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Putting neoliberalism in its time and place: a response to the debate

The debate in this journal on neoliberalism neatly illustrates Nietzsche's proposition that 'all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined' (Nietzsche 1994 [1887]: 53). This claim is implicit in Daniel Goldstein's remarks about the 'surprisingly thin' trope of 'actually existing neoliberalism' and, more pointedly, about how many anthropologists invoke neoliberalism 'as a sort of explanatory catholicon' (2012: 304). Even authors who accept that neoliberalism is a valid analytical object still differ over the entry points they adopt to establish its essential qualities – referring variously to a particular genealogy, a particular time period, a particular case or set of cases or a particular policy field. Others deny that neoliberalism has a quintessential form, insisting on its diverse origins, continuous reinvention, diverse local instantiations or variegated nature, without, however, asking what this polymorphic, even polymorphous, 'it' might comprise. The result is that neoliberalism tends to become a 'chaotic concept'. In this context, it is interesting to note that this term is more often used by outsiders and critics of neoliberalism than it is by the advocates and supporters of the ideas, institutions, strategies and policies that this slippery concept is said to denote. For these reasons, as some contributions to this debate also indicate, neoliberalism may serve more as a socially constructed term of struggle *(Kampfbegriff)* that frames criticism and resistance than as a rigorously defined concept that can guide research in anthropology and other social sciences.

I

In his initial stimulus to the debate, Loïc Wacquant, in a piece worth reading beside Mathieu Hilgers (2010), criticises some anthropological accounts of neoliberalism for their overemphasis on the economics of *market rule* or, conversely, their concern with the disciplinary nature of neoliberal *governmentality*. He regards the former as characteristic of economists and Marxists, the latter as favoured by Foucauldian scholars, and then advocates a third approach based on Bourdieu's analyses of the state as a social field and of neoliberalism as a set of social practices. Specifically, he proposes a *via*

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media that grounds the novelty of neoliberalism in its character as a political project to reengineer and redeploy – rather than to weaken, roll-back or dismantle – the state as the core agency that assumes responsibility for (or is tasked with) conforming subjectivities, social relations and collective representations to the changing imperatives of market forces. In short, for Wacquant, the pursuit of neoliberalism rearticulates state, market and citizenship by harnessing the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third. This attributes a specific structural coherence to the neoliberal project. Drawing on Bourdieu's approach to the state as a conflictual bureaucratic field rather than on more Marxist or Foucauldian approaches, he then reprises three theses that he has advanced on several occasions elsewhere. First, neoliberalism is not an economic regime but a political project of state-crafting that mobilises disciplinary 'workfare', neutralising 'prisonfare' and the trope of individual responsibility in the service of commodification. Second, neoliberalism tilts the space of bureaucratic agencies concerned with 'public goods' from a protective and collectivising role towards one that is disciplinary and individualising – thereby creating a Centaur-like state that permits liberal freedoms at the top of the class structure and practises punitive paternalism at the bottom. And third, in this context, the growth and glorification of the state's penal wing is an integral feature of this new state form (Wacquant 2012).

My immediate thoughts on reading this analysis were that it has succumbed to the temptation identified by Nietzsche to define a changeable phenomenon in an essentialist and ahistorical manner, offers an inadequate genealogy of neoliberalism, misrepresents the contributions of Marxist and Foucauldian analyses to critical political economy in general and the study of neoliberalism in particular, misperceives the nature of the state as a social relation and adopts an entry-point that is overly path-dependent on the author's pioneering work on the carceral state. These immediate reactions may be overreactions (especially in the light of Wacquant's other studies of neoliberalism) and will be tempered somewhat in the following remarks. Other contributions to this debate have already commented on the definitional problem and the validity of regarding penalism as one of just three broad defining features of neoliberalism. So I will focus here on the other problems that impressed me on my first encounter with this text.

