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Reanimating neoliberalism: process geographies of neoliberalisation

We welcome this opportunity to join the conversation on the historicity of the neoliberal state, following the provocative contributions in the previous issue of *Social Anthropology* from Loïc Wacquant and Mathieu Hilgers. Since many of the substantive arguments outlined by Wacquant and Hilgers echo and reverberate with those that we also have been making in collaboration with Neil Brenner, particularly concerning localised forms of actually existing neoliberalism and the vicissitudes of neoliberalisation as a transformative process of state restructuring (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Brenner *et al.* 2010), we do not seek here to set out an opposing position. Rather, we will make the case for attending frontally to an analytic dimension that is curiously underplayed in both earlier contributions, yet which in our view is crucial to understanding neoliberalism as an historical, constructed formation (together, we would add, with its dogged capacity for contradictory reproduction): the distinctive *spatiality* of neoliberalism.

We concur with Wacquant and Hilgers that there is a continuing need for new and ever-more searching histories of the neoliberal present. After all, the proper specification and even definition of the still-perplexing phenomenon of neoliberalism remain nontrivial social-scientific challenges, if not matters of controversy. Some see neoliberalism as the ultimate source of pervasive, effectively structural forces; others invoke the term only obliquely, or with practised ambivalence. Some eschew the concept altogether, on the grounds that its liberal use might actually foster the consolidation of 'inevitable' narratives, preempting the scope for thinking or acting outside (this reading of) current 'realities'. Others counter that failures to confront the entrenched character of neoliberalised practices and power relations, or retreats into separatism and localism, carry even greater political risks (for discussion, see Leitner *et al.* 2007; Peck *et al.* 2010). These interpretative and political challenges are further complicated by the necessity for virtually real-time theorising, in which 'local' instances of neoliberal restructuring/resistance are (implicitly or explicitly, carefully or casually) 'located' on a still-moving landscape, marked by an array of fast-moving institutional, ideological, and ideational currents and counter-currents.

And all this, several decades after neoliberalism's emergence as an extended family of actually existing state projects (in locations like Chile, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom in received accounts), and even longer since its initial articulation as a purposive ideational project. As a doctrine, neoliberalism was positioned through largely sympathetic critiques of 19th-century laissez faire and

through deeply unsympathetic critiques of those various forms of aggravated statism that were ascendant at the time, notably Keynesianism, but also state socialism and developmental-statism (Peck 2010a). Actually existing neoliberalisms may have been out in the wild for some time, their propulsive discourses may be gratefully familiar, but 'neoliberalism' itself remains a rascal concept, mostly deployed by critics who at the same time are often divided over issues of definition, origin and provenance. Perplexingly difficult to operationalise in methodological terms, neoliberalism has the status of a mere slogan or even mirage for some, while for others it represents the least avoidable social fact of these globalising times. For all this troubled and controversial existence, the concept of neoliberalism refuses to go away.

The issues at stake here far exceed those of analytical correctness, however. In the wake of the global financial crisis, and its continuing aftershocks, they rise to the status of urgent political questions, in this unfolding era of endemic insecurity and not only macroeconomic but macropolitical instability. The same might be said of the always-shifting geographies of neoliberalisation. Are we witnessing the continued mutation of a global 'thought virus' (Bourdieu 1999; Beck 2000), entrenching financialised forms of class power, or a proliferating mosaic of local hybrids, untethered from a dominant centre, with the capacity to morph into postneoliberal trajectories at every turn (Ong 2006; Ferguson 2010)? In addressing these questions, we will argue here that what might be called the mental maps of neoliberalism make a real difference, not least to how we understand the mongrel logics and manifest limits of this still evolving programme/process. As we seem to be surrounded by increasing evidence of neoliberalism's pervasive reach, if not compound hegemony, it may be tempting retrospectively to impose, on what has been a disorderly and multipolar trajectory, a simplified model of global ascendancy. It is not sufficient, however, to invoke a convergence account, in which all of the social-democratic, post-communist and late-developmental dominoes eventually tumble in the same direction. We maintain, instead, that the historical geographies of neoliberalism continue to tell different stories, revealing distinctive forms of spatiality that cut to the heart of how neoliberalisation works as a contradictory process of state-authorized market transformation. As such, they speak not only to where neoliberalism came from, but where it might be going and indeed how it might end.

