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Embodying neoliberalism: thoughts and responses to critics

A spectre is haunting anthropology — ‘the spectre of neoliberalism’ (Sanders 2011: 549). How can we explain why a concept as fluid and elusive as ‘neoliberalism’ is the focus of so much research, so many publications and conferences? A cynic might ask whether neoliberalism as an object of academic study is nothing more than a new product intended to increase the impact factor of proletarian intellectuals selling their labour power! Indeed, in the production regime of cognitive capitalism, some scholars seem to have given in to the lure of flexible concept models that can explain anything, apply to all disciplines and satisfy their insatiable appetite for visibility and ‘editerritorialisation’: they imagine the extension of their own editorial territory as the conquest of a new market. Apart from these extreme cases, and sometimes far beyond authors’ intentions, criticism has become a commodity. As recent studies have suggested, the new spirit of capitalism enables criticism, but also has the ability to reappropriate it – to transform it into a product that can be bought, sold and generate profits (Boltanski and Chiappello 2005; Žižek 2009; Brockman 2012; Hickel and Khan 2012). Academic discourse is deployed in a space whose heteronomy is growing as radical reforms strike and erode the autonomy of universities.

Cynicism aside, the debate in *Social Anthropology* shows that discussion of neoliberalism continues also, and above all, for reasons linked to the social, political, economic and ecological state of the world. On one hand, some have shown how in numerous places neoliberal ‘regulated deregulation’ is responsible for many people’s deteriorating quality of life and have sounded a call, in one way or another, for radical change. The implementation of neoliberal policies and the strengthening of elite power, as well as the accompanying escalation of inequalities, feelings of precariousness and flexibility have led scholars to ask what organising principles might explain a social world characterised by recurring crises and a widening chasm between rich and poor. Their goal is to unmask the hidden mechanisms that lead to the reproduction and growth of inequalities (Bourdieu P 1998; Harvey 2005; Wacquant 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Brockman 2012). However, on the other side of capitalism’s coin, other recent analyses have tried to nuance this critique. As Hölderlin put it: ‘But where danger is/Deliverance also grows.’ Without minimising the harmful effects of neoliberal measures, other scholars have sought to avoid a posture of denunciation or apology by highlighting the positive aspects of such measures and establishing a vision for how to act within the

world that they are fashioning. Neoliberalism can create opportunities favourable to the common good – or, more radically, for some scholars, ‘neoliberal reforms provide a justification for redistribution and social welfare’ (Collier 2011). These authors’ goal is to rethink collective action by considering the space of possibilities that neoliberalism opens (Ferguson 2010, 2011; Collier 2012; Robinson 2011; Parnell and Robinson 2012).

However, even among these disparate positions, there are areas of agreement. For the most part, neoliberalism has an inevitably political character. The state constitutes a central junction for its enactment. Its policies are many, heterogeneous and contradictory. They never cause the fantasy of the spontaneous market order to materialise. Nevertheless, when we try to dig deeper, the multiplicity of contradictory experiences associated with neoliberalism as well as the variety of geographies and histories where it has been applied make consensus on a definition particularly difficult (Hilgers 2011; Peck and Theodore 2012). The concept has become polysemic and appears sometimes as a totalising explanation or a ‘concrete abstraction’ (Comaroff 2011). Faced with this persistent lack of precision and the scholastic turn towards unending definitional debates, some propose, out of fatigue, that we abandon the concept (Ferguson 2010), while others remind us that its exportation into contexts outside the area that produced it risks obscuring rather than clarifying analyses (Parnell and Robinson 2011), or eclipsing more important factors (Kipnis 2007).

While we certainly must work with nuance and rigour, we also know that if we had always restricted ourselves to fetishising dictionary definitions, major thought generated from even more obscure notions – globalisation, identity, modernity¹ – would never have been produced. Was not our discipline built upon an object – culture – for which it has never been able to give a universally accepted definition, or even to agree on a more modest provisory definition, and which is still at the heart of spirited debates? The difficulty is to work with rigour and clarity without fetishising or reifying a notion that aims to grasp a fluid and moving reality, an ‘unevenly distributed ensemble of attributes discernible in the world; (...) species of practice, a process of becoming – however *un*becoming that process may be to our eyes’ (Comaroff 2011), or more generally the ‘development, dissemination and institutionalization’ (Brown 2005) of a specific rationality that pretends to be valuable for most, if not all, domains of our life and colonises at least some of them.

