United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

Heterogeneity of Neoliberalism and its Diverse Impacts

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Draft paper prepared for the UNRISD Conference
New Directions in Social Policy: Alternatives from and for the Global South
7-8 April, 2014, Geneva, Switzerland

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New Directions in Social Policy Workshop,
Geneva, 7-8 April 2014

I want to begin by focusing on the key term in the topic I have been given; namely 'neoliberalism'. As some of you will know I am a geographer. Neoliberalism is a term that has had particular currency in my discipline; indeed for us it was the concept that in the end captured the debates about qualitative changes in contemporary economic, political and social life that have taken place over the last two decades. That said, the term is also now ubiquitous in the broader social sciences. It is used as both a means of delineating the period as a whole – neoliberal times, neoliberal era, neoliberal decade, neoliberal world – as well as in relation to a wide range of other more specific phenomenon including the neoliberal university, neoliberal cities, neoliberal citizenship, neoliberal geopolitics, neoliberal subjects, and even neoliberal nature.

It is important to remember that this was not always the case. In early analyses of neoliberalism, in which the focus was on nation-state reform programmes, there was considerable debate about how the new market-oriented approach to politics should be understood. In these influential arguments neoliberalism was framed as 'jungle law'. It was understood to be the politics of the crisis and therefore destined to be a short-lived phenomenon, the perils of which would be quickly recognized by academics and publics alike, and a welcome return to the universalistic aspirations of Keynesian-welfarism would follow. In the efforts to challenge neoliberalism geographers, like many of their social science colleagues, focused their attention on documenting the social inequities produced by this new approach to politics; tracing how deregulation, privatization and marketization exacerbated social differences based on class, region, gender and race/ethnicity.

From early on, however, there were a series of theoretical challenges to these accounts which took the form of claims that neoliberalism was more novel, more original, and more challenging than many on the political and academic left was often prepared to acknowledge. These commentaries came from a variety of positions and included the sociological accounts of the late Stuart Hall who argued that Thatcherism articulated contradictory discourses about tradition and markets, as well as the early interventions of the London based History of the Present network who deployed a reading of the late work of Foucault on governmentality to argue for an analysis of what they called 'advanced liberalism'.

As the theoretical debate and research agenda on neoliberalism has developed, and because neoliberalism did indeed prove to be less transient than many of the early commentators anticipated, so too did the effects of the new market-oriented political forms begin to receive greater attention from geographers. Indeed, for a while analyses of neoliberalism seemed to be everywhere - as I complained in a somewhat tetchy editorial following the 2002 American Association of Geographers conference (Larner 2003). The term neoliberalism was being used to analyse processes as diverse as new forms of industry training in the United Kingdom, the post-apartheid regime in South Africa, water privatisation in the Andes, the rise of global feminist NGOs, competitive

city strategies in Canada and new forms of environmentalism in the United States. The difficulty was that the content of neoliberalism itself was usually taken-for-granted.

There remains a widespread tendency to see neoliberalism as a preconstituted theoretical explanation and self evident descriptor of contemporary forms of economic, political, social and environmental change. Identifying this problem in a critical commentary, Clive Barnett argued that these accounts of neoliberalism provided a simplistic 'consoling' reiteration of how the world works and offer little assistance in thinking about the rise of pluralistic differences and new forms of effective collective action. He points out that it reproduces a monolithic narrative 'in which recent history is understood in terms of a motivated shift away from public-collective values to private-individualistic values' (Barnett 2005:8) and that analyses of neoliberalism paid little attention to the pro-active role of socio-cultural processes in provoking changes in modes of governance, policy and regulation. From a different theoretical perspective, but also concerned with the direction of discussions of neoliberalism, Noel Castree (2006: 4) also voiced his fear that the 'neoliberalism depicted over and over again is a pure archetype: something unreal that has no consequences or existence in itself'.

More recently there have been sustained efforts to develop analyses that allow us to identify different political-economic modalities of neoliberalism and emphasize the hybridity and contingency of this phenomenon. One consequence has been a shift from an emphasis on particular political projects to process-oriented accounts (captured by the shift in geographical terminology from neoliberalism to neoliberalization) that attempted to focus on historically and geographically specific cases and locations. Whether we want to call these different forms 'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism, neoliberalism and inclusive liberalism, neoliberalism and social investment state, or even 'after neoliberalism' as my New Zealand colleagues and I have done, the result was the growing recognition that 'actually existing neoliberalism' takes many and diverse forms, both temporally and spatially.

