



EDITORS' NOTE ON "NEOLIBERAL FUTURES"

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For anthropologists, *neoliberalism* is one of those terms that goes without saying. Like other keywords—*modernity*, *capitalism*, *development*, *race*—we seem to know what it means and what its politics entails. But as a catch-all descriptor of the contemporary condition, this promiscuous signifier loses much of its force as a diagnostic of what is distinctive about the current moment. And yet *neoliberalism* continues to do important work in our discipline as evidenced by the flood of submissions we have received over the last four years under its sign, and its use may conceal more progressive political valences.

In deciding to devote one issue per year to what we have called the “futures of neoliberalism,” we hoped to thicken and nuance the term’s meaning by showcasing what anthropologists do best: offering theoretically-astute, fine-grained ethnographic analyses, in this case, of the effects of global restructuring today. We envisioned articles that might take us beyond a mere re-issuing of those political-economic truisms—though undeniably all-too-real—that neoliberalism entails state pullback, increasing marketization, growing inequality between haves and have-nots, the “self-responsibilization” of individuals, and so on. Indeed we find that the essays we have published deepen and transform the meaning of the term in fundamental ways, some of which we aim to spell out here.

By invoking neoliberalism’s “futures,” we hoped to call attention to what happens to sensibilities of time—whether or not their horizons of expectation are

oriented to the present or future—and to the futures of the term *neoliberalism* itself. As our authors have consistently noted, the architecture of time under regimes unilaterally focused on economic growth, individual responsibility, and state pullback can be remarkably schizophrenic. It is not that the modernist dreams of a progressively-better future—the promise of the post-war Fordist social contract (in metropolitan countries)—have totally disappeared; nor that people have abandoned the desire or capacity to dream of elsewhere—whether spatial, temporal, or social—beyond the here and now. Rather, in the precariousness and risk such dream-making now inhabits, attachments to the present have intensified. Embedded in rhythms of truncated work, interrupted life cycles, and the arrival of foreign migrants or military incursions, imaginings are often radically presentist, collapsed or imploded into the immediacy of survival (especially in today’s global peripheries and margins).

Such a refiguring of temporality is accompanied by an intensified attention to the materiality of everyday existence, one focused on shelter, food, and body—on an everyday here and now that has become little more than the struggle to survive. Thus, Amira Mittermaier (29:1) describes a Sufi soup kitchen in Cairo, inside the “City of the Dead,” where the guiding principle is to give food and tea to anyone who comes by. In what she calls an “ethics of immediacy,” this humanitarian gesture is the inverse of developmentalism (with its promise of a better future). Here, care is disseminated on a post-identitarian basis, as if all outsiders, both cultural and economic, have vanished. Kregg Hetherington (28:1), inspired by the new materialism studies—many of our authors are influenced by the Latourian turn—writes about a war over beans in Paraguay, where beans themselves became triumphant agents in peasant struggles against corporations and the state.

Another type of materiality can be found in the grotesque piles of cash that imaginatively saturated the landscape in Albania, goading so many into investing in the pyramid schemes that raged during the 1990s (Musaraj 26:1). Mis-imagining the materiality of the present is also at work in the xenophobia that erupted in violent riots against foreign workers in South Africa in 2008. Jason Hickel (29:1) not only shows how the violence was justified by local perceptions of usurping foreigners as witches but also suggests that such violence be read, ironically, as contesting the culture of neoliberal labor itself—as flexible, cheap, uprooted, mobile, kinless, and individualized.

How work aligns itself with—bleeds into, poaches on—life, indeed bare life, is critical here. As one barter labor for life in an economy in which em-