At the risk of muddling the question further and adding confusion to confusion, I argue that in order to more fully grasp the effects of neoliberalism, the debate must take into account culture, understood here as a symbolic system articulated through systems of dispositions.² This implies broadening the two approaches – systemic and governmentality – which are often used to summarise studies on neoliberalism (Kipnis 2007; Robinson 2011; Wacquant 2012; Springer 2012), in order to include its cultural dimension in the analysis; culture cannot be reduced here to an epiphenomenon of infrastructure (Wacquant 2012).³ My reaction to recent debates and critics will thus

1 Cooper (2005) offers a stimulating critique of these notions.

2 I am directly inspired by Bourdieu here. As he puts it in the postface to his translation of Panofsky into French, ‘Panofsky shows that culture is not just a common code, or even a common repertoire of answers to common problems, or a set of particular and particularised forms of thought, but rather a whole body of fundamental schemes, assimilated beforehand, which generate, according to an art of invention similar to that of musical writing, an infinite number of particular schemes, directly applied to particular situations’ (Bourdieu 2005: 233).

3 On this question see also Gershon (2011) and Hilgers (2011).

consist of some reflections intended to think about the impact of neoliberalism on the construction of symbolic systems and systems of dispositions.⁴ My purpose will be to draw attention to the decisive impact of neoliberalism on these systems and to the decisive role of these systems in the expansion of neoliberalism. To this end, I propose to expand what we generally understand by the ‘implementation’ of neoliberal policies by considering the historicity of spaces and institutions where such policies are set in motion and unfold, and by taking into account the systems of dispositions that shape the representations and practices of social agents. By doing this, I hope to respond to colleagues who did not clearly perceive what I meant by ‘implementation’ in my first contribution to this debate.⁵

Expanding the notion of neoliberal implementation

Why, compared with other disciplines, did neoliberalism as an object of research appear late in anthropology? I offered a response to this question in a recent paper that identified three main angles from which anthropology has approached neoliberal expansion: culture, structure and governmentality (Hilgers 2011). When neoliberalism is implemented and, in its name, practices and discourses affect conceptions of the human and modify social relations or institutions, it becomes an object of anthropological inquiry. This statement expresses neither a judgement, nor an agenda, nor even a definition, but merely an observation that caught the attention and interest of numerous participants in this debate. Let me briefly clarify this observation.

When the effects of neoliberal policies participate concretely in the structuring of the social world and lived experience, when they exercise a real influence on the ways in which agents think and problematise their existence, it is then that fieldwork

- 4 Like the pamphlet, the essay or the article, the ‘debate’ is a specific literary genre with its own techniques, tones and content. It is part of the style that some positions (not all) are developed through rhetorical strategies: oversimplification, caricature of others arguments, accumulation of different quotations to distort a thought... I feel a bit awkward in this exercise and it would be probably useless and uninteresting to many readers for me to answer all of my critics point by point. That is why I develop my response as a general argument and keep this paper’s fluidity by putting specific answers to critics in footnotes.
- 5 Collier (2012) reads me as suggesting that anthropology *should* be more concerned with neoliberal implementation than with neoliberal theory; Goldstein (2012) adds that I designate implementation as the proper object of anthropological knowledge, even though it is not easy to distinguish between theory and practice. In the papers of mine that these critics mention (Hilgers 2011, 2012a), after I enumerate the difficulties of such a distinction and recall the extent to which theory and practice mix and are aligned (!), I do make an analytical distinction between them as part of my response to Wacquant. In doing so, my first objective is to recall that many canonical theorists of neoliberalism insisted, before Wacquant, that neoliberalism is not an economic but a political project. Secondly, I emphasise that a large part of the theory associated with neoliberalism has never been put into action at all, except if we consider ‘put into action’ to mean the mere fact of existing and assuming a semiotic value whose negation helps determine other theoretical values. Finally, when I distinguish between theory and practice I do so because (a) implementation never corresponds precisely to theory, (b) all practices of theoretical production are not necessarily practices of implementation and (c) every theoretical practice is certainly a practice, but not every practice is a theoretical practice. It is for these reasons that in this debate we speak about ‘*actually* existing neoliberalism’ by contrast to abstract or ‘*theoretical* neoliberalism’, but this does not mean that there are no theoretical practices which implement neoliberalism.

