



IN FOCUS

## SEEING HUMANS, SOCIETY &amp; CULTURE IN NEOLIBERALISM

*Humans and societies are interacting and moving in a complex of global networks, a complex that has become known to many as “neoliberalism,” or a host of assumptions about and resistances to rational choices. AN asked its readers: How do anthropologists understand neoliberalism? What new forms of consumption and global capitalism are emerging currently? What social entities play a key role in directing and governing neoliberalism today? How do neoliberal policies impact humans? What are the new languages of protest and activism in response to neoliberalism? What new categories of identity have emerged as a result of neoliberal policies? What role do new technologies play in new forms of global labor? The following are five responses and a related series of commentaries on the anthropology of global production.*

## Notes on the Anthropology of Neoliberalism

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**A**nthropological interest in neoliberalism has exploded. According to a search in AnthroSource, the number of articles in which “neoliberal” appears nearly quadrupled between 2004 and 2005. And it has been used to modify a variety of terms: ideology, project, era, spirit, climate, economy, enterprise, state, globalization and democracy. Given this interest in neoliberalism—and the apparent diversity of things “neoliberalism” may modify—the time seems ripe to reflect on the meaning and function of neoliberalism in anthropological inquiry.

### Situating Discussions of Neoliberalism

As a starting point, we found it useful to ask how “neoliberalism” is understood in social science discussions. On the one hand, virtually all such discussions associate neoliberalism with a specific historical conjuncture in the 1970s and 1980s, delimited by the oil shocks, fiscal crises of states, perceived crises of welfare systems, declining productivity growth in many industrial countries, and the effects of collapsing world commodity prices on many non-industrial countries. This conjuncture is also marked by the emergence of neoconservative, neoclassical and libertarian understandings of these crises. Finally, this historical moment encompasses certain model cases: Pinochet’s Chile under the influence of the “Chicago Boys”; the US and UK under Reagan and

Thatcher; Latin America under the “Washington Consensus,” policies of structural adjustment; and post-socialist countries during the “transition” to a market economy.

On the other hand, views on the scope of “neoliberalism” vary widely, ranging from those who see it as a limited intellectual movement of economists and political theorists to those who treat it as an encompassing hegemonic project. The latter view, which has been particularly influential in anthropology, has been taken up by David Harvey in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, published last year. In it he defines neoliberalism as, first of all, a hegemonic project that seeks to “re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.” This project, in turn, is associated with a stable package that includes “a theory of political economic practices,” a “hegemonic mode of dis-

Deng as the possible outlier) in the 1970s and 1980s can still stand for neoliberalism in 2005.

But how well does such a picture hold up today? Reagan and Deng are dead. Thatcher’s party is moribund. Pinochet is out of power and hounded by courts both inside and outside Chile. There is little discussion of the Washington Consensus, and the theory of “structural adjustment” has been subject to a profound critique by the very international development institutions from which it arose. Recent talk of a “Beijing Consensus” represents one of various efforts to displace Washington as the single site of economic policy formation.

Meanwhile, all over the world “neoliberals” have been succeeded by a new generation of political leaders, such as Russia’s Putin and Chile’s Lagos, who have not abandoned their predecessors’ “neoliberal” policies entirely, but have redirected them to meet new

ogists concerned with neoliberalism tend to focus on specific effects of, and resistances to, neoliberalism, not on the phenomenon itself. The generally *implicit* understanding of neoliberalism in much anthropological work—suggested by concepts such as “millennial capitalism,”

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coined by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff in their work on “the culture of neoliberalism”—seems to correspond to Harvey’s picture of an encompassing hegemonic project. But in fact very little attention has been devoted to specifying what “neoliberalism” means in anthropological inquiry. It would be most accurate to say that, although ever more anthropological studies are concerned *with* neoliberalism, there have been few steps made toward an anthropology *of* neoliberalism,

The purpose of examining the multiple configurations in which “neoliberal” elements can be found is not simply to proliferate examples of difference and specificity that can be counterposed to an inflexible understanding of neoliberalism. It is also to develop a more critical approach to the political and ethical stakes of neoliberalism.

course,” and policies that seek “to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” Finally, Harvey ascribes to neoliberalism remarkable geographical scope and temporal continuity. The choice of images on his book’s cover—Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, General Augusto Pinochet and Deng Xiaoping—suggests that those figures who stood paradigmatically for neoliberalism (with

political goals. These shifting alignments should, at the very least, cause us to pause and reassess neoliberalism’s coherence as a hegemonic project, and its stability as a predictable “package” of policies, ideologies and political interests.

