

DISAGGREGATING NEOLIBERALISM

In *Peripheral Visions* (2008), I interrogated arguments linking global processes of neoliberal reform to a worldwide resurgence of religious faith in the 1970s–80s, drawing on the case of Yemen to gauge the validity of this familiar claim. My aim there was not to introduce complications for their own sake, but rather to show how by attending to the Yemeni example we can refine our general theorizations about a politics of piety in the present.¹ Responding to political economy and anthropological arguments in which neoliberalism seemed to be doing too much work, I advocated for disaggregating the concept—for making it less capacious. Neoliberalism tends to refer to at least four different political economy phenomena: 1) macroeconomic stabilization (policies that encourage low inflation and low public debt, and discourage Keynesian countercyclical tendencies); 2) trade liberalization and financial deregulation; 3) the privatization of publicly owned assets and firms; and 4) welfare state retrenchment. Sometimes these four aspects work in concert but often they do not, and their impact on population welfare varies.² In the book, I was most interested in the latter three dimensions of neoliberalism—trade liberalization, the privatization of publicly owned assets and firms, and welfare state retrenchment.

Unpacking the term allowed me to capture important variation, not only among countries but also within Yemen. And my more general argument went something like this:

Neoliberal reforms are an important to our understanding of the Islamic Revival, in part because they have incited various appeals to a community of believers, who are enjoined to live ethically within a context that often presumes the moral and legal obligations of the state. Those appeals actually predate market reforms, but have proliferated in the wake of neoliberalism's impact. This impact is not uniform in all places, because the historical conditions under which the reforms were initiated differed and other historical factors (such as ongoing superpower interventions and internal regime-society relations) also proved salient. In places where the state had not been the primary addressee for people's moral and material entitlements, its contraction cannot be having the same effect it might in settings where citizens were accustomed to welfare provision. And these provisions themselves have been unevenly withdrawn and, in some cases, actually expanded, despite the claims of neoliberal orthodoxy and the expectations of scholars studying it.

The political scientist Isabella Mares (2005) has argued that contrary to many scholars' assertions, there has actually been a significant expansion in social service provision worldwide, that the welfare state has been remarkably resilient, despite reforms.³ She draws our attention to major divergences across policy areas (so that Mexico introduces universal health care but privatizes other dimensions of social service provision, for example).⁴ Mares also argues that there has been a change in financing risk, with some countries' reforms tending towards privatization (as we would expect) while others remain or become public. East Asia is an example of the latter, with universal social policies being enacted *during* the period when the

welfare state has supposedly been shrinking globally. Jean Comaroff has pointed out that African countries with means are also expanding aspects of welfare provision—Botswana, for instance; and South Africa is financing public housing as it encourages privatization in health.⁵ Even Yemen has resisted pressures to overhaul completely its civil service, and the paltry paychecks do provide a safety net to some citizens, albeit an inadequate one. In considering why particular neoliberal reforms get initiated while others do not, or why in certain areas state activities expand while in others they contract, one might point to factors such as the size and historical organization of the workforce or levels of education among the citizenry (Mares 2005), or the strategies available for inducing compliance and the level of state capacity (to deliver goods and services, to fend off IMF demands, etc.), to name just a few possibilities.

Neoliberal reforms *do* seem to upset the bounded regulation of national economies, but they do so unevenly and without necessarily entailing the state's withdrawal from other domains. State sovereignty may be undermined economically while being bolstered by new opportunities for and aggressive modes of policing borders and managing populations, for example. But even here, some states continue to perform a more vigorous redistributive role than others, and most post-colonial states never had the resources or capacities to operate as Keynesian welfare ones could. The variation within and between nation-states suggests that there have always been large swathes of territory inaccessible to state institutions.⁶ In order to consider the impact of neoliberalism, we have to identify how state institutions operated prior to neoliberal reforms,

taking into consideration how territorial control was exercised (when it was), and how citizens were governed (to the extent that they were).

