

# Neoliberalism as a mobile technology

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## Introduction

Neoliberalism has been viewed as a capitalist machinery that is structuring a new planetary geography. But the newness of the neoliberalism word does not disguise the classic method of relying on old macro political distinctions. By now, we are familiar with the image of neoliberalism as an economic tsunami that is gathering force across the planet, pummelling each country in its path and sweeping away old structures of power. This approach proceeds on the assumption that neoliberalism is an ensemble of coordinates that will everywhere produce the same political results and social transformation. But the very conditions associated with the neoliberal – extreme dynamism, mobility of practice, responsiveness to contingencies and strategic entanglements with politics – require a nuanced approach, not the blunt instrument of broad categories and predetermined elements and outcomes.

I propose a transversal mode of analysis that skirts an industrial or military model of neoliberal takeover. Neoliberalism is conceptualized not as a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes, but as a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts. I present an analytics of assemblage over an analytics of structure, and a focus on emerging milieus over the stabilization a new global order. Asia offers a rich empirical context for illuminating how neoliberal logic is inveigled into constellations of authoritarian politics and cultural ethics. Specifically, the intricate interplay of neoliberalism as exception and exception to neoliberalism engenders novel milieus that defy a schematic analysis.

## An economic tsunami?

Neoliberalism as social phenomenon has been mainly examined through the reframing of Marxist concepts of class ideology and structural change, and the main issue appears to be identifying the scale of neoliberal progression and the appropriate scale of analysis.

A New Left critique views neoliberalism as a class-based ideology that attacks the welfare state in advanced liberal countries such as Great Britain (Hall 1988). Structural Marxists are interested as well in neoliberalism beyond a single country, as the latest stage of capitalist hegemonic domination and organization at the global level. Stephen Gill argues that neoliberalism is an epoch-marking order that relies on the quasi-legal restructuring of relationships between nation-states and transnational agencies. He claims that this global disciplinary regime is accompanied by a hegemonic notion of inevitable progress and social hierarchy associated with ‘market civilization’ (Gill 1996). Such formulations have influenced broad culturalist remappings in epochal terms (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), but seem to ignore how particular political environments are also being reconfigured by neoliberal policies.

More recently, Hardt and Negri go beyond the neoliberal North–embattled South model by updating structural Marxism through an infusion of Foucauldian-inflected notions of planetary regulation. They make an epochal claim that we are in a transition to systems of control spread by the ‘deterritorialized flows’ of global markets (Hardt and Negri 2000, 23, 328–9, 332). There is an emerging Empire of globalized uniformity in labour regimes, creating labouring populations who are

finally decontextualized as a placeless multitude. The very information and communicative tools that have been used to regulate them become weapons for the multitude as a counter-Empire, arming them to demand 'global citizenship' in capitalism's Empire (Hardt and Negri 2000, 400). In their questionable use of the power-knowledge concept, they present a homogenized 'governmentality' at the global scale that is more Marxian than Foucauldian in spirit and analysis.

David Harvey introduces a more gradualist model of neoliberalism's progress across the planet, country by country. Neoliberalism is identified by 'the neoliberal state' exhibiting an 'institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2002 <http://user.chol.com/~moraz/DH-neoliberalism.doc>). Neoliberalism is cast as an entity, a unified state apparatus totally dedicated to the interests of unregulated markets. There is a suggestion of a standard neoliberal state, one that combines neoliberal institutions and liberal democracy. Given the reliance on a normative type, Harvey has trouble fitting China into his 'neoliberal template' (Harvey 2005, 139–41). China is deviant because neoliberal policies are combined with state authoritarianism. Because Harvey's neoliberal typology is focused on economic management scaled at the level of the state, it is too unwieldy to take into account the variety of institutions, programmes and actors who are knotted into complex interrelationships in a nation state, including the People's Republic of China (for more on neoliberalism and China, see Ong and Zhang forthcoming).

I call the above formulations Neoliberalism with a big 'N'. Despite their differences in scale and focus, the above approaches share a modality that collapses multiple socio-political values into a single measure or structure. These are models of serial repetition based on comparing units of equivalents. They share the following kinds of abstractions. Neoliberalism is viewed as a dominant structural condition that projects totalizing social change across a nation (another big N concept). As a determining set of economic relationships, Neoliberal transformations in all domains produce an all-encompassing condition under the hegemony of unfettered markets.

