



# The concept of neo-liberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century

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# Debate: 'The concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century'<sup>\*</sup>

**Soumhya Venkatesan:**  
**introduction**

This debate focuses on neoliberalism, a term whose increasing prominence in global public and political discourses has been reflected in proliferating academic interest, within and beyond anthropology. The idea for the motion came from a remark about the increasingly common appearance of the words 'neoliberal' and 'neoliberalism' in published works, conference papers, and student writings in recent years, and a general disquiet about both the moral valences of such usages and their explanatory utility. As Tejaswini Ganti (2014) notes, since 2005 both terms have become near ubiquitous in anthropological publishing, notwithstanding criticisms that they are insufficiently theorized and obscure understanding even as they might illuminate some key global trends. As will be seen, this is one of the points that the proponents of the motion pick up on. The opponents of the motion argue that there is a pattern to the ways in which relations between states, corporations, and the public are being modified around the world and that this pattern can be described as neoliberal. The concomitant changes adversely affect not only various groups of people, especially those already marginalized, but also notions

of the individual and aspirations thereof. Herein lies the moral position taken up by the opposition: if anthropologists cannot or do not recognize the inequalities perpetrated in and by the new configurations of interest that favour marketization and the retreat of the state, we are letting down the people with whom we work, instead quibbling about the exact meanings of words and indulging in a kind of 'Bongo-Bongoism'. For the proposition, however, suggesting that neoliberalism is at the bottom of the various ills besetting the poor and marginalized around the world does violence to the particular histories and structural and life conditions of particular places and peoples. If we already 'know' that the problem is neoliberalism, they argue, then we do not delve ethnographically and deeply into what might be going on in any given location, how things have changed, how people perceive they have changed, and their expectations and aspirations. In a related vein, as Martin argues, when our informants are using the terms 'neoliberal' and 'neoliberalism', surely it behoves us to do so as well. At stake here, I would suggest, is the usage of the same concepts by both anthropologists and our informants and the subsequent need to clarify our respective usages. Perhaps predictably, given how the opposition laid out its case, a large part of the general discussion centres on the place of political convictions and what the role of the anthropologist is or should be – description and analysis and/or activism. At times, it almost seemed like querying the use of the terms in question implied a leaning towards, if not actually occupying, a right-wing position. I will leave it to the reader to examine the different positions put forward in the debate and make up his/her mind about the validity and utility of 'neoliberalism' as a concept in anthropological usage. The presentations below and discussions certainly make for lively and thought-provoking reading.

<sup>\*</sup>The following discussion developed from a debate held on the motion: 'The concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century', held at the 2012 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) at the University of Manchester. The debate was organized and edited for publication by Soumhya Venkatesan. A full transcription of the debate is hosted on the JRAI website: <http://www.jrai.net>; a full podcast of the debate can be heard at the Talking Anthropology website: <http://www.talkinganthropology.com/2013/01/18/ta45-gdati-neoliberalism/#t=2:49:40.219>.

## REFERENCE

GANTI, T. 2014. Neoliberalism. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, 89–104.

## James Laidlaw: proposing the motion

### A slur for all seasons

The 2012 American Anthropological Association meeting included something north of 150 papers with the words ‘neoliberal’ or ‘neoliberalism’ in their titles. If you survey these titles, it rapidly becomes apparent that – according to the body of anthropologists writing today – there is pretty well nothing and no place on earth not encompassed by this phenomenon. Among these papers one finds neoliberalism deployed as an explanation for why middle-class people shop at farmers’ markets in the United States; for the form of the introduction of environmental regulation, and resistance to the introduction of environmental regulation, in places as varied as Kenya and Chile; for the imposition of heritage regulation, and resistance to the imposition of heritage regulation, in places such as India and Colombia; and for Islamist calls for the re-establishment of a Caliphate, and liberal opposition to Islamism, just about anywhere you might care to look.

Neoliberalism also apparently explains changing patterns of parenting in the Caribbean, the sale of fake branded headscarves in various places where Islamism is on the rise, Malay marginalization in Singapore, anti-homosexual legislation in Uganda, and educational policy in Morocco. The words get dropped into titles, in particular in the adjectival form, so that, you will have noticed, nothing ever happens anymore in Mexico, it only ever happens in *neoliberal* Mexico ... or Turkey or India, and so on. I was recently sent an abstract of a paper where something or other was going on in neoliberal Syria, which I thought was ‘stretching the envelope’ quite a bit. It can only be a matter of time before I see one set in neoliberal North Korea. I’m thinking of offering a prize for the person who gets that into print first.

So, apparently, everywhere, everything is neoliberal. Obviously this is pretty hopeless. Any concept or theory that purports to explain everything can only be explaining nothing. We’ve seen this happen before, of course, many times over. To give you just one example, back in the period when structural functionalism was becoming established as a paradigm, the concept of function might have been properly defined. The nature and limits of the organic analogy might have been established, set out, and agreed upon; and, similarly, that of the mechanical analogy might have been delineated. The conditions necessary for functional explanation, in terms of what has to be the

case for a teleology to be valid, might have been specified, and these might have been agreed upon and generally adhered to in the discipline. Instead, the category of function became a catch-all term for any kind of connection or relation between any kind of phenomena. Before long it signalled the vague idea that everything is *connected* somehow or other to everything else, and pretty soon that degenerated into the fatuous suggestion that the *fact* that everything is connected to everything else is itself an explanation for each thing in particular. Now that could only have been true, of course, if one assumed a whole set of conditions, which one can summarize with the notion of some kind of historical equilibrium state. And that, people fairly soon realized, was not in place. As this became recognized, the paradigm began to be discredited and abandoned. The pity is that it has left a good deal of excellent research locked into a flawed explanatory framework.

For some time now it seems to me that neoliberalism has been headed in the same meaningless direction. And once this goes a certain distance (which I think it undoubtedly has in this case), you can’t put the genie back in the bottle. Here we have to remember some basic facts about how language works: I mean the basic Wittgensteinian point that the meaning of a word is its use. Once its use becomes established, that is its meaning. Prescriptive definition just doesn’t work. So even if we now come up with a brilliantly concise definition of how we should use ‘neoliberalism’ it is, I’m afraid, already too late for this word to be a useful term in anthropological analysis. That boat has sailed, I suggest.

