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# Neoliberalism

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*'Neoliberalism' is a widely used term that travelled from economic philosophy into policymaking, and from policymaking into critical social scientific discourse in the late twentieth century. It refers to a form of capitalism ascendant since the 1970s but informed by post-war economic philosophical ideas. In practice, it is characterised by the retrenchment of the welfare state and an increased role of the state in preserving market competition. Anthropologists have critically engaged with neoliberalism. They have at times used the word as a neutral description of an economic doctrine or set of related policies, and at others as a normative description of their negative effects. This entry starts by exploring the benefits and drawbacks of two different ways of theorising neoliberalism. First, it examines contributions that have treated neoliberalism as a world system, and the influence of Marxist concepts on this approach. Second, this entry presents work that frames neoliberalism less as a unified system and more as a flexible mode of governing, and the influence of the work of Michel Foucault on this body of literature. Third, it addresses how the intersections between these two approaches have been productive for anthropologists. In order to demonstrate as much, this entry highlights insights about the effects of neoliberalism on the state and on labour. It concludes by setting out ongoing debates about the use of neoliberalism and related concepts proposed to think critically about contemporary capitalism.*

## Introduction

As an economic philosophical movement, neoliberalism refers to the form of liberalism resurgent after the Second World War. Its contemporary use was consolidated by the inaugural 1947 gathering of the Mont Pèlerin Society, organised by Friedrich Hayek, and attended by prominent economists and thinkers such as Milton Friedman, George Stigler, and Karl Popper (Harvey 2007, Coleman 2013, Mirowski & Plehwe 2015, Slobodian 2018). While there was disagreement amongst attendees about the precise form that this 'new' liberalism should take, most were critical of the rise of the welfare state and Keynesian economic doctrine, which encouraged state intervention and spending to boost economic growth (Slobodian 2018: 6). These approaches had gained momentum in response to the Great Depression and declining faith in classical liberalism, which relied on the assumption that the market was capable of regulating itself, a conceit troubled by economic crisis (Coleman 2013: 82).

Those committed to Hayek's vision felt that to avoid repeating historical failures, a different relationship between state and market should be engineered. Unlike in classical liberalism, the market would be treated not as a natural and separate sphere but 'as the principle, form, and model' for the state (Foucault 2010: 117). Like Keynesians, neoliberal thinkers supported state intervention, but with the purpose of preserving market competition, which was thought to index a healthy liberal democracy (Lemke 2001: 193). This new liberalism was thought to be the road to a stable post-war international economic order: in theory, it

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recognised the necessity of state intervention without compromising individual liberty (Slobodian 2018: 128).

The economic ideals put forth by early proponents of neoliberalism were consciously taken up by policymakers and states in the 1970s and 1980s in response to 'stagflation', a period of high inflation and unemployment. These variants of neoliberal policymaking were tailor-made to different social settings, but they tended to protect individual liberty and private property rights, encourage free trade, involve a decline in social provisions, and increase the political influence of the private and financial sectors (Harvey 2007: 3; Gershon 2011: 538). Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Augusto Pinochet, and Deng Xioaping are frequently cited as neoliberal policymakers *par excellence* (Harvey 2007). Yet where these policies and policymakers were dubbed 'neoliberal', it was most often by critics using the term negatively and normatively (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009). These critics often argued the above policy shifts were the root causes of various patterned and detrimental social effects in the late twentieth century. The results of the policies born of neoliberal reform that these critics highlighted include rising inequality, a decline in welfare support, heightened labour precarity, a power shift toward financial institutions, increasingly speculative financial practices, and a punitive displacement of social responsibility from the state onto the citizen-subject (Harvey 2007; Wacquant 2008, 2009; Standing 2011, 2012).

This normative use of the concept of neoliberalism quickly gained traction in the social sciences. Throughout the late twentieth century, and particularly in the early twenty-first, anthropologists used the term to critique the dominance of market-led policymaking and the decline in social welfare (Kipnis 2007: 383). These critics saw the policy consensus of the 70s and 80s as sufficiently successful that it had come to influence everyday life on a global scale. By the turn of the century, for many of these anthropologists, neoliberalism was aptly described as a 'new world order' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 291). Such theorists were frequently influenced by Marxist concepts, and often focused on neoliberalism as a political economic structure or ideology. Others argued that neoliberalism was best understood not as a unified political economic or cultural system, but as a flexible mode of governing (Ong 2007). The latter theorists frequently made use of the work of Michel Foucault—particularly his work on governmentality and the subject—to examine the ways in which neoliberal policies can produce unexpected outcomes.

