Notes on the Anthropology of Neoliberalism

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Anthropological 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 “neoliberal” 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 neoclassical, neoliberal 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 discourse,” 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 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 challenges. An anthropology 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 anthropological work might look like after participating on a panel together at the 2005 Society for the Anthropology of North America
The Washington Consensus in fact associated with neoliberal policies of “adjustment” usually associated with World Bank policies, think tanks, or self-help books? And what are their mechanisms of diffusion? Technocrats, websites or book translations? Traiinees see 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 calculating 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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