Just look how many things the term has come routinely to mean, and therefore how much you’d have to arrest and reverse if you wanted to establish a clear meaning for it. There are, to begin with, two incompatible, big ideas about neoliberalism as a huge great system. You have the idea of it as a *structural* system – this is the meaning that Ferguson (2010), I think, nicely summarized as ‘a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself’ – the notion of neoliberalism as a pervasive abstract causal force that comes along and assimilates local ways of life. Collier (2012) nicely describes Wacquant’s (2012) version of this theory as ‘neoliberalism as big leviathan’. And then there is the equally *extensive* all-encompassing global system, but one not of structural uniformity but rather of an infinite malleability, whose point is that it isn’t a system at all. This is the version of neoliberalism that we get from Aiwa Ong (2006) – a system defined by the fact that its parts are *not* systematically related. This is nicely summarized by Muehlebach in her recent book *The moral neoliberal* with the sentence ‘Neoliberalism is a force’ – just notice that, it’s a force here – ‘that can contain its own negation’ (2012: 25). Initially that sounds intriguing, until you notice that the idea of a

self-negating force is not only logically confused but also empirically quite un-falsifiable: a handy tool for attributing a virtually unlimited range of bad states of affairs in the world to the same undefined cause. Cognitively empty, it has the merely rhetorical function of signalling the author's political affiliation and moral disapproval of any unhappy situation whatsoever, and of implying that the latter vindicates the former.

Now we could reject both these ideas of a global system, and try to pick on something a little bit more specific to be what we mean by neoliberalism. For instance, we could think of it as a 'clique' of ideologues and politicians carrying out a cunning conspiracy to advance class interests (the Harvey [2005] version) or we could use it to mean any policies of deregulation, marketization, and so forth, any active government pursuit of the extension of markets. The trouble with this last one, of course, is that this is one of the things that liberalism has been about doing (at least intermittently) for a very long time, long before the word 'neoliberalism' was invented. That was indeed, I thought, one of Lenin's points (Lenin 2010 [1916]). Now no doubt both these phenomena – conspiracies and the liberal advocacy of markets – exist, but they are much more limited than the nebulous behemoth that anthropologists have come to dub 'neoliberalism'.

Or we could speak instead of a particular set of techniques, devices, modes of rationalization, paradigmatic modes of audit, and so forth. This is the formulation you get in Rose (1999), Ong (2006), and others. And the point about these techniques, in these accounts, is that they're particularly far-reaching because they are used by power, but also get assimilated and used against it. So whatever's going on, you can always detect them in operation. But we should note two things about these techniques. First of all, they have no necessary connection with market ideology or practice – a point powerfully demonstrated by Kipnis (2007; 2008) with respect to China. And secondly, they have no necessary relation either to the promotion of the interests of the rich or to the undermining of the interests of the poor – as Ferguson (2010) has also neatly pointed out for Africa.

Alternatively, we can speak of neoliberalism as the fostering of some sort of self-actualizing subject, where subjects are encouraged to see themselves as a project or an enterprise – again Ong (2006) also uses this. But the problem with this characterization and the reason Ong finds it so widespread in Asia is, of course, because it's been around a long, long time. The idea of taking the self as a project of self-discovery in the West goes back at least to Stoicism and has been there in Asia in Buddhism and Confucianism for centuries. The use of some market idiom for describing that comes and goes and is not essential to it.

One last possibility is that we could go back to a set of texts, the writings of some specific thinkers of the

mid-twentieth century – Mises (1949), Hayek (1960), Friedman (1962), Buchanan and Tullock (1962), and so forth – and use the term 'neoliberalism' to refer specifically and exclusively to their ideas, views, and proposals. Here at least we would be in the presence of something it would not be inaccurate to call an 'ism', although, as ever with schools of thought, its boundaries would be open to dispute, and so forth. This is the problem that Collier explores in his book *Post-Soviet social* (2011), where he makes the point that one of the things these particular authors had in common was that their formulation of liberalism was specifically a response, as classical liberalism from Locke to Mill had not been, to mid-twentieth-century socialism. This is undoubtedly the most intellectually coherent exercise I've come across in the literature, and follows Foucault (2008) at least, as much of the literature that cites him extensively does not, in actually reading these texts with some attention. But if you do this, if you take this as your project, two things follow. First, you discover that much of what I've mentioned above, and what is referred to in the normal anthropological lexicon of neoliberalism – processes of audit, and so forth – would have been anathema to those authors, and therefore if we were to take the writings of those authors as definitional of neoliberalism, anthropologists would have to unlearn virtually everything they associate with the term. That might not be a bad thing, but it's not going to happen. The second thing you discover is that if this is the meaning of the term, then it renders the 'neo' in neoliberalism basically otiose. Hayek, for instance, says explicitly at the beginning of *The constitution of liberty* (1949) that his project is to restate and reformulate classical liberal principles for the era in which he was writing, specifically in answer to all those good and well-intentioned people he identifies as socialists. So the retrospective use of the 'neo' label does not tell us anything that it did not say on the tin first time round for these particular theorists. Liberalism, of course, is a historical phenomenon. It will change and be reformulated through time: think of the differences between John Locke, John Stuart Mill, T.H. Green, John Maynard Keynes. Hayek is no more 'neo' than any of those other authors.

But all of this is pointless speculation anyway. None of these ways of redefining or pinning down the meaning of 'neoliberalism' is going to happen. It is hopeless to think you could pick any one of these meanings and tell people they are not allowed to use the word 'neoliberalism' for any other than the one you've picked. In practice, if you look at those American Anthropological Association papers and at the major journals over the past ten years or so, anthropological usage is converging on the version popularized I suppose most by Ong, where it means roughly 'any or all of the above, as applicable' and,

crucially, 'everything I don't like about the world'. Jon Mair will say a bit more about this later.

