

The three anthropological approaches to neoliberalism*

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Over the last fifteen years or so anthropology has been engaged in the study of neoliberalism, with a growing quantity of research into the implementation and consequences of neoliberal policies (cf. Kipnis 2007). Why should a subject that has generated, and continues to generate so many debates in other disciplines have such belated success in anthropology? In principle the reasons are solid, good, and simple. It is only once neoliberalism is implemented and its associated practices and language affect our understanding of human beings, modifying social relations, institutions, and their functioning, that it becomes a proper subject for anthropology. Once it becomes involved in the concrete structuration of the world of social interaction and experience, and exerts a real influence over the way that agents think and problematise their lives, investigations can be undertaken in the field, and theories emerge that seek to analyse it and establish its effects, while avoiding its reification.

In the debates broadly shaped by economics and the political sciences, the importance and particularity of the anthropological approach is to highlight dimensions that these other disciplines leave in shadow. The impact of neoliberalism is not confined to aspects directly linked to the market, institutional reforms, or political practices. One

of the main questions the anthropologists seek to explore is that of how what can be termed neoliberal practices and representations are produced and disseminated on the global scale. Starting from this question, this article shows that, beyond their great diversity, these different investigations are built on three forms of anthropological knowledge. Each documents the phenomenon empirically in its own way and proposes theoretical advances that enable us to look with new eyes at neoliberalism and its expansion across the globe. This article highlights the conception of neoliberalism and the epistemology on which the three approaches are based, also considering their shared presuppositions. It then goes on to examine these approaches critically and analyses the way that they have theorised the spread of neoliberalism. In this way, the article shows that, beyond describing known effects (such as deregulation, flexible working, the liberalisation of capital, restriction of public spending, and erosion of the social state), anthropological analysis has a real contribution to make to multidisciplinary discussions in which it sometimes has difficulty making its voice heard.

Differing approaches with shared presuppositions

Before considering the three approaches, it is important to identify the presuppositions they

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share. Despite their diversity, anthropological understandings of neoliberalism have at least three presuppositions in common.

First, all the studies recognise that, despite its currency, the term “neoliberalism” has no single definition on which all agree. It is used by alterglobalisation activists, within political debates, and also as a scientific term by some academic researchers. However, unlike economists, whose differences are generally expressed within the framework of the neoclassical paradigm and often have trouble agreeing on a uniform “neoliberal” appellation, anthropologists have profoundly distinct theoretical frameworks, but share more or less the same empirical vision of the phenomenon. They apply the term to a radicalised form of capitalism, based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention, and characterised by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, a belief that growth leads to development, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realisation that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible.

Second, researchers distinguish theoretical neoliberalism from practical neoliberalism, which is characteristically embedded in the categories of perception and practices of social agents and institutions. They also recognise many differences in the implementation of neoliberal policies.

Third, one of the anthropologists’ objectives is to explain the production and global spread of what are called neoliberal practices and representations. The question of what mechanisms are involved in the dissemination of culture and sets of representations and practices has been central to anthropology since the twentieth century. The work of Ratzel and Frobenius has aged, but the development of research into globalisation and world systems has led to a revival of diffusionist debates. The question of whether the implementation of neoliberal policies is due to their autonomous invention in different regions across the globe or whether they appeared in a few places from where they spread seems today to have a generally accepted answer. Aside from a few interesting but isolated voices (Kipnis 2008, p.285), authors generally agree that the emergence and development of neoliberalism is the result of a historical process that has led to the emergence of a specific form of capitalism. The theoretical

corpus generated by economists, the Walter Lippman colloquium (in 1938), the Bretton Woods agreements (in 1944), the establishment of the International Monetary Fund (in 1944) and the World Bank (in 1945), and the approaches adopted by Deng Xiaoping, Thatcher, and Reagan in the late 1970s – reducing regulation, taxes on capital and work, government spending, and inflation – all played a decisive role in the development of neoliberal policies and their spread. What must now be analysed are the forms this propagation takes in a multipolar context. Briefly, we can note that most anthropologists describe deregulation, the freeing up of capital, the rush to profit, the new technologies of communication and manufacture, the compression of spatial and temporal frameworks, increases in economic, cultural and social flow, and the growth of the media as central elements in this worldwide dissemination. Lastly, in each of the approaches some authors emphasise the importance of education in the spread of neoliberalism (cf. Shore 2008, 2009; Shore and Wright 1999).

Three modes of anthropological understanding

Taking these shared presuppositions as our starting point, we can identify three forms of anthropological knowledge in which neoliberal expansion has been considered: the culturalist approach, the systemic approach, and the approach through governmentality.¹ As we shall see, these approaches retain a relationship with the classic paradigms of anthropology. As we cannot explore the entire field here, this article will draw on a few emblematic texts to (1) reveal the direction of the research, (2) sketch out the principles underlying the three approaches, and (3) establish how their epistemologies affect considerations of neoliberalism as an object of anthropological study.