projects engage with them, that theoretical studies emerge and attempt to analyse and assess their impacts, without being reductive. This does not mean that they limit the analysis to the application of neoliberal policies; yet to respond to some contributions to this debate, I tend to believe that anthropologists would have been less drawn to study these policies and neoliberalism more broadly if they had had no effect. However I wish to be clear on this point. To study the implementation of neoliberalism does not involve that we only study the ‘application’ of policies. It also requires us to consider the process of their production, the historicity of places and institutions where neoliberalism is deployed and the historicity of dispositions that embody it. In other words, by neoliberal implementation I target the triangle constituted by policies, institutions and dispositions.

Neoliberal policies

When we speak of neoliberal *policies* throughout the world, it is not only because they exist in the platonic world of ideas or only because they constitute a space of possible options, but also, and perhaps above all, because we put some of them *into action*, and they are followed by effects. This does not mean that such an operation takes place mechanically and magically through a movement from Point A, ‘perfectly organised and finished policies’, to Point B, ‘application’. Neither Point A nor Point B is perfectly organised, definitive or unchanging. Policies do not appear out of nowhere according to autopoietic principles of organisation. The back-and-forth movements between Point A and Point B constitute a determining factor in the process of putting neoliberalism into action.⁶ There is a multitude of reforms, a proliferation of strategies and action, which make it difficult to believe in a clear and singular movement. As an anthropologist who works in African cities, I have never had the opportunity to observe an application of reform without a multiplicity of negotiations, flexibilities, procedures and controversies that often cause the result to be far from the initial intentions (Hilgers 2009a, 2012b). It is now common to say that neoliberalism is not a monolithic, fixed and rigid entity, but rather transposable and adaptable (Ong 2006). Hayek himself insisted on this flexibility (Peck 2010: 106). The polymorphous and flexible nature of neoliberal models, their reformulation in the face of positive or negative circumstances, the possibility of adjustments for local variables, the exchanges and movement between lived experiences, audits, formal and informal meetings, small teams or summits of experts, their adaptability to a various range of contexts, make it a ‘mobile technology’ (Ong 2007) that is not subordinated to any single, static or totalising project (Brenner *et al.* 2010; Hilgers 2011). As such, we must not overestimate their logic or coherency (Larner 2000; Peck 2003: 225). Neoliberalism is mobile, neither unified nor uniform, because the policies associated with it are sites of struggle, conflict, negotiation and power relations in a multiplicity of contexts, but everywhere it contributes to the extension of a specific conception of market rationality to nonmarket domains (Brown 2005).

In order to analyse these processes while avoiding the disconnect from empirical reality that an exclusive focus on the terms of reference, reforms, theories or policies can cause, we must dive into ethnography, studying the controversies and microscopic – or

6 For a documented perspective of this process see Peck and Theodore (2010).

sometimes larger – negotiations that intersperse the life of the state, institutions, associations and collectivities and lead notably to the production of those terms, laws, norms, figures and statistics, as well as to variations in their application. In other words, we must consider the historicity of the implementation process. The term historicity, as defined by Bayart in his study of the state in Africa (1996), seeks to account for the endogenic production of the state instead of focusing only on its ‘importation’ from centre to periphery. What I suggested in my previous contribution to this debate, in reaction to Wacquant’s overgeneralisation on the form of the reengineering of state in the neoliberal age, was to consider the state’s historicity in order to avoid all ethnocentric, teleological and evolutionist interpretations (Hilgers 2012a).