In one sense, therefore, I am tempted at this point to say, 'we rest our case'. This is all we need to carry the motion: if we demonstrate that the term is so baggy and unclear that it means almost nothing, except, of course, the patently false idea that markets in the Andes and handbags in Shanghai are all effects of the same big bad thing. The right thing to do, I suggest, would be to drop the term 'neoliberalism' entirely, rejecting therefore the spurious idea that *we already know* how all these things are connected – these things being audit culture, self-improvement, deregulation, and so forth – and instead call these various things what they are and actually *inquire* into if and how they might be connected in different places and different circumstances. The idea of the big bad package, that they all hang together as 'neoliberalism', could only be an obstacle to that endeavour.

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## Thomas Hylland Eriksen: opposing the motion

### The neoliberal person

Suddenly, the word seemed to be everywhere, which is reason good enough to treat it with caution. Otherwise different events, crises, and changes taking place across the planet were now blamed on neoliberalism. Is it merely, as Marshall Sahlins (2002) seemed to suggest, a new word for what we used to call late capitalism? (A concept I never warmed to. Late for what?) Or are we talking about a new turn on the machinery of globalization, where complicated financial instruments, new public management, unreformed utilitarianism, and a strong version of individualism rule the global waves? Moreover, is the concept helpful in comparative anthropological research, or does it, owing to its ubiquity and general fuzziness, obscure more than it reveals?

It is doubtless true that neoliberalism has become 'something of a "rascal concept" – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested' (Brenner, Peck & Theodore 2010: 184, original emphasis). It needs an operational definition, a credible genealogy, and convincing empirical justification. It is far from obvious that we can meaningfully use the concept of neoliberalism to analyse shifts in state policy towards Dalits in India, changes in Sami ethnopolitics in northern Scandinavia, new public management in hospitals and universities across the North Atlantic, and local responses to the debt crisis in Southern Europe. There may be good reasons why the particularistic instincts embedded in the intellectual habitus of social anthropologists kick in when a new universal concept is proposed. Yet at the same time, neoliberalism affects life-worlds across the planet, and we cannot afford to ignore this for the sake of a programmatic particularism or because it is being overused. The concept, and the diverse phenomena to which it refers, also sit well with at least two sets of questions which have been constitutive of modern social anthropology, namely the comparative approach to personhood and the relationship between reciprocity and market utilitarianism.

Before moving on, a short genealogy of the concept may be useful, and I hope it will convince you of its continued and indeed acute relevance for an anthropology of the contemporary world.

The origin of neoliberalism is generally traced to Friedrich Hayek and his successors, notably Milton

Friedman, whose finest moment may have been in the early 1980s with the implementation of this economic ideology in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, there is an immediate precursor which should be interesting for anthropologists. Hayek's teacher in Vienna, Ludwig von Mises, was an enthusiastic libertarian, an enemy of socialism in all its forms, and a believer in deregulation of markets. Mises's most important critic was the economic historian Karl Polanyi, whose *The great transformation* almost immediately caught the attention of anthropologists upon its publication in 1944. This book in fact was the main source of inspiration for the subsequent 'great debate' in economic anthropology between substantivists and formalists. And the debate continues to this day, in new guises, across the field of economic anthropology.

*The great transformation* begins on a dramatic note as the author states, as a matter of fact, that 'Nineteenth-century civilization has collapsed' (Polanyi 1944: 3). What he has in mind is the ultimate outcome of nineteenth-century industrialization and colonialism, whereby the market principle became predominant and pervasive in Western societies. In what is virtually an *avant la lettre* criticism of neoliberalism, Polanyi argues that the values and practices of sociality, based on reciprocity and solidarity, are more fundamental to human existence than the disembedding and ultimately dehumanizing market principle. He predicts that they will prevail in the long term. A non-Marxist socialist, Polanyi argued against the commodification of labour and more generally the limited vision of mainstream economics. His main target was Mises, the father of neoliberalism. Polanyi was not opposed to the market principle as such, and was well aware of the existence of functioning markets in non-capitalist societies. What he objected to was its spread into social domains which should be governed by principles of sociality. Just as *Gemeinschaft* is ontologically prior to *Gesellschaft* in Tönnies's analysis of the transition to urban, industrial society, a 'human economy' based on reciprocity and redistribution (Hart, Laville & Cattani 2010) is fundamental to social life, and people living in communities everywhere will therefore resist market dominance.

The assumption that society would strike back against artificial and alienating market dominance seemed to come true in the North Atlantic world after the war. This lasted until the implementation of a market ideology reminiscent of nineteenth-century libertarianism, but fuelled by the increasing globalization of the world economy. The spirit of the nineteenth century had returned with a vengeance, in a global setting. At the same time, Polanyi's 'double movement' between the market principle and the more fundamental values of sociality, that is, reciprocity and

redistribution, is growing in intensity with each turn on the wheel of global deregulation. The Occupy movement shows this opposition well. More global in scale and diverse in content, participants in World Social Forums show that discontent with disembedded global capitalism and the spread of market principles into life-worlds goes well beyond the North Atlantic world and concerns a perceived threat against not only economic self-sufficiency but entire ways of life. The projects of groups such as Brazilian indigenous organizations, Spanish trade unions, and Japanese greens differ almost as much as their respective life-worlds, but the target of their discontent is the same, namely global neoliberalism.

Polanyi turned the libertarian argument on its head by arguing that *laissez-faire* did not emerge *sui generis* in the absence of state interventions, but that it relied, contrary to popular belief, on political protection from societal opposition. While this has been confirmed time and again – think about the widespread resistance to structural adjustment programmes in the global South – this insight forms the basis for much of the anthropological engagement with neoliberalism. The ways in which people, groups, or communities try to protect themselves against the changes imposed by state-implemented marketization are wide-ranging, studied by anthropologists and comparable because they are responses to the same kind of process, namely that which made the American journalist Thomas Friedman exclaim, a few years ago, that the world had become flat (Friedman 2005). (To which John Gray responded, in his eloquent review [Gray 2005], that as a matter of fact, the world remained round and bumpy.) We are talking here about a tension between the culturally specific, but universally human qualities of sociality as opposed to the disembedding forces of the global market.