Neoliberalism in motion

Most observers now agree that those reports of the death of neoliberalism, excitedly issued in the midst of the Wall Street crash of 2008, were exaggerated. This was more, however, than a miscalculation of the political odds. As we emphasised at the time, neoliberalism may have been distinctively prone, all along, to internally generated crises of deregulation, (over)marketisation and (hyper)exploitation, but it has also demonstrated a dogged capacity to exploit these same crises in the course of its own adaptive reinvention (Peck *et al.* 2010). It follows that the nonlinear, multidirectional course of real-world neoliberalisation cannot be reduced to a process of enacting a singular, pristine plan or grand design. Likewise, neoliberalisation does not produce a singular, 'advanced' or globalising state form that somehow coheres in politically functionalist, though socially destructive, ways. Neoliberalisation instead displays a lurching dynamic, marked by serial policy failure and improvised adaptation, and

by combative encounters with obstacles and counter-movements. It has carved a path, therefore, not of manifest destiny but one shaped by opportunistic moments, workarounds and on-the-hoof recalibrations, which in practice often bear little resemblance to the lofty ideals expressed in neoliberal theory.

In other words, this has not been an unimpeded and sure-footed forward march, but instead neoliberalism's rolling and roiling programme has repeatedly 'failed forward' through cumulative episodes of discursive rebranding and institutional reinvention. Heavy drinkers of the neoliberal Kool-Aid may have once believed that simple acts of state withdrawal would be sufficient to spontaneously animate free markets and civic voluntarism, but the prosaic and frequently tawdry practice of deregulatory statecraft has more often than not been a prelude to deregulatory failure, trial-and-error experimentation, market-oriented reregulation and exploratory re-engineering. Yet over and over again, neoliberal policymakers and framers have displayed a capacity to 'lean into' crises of their own making, extemporising 'downstream' responses in the resulting disarray, but at the same time nudging the programme of liberalisation-cum-desocialisation forward on a zigzagging course. Witness, for example, the way in which the blunt instruments of structural adjustment have gradually given way to an insidious embrace of localised, pro-market 'governance' and the cooptation of NGOs; or how the penchant for large-scale privatisations has morphed into a fuzzy embrace of public-private 'partnership' or tolerance of lightly regulated private monopolies, the imperative of maintaining public legitimacy necessitating blended strategies and new forms of regulatory oversight; or the manner in which the retrenchment of welfare supports and the deregulation of labour markets failed to result in the rhetorically trumpeted unilateral exit of the state, but to new rounds of flexibility- and employability-enhancing interventions, themselves endlessly adjusted and reformed.

This shape-shifting character is one reason we have remained sceptical of talk of a coherent and stable neoliberal order, opting instead for the language of neoliberalisation, as a signifier for an always-contradictory process, and for an evolving/rolling programme of restructuring (see Peck and Tickell 2002; Brenner *et al.* 2010). In marked contrast to the strident clarity of neoliberal mantras, the real-world trajectories of neoliberalisation have been far more messy, following a proliferative array of pock-marked, crisis-strewn development paths. There may be forward momentum of a sort here, but it is a long way from 'inevitalist' readings of neoliberalism, propelled by some historical motor along a (pre)set course. The ideology of neoliberalism may be characterised by a series of guiding principles – including fiscal restraint, tax aversion and a preference for individualised, market-oriented approaches over collectivist and progressively redistributive ones – but even these are inconsistently and unevenly applied, triggering their own contradictions, externalities and recoils.

Crucially, the neoliberal playbook provides no guidance whatsoever on where to draw the line on those rolling programmes of marketisation, commodification and privatisation that its utopian rhetoric inspires, with the result that the associated forms of statecraft are perpetually mired in contradictions of a 'double movement' kind (cf. Polanyi 1944; Peck 2010a) – social and institutional reflexes that themselves call forth (new) challenges of political management and reregulation. This inscribes a deep form of *context-specificity* amongst neoliberal restructuring programmes, quite aside from the fact that their points of departure are themselves geographically differentiated (involving the restructuring of more or less expansive welfare regimes in some situations, the selective dismantling of the apparatuses of colonial control or

state-socialist redistribution in others). Neoliberal restructuring measures like privatisation, for example, may be found in all such contexts, but the object and outcomes vary widely, and in more than merely contingent ways. These measures – indeed the wider neoliberal programmes of which they are a part – are never implemented on *tabulae rasae*, and never in controlled, laboratory-like circumstances; they are never entirely insulated from the vagaries of politics. Geographies of (actually existing) neoliberalism are therefore never merely deviations from some presumed norm, or variations on a theme. The spatiality of neoliberalisation, instead, is crucial to its very character as an incomplete (indeed ‘incompletable’) programme, inconsistently prosecuted and resisted across a variegated landscape (Brenner *et al.* 2010).

