

Critical review

# The nonillusory effects of neoliberalisation: Linking geographies of poverty, inequality, and violence

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## Abstract

This paper steps into recent debates concerning the (f)utility of neoliberalism as an ‘actually existing’ concept by reminding the reader that without a Marxian political economy approach, one that specifically includes neoliberalisation as part of its theoretical edifice, we run the risk of obfuscating the reality of capitalism’s festering poverty, rising inequality, and ongoing geographies of violence as something unknowable and ‘out there’. By failing to acknowledge such nonillusory effects of neoliberalisation and refusing the explanatory power neoliberalism holds in relating similar constellations of experiences across space as a potential basis for emancipation, we precipitously ensure the prospect of a violent future.

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“[S]imply trying to wish away the structural power of capital is a curious theoretical and political strategy for those on the Left – and one that is doomed from the outset as the basis for a radical and emancipatory politics. And as long as it remains the case that we are grappling with the economic (and other) geographies of capitalism, we... have a deep and enduring need for Marxian political economy.” (Hudson, 2006: 389)

It is these ‘other’ geographies of capitalism, namely those of impoverishment, socioeconomic disparity, and in particular violence, that form the basis of concern in this critical review. In identifying how poverty and inequality can be understood in relation to violence, I am convinced a Marxian political economy is a necessary precursor insofar as it positions us in such a way that allows us to recognise the inherent violences of capital. Indeed, Marxism proceeds from a position that sees capitalism as the central social institution of the modern world (Palan, 2000: 10), and as

Duménil and Lévy (2004: 269) contend, the “basic function of economic ‘violence’ remains a core feature of capitalism.” Notwithstanding the recent criticisms of Amin and Thrift (2005), who ask “what’s Left?” about a Marxian political economy, and the parallel position of Gibson-Graham’s (1996) project to move beyond Marxism for what they view as its discursive fetishisation of capital, following Hudson (2006) I believe our world remains to a considerable extent produced – in a Lefebvrian sense (Lefebvre, 1991) – and driven by the logic of capital and capital accumulation. In light of the successful expansion of the neoliberal project that currently envelops the globe, it would seem that Marx has been proven correct in his view that the logic of capital maintains a self-expanding value that reproduces itself across time and space, penetrating and creating new and distant markets (Harvey, 2003, 2005; Palan, 2000). It is in this sense rather disheartening that some have seemingly and perhaps inadvertently done such paralysing damage to a Marxian approach, and its concern for structure, right at a time when it has the potential to be most critical and elucidating. I am thinking in particular of Castree’s (2006) recent lament (compare Castree, 1999),

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following Barnett (2005), about the (f)utility of the term ‘neoliberalism’ in a political economy approach to understanding our current situation.

I do appreciate Barnett (2005) and Castree’s (2006) shared concern that neoliberalism has become such a pervasive academic buzzword as to lend it the appearance of monolithic (the very critique that Gibson-Graham (1996) articulate with respect to capitalism), and accordingly I welcome the recognition of multiplicity, complexity, and variegation found in recent accounts such as Brenner and Theodore (2002) and Peck (2001). I am equally concerned by the emerging claims (see Farrands, 2002) that the Left must seek to replicate the Right in articulating an alternative to neoliberalism that mirrors its breadth and scope of think tank networks and institutional connections (Plehwé and Walpen, 2006; Carroll and Carson, 2006; Weller and Singleton, 2006). Indeed, such a totalising vision is a detrimental recapitulation that brings us no closer to the notion of human ‘emancipation’ than we are today. Following Mitchell (2002), we should rightly question why ‘experts’ should remake the world rather than the collective world remaking itself on its own terms. Nonetheless, Barnett’s (2005) post-structuralist critique that ‘there is no such thing as neoliberalism’, a claim Castree (2006) approaches from a critical realist perspective in deeming neoliberalism a ‘necessary illusion’, are both potentially wanton in the face of the contemporary prevalence of poverty and inequality, and the resultant violence that such divisions of wealth, status, and power so often entail. Castree no doubt remains committed to a Marxism of ensembles, where ‘neoliberalism’ is replaced by a set of connected and differential neoliberalisations. He also recognises full well that there are very real effects to come to terms with, but I fear that he leaves the question of ‘where do we go from here’ dangerously wide open. Barnett is less apologetic, contending ‘neoliberalism’s’ ascription as a singular ‘hegemonic’ project reduces our understandings of social relations to that of residual effects by disregarding the proactive role socio-cultural processes play in changing policy, regulations, and governance modes. The contrasting reality, Barnett avers, is that market liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation have actually been impelled from the bottom-up, primarily via the populist ethos of left-leaning citizens movements seeking greater autonomy, equality, and participation. This critique may have some resonance in many first world settings, but in making this argument, other than to question academics’ alliances with various actors ‘out there’, Barnett completely ignores third world contexts where such reforms have largely been foisted from the top-down through the coercive auspices of aid conditionality, International Financial Institution lending practices, and occasionally even overt militarism as is currently seen in Iraq. Likewise, he fails to consider the resultant violent outcomes these impositions so frequently have (see Uvin, 1999, 2003).

