

Afterword: Neoliberal Opportunism

By Madeleine Reeves (University of Manchester)

Anthropology has tended to have a conflictual relationship with neoliberalism. This is so in a double sense. As a political and ideological project, neoliberalism is premised on models of calculative reason, flexible accumulation, the dominance of the market, and the instrumentalisation of personal relationships that are often anathema to anthropological understandings of human action and modes of reasoning. The ethnographer's reflex is typically to point out how realities are more complex, humans less rational or aggressively instrumental, markets less 'pure,' the present more haunted by the past, and espoused 'freedoms' more constraining than the proponents of neoliberal ideology would have us believe (see, indicatively, Comaroff and Comaroff 2001).

But anthropologists have also tended to be wary of 'neoliberalism' as a category of anthropological analysis or explanation. The term is critiqued for being too broad, too generalizing and too unspecific, and for too readily serving as a category of description (the 'neoliberal world order') than as a category of explanation. If neoliberalism is understood to be (almost) everywhere – a global hegemonic project as David Harvey (2005) and other macro-sociologists have suggested – then how can this category allow us to talk meaningfully about the variety of ways in which particular political rationalities translate into specific ways of inhabiting the world?

The claim that it *cannot* – that 'neoliberalism' inhibits rather than facilitates sustained anthropological enquiry of specific times and places – has been argued from a variety of perspectives in recent years. In 2012, the Group for Debates in Anthropological

Theory (GDAT) at the University of Manchester debated the motion that ‘the concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century.’ Defending this motion, Jonathan Mair argued in the debate and in an accompanying blog post (2012) that neoliberalism has lost value through overuse, such that the critique of neoliberalism has become a ‘kind of disciplinary common sense reinforced by a smug sense of shared moral indignation’ doing little to advance our understanding of other people’s (or our own) politics.

More than this, Mair suggests, the term obfuscates, ‘seem[ing] portentously to invoke a whole global theory as a background explanation without doing the work of showing how ‘global forces’ are actually linked to or expressed in the sort of ‘local’ settings the speakers were talking about’ (ibid). Mair is not alone in this critique. Brenner et al. have characterised neoliberalism as a ‘rascal concept,’ ‘promiscuously pervasive yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested’ (2010: 184); Kipnis has argued that, rather like the term ‘culture,’ which does little explanatory work when taken as a noun form (‘Chinese culture,’ ‘American culture’), ‘neoliberalism’ can only do meaningful analytic work when specified and qualified ‘to show exactly which policies, or traditions of thoughts, or discursive actions the author is defining as neoliberal’ (2007: 388). Other critiques point less to the term’s promiscuity than to its contemporary (ir)relevance for capturing a world racked by financial crisis, in which the ideological hegemony of the free market has come under sustained and varied attack in popular demonstrations and political elections alike. Indeed, some scholars have spoken, optimistically perhaps, of a ‘post-neoliberal state’ to describe New Zealand, the UK and Canada (Simon-Kumar 2011), or a ‘post-neoliberal era’ to describe parts of contemporary Latin America (Redo et al. 2011).

Scholars of formerly socialist societies, which have been subject to some of the most extreme experiments in neoliberal economic reform, have enriched these debates by highlighting the disjuncture between the emergence of paradigmatically ‘neoliberal’ discourses of capitalist consumption, on the one hand, and materially and institutionally embedded practices that allow very different logics of care, of labour, or of ritualised

redistribution to be sustained, on the other (Collier 2011). Drawing on an ethnography in a radically restructured baby-food factory in Poland, Elizabeth Dunn (2004), for example, has shown how new projects of rationalisation intended to foster economic efficiencies and 'responsibilised' employees often end up generating their own spaces of refusal and logics of muddling along. Moreover, economic projects of extreme liberalisation can often coexist with political projects that are decidedly *illiberal*. For instance, Tomas Matza (2009) has shown in an ethnographic study of Russian talk-show tactics, how a 'neoliberal economy has been divorced from liberal politics.' Rather than an instance of Russian exceptionalism, Matza suggests, such disjuncture 'may characterize neoliberalism more generally, testifying to the flexible promiscuity, discursive power, and political life of neoliberal techniques.'

Other scholars draw on these continuities between past and present political modalities to question the 'neo' in neoliberalism, asking whether the era we inhabit might not more accurately be described as one of 'late liberalism' – a new twist on an old tale, rather than a categorically new global moment (see also Montoya's introduction to this special issue). In my own research, drawing on ethnography with migrant workers in Kyrgyzstan and Russia, I have argued that scholars of postsocialism have sometimes been too willing to infer transformations in subjectivity from shifts in economic regime or discursive logic: to assume a straightforward iteration between a given labour regime and the fashioning of (calculative, rational, consumer-oriented) selves (Reeves 2011).

