

# Neoliberalism

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## Keywords

late capitalism, liberalism, political economy, governmentality, NGOs, market

## Abstract

Neoliberalism has been a popular concept within anthropological scholarship over the past decade; this very popularity has also elicited a fair share of criticism. This review examines current anthropological engagements with neoliberalism and explains why the concept has been so attractive for anthropologists since the millennium. It briefly outlines the history of neoliberal thought and explains how neoliberalism is different from late capitalism. Although neoliberalism is a polysemic concept with multiple referents, anthropologists have most commonly understood neoliberalism in two main ways: as a structural force that affects people's life-chances and as an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities. Neoliberalism frequently functions as an index of the global political-economic order and allows for a vast array of ethnographic sites and topics to be contained within the same frame. However, as an analytical framework, neoliberalism can also obscure ethnographic particularities and foreclose certain avenues of inquiry.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the past decade, anthropological interest and scholarship about neoliberalism have increased tremendously, as evidenced by the large number of articles published in the main journals of the field as well as by the increasing number of monographs that discuss the topic. A simple search in AnthroSource for the keywords “neoliberal” or “neoliberalism” appearing in journal articles published between 1990 and 2013 reveals that nearly 80% of this scholarship has been published since 2005. The near ubiquity of the terms “neoliberal” and “neoliberalism” within contemporary anthropological scholarship has also attracted a fair share of criticism for being cursory or insufficiently theorized (Clarke 2008, Elyachar 2012, Ferguson 2009, Hoffman et al. 2006, Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008, Schwegler 2009). In fact, in December 2012, the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) at the University of Manchester debated the motion, “The concept of neoliberalism has become an obstacle to the anthropological understanding of the twenty-first century.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in addition to anthropology’s concern with neoliberalism, anthropologists have also been concerned about that concern, expressing unease about the concept’s popularity within the discipline. This critique is expressed in two main sets of questions. First, why is neoliberalism the term of choice to describe our contemporary world? What happened to late capitalism (Ortner 2011, Sahlin 2002)? What is different about neoliberalism as a historical moment and as a political-economic phenomenon? And second, if neoliberalism explains and describes all contemporary socio-political-economic-cultural phenomena, then does it have any utility as an analytical category (Clarke 2008, GDAT 2012, Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008)?

In this review, I answer the above questions as I examine current anthropological engagements with neoliberalism as an analytical frame and a historical process. I endeavor to explain why the concept has been so attractive for anthropologists since the millennium. I also discuss what neoliberalism indexes for scholars and what it enables anthropologists to represent, analyze, and discuss, as well as what it can occlude. At the heart of the criticisms and debates over the efficacy or inefficacy of neoliberalism as a theoretical framework lie long-standing anthropological concerns about scale, representation, comparison, and relevance.

This article is organized into three main parts. In the first, I briefly outline the history of how neoliberalism emerges as a particular political-economic philosophy in interwar Europe as a way to determine how neoliberalism is different from late capitalism. Historicizing and locating neoliberalism will enable us to treat it less as a monolithic ideology and process. In the second section, I discuss how anthropologists have most commonly understood and defined neoliberalism and detail how anthropologists have engaged with it in their own ethnographic work. This scholarship can be divided into three broad themes: neoliberalism as a structural force that affects people’s lives and life-chances; neoliberalism as an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities; and the sites and agents of neoliberal practice. In the final section, I detail the criticisms posed by anthropologists about neoliberalism as an analytical category and speculate why it became such a compelling framework for anthropologists in the past decade and what some of the unexamined assumptions of this turn have been.

## DEFINING AND LOCATING NEOLIBERALISM

Ong (2006) remarks, “Neoliberalism seems to mean many different things depending on one’s vantage point” (p. 1). When surveying the literature that references neoliberalism, the term appears

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<sup>1</sup>The entire debate can be heard at <http://www.talkinganthropology.com/2013/01/18/ta45-gdat1-neoliberalism/#t=0:40.700>.

to be quite polysemic without a singular referent. Instead, the concept has four main referents: (a) a set of economic reform policies that some political scientists characterize as the “D-L-P formula,” which are concerned with the deregulation of the economy, the liberalization of trade and industry, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises (Steger & Roy 2010, p. 14); (b) a prescriptive development model that defines very different political roles for labor, capital, and the state compared with prior models, with tremendous economic, social, and political implications (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009, p. 144); (c) an ideology that values market exchange as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Treanor 2005); and (d) a mode of governance that embraces the idea of the self-regulating free market, with its associated values of competition and self-interest, as the model for effective and efficient government (Steger & Roy 2010, p. 12).