First, neoliberalism has a complex intellectual history rooted in the interwar years in Europe and the USA, and was first trialled as an economic programme and political project in its Ordoliberal form in postwar West Germany and in its neoliberal form in Chile (thanks to the influence of 'los Chicago boys') (for brief comments relevant to this point, see Peck and Theodore 2012: 183; and, more extensively, Peck 2010; and, on the more recent public mytho-poetics of neoliberalism, Kalb 2012: 321). Thus the USA is far from the originary or 'pure' form of neoliberalism or, again, the singular basis for constructing an ideal type with which other 'actually existing' cases can be compared in terms of their difference, deviation or derogation therefrom.

Second, as critical political economy and historical institutionalism have long argued, the economic and the political in capitalist social formations may be more or less institutionally distinct but are always substantively entangled and interdependent. There are certainly examples of reductionist analyses in orthodox and heterodox economics (much more often in the former case), but it is surely more productive to build on best practice than to generalise from bad scholarship. In these respects, I share Don Kalb's critique of the one-sided character of Wacquant's account of Marxist class analysis (2012: 324) and would add to this, in line with Stephen Collier (2012: 362), a similar

underestimation of neo-Foucauldian analyses of the neoliberal project and practices. Indeed, concern with the complex articulation of the economic and political also informs Foucault's analyses of the constitution of the economy as an object of governance and of the state as the key site for the strategic codification of power relations concerned with accumulation and security (e.g. Foucault 2008; Lemke 1997; Marsden 1999; Read 2009; Teleman 2009). In this context, Foucault and Foucauldian scholars have related new technologies of governmentality to shifts in the form of liberalism (classical, social and advanced) (cf. Rose and Miller 2008) and, in particular, to the challenges posed by economic, political and social crises as the Fordist variant of social liberalism began to lose its growth-generating and socially cohesive force (cf. Fraser 1997; Kiersey 2011; Lemke 2003).

And, third, the state *qua* social relation is not just a bureaucratic field in which political elites manoeuvre *intra muros* to pursue political objectives. It is better understood as an institutionally mediated condensation of a changing balance of forces that is determined not only by cooperation–conflict within the state but also by struggles to transform its institutional architecture and strategic biases and by struggles at a distance from the state that shape political calculation (Poulantzas 1978). I develop these three points later, after commenting on other replies.

Mathieu Hilgers' reply to Wacquant distinguishes between theoretical neoliberalism (a literature that he claims is mostly written by economists) and practical neoliberalism, i.e. policies oriented to the realisation of the neoliberal project, especially the advancement of market rule and competition. Uncritically accepting the critique of Marxists as economistic, Hilgers argues that practical neoliberals do not take the economic structure as given or determinant in the last instance but seek to deploy state power to generalise competition, compensate for market failures, and conform the people to market imperatives (Hilgers 2012: 81). The proper focus of anthropological inquiry is the multiple sites where practical neoliberalism is implemented. Then, drawing on the case of sub-Saharan Africa to decentre prevailing analyses, he distinguishes two phases in the implementation of neoliberalism under the aegis of international agencies: first, starting in the 1980s, efforts were made to reorganise the economy through structural adjustment programmes; and, second, beginning in the 1990s, attention turned to promoting democracy (or, at least, good governance), in part to compensate for the failures of these earlier programmes (Hilgers 2012: 83). The outcome of these policies could confuse observers on two grounds. First, the state seems to be both omnipresent and wholly absent. And, second, state elites seem to have enhanced the state's capacities (as well as their own private interests) by recalibrating the state in some areas even as other areas (e.g. infrastructure, health and education) have seen a decay in these capacities (Hilgers 2012: 82–6). Together with the relative unimportance of the penalisation of poverty and supervisory workfare, this indicates the importance of the historicities of state formation and their contribution to the variety of neoliberalism projects and outcomes (see also Goldstein 2012: 306).

Daniel Goldstein (2012) pointedly observes that there is no *Urtext* of neoliberalism and that this poses problems for contrasting Neoliberalism with actually existing neoliberalisms. This explains why some commentators argue that one should refer to diverse patterns of (always incomplete) neoliberalisation rather than assume that neoliberalism has an unchanging, context-free essence (e.g. Peck, 2010). Without a foundational document or 'pure' exemplar against which to measure deviations in actual cases, one must study local lived realities in which people and states work out

their own theories, critiques and discourses about the worlds they inhabit and how it should be organised (Goldstein 2012: 305). Drawing on the case of 'post-neoliberal' Bolivia, he shows that, as in many other poor non-Western societies, we actually find neither neoliberalism or post-neoliberalism, neither a strong or a weak state, but a hybrid mix of economic and political projects in which individuals must manoeuvre as they seek to make a living and achieve some kind of security (Goldstein 2012: 307).

