

The ideal-typical transition from Fordism to post-Fordism: A  
neopositivist problem setting

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By  
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**Abstract:**

*The present article discusses a fundamental argument of a series of regulation approaches. Although regulation approaches are heterogeneous, both in their premises and in their analytical instruments, this relatively common argument describes a shift at the level of the economy, the state and the organization of work: from Fordism to post-Fordism and from Keynesianism to neoliberalism. Despite the influence of this argument in economic and social theory and despite its contribution to recent debates about neoliberalization and the crisis of the welfare state, this transition also sets some methodological limitations presented in this article.*

**Keywords:** *Fordism, post-Fordism, Keynesianism, neoliberalism*

**JEL Classification:** D20, D23

## 1. Introduction

During the last decades regulation theories have radically dominated the agenda of economic and social theory and have provided a number of conceptualizations concerning the changes and transitions of the relation between state and economy. Under the influence of economic internationalization and of the consequent political interdependence caused by the opening of global markets, specific transitions are being analyzed; at the economic level, the transition from industrial Fordism of mass production and mass consumption to post-Fordism of “flexible” work forms and of the third sector; at the political level, the transition from the national, Keynesian, intervening welfare state to the post national, neoliberal, entrepreneurial state.

Despite the differences within the regulation approach, there is a broad consensus over the instrumentalization of the ideal types of Fordism, post-

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Fordism, Keynesianism and neoliberalism. This article attempts to discuss its contribution to comprehending recent sociopolitical changes.

## 2. Fordism and post-Fordism

Regulation approaches have broadened the concept of Fordism. Fordism is no more conceptualized like it used to be by traditional industrial sociology. It does not merely describe the factory system of the “assembly line” introduced by Henry Ford at the auto manufacturing company in 1914 at Highland Park and in 1926 at River Rouge (for the history of Fordism from 1920 until 1950 see Pietrykowski 1995). Also, it does not merely imply simply the modernization of the factory’s organizational structure like suggested by Frederick Winslow Taylor in *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911.

Fordism constitutes an ideal type that describes an overall mode of mass production and intensification of productivity. According to Joachim Hirsch (2000: 28), Fordism was an answer to the international crisis of 1929-30, lasted until the Middle 1950s and was related to a state management of demand and to a number of fiscal and consumption policies guided by the welfare state. Similarly, Bob Jessop (1992: 53) classifies four dimensions of Fordism: labour process, regime of accumulation, mode of regulation and mode of societalization. Furthermore, Jessop (1992: 57) combines Fordism with a wage relation, in which wages are indexed to productivity growth and inflation, a central role for the state in managing demand and state policies which help to generalize mass-consumption norms. These characteristics are also combined with Taylorist organizational methods (decadence of modes of production based on manufacture, “scientification” of work, vocational training, polarization between specialized and non-specialized work, productivity bonus, surveillance in work places, intensification of specialization etc.).

In this frame, Mark Elam classifies three major post-Fordist perspectives, the neo-Schumpeterian, the neo-Smithian and the neo-Marxist. The neo-Schumpeterian approach departs from Schumpeter’s reworking of the Kondratiev’s notion of economic development through “long waves”. While neo-Schumpeterian approaches conceptualise the post-Fordist era as “fifth Kondratiev”, neo-Smithian approaches classify post-Fordism to the “second industrial divide” after a period of Fordist mass production. Neo-Marxist approaches emphasize on the concepts of capitalist regulation, regimes of accumulation and modes of regulation and examine the chances of each different phase of capital accumulation for stabilisation in society (for a detailed overview of the three post-Fordist approaches see Elam 2000: 30-60).

Fordism was neither homogeneously implemented from country to country, nor can it be commonly dated, for the specific geo-economic conditions in the countries of Atlantic Fordism (USA, Northwestern Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) differed. However, there is a relative broad consensus about the crisis of Fordism. This crisis by the end of 1960s and through the oil crisis of 1973 signals the ideal-typical transition to the post-Fordist era and to

“flexibilization” of work, to deindustrialization, to informationalism and the knowledge-based economy.