Within the anthropological literature, neoliberalism denotes a wide array of political contexts and socioeconomic phenomena: from structural adjustment policies in the Global South (Elyachar 2005, McKay 2012, Richard 2009), to postsocialist transformations in Eurasia (Bloch 2005, Hemment 2012, Kalb 2009, Musaraj 2011), to the retrenchment of the welfare state in Western democracies (Dunk 2002, Molé 2010, Morgen 2001), to the production of selves and subjectivities (Gershon & Alexy 2011, Hoey 2010, Matza 2012, Pazderic 2004), and to the ways that culture and cultural difference are commodified to accrue profit (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009, Dávila 2012). Economic historian Philip Mirowski (2009) asserts, “Neoliberalism remains a major ideology that is poorly understood but curiously, draws some of its prodigious strength from that obscurity” (p. 426).

Unlike “late capitalism,” which is a temporal and descriptive marker devised by scholars to characterize transformations in the nature of capitalism (Harvey 1990, Lash & Urry 1987), neoliberalism is an ideological and philosophical movement—what economic historians refer to as a “thought collective” (Mirowski & Plehwe 2009)—that emerges at a particular historical moment and can be traced to the networks of specific intellectuals and institutions in post-World War I Europe and the United States. The aim of these intellectuals, mostly economists and philosophers, was to oppose what they saw as a rising tide of collectivism, state-centered planning, and socialism and to develop an agenda that was distinct from classical liberalism. Although many accounts of neoliberalism refer to the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 by Austrian economist Friedrich August von Hayek as the key moment in the formulation of neoliberal philosophy (Harvey 2005, Ong 2006, Steger & Roy 2010), economic historians surmise that the term neoliberalism appeared first in 1925 in the Swiss economist Hans Honegger’s *Trends of Economic Ideas* and point to the diverse origins and strands of neoliberal ideology (Plehwe 2009). For example, one articulation of the concept referred to as ordoliberalism, by a group of economists and legal scholars in Germany affiliated with the Freiburg School, argued for a more moderate version of classical laissez-faire liberalism in which the state had to play an active role for the free market to function effectively because powerful private actors such as monopolies or cartels could threaten the freedom of competition (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009, Lemke 2001).

An important event in the development of neoliberal thought was the publication of Walter Lippmann’s *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* in 1937, which argued that a market economy was far superior to state intervention and that the absence of private property was akin to totalitarianism (Plehwe 2009). The book was so well received among certain European intellectuals that the Colloque Walter Lippmann was organized in Paris in 1938, which several key figures who would later participate in the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society attended. During the colloquium, neoliberalism was defined in terms of the priority of the price mechanism, free enterprise, the system of competition, and a strong and impartial state (Plehwe 2009, p. 14). Although the participants at the colloquium launched a journal and a think tank headquartered

in Paris with branches in Geneva, London, and New York, with the aim of promoting neoliberal philosophy, the outbreak of World War II shortly thereafter halted such efforts.

In April 1947, a group of economists from Europe and the United States gathered in the Swiss village of Mont Pelerin for a conference cosponsored by the Foundation for Economic Education (based in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York), the William Volker Fund (Kansas City, Missouri), and Credit Swiss. To combat its sense of intellectual isolation and lack of influence on policy makers, the group founded the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) to build a transnational network of intellectuals who could be trusted to promote the cause of neoliberalism. In their draft statement of aims, group members laid out 10 principles that attempted to articulate a common vision for the society. Although they could not agree on this draft, it is worthwhile to describe some of the principles to give us a clear idea of what constitutes some of the core concerns of neoliberalism as a political-economic philosophy. The draft statement argued that individual freedom could be preserved only in a society that protected private property and had a competitive market as the foundation of economic activity. Private property in terms of the means of production was seen as key to decentralizing power and preventing its concentration, which could otherwise jeopardize individual freedom. Freedom of choice across all domains of production and consumption—of the producer, worker, and consumer—was imperative for the efficient and satisfactory production of goods and services. Freedom of choice also extended to individuals who should have the right to plan their own lives rather than be directed by a centralized planning authority. A proper legal and institutional framework that enabled government activity to be rendered predictable as a result of fixed rules was necessary to produce an effective competitive order (Plehwe 2009, pp. 23–24).

