

STEPHEN J. COLLIER

Neoliberalism as big Leviathan, or . . . ? A response to Wacquant and Hilgers

For as long as scholars in anthropology and adjacent disciplines have discussed neoliberalism they have grappled with the difficulty of pinning the term down. There is now a substantial corpus of work that attempts to distinguish various approaches to neoliberalism – and corresponding definitions of neoliberalism – and to find accommodations among them. In the present debate we have the latest additions to this corpus. Mathieu Hilgers (2011: 361) distinguishes three perspectives – cultural, structural and governmentality approaches – and suggests that they should be combined in a common ‘explanatory repertoire’. Loïc Wacquant suggests that Hilgers’ three should be replaced with his own two – ‘market rule’ versus governmentality approaches – and proposes a *via media* between them. Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (this issue) propose their own *via media* between Wacquant and Hilgers, whose respective positions, Peck and Theodore propose, should be seen as ‘iterative steps in an ongoing but more dialectical mode of theory development’. All of this work on accommodation reflects an admirable optimism about the possibility of characterising neoliberalism ‘in the round’, as a certain anthropologist once said. It is an optimism that I do not share. Following the arguments Clive Barnett (2005) has made about related issues in geography, I worry that the theoretical gymnastics involved in such accommodation may obscure the methodological choices – and the critical stakes of those choices – that an anthropology of neoliberalism must confront.

In this response, therefore, I will give a push in the opposite direction by focusing on what seem to me real and perhaps unbridgeable methodological differences among possible approaches. Specifically, I will explore one (surely not the only) issue. It can be described in the language of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1981): Should neoliberalism be analysed as a ‘big Leviathan’ – a macro-structure or explanatory background against which other things are understood? Or should we rather analyse neoliberalism as though it were the same size as other things, and trace its associations with them?

I want to underline at the outset that my aim is not to advance a conclusive case for one of these two approaches – and still less to transcend their differences – but to clarify the choice between them. Nonetheless, I should be explicit about my point of entry. My work (e.g. Collier 2009, 2011) is indebted to Michel Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism. Much recent commentary has associated these reflections with an influential literature on governmentality that has, in turn, been interpreted to advance an anti-structural particularism. It is correct that Foucaultian perspectives have emphasised

a non-structural understanding of neoliberalism, but misleading to charge them with particularism, and odd to identify Foucault's work on this topic only with the concept of governmentality. Part of my agenda, therefore, is to suggest a more differentiated picture of non-structural approaches, and to reflect on the range of contributions a Foucaultian perspective might make to an anthropology of neoliberalism.

I

Loïc Wacquant enters this discussion by way of work on urban poverty and 'advanced marginality' that led him 'deep into the bowels of America's gargantuan carceral system, and thence to the vexed issue of neoliberalism and state crafting on a global scale' (2012: 66). In his essay in *Social Anthropology* – and in prior publications that cover similar territory – Wacquant develops a sequence of claims. First, he insists that neoliberalism is not a proposal for state retrenchment but a quintessentially political project. At an initial level, an important function of the neoliberal state is not only to remove impediments to the free working of markets but also to create the positive conditions for their functioning. A second step of the argument, central to Wacquant's research, concerns the 'Centaur-like' quality of the neoliberal state. It expands freedom at one end of the scale of income and privilege while at the other end punitive measures replace a retrenched welfare state. Wacquant's third thesis clarifies the second: This connection between growing economic freedom in certain sectors and the 'penalisation of poverty' is not accidental. It is, rather, a 'core element of the domestic implementation and transborder diffusion of the neoliberal project, the 'iron fist' of the penal state mating with the 'invisible hand' of the market in conjunction with the fraying of the social safety net' (Wacquant 2012: 67).

I want to focus not on the substance of these claims but on Wacquant's methodological procedure, in particular how he handles the correlation between liberalisation and hypertrophic penalty that lies at the centre of his work. Rather than arguing that we see neoliberal policies or programmes fused with other things, thus pointing to the empirical and explanatory limits of neoliberalism, Wacquant doubles down, arguing (in a previous essay) that 'we must expand our conception' of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2010: 212). 'There exists', Wacquant posits, 'a deep structural and functional connection between market rule and punishment after the close of the Keynesian-Fordist era' that constitutes the 'institutional core' of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2012: 76).