If I use the term ‘historicity’ here, it is precisely because, contrary to what Collier affirms, I and other anthropologists do not necessarily see, and in any case do not reduce, locations of reform implementation as mere ‘sites located at some distance from centers of hegemonic power, which are framed as zones of refraction and recalibration’ (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 201, cited in Collier 2012: 192).⁷ In the first place, anthropologists do not only work far away from centres of hegemonic power. Much anthropological research has been conducted in the arenas of finance and international institutions (i.e. Abolafia 1996; Hertz 2000; Garsten and Lindh 2004; Zaloom 2006; Gudeman 2008; Ho 2009; Abélès 2011) and some research even shows how certain relatively autonomous domains of activity positioned at the heart of capitalism and hegemonic power actually constitute zones of refraction and recalibration of official policies (Mangez and Hilgers 2012). Second, it goes without saying that the integration of neoliberal reforms into the trajectory of states and societies always renders those reforms idiosyncratic. As soon as they are ingested, they change: they end up transformed, more autonomous, playing a new role. Before long the reforms cease to resemble the original form from which a series of variations was derived. However, studying historicity requires that we do *not only* study the refraction of an object produced at the epicentre of capitalism and imported to its periphery, or enumerate the incarnations of a pure form through an infinity of variations. Studying the historicity supposes to grasp the endogenic production of neoliberalism without restricting this endogeneity to a process of refraction. Rather, many scholars are attempting to ‘decolonise’, as Goldstein puts it in this debate (2012), dominant interpretations constructed in the North, and to avoid a fast and simplistic application of these in the South. Without getting bogged down in hyperparticularism – ‘one anthropologist, one village, one culture’ – these scholars show how the analysis of regions of the world or social spaces that are marginalised or ignored by dominant tendencies can nuance the theoretical points of view of an imperialistic provincialism, and can constitute useful resources for general theories (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). A significant reason for this ability to nuance is that such research often accounts for social processes that affect the majority of people, though the majority may be invisible or at the margins of the global research agenda (Robinson 2006; Simone 2011; Hilgers 2012b). Non-Western states also produce neoliberalism, and maybe sometimes in ways and through experiments that subsequently spread elsewhere.

In other words, I appeal to the notion of historicity in this debate because I think we have to go beyond a perspective that contrasts case studies with ‘a pure

⁷ Collier uses a quotation of these authors to develop his argument, but in reality their target is not ‘anthropological studies’, as he claims (2012: 192), but approaches based on governmentality (Brenner *et al.* 2010: 201).

variant of neoliberalism found either in theory or in the institution of capitalist core' (Collier 2012: 192). From this point of view, the suggestion to distinguish four types of neoliberalism 'that emerged in reaction to the crisis of post-World War II models of capitalist development' outlined by Jessop is useful (Jessop 2013: 70). Of course the purpose is not to reify these paths, but to pave the way for a general and comparative perspective that would make it possible to grasp how neoliberalisms vary as a function of models of development, states, political regimes and their historicities – without considering these neoliberalisms as the main cause of every social fact everywhere.

The idea of historicity reminds us that variation in the trajectories of states, institutions and collectivities is a crucial point in the articulation and implementation of policy. Today it is common sense to say that development plans that are relatively uniform or deployed at a large scale are necessarily mediated by the organisation of the societies within which they are applied. Their implementation transforms the political space and contributes to the reorganisation of the state, yet reforms are never radically extraneous. Societies are not passive. They produce these reforms and invent their execution and this constitutes not only a process of refraction. Reorganisation happens through the participation of all agents involved in the production of the state. However, this reorganisation is set in motion in a space where two distinct processes are entangled in the production of historicity: on one hand, deliberate *constructions*, the result of an apparatus of control that creates a network of relations and constraints; and on the other, a largely involuntary historical process of multiple *formations*, the result of multiple negotiations, compromises and strategies that are themselves contradictory in certain ways (Bayart 1996).⁸

Neoliberal institutions

To document these processes of constructions and formations, Wacquant's study in this debate of the bureaucratic field opens stimulating perspectives (Bourdieu 1994; Wacquant 2010, 2012). It is notably there, in the articulation and execution of neoliberal policies, in concrete and everyday transactions, exchanges and associations, in configurations shaped by voluntary and involuntary dynamics that the implementation of neoliberalism takes place. However, beyond the assertion that this field is structured by a double struggle,⁹ Wacquant does not describe the details of its functioning or concretely address the relation between formation and construction of the state.¹⁰ To better understand how neoliberalism is implanted and implemented, an analysis of the state's role, work and functioning would require an ethnographic approach that grasps the concrete processes of symbolic construction that accompany the application of social, political and economic measures. Recent studies show that the elements of negotiation, flexibility, procedure and controversy within the daily workings of the bureaucratic field can only be understood through empirical research (Herzfeld 1992; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2007; Blundo and Le Meur 2009; Spire 2008; Dubois 2010).