Such descriptions unwittingly metaphorize neoliberalism as an economic tsunami that attacks national space, represented by an inert receptacle of market-driven forces and effects. This tidal

image has informed perceptions across the world. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, Korean workers protested against global financial policies by brandishing T-shirts stating 'IMF: I'm Fired.' There is thus a popular view that neoliberalism is savage capitalism, spreading norms of unfettered markets across countries. This view has been supported by broad-brush academic approaches that trace neoliberalism's spread in successive waves across multiple geographic scales.

Yet, Neoliberalism writ large seldom engages with the dynamism it encounters in particular environments. The use of macro categories like structure, civilization, Empire and nation-state betrays an industrial sensibility that tracks the unfolding of an inevitable process across units. But if we view neoliberalism not as a system but a migratory set of practices, we would have to take into account how its flows articulate diverse situations and participate in mutating configurations of possibility.

### In motion: logic and assemblage

Neoliberalism with a small 'n' is a technology of governing 'free subjects' that co-exists with other political rationalities. The problem of neoliberalism – i.e. how to administer people for self-mastery – is to respond strategically to population and space for optimal gains in profit. In Great Britain and other advanced liberal nations, neoliberalism has been defined as a mode of 'governing through freedom' that requires people to be free and self-managing in different spheres of everyday life – health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, etc. There is also a stress on responsibility at the community level, and new requirements of self-responsibility by individual subjects. Neoliberalism as a governing by calculation suggests new relations between the governing, the self-governed and the space of administration. Nikolas Rose suggests that neoliberal practices pervade all areas of contemporary British society (Rose 1999, 27–8). But in emerging non-Western contexts, the strategy of governing and self-governing is not uniformly applied to all groups and domains within a nation. Indeed, neoliberal policies are all about the recalibration of the capacity of groups in relation to the dynamism of global markets. Not all populations or areas can or should be subjected to techniques of self-governing and the free play of market forces. Neoliberal strategies respond to

problems of governing by making calculative choices about intervention and risk in an unfolding situation.

The interplay of optimizing rationality, political institutions and actors defines a particular configuration, i.e. a milieu of transformation that is also for the analyst, a space of problematization.

Thus, neoliberal logic is best conceptualized not as a standardized universal apparatus, but a migratory technology of governing that interacts with situated sets of elements and circumstances. As a 'global form' (Collier and Ong 2005, 11–12, 14), neoliberal practices spread not out of a necessity of universal reproduction, but through the vectors it carves through the global marketplace of ideas and practices. Neoliberal rationality has floated beyond advanced liberal countries to political environments as varied as the garrison state (Roitman 2005), post-socialist oligarchy or authoritarian formation without replacing the political apparatus or ideology (Ong 2006a). To grasp such seemingly indiscriminate couplings, we take cues from the vector of this global form and its convergences with situated institutions and practices (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Stephen J. Collier and I use the concept of 'global assemblage' to identify an unstable constellation shaped by interacting global forms and situated political regimes (for a discussion of assemblage, see Collier and Ong 2005). The space of analysis is not already defined by geographical entities, but by the space configured through the intersection of global and situated elements. The concept bypasses structural analysis, scalar progressionism and predetermined outcomes commonly deployed by political economy. As a field of inquiry, assemblage stresses not structural hierarchy but an oblique point of entry into the asymmetrical unfolding of emerging milieus.

Because the focus is on forces drawn together, and the reconfigurations that emerge, there is no claim of determination by a global form. Although assemblage invokes nexus, it is radically different from concepts such as 'network society' or 'actor network theory' that seek to describe a fully-fledged system geared toward a single goal of maximization (e.g. see Latour 1990; Castells 1996). Rather, the promiscuous entanglements of global and local logics crystallize different conditions of possibility. This conceptual openness to unexpected outcomes of disparate political and ethical intentions suggests that outcomes cannot be determined in advance.

Instead of assuming that certain environments are more or less amenable to neoliberal rationality, the assemblage concept stresses reflexivity in the interplay between global technology and situated practices. As Ulrich Beck has noted, reflexive modernization involves the recursive relationship between modern projects and cultural norms (Beck *et al.* 1994).