### What Is Anthropology’s Role?

On one level, the emphasis of most anthropological analyses is quite different from Harvey’s. Anthropol-

that is, an anthropology in which the very definition of neoliberalism is put in question and made an object of investigation.

We began our collective reflections on what such an anthropology *of* neoliberalism might look like after participating on a panel together at the 2005 Society for the Anthropology of North America

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conference. In discussing our respective projects on Russia, China and Guatemala, we found that we faced a common analytical dilemma. For each of us, neoliberalism was an inescapable point of reference in dealing with phenomena such as the de-statization of governmental activity and the marketization of labor and budgetary austerity policies. Yet, we found these phenomena in configurations that did not necessarily correspond to the picture of a standard “neoliberal package” described by Harvey and others.

tribution. In China, Hoffman found that the replacement of bureaucratic job assignments with labor markets helped produce a self-enterprising ethos among young professionals, even as they acted in the name of a patriotism reminiscent of the Maoist era. And in Guatemala, DeHart found that indigenous activists invoked norms of efficiency, transparency and accountability—all often associated with neoliberalism—precisely to criticize state policies frequently characterized as “neoliberal.”

None of these descriptions fits very comfortably into the picture that most scholars have of “neoliberalism.” And yet, they describe situations that are very much connected to the historical processes, modalities of reform and political transformations associated with

the effects of a taken-for-granted hegemonic project. Rather, it would begin by analytically deconstituting “neoliberalism.” That is, it would distinguish among, and focus attention upon, specific elements associated with neoliberalism—policies, forms of enterprising subjectivity, economic or political-economic theories, norms of accountability, transparency and efficiency, and mechanisms of quantification or calculative choice—to examine the actual configurations in which they are found.

### Concepts and Methods

One important step in an analytical deconstitution of neoliberalism is to recognize that the configuration of elements that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s is in fact contingent and specific. A conservative

Writing against this tradition, intellectual historians, such as Emma Rothschild, have demonstrated that the liberal tradition is, in fact, tremendously diverse. For example, “liberals” have advocated widely different levels of state intervention in the name of social justice. In this light, “unexpected” contemporary configurations become more immediately intelligible, such as the wedding of calculative mechanisms of resource distribution with Soviet norms of social welfare provisioning.

Another step in an analytical deconstitution is to trace the diffusion of specific elements associated with neoliberalism. Where do specific elements originate? In World Bank policies, think tanks, or self-help books? And what are their mechanisms of diffusion? Technocrats, websites or book translations? Tracing lines of diffusion makes it possible to see more clearly how the mobile and flexible elements associated with neoliberalism take shape in models of reform, modes of self-formation or forms of political agency. Thus, we can understand how norms of transparency or accountability are linked to ethnic empowerment movements in Guatemala, or how young professionals in China who adopted calculative and self-enterprising forms of conduct are also guided by patriotic concerns for the welfare of the nation.

The purpose of examining the multiple configurations in which “neoliberal” elements can be found is not simply to proliferate examples of difference and specificity that can be counterposed to an inflexible understanding of neoliberalism. It is also to develop a more critical approach to the political and ethical stakes of neoliberalism. Such an approach might allow anthropologists to play a central role in critically reframing the important substantive questions associated with neoliberalism—the future of the welfare state, de-statization of governmental activity, and the emergence of new forms of personhood and political agency—as the phenomenon of “neoliberalism” itself changes. ■

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A man appears overwhelmed with the choices of magazines and newspapers for sale at a street-side news stand, May 2000. Despite being tightly controlled by the government, Chinese media companies have embraced an increased appetite by both readers and advertisers for a wide range of news and lifestyle publications. In May 2000 China welcomed a vote in the US House of Representatives normalizing trade ties, which would give American companies free and fair access to the massive Chinese market. Photo courtesy Stephen Shaver/AFP/Getty Images

For instance, in Russia, Collier found that programs for budgetary “adjustment” usually associated with neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus in fact served to re-embed Soviet social values of welfare provisioning, even as they introduced mechanisms of calculative choice into resource dis-

tribution. How, then, might we grapple with such situations? What conceptual and methodological tools might be appropriate for an anthropology of neoliberalism?

This endeavor would not begin with a pre-given definition of neoliberalism as a stable package of elements, or with assumptions about

libertarian tradition has dominated the definition of neoliberalism and its patrimony, arguing that the history of liberalism and neoliberalism is one of fundamental continuity and coherence. Ironically, this conservative libertarian claim has been accepted by many critical social scientists, Harvey included.