8 For the distinction between state formation and state construction, see Berman and Lonsdale (1992), Bayart (1996, 2007).

9 In Bourdieu's terms: 'Higher state nobility' – policy makers – vs 'lower state nobility' – executants – and 'left hand' – protective – vs 'right hand' – disciplinary – of the state.

10 Nevertheless, recent studies have used Wacquant's framework to engage empirical work within the bureaucratic field; see for example Woolford and Curran (2012).

A significant feature of neoliberal institutions is that they are organised as enterprises but they have also ‘integrated as a central belief the knowledge that all that is social could be otherwise’ (Gershon 2011: 537). Subjects, ‘market, economic rationality, and competition are all recognized as socially constructed under neoliberalism’ (Gershon 2011: 539). One can shape institutions and individuals. The obligation to enact permanent reforms, continual improvement, refinement of targets is part of this perpetual movement of amelioration by reshaping institutions and souls. Yet this account appears incomplete. Indeed, there is a major ambiguity in this process. Neoliberalism assumes the necessity to intervene; leaders claim the importance of ‘changing the soul’ in order to set up ideal conditions for the market to function. Simultaneously institutional and social legitimacy masks the power relations through which much cultural arbitrariness (i.e. indicators, figures, statistics) is produced and naturalised to increase the belief in the constant necessity of change, in the inflexible need of ‘flexibility’ and in the obligation of adaptability. In other words, in order to be legitimate this perpetual movement toward ‘amelioration’ by reshaping souls, institutions and societies needs a fictional foundation presented and perceived as a natural truth. It does not mean that in all cases these ‘fictions’ are always the product of a voluntary manipulation submitted to a clear intentionality. It merely means that they impose themselves and are imposed as an objective reality that is mainly presented and used as a reality purged of human interest.

In a recent study, Hibou and Samuel show for example how macroeconomics, a ‘fiction’ neither entirely true nor entirely false, is the object of ‘additions and arrangements with a reality which is both multiple and resistant to synthesis’ (Hibou and Samuel 2011: 14). The construction of macroeconomics, official statistics or policies in general happens through negotiations, conflicts and a multitude of contradictory oppositions within a ‘political field of competing positions’ (Hibou and Samuel 2011: 22), that is, in a particular social space with its own historicity. The production of such abstract data performs reality and has major economic and social consequences. ‘Macroeconomic fictions are above all political fictions’ that enable the quantification of persons and resources (Hibou and Samuel 2011: 22). These fictions produce the reality and are incorporated into procedures, techniques, strategies, representations and practices. In this process, management has become a dominant prism through which these fictions are produced, reproduced, institutionalised and disseminated. This process plays a major role in the ways in which societies are perceived and, as a corollary, in the ways in which people and institutions will act on and within a society (Hibou 2012).

Moreover, even if it is central to emphasise the role of the state in neoliberal deployment, the current debate in *Social Anthropology* has led the discussion to minimise other major institutions that also play major roles: international institutions of course, but also the media, corporations, NGOs, think tanks, research institutes, expert groups, religious institutions, private schools . . . Much research shows how the ‘explosion of audit’ (Power 1997) or the ‘bureaucratization of the world in the neoliberal age’ (Hibou 2012) goes far beyond the state and concerns a multiplicity of groups and institutions which, voluntarily or not, participate in the propagation of neoliberal ways of functioning. It is also through them that categories are produced that will help put neoliberalism into action and exert ‘effects of theory’ (Bourdieu 1991). The shaping of the real through the language of the state, as well as through a constellation of discourses produced by other institutions, implements neoliberalism by bringing into existence a series of realities via an operation of symbolic construction which classes, distinguishes

and discriminates; such operations influence institutions' and people's actions. On its institutional side, the analysis of implementation aims to grasp processes through which mechanisms of domination and power are exerted and mediated through objective structures and apparatuses that naturalise a set of socially constructed categories.

