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Grammars of liberalism

Liberalism has been fundamental to the making of the modern world, at times shaping basic assumptions as to the nature of the political, and in other cases existing as a delimited political project in contention with others. Across its long history, liberal projects have taken a diverse range of forms, which resist easy reduction to a single logic or history. This diversity, however, has often escaped anthropological attention. In this introduction to our special section on Grammars of Liberalism, we briefly trace this historical diversity, interrogate anthropological approaches to conceptualising liberalism and offer a broad framework for studying liberalism that remains attentive to both continuity and difference. First, we argue for attention to how the political claims made by liberal projects unfold at the levels of values, their interrelations (morphology) and the underlying rules governing the expression and combination of values, and their intelligibility as liberal (grammar). Second, we argue for empirical attention to how values are expressed and liberal projects assembled across different social forms. We argue that this approach enables anthropology to grasp the diversity of liberal political projects and subject positions while still allowing scholars to approach liberalism critically and to interrogate its underlying logics.

Key words liberalism, values, comparison, neoliberalism, ideology

Introduction

Liberalism has been fundamental to the making of the modern world. Whether as a progressive ideology of individual emancipation, a governmental formation, a justification for capitalist expansion or a philosophical tradition informing both imperialism and anti-colonial resistance, liberal projects have sought to ‘re-order the world’ (Bell 2016) in diverse, if related, ways. Liberal doctrines have informed, and become crystallised through, modern projects of violent rule and civic resistance, and have given rise to institutions and ‘code[s] for living one’s life’ (Bayly 2011: 132) that are at once both extremely varied and related through the concerns and values that they express. As such diversity confirms, liberalism has become ‘the most dominant ethic of our age’ (Mahmood 2007: 148).

Within this broad current of modern political culture, anthropology has predominantly focused on ‘late’ liberalism and neoliberalism, conceptualising them as phenomena of the late 20th century, situated within a longer history of global political economy and Western political thought. Such efforts beg the question of ‘late’ or ‘neo-’ liberalism’s relation to their historic and contemporary relatives. More generally, they prompt us to ask how our discipline should approach liberalism as a broader tradition of thought and practice. This special collection brings together ethnographies of ‘actually-existing’ liberalisms to propose a novel approach to the anthropological study of liberal ideologies and social formations. We borrow the epithet ‘actually existing’

from the state socialist notion of ‘real’ – as opposed to ‘ideal’ – socialism (cf. Brenner and Theodore 2002) in order to foreground the complex and often fraught relation between ideology and social practice.

We propose to understand these ‘real’ liberalisms as emerging at the intersections of historically interrelated traditions of ordinary and expert political thought – ideologies, in the common sense of the word (see Eagleton 2007; Freedon 1996; Martin 2015) – and concrete social formations whose structural characteristics, social organisation and day-to-day construction in the flow of social reality are the traditional stuff of ethnography. The contributors to this volume highlight the diversity and interconnection of actually-existing liberalisms, moving beyond characterisations of liberalism as uniform or monolithic. They explore how particular articulations of liberalism are characterised by plural values and how such values inflect and temper one another, and gain substance, within specific social relations. Collectively, these contributions offer a perspective through which it becomes possible to compare different members of the liberal ‘family’.

Varieties of liberalism

Liberalism is by no means a new subject of anthropological study. Anthropologists, however, have primarily approached liberalism through a narrowly critical (and, indeed, self-critical) lens, in relation to interrogating the global spread of ‘Western’ power. Focusing on democracy, citizenship, humanitarianism, neoliberal governmentality and multiculturalism, to name just a few topics (Ansell 2019), scholars have examined liberalism as a ‘dominant ethic’, critiquing the internal contradictions of liberal thought and practice, the ways in which liberal reason informs or becomes embedded in everyday social life, and the violence and exclusions emerging from these (for an overview, see Schiller 2015). Even when anthropologists recognise the heterogeneity of liberalism ‘on the ground’ (e.g. Ong and Collier 2005), they tend to ultimately equate liberalism with a fairly narrow set of ends – namely exploitation and domination. In turn, critical accounts have primarily focused on those dimensions of ‘actually existing’ liberalism that can be read as means to such ends, taking as given what should be an open ethnographic question: how exactly ideologies are formed, come to be articulated within and impact on particular social worlds.