The final statement that was drawn up on April 8, 1947, and the only official statement of the Mont Pelerin Society to date, illustrates how members' concerns were the product of a particular historical moment, marked by the dominance of Keynesian ideas about the state as an important economic actor and the presence of an alternative economic paradigm exemplified by the Soviet Union. The first part of the "Statement of Aims of the Mont Pelerin Society" asserts,

The central values of civilization are in danger . . . . The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved. (quoted in Plehwe 2009, p. 25)

One of the main ways that neoliberalism is different from classical liberalism is in the belief that its idea of a good society is not "natural," but instead can only come about through a concerted political effort and organization. What it shares with classical liberalism is the belief in markets, as compared with the state, as a more efficient mechanism to communicate information about supply, demand, and prices. However, neoliberalism seeks to redefine the nature and functions of the state rather than completely eliminate it (Mirowski 2009).

Studying the history of neoliberalism as a political-economic philosophy reveals the distinct genealogies of the terms neoliberalism and late capitalism and their emergence out of distinct political commitments. Whereas neoliberalism is "truly an offspring of the Great Depression" (Plehwe 2009, p. 12), late capitalism can be traced to processes of deindustrialization and shifts from Fordist or Taylorist modes of production to more flexible forms of work organization that began in Western, industrialized democracies in the 1960s and 1970s (Harvey 1990, Lash & Urry 1987). Whereas late capitalism is a descriptive or explanatory concept that indexes a set of changes in the organizational structures of production and in relationships between states, industrial capital,

and labor, neoliberalism is a prescriptive concept that articulates a normative vision of the proper relationship between the state, capital, property, and individuals. The periodization of capitalism also emerges from scholarly commitments to understanding and explaining the challenges faced by the organized industrial working class owing to new regimes of production, regulation, and workplace organization. Neoliberalism, by contrast, is a concept that originated from a political agenda that was hostile to the idea of economic decisions being predicated on working-class interests.

Another important difference between the uses of the term late capitalism and neoliberalism is that whereas the former appears to be a relatively neutral term, the latter does not. Although initially coined to signal ideological distance from classical liberalism, economists and other intellectuals associated with neoliberalism, including members of the MPS, stopped using the term by the late 1950s. Reviewing the contemporary scholarship on neoliberalism shows that the term is ideologically and theoretically charged and most commonly employed in critique—of existing capitalist political-economic structures, modes of governance, discourses valorizing individual entrepreneurialism, or efforts to retrench the state's redistributive role (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009, Bourdieu 1998, Harvey 2005, Ortner 2011).

Political scientists note that neoliberalism acquired its negative connotations after the term began to be used in Latin America, first by Chilean intellectuals to designate the economic reforms promoted by the Pinochet regime (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009, Steger & Roy 2010). The figure of economist Milton Friedman, who was Hayek's American protégé and served as the president of the MPS from 1970 to 1972, and the role played by the University of Chicago's School of Economics (headed by Friedman) in training a generation of Latin American economists in the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as the "Chicago Boys," who radically restructured and transformed economies throughout the region, leading to tremendous social inequality and various political and economic crises, have also contributed to the general negative valence of the terms neoliberal and neoliberalism within social science scholarship.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH NEOLIBERALISM

Much of the anthropological scholarship appears unaware of the long history of neoliberalism and the varying national traditions of neoliberal thought, possibly because of the discipline's present-oriented, inductive, fieldwork-based methodology. Anthropologists' ethnographic engagements lead them to focus on the social lives and concerns of their interlocutors, after which they scale up from the particular to the general. Issues of political economy are treated as a context or base that shapes and constrains action, rather than (until recently) topics of ethnographic inquiry in their own right. As Hoffman et al. (2006) note, "Although ever more anthropological studies are concerned *with* neoliberalism, there have been few steps made toward an anthropology *of* neoliberalism, that is an anthropology in which the very definition of neoliberalism is put into question and made an object of investigation" (p. 9). Being aware of the history and genealogy of neoliberalism would enable anthropologists to carry out precisely such an inquiry and to be more reflexive about using the term.