In short, in terms of the story I wanted to tell in *Peripheral Visions*, I found that there was a connection between neoliberal reforms and piety movements, but this relationship was not one of lockstep cause and effect. Neoliberal reforms occurred in the global context of unfulfilled state-centric aspirations and ongoing great power interventions, which helped to advantage some organizations and weaken or destroy others. Neoliberal reforms did tend to intensify piety movements already underway, however, providing added recruits and a vision of a far-reaching territorially indeterminate public, one whose collective imaginings could anchor everyday challenges in a specifically moral commonweal while also sustaining (rather than undermining) territorially rooted commitments to the nation-state.

The two issues I want to raise in what follows do not have to do with the relationship between neoliberalism and piety. Here, I want to pose two questions that draw on my comments above but also attempt to move beyond them—in an effort to animate our discussion today. First, while conceding that it is important to unpack the term “neoliberalism” and to appreciate variation in the content and implementation of reforms, does the emphasis on variation and historical specificity ride roughshod over an important aspect of neoliberalism, namely its significance and general character as an ideological formation? Or to put it somewhat differently, does focusing on variation miss something about the distinctiveness of this worldview, its saturating effects, and its ability to enlist citizens into novel forms of regulation and intervention in the service

of what Michel Foucault calls “the general art of government” (Foucault 2010, 131)? Michael Dawson (forthcoming pp. 155–158 of chapter 4) uses my discussion of neoliberalism in his new book *From Katrina to Obama* and wants to add a fifth dimension to neoliberalism, its ideology. My question above is different from this intervention, as useful and important as it is. I’m asking whether disaggregating the concept actually ends up missing part of the potency of the phenomenon by neglecting its general ideological sweep: deregulation, privatization, welfare state retrenchment, etc., are part of neoliberalism as an ideological formation; ideology isn’t a constitutive element of neoliberalism. It is the thing itself. Inscribed in material practices and yet somehow broader than its particular instantiations, my question, to reiterate, is the following: do we lose something by focusing on its variations as opposed to underscoring neoliberalism’s general workings as ideology?

The second issue is related to the first, but might end up undermining a focus on generality. We need to describe what this ideological formation is and what it entails. Such descriptions allow us to historicize the concept’s emergence and diffusion, but they may also permit us to theorize the present more compellingly. In this spirit, let us think of “neoliberalism” as an ideology in which everyday practices, scholarly works, and official policies invoke the “language of efficiency, consumer choice, cost-benefit analysis, and individual autonomy” in ways that “mark a shift in risk-bearing away from governments and corporations onto individuals.” If this is an acceptable characterization (one derived from scholarly critiques of the phenomenon, personal experience, and wikipedia), might we consider how this market logic operates in practice not only to produce

“zones of social abandonment” (Biehl 2005), but also to organize new forms of sociability, affective connection, and pleasure? Most importantly for my own purposes: How can an aging left (devoted to a certain asceticism borne out of a commitment to social justice and redistribution) grapple theoretically, and *without* being puritanical, with new experiences of the “good life”—with the psychological investments in good food and fine wines, for example, and with the luxury and sheer abundance available to some?

Take, for example, the Damascus of 2010. In sharp contrast to the city a decade ago, restaurants abound and are filled with diners most days of the week. The breadlines of the 1980s have given way to a plethora of croissant bakeries in the 2010s, and people are palpably less afraid to mention the President’s name in public. New forms of social life have emerged, invigorated by young people who find no contradiction in blasting Dr. Dre-like music in front of the Umayyad mosque while performing bike stunts to lyrics peppered with expletives. The few coffee houses that used to be frequented only by old men with time for interminable games of backgammon have been supplanted by numerous cafés serving an array of Starbucks-like beverages to a bustling multi-generational clientele. Whereas few in the 1990s would have walked in the old city at night for fear of being nourishment for Damascus’s robust rats, today’s old city boasts beautifully renovated Ottoman homes, the site of bars, clubs, and restaurants that attract Damascenes and tourists in the thousands. Is this phenomenon—this stark contrast between zones of abandonment and the flourishing of lavish commerce in places previously removed from its enticements—best captured by the term or under the sign of “neo-

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liberalism”? At stake is less a terminological issue than a political one: disaggregating neoliberalism allows us to have a differentiated view of how a bundle of market-oriented reforms, applied variously, operate. Thinking of neoliberalism as a coherent ideological worldview with its own techniques of governance and norms of success and failure, however, raises the issue not only of contemporary forms of exploitation and precarious living, but also of pleasure. Or to put it more accurately, it is indisputable that new sites of social satisfaction such as cafés are brought into existence as part and parcel of the same set of changes (neoliberal reforms) that elsewhere produce zones of abandonment. How are we to understand this collision between catering to human flourishing, on the one hand, and the utter devaluation of human being, on the other?

