



Neoliberalism is a pervasive ideological formation that reshapes how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others. Photo: TUCHONG

By WANG JUNMEI

Since the latter half of the 20th century, neoliberalism has profoundly reshaped the global political and economic landscape while securing a prominent place in academic debate. Its supporters have presented it as a “truth” that safeguards individual freedom, stimulates market vitality, and advances globalization. Its critics, meanwhile, argue that it has exacerbated social inequality and even generated recurring crises. In interviews with *CSST*, scholars traced the theoretical development of neoliberalism, examined its practical manifestations in different contexts, and discussed the profound challenges it faces in the contemporary world—as well as its possible future trajectory.

A complex fusion of ideas and practices

Joseph Cohen, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Queens College, City University of New York, told *CSST* that the term “neoliberalism” signaled the beginning of a new period in Western societies, one in which governments were expected to relinquish control over the economy. He described neoliberalism as an ideology—a system of beliefs about how society should formulate economic policy. It was particularly influential in the 1980s and 1990s but has since entered a prolonged decline.

Cohen divided the development of neoliberalism into two stages. The first, extending roughly from the 1970s through the 1990s, was less overtly ideological. During this period, Western governments increasingly concluded that established systems of governance were

no longer working and mounted a vigorous critique of the traditional belief that the state should take charge of everything and exercise comprehensive control over the economy and society.

In the subsequent stage, discussion of neoliberalism shifted. What had begun as a largely technocratic debate over particular policy reforms developed into a broader ideological claim that the free market could solve virtually every social problem. This version of neoliberalism was highly political and became especially prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

“Neoliberalism is often used to refer to a complex and diverse combination of ideas, practices, and historical developments,” said Antonio Cerella, a senior lecturer in social and political studies at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. In his view, neoliberalism should not be understood solely as a doctrine, a set of policies, or a particular historical period. More broadly, it is a pervasive ideological formation that reshapes how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others.

The inherent limitations of market mechanisms

Kean Birch, a professor from the Department of Science, Technology and Society at York University in Canada, described “market rule” as neoliberalism’s central principle: the belief that markets are the best mechanism for managing society, wherever people may live.

Yet the broad imposition of market logic gives rise to numerous social contradictions, Birch observed. Beneath

The crisis, logical deconstruction, and future direction of neoliberalism

them lies a more fundamental problem. A market-based society would require people to negotiate and continually renegotiate every transaction—and therefore every contractual relationship. If all human interactions were treated as market exchanges, the time and effort required to negotiate, monitor, and enforce them would quickly become unmanageable. Markets alone therefore cannot sustain social life. People also depend on institutions and relationships such as trust, friendship, and family.

Cerella argued that neoliberalism’s commitment to “market supremacy” rests on a set of highly restrictive assumptions—perfect information, effective competition, and equality of opportunity—conditions rarely, if ever, realized in practice. More fundamentally, neoliberalism tends to naturalize inequality by portraying it as the legitimate outcome of fair competition on an ostensibly level playing field. The apparent equality it promises is, in reality, underpinned by structural inequality.

The claim that markets reward merit obscures entrenched disparities in access to resources, education, and social capital, Cerella continued. These internal tensions are not incidental but constitutive. Neoliberalism reconciles its normative commitment to equality with observable inequality by assigning responsibility for the latter to individuals, thereby concealing the systemic conditions that reproduce it.

“Neoliberalism cannot intrinsically or automatically generate greater prosperity for all,” Cerella said. On the contrary, the supremacy of the market often translates into the supremacy of elites and concentrated economic power. In the United States, for example, recent data on inequality indicates that the top 1% receive approximately one-fifth of total national income.

Such concentration is not accidental. Once economic power becomes heavily concentrated, it tends to shape the political system as well—particularly where elected officials depend on donors, lobbying networks, and major corporate interests. From this perspective, Cerella explained, the global rise of neoliberalism was driven not only by intellectual persuasion but also by the institutional power of states,

international financial organizations, and transnational elites, which promoted market liberalization, privatization, and deregulation as universal solutions.

The displacement and hidden persistence of the neoliberal crisis

The 2008 global financial crisis is widely regarded as the culmination of neoliberalism’s mounting contradictions. More than a decade later, however, the tension between financial regulation and market freedom has not been resolved, Cerella argued. It has merely been displaced and temporarily obscured.

Birch noted that the financial reforms and restructuring introduced after the crisis—particularly international efforts intended to reinforce financial-market stability—have themselves contributed to a series of continuing crises.

One major development following the global financial crisis was the rise of Big Tech, especially Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Google. These corporations took advantage of inexpensive capital to invest heavily in digital technologies and establish monopolistic positions across numerous markets. At the same time, investors began shifting substantial amounts of capital from public to private markets, fueling the emergence of a new generation of technology “unicorns.”