With the exception of those working in Latin America, anthropologists did not begin to engage with neoliberalism or even start using the term until well after the millennium, although the retrenchment of the social welfare state, the spread of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated structural adjustment policies, and the "D-L-P Formula" were features of the global political economy from the 1980s onward, which intensified further in the 1990s. "Globalization" or "transnational cultural processes" were more salient categories for anthropologists in the 1990s, which in a post-1989 world marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin

Wall indexed a certain contingency about which scholars could be agnostic. Anthropological engagements with the topic of neoliberalism begin in earnest in a post-9/11 world where the impact of various market-oriented economic reforms, policy prescriptions, financial crises, and the global War on Terror became more palpable in anthropologists' field sites. The emergence of business process outsourcing (BPO) whereby white-collar jobs in service, technology, and knowledge industries migrated to countries such as India and the Philippines and the rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) to challenge the economic hegemony of the OECD also contribute to the generalized state of insecurity and anxiety experienced by populations in the global North. As mentioned above, "neoliberalism" serves predominantly as a term of critique and thus indexes what Ortner (2011) describes as a "darker, bleaker narrative."

The bulk of the anthropological literature focusing on neoliberalism falls into two main strands: One is concerned with policies and politics and the other with ideologies and values. This division is a heuristic one rather than a claim that policies are devoid of ideologies or that values are apolitical. The first derives from a Marxist paradigm dedicated to questions of political economy, specifically regarding the effects of macroeconomic policies such as structural adjustment programs, the retrenchment of the social welfare state, and the privatization of public services or goods. The second emerges from a Foucauldian framework that focuses on technologies of self and governmentality whereby subjectivities are formed or refashioned in alignment with values of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and market competition. In both, neoliberalism represents a structural or ideological force that has a tremendous impact on people's lives, life-chances, social relations, and ways of inhabiting the world. A third strand, which intersects the first two, is scholarship that examines the agents and institutions—technocrats, bureaucrats, NGOs, and mass media forms—held to articulate or mediate neoliberal ideology and practice.

### **Neoliberalism as Structural Force that Engenders Material Effects**

Given the discipline's commitment to elucidating local life-worlds, anthropologists have been well positioned to document the varied effects of neoliberal policies and economic restructuring on people's lives and life-chances throughout the world. A general conclusion from most anthropological studies that discuss neoliberalism is that global inequalities have risen sharply; most people are marginalized, dispossessed, and disenfranchised (Bourgois 2011, Comaroff & Comaroff 2000, Ferguson 2006, Greenhouse 2010, Mains 2007, Ruben & Maskovsky 2008) as public resources have been privatized (Aiyer 2008, Amouroux 2009, Sampat 2010, Smith-Nonini 1998), cities increasingly gentrified (Babb 1999; Dávila 2004; Guano 2002, 2004; Katz 1998), social welfare programs reduced or slashed (Kingfisher & Goldsmith 2001, Morgen 2001, Yazici 2012), and the rural and urban poor incorporated into market economies (Elyachar 2005, Feng 2007, Hairong 2003, Han 2011, Karim 2011, Powell 2008, Thomas 2013). This situation illustrates Harvey's (2005) argument that neoliberalism is a class-based project that seeks to restore the power of economic elites.

Not only have anthropologists investigated the material effects of neoliberal policies, but more importantly they have examined the strategies people develop to cope with them (Bayat 2012, Berger et al. 2011, Chesluk 2004, Gagné 2011, Molé 2010, Morgen & Gonzales 2008, Pfeiffer et al. 2007, Pozniak 2013, Smith 2005). For instance, one response that has emerged in various national and political contexts is nostalgia for earlier political-economic formations, such as colonialism (Bissell 2005), collectivism and socialism (Bloch 2005, Hemment 2012), and developmentalist austerity (Chua 2011). The scholars cited here argue that such nostalgia functions as a critique of contemporary neoliberal restructuring and may serve to reanimate prior political imaginaries (Hemment 2012). In all these studies, scholars demonstrate how the impact of neoliberal policies



is mediated by gender, class, race, age, and other categories of social difference. Although this work aims to show the agency of the poor and marginalized, it also acknowledges the structural constraints that limit such agency.