While the distinction between Marxist and Foucauldian approaches is important, it should be noted that it is rare to find anthropologists of neoliberalism that are not indebted to the insights of both thinkers. Most anthropologists mentioned do not strictly belong to one school or another, but instead they tend to draw on a combination of Marxist, Foucauldian, and other concepts. Indeed, while there have been various categorizations of the anthropological literature on neoliberalism that distinguish between Marxist and Foucauldian approaches (Kipnis 2007, Ferguson 2010), others distinguish between approaches to neoliberalism as culture versus system, even where both draw on Marxist concepts (Hilgers 2011), or offer the work of other theorists, like Bourdieu, as an alternative (Wacquant 2010). Nevertheless, the first two

sections of this entry discuss Marxist and Foucauldian approaches separately. The third section then explores how the intersections between these two approaches have yielded some of anthropology's most distinctive contributions to the analysis of neoliberalism. Examining two areas in particular—the state and labour—this entry explores a key anthropological insight: while neoliberal logics often seem overly dominant, they never manage to govern people's lives fully. The entry concludes with a discussion of enduring disagreements regarding the usefulness of neoliberalism in anthropology, as well as the benefits of considering related critical theories of contemporary capitalism.

**Neoliberalism as world system**

The rise of neoliberal reform at the end of the twentieth century coincided with seismic geopolitical and intellectual shifts. The fall of the Berlin Wall, and the spread of liberal democracy and market capitalism, meant that for many, the modernist ideological battles of the twentieth century were replaced with a sense of all-encompassing governance. This shift was encapsulated most famously—and controversially—by Francis Fukuyama's declaration, in 1992, of the 'end of history' and liberalism as the final stage of social progress. Around this time, there was also a proliferation of ethnographies of globalization (e.g. Appadurai 1990, Hannerz 1996 [cited in Ortner 2011]) and 'the capitalist world system' (Marcus 1995: 97). This body of work sought to produce social analysis 'sensitive to its context of historical political economy' (Marcus 1986: 167), to situate diverse 'lifeworlds' in the 'world system' that may by turns facilitate and constrain them (Marcus 1995: 98). This work demonstrated that 'local' experiences of everything from family life to religious beliefs to labour could be understood in terms of 'global' political economic systems like capitalism (Marcus 1995). As Marcus argued, the 'world system' thesis 'developed explicitly within genres of Marxist anthropology' (1995: 97). Like Marxism, it was devoted to the idea that political and economic forces and events constrain our interlocutors' thoughts and actions in a structured sense.

However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, neoliberalism came to replace 'globalization' as the most relevant 'world system' within which to understand a variety of ethnographic cases. This was not just a shift in terminology. Increasingly, anthropologists became pessimistic about the exclusionary effects of globalization and capitalism in their fieldsites around the world (Ortner 2011). Neoliberalism was the word used to critically spotlight these effects. Often, in doing so, these theorists made use of a variety of Marxist tools and concepts. Some of these anthropologists focused on neoliberalism as a policy project with material effects, especially the accumulation of wealth in the upper class. Others framed it as a culture, or set of ideological values and discourses.

Geographer David Harvey is perhaps the most vocal proponent of a class-based theorisation of neoliberalism. For Harvey (2007, 2016), neoliberalism is a globally-dominant policy project designed to intensify the accumulation of wealth in the upper class. It is characterised primarily by 'deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (Harvey 2007: 3). This policy

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project draws on a number of discourses and values, which echo those of significance to the neoliberal architects and engineers discussed above: for instance, the 'assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market' (Harvey 2007: 7). Yet at base, it is best understood as a practical political tool for wealth accumulation. As Harvey notes, the 'increasing social inequality' is observable in national income distribution. After neoliberal reform in the US, for instance, 'the ratio of the median compensation of workers to the salaries of CEOs increased from just over 30 to 1 in 1970 to nearly 500 to 1 by 2000' (Harvey 2007: 16).