Keynesianism reflected the political regulation of Fordism and had its greatest influence in two historical phases. The first one was during the years of the Great Depression (1929-1933), while the second began after World War II (1945) and lasted until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Great Depression led to extreme pauperism great parts of the population in industrially developed countries, notably the USA, Germany and Great Britain. The American economy underwent, during those years, a severe economic crisis, leading to Roosevelt’s “New Deal” (1933-1938). A number of acute social and economic problems, especially massive unemployment, deflation and a persistent decline in industrial production would have to be resolved through public spending. In this framework, Keynesian economic ideas stretching the dysfunctionality of Laissez faire were prioritised (see Hobsbawm 1995).

Keynesianism provided for the substitution of a partially state-administered economy for the inefficient unregulated order. This would suffice for the achievement of such desirable goals, as sustainable economic growth, eradication of involuntary unemployment and a boost in aggregate demand. Cases conceived as market failures were to be dealt with expansionary fiscal and monetary policy and centrally dictated price controls. Additionally, whilst in classical economics income inequality is viewed as a structural, thus inevitable part of a liberal economy, a condition sine qua non for a well-functioning competitive market, for Keynes this view neglected incurring side effects on the potential of a wide range of the populace to consume. Governmental measures and interference were in this context necessary, in order to ensure the continuation of mass capitalist production, by means of high aggregate demand based on consumption. The concept of state interventionism through public expenditure and credit expansion became again influential after World War II. The restructuring of wrecked, post-war Europe included a series of economic initiatives inciting financial cooperation between the USA and non-communist Europe for the sake of stabilising the world economy and developing new opportunities for free trade. Bretton Woods Agreement (1944) ratified an international monetary system, which would regulate the new economic order and give an impetus to post-war cooperation. International organizations were created in order to guarantee peaceful and consensual economic relations in the new international environment. The organizations thenceforth established were the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the International Trade Organization (ITO).

The – friendly to Keynesianism – term “Golden Age” described the years of prosperity for Western economies after World War II. During this period, Keynesianism and state intervention played a major role in economy. They constructed a huge edifice of state-financed welfare services as the supposedly single remedy to the evils of social injustice produced by the impersonal market mechanism. National states were charged with the responsibility of economic planning and macroeconomic design, not the least by promoting strategies of nationalization of vital enterprises and public command in the areas of industrial infrastructure and banking.

Keynesianism showed its first signs of crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s for various reasons. Stagflation and a decline in the rate and volume of profits became more visible the years following the oil crisis of 1973, when OPEC quadrupled its export prices to the Western countries. The institutions of the welfare state were criticised for producing bureaucracy, juridification, clientalism and centralization (see Jessop 2002). Partly thanks to technological advancements, economy was making its first steps to becoming global. Keynesianism, as an economic model rather applicable on a national scale, could no longer effectively respond to the needs of international competitiveness and globalisation of markets. In this context, social policies aiming at full employment were graded low in the public agenda.

Neoliberal economies replaced the Keynesian pattern, while the primacy of the nation state was being gradually undermined. The denationalisation of the state in favour of economic globalisation resulted into a series of deregulation policies. Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) in the UK and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) in the USA signalled the emergence of the neoliberal era. Privatizations took place in many fields and “flexibilisation” of production and labour supplanted the Keynesian agenda of full employment. New Public management and the demand for more “effectiveness” and “efficiency” with regard both to the public and the private economy became dominant. Keynesianism declined and the ideas of “free enterprise” and “free market” came once again at the front of the stage.

### **3. Social Theories influenced by the “Fordism/Keynesianism – post-Fordism/Neoliberalism” shift**

This model of shift functions as a pattern for analysing several changes at various levels of economic and social policy and has dominated sociological thinking from state theory, to the theory of urban governance. A short analysis of those two indicational sets of arguments shows how the ideal types of Fordism, post-Fordism, Keynesianism and neoliberalism are applied in different contexts.

#### **3a. Urban Environment and Local Governance**

Critical urban sociology has historicized its paradigm of shift by applying the ideal-typical shift from Fordism to post-Fordism and from Keynesianism to neoliberalism at the local level, adjusting this model to the specificities of different cities and city regions. For instance, Mark Goodwin and Joe Painter use this shift in order to discuss a series of changes of the local government system in Britain and explain how “a multitude of unelected agencies (public, private and voluntary) have become involved in attempting to influence the fortune of local areas” (Goodwin and Painter 1996: 635). The authors locate the roots of this shift in the crisis of the Fordist mode of regulation and they categorise a Fordist and a post-Fordist mode of local governance. At their categorisation, Goodwin and Painter (1996: 643) classify a number of changes in the mode of Fordist and Post-Fordist regulation.

