

## **Abstract of Doctoral Thesis**

### **Title: Sociology of Knowledge on the Transition of Neoliberalism as Concept**

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The purpose of this thesis is to map the use of the term “neoliberalism” in order to identify the problem consciousness shared by those who use the term and its changes.

Neoliberalism is considered a key concept for understanding the transformation of contemporary society since the 1970s, and in recent years, more than 3,000 papers on the subject of neoliberalism have been published annually across academic disciplines. On the other hand, the term has given rise to much debate over its meaning and validity, and has been criticized as an empty concept without substance. At a time when ending the era of neoliberalism is a shared global issue, the term, despite its importance, continues to be ambiguous, and there is a strong need for its academic clarification.

This paper addresses this issue. Specifically, the paper will organize the problems surrounding the term into the following two points: (1) self-identified problematic term: people who are considered neoliberals do not use the term, and (2) other termed problematic term: the term is “abused” by all kinds of subjects. The paper then traces the use of the word from the perspective of recent sociological studies of knowledge, which focus on the process of “production, circulation, and reception” of ideas.

This paper clarified the following for these two problematic systems. First, with regard to the issue of self-designation, it is clear that when neoliberals used “neoliberalism” as a self-designation, there was always an awareness of the problem of differentiation from liberalism. However, this meant, conversely, that if the situation had changed, there would be no need to use the term. The

background to the gradual disuse of the term by neoliberals in the Anglo-American group was a change in their awareness of the issues, as they advocated continuity rather than differentiation from classical liberalism. With the Great Depression a memory of the past and the Cold War with the communist camp, the challenge was to establish the legitimacy of liberalism. This was also true within the neoliberal movement. When the common problem of renewing classical liberalism was lost, the need to use the term was also lost. Neoliberals in the British-American group stopped using the term. Neoliberals in the German group began to identify themselves with other terms. The neoliberals of the French Group gradually lost their presence because they never formed a school of economic thought.

The generalization of the use of the term “neoliberalism” with respect to the other term’s problematic system was the result of the gradual difficulty in using the other terms. In the 1980s, terms such as neoconservatism were mainly used as ideology, and in terms of policy, terms such as supply-side economics and monetarist philosophy were used. In the 1990s, however, the political and economic situation changed dramatically under the advance of globalization. The continued implementation of policies such as trade liberalization and privatization of state-owned enterprises, not only in conservative governments but also in center-left governments, meant that “neoconservatism” was no longer an appropriate name to describe the social situation. As a result, “neoliberalism” became the established term for a return to market fundamentalism and laissez-faire. However, the widespread recognition of the term and its use across a variety of geographical, political, cultural, and historical subjects, from economic policy ideologies, also raised suspicions that the term was being “abused.”

In response to this problematic system of other names (“abuse” of the term neoliberalism), this paper will identify a shared problematic in the neoliberalism studies in the English-speaking world, which is that the study (1) denaturalizes the claims of neoliberals and (2) attempts to explain why neoliberalism is a return to laissez-faire and (2) relativizing the popular understanding that equates neoliberalism with a return to laissez-faire and market fundamentalism.

This work is significant in that it provides a common foundation or premise for academic discussion of neoliberalism in the current social context of political polarization. The paper also makes a contribution to the study of the history of political thought by clarifying the changes in neoliberals’ problematic consciousness through a multilayered description of their actual discourses, their institutional and personal networks, and their social conditions.