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## From neoliberalism to neoliberalisation: consolations, confusions, and necessary illusions

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### Abstract

Of late, I have been conducting a review of empirical research that analyses the relationships between neoliberalism and the nonhuman world. When published, the review will, I hope, be a useful way-station in advancing our understanding of these relationships. In a short space of time there has been a proliferation of research into the 'nature of neoliberalism and the neoliberalisation of nature' (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Until recently neoliberalism had been the topical preserve of critically minded urban, economic, and development geographers. Now, though, a cohort of environmental geographers also critically minded have turned their attention to how the non-human world affects and is affected by neoliberal programmes. For instance, the journals *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* and *Geoforum* have both devoted whole issues to the topic in the last twelve months. Much of the research I am surveying is Marxist or neo-Marxist in its explanatory and evaluative approach. Although theoretically informed, it is also insistently empirical: it attempts to trace the environmental logics and effects of neoliberalism contextually. My aim has been to parse it so that we can see the proverbial woods in diagnostic and normative terms for the empirical trees. In the absence of a systematic review of the empirical literature I suspect that we will remain unclear what gains are being made in terms of concepts, evidence, or critique.

### Keywords

necessary, illusions, confusions, neoliberalism, consolations, neoliberalisation

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## **From neoliberalism to neoliberalization: consolations, confusions and necessary illusions**

Of late, I've been conducting a review of empirical research that analyses the relationships between neoliberalism and the non-human world. When published, the review will, I hope, be a useful way-station in advancing our understanding of these relationships. In a short space of time there's been a proliferation of research into the 'nature of neoliberalism and the neoliberalization of nature' (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). Until recently neoliberalism had been the topical preserve of critically-minded urban, economic and development geographers. Now, though, a cohort of environmental geographers – also critically-minded – have turned their attention to how the non-human world affects and is affected by neoliberal programmes. For instance, the journals *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* and *Geoforum* have both devoted whole issues to the topic in the last 12 months. Much of the research I'm surveying is Marxist or neo-Marxist in its explanatory and evaluative approach. While theoretically informed, it is also insistently empirical: it attempts to trace the environmental logics and effects of neoliberalism contextually. My aim has been to parse it so that we can see the proverbial woods – in diagnostic and normative terms – for the empirical trees. In the absence of a systematic review of the empirical literature I suspect that we'll remain unclear what gains are being made in terms of concepts, evidence or critique.

Yet in the slow (but enjoyable) process of reviewing the literature I've become increasingly confused as to the precise object of analytical attention. It's not simply that the research papers I'm reading focus on different kinds of natural and altered environments (hardly surprising given the world's biophysical diversity). In addition, the political economic project driving environmental change – 'neoliberalism' – seems to alter its shape from paper to paper. So, while the authors whose essays and chapters I'm reading appear to share a common analytical focus – their different environmental expertises notwithstanding – it turns out that this focus is rather fuzzy. This is not just an empirical issue. In theoretical terms what counts as neoliberalism does not appear to be a matter of consensus among critics in geography and cognate fields. In some cases privatisation and marketization are the key criteria; in other cases additional features are listed among its *differentia specifica*. Empirically, it's no surprise to discover that, however defined, 'neoliberalism' does not 'ground itself' unchanged from place to place. Rather, as the case studies I've been reading show so well, its embedding in real world situations muddies the clean lines of its conceptual specification.

So far so unexceptional. Anyone with an even passing familiarity with geographical debates over previous grand abstractions – like post-modernity, post-Fordism or globalization – will doubtless interpret my 'fuzzy concept' problem as no problem at all. Given time, it might be thought that those researchers whose empirical work I am surveying will sharpen theoretical understandings of neoliberalism by carefully specifying different modalities of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. This being early days, it might be thought that we still have some way to go before research into the 'nature' of neoliberalism reaches maturity. 'Maturity', from this perspective, would be a situation where a substantial body of evidence has both arisen from and altered increasingly refined conceptualisations of what neoliberalism is all about. Since this involves increased theoretical complexity, then the theoretical abstraction 'neoliberalism' will, over time, give way to plural understandings of *neoliberalisation* as a really existing process rather than an ageographical thing. The

end result will be that environmental geographers – like other geographers interested in neoliberalism – will move from the heavens of abstract theory to the nitty-gritty of empirical specifics ending-up somewhere in-between: with mid-range conceptualisations that have genuine explanatory and normative purchase.