These studies have revealed that the actors and processes involved in apparently neoliberal political formations are much more diverse than initially assumed. Neoliberalization (to use the term now most widely used in geography) cannot be explained by simply focusing on paradigmatic figures like Hayek, Thatcher and Reagan, or even particular groups of technocrats and economists. There are also oppositional figures playing key roles in neoliberal assemblages, as Li (2007) shows by highlighting the role of activists and academics in her example of community forestry management, as Sharma (2008) shows in her account of feminist involvement in development projects, and as I emphasize in a paper on former WTO Director General Mike Moore (Larner 2010). To foreshadow the argument I will make later in this paper, these findings ask us to think in new ways about the 'seemingly contradictory' dynamics of marketization and the social turn identified in the summary for this workshop.

Reflecting on this growing body of work, Stephen Collier (2009) argued that a 'knee jerk' assessment that involves identifying aspects of contemporary rule - such as responsibilization, or calculative practices, or government at a distance - and then assuming that what we are seeing is necessarily 'neo-liberalism' is problematic. Indeed, one of the problems with the wider literature has been a tendency to identify any political programme with neoliberal tendencies as essentially neoliberal, and then proceed as if this assumption provides a sufficient account of its nature or an explanation of its existence. The consequence is, as Collier explains, an observation of a neoliberal part is taken to mean that the analysts is dealing with a neoliberal whole.

Consequently there is a strong tendency to think that neoliberalism is THE total logic of power relations in society (hence the claims about the neoliberal era, neoliberal decade, neoliberal world and so on mentioned above), albeit with certain local specifications and modifications.

In short, neoliberalism is too often treated not only as if it was a coherent regime that dominated an epoch, but also as if it was the only political formation worthy of our attention. This is not just to argue for the need to disturb the big 'N' formulations of neoliberalism by examining more carefully its diverse political forms and empirical manifestations. Analysts have also downplayed the diversely generative aspects of power, in particular those associated with grassroots movements and 'bottom up' pressures and as a result have often overlooked the possibility that may be more or less progressive versions of neoliberalism. Finally, we have tended to forget the important point made over a decade ago by Nikolas Rose (2001); namely that advanced liberal techniques can be articulated to diverse political projects. In sum, we have failed to ask important questions about the nature and content of contemporary political formations and our analyses have correspondingly been partial.

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My argument is that these tendencies have been particularly marked in discussions of changes in social policy regimes. As the summary for this workshop acknowledges, there has been a great deal of work on 'how social policy institutions are adjusting to market imperatives and pressures associated with fiscal discipline, privatisation, austerity and retrenchment'. But much of this discussion remains constrained by taken for granted assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon we are analysing and terrain on which we are working. My reading is that the vast majority of accounts of the changes in social policy regimes are deeply pessimistic. Attention is being drawn to processes of marketisation, the ever increasing encroachment of 'audit culture', and the rise of individualised subjects, often captured in a short hand reference to 'neoliberalism'. There is also concern about the new private sector actors entering into the space traditionally occupied by states and third sector organisations. Overall however, whether the discussion focuses on ideational or structural changes, the assumption remains that state institutions remain the primary policy makers, regulators and providers of welfare, even though they are now being challenged by the market.

But I want to suggest that the picture is more complicated than is often assumed. There is now a significant body of work that reveals that techniques conventionally associated with neoliberalism have been taken up by both authoritarian and left leaning governments, as well as those more market oriented governments we might expect to be sympathetic to neoliberalism. There are also examples where apparently neoliberal techniques have been used to strengthen the state or in projects of social welfare that are in part a response to neoliberalism. Indeed it was this phenomenon that my New Zealand colleagues and I had observed, and which informed our attempts to grapple with the conceptual implications of 'after neoliberalism'. Similarly James Ferguson (2010) asks this question in his work on the basic income grant campaign in South Africa. Tracing carefully how such techniques move from one context to another and the work that they do in different settings is thus revealing unexpected political alliances and hybrid political articulations which problematize some of the 'taken-for-granteds' in the social policy literature.