Assemblage highlights the situated interplay of motion and contingency, of technology and ethics, of opportunity and risk. The space of assemblage is the space of neoliberal intervention as well as its resolution of problems of governing and living. To anchor my theoretical project, I turn to neoliberal encounters in non-Western contexts.

### Exceptions and refigurations

Especially in Asia, where neoliberal rationality has been rapidly adopted outside the West, the strategic and contingent nature of its intervention is dramatically telling. Neoliberal practices are introduced in Asia as exceptions to political business as usual, bringing about not totalizing change, but the refiguration of political logics and spaces. But first, how is neoliberal reason operationalized as innovative politics?

Neoliberal logic travels to emerging economies, both as a technique of administration, and as a metaphor. While many consider neoliberalism broadly as global markets overwhelming countries, neoliberalism as a technique is fundamentally about the re-management of populations. For emerging countries, the World Bank has prescribed 'political entrepreneurialism', or a shift from a focus on the production of goods (already underway for decades) to the production of educated subjects. Neoliberalism's metaphor is knowledge: 'Knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere' (World Bank 1999, 16). As we shall see, neoliberal calculations in emerging Asia are less concerned with adopting norms of efficiency, transparency and accountability (though Singapore is as always an exception), and more about fostering self-actualizing or self-enterprising subjects. The common goal is to induce an enterprising subjectivity in elite subjects, to increase their capacity to make calculative choices in the fast-expanding information industry. However, these market-driven mechanisms are not uniformly enforced, but must take into account other political

logics and risks that already exist in a particular context.

Indeed, over the past decade, 'knowledge society' has been the buzzword in Asia, with China obsessed about the overall 'quality' of its population, India pointing with pride to its vast technical labour force, and smaller Asian countries stressing high-tech or biomedical expertise. More striking than in Western contexts, in Asian milieus of development, neoliberal thinking is directed toward the promotion of educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets. This emergence of high-tech and scientific workers has propelled a global job migration, making 'labour arbitrage' an increasingly common corporate practice (Ong 2006b).

But empirically speaking, pro-talent strategies cannot be universalized throughout a particular national territory, but must selectively target certain populations and places.

In India, only about one million people are seriously involved in 'high-tech' industries, and they are scattered in a handful of cybercentres in a vast agricultural nation. In the People's Republic of China, special zones are located in coastal cities that attract a disproportionate number of educated and enterprising citizens. In Malaysia, high-tech zones are succeeded by a multimedia corridor that purports to combine high-tech and media production. Neoliberal calculations are introduced as exceptions to the prevailing political system, separating some groups for special attention, and carving out special zones that overlap, but do not coincide, with the national terrain.

Carl Schmitt's view of state sovereignty is based on the strategic and situational exercise of power that responds to crises and challenges by invoking exceptions to political normativity. 'All law', he argues, 'is "situational law"' (Schmitt 1987, 13). The contingent exploitation of the exception – as neoliberal technologies, or as exclusions from neoliberalism – is skilfully applied in some Asian contexts. Policies favouring the production of free, self-managing subjects are introduced in environments where conditions of freedom are much more ambiguous and qualified by the claims of culture and politics. Strategies that seek to get people to be self-improving and competitive rub up against the claims of race, religion and caste. The situated interplay between neoliberalism as exception and exceptions to neoliberalism shapes an emerging milieu where the free co-exist with the unfree,

unbridled knowledge flows and yet there are limits on knowledge, and where citizens are obliged to be both self-managing and patriotic. Neoliberal reason further fragments national space and population rather than unifies the condition of living and working within the nation state.

In situations of neoliberal exception, state controls, territory and populations are teased apart and then recombined in milieus that link up with global markets. In China, pro-market policies are interwoven with a socialist state, private enterprises flourish alongside repressive laws, consumer culture cohabits with the lack of inalienable rights. Policies of optimization are materialized in the re-inscription of geographic space into special zones. Thus 'market reforms' in China were introduced through zoning technologies that encoded alternative territorialities for experiments in economic freedom and entrepreneurial activity. These sites concentrated highly skilled citizens and investing foreigners without annulling the political matrix of socialist planning (Ong and Zhang forthcoming). Neoliberal calculations identify optimizing spaces and populations in relation to global market opportunities. While cities like Shanghai and Dalian have been chosen because of their historical access to international networks, they also attract highly educated populations. As the study by Hoffman (forthcoming) has shown, these are also zones where China's talented labour markets are cultivated and regulated. Strategies of optimization train white collar workers to be self-enterprising, to make choices in global markets. At the same time, such regulations are opportunistically combined with the socialist state's aspirations. Therefore, in contrast to situations in the West, neoliberal governmentality engenders 'patriotic' professionals who serve China's global advancement (Hoffman forthcoming). Indeed, one may argue that neoliberal policies promoting the talents market are limited to the market sector, and instead of erasing the pre-existing logic of socialist patriotism, the new self-enterprising ethos is brought into alignment with it. Furthermore, the vast majority of Chinese people outside this loop are not groomed for this kind of self-authorization, but serve as a vast reservoir of cheap labour power frequently abused by self-enterprising elites. Neoliberalism in the Chinese environment thus crystallizes conditions that engender both self-reliant but state-dominated professionals on the one hand, and rebellious workers seeking protection against capitalist dispossession on the other.