Neoliberalism as culture

The first avenue of analysis highlights principles commonly shared in representations and practices that can be assimilated to a *neoliberal culture*. We are not talking here about a theory in the strict sense, but rather a range of attempts to shed light on the set of shared beliefs integral to institutions

and practices and involved in actions characteristic of a neoliberal relationship to the world. This kind of approach does not presuppose definition of culture to be defined in any substantialist way. On the contrary, it reveals cultural transformations to be directly linked to the development of material structures to which they are never external. Culture is unstable and open and it shapes political directions. The work of Jean and John Comaroff, notably “Millennial capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) offers a prime example of this desire to highlight the characteristic elements of a new, globalised culture based on elements classically analysed by anthropology in order to understand the transmission and diffusion of culture (lifestyle, institutions, economic structures, symbols, intergenerational relations).

A culture is shaped by an ethics of life and, according to Comaroff and Comaroff, the ethics of neoliberalism rests on the belief that it is possible to produce wealth almost by magic. The sophistication of markets, products, and technologies gives the financial social order a degree of autonomy in the production of reality hitherto unseen in the history of political economy. With the dematerialisation of the economy, the non-correspondence of stock values to material reality, neoliberalism has realised the mediaeval alchemists’ dream, turning paper and figures into gold. New forms of enchantment are produced by a *casino relationship* to the world, in which a nobody can acquire a fortune and a private income with nothing but luck and a lottery ticket. The legitimacy of such a contingent, accidental transformation is rarely questioned. It reflects the way that life, wealth and its distribution are seen today and relates to the twin observations that, on the one hand occult economies are becoming increasingly important and, on the other, the neoliberal era has obscured the roots of inequality in the structure of production.

Occult economies comprise a set of techniques and practices that defy explanation and practical reasoning by mobilising, consciously or not, “magical” means to obtain material resources without effort (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). This magic varies profoundly from one context to the next. In the West the hyper-rationalisation of modern societies gives rise to the financialisation of the economy and the inclusion of cohorts of engineers and mathematicians in banks and insurance companies. Production has been supplanted by the immaterial paths of the market and speculation to

generate value. This speculative practice, its increase and pseudo-science are archetypal of a magical relationship to the world, to money and numbers, of which one of the most common expressions is the mystique of market self-regulation. At every level of the social hierarchy, practices grounded in a belief in the efficacy of probability have become commonplace. The moral value associated with speculation has changed. The status of betting, condemned by puritanical societies, has passed from social disease to social policy. In a context of extreme deregulation, where taxes are frowned on and the National Lottery fills the coffers of the state, it becomes a matter of patriotism to gamble. Betting becomes normalised and routinised. As speculation grows in all its forms (from lotteries to stock trading or risky investments) and becomes enshrined as a key element of national taxation, as markets expand and highly speculative investments increase, the world turns into a vast casino. But the growth of occult economies is not confined to speculative practices or games of chance. It engenders practices seeking to soothe the ontological anxiety linked to the expansion of neoliberal capitalism. Thus Africa offers many examples: religious enterprises (Corten and Marshall 2001; Laurent 2003), “the modernity of witchcraft” (Geschiere 1997), “mutant” heroes of the diamond trade (De Boeck 1999; De Boeck and Plissart 2004), the rhetoric of autochtony (Geschiere 2009; Hilgers 2011a), marabouts who claim to make banknotes multiply, “zombies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), and so on.

According to Comaroff and Comaroff, neoliberal culture, and ultimately the entire world, are characterised by a triple movement that helps that culture’s spread, consisting of religious expansion, the growth of occult practices, and a weakening of the political sphere. The importance of this analysis lies in the identification of the characteristics of neoliberal culture and the relationship to the world to which it gives rise, such as the belief in “magical” wealth creation, in other words without work, which is omnipresent but varies between contexts. However, the macro-anthropological dimension to which the argument relates does not always permit a nuanced approach. Above and beyond the critique of Moore (1999), for whom the causal relationship between the effects of neoliberalism and the rapid expansion of the occult economy cannot be verified on the basis of the Comaroffs’ work, we can make three observa-

tions: first, the African studies within which occult phenomena are abundantly documented are far from being consensual in the debates around the causes and representative nature of such beliefs (Meyer 2009; Ranger 2007; Ter Haar and Ellis 2009). Second, the occult-based approach has its own limitations for understanding the expansion of neoliberal culture across the globe and proving that the dematerialised economy of capitalism gives rise to the production of “zombies” on its fringes. The occult is liminal, only partially perceptible, and hard to systematise and to analyse in its production, practices, and diffusion. Lastly, hasty generalisations leave aside the importance of local history in cultural configurations (Hilgers 2009).² These remarks do not undermine any possible relationship between occult phenomena and neoliberalism. They are intended above all to highlight the importance of reinforcing the rules of evidence. Without offering an unequivocal explanation, statistics making it possible to establish correlations between the penetration of capitalism and the modification of practices (such as a growth in the number of accusations of witchcraft) could help reinforce the arguments of this thesis. The same can be said for other studies that use a very broad conception of neoliberal culture (e.g. McGuigan 2005).