It is at this point that Hilgers enters the discussion by posing a simple but crucial question: how do we make sense of cases – such as the African states on which his essay focuses – in which economic liberalisation is not paired with social welfare retrenchment or with a rapidly expanding penal apparatus? Hilgers draws a provocative analogy. He points out that we would never think to conduct a discussion of Marxism without some consideration of Marx's texts; but we also would not conduct such a discussion without some reference to the political institutions and economic circumstances in countries that purport to be Marxist. Hilgers' description of this issue as a matter of 'theory' versus 'implementation' is unfortunate, for reasons to which I return. It does not, in any case, quite respond to Wacquant, who does not try to infer neoliberal practice from neoliberal theory, but suggests that we should look *past* neoliberal theory to show how actually existing neoliberal regimes are constituted. But Hilgers nonetheless poses an important

challenge in his claim that the impact of neoliberalism ‘can never be understood in radical separation from historical configurations’ (Hilgers 2012: 81), at least some of which look very different from those that Wacquant analyses.

A different analogy with the analysis of Marxism may better illuminate Hilgers’ argument. It was Friedrich von Hayek, of course, who famously argued that despite the benevolent aims proclaimed by socialists of all parties, the practical reality of collectivist measures always tumbled in the direction of total power. Totalitarian regimes, indeed, illustrated the inevitable result of attempts to put such measures into practice. This inevitability thesis, which was long ago rejected by some of Hayek’s fellow travellers, has not proved very prescient. Here I am reminded of a classroom exercise I use when teaching ‘The Communist Manifesto’. I ask students how many items on Marx’s list of features of the coming communism are taken for granted in rich countries today (answer: quite a few, starting with universal primary education and a progressive income tax). But the point of the exercise is not only that Hayek was wrong about the future of collectivist policies but also that he was methodologically wrong. He presented a clumsy and inflexible account of the interactions among ideas, institutions and economic circumstances. And there was a cost to this methodological rigidity: it led Hayek to obscure, among other things, how elements of the Marxist programme could function in systems that bear no resemblance to a dictatorship of the proletariat or, for that matter, a dictatorship of any sort.

Although the mechanics of his argument are a bit different, it is not a stretch to say that Wacquant does to neoliberalism what Hayek did to Marxism. He finds neoliberal ideas in association with unsavoury regimes or policies, posits that these associations are inevitable and intrinsic, and rests his case. And the costs are roughly the same. They begin (but do not end) with the one Hilgers identifies: a lack of space in his theoretical apparatus to account for formations that are different from the one he analyses.

II

But this does not conclude a debate about the value of structural approaches to neoliberalism – far from it. It is appropriate that Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore are responding to this discussion since, along with Neil Brenner, they have made the most serious attempt to grapple with the type of criticism Hilgers is advancing while holding on to what they see as the strengths of structural analyses. They have argued, on the one hand, that critics often paint a cartoonish picture of structural approaches – in which the effects of neoliberalism are portrayed as ‘predetermined, universalizing, territorially immobilized, and rigid’ (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 201) – and ignore more sophisticated structural analyses that accommodate variation, or variegation, as they would have it. On the other hand, they argue that the ‘low-flying anti-systemic’ analysis that is often proposed as an alternative to structural approaches ‘tends to obscure from view those macrospatial rules, parameters and mechanisms that serve to channel, circumscribe and pattern the contextually embedded forms . . . they are concerned to decipher’. This tendency, which Peck and Theodore detect in Hilgers, obscures the ‘context of context – specifically, the evolving macrospatial frameworks and interspatial circulatory systems in which local regulatory projects unfold’ (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 201, 202). Two questions arising from Brenner, Peck and Theodore’s claims are salient in this discussion: First, have they convincingly characterised the stakes of adopting or rejecting

a structural analysis of neoliberalism? Second, have they plausibly portrayed the alternative?

