REPLY

Power, politics, and places: What's not neo-liberal?

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I am delighted by the generous and critical engagement that Peter Little, Don Nonini, and Neil Smith have brought to my uneven and unsteady thoughts about neo-liberalism. I hope that this response maintains the tone and style of their thoughtful and thought-provoking comments. They all make examining the times and places of neoliberalism a central concern. This is most explicit in Don Nonini's argument about China as marked by different social and political forces and dynamics than those gathered under the label of neo-liberalism, but it is also present in Peter Little's careful distinction of the forms of power and control that construct a neo-liberal Africa "from the outside." Neil Smith insists on the necessity of a more historical reading of the emergence, development, and shape-shifting character of neo-liberalism in order to recognize its specificity as a class project, working on a global rather than national scale. I accept wholeheartedly these injunctions about the necessity of a careful analysis of specific coordinates of space and time. They are particularly important in the face of claims that this is a neo-liberal world or a neo-liberal era, claims that tend to override or obliterate such specificities. But they are also hard to sustain analytically because how we understand time and space has been reorganized by the forces we usually label "neo-liberal." The rise of new transnational agents, relations,

institutions, and flows change the conditions of existence of nations, states, and peoples. But they change them unevenly—the mode of insertion of nation-states within the European Union into the new global (dis-)order is hugely different from those states of Africa locked into new relations of servitude, dependency, and tutelage. Being attentive to that sense of difference—grasping the relations of insertion and articulation in which places are produced and transformed—seems to me to be a central commitment for any critical analysis, not just for the discussion of neo-liberalism.

This leads, I hope, to questions of politics; in particular to the question of whether my original piece is too soft on neo-liberalism, allowing it too easy and uncontested a ride. Again, I think all three of the commentators identify this problem. For Peter, this involves questions about the political relationships between populations with pressing needs, demands, and expectations; governments that barely sustain sovereignty, much less deliver social welfare or economic improvement to their people; and international agents and agencies that exercise neo-liberal authority and direction. This political field, as he rightly argues, is very different from either the institutionalized politics of the North (even if there is a growing significance of international agencies, there too), or from the more centrally authori-

tarian states in East Asia. Here his comments intersect with Don's, partly through the question of how to identify the formation and trajectory of China. But Don links this issue to questions about my lack of attention to power and its organization—in part through my taking an overly fetishized view of neo-liberalism itself. Again, this connects to Neil's argument about my failure to attend to the forms of political opposition to neo-liberalism—precisely those forces and practices that stop it being, or becoming, omnipresent and omnipotent. There is a more specific connection since both Don and Neil raise the issue of treating neo-liberalism in class terms (the organization of class power; as a class project).

Although I accept the importance of both power and politics as key words for critical analysis, I want to try to disentangle some of the knotty problems of their relation to neo-liberalism. But first, I want to retrieve some of the arguments that I evidently managed to bury in the original article. Like Neil, I believe that the attempts to install neo-liberal strategies, techniques, and politics have been far from uniform or uniformly successful. Indeed, I had intended to stress questions of resistance, recalcitrance, and contestation—as well as making contradiction and antagonism central to the discussion. That is, attempts to install neo-liberal rule are often unsuccessful because they encounter very diverse forms of refusal. At the same time, the contradictions and antagonisms that neo-liberal strategies create (as well as earlier ones that they fail to resolve) produce a political-cultural landscape of innovation. That means thinking about whether the entire array of initiatives of the last twenty years are all neo-liberal—from privatization through corporatization to “NGOization,” from structural adjustment to empowerment-centered development, from activation through to securitization, from the creation of enterprising selves to governing through community. Some of them look more like innovative solutions to earlier forms of neo-liberalism and the problems they created (and this is why Neil is right to insist on a fully historical analysis). But it feels less than helpful—or even meaningful—to identify them all as neo-liberal.

They are, however, all marked by questions of power and its recomposition. Some of this certainly involves the remaking of class power—the expansion of the scale, scope, and reach of capital and the remaking of labor in new forms of subordinations. It also involves the construction of new relationships between different forms of power and authority—extending the reach of the corporation; rendering more of the world “business friendly”; diminishing the scope for constraint, regulation, and control by public authorities over private power and more. But the recomposition of power and authority has meant more than this—from changing relations between states and citizens to the reinvention of the private authority of the household (as well as the individual); or from the ambiguous politics of empowerment to the rise of demotic forms of voice and authority. Here the view of neo-liberalism as a project for the reconstruction of class power has to deal with the view of neo-liberalism as a form or phase of liberal governmentality. This is a difficult intersection, not least because both tend to over-totalizing views of neo-liberalism, granting it too much coherence and too much effectivity. I remain doubtful about many of the claims that have been made for, and through, the concept of governmentality. It is associated with somewhat overblown, epochal, and totalizing conceptions of modes of governing, and there are problems about what is not governmental. Nevertheless, it announces three problems that demand our attention.

The first concerns how to think about the state and the emergent forms, sites, and practices of governing populations. How do we get beyond the debate about the decline or persistence of the state into an analytic that is attentive to how, where, and in what forms the business of power and authority is being organized? It is not that I think the perspective of governmentality is right, but that it points us toward shifting, hybridized, or mixed modes of governing that escape institutional conceptions of the state and state power. Second, Foucault's interest in the imbrication of power and knowledge draws us toward something other than the view of ideology as the simple (or even complicated) expres-

sion of class interest. In particular, I think governmentality-based work has opened important discussions about what counts as “economic” and how new economic subjects, relations, and practices are created. Third, governmentality has proved to be a powerful “enabling concept” for critical work on very diverse forms of governing, not least in terms of what Partha Chatterjee has called “the politics of the governed” (2003; see also Li 2007, Sharma forthcoming).

At this point, I will reclaim the position of ambivalence that so upsets Neil Smith (and I can imagine him feeling another wave of frustration as he reads this). I am not sure that I aspire to certainty, at least in the form that requires me to purge impure theoretical concepts, to know the real or fundamental moving forces, and to be certain about the political implications of particular changes. I suffer from theoretical ambivalence and find myself occasionally tempted by concepts and perspectives that make me look at things anew. I also suffer from analytical and political ambivalence—about state power and its uses; and especially about emergent and hybrid forms of governing that offer new modes

of subjection and subordination, while also creating sites and possibilities of mobilization, resistance, and just bloody-minded recalcitrance. This conversation has persuaded me that we might do better by thinking separately about the different projects, strategies, and tactics in play in recomposing power and authority in this conjuncture—and only then worry if there is a single principle of coherence, rather than starting from the unity of neo-liberalism. This conclusion may not have been the desired intention of my interlocutors—but I am very grateful to them for making me think it.

References

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