So where do these critiques leave us in questioning neoliberalism, as a particular global *moment*, as a strategy of governmentality, or as a category of analysis? Certainly, such critiques are important counterweights to the tendency to treat neoliberalism as a singular, unified global project, or to invoke 'neoliberal' as adjectival qualifier, without really unpacking what we mean when we speak of a neoliberal 'moment,' 'era,' 'world' – or indeed of neoliberal subjectivity or personhood. And yet, as with any descriptive term that seeks to qualify a putatively shared political experience ('global,' 'modern,' 'postcolonial,' 'transnational,' 'postsocialist'), the devaluing of a descriptive currency does not mean that there is not a complex set of intersecting material, political and

economic processes – including in this case the privatisation of notionally ‘public’ goods, the loosening of labour protections, the emphasis on worker ‘self-discipline,’ the spread of audit cultures, the financialisation of ever-increasing zones of life – that are both systematically interlinked and present in ever more domains of social and public life.

Equally importantly, as the contributions to this issue of *Anthropology Matters* argue, we should not allow a position of critique (whether a substantive critique of neoliberalism as a particular economic-political constellation or a critique of neoliberalism as a category of analysis) to blind us to the fact that many of the people we work with are preoccupied less with distancing themselves from neoliberalism than with making this particular constellation of economic and shifts (however we label them) *work* for them. Moral indignation is not a research strategy; nor does it allow us to get at the much more ambivalent affective registers that we often encounter towards ‘the market’ writ large in the field. Indeed, as Michael Upton illustrates vividly in this collection, the very contradictions, inconsistencies and paradoxes that characterise neoliberal interventionism can create spaces of possibility that can be mobilised towards contrary ends. It is this very complexity that makes a sustained ethnographic analysis of neoliberalism more, not less, urgent (see also Hoffman, DeHart and Collier 2006).

Within the flurry of recent publications debating neoliberalism, the four articles in this special issue make important contributions to understanding the tenacity of this particular social and economic project by pointing to the disjunctures opened up by neoliberal policies and interventions, and the spaces that these create for individual or collective agency – or what we might gloss as *neoliberal opportunism*. In her study of female sex workers on the US-Mexico border, for instance, Susanne Hofmann shows how the aspirations of sex workers (for freedom, for self-realisation, for consumption, for personal autonomy) are intertwined with a neoliberal appeal to ‘consumption-centred self-creation’ articulated through individual responsibility for health and well-being. There is unambiguous political economy underlying women’s entry into the sex

industry in Tijuana and the 'complicated mix of structural conditions, feminised care responsibilities, and exceptional hardships' that are differentially distributed throughout the Mexican population, just as there is underpinning the attempts by Mexican authorities to 'clean up' the Tijuana red light district and render it modern and 'transparent' for the predominantly US clientele. And yet, the sex workers interviewed by Hoffman experienced self-employment within this profoundly neoliberalised environment as a kind of freedom: they had a 'clearly formed idea of what self-determination and flexibility in sex work means for them, and... they seek options that give them the greatest deal of control over their work' (2014: 74).

This is a precarious freedom, of course – one that is contingent upon daily exposure to health and other risks. And yet the discourses of personal responsibility, personal freedom, and personal choice that have turned 'well-being into a business strategy' to be secured through purchased medications and services, has opened up spaces of opportunity for economically disadvantaged women to aspire to middle-class patterns of consumption and mobility, and to enter these without stigma. To understand the durability of neoliberal governmentality, Hofmann argues, it is precisely these entanglements, which inject 'individualising market logics into people's attempts to improve their lives' (2014: 84), that we need to understand.

Michael Upton's beautifully crafted paper takes us from the red light district of Tijuana to the glassy corridors and conference halls of the World Intellectual Property organisation in Geneva to illuminate a kindred argument about the paradoxes of neoliberalism and neoliberal opportunism. Upton is concerned with the concrete processes through which neoliberalism is globalised, of which the so-called 'harmonisation' of international property law is one of the most productive and prospectively pernicious (as well as one of the least studied) dimensions. Tracing the discussions that surrounded the seemingly innocuous 'list of issues' that polarised debate between countries of the global north and south during meetings of the Standing Committee on Patents, Upton explores the emergence of a 'new proprietary ethics' based on increasingly prescriptive intellectual property laws (2014: 121). Countries of

the global south, which rely on the possibility of manufacturing generic medicines to deal with HIV/AIDS and other pandemics, have sought to contest the logic of patent harmonisation. Striking here in the context of neoliberal opportunism are the mechanisms through which this is achieved. Upton's fieldwork shows how intergovernmental organisations lobbying on behalf of countries of the global south draw upon and contribute to a 'distinctive semantics,' which allows procedures and decisions that are presented as merely technical to be repoliticised –and thus contested in standing committees as a subject rightly deserving debate. In this process of strategic resignification, new metaphors are developed to articulate the production of knowledge (from 'thickets' to 'pools,' from IP 'harmonisation' to an 'ecology' of knowledge), in which the production of knowledge is 'reimagined as a carefully balanced interconnected ecosystem to be delicately nurtured, a system whose norms should reflect the conditions and needs of the specific context' (2014: 130). Here, too, we see the kinds of eruptions and appropriations that characterise neoliberal governmentality. For as Upton points out, the semantics cultivated to contest the logic of patent harmonisation draw upon paradigmatically 'neoliberal' conceptions of property to do their critical work.