As to the first question, the justification Brenner, Peck and Theodore advance against approaches that abandon structural analysis has a somewhat tautological quality. To say that such approaches fail to grasp the ‘context of context’, the ‘meta-context’, the ‘macro-spatial frameworks’ or the ‘macro-spatial rules’ that structure neoliberalisation processes is not an argument against doing so. It just restates the fact that a non-structural approach is a non-structural approach. In principle, it is not hard to understand the payoff in demonstrating (following Wacquant) that what previously seemed to be an exception to a neoliberal logic is in fact an integral part of the neoliberal hegemonic project, or to show that (following Brenner, Peck and Theodore) a diverse landscape of institutional transformations is linked in a common though variegated story of neoliberalisation. The story gets bigger and the explanatory stakes larger – all to the greater glory of social science. But this is only a step in the right direction if it illuminates rather than obscures the thing we are interested in.

This is not the kind of issue that can be decided in a short response essay (or perhaps even in a long one). We can, however, clarify the question. The issue as I see it is *not* whether there is value in examining the actual political and institutional configurations in which neoliberal reforms, institutions and ideas appear, and in analysing their systematic divergence from neoliberal theory; nor is the question whether there is value in studying patterns across cases and inter-local connections. It is certainly imperative to investigate the troubling correlation between neoliberal policies and harsh penalty in certain countries (though claims about this correlation deserve some scrutiny as do, per Hilgers, its limits). And there is great power in Brenner, Peck and Theodore’s (neo-regulationist) attempt to identify variegated institutional and spatial reconfigurations of capitalism across a broad array of cases, as well as the ‘inter-jurisdictional family resemblances, interdependencies and interconnections among contextually specific patterns’ (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 202). Rather, what I aim to highlight, and thus make available for scrutiny, is the choice between two ways of proceeding. In one, neoliberalism is associated with a specified set of elements (thinkers, institutions, policy programmes) that have to be teased out from a tangle of other things (local and trans-local political conditions; countervailing visions of reform; structural transformations of the global economy that are not reducible to neoliberalism, and so on). In the other, the concept is expanded, and the entire ensemble of elements is identified with neoliberalism. No matter how many modifiers (variegated) or verbalisations and substantivisations of the term (neoliberal => neoliberalise => neoliberalisation!) the question remains: what happens when ‘neoliberalism’ designates phenomena at the level of structure, the context of context or the macro-context?

One thing that happens is that neoliberalism grows bigger, and becomes more fundamental, more structural and structuring, than other things in the field. But is this inflation of neoliberalism justified? And does it allow us to understand neoliberalism better? To repeat: a short discussion piece is no place to provide an answer, but I do want to insist on the question.

III

Advocates of a structural approach might rightfully ask: better, in relation to what? What alternatives are on the table? In fact, Brenner, Peck and Theodore, and now Wacquant,

have recently spent a good deal of energy assessing the strengths and weaknesses of alternatives, in particular governmentality studies, which they take to be a main contending perspective. In some cases this commentary raises important questions about the relevant literature, to which I turn in a moment. In other cases – specifically in the case of Wacquant – it amounts to breezy dismissal and bald misunderstanding. This criticism should be dispatched immediately.

Take for example, Wacquant's treatment of neoliberalism and calculation. Wacquant proclaims that 'The trouble with the governmentality approach is that its working characterisation of neoliberalism as "governing through calculation" is so devoid of specificity as to make it coeval with any minimally proficient regime or with the forces of rationalisation and individuation characteristic of Western modernity *in globo*' (2012: 70). But Wacquant is simply mistaken. The attempt to govern *through the calculative choice of individuals* distinguishes what Nikolas Rose calls 'advanced liberal' technologies of government (e.g. Rose *et al.* 2006). The question Rose poses is about a particular location of calculation – not calculation *per se* – and about the relationship of different kinds of expertise (particularly formal or economic expertise as opposed to substantive expertise) to government. There is an interesting ongoing discussion about whether government through the calculative choice of autonomous subjects distinguishes advanced liberal government. But Wacquant is not engaged in it.