There are three of these 'taken-for-granteds' I want to discuss in more detail here. First of all, we are no longer working with discrete categories of state, market and civil society. These shift we are trying to make sense of are happening on top of an already reconfigured governmental and political terrain. This is not just an argument about the changing role of the state, the expansion of the market, or even the ongoing reconfiguration of the tripartite division between state, market and civil society. Indeed I think to start with these familiar conceptual categories would be to misapprehend the nature of the political-economic spaces and subjects involved in contemporary social policy processes. One consequence of processes such as devolution, marketization, the shift to outsourcing, the rise of business and community partnerships, diverse forms of commodification and so on, is that there are now systematic and systemic limits to state planning, public management and familiar forms of political participation. The 'flex organisations' identified by Janine Wedel (2001) in her work on Eastern Europe are becoming ubiquitous. These are organisations that work across public-private boundaries and strategically shift their status in order to access resources and bypass conventional political constraints and forms of accountability. More generally, I want to underline Fraser's point about the multiple actors and institutions now involved in welfare provisioning and social citizenship.

Secondly, as we all know we are no longer working in nationally bounded settings. But this is not simply the 'compromising of national policy sovereignty', which implies that this is a problematic process and presupposes a preference for national policy making. Instead I would argue we need to identify and examine the transnational networks of expertise through which policies, technologies and bodies travel. Indeed one of the dimensions downplayed in the existing literature is the extent to which the diverse organisations operating in the social policy arena are now actively learning from each other in these realms, particularly as international collaboration, global networks and deep partnerships become institutionalised. These networks are not the singular networks of the policy transfer literature; scientific, economic, political and social expertises are increasingly heterogeneous and globalized (Larner and Laurie 2010). As we have seen from the material prepared for this workshop, social policy has expanded its scope into new arenas such as the environment and energy. Moreover a whole range of globalising 'intermediaries' have also appeared: consultants, communicators, public engagement experts, think tanks, journalists, social entrepreneurs and political activists all play explicit roles in producing and circulating these mobile and mutating knowledges. Some of you will be familiar with the work of my geography colleagues Nik Theodore and Jamie Peck (Peck and Theodore 2010) in this regard but there is much more to be done and said.

Third, we need to understand much more about the new modes of contact between academic, policy and practitioner worlds, and the new forms of politics and power these are giving rise to. New relationships are actively built, political-economic forms are being generated, and novel knowledges are being created as experimentation has become central to new policy regimes. Relatedly, new forms of value generating, formalized labour are becoming more prominent, including amongst the intermediaries I mentioned above. Social policy careers no longer take place in public sector institutions with the secure jobs that sector tended to offer, nor do they necessarily involve only the 'social experts' of the past. Nor is this simply the 'evidence based policy movement' and the new dominance of consultancy culture. As the broader debate about 'immaterial labour' (Lazzarato 2009) underlines, in many areas of social policy attributes like communication, affect, attention and emotion are being actively engaged. At the same time, these emergent value generating spaces and subjects are unlikely to follow

established patterns of economy, work and career, and are more likely to be based on new forms of entrepreneurship, self-employment, contingent labour and/or 'portfolio careers'.

So what are the implications of these wider arguments for academic analyses of contemporary social policy regimes? What I want to suggest is that they demand that we be more reflexive about social policy research and practice. I am going to discuss two quite different examples that suggest that neither state nor market hold the answers to 'big questions' and which make manifest the importance of the three themes I have highlighted in the previous section.

My first example is the new prominence of co-production in both social science research and public service delivery. Co-production emerged in the 1970s through Elinor Ostrom's pioneering research into policing in Indianapolis and Chicago (Stephens 2012), but today is becoming increasingly ubiquitous promoted by governments, funding bodies and community organisations alike. My view is that we need to know much more about the novel forms of engagement and partnerships with civil society and public sector institutions that are now receiving significant academic and institutional investment. For example, I am involved in a major co-produced research programme in Bristol that involves two universities and nine community organisations. Building on established precepts from participatory research, and following nef/NESTA's key principles of co-production (2010), we begin with the understanding that the universities and the community organisations are equal partners in the design and delivery of the research and community partners. Rather than the traditional 'deficit model', academics work with communities to identify research opportunities that enhance economic and social well being, establishing research frameworks based on interdependent relationships, and use peer networks to transfer knowledge and support wider processes of change.

My second example, and another area in which novel social policy relationships and forms of engagement can be clearly seen, is in the explosive growth of field experiments and randomized control trials in social policy. These are driven by the new prominence of behavioural economics, but the acceptance of the recognition that global problems need to be locally contextualised makes epistemological and methodological practice in such projects incredibly complicated. These projects typically involve large budgets, large teams and complex implementation processes that partner universities with government, NGOs and private companies. The key to success in these research domains is the ability to manage large teams with an interdisciplinary flavour, and they often involve industry or community partnerships (or indeed both). Best-practice guides