Though the above scenario is not implausible, I have nagging doubts – ones whose implications extend way beyond my immediate subject of concern. My worry is that analysts of neoliberalism’s environmental impacts are travelling down a road to nowhere. The potential dead-end to which I refer is not a function of the topic being researched – like any political economic project, neoliberalism will have non-trivial effects on the non-human world (and therefore on us). It is essential that these effects be described, explained and evaluated. But the key question – and the basis of my concern – is what precisely *produces* these effects. Ostensibly it is ‘neoliberalism’ of course. But since geographical researchers of neoliberalism are rightly trying to complicate and dehomogenise this thought-abstraction, the issue of what, precisely, the object of analysis is arises. If, as Barnett (2005: 9) states, ‘There is no such thing as neoliberalism!’, then we are forced to recognise one of two possibilities. The first – apropos the mid-level theory mentioned above – is that there are distinct kinds of neoliberalisation whose environmental impacts can be fairly accurately understood (even though there’s unlikely to be a consistent relationship between kinds and impacts). The second is that even at this meso-level neoliberalism can only exist as a thought-abstraction not a ‘real entity’ because ‘it’ only ever exists in articulation with actors, institutions and agendas that immediately call into question whether a thing called ‘neoliberalism’ – however carefully specified – can be held responsible for anything.

Clearly, I am touching here upon fundamental research issues – those of ontology and epistemology – that cannot be resolved at a purely philosophical level. To date, researchers of neoliberalism in urban and economic geography have tended to resist the second possibility mentioned above (perhaps because it appears to lead to the dead-end of an idiographic focus on the unique and the singular). Instead, they believe that ongoing empirical research can be synthesised and compared so that mid-level concepts will emerge. The likelihood is that the environmental geographers whose research I’ve recently been reading will, similarly, see the production of such grounded concepts as their long term objective. If so, I wish to give them pause for thought – so too all those other geographers undertaking theoretically informed and theoretically relevant empirical research into neoliberalism’s actually existing forms.

A brief exploration of some unresolved tensions in the writings of Wendy Larner and Jamie Peck is instructive here. Economic geographers both, Larner and Peck’s overview pieces on neoliberalism have enjoyed a wide readership among critical geographers (Larner, 2003; Peck 2001, 2004; see also Peck and Tickell, 2002). Both authors have tried to set agendas for current and future geographical research into neoliberalism that touch upon the source of my concern in this commentary. Larner (2003: 510) has argued that neoliberalism needs to be given “an identity crisis”. Following Gibson-Graham (1996) she argues that when critical scholars reify neoliberalism as a hegemonic, unified entity they, perversely, exaggerate its power despite their oppositional stance towards it. Her recommendation is that we take aspatial and universal conceptions of neoliberalism and render them geographical: that we pay attention to “the *different variants* of neoliberalism, to the *hybrid nature* of contemporary policies and programmes, ... [and] to the *multiple and contradictory aspects* of neoliberal spaces, techniques and subjects” (*ibid.* 509). However, perhaps aware that this argument can be seen to license the proliferation of disconnected case

studies, she also stresses “the important contributions of academic work focused on identifying the similarities between different forms of neoliberalism” (*ibid.* 510).

The hidden tensions in Larner’s argument become manifest in Jamie Peck’s excellent synoptic essays on neoliberalism. He notes that neoliberalism is a “perplexingly amorphous political economic phenomena” (2004: 394) because it remains unclear at what geographical scales and levels of theoretical abstraction we can identify it. As he puts it, “While the neoliberal discourses and strategies that are mobilized in ... different settings share certain family resemblances, local institutional context clearly (and *really*) matters in the style, substance, origins and outcomes ...” (*ibid.* 395). This is more than a reiteration of Larner’s apparently sensible attempt to give the grand abstraction ‘neoliberalism’ an identity crisis. More than Larner, Peck wants to identify commonalities-within-apparent-difference without succumbing to “the fallacies of monolithism ... or convergence thinking” (*ibid.* 403). As he continues, “While geographers tend to be rightly sceptical of spatially totalizing claims, splitting differences over varieties of neoliberalism cannot be an end in itself, not least because it begs questions about the common roots and shared features of the unevenly neoliberalized landscape that confronts us” (*ibid.*). What Peck seems to have in mind here is not a process of pure thought abstraction: one where generic similarities among different neoliberalisms are identified yielding a ‘neoliberal model’ that nowhere exists as such. Instead, Peck recognises that all neoliberalisations are hybrid *from the outset* (“... even the United States represents a ‘case’, rather than the model itself” [*ibid.* 393]). It follows for him, therefore, that “in the absence of a more careful mapping of these hybrids-in-connection, the concept of neoliberalism ... remains seriously underspecified, little more in some cases than a radical-theoretical slogan” (*ibid.* 403).

It seems to me that, despite his best efforts, Peck fails to satisfactorily address some key problems in the argument that both he and Larner are advancing. In a sense both authors want to have their cake and eat it. They insist that we identify different modalities of neoliberalism without giving up on the task of discussing “the abstraction we might provisionally term neoliberalism in general” (*ibid.* 395) – where the latter now arises from a comparative consideration of empirical research rather than *a priori* thought-experiments or reference to the programmatic writings of Friedman and Hayek. For my own part I see difficulties with this ‘both/and’ agenda even as I understand the intentions behind it. Let me explain.