In addition to analyzing changes in people's daily lives, anthropologists have examined how the political and economic restructuring associated with neoliberal policies have reshaped politics and ideas about citizenship at the local, grassroots, and community levels, often in unexpected ways (Kalb 2009, Lukose 2005, Shakow 2011). Much of this work is centered on Latin America. For example, in Ecuador, scholars have shown how local indigenous politics can be revitalized in conjunction with the fragmentation of cultural values and formation of new hierarchies within the same communities (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002); by comparison, in Argentina a logic of cooperativism that redefines work and citizenship can emerge to challenge ideas that had originally contributed to the demise of job security (Faulk 2008). Others working in Brazil and Bolivia have discussed how the very processes of dispossession that produce vulnerability in terms of increased unemployment, underemployment, and diminished access to natural resources can also lead to new forms of politics and alliances that cut across class and ethnicity, as well as to expanded ideas of democracy and citizenship (Millar 2008, Postero 2005).

Anthropologists have also demonstrated how neoliberalism can accommodate a theory of collective rights even though common scholarly understandings of it assume it is an aggressively individualistic ideology (Hale 2005). Hale (2005) characterizes the compensatory measures granted to "disadvantaged" cultural groups as "neoliberal multiculturalism" and argues that the idea of collective rights rooted in cultural difference is an integral part of neoliberal political and economic reforms in Latin America, which then help to produce support for such reforms. In his discussion of the creation of new rural municipalities among indigenous communities in the Bolivian Highlands, Orta (2013) observes how "there is a curious synergy between neoliberal modes of governance and indigenous techniques of community reproduction," and he argues that the political and administrative decentralization associated with neoliberal reforms may be more empowering at a local level; if they occur at a national or aggregate level, such reforms seem disempowering or marginalizing. Along similar lines, Junge (2012) points to the "perverse confluence" between neoliberal projects that mandate the shrinking of the state and its social responsibilities and projects geared to expanding citizenship and democratic rights. Discussing the interaction between grassroots community leaders and NGOs in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Junge (2012) complicates our understanding of leftist organizing, proposing that it is too simplistic to characterize community leaders as "neoliberalized" if their approaches appear entrepreneurial, for in some cases entrepreneurship can promote cooperativism over atomism and partnership with the government. In her discussion of state-initiated women's empowerment programs in India, Sharma (2008) argues that although NGO and state-partnered empowerment-based development interventions may "deradicalize empowerment, depoliticize inequality, and reproduce power hierarchies," they can also lead to subaltern political activism centered on questions of redistribution and social justice. All these examples disrupt any simple correspondence between policy and practice and challenge the telos that is assumed to be the trajectory of neoliberalism.

## Neoliberalism as Ideology and Technology of Self-Making

A key contribution of anthropology to the analysis of neoliberalism is the focus on its ideological dimension. Two central concepts undergird this analysis: the calculating, self-interested actor, encapsulated in the figure of *Homo economicus* (Ong 2006); and the idea of governmentality, which refers to the range of knowledge and techniques directed at managing the self through the regulation of everyday conduct (Foucault 1991). Anthropologists have paid attention to

specific projects of subject formation that follow from the valorization of metaphors of market rationalities and discourses about efficiency, competition, entrepreneurialism, and individual autonomy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Gershon 2011a,b; Hairong 2003; Hoey 2010; Quan 2005; Rudnyckyj 2009; Urciuoli 2008). Utilizing the concept of “spiritual economies,” Rudnyckyj (2009) discusses a moderate Islamic spiritual reform movement, popular in state and private enterprises in Indonesia, which seeks to transform workers into more pious religious and more productive economic subjects. He describes how spirituality is constructed as a site of management and intervention and work is reshaped as a form of worship and religious duty. Thus, Islamic ideas about individual accountability and neoliberal ideals of transparency and entrepreneurialism come together “to create a new ethical orientation toward oneself, one’s work, and one’s collectivity” (Rudnyckyj 2009, p. 106). Urciuoli (2008) analyzes the emergence of “skills discourses” within the contemporary US corporate and educational landscape in which students and workers are conceptualized as “bundles of skills” and skills, especially “soft” ones such as communication, human relations, and leadership, are understood as facets of personhood with exchange value on the labor market. She traces how soft skills have superseded hard skills—related to manual and mechanical tasks—and argues that soft skills “represent a blurring of lines between self and work by making one rethink and transform one’s self to best fit one’s job, which is highly valued in an economy increasingly oriented toward information and service” (Urciuoli 2008, p. 215).