ployment becomes ever more flexibilized and just-in-time—continually outsourced to those willing to work the hardest for less—the organization between work and life, and the ecology of existence itself, takes on a kinetic shape with labor often assuming novel forms. Danny Hoffman (26:1), for example, shows how war becomes a form of labor for young men in Sierra Leone. Qualitatively similar to other kinds of labor, like working in the mines, the timber industry, or on rubber plantations, selling one's ability to fight renders all labor commensurable in the violent economy of war-torn Sierra Leone. War is productive of money and life for these paid-for rebels, and their allegiances easily shift, since they are engaging in violence more as a job than as political endeavor. The line between job and life—or in Hoffman's case, death—is porous, much as it is for the Japanese cell-phone novelists described by Gabriella Lukacs (28:1), writers who draw on lives of suffering and pain to produce novels that, posted on cell-phones, entertain fast-paced commuter-consumers in urban Japan. Expected to invest their souls in this work—to extract stories from bodies in pain—these cell-phone novelists engage in labor they experience as hard but meaningful, and less alienating than other kinds of work available to young precariat. In the dream-work they produce, and co-author with readers who write back, cell-phone novels enable a circuitry of affect that also creates new collectivities. And yet, as with Hoffman's youthful soldiers, the horizon of expectation is turned to the present, to getting through the here and now rather than imagining a there and beyond. This is also true, but with a twist, for the urban poor described by Kathleen Millar (29:1), who plunder the dumps outside of Rio de Janeiro for recyclables to sell. In a wage-less job at the very bottom of the socio-economic spectrum, the scavenging poor are not only stigmatized but also put at considerable risk. Nonetheless, there is a "continual return" in the rhythms of their work in the dump because, living amidst multiple forms of insecurity and everyday emergency, this is one kind of labor that accords them flexibility. They can return any time, work for as long as they want, and always make a small profit. Work like this melds itself to the unpredictability of lives on the ground. While working in the dump is a source of suffering, it is also a refuge of sorts. The exigencies of a precarious life—sick children, the need to tend to an aging parent—are not eased by the precarity of such work, but they are also not sacrificed in the contract made between labor and life.

As Millar notes, insecure labor is increasingly becoming a shared condition that is merging the destinies of global North and South. But how precisely people respond to this condition and what they make of life in the present—and whether

and how they imagine it otherwise—is quite varied. Being without work produces an affect of boredom for the jobless and homeless in post-communist Bucharest (O’Neill 29:1). Unable to do or buy anything, they bear the marks of social exclusion, and their dreams are of drinking Nescafé, as if a jolt of caffeine might s(t)imulate the activity of a job or of life itself. In asking how the poor corporealize their poverty in the seemingly permanent state of crisis in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, Elysée Nouvet (29:1) describes what she refers to as the current moment’s “(in)convenient affects.” One woman is able to carry on despite the precarity of labor and life, while another too often just stays in bed. Unable to motivate herself to sell the meager foodstuffs she peddles, she puts her four young children at risk of survival. And yet, as Nouvet asks, is there a difference between carrying on or staying in bed in a context of acute structural violence? When life becomes so indistinguishable from death, what accounts for those who can manage—and from what resources do they draw—to keep living?

The crisis in value is seen not only in barter made between life and death but also in the pursuit of homeownership by middle-class Israelis in a real-estate market where such investment no longer makes financial “sense” (H. Weiss 29:1), or in the recent banking crisis in Argentina, where a new ecology of dollars, bricks, and pesos deprives currency of its anchor in anything beyond the fragility of the moment (D’Avella 29:1). In Indonesia (Luvaas 28:1), Guatemala (Thomas 28:1), Macedonia (Graan 28:1), and Brazil (Dent 27:1), brands—of corporations and nation-states—are hyped alongside their counterfeits (Nakassis 28:1), and the piracy of fakes flourishes while a desire, even belief, in authenticity still reigns.

We have also seen in many of the articles creative efforts to engage in subsistence bricolage, to find a way to keep going or “make time” out of the very lineaments of a market economy that cuts off jobs (Muehlebach 26:1), shuts down the electricity (Mains 27:1), and makes persons socially redundant or dead (Molé 29:1). This is what Clara Han (26:1) discovered in her work on a low-income neighborhood in Santiago, Chile, where temporality for residents is one of waiting: waiting for life to take a turn while balancing the demands of caring for kin, the struggles to find or keep a job, and the cascading effects that pepper life for those suffering from intractable mental illness, violence, and drug addiction. While the materiality of everyday life is both fractured and in continual flux, people dream nonetheless; not so much of making fortunes as of having a modicum of security for or with family. The economy of credit allows them to buy a bit of life, “loaned life” in Han’s felicitous phrase: some food for the kids today or repairs for their home tomorrow. This makes one indebted, and debt consumes

so much interest that whatever is gained is often taken away, in spades, only too soon. But, for a while, one “makes time” and, in this sliver of hopefulness about an indeterminate future, life is lived for the moment.

While certainly depressing, this intensification or implosion of the political-economic—into presentism and immediacy, into a recursive materiality, into new bargains waged between labor and life, into the barest of life—also bespeaks an excess or surplus beyond political-economy and labor alone. Holding on, making do, or getting by in situations of uncommon precarity also produces new socialities and openings. If not exactly politics as we know it, and not entirely hopeful, there is emerging a type of melancholy *rejouissance* that points toward a different future, perhaps even a future or beyond to neoliberalism itself.