First, part of neoliberalism’s ‘perplexing amorphousness’ – *whatever* geographical scale or level of theoretical abstraction we’re dealing with – stems from a fairly intractable inability to ‘fix’ the term’s meanings and real world referents. Unlike, say, water – which in one of its three states remains water wherever and whenever it is – neoliberalism does not possess stable characteristics. We only ‘know’ what a given phenomena is neoliberal – or has “a more than trivial degree of neoliberal content” (*ibid.* 403) – because we have selected from among several definitions that other researchers or real world actors use to specify that neoliberalism is. Because these definitions are multiple – as I noted earlier, critics usually offer between two and several criteria when defining what counts as a neoliberal idea or policy – then ‘the real world’ can only partly function as a ‘court of appeal’ to resolve competing claims as to what is (or is not) neoliberal in degree and kind.

Second, even if this were not an issue, neoliberal practices always, as Larner and Peck rightly argue, exist in a more-than-neoliberal context. The context matters because it introduces difference, path dependency and unevenness in terms of process and outcome: neoliberalizations in the plural. But this then begs the question: what

does it mean to abstract from context (again, *whatever* geographical scale or level of theoretical abstraction we're dealing with) in the way that Larner and especially Peck recommend? Even in Peck's subtle reading of 'neoliberalism in general' we confront the possibility that we're simply listing generic – albeit historically specific – characteristics found in multiple geographical contexts. Since the effects of these characteristics can only ever be understood contextually then the suspicion arises that neoliberalism depicted over and above context is a pure archetype: something unreal that has no consequences or existence in itself.

This, of course, raises the key question of where context begins and where it ends. Phrased differently, it raises the question of geographical scale: at what socially constituted scale/s does/do discrete modes of neoliberal policy and practice exist? The answer, as the growing empirical literature shows, is that it very much depends. One of the reasons that critics see neoliberalism as tendentially hegemonic is because it has been 'rolled out' by *global* institutions (like the World Bank) with the (apparent) power to impose their will on whole countries. But this does not, of course, mean that it is implemented uniformly over space because of pre-existing differences in the configurations of state, business and civil society. What's more, national, regional and local level actors in various parts of the world have enacted *their own* neoliberal policies in relation to specific sets of people, places, natural resources, industries and so on. So even if neoliberal ideas have, these last twenty years, diffused out from globally powerful bodies this does nothing to alter the fact of hybridity and variety that Larner and Peck both discern.

My third point, in light of this, is that it is wrong to believe that 'larger' geographical scales (e.g. the NAFTA area) comprise a more uniform neoliberal landscape 'over-laying' more regionally and locally variable ones. The point, surely, is that even global policies and rules 'bite' differently all the way from the continental down to the local scales. In other words, 'difference' does not begin (or somehow 'deepen') at the local scale alone (as implied by Perreault and Martin [2005]). Neither Larner nor Peck suggest that it does, but there's nonetheless the risk that their arguments can be seen to imply that there's a scale or scales where geographical difference ends and spatial similarity begins. As I suggested in the previous paragraph, neoliberalism is 'impure' at *all* geographical scales meaning that the search for similarities can easily become a formal rather than substantive exercise.

The way to avoid this last possibility is to do what critical realists in human geography have been doing for years. Supposing that we can agree on what neoliberalism's defining characteristics are, we start by recognising that it exists in an overdetermined socionatural universe. We therefore acknowledge that it never acts alone – only in a faery-tale world where everything is privatised, marketised and commodified would this not hold true. Therefore, when we identify specific *variants* of neoliberalism we are not examining varieties of a really existing, homogenous *genus*. Instead, we are doing two things. First, we are seeing how a really-existing and quite widespread set of policy ideas are having *conjoint effects* at specific geographical scales (up to and including the global). In other words, we are examining contingently occurring processes and outcomes that may well have operated differently if the 'neoliberal component' had not been present. Secondly, this means the object of analysis in any giving research project is not a mere temporary 'variant' of something more enduring and solid but rather a qualitatively distinct phenomena in its own right: namely, an articulation between certain neoliberal policies and a raft of other social and natural phenomena.