While it may be true in some specific instances (let’s not suddenly forget plurality!) that “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 is far less glamorous and ‘sexy’ to have constantly to describe one’s objects of analysis as multiple, complex, and varied through time and space” (Castree, 2006: 5). Yet it could also be argued that the ‘sexiest’ position of all is that which seeks to secure a space and establish the framework for the next major ‘post’ in academia. By leading the ‘post-neoliberalism’ charge, Barnett and Castree will almost certainly make waves, which is not to attribute shallow careerism to either scholar, but to question the potentially unreflective allure such a new position might have among geographers and within the wider academy. My sense is the ‘post-neoliberalism’ sentiment reveals more about the sociology of critical human geography and its constant appeal to novelty than it does about the world outside. Nonetheless, while Castree’s (2006) commentary is aimed at pale imitations of neoliberalisation arguments by raising questions about how case study research is operationalised and envisaged using a neoliberalism-as-monolithism interpretation (see also Castree, 2005), I suspect these subtleties may be lost on many observers. Thus, the point I want to make is that should an injudicious ‘post-neoliberalism’ position pick up steam among leftist scholars, this may be at the expense of giving those on the academic Right even more room to manoeuvre as they continue to define their own terms of reference in linear and modally uncomplicated ways. This is not to say that the Left should follow suit in such over simplification. However, if leftist scholars are content to ruminate endlessly about slight differences in definition, scalar applicability, and the usefulness of a ‘both/and’ agenda vis-à-vis neoliberalism without ever getting around to the vital work of thinking about how we might link ‘local’ expressions of violence to a bigger conversation concerning impoverishment and socioeconomic disparity, a discussion which Castree (2006: 6) quite surprisingly informs us is only “apparently important”,<sup>1</sup> I worry that the Left’s position in academia and its ability to influence policy will wane even further than it already has in the years since 11 September 2001. By relating our ‘local’ accounts into ‘larger’ political and economic strategies such as neoliberalism/neoliberalisation, scholars are offered a potential way forward in identifying and understanding the nonillusory ‘local’ and ‘everyday’ effects, which need to be explored more thoroughly, particularly as regards violence. In doing so we offer counter to the vengeful Orientalism of Huntington’s (1996) *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Kaplan’s (2000) *The Coming Anarchy*,

<sup>1</sup> Castree’s (2006: 6) full statement reads: “The habit of naming and evaluating the unnamable – the grand phenomenon that is supposedly expressed through diverse spatiotemporal particulars – dies hard. This is why I suspect ‘neoliberalism’ will remain a necessary illusion for those on the geographical left: something we know does not exist as such, but the idea of whose existence allows our ‘local’ research finding[s] to connect to a much bigger and apparently important conversation”.

and similar rightist treatises, which posit violence as little more than the aberrance of backward cultures while failing to consider how ‘global’ conditions often exacerbate the circumstances that give rise to ‘local’ expressions of violence. By omitting political and economic interests and contexts – however hybrid, variegated, and amorphous they may be – when describing violence, and in presenting violence as exclusively a result of traits embedded in local cultures, such Orientalist imaginaries feed into hegemonic stratagems that legitimise continuous (neo)colonial projects (Tuastad, 2003).