Methodologically, this means that concrete investigations of neoliberalisation must always be contextually embedded, but no less importantly these must also be ‘located’ according to those various extra-local contexts defined by shifting landscapes of regulatory transformation, the prevailing ‘rules of the game’ as enshrined in supra-scalar settlements, the disciplinary drag of fiscal restraint, the dull compulsion of competitive pressures, and so forth. Correspondingly, the fact that neoliberalisation always amounts to more than the sum of its local parts necessitates constant recourse to cross-case and cross-conjunctural modes of analysis, as opposed to extrapolations from one site or another. The preceding contributions from Loïc Wacquant and Mathieu Hilgers, in fact, provide two compelling illustrations of the emergent form of neoliberal penalty, each visualised from a different conjunctural location in the world system. We would not contest the contextual specificities of their arguments, each of which are authoritative in their own terms. However, we do wish to make the case for theorising *across* such armatures, in addition to within or from them. Indeed, we maintain that such forms of cross-case theorisation are essential to any adequate understanding of neoliberalisation as an historical process, the contradictory and uneven character of which is deeply constitutive rather than merely contingent.

Neoliberalism, in and out of place

Pursuant to such a lateral manoeuvre, we embark here in a different kind of *via media* to that proposed by Loïc Wacquant, styled in his paper as a third methodological course, cut between an insufficiently reflexive political economy stance on the one side and an excessively fluid, diffuse governmentality approach on the other, the respective contributions and limits of which we have discussed at length elsewhere (Brenner *et al.* 2010). The alternative *via media* that we invoke here moves between, but also in dialogue with, the respective contributions of Wacquant and Hilgers, calling attention specifically to the distinctive *spatialities* implied in these readings of neoliberal historicity. This means cutting a path between Wacquant’s (2012: 67) approach, which tellingly connects the ‘micro-ethnography of the postindustrial precariat to the macrosociology of the neoliberal Leviathan’, and the contrasting analysis proposed by Hilgers (2012: 81, 90), in which the variety of actually existing neoliberalisms is emphasised, in varying degrees of tension with ‘quintessential’ expressions of neoliberal multilateralism like the Washington Consensus and those Western configurations of the workfare/prisonfare state invoked by Wacquant, effectively endogenising neoliberal impulses within a situated reading of the ‘sociohistorical trajectory[ies] of the state’. In light of these quite different analytical orientations, it would probably be fair to say that – confronted with

the *same* hybrid formation of actually existing neoliberalism, cohabiting (as it must) with other social and state forms – Wacquant would be more inclined to emphasise (and sample on/theorise from) tendential commonality, while Hilgers would more likely opt to emphasise (and sample on/theorise from) revealed discrepancy. For one, the neoliberal glass is half full, for the other it is half empty. One is more concerned with emergent regularities and patterns, even convergent tendencies, the other with exceptions to these self-same rules.

Now, our own *via media* would not legislate dogmatically in favour of one or other of these methodological strategies, but instead conceptualise them as iterative steps in an ongoing but more dialectical mode of theory development. This perspective positions the respective contributions of Wacquant and Hilgers not merely as differently situated readings – one Atlanticist, the other Africanist – or competing accounts of the same social reality (neoliberal penalty), but instead conceives them as alternate analytical poles, en route to an understanding of the unevenly developed yet globalising process of neoliberalisation.

‘What started as an inquiry into the everyday predicament of the urban precariat at ground level in inner Chicago and outer Paris’, Wacquant candidly explains, ‘ended with the theoretical conundrum of the character and constituents of neoliberalism on a planetary scale’ (2012, 67–8). It is on the basis of this vividly portrayed conjuncture that Wacquant extrapolates to what he sees as an emergent, globalising neoliberal state form – in the shape of a tendentially re-engineered, Centaur state, conferring liberal freedoms on those at the top of the social structure while imposing penal restrictions on those at the bottom. The spatiality of this argument is rooted in a matrix of centrifugal and combinatory forces, involving the ‘sequential diffusion and functional interlock whereby policies of economic deregulation, supervisory workfare and punitive justice tend to track and blossom together’, albeit under conditions in which the ‘velocity, magnitude and effects of this institutional torque will vary from country to country, depending on its position in the international order, the makeup of its national field of power, and the configuration of its social space and cultural divisions’ (Wacquant 2012, 67, 74). There is deviation around the emergent standard, in other words, conditioned by political contexts and social struggles, but the workings of this ‘institutional torque’ are essentially focused on a path of penal intensification, overseen by a tendentially predominant Centaur state. Driven less by a simple process of functionally guided convergence than by a progressively tightening knot of (often dysfunctional) regulatory congruences and complementarities, this is a pattern in which neoliberalism’s adaptive plurality is enfolded into a macro-directional dynamic, manifest in an ‘*institutional core*’ that makes it distinct and recognisable’ (Wacquant 2012, 71; original emphasis).