The anthropologists seem to be describing actual experience – the growth of the occult, religious movements, intergenerational upheavals and, in other cases, the commoditisation of the world – resulting from structural transformations at the global level, but the analysis sometimes seems so broad that it loses its nuances by generalising liminal experiences that do not in any way reflect experience across the world. It describes neoliberal culture, but proves inadequate to illuminate its structuring principles, which vary from one context to another and are far from uniform. To put it another way, the “imaginative sociology” of the Comaroffs could do with consolidating its sociological aspect in order to reinforce the scientific value of their arguments.

Nevertheless, one of the great merits of this approach is that it seeks to provide ethnography of neoliberal culture that links the local to the global. From this starting point, it opens up a new area for investigation. In reality the notion of neoliberal culture poses questions in itself. Can one generic term subsume a wide range of practices linked to common material transformations, which never-

theless have their concrete existence and meaning in distinct symbolic systems, and share, as their main characteristic, a belief in the possibility of wealth creation without work? Who shares this culture? Should we regard it as a common background against which other cultural forms can be seen? Who is involved in this background? How are its variations organised? Should we speak of a singular neoliberal culture or plural neoliberal cultures? What are the consequences of this kind of relationship to the world? What concrete relationships can be established between the doctrine of self-regulation, economic autonomy, and the real practices of governance? Surely the instruments and techniques of government, the modes and practices of governance should also be subject to analysis when we are seeking to describe this culture? The questions opened up by this approach are many, important, and stimulating.

Other research studies neoliberal culture and offers certain answers by focusing on more precisely defined groups or specific domains (Bronwyn 2005; Freeman 2007; Hannerz 2007; McGuigan 2005; Saltmarsh 2007; Shore 2008, 2009; Shore and Wright 1999). Above and beyond anthropology, many studies document professional cultures, among both elite and vulnerable groups (Sennett 1998, 2006). Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) for example, seek to establish why today’s critiques of capitalism are so ineffective. In addition to the ambient culture transmitted by schools, the world of work and families, the “new spirit of capitalism” is disseminated through the training of elites and the instilling of a set of values, which the authors dissect. Through an analysis of the language of management textbooks used in training and read by executives, and which currently represent “the form par excellence in which the spirit of capitalism is adopted and shared” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.51), they show how the moral justification of capitalism operates and the personal motives for engagement are constructed at a time when many actors are denouncing the inauthentic lifestyle, market oppression, misery, inequalities, and selfishness it produces. If the dominant ideology spreads so strongly it is because, among other things, it cannot be reduced to a simple expression of the transfigured interests of one social position and is able to take on board the criticisms it faces. To the “artist’s critique” of its lifestyle, neo-management responds by promoting projects, employability, authenticity, and freedom and by

developing a rhetoric of innovation, renewal, and enterprise for enterprise's sake, but leaves aside the social aspect of the critique of capitalism.

Through these examples we can see that approaches to neoliberalism as culture can be distinguished according to their degree of generality. Those that envisage culture in the broad sense have the heuristic importance of revealing relationships to the world that are apparently shared across the globe and directly linked to the transformations of capitalism. They seek to establish the way that the transformation of material conditions (i.e. separation of the financial economy from the real economy, insecurity of lifestyles) gives rise to new cultural forms (i.e. temptation of the occult, magnification of chance, commoditisation of the world). They do not suppose a unilateral determinism, but suggest that the social and material transformations necessary to the emergence of a neoliberal type of capitalism produce shared cultural forms that shape what Comaroff and Comaroff call "the culture of neoliberalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). At the international level the transnationalisation of production and capital reproduces and transforms divisions that were formerly internal to states. This makes it hard to feel any shared sense of belonging. The erosion of ties binding enterprises to a particular nation undermines the possibility of negotiating working conditions. The reduction of working costs, growth in inequality, and reduction of the proletariat to the lowest common denominator, the proclamation of the end of social classes, and the difficulty of organising collective struggles all influence the direction of world history. Class anxieties have become displaced to the level of intergenerational relations and, as with any other culture, it is through relationships between generations that the culture of neoliberalism operates, spreads, and is passed on.

Studies focusing on precise groups describe the values and practices that bind individuals together at a time when institutions are fragmenting. They show how the classic agents of the transmission of a culture, such as education, play a crucial role in the expansion of neoliberal culture. So the culture-based approach proves important in recognising the values shared by a group and revealing the way that they influence practices and representations. Culture-based approaches are more sharply focused when describing specific neoliberal cultures and more general when they

understand culture in a broader sense. They become less effective and more metaphorical as they make their analysis and description more general in order to discuss principles that are supposedly shared by a very large group living in neoliberal conditions. Too great a degree of generality runs the risk of leading to a similarly broad conception of both culture and neoliberalism, reifying both and, ultimately, turning black boxes into explanatory principles.