We must thus add three qualifications to Gershon's observation that everything (subjects, market, economic rationality and competition) is 'recognized as socially constructed under neoliberalism' (2011: 539). First, as explained previously, these various projects of construction are never fully achieved and face much resistance; second, many of them suppose a social and institutional work of naturalisation of representations; third, the question of intentionality must be seriously addressed here. Whereas some analysts insist on the project of neoliberalism as a project of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2006: 9–68; Bockman 2012), others encourage us to move beyond the question of intentionality in order to make our analyses more complex (Hibou 2012). The account of *constructions* and *formations* in the historicity of institutions constitutes a good *via media* to overcome this opposition and to consider the complexity of voluntary and involuntary relations within social dynamics. Whether they achieve their objective or not, these attempts to reshape practices and souls exert a major impact on individual dispositions.

Neoliberal dispositions

There is a point on which I want to insist in order to grasp fully the notion of 'implementation'; neoliberalism is never implanted or put into action as successfully as when it leads to the internalisation of categories of perception that shape how agents problematise their experience, reinterpret their past and project themselves into the future. When we seek to analyse neoliberalism and its variations, it seems useful to examine how these categories of perception as well as practices, bodily dispositions and cognitive dispositions are fashioned by neoliberalism into a set of reforms, beliefs and practices.¹¹ That is, the implementation of neoliberalism is also achieved through the modification of individual dispositions.

In a short piece, Bourdieu (1998: 94–105) wrote that the neoliberal utopia is in the process of being realised. Agents embody categories and dispositions that lead them to act according to theories prescribed by economists. Many scholars have analysed the production of the self in relation to the market, the vitalisation of individual responsibility, the ethics of accountability, the 'capitalization of the self' (Rose 1999: 161), the construction of relationships as 'alliances based on market rationality' (Gershon 2012: 540), and so on. Some researchers who have analysed the embodiment of dispositions related to neoliberalism have described the emergence of a radical figure. Ong (2006) presents the 'neoliberal anthropos' as a subject formed through the assemblage of a globalised circuit of education, ready-made for the market and for

11 Although these questions come up throughout his work, I am surprised that Wacquant has never developed his 'carnal' sociology (Wacquant 2004) towards an analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on bodies. Indeed, the reinforcement of racial discrimination and social homogeneity in the prison and the ghetto – which, for him, constitute a *continuum* (Wacquant 2001) – is strengthened by neoliberalism and inscribed on bodies, especially given a context where the structure and workings of the bureaucratic field are marked by ethnoracial bias (Wacquant 2009a).

employment. Harold and Lomsky-Feider (2010: 108) emphasise that this neoliberal anthropos is principally made up of mobile, global citizens with direct ties to the dominant circuit of capitalism. Bodies are the objects and targets of a power that disciplines them in order to maximise production.¹² On the one hand, technologies of subjection aspire to regulate populations for optimal productivity; and on the other hand, agents subject themselves to and embody technologies of subjectivity that incline them to optimise their individual choices and to perceive the world through the principle of competition. Individuals develop a subjectivity, an ‘ethics of individual accountability that [is] deemed commensurable with neoliberal norms’ (Rudnycky) 2009: 105).

These dispositions produced a relation to the world, a perception of the world; they sustain the work of imagination. People invest in ability in order to be suitable to the market, the self-regulation of their own human capital, the perception of the world and of human relations through the prism of competition are some of the regional results of a generic disposition induced by neoliberalism. As E. Bourdieu puts it, ‘the specificity of generic dispositions comes from the fact that they are not attached to a determined practical sphere, but rather seem to act within several spheres while specifying themselves in each case in the form of a particular disposition’ (Bourdieu E 1998: 255). In this sense, in its radical form a neoliberal disposition appears to be a generic disposition that shapes the ways in which other dispositions have been acquired, or at least the ways in which an agent will use his or her dispositions. In a provisional definition, I would say that the generic disposition induced by neoliberalism is an organising principle of the self, of the self’s relation to the self, and of its relation to others, articulated towards the maximisation of the self in a world perceived in terms of competition. One feature of this disposition is that it inclines the individual to mobilise a specific reflexivity that fits into a world perceived as a competitive market where it is necessary to maximise oneself.¹³

However, here again the mechanisms that regulate the self and bodies meet resistance. Even if neoliberal implementation produces social and cognitive categories that make individuals conform, with more or less success, to the logic of the market, the description of a ‘neoliberal anthropos’ as a quasi-ideal type seems of course too radical to account for many groups. Domestication is never total. By definition, the utopia of the spontaneous market order never fully materialises. It requires constant work,