Neoliberalism is not just a handy analytical device in research on global capitalism and local responses to it; it is not merely a new version of what we used to call late capitalism or an extension of the market versus society tension. By positing and actively encouraging a particular view of the person as a disembedded, goal-rational individual, the ideology of neoliberalism affects personhood and self-understanding. Back in the 1980s, European politicians could still praise non-European immigrants for looking after their families so well and representing a collective ideology of sharing and caring. Had they said similar things today, they would immediately have been accused of promoting irresponsible and divisive multiculturalism, enforced marriages, and gender segregation. The heroes of contemporary tales of integration are no longer the self-sacrificing Hindu mothers, but their daughters who bravely oppose tradition in order to fashion themselves into free, autonomous agents.

When, more than twenty years ago, I began to teach courses on nationalism, I could still speak about railways and postal services as nation-building devices strengthening anonymous and abstract solidarity by moulding persons into citizens. Such examples today have an antiquarian ring to them, as citizens have been redefined as customers and consumers by their governments and NGOs. This shift from political to consumerist identity has been theorized fairly extensively, and ethnographies from around the world indicate the significance of this change. For now, I shall limit myself to showing how an understanding of neoliberalism is necessary in order to make sense of contemporary changes in the forms of collective identification.

The Sami of northern Scandinavia have been obliged to relate to the state and Christian missions for more than two centuries, and since the Second World War, their organizations have worked politically to promote their ethnic and cultural interests. This struggle has mainly involved claims to land, political autonomy, and language rights. In recent years, however, there has been a perceptible shift in the predominant Sami approaches to identity. Increasingly, the Sami territories are being marketed with a view to increasing tourism, and the market for Sami handicrafts has likewise grown steadily, especially in the 'high' designer end. One Sami woman, who now receives tourists in her home, serving traditional foods and entertaining the visitors with Sami tales and myths, explains that this activity brings her in contact with her origins in ways that feel more authentic than political activity would. Now, she says, people voluntarily pay to hear her stories, to familiarize themselves with the Sami way of life and to eat Sami food. This in turn has made it necessary for herself to relearn her half-forgotten heritage. She contrasts her commercial venture with standard identity politics, which in her view represents a more negative approach, where the state or county would eventually give in to pressure, not because they see the intrinsic value of Sami culture, but because they feel they have to. At the same time, this kind of revitalization is individualized, unpolitical, and framed by a narrative of self-realization and personal achievement.

Attempts among indigenous peoples around the world, from Siberia and the Pacific to the Americas and South Africa, to achieve copyright for their immaterial cultural products and handicraft techniques, in order to prevent piracy and economic loss, have similarly been documented by anthropologists in recent years. Whereas this kind of identity work can be effective in strengthening collective pride and boosting self-esteem within the group in question, it can also be controversial, precisely because it moves the project of cultural identity in an individualized, goal-rational, and commercialized direction. Many spokespersons

from indigenous groups reject the logic of the market and the commercialization of their cultural identity; but if they do so, they have to do it actively as a form of resistance, surrounded by an encroaching sea of neoliberal thinking.

The shift from identity politics to tourism and other commercial activities is just one example. Today, it would be hard to come across a social movement, a political project, or an economic process anywhere in the world which does not relate itself to neoliberalist ideas, whether condoning or opposing them. A current case is the recent shift in the Indian state's approach to upwards social mobility among Dalits, where individual mobility is now given priority under the label of 'inclusive growth' (Dag Erik Berg, pers. comm., 12 November 2012), as opposed to the collective schemes – reservation, or affirmative action – dominating in the past. Again, when the current leadership of Bolivia declares the country 'post-neoliberal', the very refutation of neoliberalism indicates its pervasiveness, which incidentally has affected Bolivian peasants, traders, slumdweller, and civil servants alike through policies of deregulation, structural adjustment, and marketization.

Let me be clear about this. Neoliberalism is not everywhere, and it is not a 'universal acid' making other conceptualizations of contemporary societies superfluous. As with any concept, one should be wary of misuse and overuse. For one thing, I am not entirely convinced by the idea that 'occult economies', seen as mystical entities where wealth can be created through a form of magic, should be seen as a consequence of neoliberalism; and if the concept is used as a blanket term, it will in the end conceal more than it reveals. Yet the term is more specific than, say, 'capitalism' or 'modernity', while at the same time being a genuinely comparative concept enabling comparison between contexts which would otherwise only with great difficulty speak meaningfully to one another. Already in 1964, in *Old societies, new states*, Clifford Geertz pointed out that few anthropologists today, regardless of their field-sites, could entirely avoid coming across expressions of nationalism. Today, this may doubtless be said about neoliberalism: its effects are resisted or embraced, enthused over or worried about, and the neoliberal turn in the world economy and hegemonic ideological constructions brings about changes in many realms, often without being acknowledged. Let us keep in mind that Clifford was not exactly a hardcore universalist; quite the contrary, but even the cultural relativist Geertz recognized a useful dimension of comparison when he saw it.

To sum up: neoliberalism is a peculiar, historically specific, kind of globalized financial capitalism operating in real time, ideologically guiding not just markets but also political institutions and transnational NGOs, and at the same time representing a particular

view of personhood, positing the 'responsible, bounded, autonomous, maximizing individual', who is simultaneously a moral agent and a rational person, but fully accountable for his or her actions. In order to understand the tensions surrounding contemporary personhood across the world, and to connect them to broader economic and political processes, we need the concept of neoliberalism. It mediates between the person and the system, the formal and the informal, the community and transnationally connected world society; and it encourages an anthropology which is truly globally comparative while remaining committed to the study of the present – an anthropology enabling us to study a world divided by a shared destiny.

By opposing the motion, I have argued that neoliberalism appears not only as an economic practice or ideology, or as a particular form of governmentality such as New Public Management – both these aspects have been thoroughly described by anthropologists and other social scientists working in otherwise diverse parts of the world. Rather, a reconceptualization of the person accompanying this shift places neoliberalism at the very core of the anthropological endeavour, namely with the study of the social person.