In contrast with the dominant focus on resistance outlined above, fewer anthropologists have explored how consent to and complicity with neoliberal ideologies are secured (Cahn 2008, Dunk 2002, Freeman 2007, Kanna 2011). Related to Urciuoli’s discussion above, Dunk (2002) examines how downsized male industrial workers in Canada’s pulp and paper industry make sense of and explain their job loss. He argues that the counseling and retraining services available to these workers, which emphasize the individual worker’s responsibility to be flexible and adjust to the vagaries of the labor market, reinforce “an instrumental, individuated, and competitive understanding of job loss and economic adjustment” that redirects workers’ attention away from the larger structural reasons for their situation, thereby foreclosing any possibility for worker solidarity.

Scholars have also explored the role of affect in incorporating people into larger projects of privatization, which accompanies neoliberal restructuring of the economy (Muehlebach 2011, Shever 2008). Shever (2008) discusses how the privatization of Argentina’s state-owned oil company was achieved through deploying familial sentiments and kinship practices—forces that ostensibly were supposed to be eliminated during the restructuring. She claims that one cannot understand how former state oil employees were willing to work harder for less pay and fewer benefits without accounting for the role of affective bonds and kinship sentiments. Muehlebach (2011) describes how a highly moralized form of citizenship has been emerging in Italy as social services are increasingly privatized. In this discourse, good citizenship is defined by proper affect and a culture of voluntarism; unemployed workers close to retirement are exhorted to labor for free rather than to claim their entitlements.

### **Agents and Institutions of Neoliberal Ideology and Practice**

How do the policies and ideologies discussed above actually take shape in practice? A smaller body of scholarship focuses on the agents and institutions that help to articulate, operationalize, and disseminate policies and ideologies characterized as neoliberal. Because neoliberalism originated as a theory of political economy, the most common sites examined by anthropologists are those that comprise the state or are in dialogue with state institutions and actors, such as NGOs. Anthropologists have written about how the state is transformed under conditions of neoliberal restructuring. However, like the discussion about local politics, the impact is not uniform.



Whereas some scholars point to the weakening of state institutions and structures (Besky 2008, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Smith 2005), others have argued that the state is strengthened in certain capacities (Chalfin 2008, 2010; Junge 2012; Morrell 2012; Sharma 2006). Chalfin's (2008, 2010) research about customs officers in Ghana illustrates how transnational flows and supranational interventions restructure rather than undermine state power. She argues that in contexts of expanded cross-border and international traffic that accompanies the increasing incorporation into a global economy, the state's administrative authority is expanded rather than diminished. Gupta & Sivaramakrishnan (2011) note that contrary to standard narratives about neoliberalized states, which are characterized as cutting back on all forms of social welfare spending, the state in India actually spends much more today on social programs than it did before the period of structural adjustment and liberalization that began in 1991.<sup>2</sup> In her research examining the negotiations and contestations between Mexican technocrats and politicians during the development of Mexico's New Law of Social Security in the late 1990s, Schwegler (2008) provides insight into how such counterintuitive phenomena can occur. Characterizing the discussions as based on "anticipatory knowledge," whereby each group involved in the making of the law "recast their political proposals on the basis of their ideal-type anticipations of what a rival team would present," Schwegler argues that "apparently irreconcilable neoliberal and collectivist rationalities of social welfare are strategically reconfigured and integrated through political interaction" (p. 686).

An institution deeply connected to the transformed nature of the state, specifically its reduced role in social welfare and development, is the NGO. The growth of NGOs has been an essential feature of the decentralized and privatizing political-economic landscape associated with neoliberalism. NGOs are a critical feature of the global political economy as more development aid is channeled to the Global South through NGOs than through the World Bank and the IMF combined (Elyachar 2005). Given their crucial role in the implementation of neoliberal policies, NGOs have become a fertile terrain of study for anthropologists in the past decade or so (Elyachar 2005, 2006, 2012; Hill 2012; Junge 2012; Karim 2011; McKay 2012; Medina 2010; Quan 2005; Richard 2009; Schuller 2009). In contrast with representations in policy and planning discourses where NGOs are upheld as bastions of empowerment, community participation, and transparency, anthropological discussions are less sanguine. Schuller (2009) sees NGOs as important intermediaries that "glue globalization" in three main ways. NGOs challenge the governance capacity of states in the Global South by weakening the sense of a social contract. They can reproduce inequalities within a society by being a source of high-paying jobs for an educated middle class. Finally, NGOs operate as a buffer between elites and subalterns and thus hinder more expansive political participation (Schuller 2009). NGOs also play an important role in knowledge production (Elyachar 2006, Li 2009), which is often related to new modes of governance that rely on particular practices of accountability, commonly referred to as "audit cultures" (Pearson 2009, Vannier 2010).