Similar basic confusion is evident when Wacquant writes that the governmentality scholarship obscures '*what is "neo" about neoliberalism*, namely, the *remaking and redeployment of the state* as the core agency that actively fabricates the subjectivities, social relations, and collective representations suited to making the fiction of markets real and consequential' (2012: 68). In fact, as Hilgers (2012: 82, n. 3) shows, it is a basic premise of the Foucaultian scholarship that *neoliberalism* is distinguished from *classical liberalism* by (among other things) the active role it imagines for government in creating the conditions for diffusion of markets and market-like mechanisms. There is, again, worthwhile discussion about the nature of this constructivist dimension of neoliberalism, and about the role governmental versus non-governmental institutions play in it. But again Wacquant is not taking this discussion up; he simply acts as though it does not exist.

Perhaps he does not know that it exists. Judging from his sparse references it seems that Wacquant's understanding of this scholarship is largely (though not entirely) based on recent work of Aihwa Ong (e.g. Ong 2006). Wacquant's explanation is that Ong's work presents an 'extreme' example of a tendency in the governmentality scholarship to argue that 'there is not one big-N Neoliberalism but an indefinite number of small-n neoliberalisms born of the ongoing hybridisation of neoliberal practices and ideas with local conditions and forms' (2012: 70). This concern that the governmentality scholarship lapses into a kind of not-in-my-village particularism is shared by Brenner, Peck and Theodore, who also take Ong's work as exemplary in this regard (and others). They argue that the governmentality scholarship portrays neoliberalism as 'context-drenched, haphazardly mobile, radically fluid, and infinitely mutable' (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 201), and treats local variants as *sui generis* – 'unique unto themselves' (2010: 204) – and severed from the 'conditions of production' of macrospatial regulatory landscapes (2010: 202). As I will suggest, I find this nearly exclusive focus on Ong's work both puzzling and misleading, since it paints a distorted picture of the non-structural alternatives. But the charge of particularism should be addressed.

On one level, this interpretation of Ong's work is understandable (though its formulation is a bit overblown). Ong (including in Collier and Ong (2005)) emphasises the mobility of neoliberal techniques, the diverse formations in which they are found and their uncertain political valence. Similar emphases can be found in writing by Rose and other scholars in this field. But on my reading these are not arguments *for* particularism in the sense discussed above so much as they are arguments *against* a certain kind of overly-rigid structural analysis that, as already noted, Brenner *et al.* find cartoonish and over-simplified, but of which we have a clear example in Wacquant, and of which innumerable other examples could be cited. This reading is borne out by consideration of the actual claims Ong and Hilgers advance. Hilgers does not endlessly multiply specific cases and abandon any core understanding of neoliberalism. Rather, he builds on the analysis of cases to say something rather general about 'neoliberal implementation' in African states. If anything, as I suggest below, far from abandoning a core understanding of neoliberalism he takes one too much for granted. Similarly, Aihwa Ong advances broad claims about how neoliberal technologies or techniques are deployed in East and Southeast Asian states in which 'neoliberalism itself is not the general characteristic of technologies of governing' (Ong 2006: 3). In short, Ong and Hilgers do not argue that neoliberalism can be just anything. They just insist it is not everything.

Once more, it seems we have to rethink the salient methodological choices that an anthropology of neoliberalism must confront. The choice is not (as structurally-oriented critics suggest) between one approach that emphasises endless diversity in local instantiations of neoliberalism and another that looks for patterns across cases and connections among them; nor is it (as these critics' critics argue) between one approach that sees simple repetition of an institutional pattern and another that sees variation. Rather it concerns how neoliberalism is specified in a variegated landscape of institutional, economic and political forms. We have a vivid picture of the options in the contrasting ways that Ong and Wacquant address analytical challenges that, as Hilgers notes (and despite Wacquant's protestations about Ong's extremism), are ultimately rather similar. Both want to understand how expanded freedom and liberalisation for certain people in certain spaces is coupled with apparently illiberal measures (harsh and expansive penalty, limitations on citizenship, and so on) for other people in other spaces. But to reprise the distinction drawn above: Wacquant treats neoliberalism as bigger, stronger, more structural and more structuring than other things in the field, as indeed determinative of those things, such that we can call the whole mess neoliberalism. Ong, by contrast, insists that neoliberalism is just one thing among other things. One needs conceptual recourse to something called neoliberalism to understand the political formations she examines (this point is crucial – it is a concept we cannot do without), but that does not mean they are neoliberal, or that neoliberalism – or neoliberalisation – is helpfully invoked as a structuring background or 'context of context' for their development.