Historically however, liberalism, even in its most canonical iterations, has often been a demonstrably more plural, socially grounded and self-critical endeavour than such critical readings would suggest. There is a vertiginous amount of scholarship in both political theory and history of ideas, seeking to describe and theorise this diversity (e.g. Bell 2014, 2016; Freedon 2009; Jackson and Stears 2012; Losurdo 2014; Trencsényi et al. 2018). Several brief examples will suffice to demonstrate the diversity of liberal *ideas*. Despite Adam Smith’s famous call for a ‘system of natural liberty’, in *The Wealth of Nations* (2008 [1776]), for Smith self-interest and market competition emerge not as ends in themselves. Rather, in his broader work he positions them as vehicles for securing interpersonal recognition and moral alignment within a growing, increasingly mediated world, where virtuous deeds and interpersonal rhetoric have less of an effect in cultivating civic virtue (Smith 1976 [1759]; also Kalyvas and Katznelson 2008; Montes 2019; Tronto 1993). Similarly, Kalyvas and Katznelson (2008) demonstrate that for James Madison – often regarded as the father of the American Constitution

– personal liberty was both essential and limiting to democracy. While Madison argued that personal liberty fostered pluralism in values and interests, which fragmented the power of organised factions pursuing domination, he also saw this individualistic fragmentation as constraining the capacity of democracies to strive for the common good. He thus championed a system of representative democracy, where representatives became legitimate arbiters of, and advocates for, visions of the common good, which could justly restrict individual freedom. In a similar vein, Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive liberty (that is freedom *from* external constraint, and freedom *to* act on one's intentions), and his defence of the former against the latter, is often read as emblematic of the deep liberal belief in the universality and paramount ethical importance of the autonomous, individual subject. Yet Berlin's *Two concepts of liberty* (1969) was also a reflection on the intellectual and historical framings of liberty that had given rise to National Socialism and Soviet Communism, and an argument for tempering universalism – particularly the universalism found within liberal theories of human rationality. The relative value placed on either form of liberty was not to be determined in the abstract, but in relation to ongoing historical and sociological realities (Anderson 2016; Cherniss and Hardy 2018).

Across these historical instances, liberal projects were defined by a multiplicity of values – such as self-interest, recognition and moral alignment, in Smith, or rationality and positive and negative liberty, in Berlin – which do not simply express a single overriding logic but counterbalance, inflect or qualify one another. Contemporary liberal ideologies that build on this intellectual heritage are similarly heterogeneous. To recognise this diversity, as we seek to do, is not to redeem liberalism, but to offer a more complex view of it, including how forms of exclusion, exploitation and domination arise from or are woven into the sincerely held visions of the good expressed within configurations of liberal ideas.

This diversity of liberal ideas emerged and developed within specific historical settings and concrete political struggles, leading to complex patterns of variation, both within and across different contexts. For example, the liberalism that became – for a while – the dominant political force during the 19th century in Balkan countries such as Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria was above all a *national* liberalism, concerned less with the individual liberty that motivated Western European liberals than with securing national liberty from surrounding empires (Mishkova 2014). After the First World War, in most East Central European countries, now independent from imperial rule, liberalism assumed a new vitality and a greater range, bolstered by the ideological influence of the Allies, who promoted a doctrine of self-determination, democratisation and broader constitutional liberties. The historian Balázs Trencsényi and his collaborators (2018: 67–9) identify four types of liberalism present in the Balkans during this period: 'National liberalism' 'continued the pre-1918 project of national emancipation and modernization'. In contrast, 'bourgeois liberalism' defended 'the political, social, and economic position of the bourgeoisie' (2018: 68). Often opposed to this was a 'cultural liberalism' originating from the same bourgeois milieu but embracing a 'progressivist' vision of history, liberal democracy and individual rights in ways that were critical of both the bourgeois social order and its right- and left-wing collectivist alternatives. Finally, somewhat at a distance from concerns with political order was 'economic liberalism' that argued for economic efficiency and free markets, e.g. as an economic path to political modernisation and liberation. These types of liberalism co-existed in tension with one another, sometimes even within the corpus of a single author.