At the present time there is very little research seeking to produce a synthesis of studies on particular neoliberal cultures and attempts to describe a global neoliberal culture. The question of what the existence of globalised neoliberal culture signifies in concrete terms opens an important area for research, requiring us to clarify the mechanisms of its diffusion. The second anthropological approach to neoliberalism does not ignore the cultural impacts of socio-economic configurations but seeks to go more deeply into the systemic dimension, which is merely outlined here.

Neoliberalism as system

By systemic approach we mean the attempts that have sought to describe neoliberalism as a system or structure constituting a network of relations between different positions in the social space.³ They suppose the existence of systemic rules that are internal to the development of a neoliberal society. They bring to light certain logics and veiled interests linked to its functioning. They describe the way in which a system maintains a dynamic whole in a state of equilibrium, for example, by presenting the punitive treatment of poverty as necessary to the maintenance and strengthening of a society whose existence relies on the inequalities it produces and which it simultaneously suppresses. The functionalism underlying systemic perspectives varies in intensity according to their epistemological presuppositions. We shall see this clearly through a contrastive analysis of work on the interdependency of punitive treatment and the functioning of the state. In the first case, functionalism is moderated and the neoliberal system is not reduced to the intentionality of an elite; in the second functionalism is strong and the regulation it implies is presented as the result of an omnipotent will to social control.

In his historical anthropology of the development of the neoliberal state, Loïc Wacquant

describes the present period as marked by a transition from the active social state of the Fordist and Keynesian period towards a new “authoritarian and neoliberal” state (Wacquant 2008, 2009a, 2009b). In a context characterised by flexible working, volatile capital and the growth of inequalities, the function of social policies in maintaining order is being eroded and gradually replaced by policies emphasising punishment and incarceration that hit the poorest elements of populations the hardest. Penal radicalisation “is a response to *social* rather than *criminal* insecurity” (Wacquant 2010, p.198). The penalisation of poverty is part of the development of the neoliberal political project, in which it is a central element making it possible to express the sovereignty of the state, impose new cognitive categories, “consolidate material and symbolic divisions and . . . to shape social relationships and behaviours” (Wacquant 2010, p.205). This is why “the ‘top down’ capitalist revolution . . . commonly called *neoliberalism* involves the expansion and elevation of the penal sector . . . so that the state can silence the reverberations caused by the diffusion of social insecurity at lower levels of the hierarchy of class and ethnicity, and appease popular discontent generated by the withering of its traditional economic and social functions” (Wacquant 2010, p.211).

For Wacquant, the rise of the economy of punishment fulfils three functions: (a) containing, controlling, and neutralising supernumerary fractions of the working class and rebels within their social environment; (b) disciplining desocialised elements of the employed and insecure elements of the middle classes; and (c) reinforcing and reasserting the role of the state, elites, and meritocratic ideology. Changes in attitudes to illegality, a hardening of policies on the police, judiciary and prisons, the atrophy of the social state, and hypertrophy of the penal state are all characteristic of a neoliberal, Neo-Darwinist state that makes competition more fierce, the poorest more vulnerable and fetishises individual responsibility. Neoliberalism and its expansion thus appear as carceral inflation’s keystone. According to Wacquant, the growth in prison numbers produced by neoliberalism results from a combination of “initial intentions”, “trial and error”, “adjustments”, and “electoral issues”. The growth, deliberate or not, of political measures on employment, social assistance, and justice that are characterised by ethnoracial bias in their modes of operation,

leads to a reinforcement of the penal sector to the detriment of the social state.

Other studies simultaneously highlight increased recourse to prison and the enrichment of affluent classes. Some, merging into conspiracy theories, describe neoliberalism as a system developed by a minority expressly to take over most of the means of production (the pharmaceutical and food industries, the media, energy production, and so on) and gain disproportionate power. The United Nations Development Programme report on human development, which describes the effects of reforms started in the UK in 1979, offers some important indications as to the factors underlying these analyses:

At the end of the 1990s the United Kingdom had one of the highest rates of child poverty in Europe. In 1998 some 4.6 million children – around one in three – were living below the poverty line. These high poverty levels, double those at the end of the 1970s, were a legacy of the 1980s – a decade characterised by a distinctly pro-rich growth pattern that left poor people behind. At the end of the 1970s the richest 10% of the population received 21% of total disposable income. Twenty years later it received 28%, nearly as much as for the entire bottom half of the population. Average annual incomes for the richest 20% increased at about 10 times the rate for the poorest 20% (3.8% compared with 0.4%). The United Kingdom’s Gini coefficient climbed from 25 to 35 by the mid-1990s – one of the biggest increases in inequality in the world. (UNDP, 2005, p.68)