As a result, Birch argued, post-crisis financial re-regulation has weakened competitive market dynamics. It has made companies that pursue market dominance and undermine competition increasingly attractive to investors.

Birch further noted that governments responded to the global financial crisis with extensive bailout programs for financial institutions and markets. The resulting expenditures produced large budget deficits, which were then followed by austerity policies that damaged living standards and employment prospects for much of the population.

Some scholars interpret the subsequent rise of right-wing populism in Western countries as a displacement or externalization of the neoliberal crisis. Cerella broadly agreed but argued that the recent populist wave should be understood not merely as a displacement of neoliberalism’s crisis, but as one of its most direct political consequences.

Reexamining neoliberalism’s deep logic

Some scholars contend that neoliberalism is approaching its end. But what might succeed it?

Cerella argued that this question cannot be answered without first clarifying what is meant by “neoliberalism.” Economic policies may change, while doctrines may evolve or even be formally abandoned. From the perspective of social and political science, however, the more pressing concern lies elsewhere: in the individual subjectivities and collective imaginaries shaped by decades of what might be called “actually existing” neoliberalism.

Even if neoliberalism recedes as a policy paradigm, its deeper imprint on social life is likely to persist. It has not merely reorganized institutions; it has also transformed how individuals understand themselves—as entrepreneurial actors, as bearers of human capital, and as competitors operating within a generalized market logic. This transformation cannot easily be reversed through changes in economic governance alone.

“I gradually came around to the view that we have never been neoliberal,” Birch said. Markets were never comprehensively installed throughout society. Instead, governments and social groups partially introduced market-like mechanisms while experimenting with new forms of statecraft.

Most of these experiments, however, ultimately became subsidies or other forms of support for businesses, contributing in particular to the growth of monopolistic control. In this sense, neoliberalism facilitated a massive shift toward monopoly rather than the liberation of markets. It has enabled corporations to expand their control over the assets and resources of society, including social assets, land, and infrastructure.

In the present circumstances, Cerella concluded, emerging post-neoliberal models may offer partial remedies—whether they emphasize ecological sustainability, stronger public institutions, or more egalitarian and cooperative forms of redistribution. Their viability, however, will ultimately depend on their ability to reshape not only public policy but also the ethical and cultural foundations of social life.

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On one hand, it creates a tiered oversight and management mechanism, explicitly assigning responsibilities at four levels to balance collective governance, team-based control, and individual self-discipline. At the first level, research management units bear primary institutional responsibility. At the second, project leaders and organizers of academic activities are responsible for oversight. At the third, academic advisors perform a supervisory role, while at the fourth, individual users bear lifelong primary responsibility for their own use of AI—the most central and direct level of accountability.

On the other hand, issuing restrictive provisions without adequate supporting

measures could easily leave researchers with the impression that the Norms impose limitations without providing assistance. This could foster reluctance and ultimately hinder the adoption of human-AI collaborative research models. The Norms therefore devote an entire chapter to support services, addressing six areas intended to help researchers use AI confidently, competently, and effectively.

First, the Norms support the development of infrastructure for AI-assisted research, including an integrated innovation platform combining computing power, algorithms, data, models, and security. Second, they support innovation in research evaluation mechanisms centered on research teams, encouraging the use of AI to produce high-quality

interdisciplinary outputs. Third, they promote the integrated development of “AI plus disciplines,” strengthen emerging interdisciplinary fields such as digital humanities and computational social science, while advancing the digital and intelligent transformation of traditional disciplines. Fourth, they support the development of high-quality databases and case repositories for philosophy and the social sciences, encouraging open sharing within secure and controllable parameters. Fifth, they support collaborative AI-assisted research projects across institutions, disciplines, and fields, including the development of specialized models for particular academic domains. Sixth, they support the establishment of curricula and instructional materials for AI-assisted

research in philosophy and the social sciences, with the aim of cultivating composite talent equipped with both humanistic literacy and AI expertise.

Exploring new paradigm for AI-assisted research

Tang emphasized that AI technology is developing rapidly, while regulatory and auditing mechanisms for AI-assisted research remain at an exploratory stage both in China and abroad. It would therefore be unrealistic to attempt to establish a rigid and permanent set of rules at this point. The present Norms represent only the beginning of CASS’s exploration of AI-assisted research. Their long-term goal, he said, is to unleash vitality, establish clear rules, and put new

research paradigms into practice.

Looking ahead, Tang said that CASS will revise the Norms in close alignment with national legislation and evolving policies on AI governance, dynamically monitor their implementation, and continue refining their content. He added that CASS will also engage actively with the broader national philosophy and social sciences community to solicit feedback, working toward the gradual establishment of unified standards for AI-assisted research across Chinese academia.

CASS’s goal extends beyond simply regulating the use of AI tools. With the Norms as an institutional foundation, it will continue exploring new forms of academic research suited to the intelligent era, Tang added.