IV

But precisely at this point – in this need for conceptual recourse to something called neoliberalism that is not a macro-structure – Wacquant and Brenner, Peck, and Theodore pose an important challenge to the anthropological approach proposed by Hilgers and,

in a different way, Ong, Brenner, Peck and Theodore astutely note in anthropological work 'a sampling preference' for investigating neoliberalism in 'sites located at some distance from centers of hegemonic power, which are framed as zones of refraction and recalibration' (2010: 201). They observe, further, that these cases are implicitly contrasted to a pure variant of neoliberalism found either in theory or in the institutions of the capitalist core, but that the essential features of this pure variant are taken for granted rather than made an object of anthropological investigation. Hilgers, indeed, has raised this point to a matter of principle in a recent essay in which he wrote that 'It 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). Anthropology, in his view, should therefore be concerned with 'neoliberal implementation' rather than neoliberal theory. But this is odd. Does the formulation of neoliberal theory not involve 'social relations, institutions, and their functioning'? Why should anthropologists limit themselves to this magical scene of implementation? And is the distinction between theorisation and implementation so clear in any case? I do not mean to suggest that Hilgers is wrong in his assessment of anthropological work in this area. But I agree with Brenner, Peck, Theodore and Wacquant that this way of circumscribing the anthropological interest in neoliberalism has real costs.

These costs become evident when the time comes to actually define this thing that is being studied through zones of 'refraction and recalibration'. In a recent essay, for example, Hilgers writes that although anthropologists recognise that neoliberalism has 'no single definition on which all agree', they 'share more or less the same empirical vision of the phenomenon'. This vision includes '[A] radicalised form of capitalism, based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention, and characterised by an opposition to collectivism', as well as 'an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility' and 'a belief that growth leads to development' (Hilgers 2011: 352). All of this, he adds, finds its 'quintessential expression' in the Washington Consensus (Hilgers 2012: 81). But if they are focused on the scene of implementation, how precisely have anthropologists come to agree on this understanding of neoliberalism? Here I am reminded of another classroom exercise in which I ask students to name the tenets of the Washington Consensus as originally defined by John Williamson. Generally they get a couple points right, are quite surprised to discover that they agree with many items they did not suspect were on the list (for example, Williamson's insistence, following the well-known collectivist Bela Balassa, that health care and education are 'quintessentially proper objects of government expenditure') and are puzzled by Williamson's moderation on a range of issues (he criticises excessive hostility to subsidies, laments the fact that political Washington favours reduction in expenditure rather than increases in tax revenue to address destabilising fiscal imbalances, and casts doubt on the inherent superiority of private versus public management of enterprises).

The point is not that a more careful reading of Williamson will provide us with the real contents of neoliberalism. But given that claims like Hilgers' have been mechanically reproduced in hundreds or thousands of articles by anthropologists, it should at least give some pause. In fact, as a growing literature in other disciplines is demonstrating, neoliberal theory is heterogeneous, in many respects contradictory, and in any case contrary on many points to the picture Hilgers paints. If Wacquant loses track of neoliberalism by assimilating it into a big Leviathan in which it assumes mystical

proportion and magical power, anthropologists risk losing track of it by ceding its study to others – and taking its essential features for granted.