Johanna Bockman accepts neoliberalism as a political project to re-engineer the state but also endorses the arguments of this project's critics that neoliberalism relies in part on the skilful co-option and absorption by elites of the expanded politics and commons created by radical feminist, black power and socialist movements. In short, radical critiques and movements have been selectively appropriated and enlisted to facilitate the renewal and relegitimation of capitalism through new forms of accumulation by dispossession and the fragmentation of opposition (2012: 313–14; cf. Fraser 2009: 100).

Don Kalb agrees that local forms of neoliberalism and resistance thereto matter, but situates its origins, expansion, crisis-tendencies and antagonisms in the context of bigger changes in the world market. It emerged in response to global economic crisis, the reordering of the global economy (especially China's rise as factory to the world), the massive growth of the proletariat on a global scale (and its increasing precarisation), and the social disruptions caused by flows of goods, capital and people. Specifically, Kalb distinguishes three overlapping phases in actually existing neoliberalism. In the first phase, exemplified by Pinochet/Thatcher/Reagan, it was deployed in the 1970s and 1980s to overcome stagflation, labour unrest and growing welfare demands. In phase two, framed by the Washington Consensus, neoliberal policies aimed to resolve the fiscal crisis and secure the repayment of domestic and sovereign government debt on behalf of *haute finance.* The third phase is linked to the Third Way in the 1990s and 2000s and implemented new public management under (social democratic) governments (Kalb 2012: 326). Kalb adds that neoliberalism has witnessed worldwide episodes of political contestation and resistance in both core and periphery, which indicate that neoliberalism is not so persuasive, resonant or hegemonic as some radical critics have suggested.

This theme is elaborated by Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore in their suggestive depiction of the complex, unevenly developing spatialities that are deeply constitutive rather than merely contingent aspects of the project of state-authorised market transformation. They reject both one-sided emphasis on the essential structural coherence of actually existing *neoliberalism* and one-sided insistence on the essential heterogeneity of its multiple instantiations. Their alternative is cross-case analyses of the multiple, sometimes intersecting, and sometimes divergent paths of *neoliberalisation* as a multiscalar, multipolar historical process – analyses that reveal its cross-referential, intertextual and structurally coupled form. This process does not evolve in pure form but interacts with the broader contexts in which neoliberal projects and resistance thereto are embedded and entangled. Thus its effects cannot be assigned to neoliberalisation alone – its contexts are always co-constitutive. This excludes treating some cases as paradigmatic, some as 'exceptional'. Moreover, while cross-case analysis shows that neoliberalism is more than the sum of its parts, it is also significantly less than a unitary, but hierarchically ordered, totalising process within which there are paradigmatic centres and lagging emulators (Peck and Theodore 2012: 183).

Stephen Collier poses a different methodological challenge for the anthropology of neoliberalism, based on a contrast between those whom Darwin once described as

'splitters' and 'lumpers'. Whereas the former emphasise differences, accept unstructured complexity and find coherence at most on a molecular level, the latter look for commonalities, prefer simple schemes and identify big, coherent patterns at a molar level (cf. Hexter 1975; Hill 1975; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). For Collier, some scholars seek to disentangle specific elements of neoliberalism from contexts that are neither essentially nor contingently neoliberal in character and may well include structural forces or social agents that resist the neoliberal project. Conversely, others perform 'theoretical gymnastics' to extend the concept of neoliberalism so that it subsumes a widening array of disparate features under an overarching neoliberal ensemble that thereby becomes more fundamental and more totalising in the scheme of things than other forces that are held to operate on smaller scales, more locally and with more limited effects (Collier 2012: 189). He adds that the problems for anthropological research created by 'lumping' (my term, not his) cannot be avoided by invoking variegated neoliberalism, neoliberalising actions or neoliberalisation. He also notes that anthropological studies of neoliberalism at the margins tend too often to take for granted a structuralist definition derived (inappropriately) from its alleged heartlands. While, *pace* Wacquant, Collier refers favourably to Foucauldian studies of neoliberalism, his own approach owes more to actor-network theorists, with their call to study the messy horizontal linkages among small-scale phenomena rather than presume, without warrant, a big 'Leviathan' as the demiurge behind neoliberalism (2012: 186; cf. Goldstein 2012: 304–5).