Another sort of neoliberal paradox underlies Andrew Hodges' exploration of the dilemmas faced by astrophysicists in Belgrade, Serbia. Hodges illuminates how neoliberal policies that are often imagined in the singular play out very differently in different settings. In Serbia, the collapse of socialism coincided with war, embargo, and a devaluing of big science. This experience of material isolation – and its concomitant realities of restricted mobility, limited journal access, the sense of being outside of the currents of EU support for scientific research – has fostered a particular concern with articulating membership in a trans-border scientific community that is ostensibly above national differences and apolitical. Since 2000, opportunities for participation in large European research projects have increased, with accompanying pressures to submit to EU audit culture. Here, too, we see the janus-face of neoliberal opportunism. Membership in an international scientific community is simultaneously necessary (to be able to participate in collaborative applications for EU scientific funding, for

instance) and tantalising (because membership is mediated by the 'everyday geopolitics' of economic marginality and institutional 'catch-up'). Neoliberalism affords opportunities for marginal gains (for instance, by making scientific observatory recordings when scientists in western Europe are on their Christmas break), but this opportunity is highly circumscribed. The irony is that for all of its promise of equal membership, conditional participation in a global scientific community that is subject to neoliberal pressures to innovate, often serves to heighten awareness of becoming 'stuck behind.'

Laura Jordan takes us to Flint, Michigan, a city immortalised by Michael Moore as a company town decimated by the dictatorship of the market and the dismantling of unions. What Jordan highlights here with forensic detail is the way that neoliberalism takes hold and is reproduced in distinctive ways at different scales (national, regional, local), leading to differential outcomes for different elite groups. Jordan starts with the story of neoliberalism 'writ large' as it played out in Flint: the story of General Motors' spectacular descent between 1979 and 2010 and the transformation of Flint from a paradigmatic company town into one of the most depressed cities in the United States. As the giddy graphics in her article reveal, General Motors was dramatically transformed – indeed hollowed out – by the neoliberal reforms of the 1970s onwards, marked not just by the laying off workers and undermining of unions, but by a tendency towards financialisation of assets and a mushrooming of non-traditional forms of capital (selling insurance packages and mortgages, for instance, rather than cars).

These dynamics affected the local auto-elite, threatening their class status. And yet, as Jordan demonstrates, the economic elites of Flint responded not by questioning the neoliberal logics that had brought about this predicament, but by appropriating neoliberal tactics for their own ends ('neoliberalism writ small'). This was a spatial as well as an economic shift, marked by investment in lucrative downtown redevelopment projects where the risk of failure is displaced onto the public purse even as profits are channelled to a private company. Public and charitable funds were effectively channelled 'away from the city's low-income neighbourhoods toward spaces and for-

profit businesses that both cater to the country's high-income residents, and financially benefit their own social networks' (2014: 47). Here, as with Upton's campaigners from the South Centre, language proves a critical resource in framing private investment as a 'community-minded' initiative undertaken for the public good: one that can satisfy collective yearnings for an appealing, 'modern' city, while insulating local elites from the risks of economic failure.

How to capture the tone of these four pieces? It is striking, in the light of Mair's critique of the 'shared moral indignation' that often characterises anthropological writing on neoliberalism, that these four articles, disparate in subject matter and fieldsite, seem to share a steely, wide-eyed analysis of how neoliberalism unfolds in particular settings. All are far from the casual references to a 'neoliberal world order' (Ferguson 2006), or 'our brave neo world' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 31) that peppered many article titles in the mid 2000s. What emerges here is a much more complex and variegated picture of neoliberal entanglements with multiple social milieux. Each of the contributions, in its own way, points to the disjunctures, discrepancies, and spaces of contradiction opened up by the introduction of policies of neoliberal economic reform, from new discursive tropes to puncture the obfuscation of patent 'harmonisation' (Upton) to new ways of articulating personal autonomy in Tijuana's red light district (Hofmann). Each is attuned to the way that neoliberal policies often combine the promise of an efficient and inclusive future with realities of increasingly entrenched inequalities and forms of structural precariousness. Yet, each also suggests that a concern with such inequalities and their social effects, from the stalled distribution of generic antiretrovirals to the economic disinvestment in the poor neighbourhoods of Flint, should not detract from the need to understand how neoliberalism creates opportunities of a sort – opportunities that may be circumscribed, illusory, and patently unequal. Understanding how neoliberalism enrolls us in its promises, these articles suggest, is critical to understanding its tenacity, and its everyday seductions.

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