Starting from this observation, and noting the decline in the economic power of the upper classes during the period 1945–1979 that preceded these reforms, David Harvey (2005), a geographer and now Professor of Anthropology at New York University, states that the utopian project to reorganise international capitalism provides the ideological framework justifying a political project that seeks to re-establish the conditions for wealth accumulation and to restore the power and status of the elite. From this perspective, the development of a “prison-industrial complex” (Harvey 2005, p.165) enhances the social control of poor and recalcitrant populations. In developing countries, where accumulation by dispossession is most extreme, neoliberal states thus maintain constant repression to counter potential insurrection.

Any analysis of the profit garnered by elites that focuses solely on uncovering the hidden but conscious interests of the dominant classes necessarily flirts with conspiracist interpretations. While some political measures clearly benefit a minority,

the presentation of neoliberalism as a project intentionally seeking to restore the elite and dismantle the working class (Harvey 2005, pp.62–63) reduces the complexity of the social world to a set of mechanisms that can be controlled at will by a few selfish, omniscient individuals. However interesting it may be to nuance the effectiveness of the project, the distinction Harvey draws between practical and theoretical neoliberalism proves insufficient to shed light on two interlocking levels in the constitution of a neoliberal type system. To understand the social world as system, the analysis has to be able to explain this system as an intentional construction resulting from a mechanism of control that creates a network of relationships and constraints. But it must also be able to describe and explain the system as a formation resulting from a largely unconscious historical process arising out of negotiations, compromises, and many strategies that are in themselves, to a degree, contradictory.⁴ The systemic point of view requires us to consider and analyse both explicit strategies and non-intentional aspects linked to the action of social groups and processes involved. The recognition of this distinction impacts on the analysis of neoliberal expansion.

So, for Wacquant, in whose work this distinction is at least implicitly apparent, neoliberalism is “a transnational project”, originating in the United States and spread by a new dominant class, seeking the top-down reorganisation of “the relationships between market, state and citizenship” (Wacquant 2010, p.213). At the same time this emerging social class (managers and administrators of major companies, high level political institutions, and international organisations), trained by institutions that share the same social perspectives, has adopted mental categories and dispositions that are not entirely within its control.⁵ A set of commonplaces, which owe part of their persuasive power to their omnipresence, shape undisputed presuppositions that circulate in conferences, reports, and commissions and are relayed by institutes (Wacquant 2009b). These are said to give rise to the “globalisation of American problematics” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, p.46) to which the apologists of deregulation, the diminution of the social state, and inflation of employment instability (for example the Commonwealth, Brazil, South Africa, or Turkey) are particularly sensitive. The export of securitarian theses in the form of a globally-accepted dogma is said to lead to increased rates of

incarceration and higher sentences in most European countries, the strengthening of state power, and the uniformisation of criminological theories claiming that assistance to the poor is responsible for criminality. Zero tolerance is spreading through Italy, Austria, France, the UK, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and elsewhere. Even if the mechanisms it implies do not have the desired effect, the new penal common sense devised in America is becoming international. The government of social insecurity in its American version is said to produce new categories of perception disseminated on a worldwide scale. America thus becomes the laboratory for the neoliberal future (Wacquant 2009b).

This explanation is more developed than the one claiming that a single master group that controls the social destiny of humanity is lucidly acting in concert to maintain its privileges. However, while the idea of the globalisation of securitarian issues sheds light on some characteristics linked to neoliberal expansion, it also hides the diverse transformations, inconsistencies, and divisions within the system and fails to analyse resistance to and critiques of penal radicalisation.⁶ Furthermore, this analysis rests largely on the idea of dissemination from the centre towards the periphery of the system. Yet one could argue that the similarity of social and political contexts, the homogeneity of habitus and social positions, clearly revealed by this hypothesis, might have led more or less identical solutions to emerge independently. The relatively independent invention of solutions may, as Kipnis (2008, p.285) notes, have been hidden by the borrowing of terms and labels that confer an international air or a new legitimacy on what was already locally envisioned. Considering securitarian radicalisation in this way could cast in a different light the “transatlantic distortion” of penal discourse identified by Wacquant when he analyses the movement of that discourse from the USA to Europe, the misunderstandings that facilitate its reception, and the illusion of its correctness and relevance (Wacquant 2009a).

