Criminology might move to search for more advantageous opportunities for social change. Shilliam’s conclusion was that it was in the shared ownership of socially reproductive resources (in his case the ‘proving ground’ that many slave communities in the Caribbean and North America depended on for self-provisioning) rather than just changes in legal status that the emancipatory potential of abolition rested. The parallel of the ‘proving ground’ in the context of this essay, is the collective resources that are, and might be, marshalled in favour of more equitable processes of social reproduction. Refocussing both IPE and crime analysis toward the way the national and global economy are embedded in the foundations of household and community social reproduction in the everyday, and across generations would yield quite a different set of goals for both economic and criminal justice policy.

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1. A full discussion of disciplinary labels, boundaries and their meaning is beyond the scope of this paper and hotly contested. For the purposes of this paper the discipline of critical IPE is distinguished from Political Economy in the sense of the former being heavily influenced in the 1970s and 80s by Gramscian understandings of the shift from Keynesism and Fordism to ‘neo-liberalism’ and Post-Fordism, which have subsequently been added to by Feminist, Constructivist and Post-Colonial theory and a recent tendency to see the ‘international’ or ‘global’ political economy as domestically embedded at the state and sub-state (in communities and households) scale. Political Economy is a challenging label as it calls forth ‘classical’ theory from Locke, Smith, Mill, Riccardo etc forward and some would also include Marx and then the ‘Marginalist’ turn which now characterises modern economics. However, the sub-title of Marx’s master work – Capital – was of course a ‘critique of political economy’. There is therefore an ongoing foundational debate about the meaning and borders of ‘political economy’. This is also the case for IPE, especially following a bad-tempered engagement over the proposition of a ‘Trans-Atlantic Divide’ in the nature of theory and methods in IPE, but the term ‘critical IPE’ does denote a general agreement over the field of study that the two authors were trained in. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Given the topic of this paper, the irony that Gramsci produced this knowledge while subject to incarceration for political dissent, should not be ignored. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. He makes this comment in the film *A Perverts Guide to Ideology*, but the broader argument about eschatology, misplaced optimism about linear time and the availability of solutions to calamitous problems such as climate change, and the need for critical agency against capital is also made in the (2009) *First as Tragedy and Then As Farce*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Post-War period saw many UK cities be subject to slum clearances and major public housing building projects to create large scale housing estates, with minimum standards such as sanitary provision and space, gardens or outdoor space and local facilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The promise was not inclusive in racial terms. Indeed, the induced migration of the 1950s and 60s was partly necessitated by the ‘upward mobility’ of some members of the working class into the NMC, creating labour shortages in working class occupations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. And it is noted that the Thatcher government did not just respond to this failing consent but actively sought to provoke it, for instance stockpiling coal in advance of confronting the NUM. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Thatcher government was particularly concerned with law and order and used state powers decisively in several symbolic industrial disputes such as the 1982-3 Miner’s Strike. There was also a process of harsh policing of urban estates and minority ethnic communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. E.g. Privatisation of nationalised industries and the use of Monetary policy to create unemployment, with the intended effect that this would adjust wages downwards to make the UK labour market more internationally competitive. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. A small number of area based regeneration projects (New Deal for Communities) and a range of Active Labour Market Programmes directed at particular social groups (e.g. New Deal for … Lone Parents/Young People/Disabled People etc). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. A system of providing income transfers to low paid working families, mainly where they had children. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. A major public policy intervention to improve the lives of young children, first in deprived areas. Some of the background ideas were drawn from Scandinavian family support and childcare provision but the approach was more similar to Head Start programmes in the US. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Family Intervention Projects and Troubled Families Programme were social work projects designed to intervene decisively in families deemed to cause problems in local areas (Hargreaves et al, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See the Bank of England’s Monthly ‘Money and Credit’ release (<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/money-and-credit/2021/august-2021>) and also its longer term data on Household debt (<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/statistics/visual-summaries/household-credit>), last accessed 20-10-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)