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## Jonathan Mair: proposing the motion

### The concept of neoliberalism as a moral schema

James Laidlaw suggested that one of the reasons anthropologists continue to use the concept of neoliberalism, despite its obvious problems, is that they think using it is taking a moral stand against all that's wrong with the modern world. He also provided plenty of causes to think that moral indignation, even when it

is justified, is a spurious and self-defeating reason for keeping alive a concept that has failed analytically.

James's argument should be enough to settle the issue. However, you may be thinking that, analytical concerns notwithstanding, this kind of moral commitment in the face of the evidence is harmless – perhaps even admirable. Maybe you're thinking that it's right to stand shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with well-meaning anthropologists of neoliberalism, even if their key concept is hopelessly confused. If that's what you're thinking, then my speech is for you.

The moral commitments entailed by the anthropological use of the neoliberalism concept are themselves a source of great obscurity. The fact that the term can be and is applied to almost any situation, as James has shown, means that its proponents can draw little in the way of content from ethnographic investigation: every case study further undermines the effort to arrive at general characteristics empirically. However, the moral outrage that sustains the concept is based on what linguists would call an implicit 'schema': a stereotypical narrative and set of oppositions and homologies. You may prefer to call it a discourse. And while the category of neoliberalism is effectively empty, the schema with which it is associated is heavy with moral and teleological assumptions deeply rooted in Western and academic common sense.

Invoking the neoliberalism concept thus obscures anthropological understanding in two ways that are additional to the problems that James has already enunciated.

First, it has the effect of pre-emptively overwriting the moral views of our informants with this extraneous commonsensical narrative. This is the sort of substitution that anthropology was invented to undo, not to perpetuate. This is a formal objection: neoliberalism-ism leads to poor ethnography.

Second, by wedding us to what is a rather self-defeating ethics in which the only moral victory is a Pyrrhic one, the use of the concept of neoliberalism prevents anthropologists from exploring the many other possible moral/economic settlements that we already know are out there in the ethical ecosystem. This is a substantive objection: neoliberalism-ism prevents us from taking alternative values seriously as 'candidate universals', to borrow a term from Joel Robbins (2010).

### *The substance of the schema*

So what is the content of the schema? I hardly need to spell it out – you know it already. It is based on a division of the world into two spheres, the very division that Thomas Hylland Eriksen invoked when he spoke of the world of sociality and the 'life-world', and distinguished that from the world of the market. One sphere is suffused with morality. It is bound up with customary obligations between people who are defined



by their relationships to each other and to a community defined by its relationship to a local place. The other sphere is dominated by instrumental reason, profit maximization, and efficacy. In this sphere, people count not because of their relationships, but as individuals, as owners, consumers, entrepreneurs. In this world, local loyalties count for nothing: trans-local networks rule.

According to the schema, the two spheres coexist, and aspects of both have been present for the whole of the modern period, at least. The forces of money, industry, and capitalism mean that the moral sphere has long been in decline. This transformation continues, but the moral sphere is more endangered than ever because of the conspiratorial forces of neoliberalism. This is why the 'contemporary moment' is thought to be special – 'epochal' is the term of art. And it is why some think that a special form of anthropology, the anthropology of neoliberalism, is required to understand what is happening.

In a much-cited article, 'Neoliberal newspeak: notes on the new planetary vulgate', Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) condemn the vocabulary of the neoliberal technocracy. Its categories, they say, purport to be universal, but they are actually derived from the local experience and prejudices of US elites. The categories are related in such a way that the use of one reinforces the others, and the discourse as a whole has the power to impose a particular normative view of the world wherever it is deployed. They break the discourse down into a number of key oppositions, unified by their relation to the narrative of globalization.

Bourdieu and Wacquant argue that this discourse is shaping the world in its image. Subsequent scholarship gives us reason to doubt the extent to which this discourse has really taken over (see, e.g., Goldstein 2012; Kipnis 2007; 2008; Nonini 2008). However, the schema they elaborate is real enough. And it is no coincidence that it bears a striking resemblance to the schema that I have argued underlies the anthropological critique of neoliberalism. The discourse of academic critics of neoliberalism is nothing but the discourse of the academic proponents of neoliberalism – but with the signs reversed.

Neither side invented the categories it works with. This disagreement is simply the latest battle in a long, long war in Western thought about the proper balance of the moral and the instrumental spheres of life. One side in this argument has always argued that the sphere of economic rationality should be carefully constrained in order to preserve moral life from its taint. The other side has always argued that more amoral selfishness in the short term will produce the optimum outcome for all in the end and is therefore, only apparently paradoxically, the more moral course of action. What both sides take for granted is the fundamental division of the moral from the instrumental. (If the concept of

'ontology' were not just as compromised as 'neoliberalism', one might want to deploy it here.<sup>1</sup>) The use of the concept of neoliberalism in anthropological writing has been little more than an excuse to rehearse this old and essentially parochial argument, in a way that appears to mobilize ethnographic evidence but in fact precludes the possibility of learning anything new.

### *The schema in use*

To see what I mean, consider a typical example of the genre: Dan Smyer Yü's 'Living Buddhas, netizens, and the price of religious freedom' (2008), published in a key text in the anthropology of neoliberalism, Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong's edited collection on China. I have chosen this piece because it deals with a subject of which I have some experience, the revival of Tibetan Buddhism among non-Tibetans in China, but the logic of the neoliberalism bandwagon means that all contributions to the ethnography of neoliberalism are condemned to follow a similar pattern.

I want to draw your attention to three steps in Yü's argument.

Step (1) is to identify the object of study as an instance of neoliberalism. This is no straightforward matter, because no case of neoliberalism is like any other. Contemporary China in particular, Yü notes, is not a 'classic' case of neoliberalism (2008: 198).

However, the capaciousness of the neoliberalism concept means that if one looks for the signs of neoliberalism, one is sure to find them.

Yü finds a chain of clues: Tibetan Buddhists in China use electronic networks, including the Internet. These networks are dependent on the infrastructure planned by the Chinese government. The Chinese government is 'an agent of global neoliberal practices'. On the basis of this game of consequences, he concludes that his topic 'appears to be a triumph of worldwide neoliberalism' (2008: 198).

Everything hangs on this step, because however tenuous the identification, once it is made, the whole explanatory apparatus of the moral schema can be dropped into place. This is Step (2).