The systemic approach to the state and neoliberalism, understood as the desire to compare, generalise, and theorise the production of the social within a unified framework, is profoundly sociological. Although it lacks the strong ethnographic description of the first approach, systemic analysis has the merit of shedding light on the conditions in which the neoliberal state is produced

and, on the global scale, of studying the means by which its organising principles are disseminated. It also makes it possible to detail, in a given field – that of prisons and penal policy in the examples chosen here – the formation of neoliberal ideology, to identify those zones of the social space that are necessary to its functioning, and to reveal its consequences. While a moderate degree of functionalism proves useful in establishing the characteristics of neoliberalism as a system, overly rigid functionalism risks – as noted by Marx and later by Bourdieu after him – turning the things of logic into the logic of things. The need to develop a flexible framework that can recognise the many different inflexions characteristic of the functioning of states and the dissemination of policies which, in practice are neither uniform nor without obstacle, is one of the aims of the analysis of neoliberalism as a mode of governmentality.

Neoliberalism as governmentality

The third approach to neoliberalism is today making great strides. It draws inspiration from the work of Foucault, notably the lectures he gave at the Collège de France in 1978 and 1979 on the birth of biopolitics. In these lectures Foucault seeks to analyse neoliberalism not as theory or ideology, but as practice, in other words “a ‘way of doing’ directed towards objectives and regulating itself through continuous reflection” (Foucault 2004, p.323). This involves challenging abstract, fixed conceptions of neoliberalism in favour of an analysis of the composite, polymorphous reality to be seen in the implementation of a method and principle of “rationalisation of the exercise of government that obeys – and this is its specificity – the internal rule of maximal economy” (Foucault 2004, p.323), minimising costs and maximising profits.

A growing number of authors are taking up this approach, which tends to understand neoliberalism in morally neutral terms, while highlighting the technologies of government it involves. There have been many studies. Some are theoretical and seek to shed light on the historical foundations of neoliberal societies (Dardot and Laval 2009; Jeanpierre 2006; Laval 2007), others are more empirical (Hairong 2003; Hiemstra 2010) or seek to adjust, refine, or illuminate this approach through an analysis of social, political, and eco-

nomic transformations (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Lazzarato 2009; Ong 2006; Rose 1999).

Despite their diversity, these studies have a common foundation. They suppose that neoliberal governmentality is based on two types of optimisation technology, which are crucial to its spread. On the one hand, the technologies of subjectivity encourage agents to optimise their individual choices through knowledge and to perceive the world in terms of competition. On the other, technologies of subjection regulate populations for optimal productivity. Neoliberal governmentality is thus constituted by the concerted functioning of techniques of the self and technologies of power. This combination is brought about by logics of competitiveness, commercial rationale, and risk calculation.

The drive towards individual responsabilisation and the self as enterprise is a major principle of the neoliberal art of governing. It leads subjects to perform actions that reinforce their own subjection (Barry *et al.* 1996; Rose 1996; see also the debate with Kipnis 2008). The technologies of domination, the micropolitics of insecurity (Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Lazzarato 2009, p.120) and the increasing instability of living conditions increase individualisation, competition, and personal responsibility and force individuals to act and understand themselves as the entrepreneurs of their own destiny. The self is developed and conceived of as an enterprise in a competitive framework that leads individuals to manage themselves in accordance with the logic of the market.⁷

The means and degree through which the self corresponds to the market varies according to one’s position in the social structure and the amenities offered by state policies. Neoliberal governmentality shapes and is shaped by a multitude of ethical and moral codes that are applied and combined according to a principle of maximisation. To attract capital, segments of the population are identified by states according to their capacity to deal with the globalised economy. Some categories of human beings are excluded from citizenship (refugees, illegal migrants, some workers), while others, by contrast, are first class citizens. The elites who are able to play the game of globalised capitalism benefit from state support (removal of taxes, facilitation of business, visas, residency permits, insurance etc). The poorest and least qualified are subjected to work and discipline by a power that arranges them in space, packaging and structuring

them in order to maximise the utility of bodies and minimise the costs of their use. This separation into different moral economies creates new forms of slavery. In her analyses of eastern variants of neoliberalism, Ong (1999, 2006) shows that, in Indonesia, the army collaborates with business to control certain workers. Production sites are located near military barracks to make it easier for the army to intervene in cases of strike, protest, or rebellion. In Asian cities it is regarded as a “social right” for wealthy households to have domestic labour performed by workers of foreign origin. The migration of these workers is facilitated, but they live in degrading conditions and are often deprived of their rights. These workers are seen and treated as undesirable and dangerous, when in fact they are indispensable to the functioning of cities with the ambition to become geographical hubs of world capitalism (Ong 2006, pp.195–217).

