

Special Theme Issue Introduction

Fracturing Neoliberalism: Ethnographic Interventions

Kaja Tretjak
CUNY Graduate Center

Elan Abrell
CUNY Graduate Center

While the concept of neoliberalism¹ occupies a central place in understanding political economic and cultural change across disciplines, emerging approaches in anthropology challenge paradigms that envision neoliberalism as a coherent, unitary force or treat it as a monolith acting upon the world. Further, these approaches do not take up the project of identifying neoliberalism's unifying strands across disparate contexts. Rather, they highlight the contingent, contradictory, and unstable character of neoliberal processes, examining historically and geographically contextualized situations through grounded studies of concrete places, people, and institutions (e.g. Clarke 2004; Kingfisher 2002;

Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Maskovsky and Kingfisher 2001; Nybell, Shook and Finn 2009). Importantly, the aim is not to downplay the powerful impact of neoliberal formations on real lives and experiences; it is to interrogate and problematize the particularities of these formations with an eye toward their limits. The central set of questions, then, focuses on specific places at particular moments: "who does what, by what means, to what ends and with what institutional effects?" (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008:121).

The concept for this volume stems from a 2009 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting invited session on the interrelations between contemporary neoliberal and conservative movements, in which all authors participated. The articles collected here explore a number of themes that contribute to the project of developing more nuanced understandings of disparate neoliberal processes across varying contexts. In particular, we wish to highlight three such interrelated themes, illustrated especially well through grounded ethnographic studies: (1) the role of narratives and discourses in legitimizing neoliberal projects as well as in helping understand their transformations and limits; (2) that such projects are decidedly not self-actualizing (Peck and Tickell 2002) but stem from distinct actors,

1 As is well known, neoliberalism as a political economic concept posits that human flourishing is best promoted through an institutional framework comprised of free markets, free trade, and private property rights and guaranteed by the state, the actions of which beyond this ought to be highly limited. Contemporary policies under the neoliberal rubric include deregulation of private industry, privatization of public services, and reduction of public expenditures for social provision. The rise of neoliberalism is associated with the economic restructuring of Pinochet's Chile under U.S. influence during the 1970s, and, subsequently, with the regimes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan more generally (Harvey 2005). Among other important contributions, analysts have theorized the different moments and changing forms of neoliberalism throughout its ascent to global prominence (Peck and Tickell 2002) as well as the potential transcendence into a post-neoliberal era (MacDonald and Ruckert 2009); the role of state action in neoliberalism (Bourdieu 2003; Sassen 1996); and neoliberalism's ideological and political dimensions (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Klein 2007).

although often with unintended consequences; and (3) the significance of both historical and contemporary political context, particularly of competing political projects that intersect with, but are not the same as, neoliberal processes.

Narratives and Discourses

All three contributions illustrate how key elements of the state are anything but absent or in retreat, facilitating neoliberal processes in different but important ways. Through ethnographic engagement, the articles show the varied ways in which narratives and discourses produced through complex interactions between state and non-state actors play a crucial role in justifying and perpetuating neoliberal projects. Importantly, the particularities thus revealed also point to vulnerabilities and spaces for potential intervention that may emerge over time in each unique context.

Key to Nybell's account of a neoliberal reform project of social services for young people in Michigan is the question of how such reform is made appealing or acceptable to those with vested interests in the well-being of poor and working class children. While the appeal to elites of program cutbacks and the elimination of entitlements may appear more evident in light of tax cuts and privatization efforts, Nybell examines the narrative structures through which social service workers themselves became invested in the reform effort throughout the 1990s. Her ethnographic study illuminates how the movement at issue presented new narratives that "offered workers relief from 'shame and blame' for the failures of the bureaucratic welfare state in exchange for participation in new, community-based, voluntaristic and entrepreneurial configurations of help" (page 34 here), while further coupling concepts of community and childhood in presenting hopeful images of reform and celebrating local control. Yet by 2009, the exuberance underlying the effort had waned as goals remained unattained and visions unrealized. The effort's central narratives underwent important transformations as well, highlighting the vulnerabilities and uncertainties attendant to shifting forms of power.