*Local Governance, Fordism and the changing geographies of regulation*

<u>Sites of regulation</u>	<u>Fordism</u>	<u>New Developments</u>
Financial Regime	Keynesian	Monetarist
Management	Hierarchical, centralized, bureaucratic	Devolved, “flat” hierarchies, performance-driven
Labour Process	Technologically undeveloped, labour intensive	Technologically dynamic (information based), capital intensive
Labour relations	Collectivized Regulated	Individualized “flexible”
Forms of consumption	Universal, collective rights	Targeted, individualized “contracts”
Economic Goals	Promotion of full employment, economic modernisation based on technical advance and public investment	Promotion of private profit, economic modernisation based on low-wage, low-skill, “flexible” economy
Political Form	Corporatist	Entrepreneurial/Enabling

Thus, while the “financial regime” was Keynesian in Fordism, it is monetarist in the 1990s, under post-Fordism. While management was “hierarchical, centralized and bureaucratic” in Fordism, it is “devolved and performance-driven” in post-Fordism. Similarly, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, in their article about the “Cities and Geographies of Actually Existing Neoliberalism” (2002), attempt to stretch the key role of cities and urban governance in neoliberal restructuring. For this purpose, they use the same ideal-typical shift from Fordism/Keynesianism to post-Fordism/neoliberalism. According to the authors, Keynesian forms of demand-management are abandoned, traditional national relays of welfare service provision are dismantled, and traditional managerial-redistributive functions of national and subnational administrative agencies are eroded. From the other hand, neoliberalism results into a “hollowing out” of national state capacities to regulate money, trade and investment flows and a “rolling forward” of supply-side and monetarist programs of state intervention, into a mobilization of strategies to promote territorial competitiveness, technological innovation and internationalization and into the establishment of public-private partnerships and “networked” forms of governance, into the transfer of erstwhile forms of public employment to the private sector through privatization (see Brenner/Theodore 2002: 364).

### **3b. State Theory**

Bob Jessop’s account of the transformations of capital accumulation processes is one of the most influential theories based on the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, for he deals with the shift from the “postwar Keynesian welfare national state and the Fordism” to the “postnational, post-Fordist accumulation regime” and to what he describes as the “Schumpeterian competition state”.

Why post-Fordism and not Toyotism, Sonyism, Gatesism, Wintelism, insofar these new forms of “flexible specialization of work” structure new systems of capital accumulation? Jessop answers that such concepts would be

more fruitful than simply “post-Fordism” as a chronological prefix to distinguish it from Fordism, and less vague than the often used “new economy”. However, “post-Fordism and knowledge-based economy” set a new paradigm, which is differentiated from the Fordist era and does not consist a new phase of it, for this would be high-Fordist, late-Fordist, neo-Fordist (Jessop 2002: 97).

Furthermore, he examines the distinct features of the Keynesian welfare national state (KWNS) as an ideal-type form of state and focuses on the causes of the fiscal and economic crisis that this form of political organization underwent in the late 1960s and 1970s: The retreat of domestic production in favor of the growing internationalization of capital, the growing stagflationary tendency in Fordism and a decline in the rate and mass of profits. Also the “class-based egalitarianism and the accompanying class-based redistributive politics” (Jessop 2002: 90) of the KWNS reflected on a number of welfare and social reproduction policies that “assumed the predominance of stable two-parent families” (2002: 72), a strategy, which reproduced specific forms of patriarchal, ethnic and racial domination.

