

'GDAT 2012: Debating neoliberalism'

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On Saturday I had the pleasure of taking part in [GDAT](#), an annual debate on anthropological theory hosted by Manchester University. GDAT, the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, was started in the late 80s by Tim Ingold, and has been organized and chaired more recently by Soumya Venkatesan. This was the third GDAT I have attended and I think it's a brilliant institution. People come from all over the country, and the discussion is always highly engaged and critical in the best sense.

This year's motion was: *The concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century*. James Laidlaw was proposing, I seconded, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Keir Martin opposed.

The use of the concept of 'neoliberalism' has been a bugbear of mine since a conference I attended in 2009. Every panel I attended had at least one paper on neoliberalism, but each seemed to be talking about quite different, even contradictory, things — the neoliberal tag seemed to add nothing. Or worse, it seemed 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. It has become a kind of disciplinary common sense reinforced by a smug sense of shared moral indignation and that is reason enough to question its usefulness.

All the speeches will be available on the University of Manchester website soon, and I understand a recording of the debate will be made available as a podcast. Eventually, the whole thing, with a transcription of the questions following the speeches, will be published in [Critique of Anthropology](#). In the meantime, I'll be happy to send anyone who's interested a copy of my speech — here's a snippet:

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.) 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.

We lost, horribly. I got a good laugh with that line about 'ontology' though...talk about professional in-jokes!

UPDATE (31 Jan 2013): The audio recording of the debate is now available [here](#).