If Wacquant’s *via media* carries him on an analytic course between neoliberalism’s original ideational moment, represented by the mid-twentieth century birth of the Mont Pèlerin Society, and the millennial array of actually existing cases, conceived as ‘historical incarnations’ (Wacquant 2012, 71), Hilgers is much less emphatic about what he sees as a nuanced, though implicitly global, model of neoliberalism, opting instead to call attention to the often divergent ‘trajectories of a variety of states’ (Hilgers 2012, 80). It should be noted that their positions overlap considerably – including with our own – on the questions, first, of the inescapably *political* nature of the neoliberal programme, and second, its realisation in the form of variously reconfigured, re-engineered, restructured and redeployed *states*, in contrast with the generative (and still pervasive) myths of state withdrawal. But Hilgers (2012, 82) baulks at Wacquant’s (2009, ix) earlier portrayal of

the United States as a 'living laboratory of the neoliberal future', countering that the African experience of neoliberalism represents neither a downstream nor secondary form, but in its own way reflects an 'unprecedented' configuration of multilateral power and distinctively endogenous state orientations. Itself unevenly developed, of course, the African state is nevertheless broadly characterised as one that is (implicitly, in comparison with Western norms) 'both more present and visible, but at the same time more absent and weak, capable of coercion through informal measures (violence, threats, intimidation...) but incapable of fulfilling its social obligations' (Hilgers 2012: 85).

Shifting analytical focus to the subcontinental scale, however, reveals, for Hilgers, another layer of countercurrents, contradictions and out-of-character configurations, in contrast to Wacquant's evocation of an increasingly generalised process of institutional interlock tending towards a stabilised politico-institutional constellation. With respect to the state's withering left arm, the 'atrophy of the social state', it is claimed that 'numerous African countries are on the vanguard' (even some of those, apparently, that never possessed a social state as such, where absence rather than atrophy might be a more apt term); some states have even been expanding various forms of social spending in tandem with neoliberalisation; others have been slashing and cutting minimalist provisions for education and healthcare; nearly everywhere on the continent, welfare states did not historically precede late twentieth-century rounds of neoliberal restructuring, hence it is logically impossible to 'observe a universal and systematic shift from welfare to workfare [although] South Africa perhaps provides an exception' (Hilgers 2012: 88). Responsibilised neoliberal subjects can be identified in some parts of Africa but not others (and maybe not most); some West African countries have comparatively low rates of incarceration; and there are instances of neoliberal restructuring on the continent, readily available as counter-cases to the allegedly singular logic, that are adjudged to be 'perfectly opposite the one described by Loïc Wacquant' (Hilgers 2012, 88). Nevertheless, amid all these divergent currents, Hilgers explicitly acknowledges that, first, Wacquant's claims do indeed seem to be broadly consistent with conditions in the (Western) geographical conjunctures that have been the focus for his empirical investigations, and second, perhaps as an indication that some kind of long-term theoretical rapprochement could be on the cards, that there might exist a 'deeper reality' in which, 'beneath its apparent apology of freedom, neoliberalism produces a specific state that reinforces control and coercion' (Hilgers 2012, 89).

It has long been known that neoliberalisation does not necessarily beget social and political freedom (think of Pinochet's military repression or Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism'), so there are reasons to keep open the question of whether late neoliberalism is historically prone to some kind of penal or authoritarian turn-cum-trajectory. As Polanyi long ago recognised, double movements against the excesses of commodification or marketisation may take a variety of politically mediated forms; both in principle and in (emergent) practice, there is scope for politically progressive and 'more social' responses to the failures of neoliberal programming, as well as coercive/authoritarian ones (see Ferguson 2010; Sader 2011), even as the outlook from many of the supposed 'heartlands' of neoliberalism is generally much more sobering (see Crouch 2011; McNally 2011). There is both methodological contention and political principle in our advocacy here of the need to conceive of (and indeed challenge) neoliberalism *across* these conjunctural contexts, not only within them. We emphasise the spatiality of this still-unfolding process, in this context, as an alternative to retreating into localism

or falling (again) for globalism. This is not, however, an alternative to those historicities of neoliberalism outlined by Wacquant and Hilgers, but a necessary complement to them.