Anthropologists of neoliberalism have turned to their fieldsites to demonstrate how neoliberal values and policies marginalise vulnerable populations along class lines. The work of Loïc Wacquant (2012) is exemplary. While Wacquant is also influenced by other thinkers—especially Pierre Bourdieu's work on bureaucracy and the state—he is indebted to the Marxist theorisation of neoliberalism as a form of class struggle, or what he calls a 'revolution from above' (2010: 211). Wacquant's work focuses on issues of class and race for the urban poor in the US and France (2008), as well as on the relationship between the neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state and mass incarceration (2009, 2010). Like Harvey, Wacquant argues that neoliberalism works to the disadvantage of 'those trapped at the bottom of the polarizing class structure', often with particularly severe consequences for those who also suffer racial injustice (2009: xv). He pays attention to what Harvey would also identify as key features of neoliberal reform: 'the social and urban retrenchment of the state' and 'the imposition of precarious wage labor' (Wacquant 2009: vx) in increasingly underserviced urban neighbourhoods (Wacquant 2008: 25). Building on Harvey, he argues that the retrenchment of social welfare is only one-half of the neoliberal picture. It isn't just that the urban poor have suffered decades of decreasing social and labour security, but also that the carceral system has been mobilised to discipline and contain those suffering the worst effects of social insecurity (2010: 216).

Other anthropologists have turned their attention to the role of neoliberal values and discourses accompanying the rising material inequality discussed above. The work of Jean and John Comaroff (1999, 2000) is a case in point. For these anthropologists, neoliberalism is best understood as a global 'culture', a patterned way of relating to oneself and others that draws on both 'ideology and practice' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 305). Based on ethnographic research in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, they demonstrate how increasing labour precarity as a result of neoliberal reform was accompanied by a marked rise in anxiety about the illegitimate accumulation of wealth. The latter manifested in what they call 'occult economies', systems of exchange that deploy 'magical means for material ends' to gain access to wealth as if by 'enchantment' (1999: 279). Their ethnographic examples are diverse, ranging from witchcraft accusations, to pyramid schemes, ritual killings, and the illicit sale of body parts, observed in Africa, Latin American, the United States, Eastern Europe, and Asia. According to the authors, all involve efforts to 'multiply available techniques of producing value, fair or foul' (2000: 316) and to isolate causes for the uneven distribution of resources. The Comaroffs thus see these as instances of a global backlash

against a contradiction at the heart of neoliberal capitalism: 'the culture of neoliberalism' (2000: 304) relies on a newly positive moral value attached to speculation, gambling, and risk, and with it comes a sense that inordinate sums of wealth can be accumulated without effort. Yet for many, this belief is at odds with real material inequality. Neoliberalism thus 'appears both to include and to marginalize in unanticipated ways' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 298). Occult economies, then, can be understood as expressions of both hope in and disappointment with the promises of neoliberal capitalism.

Despite their differences in approach, there are important convergences across the aforementioned analyses of neoliberalism. All share the conviction that neoliberalism is the dominant world system. Along with other Marxist critics of neoliberalism (e.g. Brenner & Theodore 2002), they frame it as the root of systemic forms of global inequality, which are thought to be less the result of individual choice or responsibility than of a fundamentally unequal distribution of political power and resources (Hilgers 2011, see also Harvey 2007: 16). If Harvey and Wacquant focus on the material and institutional effects of neoliberalism as a political economic project, the Comaroffs focus on the relationship between material inequality and the beliefs and values that accompany neoliberal reform. In both cases, the influence of Marxism is clear: the power of political economic structures and institutions is linked to the dominance of certain ideological beliefs and values, and both are seen to have global reach. What this body of work is particularly good at, then, is situating a range of ethnographic examples within a set of predictable forces, events, and constraints which are often presumed to chiefly oppress citizen-subjects. Nevertheless, what should also emerge from the aforementioned body of work is that neoliberalism can play an expansive explanatory role. Some anthropologists thus began to question whether neoliberalism was as coherent and constraining a system as the above analyses sometimes imply. To do so, many turned to the work of Michel Foucault.