NGOs are a key player in the process of free-market expansion throughout the world, especially through microenterprise and microfinance programs (Elyachar 2005, Karim 2011). Elyachar (2005) argues that NGOs set up to provide loans for microenterprise in Egypt furthered the "capital-state nexus" rather than serving the interests of the urban poor for whom they were established. She asserts that attempts to create new market forms in Cairo became a process of dispossession in which the poor's cultural practices and community resources were co-opted and turned into a source of profit from which they themselves did not benefit. In a trenchant

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<sup>2</sup>The authors warn that such increased spending does not necessarily translate into a vision of inclusive growth, but rather reflects anxieties over more radical and violent forms of subaltern mobilization.

critique of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, perhaps the most vaunted and replicated microfinance institution in the world, Karim (2011) argues that microfinance NGOs "manipulate existing and kin social relations to regulate the financial behavior of individual borrowers to create wealth for the NGOs" (p. xvii). Behind the much-publicized 98% rate of recovery on microloans, Karim identifies an "economy of shame" whereby most loans are coercively recovered by NGOs through the public shaming of women who default and their families.

Although the mass media have not received a great deal of attention in anthropological discussions of neoliberalism, the restructuring of media industries and the transformations in their political economy are significant sites where ideologies about free markets and state divestment are realized and rendered most visible (Ganti 2012b, Mandel 2002, Rao 2010). Media forms such as advertising, cinema, radio, and newspapers are also responsible for generating and circulating the narratives and images associated with the valorization of consumer capitalism and ideologies of individual empowerment, self-interest, and the conflation of consumer choice with political choice (Kunreuther 2010, Mandel 2002, Mankekar 2011, Matza 2009, Mazzarella 2003, Park 2010).

## **BENEFITS AND HAZARDS OF NEOLIBERALISM AS ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2005) argues that neoliberalism has become "hegemonic as a mode of discourse." He observes how "[it] has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world" (p. 3). Harvey's statement could easily characterize anthropology's relationship to neoliberalism as an analytical framework, where neoliberalism appears as a hegemonic mode of analysis. Why has neoliberalism been such a compelling concept within anthropological scholarship over the past decade? What sort of analytical work does it enable anthropologists to do? In many instances, neoliberalism appears as a linguistic gloss akin to "globalization," a placeholder to signal complex, abstract forces at work in the world that shape and constrain human action.<sup>3</sup> It functions as a shorthand to signal a contemporary political-economic context and to acknowledge that the sites in which anthropologists work are affected or inflected by forces originating elsewhere (Schwegler 2009). Neoliberalism as a concept helps to pin down globalization—a term so ubiquitous in anthropological scholarship in the late 1990s—and make it more concrete.

Marcus (1995) has discussed the challenges anthropologists face in trying to represent the world system ethnographically. World systems and globalization are concepts that appear unwieldy for ethnographic scrutiny because they signify tremendous interconnectedness on a vast scale. However, neoliberalism is a concept associated with specific policies, practices, institutions, and agents with which anthropologists can "follow the people, the thing, the metaphor, the plot/story/allegory, and conflict" (Marcus 1995, pp. 106–10) in a concrete fashion with fewer of the attendant anxieties that Marcus had outlined in his discussions about multisited ethnography. The framework of neoliberalism can also help anthropologists to disaggregate the study of the state by focusing on certain actors, institutions, and policies and offers a critical vantage point from which to study "up" and be less complicit in the study of elites (Marcus 1997).

In addition to providing a gloss for the contemporary global political economy, neoliberalism allows for a vast array of ethnographic sites and topics to be contained within the same analytical frame. For example, a recent volume, *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism* (Greenhouse 2010),

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<sup>3</sup> Boyer (2007) characterizes the use of phrases such as "the media," "the government" or "the market" as such.

covers topics as wide-ranging as US presidential campaigns, indigenous publics in Bolivia, African American women's musical production, fiestas in Venezuela, and financial professionals in Japan. Thus, utilizing neoliberalism as a framework allows scholars who work in different geographic regions and subject areas to participate in a comparative project that has a long history within anthropology. It provides a common vocabulary that enables scholars to draw connections across vastly different cultural contexts and geographical regions, thus allowing them to transcend the provincialities and legacies of an area-studies paradigm and anthropology's own history of discrete culture areas.