So neoliberal governmentality results from the infiltration of market forces into the political domain (Ong 2006, p.4). Principles of optimisation, technologies of subjectivity and subjection, and elements usually linked to citizenship, such as nation, territoriality and rights, are combined and recombined in accordance with market forces. The market, capital, and competition thus do not have an intrinsic, spontaneous logic that gives rise to exchange. They are the result of a construction requiring multiple interventions (Lazzarato 2009, pp.113–117). States differentiate their politics according to the zones (such as tourism, forestry, industry, work) and populations they administer. They manage them in accordance with the world market and with the aim of attracting capital. Ong’s work in Asia (2006) reveals the proliferation of differentiated sovereignties, regimes of rights and citizenships both within and outside national borders, with the aim of maximising connections with capitalism. Citizenship and state sovereignty are redefined, re-imagined, as ethical situations unfold and are rationally regarded in the light of the market. The new political modes of optimisation reconfigure relations between the governed and those who govern, between knowledge and power, sovereignty and territoriality (Ong 2006, p.3). In this way neoliberal governmentality produces a heterogeneous, flexible set of calculations, choices, and exceptions that constitute security, life, and ethics, rather than a fully coherent system.

The approach based on governmentality extends analyses of neoliberalism in terms of a

North–South divide or a typology of the state, studying it instead as a set of rational techniques of government that can be decontextualised from their sources and recontextualised in a constellation of relationships that are mutually constituted and contingent (Ong 2006, p.13). Neoliberalism’s capacity for transposition and implementation is due to its plasticity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Rather than a fixed technology of government, it is a political mode of optimisation whose flexibility allows it to be modified to suit its context. It is never adopted in a uniform way. All of Aihwa Ong’s work reveals how polymorphous combinations of capital, citizenship, sovereignty, and the market create enclaves of neoliberalism in places where it is not officially welcome and other enclaves where neoliberalism is no longer the rule in areas it has officially conquered. There is no “pure” neoliberal governmentality. Governmentality is always linked to other modes of power, government, and social technology. Exceptions to neoliberalism may sometimes preserve a form of social state, sometimes exclude citizens from the benefits of capitalist development (Ong 2006).

Noting that neoliberal governmentality generates a transfer of the operations of government to non-governmental entities (Barry *et al.* 1996), that the logic of the market has extended to institutions that were once part of the state (post services, schools, police, administration, and so on), that the power of business is growing and the role of international institutions is becoming increasingly important, other studies suggest extending the notion of governmentality to the mode of government established at a global level. This involves analysing neoliberal governmentality as a form of power exerted beyond the framework of the nation state and studying the strategies of international institutions, the WTO, the IMF, or NGOs and activists in implementing, disseminating, or countering neoliberalism (Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

The flexible implementation of neoliberalism and the array of technologies of subjection and subjectivities are thus the keys to its dissemination. To understand this combination more precisely, some studies have initiated a sociology of the production of intellectual techniques of neoliberal governmentality and their circulation (Jeanpierre 2006). Ong, for example, shows the importance of American education establishments in the training of neoliberal citizens (Ong 2006, pp.139–174). Attendance at these establishments offers access to

international careers. Investment in a qualification is one strategy for accumulating the economic, social, and cultural capital that enables individuals to position themselves in the competitive international market. The relationship to study is instrumental. The elite universities train neoliberal subjects who have acquired a new way of thinking, moving around and taking risks, and whose aim is to amass capital rather than values. The emphasis is placed on skills, talent, and an *ethos* without borders. Knowledge is understood as a depoliticised tool that is useful for problem solving and optimising production (Ferguson 1990). On leaving these establishments neoliberal subjects apply the principles that have been inculcated into them. They maximise their results by finding markets and a new, less costly workforce. Knowledge is no longer the monopoly of the middle classes of so-called advanced countries. Jobs leave the USA for regions where the workforce is more flexible.⁸

Rather than as culture or structure, neoliberalism is seen here as a technique of government that has become the dominant rationality and has competition as its first principle (Ong 2006). Neoliberalism is spread through the training of the elite, but the effectiveness with which it is implemented is largely a matter of its flexibility. This is an essential component enabling this new form of biopolitics to be translated, technologised, technified, disseminated, and put into operation in a range of diverse situations.

The approach based on governmentality is particularly stimulating and is currently seeing major developments arising out of new questions, such as: What is the relationship between neoliberal governmentality, money, the financialisation of the economy, and the transformation of the relationship between capital and work? What role does the state play in these processes? How far does the logic of the market extend? Can we really assume that neoliberal governmentality can colonise all experience of the world? These questions indicate just some of the directions of the most recent studies.

All the same, when applied in a strictly Foucauldian perspective, this approach also reveals its limitations. When it tries to grasp reality in all its variability, and moves away from abstract conceptions in favour of empirical analysis, its analysis of the method and practice of government following the internal rule of the maximal economy is stimulating, but beset by problems.