The characters are classified according to whether they lie on this side or that of the epochal divide between moral life and economic life. In this case, traditional, local Tibetan communities and their relationships with authentic *tulkus* are contrasted with a transnational network of spiritually empty Han consumerists, who try to buy spirituality on the market through relationships with ersatz Living Buddhas.

The offerings made by these Buddhists often take the form of large sums of cash that destroy spirituality by externalizing it (2008: 201). In contrast, the offerings made by traditional Tibetan Buddhists (all scoops of yak butter and sheepskins, he says, as if no one in the history of Tibetan Buddhism ever endowed a

monastery or commissioned an expensive set of scriptures) sustained 'relationships of reciprocal dependence' (2008: 210-11).

Once the lines have been drawn, Step (3) is to assimilate the actors' experiences and voices to the master narrative.

Evidence of enthusiasm or complicity in any aspect of what has already been identified as neoliberalism is taken as evidence of support for the dominance of the instrumental sphere in general. Since we know that neoliberal transformations are inimical to actors' authentic interests as moral beings, there is no need to ask why they might value the goals they pursue; they are dupes of forces beyond their comprehension.

Thus Yü explains that the Han Buddhists' apparent enthusiasm for this or that Living Buddha is stimulated by the commercialism of Living Buddhas through the trans-local electronic networks. It is no different from other consumers' preference for brands such as Nike and Motorola (2008: 211). No doubt the devotees would think it *quite* different, but no matter, they do not understand. In the only passage in which he pauses to consider their views, Yü comments dismissively that, 'In my participation in Tibetan Buddhist Dharma events mediated by cyberspace, I noticed the obvious gullibility of Chinese Buddhists' (2008: 206).

On the other side, evidence of discontent about any aspect, be it ever so narrow, of what have been identified as neoliberal transformations is taken, without further justification, as a rejection of *all* of the phenomena that have been so identified. It is this logic that allowed Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his speech, to identify all resistance to structural adjustment programmes as the reassertion of a single global ethic of sociality.

This is how Yü presents the complaints of two Tibetan Buddhist leaders, both of whom are worried about fake Living Buddhas (2008: 202). He also enlists contemporary Chinese debates about the 'spiritual crisis' of post-socialism as evidence of a local critique equivalent to his own (2008: 199).

In Yü's chapter, as in so much of the anthropology of neoliberalism, the moralized schema provides all the categories, and attributes a positive or negative value to them. Ethnographic exploration of how the people involved classify and value their activities is rendered unnecessary. The argument boils down to a question of which people or processes we are supposed to be in favour of: is religious revival in China resistance to neoliberalism or just another aspect of it?

But the limited snippets of ethnography that Yü does provide illustrate how much more adventurous a genuinely ethnographic approach – that is, one that defers moral judgement for long enough to understand local ethical categories – could be.

For example, Yü interprets the senior lamas' complaints about fake Living Buddhas as an anti-neoliberal abhorrence of contamination of the spiritual by the economic. But in the quotations he provides they say nothing of the sort. They express a very long-standing concern in Tibetan Buddhism about the problem of impostors motivated by greed, but nothing at all about the impropriety of worshipping with large sums of cash (2008: 202).

And when Yü speaks of the fear of 'spiritual crisis', he glibly assimilates this to what he takes to be a universal human concern about the threat that economic development poses to spiritual life, as the instrumental sphere encroaches on the moral.

But this is not the problematic around which debates among Chinese intellectuals about spirit and matter are organized.

In the 1980s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the introduction of the Reform Policy, Chinese social scientists and Party theorists argued about the relationship between 'material civilization' and 'spiritual civilization'. Previously the government had been engaged in planned social and economic development, but from now on it would focus on the latter. The question was whether spiritual development would follow on automatically from material development, as orthodox Marxist historical materialism predicted, or if it required the same kind of purposeful attention that the economy was receiving. The potential danger was not that instrumentality and avarice would overcome morality, but that if moral improvement were neglected it would not keep pace with material development, so that material development itself would become unsustainable and would collapse into instability.

There are interesting and important ethnographic questions here. In fact, we know a lot about these things already. There have been excellent anthropological and historical studies of the role of wealth and fortune in Buddhist societies,<sup>2</sup> and of the developing Chinese debates on spiritual civilization and personal quality.<sup>3</sup> The effect of the concept of neoliberalism is to make us forget that we know about these things, because what we know cannot be accommodated under the simplistic opposition of instrumental and moral spheres.

I have considered what happens to an anthropological study of China and of Buddhism when it is viewed through the prism of the concept of neoliberalism: anything distinctively Chinese or Buddhist, anything ethnographic, is pushed out by the morally propelled explanatory schema that goes along with the use of the term. The point could be made in relation to any ethnographic setting because it is a problem not of local misinterpretation, but of the logic of an overbearing anthropological metanarrative. That is not to say that there are no worthwhile ethnographic studies that use the concept of neoliberalism, but it

does mean that they are successful in spite of its use, not because of it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the 2008 debate 'Ontology is just another word for culture' in *Critique of Anthropology* 30, 152-200.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent example that also deals with Tibetan Buddhism in contemporary China, though in this case among Tibetans, see da Col (2012).

<sup>3</sup> For example, there is an excellent discussion of the development of the spiritual civilization debate in Reform-era China in Bakken (2000), and anthropologists have tackled the related notions of population quality and personal quality (see Anagnost 2004; and Kipnis 2006; 2007).