The unfolding historical *geographies* of neoliberalism, we contend, do not display a unidirectional arc either towards or away from coherence/singularity. It is possible to trek to Mont Pèlerin and back and discover that there was not one but a series of founding texts, and that the earliest ideational manifestations of neoliberalism were somewhat divided and dialogic (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Peck 2010a). In other words, there was no *locus classicus*, as such, and as a result actually existing neoliberalism cannot be defined exclusively in relation to a fully articulated and preceding ideational programme. The moving map of actually existing neoliberalism is, of course, inescapably more complex. There was no single birthplace, to which all subsequent formations can be genealogically tagged, but a series of localised manifestations, the mutual referentiality and interdependences of which have deepened and densified with time, in the context of continued uneven development rather than simple convergence. Amongst the multiple points of origin, one might identify currents within the West German 'social market' model, Rogernomics in New Zealand, and Pinochet's Chile, in addition to the trajectories initiated by Thatcher and Reagan (both of which had their constitutive precursors). In other words, there is no singular *fons et origo*, from which subsequent 'deviations' can somehow be calibrated.

Neoliberalism's more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts character, its cross-referentiality and intertextuality, is therefore revealed *across* these cases and conjunctures, which comprise a multipolar constellation not a hierarchically ordered group of paradigmatic centres and lagging emulators. Even though there remain doctrinal reference points, disciplinary pressures, fiscal parameters, strategic preferences/prejudices, and so forth, which establish commonalities and connections across this matrix of variegation, the fact that neoliberalism can only exist in socially embedded form (Cahill 2012) means that transformative dynamics can never be *exclusively* assigned to neoliberalism. The hybrid (re)combinations within which neoliberalism dwells are themselves generative; it is not that neoliberalisation is active, while its socio-institutional 'hosts' are merely inert, residual. Again, this speaks to the need to trace the diverse effects of neoliberalisation across cases, not to raise selected cases to the status of quintessence or paradigm, or for that matter to classify others as 'exceptional'.

For these reasons, the accounts of neoliberal penalty sketched by Mathieu Hilgers and Loïc Wacquant, while useful for understanding the continued, historical unfolding of neoliberalisation, are destined to remain incomplete in the absence of a more explicit theorisation of spatiality, variegation, and uneven geographical development. We question Wacquant's (2012, 71, footnote 5) strategy of theorising actually existing neoliberalism, in all its variants, in relation to a distinct 'institutional core' and the historical process by reference to a 'more complete original core'. As an incomplete historical process, unevenly realised in space, neoliberalism must always dwell with its others; it may even be necessarily parasitic on other social and state formations. 'Essential' features of neoliberalisation, as process, can be identified through abstraction, in constant dialogue with concrete cases, but these need not be manifest in a distinctive institutional core; indeed, their institutional manifestations are likely to be *especially* characterised by messy hybridity and contradictory development. This said, we share Wacquant's determination to refine and interrogate the nature of neoliberalisation as an abstract process, and to flush out constitutive connections and family resemblances

across cases. By the same token, we have reservations about the loosely principled granting of 'exceptional' status on the basis of local empirical counter-tendencies, particularly where these are drawn in relation to a 'quintessential' other, echoes of which we see in Hilgers' otherwise nuanced response. Instead, we would seek to position the variegated formations to which Hilgers alludes according to distinctively (rather than randomly) patterned forms of uneven development that are associated with neoliberalisation. Our *via media* consequently takes us between paradigmatic truth spots on the one hand, and spaces of exception on the other, towards an understanding of the complex spatiality of actually existing neoliberalism and its co-evolution with neoliberal doctrines.

Admittedly, this is not a recipe for an essentialised, singular model of neoliberalism, nor for a compact, catch-phrase style definition, but it arguably does allow us to grapple with an historical process that is manifestly global in reach, but that has not been, and may not be, realised in any kind of planetary uniformity. With Phil Cerny (2009) and others, we recognise the importance of *cross-sectional/conjunctural* analyses of 'varieties' of neoliberalism, while emphasising the interpenetration and co-dependency of many of these varieties. With Aihwa Ong (2006) and others, we acknowledge the significance of *lateral/liminal* analyses of neoliberalism as a travelling technology of rule, while calling attention to the patterned landscapes across which these journeys occur. With Peter Hall (1993) and others, we see a role for *ideational/institutional* analyses of neoliberalism as the cumulative construction and evolution of a market-oriented policy paradigm, while seeing this domain also as the source of endemic under-performance, volatility and persistent counter-currents. And with Stephen Gill (1995) and others, we appreciate the contribution of *hegemonic/hierarchical* analyses of neoliberalism as a global disciplinary order, while at the same time stressing the relational construction of this evolving order across different scales of governance. Just as it is necessary to theorise neoliberalism across cases, so also must adequate treatments of the spatiality of neoliberalisation take account of these polyvalent registers.

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