These historical examples suggest that the continuity and friction between different liberal projects, which unfold across the globe and through history, sometimes in contention to one another, demands an empirical perspective that moves beyond merely acknowledging that these are all instances of liberal ideologies, or (erroneously) seeing the transmission of liberal ideas as *only* a Western export. Trencsényi *et al.* suggest that

it is more meaningful to conceive of the East Central European liberal tradition [of the time] in terms of several axes with different ideological options (from free trade to state intervention, from anti-nationalism to the advocacy of homogenizing nation-building, from the critique of mass politics to an enthusiastic praise of participatory democracy, etc.) with the neighboring variants sharing many features but the two ends of the continuum containing very few common elements. (2018: 69)

Difference and continuity

We suggest that anthropologists take heed of such connective exercises, and conceptualise liberalisms in a way that is attentive to both their variation and the forms and dimensions of their continuity. The existing anthropological literature on liberalism and neoliberalism, in fact, has given some attention to the question of continuity and variation, but has often privileged the former over the latter, and offered partial conceptualisations of what it is about (neo)liberalism that stays the same or changes across different sites. For example, a key strand of work on neoliberalism and ‘advanced liberalism’ has mobilised Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality – a ‘formula of rule’ or technology of power that guides individual and collective conduct by shaping subjectivities ‘at a distance’ through various discursive, material and economic techniques (Barry *et al.* 1996; Rose 1999). In this vision, liberalism operates through, and is identified with, systems of thought and knowledge, embedded in a wide range of representations, practices and things that regulate how subjects exercise freedom and cultivate themselves (Rose 1993: 288). For Sherry Ortner, however, this presents ‘a virtually totalizing theory of a world in which power is in every crevice of life’ (2016: 50) and leads many anthropologists to identify ‘the liberal subject – the freely choosing individual – as the hegemonic form of governmentality in the neoliberal world’ (2016: 55). Thus, while within this paradigm it is possible to trace techniques of liberal rule, or liberal subjectivities, across multiple locales, the problem is that (neo)liberalism thus traced is assumed to be the same thing, or to operate in the same ways, across different contexts (Ferguson 2009). Our contention, then, is not only that this view is geared to find *too much* continuity in different liberal projects of rule, but also that the anthropology of liberalism should be able to trace continuity of a *different kind*, and explore the social and cultural dimensions of liberalism that exceed technologies and logics of rule, or even rule itself as the relevant ‘problem’.¹

¹ This is indeed what some recent ethnographies, including the work of Collier (2011) and Bear (2015), have explored by documenting the institutional, social and material heterogeneity of sites through which neoliberal ideas flow. See also Ganti (2014) for an overview.

In this respect, Coleman and Golub offer an exemplary approach to liberalism, which they take ‘to embrace several, sometimes conflicting, historical and present day moral and political sensibilities’.² They suggest that

[b]ecause liberal ideals always take root in a variety of cultural and institutional contexts and through the action and reactions of social groups, liberal commitments and critiques of liberalism are not only made tangibly manifest in these various contexts but are the very sites for liberalism’s heterogeneous articulation and historical transformation. (2008: 257)

Focusing on the re-articulation of these core sensibilities – i.e. on what remains liberal across heterogeneous sites – this approach effectively allows us to study liberal institutions, techniques of rule, subjectivities and social action, as informed by or expressing particular liberal elements. Coleman and Golub, however, say little about whether or how these different sensibilities affect (combine with, logically imply or temper) one another. In our discussion of examples from the comparative history of liberal thought, we have already pointed to the importance of understanding such combinations as both non-random and historically specific (see Freedman 2009; Gray 1995). We prefer to understand the ‘cultural building blocks’ of liberalism as values rather than sensibilities, emphasising their normative weight, emerging from specific historical junctures. More importantly, we suggest that by tracing how such values are configured in relation to one another, and how they thus come to inflect one another, we can better grasp the diversity of actually-existing liberalisms, as well as the historical connections among them.