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## Keir Martin: opposing the motion

### Taking neoliberalism seriously

As we have heard, the case against 'neoliberalism' as a concept is all too often characterized by a claim that it acts as a kind of straitjacket imposed on non-Western peoples whose rich inner lives and cultural expressions are reduced to mere symbolic representations of the underlying or true economic distresses that neoliberal policies bring in their wake. And of course, as we have also just seen, anyone can cherry-pick examples that seem to illustrate this danger. But, as we are surely all aware, even the most useful concepts illuminate some aspects of social life only at the risk of obscuring other important features if they are applied too rigidly. Only a fool would claim that everything of importance in cultural creations as diverse as therapy groups in Manhattan, sorcery in Southern Africa, or initiation into the *tubuan* cult of the Tolai people of New Guinea could be explained away with reference to neoliberalism. But wouldn't it be equally foolish to imagine that every aspect of these and other cultural phenomena, such as the workings of financial markets or the effects of deregulation and outsourcing on working-class communities in Manchester, could be explained away with reference to concepts such as kinship, the Gift, or dividuality? Isn't it equally possible to use these concepts in a manner that obscures issues of vital concern to the people with whom we work? Not everything in life can be reduced to an expression of the Western-derived concept of neoliberalism, just as not everything in life can be particularly well explained with reference to the equally Western-derived concept of ontological deixism, and nor should we expect it to be. So what lies behind the obsession in some quarters with removing neoliberalism in particular from the anthropological toolkit? One of anthropology's most valuable distinguishing features as a discipline has been its commitment to taking seriously the lives and the worldviews of the peoples with whom we work. At a time when concerns are so widespread amongst billions of people from New Guinea to New York over the social effects of the related trends that have come to be characterized as neoliberalism, such as withdrawal of state care, deregulation and privatization, and an aggressive encouragement of the spread of market relations and individual property rights, doesn't a deliberate studied refusal to engage with these concerns mark the starkest betrayal imaginable of that fundamental pillar of the anthropological project?

My own field research area of Papua New Guinea provides one of the archetypal destinations for such people within our profession who want to leave the unpleasantness of politics and poverty behind and just get away from it all to immerse themselves in the refreshingly esoteric and radically other. And in the Tolai area in which I conduct anthropological research,

there is much material that could be gathered together to present that picture: most men (though not all) still undergo periods of seclusion in the bush to be initiated into the secrets of the ancestral *tubuan* cult; mortuary rites in which shell-wealth or *tabu* is exchanged between clans paying off debts of blood and semen still mark a fundamental feature of most (though not all) Tolai's ways of life and sense of being. If I had wished to spend a couple of years ripping quotes from their context and ignoring inconvenient truths, then I suppose that I too could have found enough material in my field-notes to write a perfect ethnography of this type, describing the Tolai as exotic space-people inhabiting an entirely separate universe from my own.

But Papua New Guinea is also a country where the effects of the political and economic trends that are now characterized as neoliberalism are abundantly apparent not only to Western political scientists and anthropologists keen to impose their epistemological straitjackets on their unwilling native victims, but also to the allegedly unwilling and ontologically separate indigenous victims of their epistemological imperialism. In the past twenty years, Papua New Guinea has seen all of the policies characteristic of the neoliberal era pressed upon it by more powerful neighbours such as Australia, or by international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Moves have been made to register customary land as a prelude to buying and selling it, state industries have been privatized, increasing freedom has been given to foreign companies to extract natural resources, and the provision of state services has been drastically reduced in order to impose fiscal discipline. And all of this has had many of the same predictable consequences as in other parts of the world in which these policies have been pursued. Increasing numbers flock to squatter camps on the edge of major cities, a gap has emerged between a small growing economic elite and an increasingly impoverished grassroots that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago, and a cynical discontent with the institutions of political rule marks a contrast with the heady optimism of independence thirty-odd years ago. Within two years of the 1999 riots in Seattle that many in the West view as the start of the current wave of protests against neoliberal globalization, protests also rocked Papua New Guinea as students demonstrated against privatization and land registration and demanded that the World Bank be kicked out of the country. In many respects these were far more significant protests against neoliberalism than the Seattle riots, leaving four dead, leading to the PNG Trades Union Congress calling a general strike, and delaying land registration by several years. But they are today largely forgotten not only by the Western media but also by many anthropologists, for whom taking seriously the worldviews of Melanesians does not extend to paying much attention

when Melanesians are themselves concerned with such insufficiently exotic issues as falling wages or the disintegration of state services.

The protests against the World Bank in 2001 were explicitly framed by many of their participants as being a part of a global movement against neoliberal reforms. Although many of the Tolai I worked with would have been unfamiliar with the term, many others frequently used it and railed against it. Like other Western-derived academic concepts, such as 'culture' or 'the market', it was certainly a phrase that came up in conversations and meetings at Matupit village, unlike other such concepts whose use allegedly demonstrates a greater commitment to taking the native point of view seriously, such as 'perspectivism' or 'ontology'. Now, of course, the absence of these phrases as local emic terms should not be taken in and of itself as evidence of their inapplicability, but again the question must be asked: why should neoliberalism in particular be ruled out of order by anthropologists committed to taking the native point of view more seriously than any other anthropologists in the discipline's history when it is clear that it addresses central concerns of contemporary Tolai life? It is somehow suggested that in order to focus on the aspects of Tolai life or cosmology that are radically different from our own, we need to avoid such concerns, as if even acknowledging them amounts to a denial that such radical difference is possible. Yet the Tolai with whom I worked seemed to have no trouble in asserting that they possessed a worldview that was in many respects totally incommensurate with mine, whilst at the same time remaining profoundly concerned by neoliberalism and its effects. If it was possible for them to simultaneously hold a belief in the necessity of conducting particular kinds of gift exchange in order to enter into relations with *tubuan* spirits alongside a belief that their lives were being altered by political and economic changes that also affected people in other parts of the world, then surely it shouldn't be beyond our capacity to take our informants seriously that we listen to both sides of that equation. Of course, they didn't believe that the secret preparations and ritual revelation of the *tubuan* at mortuary ceremonies were somehow symbolic representations or critiques of neoliberalism. But neither did they believe that practising *tubuan* rites somehow meant that these political and economic changes were irrelevant to their lives.