**Neoliberalism as mode of governing**

Foucault's work has been compelling for anthropologists of neoliberalism who have sought to capture nuances they see as missing from the world system approach. One of the key concepts that appears in Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism is governmentality. Governmentality, for Foucault, is a double-edged concept. It refers to both the rationalities and to the practical techniques used to guide the conduct of oneself and of others (Lemke 2001: 201). Governmentality is the process through which influence is exerted over political subjects, which are not just oppressed 'docile bodies' but also reflective selves, who may be aware of and participate in being governed (Lemke 2001: 203). Crucially, both governmentality and the subject are unstable concepts that depend on one another; different techniques of governmentality produce different kinds of subjects. Anthropologists have therefore been attracted to Foucault's theory of governmentality and the subject because they make space for contingency. Rather than presuppose a single political economic structure, or a field of class-based struggle, within which to understand a variety

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of ethnographic examples, Foucauldian analysis leaves the specific characteristics and effects of government open-ended. As a result, Foucauldian approaches tend to treat neoliberalism not as a system or structure but as a set of context-specific practices that are vulnerable to recapture by different political projects and actors. Foucauldian theorists often emphasise that neoliberalism does not explain everything, that it does not look the same everywhere, and that not all subjects respond to it in expected ways.

Those who have relied on the concept of governmentality frequently focus on how neoliberal policies can paradoxically make space for non-neoliberal ideals and outcomes. James Ferguson's work on anti-poverty programs in Southern Africa (2007, 2015) demonstrates this clearly. Ferguson focuses on the South African Basic Income Grant (BIG), a universal direct payment granted to all South Africans to alleviate the most severe effects of poverty and labour insecurity. At first glance, Ferguson points out, we might be inclined to see this type of assistance as appealing to 'recognizably neoliberal elements', such as 'the valorization of market efficiency, individual choice, and autonomy; themes of entrepreneurship; and skepticism about the state as a service provider' (2010: 174). But upon closer inspection, one discovers that these direct payments are also 'pro-poor' (Ferguson 2010: 174). What emerges in this case, then, is that basic income grants are one of several instances in which ideals 'we can readily identify as neoliberal are being put to work in the service of apparently pro-poor and pro-welfare political arguments' (Ferguson 2010: 176). Approaching neoliberalism as a flexible mode of governing thus allows one to appreciate how 'devices of government that were invented to serve one purpose have often enough ended up […] being harnessed to another' (Ferguson 2010: 174).

If Ferguson demonstrates how neoliberalism can aid and abet non-neoliberal policies and values, other Foucauldian anthropologists of neoliberalism have pointed to instances in which neoliberalism collides with explicitly non-neoliberal policy projects to contradictory effect. A key instance of this is Stephen Collier's (2011) work on neoliberal reform in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Collier is critical of the assumption that neoliberal doctrine 'is opposed to social welfare and to the public ends of government' (2011: 1). To correct this, he examines the surprising alignment between neoliberal reform and Soviet socialism. He finds that contrary to expectation, neoliberal policymakers were not 'blind to the need for social protection' (2011: 3), nor did they attempt to retrench the social state. Rather, neoliberal reform was mobilised to retain 'the social welfare norms established by Soviet socialism' (2011: 3). Collier examines how neoliberal policies were applied to durable Soviet infrastructure—comprised of pipes, homes, urban centres, bureaucratic and budgetary practices—all of which endured and were extended through neoliberal reform. He is careful to qualify that his work is not 'an apologia for neoliberalism' (2011: 249). Instead, he draws on Foucault's theory of governmentality to emphasise the in-built 'flexibility of many elements of neoliberal reforms' (2011: 248) often overlooked in critical approaches to neoliberalism. In this sense, Collier joins a group of scholars who have examined how neoliberal reform has intersected with communism and socialism to produce 'exceptions' (Ong 2006) to neoliberalism as we know it.