V

These problems are real, but they are not intrinsic to non-structural perspectives on neoliberalism. For what structurally-oriented critics take to be the whole field of such approaches – or at least exemplary instances – is in fact only one variant. Despite its deservedly wide audience and influence, Aihwa Ong's work is not at the core of – nor is it exactly typical of – the governmentality literature, which initially developed around a group of social theorists engaged in a rather different intellectual project. Influenced by Foucault's lectures of the late 1970s, they elaborated an approach to governmental rationality that focused not on political philosophy but on mundane techniques and technologies of government. Some (though not all) scholars in this group indeed posed the question of how these techniques related to advanced liberal political programmes, a term that was rather carefully defined and that was broader than what is generally called neoliberalism. They certainly did not call these techniques themselves 'neoliberal' – or suggest that these techniques somehow bore a seed of neoliberalism when they were reworked in different contexts. In the past two decades, other scholars influenced by this work have examined how these techniques travel and are redeployed. In some cases they have carefully qualified their claims about the resulting political formations; in other cases they have drifted in the direction of a sloppy analysis in which, as Wacquant puts it, the world is awash in 'proliferating institutions all seemingly infected by the neoliberal virus' (2012: 68) and in which neoliberalism seems to lose any specificity. But the latter tendency diverges sharply from the original scholarship on governmentality, as its main exponents have pointed out (e.g. Rose *et al.* 2006).

It should also be noted that governmentality was only one among a number of concepts Foucault developed in his lectures on political government, and in many ways it was peripheral to his reflections on neoliberalism (see Collier 2009). Despite some intriguing speculations and hints about a more general political rationality, Foucault's inquiries on neoliberalism did not examine a stable mode of rationalisation or set of techniques. Instead, they were open-ended and exploratory investigations that focused on exemplary thinkers in the United States, Germany and France who reanimated and modified principles of liberalism in the face of varying circumstances (reconstruction of the legitimacy of the German state after World War II; the challenges that the rise of the social state posed to classic conceptions of government in the US) and devised intellectual and practical responses to those circumstances. In focusing on the neoliberals themselves, Foucault aimed at the very heart of the question: What is this neoliberalism? What styles of thinking characterise it? In what does its liberalism consist? And he thought that his answers to these questions profoundly disrupted existing understandings and political assessments of neoliberalism. If the original work on governmentality differs in crucial though subtle ways from the anthropology of neoliberalism as envisioned by Hilgers, Foucault's reflections on neoliberalism diverge absolutely.

Although this is all very quick and schematic, it should serve to indicate that there is a range of non-structural approaches to neoliberalism, some of which have been taken seriously by anthropologists, others of which have been neglected for reasons that seem to me obscure. Although there are tensions among these non-structural approaches,

there are also avenues for reconciliation among them. There is no reason that an anthropological investigation of neoliberalism as an original movement of thought (as Foucault would have it) could not be linked to policy programmes, to trans-local channels of circulation carved by powerful institutions or peripatetic experts, to patterns of adoption and adaptation in various countries and sectors that produce the kinds of hybrid governmental formations that Ong and Hilgers describe. Such an approach would answer some of the challenges structurally-oriented critics have posed (concerning inter-local linkages and broader institutional frameworks, for example). But I do not think such an approach is reconcilable with even the very flexible and nuanced structural approach that Brenner, Peck and Theodore lay out. This is true for at least two reasons. The first relates to the issues of methodology I have been discussing: What, at the end of the day, does one make of the heterogeneity and variegation that any careful study of this terrain will reveal? Does one think that the variation is within some range of methodological tolerance, and can still be captured by the term 'neoliberal'? Or does one find that the more one pushes into particular cases – or groups of cases – the more recourse to structural explanation simply muddies the water? The two options suggest different analytical sensibilities, but also, as I have tried to show, two entirely different ways of specifying neoliberalism in a field of inquiry.

The second issue is not methodological. It concerns, rather, how scholars define – and what they expect from – critical inquiry. As Clive Barnett (2009) has argued, one of the salient functions of structurally-oriented analyses of neoliberalism is to restore a kind of political agency to the workings of contemporary global capitalism. In whatever Marxian, Gramscian or Bourdieusian garb that agency is dressed up, this critical instinct builds on an old Marxist manoeuvre that aims to show how economic conditions, state formations and ideologies are wrapped up in a common project – however flexible, polymorphous or cunning that project is. When Wacquant writes of the 'critical solipsism' of the governmentality approach and its inability to establish any 'firm outside ground on which to stand to oppose [neoliberalism]', he is concerned about the loss of this kind of critical possibility (2012: 68). Setting aside the question of whether this is a good or bad thing, it bears asking: does a carefully reconstructive approach that begins with neoliberalism as the object of inquiry, with neoliberalism as a question rather than something that is taken for granted, in which neoliberalism is loosed from structural mechanisms, also abandon any possibility of establishing a critical perspective?