Indeed, my Tolai friends had no difficulty in claiming that whilst *tubuan* rituals and the circulation of *tabu* that underpinned it were part of a very real world of spirits that stood in stark opposition to any Western secular rationalist worldview, the way that these phenomena operated at the start of the twenty-first century was simultaneously tied in with these global economic trends. For the Tolai this didn't have to be an either/or choice, even if some

anthropologists seem to believe that being able to see that the same phenomenon has different aspects and potentialities when viewed from different angles should be an intellectual leap too far for our indigenous informants. I remember on one occasion attending a mortuary rite for a well-respected public servant, marked by the mass exchange of *tabu* and the raising of several clans' *tubuans* that often marked these events. The man sat next to me was himself a former senior public servant now fallen on hard times with an excellent and colourful English vocabulary. We sat and discussed at length the various relationships between different clans that were marked by the exchange of *tabu* or the presence of particular named *tubuans*. All of this could easily have formed the basis for a description of how Tolai kinship systems worked as self-contained systems of reciprocity in which the relations between clans that were made through the exchange of *tabu* were also relations with a world of spirits that existed outside of Western scientific rational epistemologies. And to an extent such a picture would not have been untrue. What my friend Tony told me, he doubtless believed to be true, and it represented a worldview radically different from my own in interesting ways. But it would have been a partial picture, misleading in what it deliberately left out, rather like those photos of indigenous ceremonies that have been carefully cropped to leave in the five people in feather headdresses and to leave out the fifty other participants in David Beckham T-shirts. For in order to construct this picture, I would have had to deliberately ignore what Tony said at the end of this description when he turned and pointed to Sir Rabbie Namaliu, a Tolai and former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, switched from the local Tolai language to English, and remarked to me, 'but when this man comes and throws around the *tabu* that he has bought with money, that's not custom, that's a fucking pastiche'.

After the event, I chatted with Tony about what he meant. I heard a familiar story about how *tabu* and by implication the custom that it underpinned had changed in recent years; that whereas until recently it was largely only possible to gain *tabu* through participation in customary ritual, now the emerging business and political elites, so-called Big Shots like Sir Rabbie, could fly to Vanuatu and buy the shells in bulk with US dollars and come back to pay impoverished Tolai a meagre wage to string them into *tabu*. As Marilyn Strathern (1999: 207) has observed, it is the capacities that ceremonial exchange items measure that make them valuable, and for most grassroots Tolai the capacities measured by Sir Rabbie's store-bought *tabu* are morally dubious. Hence the circulation of *tabu* and revelation of *tubuans* is of course much more than a symbolic representation of neoliberalism. But, equally, to ignore the ways in which even events such as this become sites for the moral evaluation and rejection of

neoliberal political and economic trends would be to deliberately ignore what was important to our informants in order to preserve a preconceived picture of pure cultural or ontological alterity.

The flow of *tabu* shells across the Pacific and the consequent trade of *tabu* as a cash commodity can be seen as one example of the increasing international exchange of goods that were previously not traded on the market. It's perhaps no coincidence that whereas this trade was apparently unimaginable in the 1950s and 1960s, it swiftly emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s during the era of rapid economic liberalization. Of course, the emergence of this trend does not in and of itself demonstrate neoliberalization – it is possible to imagine that it might have emerged under different circumstances in the 1960s. But the wider neoliberal restructuring of the political economy and the emergent social divisions that accompanied that process are certainly part of the picture that explains the particular negative evaluation of that trend. The so-called Big Shots find themselves running a state that in the neoliberal era has fewer resources to spread to supporters and the wider community, leading to a growing lack of trust between the two sides. In the election of 2002, the local MP, a man called Sir John Kaputin, originally from Matupit, and one of PNG's elder statesmen, lost the seat that he had held since independence by the widest margin of any constituency in the country. Many of his former supporters told me that his fate was sealed when he came to Matupit and refused to commit the funds that were necessary to rebuild a school in the village, explaining that times had changed and they could no longer expect to be, as he put it, 'spoonfed' by him or by the government as they had in the past. Sir John's response was entirely consistent with the response of politicians around the world who either desire to or are forced to manage a state with ever-shrinking social responsibility, and of course it has echoes with the ever more vicious attacks on 'welfare dependency culture' and 'the something for nothing society' that have characterized the past twenty-odd years of British politics. But it was felt keenly as an insult aimed by a man who had left them behind and now wanted to blame them for the failings of a political system that he was administering. And it is within this context of denigration of the Big Shots who manage a neoliberal state that deliberately increasingly withdraws from care of its citizens' welfare that the denigration of the Big Shots' *tabu* and their involvement in custom begins to make sense.

Later, Tony explained to me that the very ability of Big Shots to buy up custom was the result of an increasing gap between the rich and everyone else, something that he explained was the consequence of the PNG government opening up the country to foreign business and failing to look after its citizens as it did before. Tony himself used the term 'neoliberalism' several times in

the course of this conversation. But even Tolai without terms like this in their vocabulary are aware that the problems they face are part of a global trend. A few years ago, the East New Britain Provincial Government announced plans to set up a *tabu* bank that would allow villagers to convert stocks of *tabu* into cash on the basis of a report they commissioned from a management consultancy funded by the Australian Aid Agency. The rationale for this is classic neoliberalism. The stocks of *tabu* held by grassroots villagers represents a potentially monetizable resource that could be converted into money that could then fund small business development and greater prosperity. It is the same rationale that lies behind the neoliberal proscription of registering and privatizing customary land so that it can be alienated and borrowed against to fund small business. Of course, the end result of this process is more likely to be a mass of landless impoverished squatters, and most of my Tolai friends were equally opposed to the *tabu* bank, fearing that it would lead to an even greater intensification of the growing *tabu* gap as poor villagers were forced to sell their *tabu* to buy food or pay hospital fees, with the *tabu* ending up in the hands of those who could afford it, like Sir Rabbie. One of my Tolai friends I discussed this with told me that he was sure the same thing was happening in Africa: that the government wasn't helping them anymore and was forcing them to sell their custom to the Big Men. Like Tony, this was a man who of course took his own custom seriously, being very active in the *tubuan* society. Unlike Tony, he may not have used the word 'neoliberal', but like him, he knew that the practice of custom did not exist in a vacuum separate from the problems and issues of poverty, land-grab, privatization, and a shrinking state. The question that strikes me is, if he is capable of being concerned about the impact that neoliberal restructuring has had on the world in which he lives without giving up his belief in *tubuan* spirits as a part of that world, then why on earth do a handful of anthropology professors maintain the illusion that the best way to take him seriously is to refuse to listen to his concerns?

*The full discussions following this presentation can be found on <http://www.jrai.net>.*

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