Rigorously pursued, a critical realist approach to neoliberalism or any other topic resists the ‘violence of abstraction’: that is, the habit of confusing epistemic discussions about a phenomena abstracted from its contexts of operation with ontological discussions about its actual behaviour and its material effects. As the now-distant ‘localities debate’ showed, the best critical realist research does not doubt that certain phenomena cover wide spans of space and time. Instead, it insists that such phenomena are likely to be impure at all scales and this impurity must be respected not seen as a deviation from some norm or essence. How does this relate to attempts to compare different variants of neoliberalism? The answer is that critical realists would look for substantial (not formal) similarities in causal processes and contingent similarities in how those processes work out on the ground. In other words, geographical difference matters to critical realists ‘all the way down’ which is not the same as saying that the world is necessarily a patchwork of unlike parts. Critical realists, though not discussed by Peck in his recent work (though further back in time see Peck, 1996), would doubtless approach neoliberalism in the way he recommends. They would identify similarities between neoliberalizations not to suggest that the differences can be bracketed but to suggest, instead, that even *with* these differences substantial commonalities of process and outcome occur. Equally, though, they would be open to the evidence telling them a different story: one where the differences make *such* a difference that the commonalities exist only in name (conceptually) not actuality. In either case, it would be axiomatic that it is never ‘neoliberalism’ alone that causes anything, but always ‘neoliberalism-plus’ – begging the empirical question of at one point of ‘impurity’ it becomes impossible to use the term neoliberal in any meaningful analytic sense.

What’s the relevance of all this to the relatively new research literature exploring neoliberalisms and the non-human world? In a recent critical review of work by Larner, Peck and other geographic analysts of neoliberalism, Barnett (op. cit. 9-10) has made the following observation. “For all its apparent critical force”, he argues,

the vocabulary of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberalization’ in fact provides a double consolation for leftist academics: it supplies us with plentiful opportunities for unveiling the real workings of hegemonic ideologies in a characteristic gesture of revelation; and. In so doing, it invites us to align our own professional roles with the activities of various actors ‘out there’, who are always framed as engaging in resistance or contestation.

If Barnett is right (and I think he might be) then it’s important that the still young geographical research literature on neoliberalism and nature avoid the consolations to which he refers. In a recent special issue of this journal on neoliberalism in Latin America – in which several essays examine environmental impacts – Perreault and Martin (2005) seem drawn to these consolations despite themselves. On the one side, like Larner and Peck, they deny that neoliberalism *tout court* exists (only specific versions of it). Yet they also make *plenary* claims about ‘its’ implications for the environment and its governance (p. 193). What is the appeal of continuing to talk in terms of grand abstractions, even as they’re being called into question? One answer is that the ‘bad’ (i.e. aspatial) habits of social science thinking continue to affect geographical thinking. As Barnett implies, academic critics are made to feel important if the object of their animus appears to be hegemonic, global and powerful: something that demands urgent critical scrutiny. It’s far less glamorous and ‘sexy’ to have to constantly describe ones objects of analysis as multiple, complex and varied through

time and space. As David Harvey (1985: xi) argued many years ago, spatiotemporal specificity appears to paralyse the generalising impulses of mainstream and radical social scientists (like economists and social theorists).

Avoiding the consolations of neoliberalism will also, necessarily, allow future geographical research on neoliberalizations of nature to avoid some explanatory and normative confusions. As I've argued in this commentary, more thought needs to be devoted to two things. The first is the objects of analysis at any given scale of concern. What comprises the 'neoliberal component' of a complex situation? Can this component be rightly identified as a *defining* component of such an overdetermined situation? If not, is the mere existence of this component sufficient to warrant using the term 'neoliberal' to characterise that situation's specificity? Secondly, I've argued that more thought needs to be devoted to what it means to identify 'similarities' from case to case (where the 'cases' vary in scale), since formal (epistemic) and substantive (ontological) similarities are quite different things. In both cases I've suggested that critical realism – no longer *de rigueur* among researchers in human and environmental geography – still offers some useful intellectual resources. The environmental geographers whose work I've been reading should have the courage – if the evidence suggests as much – to do what Larner and Peck seem to fear. If, in terms of causal processes and outcomes, neoliberal policies turn out to have highly specific, even unique, environmental impacts from situation to situation then this idiographic finding should not be glossed in the desire to identify 'general' patterns that can then be used to condemn a non-existent 'neoliberalism in general'. Following Cox and Mair (1989), the 'meso-level' concepts that may in time eventuate from environmental research into various neoliberalisations may be highly context-specific rather than generalisable (albeit within a restricted family of cases).

This said, I'm all too aware that the road to nowhere I mentioned earlier will remain appealing for all those geographical critics with research interests in neoliberalism. The habit of naming and evaluating the unnameable – the grand phenomena that's supposedly expressed through diverse spatio-temporal particulars – dies hard. This is why I suspect 'neoliberalism' will remain a necessary illusion for those on the geographical left: something we know doesn't exist as such, but the idea of whose existence allows our 'local' research finding to connect to a much bigger and apparently important conversation.

Noel Castree

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