II

The analyses offered in *Social Anthropology* do not exhaust the treatments of neoliberalism in the social science literature, but they do relate to four of the five main approaches to this topic. Largely unremarked, apart from a brief allusion in Peck and Theodore (2012: 183), is the analysis of neoliberalism as an intellectual-professional project or epistemic construction promoted by a 'faith community' of Ordoliberals and Neoliberals in a long war of intellectual position that eventually won hegemony during the economic crises of the 1970s. One reason for this neglect could be, as Mathieu Hilgers notes elsewhere, that '[i]t is only once neoliberalism is implemented and its associated practices and language affect our understanding of human beings, modifying social relations, institutions, and their functioning, that it becomes a proper subject for anthropology' (2011: 351). A second approach, exemplified in the contribution of Loïc Wacquant and endorsed by some other contributors, examines neoliberalism as a political project or, even, a style of politics characterised by market-centrism, conviction politics and an authoritarian populism that can be moralising, polarising and, especially for Wacquant, punitive. A third account regards neoliberalism as a distinctive set of economic policies intended to intensify competition and extend market forces, including into areas once regarded as extra-economic, with different instantiations in advanced economies, transitional economies and emerging markets – linked, especially in the latter two sites, with the Washington Consensus. This approach is reflected in part in the contributions of Hilgers and, in a more qualified manner, Collier and Peck and Theodore. Fourth, neoliberalism is interpreted as the form taken by a capitalist offensive against organised labour after the crisis of the post-war mode of growth in advanced

capitalist economies, with neoliberal globalisation helping to shift the balance of power towards capitalist interests, especially those of transnational commercial, industrial and financial capital. This approach is evident in Don Kalb's intervention in the debate. And, last, but not least, neoliberalism is a specific epoch, starting in the 1970s, characterised by the advance of globalisation based on free trade, transnational production, and the free movement of financial capital. This view is largely present as a background assumption of the contributions in this journal. Such diversity of approach can be intellectually productive for a complex, overdetermined, fluid and necessarily impure phenomenon like neoliberalism provided that none claims to be exhaustive and the different accounts are theoretically commensurable. As the debate so far illustrates, this second condition is contested with important theoretical and methodological issues at stake as well as the choice of case studies.

This last remark brings us back to the question of what this 'it' denotes and/or connotes beyond a productively fuzzy, shared umbrella term to orient research on recent economic and political transformations and/or beyond a politically useful *Kampfbegriff* that can be mobilised to interpret and organise social resistance. Without being prescriptive, I suggest that a useful baseline definition consistent with the various contributions to the debate in this journal is that neoliberalism is a political project that is justified on philosophical grounds and seeks to extend competitive market forces, consolidate a market-friendly constitution and promote individual freedom. This reference point is compatible with the definition offered by Wacquant (2012) as well as the 'shared empirical vision' that Hilgers attributes to anthropological studies of the global spread of neoliberalism (2010: 352). The specific content and overall weight of these three components none the less varies in different instances and over time, as do the motives of those who advocate neoliberalism or seek to contest it in whole or part. Indeed, as the contributions to the debate amply show, the overall economic, juridico-political and socio-cultural significance of this political project varies with the sorts of crises to which neoliberalism is said to offer a response, the spatio-temporal contexts in which it is pursued, changes in the balance of forces as it is implemented and contested, and the unfolding of its multiple effects over different periods.