Well-developed narratives can also serve as

a powerful justifying force for particular projects, obscuring their potential dangers and limitations. Kuymulu's examination of market-based nature conservation projects in Cockpit Country, Jamaica, expressly challenges the discourse of "stakeholder partnerships" and "community participation" permeating the entrepreneurial approaches that have supplanted state-led conservation initiatives since the 1990s. Kuymulu argues that, while advanced by well-intentioned NGOs committed to environmental protection and the economic uplift of local people, the discourse of stakeholder partnerships and democratic community participation masks the potential of these efforts to exacerbate existing and create new inequalities.

Molina's work on minuteman activity along the U.S.-Mexico border in San Diego County, California, further underscores the significance of narratives in advancing specific political projects, revealing how complex relations between minutemen and state actors produce and perpetuate legitimizing narratives around border security. Molina argues that minuteman activity further legitimizes state border security efforts – while gaining much of its own legitimacy from state institutions – even though these efforts have proved largely ineffective in terms of curtailing illicit border crossing. While minuteman border surveillance itself is largely theatrical, its nominal accomplishments in terms of stopping migrants entrench the narrative that border security is the most effective means of stemming "illegal immigration." Through participation in broader anti-immigration networks, minutemen are able to relay this narrative, alongside related discourses around the perils of immigration, to the broader public in ways that the U.S. Border Patrol cannot.

Actors and Agency

The narratives and discourses underlying particular projects are not free-floating but advanced by concrete actors for express purposes, though nevertheless subject to reconfiguration and intervention over time. Thus, Nybell describes the state-sponsored nature of the social services reform project, funded by federal agencies and a range of private foundations. Attention to narrative structures in conjunction

with the interests of those advancing them further highlights cracks and fissures in the reform effort's edifice: for instance, attention to the uneasy coupling of the state social welfare administration's policy agenda with the narratives deployed to incorporate service workers reveals vulnerabilities that, as participants faced new contexts, became open to potential challenge.

Careful attunement to the agents behind particular projects further highlights the complexities of scale and belies the falsity of simple top-down understandings of how policy reform operates. Nybell notes that local communities served as laboratories for larger efforts, with movement proponents carrying stories of local reform across a wide range of geographical contexts – from the U.S. national stage to the streets of Iraq. Kuymulu's work too illustrates the necessity of analysis along multiple geographic scales: while the transnational Nature Conservancy and Jamaica's tourism and bauxite industries all powerfully impact the nature conservation process in Cockpit County, community-based Local Forest Management Committees also mediate it at the local level in key ways. Further, as these developments are currently in their formative stages, continued focus on the experiences of local participants may, in light of Kuymulu's critique, reveal vulnerabilities in the broader, transnational conservation trends; emergent discourses may thus once again – through the efforts of distinct actors – transcend geographical scale, this time to challenge rather than entrench dominant approaches to nature conservation.

Historical and Contemporary Political Context

While neoliberal processes, albeit unstable and contradictory, may be powerful and widespread, they by no means operate in a vacuum. Highlighting the importance of historical context, Nybell shows that it was precisely the failures of the bureaucratic welfare state that set the stage for the appeal of neoliberal reform narratives to social service workers. These workers' ensuing investment in the reform project underscores the significance of examining further how and why neoliberal projects appeal to groups other than elites.

In terms of contemporary political context, we find a clear need in the literature for more robust understandings of how neoliberal projects articulate with other political formations and to what effect. Especially important are political projects that intersect with but are different from neoliberal projects; yet these are often subsumed by analysts under the vague rubric of "neoliberal contradictions." Molina's work identifies one path toward expanding this avenue of research by examining how illiberal anti-immigrant ideology interacts with neoliberal processes. Indeed, he argues that the minutemen – expressly opposed to some neoliberal initiatives such as corporate outsourcing and free trade agreements but strongly in support of others, including welfare state retrenchment and an end to "big government" generally – may in fact be partially undermining their own aims, further entrenching neoliberal processes in U.S. political life by lending support to border security efforts that themselves partly serve to protect neoliberal economic aims.

Both historical and contemporary political context shape the repertoire of actions available to participants in any given political project, with important implications. Increased attention to this aspect of grounded neoliberal processes – in conjunction with the others outlined here, which represent but a sample of potential directions of research – will contribute to more robust, nuanced understandings of these processes, as well as facilitate the identification of vulnerabilities and spaces for intervention. The articles that follow contribute to a growing body of work that draws on ethnographic methodology toward understandings of the complex particularities, instabilities and limits of neoliberal projects as advanced by distinct actors pursuing concrete, though certainly not predetermined, ends.

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