12 In 1982 Foucault wrote, ‘This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality’ (1988: 19, original 1982: 1604). Following his lead, many studies have sought to analyse neoliberalism from this perspective (i.e. Lemke 2002; Ong 2006; Kipnis 2008; Dardot and Laval 2009; Lazzaratto 2009). However, this use of Foucault is far from being the only one possible. We all know that Foucault’s work is so rich that it has been the object of different and contradictory interpretations and uses. Collier’s approach, which he uses to formulate his critiques in this debate, is entirely legitimate. I do not doubt the relevance of rereading Foucault (2004) in a way that takes his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* of 1978–9 as a turning point toward ‘a more dynamic topological analysis of power relations’ (Collier 2009: 98). Even so, it strikes me as counterproductive to impose this original reading as a new orthodoxy and to neglect for its sake studies that use Foucault in other ways (for an alternative reading of these lessons see, for example, Jeanpierre 2006) – probably even more so if these interpretations are based on Foucault’s courses. On this point I share Rabinow’s advice: ‘It is essential to emphasize that the courses at the Collège were works in progress – philosophical-historical expeditions in search of new objects and new ways of relating to things. The course can best be seen as exercises, not final performance’ (Rabinow 1997: xiii).

13 On the relation between dispositions and reflexivity; see Hilgers (2009b).

especially on the part of the state, to bring corrections and to make practice conform to theory. Categories and the practices that they produce are entangled in the historicity of states, institutions, groups and societies, never perfectly conforming to the utopian model of the spontaneous market order. Dispositions produced by neoliberalism do not act in a virgin, helpless world without facing resistance. Dispositions driven by neoliberalism become integrated and entangled in systems of older dispositions, and in other systems of dispositions already being constituted. But this embodiment also means that such dispositions are likely to have effects and to be put into action in social spaces that were not intended to accommodate them. In many places 'neoliberalism itself is not the general characteristics of technologies of governing' (Ong 2006: 3), and as Ferguson remarks, it is possible to appropriate 'key mechanisms of neoliberal government for different ends' (2011: 66). Agents participate in a plurality of worlds within which they accumulate contradictory experiences that shape their capacity for action. They have the ability to embody 'a stock of schemes of action or habits that are non-homogenous, non-unified', and to produce 'practices that are consequently heterogeneous (and even contradictory), varying according to the context in which they are led to develop' (Lahire 2011: 26).

Like policies, certain categories and practices become autonomous from their original conditions of production (André 2012). When they are internalised, they end up being transmitted independently of the entity that gave rise to them (i.e. state, family, school). From then on they constitute schemes of perception and practice that are activated by individuals. Thus, for example, the permanent pursuit of adaptability, which is hailed as a virtue yet constitutes a constraint, gives rise to a system of dispositions that leads individuals to perceive themselves as subject to a logic of constant adaptation requiring deliberate effort. The process of learning flexibility unfolds through the embodiment of a set of dispositions which, as Sennett shows, inclines the individual toward variability, toward the ability to move from one task to the next, to learn new skills throughout life that are in step with the market, rather than diving deeply into a single art through many years of practice. When people internalise the three social deficits that Sennett identifies at the heart of the culture of the new capitalism – low loyalty, low trust, low institutional knowledge (Sennett 1998, 2006) – when such deficits are embodied and shape a system of dispositions, this has a profound impact on self-construction and personality-building, on perceptions and practices far beyond a neoliberal context of actualisation. This is why as I put it in my former contribution to the debate 'if radically different policies were enacted today, the effect of their predecessors would not be instantly erased' (Hilgers 2012a: 91).

Yet to be performed, a disposition must have the opportunity to be actualised as well as maintained. Actualisation and maintenance are dependent on context. When a context attracts, stimulates or reinforces a disposition, this disposition has the tendency to be perpetuated, even reproduced in another form. When such an embodiment is robust, it can lead to the activation of neoliberal dispositions in unrelated contexts. Sometimes, in contrast, a neoliberal context permits the actualisation of dispositions that some agents already have, namely dispositions that were formerly inhibited; this can explain why some agents or groups are better adapted to such a social configuration. Finally, neoliberal reforms also produce forms of resistance and dispositions that do not correspond to the neoliberal project, and that are therefore not exactly neoliberal dispositions but merely dispositions produced by neoliberalism.