III

In this context, it is useful to distinguish four types of neoliberalism that emerged in reaction to the crisis of post-World War II models of capitalist development: Atlantic Fordism in advanced capitalist economies, import-substitution industrialisation in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, export-oriented growth in East Asia and, in a quite different but related context, state socialism in the Soviet Bloc, China and Indo-China. Different contributors to this debate have examined how neoliberalism varies with the model of development and its associated state form(s) or political regimes that are (or are held to be) in crisis (contrast, for example, the respective foci in this journal of Wacquant, Goldstein, Hilgers, and Bockman (all 2012); and also Peck and Theodore 2012: 179–80). In identifying four types, it is not my intention to replace one quintessential structural whole with four such wholes. Instead, I aim to cast light on the variability and heterogeneity of neoliberalisation and its fragilities.

The most radical form of the neoliberal project was the attempt at *neoliberal system transformation* in the successor states that emerged from the former Soviet Bloc. Even

here we find different cases and outcomes. For example, Russia adopted a *tabula rasa* approach based on the 'creative destruction' of state socialist institutions in the mistaken belief that a fully functioning liberal market economy would soon emerge, followed more gradually by liberal democracy. In contrast, Poland had already experimented with market institutions and pursued 'market therapy without shock' based more on Ordoliberal than Chicagoan ideas.

A second form of the neoliberal project can be observed in *neoliberal regime shifts*. The principal examples occurred in advanced capitalist economies. Breaking with the post-war Atlantic Fordist settlements, based on an institutionalised compromise between capital and labour, a committed and newly empowered elite alliance introduced liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, market proxies in the public sector, internationalisation and cuts in direct taxation. These policies were intended to modify the balance of forces in favour of capital and largely succeeded in this regard, as reflected in stagnant real wages, cuts in welfare, increasing personal debt to invest in housing, pensions, education, health, or simply to maintain living standards, and a growing share of income and wealth in the hands of the top decile (especially the top percentile) of their respective populations. Well-known cases are Thatcherism and Reaganism but similar shifts occurred in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland and Iceland under the auspices of centre-left as well as right-wing parties. Further examples can be seen in Latin American economies, where with a little help from northern friends and/or military dictatorships, similar shifts occurred from the 1970s through to the 1990s in response to inflationary and debt crises in the previously dominant import-substitution growth model.

The third form comprises economic restructuring processes and regime shifts that were primarily imposed from outside by transnational economic institutions and organisations backed by leading capitalist powers and local partners among domestic political and economic elites. Whereas the second form of neoliberalism largely emerges from domestic politics, whether in liberal democratic or authoritarian regimes, this third form is more clearly associated with external intervention. It involves the adoption of neoliberal policies in line with the 'Washington Consensus' as part of a *quid pro quo* for financial and other assistance to crisis-ridden economies in parts of Africa, Asia, Eastern and Central Europe and Latin America. The policies adopted in the second and third forms of neoliberalism often overlap when they occur in the (semi-)periphery of the world market, but it is important to distinguish their different roots, lessons learnt and likely forms of resistance.

Fourth, neoliberalism can involve a more pragmatic, partial and potentially reversible set of neoliberal policy adjustments. Not all of the six defining economic policies of the neoliberal political project are likely to be adopted in such cases: liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, market proxies in the residual public sector, a commitment to further internationalisation and reductions in direct taxation. Rather, we observe more modest and piecemeal changes deemed necessary by governing elites and their social base(s) to maintain the benefits of alternative economic and social models in the face of specific crisis-tendencies and the challenges created by increasing world market integration in the shadow of neoliberalism. The Nordic social democracies and Rhenish capitalism provide examples of such policy adjustments with Ordoliberalism being more prevalent than Chicagoan neoliberalism. These adjustments can none the less cumulate over time through a ratchet effect and, combined with the deepening integration of such economies into the world market and, more recently, the contagion

effects of the North Atlantic financial crisis, they may become hard to reverse. An intriguing situation now exists where an Ordoliberal Germany that has regularly made neoliberal policy adjustments to secure its export-competitiveness backs the demands of transnational financial capital for neoliberal austerity that effectively impose a neoliberal regime shift on Greece and Spain.