However, the inclusion of articles about multilevel marketers in Mexico (Cahn 2008), piracy in Brazil (Dent 2012), airports and customs officials in Ghana (Chalfin 2008), laid off factory workers in the United States (Dunk 2002), and hereditary status categories and kinship norms in Ethiopia (Ellison 2006, 2009), all within the same broad analytical framework, has also drawn much criticism. Schwegler (2009) opines, "Perhaps neoliberalism has been a little *too* convenient. It has become a handy way to bracket the global political economy without actively engaging it" (p. 24). Ferguson (2009) argues that too often neoliberalism has become a "sloppy synonym for capitalism" (p. 171). Others insist that ethnographic particularities and local categories and meanings are erased when everything is subsumed under the framework of neoliberalism (GDAT 2012, Gershon 2011a, Kipnis 2008, Nonini 2008).

Some key questions and assumptions about the state, markets, privatization, and collectivities go unexamined in much of the anthropological scholarship on neoliberalism. This oversight is a result of the explicit or implicit temporal contrast that is drawn of life before and after neoliberalism—a contrast that is suffused with moral dichotomies that repeatedly imply that the state is intrinsically superior to the market, and communities to individuals. Although a long tradition of scholarship exists about how markets are constructed, in the anthropological discussions about neoliberalism, concepts such as "market logics" or the "free market" are treated as self-evident rather than interrogated. Is the free market a sphere of exchange free of social relations and ethical norms? Or is it an ideal type that exists in the imaginations of policy makers and economists? How does one actually identify calculative versus other forms of rationality? Anthropologists have demonstrated the complex motivations and logics behind the decision-making practices and behaviors of investment bankers (Ho 2009), traders (Zaloom 2006), firm owners (Yanagisako 2002), and media producers (Ganti 2012a,c), thus troubling our notions of any simplistic, economic rationality.<sup>4</sup> Ho (2009) draws an important distinction between corporate capitalism and financial capitalism, as well as the different models of economic agency presumed within them, which should also lead us to critically examine the concepts of "privatization" and the "private sector." Can one claim that all forms of privatization, entrepreneurship, or even self-interest are "neoliberal"? Because neoliberal is primarily a label of critique, using it too broadly can foreclose certain avenues of inquiry and analysis, leading to an absence of contingency in our representations of social, political, and economic life.

## CONCLUSION

During the debate over the anthropological utility of the concept of neoliberalism at the University of Manchester, it appeared, from their questions and comments, that most of the audience supported the motion, i.e., that the concept was an obstacle to anthropological understanding. However, when it came to a vote, the motion actually failed. Over the past several years, numerous

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<sup>4</sup>I have found that anthropologists of finance rarely use the terms neoliberal or neoliberalism in their scholarship.

journal articles and conference panels have been organized that question the viability of neoliberalism as an analytical framework. As a discipline, we appear to be at a juncture where we are anxious about the popularity of neoliberalism as a concept but are unwilling, however, to completely dis-  
 pense with the term (see Ferguson 2009). The debate over the use (or overuse) of neoliberalism is somewhat reminiscent of earlier debates within anthropology—in the wake of a disenchantment with the perceived limitedness of the culture concept—over the use of “world system” (Nash 1981) or “political economy” (Roseberry 1988) to discuss the intersection between local life-worlds and broader processes of capitalist transformation. For instance, Roseberry (1988) relates a common criticism of the time, which resonates with contemporary criticisms about neoliberalism, that “with the move toward ‘political economy,’ authors imposed uniformity or boundedness upon a heterogeneous set of scholarly and political concerns” (p. 162). At issue then and now are questions of scale, comparison, representation, and relevance. Although broad, encompassing analytical frameworks such as neoliberalism can enable the project of comparison and make it easier to demonstrate the relevance of our particular research outcomes, they can also pose a challenge to the inductive orientation of the discipline. Such debates over key concepts, however, are productive because they urge us to be more precise in our scholarship and allow us to reevaluate our scholarly agendas for the future.

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