As we can see, this question of neoliberal embodiment is complex. I do not claim to solve it here. Somehow this debate makes this question more difficult. How can we analyse dispositions produced by neoliberalism, how can we observe that some dispositions are internalised if we lack even a provisory definition of neoliberalism, or if we observe that theories and policies are multiple, mobile, heterogeneous and contradictory? These questions do not minimise the importance of analysing the impact of neoliberalism on dispositions, or the fact that this embodiment is part of the implementation of neoliberalism. They constitute problems that we must face, and that need empirical research to be solved.

The implementation of neoliberalism goes far beyond the mere appearance of its policies. It cannot be reduced to the application of a programme or to institutional changes. This implementation is deployed within a triangle constituted by policies, institutions and dispositions. This last component has remained at the margins of our debate. If we wish to grasp the depth of the changes that neoliberalism causes, we cannot neglect its effects on systems of dispositions. To analyse this impact, it is necessary to describe the symbolic operations that give rise to government-enabling representations as well as to categories that support neoliberalism and are propagated by it. This task requires accounting for the historicity of the spaces in which policies are put into action, the intentional constructions but also involuntary historical formations in which they become entangled, and the transactions, negotiations, associations, working misunderstandings and chains of translation that give them their flexibility and support their deployment.

Neoliberalism is embodied in the agents and representations through which it is put into action. Through a historical process, the dispositions that it generates become, as Bourdieu would say, durable and transposable, as well as increasingly autonomous from their initial conditions of production. As such, when these conditions disappear or transform, or when policies are modified or abandoned, some of them spread into other social spaces and contexts and take on new meanings. Therein lies the importance of broadening the notion of 'implementation', so that we may appreciate the role of culture in the dynamics of neoliberal expansion. It is precisely (but not only) because of the embodiment of neoliberalism emphasized in this paper that at the moment we are nowhere near the end of the neoliberal era. Thus I arrive, by a different path, at the same observation that Kalb (2012) formulated in this debate: today it is capitalism that is in crisis, not neoliberalism.

In some parts of the world, information that helps people to stabilize their perceptions, practices and activities is mainly produced within a neoliberal context, forms and procedures. The figures, statistics, norms, audits and discourses that I evoke in this paper are fashioned by a constellation of institutions; they condition, train and shape a mental and practical space. They impact the way in which one conceives and carries out research. Indeed, academia is not outside of this neoliberal world; on the contrary, it is a centre of development and support for neoliberalism. While many academics are critical of neoliberalism, this does not mean that they have a permanent deconstructionist relation to the world and to themselves. In many parts of academia, a neoliberal way of functioning has become common sense. If neoliberalism is so present in our mind and in the way in which academia is designed and works today, it

appears more than necessary for researchers to consider how this shapes their relation to production of knowledge.

If we wish to avoid the eviction of critical perspectives in this time of crisis, if we hope to have some chance to think within but beyond the neoliberal age, if we want to develop alternatives and different horizons, one of the first things to do is to decolonize our mind by objectifying our own neoliberal dispositions. The reflexive return to the tools of analysis is thus ‘not an epistemological scruple but an indispensable pre-condition of scientific knowledge of the object’ (Bourdieu 1984: 94), if we are to prevent the object and its definition from being dictated to the researcher by non-scientific logics, such as the necessity of being visible and marketable in the academy. To achieve a break with neoliberal common sense, anthropologists could follow Bourdieu (2003) in his will to engage in a ‘participant objectivation’.¹⁴ It is clearly this kind of objectivation even if not phrased in such terms that has led some researchers to call for a radical change in the academy, supported by new arguments and put into practice through the initiation of a ‘slow science’ movement.¹⁵ In some places, academia is still a space of critiques and alternatives.

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14 In other words, an objectivation of the social conditions of production of the researcher, i.e. of the researcher’s own trajectory, the configuration and functioning of the field in which his work is embedded and the fields that influence his work; and objectivation of the researcher’s work of objectivation, of the hidden interests invested in it and the profits they promise. See for example Stengers (2013)

15 Read for example Stengers’ manifesto (2013), another science is possible.

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