Whereas the full employment Keynesian state was based on nationally orientated economies that were less concerned with international competitiveness, the competition state described by Jessop is related to Joseph Schumpeter’s state account. This “Schumpeterian workfare postnational regime” regards labour-power as a cost of production, prioritizes its “flexibilization” and achieves through social policy the reproduction of neoliberal workfare and the establishment of the particular kind of economic “efficiency” that will respond to market failure as well as to world-market demands. Innovation within the process of production, the political promotion of entrepreneurship and of an “enterprise culture”, a market-based state management and neoliberal governance are new strategies of achieving development (Jessop 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

### **3c. Post-Fordism and the managerial state**

The post Keynesian state of competitiveness has been characterised by Clarke and Newman (1997) as a “managerial state”, a state that works through, with and for management. The intensification of management, as a set of practices and techniques for maximizing profit and achieving balance between conflicting parts, is considered as a criterion of economic effectiveness. Clarke and Newman criticize the “managerial state” as reflection of the managerialisation of its own contradictions:

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<sup>2</sup> *A shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism as Jessop (2002: 255) summarizes, occurs insofar as: “(1) domestic full employment is deprioritized in favour of international competitiveness; (2) redistributive welfare rights take second place to a productivist reordering of social policy; (3) the primacy of the national state is deprived in favour of particular state activities on other scales; and (4) governance in a negotiated, networked society is given more emphasis than government in a mixed economy”.*

*“The problems which the managerial state is intended to resolve derive from contradictions and conflicts in the political, economic and social realms. But what we have seen is the managerialisation of these contradictions: they are redefined as “problems to be managed”. Terms such as “efficiency”, “effectiveness”, “performance” and “quality” depoliticise a series of social issues (whose efficiency? effectiveness for whom?) and thus displace real political and policy choices into a series of managerial imperatives” (Clare and Newman 1997: 159)*

The transformative movement from the Public Management to the New Public Management shows a shift in the understanding of the modern state. While Public Management was related to the welfare state and to the centrality of the state as provider of social services and social policy as well as auditor of the public administration, New Public Management relates to a post-Fordist, neoliberal state, a state which is based on the idea that social problems could be resolved through more or better management, a management that is imitating the private sector (see Friedrichsmeier 2000, Schiess 2000).

Key Words of the discourse of New Public Management are the New Labour’s “Third Way”, “modernization” and the idea of a post-bureaucratic public administration. Although oppositional views suggest that the traditional model of public administration is closer to democratic values than the customer-oriented managerialism (Ricucci 2001), supporters of the post-bureaucratic model of public administration describe it as more flexible and less hierarchical, more economic and less formal, more effective and less insulated from decision making processes, more autonomous and less subjected to state’s demands (Friedrichsmeier 2000). The introduction of methods applied to the public sector would increase the efficiency and modernize the parochial administrative structures.

The emphasis lies on achieving results rather than on administrating processes. The ultimate principle is the triple “E”: Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness. To this extent, cost-effective and market strategies in order to ensure value for money are mobilized. The interest is being transformed from inputs to outcomes. The focus lies on measures for improving services and on clearly defining targets. The setting of explicit targets and programs is thought to audit the new managerial aim of efficiency and effectiveness. The organizations and institutions of public administration ought to copy the strategies and ways, with which the private sector develops. For these purposes models of statistical prediction, comparative research and microprogramming become more and more influential. What is thought to be uneconomic, unpragmatic or difficultly realized in praxis, is criticized by the supporters of New Public Management as parochial and subject to change. Projects are related to micropolitical, technicalised and managerialized targets, that are supposed to be non-ideological and serving a common interest. New Governance, enriched with New Public Management and business ideology, is understood as “entrepreneurial governance” (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). As the authors note (1992: 19), such governments “decentralize

authority, embracing participatory management and they prefer market mechanisms to bureaucratic mechanisms”.

#### **4. Conclusion: Critical remarks on the ideal-typical transition from Fordism to post-Fordism**

Some critical points that can be made with regard to the dualistic premise Keynesianism versus neoliberalism and Fordism versus Post-Fordism can be systematised as follows:

1) The ideal-typical triplex of Fordism-Taylorism-Keynesianism is understood as an over-extension of the state and its welfarist, bureaucratic institutions in relation to the – often criticised as clientalistic – binding of large parts of society to party mechanisms through corporatist, unions, organizations and state managers. The crisis of the Keynesian model of regulation has resulted into a number of changes at the political and social level. One of the most important shift is that from the traditional sovereignty model to pluralistic governance. In this process the state acts as a coordinator of pluralistic, differentiated actors, institutions and interests and at the same time as a pluralistic organization per se, in its internal structure. In this frame the state enforces a political flexibility through the deregulation of centralistic institutions and the devolution of social responsibilities. Transitions like decentralization, localisation and communalization of formerly state tasks undermine the sovereignty model of the traditional, central state as described by Max Weber. However, the aspect of pluralistic governance is not clearly seen in often simplistic categorisations such as by post-Fordist approaches.