A Marxian approach acknowledges inequality and poverty by virtue of its recognition of the uneven geography (Harvey, 2003, 2005) and ordinary violences of property that any capitalist system entails (Blomley, 2000, 2003). In particular, a Marxist perspective draws our attention to the defining feature of capitalism as a mode of production occurring through an exchange between workers and capitalists: the valorisation of capital by commodified labour (Colas, 2003; Harvey, 2003). Colas (2003) recognises how this exceptional achievement of capitalism was effected historically through the forceful and violent dispossession of direct producers from their means of subsistence, a process that Marx called ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation. However, because this is actually an ongoing process of capitalism, Harvey (2003) instead refers to this as ‘accumulation by dispossession’, which in concert with the commodification and privatisation of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations, also includes:

“the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive property rights. . . suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade (which continues particularly in the sex industry); and usury, the national debt and, most devastating of all, the use of the credit system as a radical means of accumulation by dispossession.” (Harvey, 2005: 159)

In concert with capital accumulation by dispossession, the picture of inequality and poverty becomes even clearer when we recognise the concomitant imperative of the capitalist to pay wages that are as low as possible to his/her employees to maximise one’s own profits (Dunford, 2000). The search for profits entails an obvious spatial (increasingly international) aspect, which accounts for the imperialist features of the leading capitalist countries, and their rivalry and domination over the periphery (Duménil and Lévy, 2004). This highlights the centrality of the law of uneven development (Harvey, 2003, 2005) so that imperialist expansion and monopolistic developments breathe new life into the capital system, thus temporally diffusing

the time of its saturation. In ensuring higher profit margins, Palan (2000: 12) suggests the ideal of global market equilibrium is delayed and ‘sabotaged’, and through this observation he suggests that a Marxian approach places issues of hierarchy and power front and centre in the analysis of the world economy, by incorporating “into the core of its theoretical edifice precisely those elements that economics treats as ‘exogenous’ or contingent” thus merging the political to the economic, hence political-economy. The current ‘sabotage’ is at odds with the notion of development that posits ‘a rising tide raises all boats’, the supposed imperative behind neoliberalism.

Indeed, Harvey (2005) avers that the primary substantive achievement of neoliberalisation has been the ability to distribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income, or the very continuation of accumulation by dispossession. His skepticism in this regard has led him to view neoliberalism as a project driven primarily by transnational elites, who are fundamentally concerned with the reconstitution of class power where it exists, and its creation where such class power is currently absent. This is a view increasingly shared by a number of critical scholars (see Berger, 2006; Carroll and Carson, 2006; Cox, 2002; Duménil and Lévy, 2004; McMichael, 2000; Overbeek, 2000; Plehwe et al., 2006; Rapley, 2004; Sparke, 2004; Watson, 2002). In comparison, Amoores and Langley (2002) view neoliberalism as a practice of the elite, but place it closer to Foucauldian notions of governmentality. Such expository potential is patronisingly dismissed by Barnett (2005), who contends neoliberalism-as-governmentality is a denigratory language that treats individualism as an ideological ploy by the Right, inviting us to take consolation in a perception of collective decision-making as a normatively straightforward process. Of course in making the same sort of caricatural sweeps of leftist scholars that he argues those very scholars are guilty of with respect to neoliberalism, Barnett (2005) never gives pause to consider how democratic procedures are indeed problematised by the Left, yet still seen as preferable to the dictates of a class-based elite minority. In defending his position on neoliberalism as (re)constructed class power, Harvey (2005) points to the importunate rise in social inequality under neoliberalism, which he regards as structural to the entire project of neoliberalism, a claim that is given a significant amount of credibility with Wade’s (2004) quantitative analysis and criticisms of global statistics.

Furthermore, if conditions among the lower classes deteriorate under neoliberalism, this failure is implied to be a product of personal irresponsibility or cultural inferiority (Harvey, 2005), an argument epitomised by Harrison and Huntington’s (2000) rightist call to arms ‘*Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*’. More subtly, neoliberal ideology’s suspicion of the poor as morally suspect turns the social suffering wrought by neoliberal capitalism into a ‘public secret’ (Taussig, 1992; see also Watts, 2000), allowing ‘symbolic violence’ – or that violence which accomplishes itself through misrecognition

thus enabling violence to go unperceived as such – to prevail (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004), so that the poor are blamed, and indeed blame themselves for their ongoing poverty (Bourgeois, 2004). Accumulation by dispossession operates in much the same capacity insofar as the erasure of the originary and ongoing ‘violences of property’ (Blomley, 2003) serves to legitimise the exclusionary claims of the landowning elite. The property system entails violent ‘acts’ of dispossession at its founding moment, as well as enduring violent ‘deeds’ – which need not be physicalised to be operative, as self policing becomes reflexive – that (re)enforce the exclusionary basis of private property (Blomley, 2000). Working in concert, these ‘acts’ and ‘deeds’ purposefully disregard the violence to which the poor have been subjected, while resistance and subsequent attempts at reclamation are typically treated as both proscribed and manifestly violent. It is in this way that these decidedly nonillusory effects of neoliberalisation can be seen as deliberately ‘choking the south’ (Wade, 2006) or ‘attacking the poor’ (Cammack, 2002), where we can view Polanyi’s contention that the dominance of market rationality was a fundamental cause of the savagery characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century (Dunford, 2000) as being carried forward into a new context.