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Still other anthropologists have framed neoliberalism as a process of subject formation to point to the ways in which subjects might meet neoliberal modes of governing with a variety of responses, ranging from resistance, to compliance, to indifference. As they demonstrate, even as a subject might be incited to uphold one neoliberal value, he or she might also participate in reproducing other decidedly non-neoliberal beliefs and practices. This is evident in Andrew Kipnis's work on discourse about *suzhi*, or 'human quality', in China (2007: 383). As Kipnis notes, *suzhi* is an important political concept mobilised for a variety of purposes, ranging from justifying educational reforms to legitimising the authority of political figures (2007: 388). It is used to denote features of a person 'that result from both nature and nurture', such as dress and educational attainment, and that designate their worthiness as political subjects (Kipnis 2007: 388). As anthropologists of China have argued, one area in which the effects of *suzhi* are particularly evident is in the pressure placed on parents to raise high-quality children in a competitive educational market (Anagnost 2004, Kuan 2015). From one perspective, then, *suzhi* discourse seems to be a clear instance of an effort to produce 'responsible and governable but alienated neoliberal subjects', with the 'hyper-disciplined, over-achieving only child' being a prime example of this (Kipnis 2007: 386). However, as Kipnis argues, closer attention to *suzhi* discourse demonstrates that it draws on other non-neoliberal schools of thought, including nationalism, Marxism, and Confucianism (2007: 395). Moreover, *suzhi* discourse has come to have a certain linguistic authoritarianism about it, so that 'improving the *suzhi* of the Chinese population' became a 'sacred slogan' beyond reproach (Kipnis 2007: 393). Yet people often use the language of *suzhi* disingenuously, as political cover, to soften or occlude unpopular opinions while making public expression possible (Kipnis 2007: 393). Two important conclusions follow: *suzhi* is a mode of governing that overlaps with aspects of neoliberalism as we conventionally think about it, but which also captures other political and philosophical projects (Kipnis 2007: 394). Moreover, neither discourse about *suzhi* nor neoliberal values exert complete influence over citizen-subjects, who might draw on one or both disingenuously.

As the above examples attest, Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism have allowed anthropologists to suspend assumptions about what the world system looks like in order to better examine its unanticipated effects on governance and the political subject. On the whole, then, these authors have a different vision of how to engage critically with neoliberalism. Unlike the Marxist critics discussed earlier, Foucauldian critics tend to be less interested in decrying or generalising the deficiencies of neoliberalism than in probing its context-specific inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions for alternatives (Ferguson 2011). Neither is more or less anthropological, or more or less critical, but they have different strengths and rely on different assumptions. If world system approaches to neoliberalism are good at contextualising diverse ethnographic examples in systemic political economic and ideological frameworks, Foucauldian approaches try not to assume there is a fixed context within which to understand ethnographic cases, and are therefore sometimes better at asking where neoliberal policies and values can incorporate contradictions. However, many compelling contributions to the anthropology of neoliberalism have drawn on aspects of both Marxist

and Foucauldian theory, as the next section demonstrates.

**Ethnographies of the state and labour**

While many of the above anthropologists have profited from leading with either Marxist or Foucauldian theory, it is common to find scholars drawing on a mix of the concepts discussed, often in conjunction with the work of other thinkers. Though they have faced criticism, as discussed in the final section, these accounts are generative in that they balance the recognition that neoliberalism can be flexible along with the striking, patterned inequalities that have been entrenched in the wake of neoliberal reform. Many of these contributions have married Foucault's concepts of governmentality and subjectivity with a Marxist reading of class. In so doing they have enhanced our understanding of everyday political subjects' experience of the state and labour. These examples are hardly exhaustive. Anthropologists have also offered generative accounts of the impact of neoliberal reform on areas as diverse as gender (Schild 2000), kinship (Shever 2008), gentrification (Potuoğlu-Cook 2006, Herzfeld 2010), forms of self-management (Urciuoli 2008), voluntarism and affect (Muehlebach 2012), and the division between the public and private spheres (Bear 2011, 2015). However, the following examples are particularly helpful for demonstrating the usefulness of setting Marxist and Foucauldian concepts in conversation.