2) The ideal type of Fordism begins with the “Fordist factory” and is expanded to an abstract generalization of the Fordist mode of production, of a Fordist state and of a Fordist society. However, as Psychopedis (1991: 268) notes, “the analysis of Fordism is isolated from the questioning of the particular conditions that construct it and that make the structuring of Fordist factories possible”. Fordism appears to be the fixed result of a series of economic and labour processes. However, it is not the processes that are emphasized, but rather the fixed teleology of the final result and of the transition to post-Fordism. Also, as Psychopedis (1991: 268) underlines, the concept of Fordism reduces the ideology of mass production and mass consumption to a highly abstract theoretical model that camouflages contradictions, unintended consequences, conflicts between employees and employers and the differentiated forms of action of social groups and social movements. Therefore, it illustrates a neutral social reproduction.

3) There is an almost tautological identification between Fordism, Taylorism and Keynesianism, where the three ideal types are considered as not only interrelated strategies, but also overlapping levels of accumulation regimes of an every time specific “accumulation strategy”. Thus, Fordism is the economic expression of Keynesianism and Taylorism its organizational-managerial one. Reversely, Keynesianism is the political expression of Fordism and Taylorism, while the Fordist-Taylorist crisis is also a Keynesian one.



4) The construction of ideal types is a methodology introduced by Max Weber. Although ideal types allow the construction of theoretical models, they also set a series of limitations. Such constructions represent a historicist and neopositivist approach to state theory. Although regulation theory considers itself as neo-Marxist, its methodology remains Weberian. Jessop notes that his analytical instruments are “ideal-typical” and he notes (2002: 254) that “like all ideal-types Keynesian welfare nation state and Schumpeterian welfare postnational regime have been formed through the one-sided accentuation of empirically observable features (in this case, those of Atlantic Fordist social formations) to construct a logically possible social phenomenon”. Although the author suggests (2002: 255) that these ideal types “do not derive from a naive, theoretically innocent observation of surface appearances”, he underlines that (2002: 255) “neither the ideal-typical KWNS nor its various subtypes were found in pure form in Atlantic Fordism”. Indeed, social theory is based on the construction of ideal types. However, ideal-types lose their analytical sharpness if they end up being used as simplistic labels of social phenomena, arbitrary classifications or selective interpretations of different historical phases. Although Jessop’s approach departs from such ideal types but is enriched with other analytical tools and complex argumentations as well, it seems that the ideal types of Fordism and post-Fordism are often misused in the frame of an “intellectual fashion whose product cycle has simply run its course” (Vallas 1999: 69).

5) Other critics have noted that there is an over-simplistic dimension in dichotomies such as Fordism/post-Fordism. As Amin summarizes, “reliance on sharp distinctions between phases has been criticized for falling prey, in its worst applications, to a logic of binary contrasts between, say, rigid or collective ‘old times’ and flexible or individualistic ‘new times’[...]. It is claimed that such a logic produces overviews based on arbitrarily derived guiding principles and universal claims based on partial truths, thus denying the key aspect of history as a complex and heterogeneous project of many determinations (Amin 2000: 3).

This distinction between “old” Fordism and “new” post-Fordism (following the one between “old” Public Management” and “New” Public Management”) characterizes also a number of studies in the sociology of work and work organizations. Debates about the shift from Taylorism to “flexible specialization” and “Japanisation” of work suggest that because of technological innovations and the expansion of microelectronics, production has become more specialized and targeted, achieving – contrary to mass production – “flexible” work forms and polyvalent workers. However, as John Tomaney notes (2000: 175-177), there are reasons to believe that the “new optimism” that supposes more cooperative relations between conflicting groups neglects processes of work intensification and presupposes without evidence positive effects of the introduction of computer technology.

Finally, as Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2000: 307) argue, “it is premature to talk about a post-Fordist regime of accumulation because, while some significant experiments are under way in the production sphere, a coherent post-Keynesian mode of social regulation has yet to stabilize”. Indeed, to defend stable transitions and an undisturbed, mechanic paradigm shift, like within the

analysis of post-Fordism, results into simplistic understandings and into over-generalizing assumptions about the nature of economic and social change.

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