In Southeast Asia, neoliberal exceptions are taken up in authoritarian environments dominated by ethnic governmentality. Malaysia has emerged, through its string of economic zones, as a significant high-tech manufacturing platform. As in China, neoliberal policies for promoting knowledge workers are unevenly deployed, but decisions are affected mainly by religious and ethnic considerations. On the one hand, neoliberal intervention in an ambitious technocracy crystallized a 'moderate Islam' that tempers radical religious resistance to women's mass employment by global companies. On the other, the push for a knowledge society has met stiff resistance from Malay Muslims who fear that a stress on education and high-tech knowledge will benefit the Chinese minority and undermine Muslim political domination. Outside high-tech zones, there is a powerful resistance to the knowledge society and its requirements that Malay Muslims must fully participate in its obligations of knowledge accumulation and independence of special state favours. Such exceptions to neoliberalism have reinforced ethnic governmentality in the midst of high-tech development, thus configuring a situation of graduated governing that balances the multiple interests of spaces and populations (Ong 2006c).

In neighbouring Singapore, neoliberal logic is translated as a process of continual intellectual grading beyond sheer scientific disciplines to include entrepreneurial risk-taking. In this tiny authoritarian city-state that is always projecting the next crisis scenario, there is little tolerance for ethnic or moral exceptions to absolute necessity of economic growth. Spatial practices of optimization are directed both inwards – in the creation of cutting-edge science parks and bio-tech centres – and outwards, in forging international relationships – with global companies, universities and research institutes – that transcend the limits of the postage-stamp territory to configure an 'enterprise ecosystem' linked to global networks (Ong 2005). Such networks pull in expatriates to build up intellectual capital and thus raise the bar for local knowledge workers. Citizens already subjected to a meritocratic system must now learn to let their intellect 'dance', so that they can become creative and entrepreneurial workers in an envisioned future of the city as a techno-media hub. City space, architecture and citizens are all subject to re-engineering for techno-optimization. This emergent milieu dedicated to the creation of global values in science and technology must con-

found exceptions mainly from the outside. The information cluster is precariously balanced on international norms of research and living, and exceptions that expatriates may raise about situated conditions of work and politics.

## Conclusion

Like any global form, neoliberal rationality participates in shifting constellations of politics, cultures and actors. In contrast to popular accounts, neoliberalism is not conceptualized as a hegemonic order or unified set of policies. There is an urgent need to bypass broad assertions that common features of a neoliberal order are disseminated country by country, and evenly across a nation-state. By specifying neoliberal mechanisms and their differential articulation with specific political configurations, I pinpoint mutations not in the space of the nation-state, but in the space of the assemblage.

Second, my lateral approach bypasses not only the abstracted hierarchy of structures and orders, but also the limits of stand-alone micro-analysis. By staying close to actual neoliberal practices, I track the diverse vectors of global forms (self-enterprising ethos, knowledge accumulation) and their unstable alignments with situated constellations. In the three Asian settings, the mix of neoliberal exceptions and exceptions to neoliberalism elicits different solutions that fragment as well as recombine spaces and populations in novel ways. These different outcomes stemming from encounters with neoliberal logics and norms allow a mode of comparative analysis across situations without reducing them to mass produced equivalents of some master signifier.

Finally, the very different configurations sketched above dramatize the restless nature of the neoliberal logic and its promiscuous capacity to become entangled with diverse assemblages, thereby crystallizing political conditions and solutions that confound liberal expectations.

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