Philip Bourgois' and Jeffrey Schonberg's (2009) *Righteous dopefiend* is a clear example of where class and subjectivity can be used in consort to understand the effects of neoliberal reform. Based on more than a decade of fieldwork with homeless individuals who inject drugs in San Francisco, the book situates drug addiction in the context of the gentrification of the housing market, the decline of stable wage labour, and the retreat of social services (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009: 16). They offer an account of their interlocutors' troubled relationships with their families and the state, which, in the absence of a social safety net, increasingly takes the shape of a network of temporary healthcare providers and members of law enforcement. The book sets forth the claim that substance abuse is thus at once 'structural and personal' (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009: 16). To demonstrate this, Bourgois and Schonberg draw on a class-concept written about by Marx: the *lumpen proletariat*. The *lumpen proletariat*, for Marx, are 'the historical fall-out of large-scale, long-term transformations in the organization of the economy' (18). Bourgois and Schonberg suggest that we can understand becoming 'lumpenized' as an experience of becoming a type of marginalised subject (2009: 19). In so doing, they bring a different emphasis to their reading of Foucault than those authors discussed in the previous section. To bridge between Marx and Foucault, they also draw on Pierre Bourdieu's work to argue that the state is better understood as a shifting network of institutions and actors, rather than a network of elite actors operating in their own class-based interests. Their argument would thus be unorthodox for those who consider the world system and governmentality approaches as at odds. Yet allowing these concepts to speak to one another enables the authors to show how neoliberal reforms have meant that the state is more harshly disciplinary on the poor, in ways that

aggravate class-based and race-based distinctions. Though not completely constraining, processes of subject formation emerge as more punitive for classes deemed unworthy of personal and political concern.

Anthropologists have also drawn on theories of class and governmentality to examine the effects of neoliberal reform on the labour market. Aihwa Ong's work is canonical. Like other Foucauldian anthropologists, Ong approaches neoliberalism less as a coherent ideology or structure than as a novel mode of governing that relies heavily on technical expertise, efficiency, and individual responsibility (2007: 3). Crucially, then, neoliberalism is a highly 'mobile technology', or rational tool, of governance and can operate in conjunction with other non-neoliberal policies, techniques, and ideals (2007: 3). To demonstrate as much, Ong trains her ethnographic eye on labour and citizenship in the Asia-Pacific region, in which 'neoliberalism itself is not the general characteristic of technologies of governing' (2007: 3). She echoes Collier's observation that neoliberal reform has therefore had unanticipated effects, such as the preservation of social state infrastructure. Yet she also demonstrates that neoliberalism can produce exclusions. By redrawing the lines of who counts as valuable citizens and workers, it 'marks out excludable subjects who are denied protections' and 'the benefits of capitalist development' (Ong 2007: 6, 4). One clear example of this is the ethnicised and class-based divides that are thrown into relief by the outsourcing of knowledge-based jobs from American to Asian markets. As Ong notes, 'labour arbitrage involves shifting well-paying jobs across borders', delinking traits associated with the American middle-class and 'reterritorializing such features in skilled actors' in, for instance, Asia's burgeoning urban knowledge hubs (2007: 157, 158). Meanwhile the ascendant middle- and upper-classes targeted to take up these jobs rely on 'foreign domestic workers' often confined to conditions of 'neoslavery' (196). Populations deemed to be comprised of valuable labourers are thereby conferred the rights and protections previously granted by citizenship, even as devalued labouring populations are left increasingly vulnerable. Ong thus draws on the concepts of governmentality and the subject, as well as class, to demonstrate how neoliberalism might intersect with explicitly non-neoliberal ideals and policies, even as it also throws into relief the patterned inequalities of 'global capitalism' (2007: 7).

**After neoliberalism?**

By this point, it should be clear that anthropologists have theorised neoliberalism in a variety of ways. Precisely because neoliberalism has been so analytically productive, it has also been subject to intense debate. Written between the lines of the approaches discussed above are often more fundamental theoretical assumptions about the nature of political power and the purpose of social analysis. This final section therefore traces recent debates regarding the on-going usefulness of neoliberalism, as well as the merits of alternative concepts proposed to critique contemporary capitalism.

Most critics of the anthropological uses of neoliberalism have raised concerns that the concept is both nonspecific and also explains too much. The target of critique in these debates is often the world system