The highpoint of neoliberalism (neoliberalisation) was in the 1990s. This decade saw a largely contingent mix of neoliberal system transformation, a stepwise shift from 'roll-back' to 'roll-forward' policies in neoliberal regimes, a temporary ascendance of cyclical neoliberal policy adjustments elsewhere, and continuing efforts to impose neoliberal structural adjustment in many crisis-prone countries. Yet signs soon emerged that neoliberalism was failing in key respects on all fronts. Neoliberal system transformation failed as a 'grand project'; neoliberal regime shifts required flanking and supplementing by 'Third Way' policies, networks and public–private partnerships to ensure that market failures did not undermine the market economy and threaten the cohesion of market society; neoliberal policy adjustments were contested in the name of alternative economic, political and social projects; and the quack cure of neoliberal structural adjustment often aggravated the disease, leading, in Latin America (and, more recently, in Europe), to the revival of populist politics and demands that governments distance themselves from neoliberal excesses.

Despite signs of failure, there have been continuing efforts up to and beyond 2007–8 to 'roll-forward' neoliberalism and to introduce flanking and supporting mechanisms and policies to maintain the momentum of neoliberalisation in the face of mounting resistance and/or growing signs of failure. Indeed, while there was a brief period when the global financial crisis was interpreted as a crisis *of* neoliberalism, massive state intervention has since created conditions for a return to neoliberal 'business as usual' in those societies where market fundamentalist regime shifts occurred. Elsewhere, it has led to Ordoliberal policy adjustments alongside efforts to maintain free trade, extend it to services, facilitate non-speculative capital flows and find market solutions to climate change and other global challenges.

IV

Despite the passing of the neoliberal highpoint and even after its contradictions came into play (on which, see Jessop 2012), as evidenced, inter alia, by the global financial crisis, which has produced a new phase of 'blow-back' neoliberalism, the project still dominates world society thanks to the path-dependent effects of policies, strategies and structural shifts that were implemented during that highpoint. This is particularly associated with the continuing domination of finance-led accumulation and accumulation through dispossession in the process and practices of crisis-management. These path-dependent effects are political and ideological as well as economic. This is related to the weight of the US economy (linked to its pathological co-dependence with China) in the world market and to the US state's role in helping to displace and defer the contradictions of neoliberalism onto other spaces and times. This does not mean that the US case (itself heterogeneous and, by no means confined, in any case, to the USA) is paradigmatic – it means no more (but no less) than that it is dominant. More generally these legacies are evident in the ways that neoliberal policies have shaped the forms, timing and dynamics of economic crises (broadly understood) not only in

countries where neoliberalism was adopted, imposed or adapted but elsewhere too. Thus, in addition to the legacies where neoliberal projects directly shaped politics and policies, they have also tended to disrupt social formations where alternative policies prevailed or, at least, resistance has been stronger and more effective.

To conclude, the global financial crisis has prompted reflections on what might follow neoliberalism, i.e. alternative scenarios for post-neoliberalism. These were first seriously debated in Latin America and are now being raised elsewhere. Important practical experiments are being conducted at national and regional level in Latin America, as leftwing parties have been elected to power, and, at the local and urban scale, in many other sites around the world (but, for a critical evaluation, see Goldstein 2012). None the less, even if neoliberalism is losing legitimacy, research on its impact should also include the uneven impact of failure. It will prove hard to reverse the legacies of roll-back, roll-forward and blow-back neoliberalism on a world scale and/or to tame it through new flanking and supporting mechanisms. Indeed, as Peck and Theodore (2012) indicate, neoliberalism often 'fails forward', as its diverse proponents and fellow-travellers draw on its unevenly developing crisis-tendencies, contradictions and resistances to renew the broad project in changing conditions. This trial-and-error improvisation in specific spatio-temporal contexts and conjunctures in all their messiness produces immense variation in neoliberalisms. This said, in the light of this debate, a final comment could (and, perhaps, should) be that this remark holds not only for neoliberalism but also for the other subjectivities, collective representations, social relations, institutions, policy programmes and flanking and supporting mechanisms with which neoliberal projects are associated and intertwined. In short, the same theoretical and methodological principles posited in this debate could also be used to explore alternative transformative projects in which neoliberalism in turn is one subordinate element among others.

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