NOTES

- 1 The first three pages and all of the endnotes are excerpted from my *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). The phrase “politics of piety” is from Saba Mahmood’s book (2005) of the same name.
- 2 For example, in Latin America, the imposition of macroeconomic stabilization policies benefits the poor, who had experienced a dramatic erosion of their meager salaries and savings during the hyperinflation crisis of the 1980s. The literature on neoliberalism and on the related phenomena of globalization is simply too vast to do it justice here. What is intriguing, however, is that important work in history, anthropology, sociology, geography, and cultural studies, on the one hand, does not seem to converse with seminal studies in political science and economics, on the other. Most of the work in the former category tends to be critical, which may be one reason why there are so few conversations. For a recent summary of works about neoliberalism in anthropology see Peet (2002, 62-66). Much of the literature on globalization and neoliberalism overlaps or discusses similar phenomena, such as the growth of international trade, the proliferation of financial flows and instruments (Sassen 1999, 2001), and the integration of nation-states previously understood as more autonomous or bounded. In sorting out these arguments, helpful studies include: Robert Gilpin’s *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (2000); David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005). On labor, see Miriam Golden and Michael Wallerstein’s “Domestic and International Causes for the Rise of Pay Inequality: Post-Industrialism, Globalization and Labor Market Institutions” (2006). Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Extremes* (1994) permitted me to grasp the importance of the breakdown of Bretton Woods in the 1970s; for an impassioned account of the flaws in “Washington consensus” thinking from a World Bank insider, see Joseph E. Stiglitz’s *Globalization and its Discontents* (2002); Gerard Roland’s discussion of privatization (2000) provides a helpful overview of the dramatic shift in institutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, describing the welfare consequences of public assets sales in *Transition and Economics: Politics, Markets, and Firms*; Jonas Pontusson’s *Inequality and Prosperity: Social Europe Vs. Liberal America* (2005) provides a summary

from a social democrat's perspective. I am grateful to Carles Boix for helping me navigate this rich literature.

- 3 On the one hand, leftist intellectuals generally depict systematic welfare retrenchment. On the other hand, some scholars argue that empirical evidence suggests otherwise, with considerable expansion until the 1980s, followed by stability.
- 4 The Mexican case may demonstrate some of the problems with Mares's willingness to take official rhetoric at face value, however. It is unclear whether stated policy translates into actual welfare provision, as many Mexicans have pointed out to me. In the Yemeni case, new clinic buildings funded by international donors are often left empty, for example; without medical staff or electricity, even a proliferation of clinics does not necessarily imply access to health care.
- 5 Personal communication, September 2006.
- 6 Ankie Hoogvelt (2001) asks whether the shift from what she calls Fordist production to a post-Fordist world of flexible production means that the geographical understanding of core-periphery polarization (to use her Wallersteinian vocabulary) is being supplanted by social core-periphery polarizations that cut across territorial boundaries and geographical regions. She invites us to consider how money is increasingly being made out of the circulation of money, so that capital is being disconnected from the social relationship in which money and wealth were previously embedded. This has meant the intensification of linkages within areas of core wealthy countries of the global system while peripheralization becomes a process of marginalization and expulsion cutting across territories and national boundaries. Parts of the traditional core are vulnerable to the same sorts of marginalization as large areas in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. But I would argue, as the Yemeni example suggests, that there have always been large swathes of nation-state territory, particularly in poor places, that have been outside the domain of welfare provisioning and redistribution. Indeed, the terms Fordism and post-Fordism do not seem to accurately portray worlds where industries have been scarce or inefficient.