approach. Like the concepts 'world system', or 'modernity', some argue neoliberalism has occasionally functioned as ‘a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself, or as a kind of shorthand for the world economy and its inequalities’ (Ferguson 2010: 171). One of the key issues Collier (2012) sees is that analysts sometimes assume that a given world system exists at the outset, so that they at once conjure and prove the system they seek to defend as an analytic framework. In other words, it is because neoliberalism is theorised in ways that are often more ‘prescriptive’ than ‘descriptive’ that it is vulnerable to imprecision (Ganti 2014). Proponents have responded by arguing that when carefully executed, the world system approach can have descriptive power: it can account for the patterned effects of neoliberal reform without overlooking nuances and exceptions (Brenner *et al*. 2010). And though the world system approach has received the brunt of criticism, Foucauldian governmentality approaches have also been critiqued. For some, this is because the concept of governmentality can be used in ways that are expansive enough to echo the world system approach (Collier 2012: 193). For others, the issue is that neoliberal governmentality is conceptually nebulous. As Wacquant (2012) argues, if neoliberalism is framed as mobile and capable of undergoing mutations, it is difficult to pin down, and can seem to exist ‘everywhere and nowhere at the same time’ (70). Regardless of differences of conviction, what is at stake in these debates is both whether anthropologists are accurately describing our interlocutors’ experience of political power, and whether their critical tools are empirically rigorous.

Doubts about the analytic usefulness of neoliberalism have yielded a variety of responses. Some have attempted to tease apart the various ‘uses’ (Ferguson 2010) or ‘approaches’ (Hilgers 2011) to neoliberalism to provide conceptual clarity. Others have proposed that we do away with neoliberalism altogether, as it has become so expansive that its meaning is no longer clear and its uses contradictory (e.g. Laidlaw & Mair in Eriksen *et al.* 2015: 912, 917). Indeed, even contributors sympathetic to the on-going relevance of neoliberalism have raised concerns about its usefulness (Ferguson 2010: 171; Comaroff 2011: 142). Those who continue to use it do so because they feel there are patterned phenomena to which it can be said to refer, and because they are committed to a moral and political project invested in the reduction of inequality and a reinvigoration of collectivist ideals (Eriksen & Martin in Eriksen *et al.* 2015: 914, 920). Others point to the importance of neoliberalism as a tool for comparison (Ganti 2014: 100). These disagreements may come down to ideological differences, even where one or the other side presents itself as more empirically rigorous or critically sharp (Venkatesan in Eriksen *et al.* 2015: 911).

Though many insist that any pronouncement of the death knell of neoliberalism is at best premature (Harvey 2009, Peck *et al.* 2012, Aalbers 2013), alternative terms have been proposed to critique contemporary capitalism. Nikolas Rose (1993) has insisted that ‘advanced liberalism’ is a better description of the patterns often described as neoliberal. For Rose, ‘advanced liberalism’ refers to the consummation of neoliberal principles through the governance of autonomous subjects by a network of experts, one that is less a new form of liberalism than an accelerated instance of liberalism’s classic principles (see also Rose

*et al*. 2006). For Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), the 2008 recession has given way to a novel period she calls 'late liberalism'. If neoliberalism is 'a series of struggles across an uneven social terrain' that produces forms of life and death exclusion, 'late liberalism' refers to the more specific 'shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements' (Povinelli 2011: 17, 25). Others have focused less on the relationship between neoliberalism and liberalism, and more on the changes neoliberal reform has brought about in the relationship between markets and bureaucratic institutions. Marilyn Strathern (2000) and Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1999), for instance, have argued that one of the hallmarks of neoliberal restructuring has been a rapid increase in 'audit culture': bureaucratic mechanisms for measuring social progress, profit, and efficiency. Consequently, institutions—like universities—are increasingly treated more like corporations than public resources (Shore 2010).

**Conclusion**

Neoliberalism is a concept with multiple faces. It can refer to economic and philosophical ideals, policy projects, and the effects of either of the former. Anthropologists have drawn on Marxist theory to frame neoliberalism as a political economic or ideological world system within which we can understand diverse ethnographic cases. For those inspired by Foucault, neoliberalism is best understood as a flexible mode of governing with unexpected effects. Along the way, the intersection between these two camps has yielded significant insight into interlocutors' experience of the state and labour, as well as productive disagreement on the appropriate relationship between empiricism and critique. Some of the most generative contributions anthropologists have made to the literature on neoliberalism have accounted for both the patterned inequalities neoliberal reform exacerbates, and the flexibility of neoliberal policies and ideals. If neoliberalism has at times been a messy term, it has also been immensely productive and has allowed anthropologists to participate in an interdisciplinary and public debate about how best to describe, engage with, and critique our contemporary political and economic moment.

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