I will answer, and conclude, by citing an example: James Ferguson's (2009) work on conditional cash grant programmes in South Africa that combine 'neoliberal' and redistributive or 'pro-poor' features. Where structurally-oriented scholars have explained such juxtapositions as ameliorative reactions to the crises of neoliberalism (a *transcendence* of apparent contradiction that recuperates neoliberalism at the level of macro-structure), Ferguson takes their neoliberalism seriously. What I mean by this is that he explores the possibility that they provide a political alternative – and perhaps in some ways an attractive political alternative – to the more solidarising, but also more paternalistic and in some respects disempowering, variants of a South African social state. What Ferguson is proposing, I think, is a different kind of critical reflection on neoliberalism. It involves neither denunciation nor apologetics but rather a thoughtful and probing attempt to understand what is at stake in persistent neoliberal ideas. Though Ferguson does not push in this direction (but see Collier 2011 for an inquiry that pursues such a project in a different domain), a conditional cash grant programme is

not merely derived from a mechanical opposition to solidarising measures or formulaic insistence on government through the calculative choice of individuals. More positively, it is derived from propositions of neoliberal political philosophy: that social welfare measures should be directed to individuals rather than some mystical collectivity; that they should be provided in cash rather than in kind so that the values produced by government correspond more closely to the values of the governed. Whatever one makes of these propositions, Ferguson reframes the critical inquiry of neoliberalism in a challenging direction: not only as an opportunity to rehearse familiar criticisms of the politics of the right, but also as an opportunity to rethink the politics of the left.

Stephen J. Collier
The Program in International Affairs, The New School
 66 West 12th Street, Room 612
 New York, NY 10011, USA
 CollierS@newschool.edu

References

- Barnett, C. 2005. 'The consolations of "neoliberalism"', *Geoforum* 36: 7–12.
- Barnett, C. 2009. Publics and markets: what's wrong with neoliberalism?, in S. Smith, R. Pain, S. Marston and J. P. Jones III (eds.), *The Sage handbook of social geography*, 269–96. London: Sage.
- Brenner, N., J. Peck and N. Theodore 2010. 'Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways', *Global Networks* 10: 182–222.
- Callon, M. and B. Latour 1981. 'Unscrewing the big Leviathan: how actors macro-structure reality and how sociologists help them to do so, in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (eds.), *Advances in social theory and methodology: towards an integration of micro and macro sociologies*, 277–303. London: Routledge.
- Collier, S. J. 2009. 'Topologies of power: Foucault's analysis of political government beyond "governmentality"', *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26: 78–108.
- Collier, S. J. 2011. *Post-soviet social: biopolitics, neoliberalism, social modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collier, S. J. and A. Ong 2005. Global assemblages, anthropological problems, in S. J. Collier and A. Ong (eds.), *Global assemblages: technology, politics, ethics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Ferguson, J. 2009. 'The uses of neoliberalism', *Antipode* 41: 166–84.
- Hilgers, M. 2011. 'The three anthropological approaches to neoliberalism', *International Social Science Journal* 61: 351–64.
- Hilgers, M. 2012. 'The historicity of the neoliberal state', *Social Anthropology* 20: 80–94.
- Ong, A. 2006. *Neoliberalism as exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Peck, J. and N. Theodore 2012. 'Reanimating neoliberalism: process geographies of neoliberalisation', *Social Anthropology* 20: 177–185.
- Rose, N., P. O'Malley and M. Valverde 2006. 'Governmentality', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2: 83–104.
- Wacquant, L. 2010. 'Crafting the neoliberal state: workfare, prisonfare, and social insecurity', *Sociological Forum* 25: 197–220.
- Wacquant, L. 2012. 'Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism', *Social Anthropology* 20: 66–79.