First is the risk of overinterpretation, in which the hypostases of an internal principle of maximisation are identified everywhere. Second, by studying neoliberalism in its “capillarity”, the approach based on governmentality reveals that effects can be seen everywhere but that, at the same time, there are a great many exceptions to the principle of deliberate optimisation. At this point the subject of study becomes harder to define. This is the price to pay for leaving a fixed, abstract conception of neoliberalism behind in favour of an empirical approach – should we regard any mode of government that adopts a principle of optimisation, sometimes in a single domain, as neoliberal? Lastly, one axis of this approach is based on Foucault’s hypothesis that, in a capitalist context, the aim of discipline and biopower is the increased utility and docility of bodies. But this hypothesis requires nuance. Staying with the world of prisons, which, as we have seen, constituted a core element in the neoliberal mechanism, we can observe with Wacquant (2010) that prisons certainly do not shape the “docile, productive bodies” Foucault describes. On the contrary, overcrowding and its costs and the lack of rehabilitation programmes alter the functions of prison institutions. Often these are confined to neutralising and storing refractory bodies rather than taming them in order to turn them into useful agents for capitalism. The policy of imprisonment is not that of the maximal economy.

Conclusion

While anthropology is a latecomer to the field, anthropological studies of neoliberalism are now displaying great theoretical and empirical creativity. The discipline’s contribution is based on the specific angle from which it approaches and problematises the phenomenon and produces new empirical material that sheds light on its sometimes unsuspected consequences. Whether neoliberalism is analysed as a depoliticised form of a capitalism that seeks to be scientific and does not fulfil its promises (Ferguson 2006), as an ideology that serves the dominant group (Bourdieu 1998; Harvey 2005), or as the most recent mode of governmentality (Foucault 2004; Ong 2006), neoliberalism appears as the common denominator in the production of inequalities in our contemporary societies.⁹ By drawing on three major epistemological matrices, which are anchored in major

historical paradigms of the discipline, these studies seek to reveal the factors that can explain its expansion across the globe. They thus provide an explanatory repertoire which must now be brought together. This repertoire comprises three broad principles with many internal variants: (1) The material and structural transformations produced by the mutations of contemporary capitalism give rise to representations and practices that generate new cultural forms directly linked to neoliberalism. Beyond their idiosyncratic variations, these globalised mutations produce common traits that are transmitted by the classic means of socialisation: family, schooling, peer groups, and the professional sphere. (2) The impact of these cultural forms must be considered in the light of regulatory modes proper to neoliberal societies, which are

being deciphered. For example, massive incarceration is one component necessary to the equilibrium of the neoliberal state. At the level of both deliberate choices and involuntary processes, the production of a specifically neoliberal state leads to the inflation of the prison population as part of the management of inequalities. (3) In a context characterised by uncertainty, insecure employment, and hyper-responsibilisation, neoliberalism itself is flexible. Coming together in the technologies of subjectivity and subjection, the logics of flexibility, profitability, and maximisation raise competition to the rank of prime motor of the rationality of power and the rationality of subjects. The issue for studies to come will be to produce a more searching analysis that can usefully combine the insights of these three approaches.

Acknowledgements

*To my father Paul.

Notes

1. Aihwa Ong notes the existence of these approaches when she stresses the importance of studying neoliberalism not as a culture or structure, but as a specific type of governmentality (Ong 2006, p.12).

2. See, for example, Moore's comment: "given the history of South Africa in this century, can one really say that the interest in the occult and in the market are the reasons why the underclass is not politically organised?" (Moore 1999, p.306).

3. If the aim is to understand neoliberalism through a global perspective anchored in a holistic social science, the work of Immanuel Wallerstein on the development of capitalism and world systems (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1983, 1989, 2004) and the complementary approach developed on the cultural level by Jonathan Friedman (1994) provide a useful framework.

These studies form a particularly influential corpus in the study of capitalism as a historical system. However, neoliberalism represents only a recent variant in the timescale of their analyses. It is hard, in the space of this article, to show how to reintegrate the studies presented here into this analytical framework.

4. On the distinction between process and formation, see Berman and Lonsdale (1992) and the use made of it by Jean-François Bayart and his school (Bayart 1993, 2007).

5. For a highly stimulating analysis of the symbolic conditions that shape the emergence of a high class elite in itself and for itself, see Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (2007, pp.100–111). The authors show how for itself the bourgeoisie exists only in practical terms. Its position as the dominant class controlling the means of production

and legitimacy means that it does not need a theory enabling class consciousness to emerge. When it functions following the logics of practical corporatism and collectivism, "proclamation of the existence of the class would be not only unnecessary, but also counter-productive, as theoretical individualism is perfectly able to function in parallel with practical collectivism, liberal ideology being the best self-justifying discourse that the mobilised class could employ" (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2007, p.102; see also Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2006).

6. For an expanded version of this argument and a more in-depth discussion of Wacquant's work from the point of view of research into neoliberalism, see Hilgers (2011b).

7. The debates around employability and the clinical treatment of unemployment offer perfect

illustrations of this phenomenon (see, for example, Oriane 2005).
8. The 200,000 engineers trained annually in China, or the 130,000 in

India, are cheaper than the 60,000 produced in the United States.
9. For a critique of this unanimity in anthropology and an attempt to

show how “polyvalent the neoliberal arts of gouvernement can be” see Ferguson (2010).

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