Neoliberals are quick to point out how absolute poverty has declined under the global neoliberal regime, a claim that may or may not actually be tenable (Wade, 2004). Regardless of this assertion, following Rapley (2004) we can view the global neoliberal regime as inherently unstable because it assumes that absolute rather than relative prosperity is the key to contentment, and while absolute poverty may have declined under neoliberalism, relative inequality has risen (Uvin, 2003). Building on this notion, Rapley (2004) suggests the events of 11 September 2001 were a symbolic moment of crisis, where those on the ‘losing end’ of the neoliberal regime’s unequal distribution made their discontent with systemic poverty and glaring inequality emphatically clear (see also Tetreault, 2003; Uvin, 1999, who suggest similar expressions of resentment ultimately led to the Rwandan genocide). The response in the wake of this tragedy has been escalated violence under the auspice of what Harvey (2003) calls the ‘New Imperialism’ led by the current Bush administration. Contra Lerner’s (2003) claim that this new military might is anything but neoliberal in character, the rhetorical ‘war on terror’ currently being waged by the Bush regime uses militarism to enforce the neoliberal order most overtly in those spaces where the geostrategic imperative for oil converge with the failure of Wall Street-Treasury-IMF complex (Wade, 1998) economic prescriptions, namely in Afghanistan and Iraq (Gregory, 2004; Harvey, 2003). United States military power thus serves as a bulwark for enforcement of an American concept of ‘new world order’ (i.e. neoliberalism-cum-Pax Americana) which as a renewed strategy of accumulation by dispossession is shared to varying degrees by other governments, particularly members of the G8 (Cox, 2002).

The precedent set by the New Imperialism has seen many third world states, informed by the rhetoric of their own war on terror, using violence more readily as a tool of control (Canterbury, 2005). While such repression is not entirely new, as Glassman and Samatar (1997) point to it as a commonplace feature of the ‘post’-colonial era, novelty rests in the ease of its legitimation via the discourse of ‘security’ (Springer, 2008). Indeed, such neoauthoritarianism is readily extended under neoliberalism as both a means to maintain the social order necessary for the extraction of economic surplus from those countries recently incorporated into the global capitalist system (Canterbury, 2005), and as a response to the supposedly inherent violent tendencies of the lower classes, who now faced with mounting unemployment, slashed wages, forced evictions, and all the other associated hallmarks of accumulation by dispossession, must resort to other means of survival, being ultimately forced into the underground economy as a street vendor, or worse, prostitution and drug trafficking. Thus, the neoliberal imperative for the inalienable right of the individual and his/her property, trumps any social democratic concern for an open public space, equality, and social solidarity (Harvey, 2005). Yet one is left to wonder whether Barnett (2005) would extend his argument to consider such attempts at collective empowerment and redistribution as mere ideological ploys by the Left, inviting us to take solace in an image of individualism as practically and normatively unproblematic? The parody here should be apparent.

Finally, by relegating Marxian political economy perspectives to the intellectual dustbin as Hudson (2006) contends Amin and Thrift (2005) have done, and in suggesting that neoliberalism is a ‘necessary illusion’ or that ‘there is no such thing’ as Castree (2006) and Barnett (2005) respectively do, albeit from two very different theoretical perspectives, is to run the perilous risk of obviating ourselves from the contemporary reality of structural violence (Bourgeois, 2001; Farmer, 2004; Uvin, 2003). Without theorising capital as a class project and neoliberalism as an ‘actually existing’ circumstance (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), structural violence, and the associated, if not often resultant direct violence (Galtung, 1990), becomes something ‘out there’ and far away in either spatial proximity or class distance, so that it is unusual, unfamiliar, and unknown to the point of obscurity and extraordinariness. Arming ourselves with a Marxian political economy approach, and a theoretical toolkit that includes neoliberalism, allows us to bring global capitalism’s geographies of violence into sharp focus, alerting us to the realities of poverty and inequality as largely outcomes of an uneven capitalist geography, and furthermore to recognise the ways in which the ‘out there’ of violence has occurred and continues to proliferate and be (re)produced in a plentitude of spaces, including ‘in here’. It is only through recognition of such symbolic violence that human emancipation may be offered, and without such acknowledgement, what’s left? Just a future of ensuing violence.



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