

'‘Neoliberalism’ as ‘conceptual trash heap’'

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This is my first post in a long time. Over the last year I moved to Manchester and started teaching full time. I hope to return to blogging from time to time.

Recently I've seen the transcript of the 2012 [GDAT debate on the concept of neoliberalism](#), which is due to be published in JRAI next year. I spoke in the debate as second proposer for the (resoundingly defeated!) motion *The concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century*.

I was reminded of an article I came across a few months ago: [Boas, Taylor C., and Jordan Gans-Morse. "Neoliberalism: From new liberal philosophy to anti-liberal slogan." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44.2 \(2009\): 137-161](#). The argument is similar to the one James Laidlaw and I made in the debate but it is based on a much more systematic review of social scientific literature than we were able to present in our short speeches.

> In a review of 148 articles on neoliberalism published in the top comparative politics, development, and Latin American studies journals between 1990 and 2004, we did not find a single article focused on the definition and usage of neoliberalism, nor are we aware of one published elsewhere. > > ...the use of neoliberalism in the contemporary study of political economy differs from that of other normatively charged social science concepts in three potentially problematic ways. First, its negative normative valence and connotations of radicalism have produced asymmetric patterns of use across ideological divides. Second, scholars who do use the term neoliberalism tend not to define it in empirical research, even when it is an important independent or dependent variable. And third, the term is applied to multiple distinct phenomena, from a set of economic policies or development model to an ideology or academic paradigm. In present usage, neoliberalism conveys little common substantive meaning but serves as a clear indicator that one does not evaluate free markets positively. The authors make a very interesting argument that the origin of the term's contemporary academic usage lies in South American critiques of Pinochet in the 1970s and 80s. Pinochet was applying radical economic policies formulated by the 'Chicago Boys', based on the thought of Hayek and Friedman. > Once established as a common term among Spanish-speaking scholars, neoliberalism diffused directly into the English-language study of political economy, such that its present-day usage is heir to the critical Latin American scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s. In one very important way, contemporary usage of neoliberalism has changed fundamentally since that period: it no longer denotes a new form of liberalism with specific features and empirical referents, but has become a vague term that can mean virtually anything as long as it refers to normatively negative phenomena associated with free markets. As the term neoliberalism has diffused broadly, nothing has prevented its meaning from drifting even more broadly. > This goes some way to explaining the fact that some of the strongest defenders of the concept of neoliberalism in the discussion part of the debate were scholars working on Latin America. They also suggest an ingenious explanation of the mechanism by which the vagueness of 'neoliberalism' is established and maintained. They distinguish contested concepts from contested terms. In the case of neoliberalism, the concepts are ideas associated with free markets. The term is the normatively loaded 'neoliberalism', which is applied only by those who are critical of the concepts. Where a term is agreed upon, and only the underlying concepts are contested, there's a shared incentive to police the boundaries of the term. But... > in the case of neoliberalism, the conjunction of terminological contestation and the contested normative valence of the underlying concepts to which it can refer short circuits debate over the term's meaning and proper application. Because the normative valence of free market phenomena is contested, some scholars have an incentive to suggest that the negative aspects of markets are more widespread, whereas others have an incentive to argue that their positive aspects are more prevalent. Those who use neoliberalism, however, participate in only one side of this debate. To contest the intension and extension of neoliberalism, by arguing that certain cases do not qualify or that certain definitional criteria do not belong, would be to suggest that the negative aspects of markets are not as widespread as others maintain—undercutting the still-unresolved argument about whether the free market is ultimately good or bad. The result is that neoliberalism has become a conceptual trash heap capable of accommodating multiple distasteful phenomena without much argument as to whether one or the other component really belongs. >