Liberalisms, connected

What commonalities and differences exist between different, situated articulations of liberalism (whether with regards to their ‘content’, ‘form’ or ‘function’) is an open ethnographic question. It would be problematic to state, a priori, some general, universal liberalism, or to presume a single, overarching logic that infuses all liberalisms. But it is equally unproductive to only investigate specific cases without clarifying parameters that can help us understand whether, and how, actually-existing liberalisms relate to one another, or how they vary.³ Therefore, to guide the study of actually-existing liberalisms, we propose two sets of conceptual parameters for framing descriptive and

² They state that these sensibilities are ‘concerned with a cluster of commitments: protecting property and civil liberties, promoting individual autonomy and tolerance, securing a free press, ruling through limited government and universal law, and preserving a commitment to equal opportunity and meritocracy’ (Coleman and Golub 2008: 257).

³ This kind of endeavour is of course not in itself new in anthropology: scholars of religion – first of Islam (Asad 2009), then of Christianity (Robbins 2003, 2014) – had to similarly propose conceptual frames that would allow them to talk about their objects comparatively, and through time; they have done so against strong anti-holist – in Bialecki’s (2012) formulation, ‘nominalist’ – tendencies in the discipline, which sought to dissolve both Islam and Christianity into empirical concreteness, denying either the need or the possibility of identifying a more general kind of object.

analytical accounts of liberalism, with each helping to answer a key question: ‘how is something or someone liberal’ and ‘who or what is liberal’.

We suggest that the first question – how is something liberal – can be answered in relation to three levels of analysis: liberal *values*, the *morphology* of how values are made to relate to one another and the *grammar* governing their ‘use’ and legibility, which together allow us to trace recombinations of liberal principles across multiple contexts, and their diverse practical articulations.

Beginning with values – liberty, individuality, equality, rationality, accountability of power etc. – we situate ourselves in a tradition of scholars who see different liberalisms as characterised by certain shared or overlapping political ideas, concerns or sensibilities (e.g. Freeden 2009; Gray 1995; Schiller 2013). We focus on such values because they ground our analysis in the normative claims about what *is*, and what *is good and worthwhile*, that undergird liberalism as ideology, and direct our attention to how such claims do, or do not, play out across varied social forms.

Recent anthropological scholarship on ‘lived liberalism’ (cf. Hadley 2010) has paid much attention to unpacking individual liberal principles: most prominently, autonomy/freedom and its derivatives in economic and political life (Englund 2006; Lino de Silva and Wardle 2016; Reed 2015), but also tolerance (Dzenovska 2018), civility (Thiranagama et al. 2018), conscience (Kelly 2020), non-violence (Lempert 2012), publicity (Graan 2016) and reasoned dialogue (Englund 2018), to take several key examples. This literature demonstrates that it is useful for ethnographers of liberalism to trace how people embrace, mobilise or respond to values and their expressions in particular situations and to follow how these values are woven through everyday practices, institutions and material arrangements in uneven ways. Such works also demonstrate the importance of deducing liberal values from social practice, rather than simply from ideological texts. How values come to be expressed, and how such expression reshapes the world as well as the content of values themselves, then, should be investigated ethnographically. Illustrating this in her contribution to this collection, Brkovic explores how gay-rights campaigners in Montenegro take up globalised discourses of sexual liberation, not in an effort to claim autonomous freedom, but as a means of eking out space for negotiating how sexual self-expression and other forms of relationality might intermesh.

Values gain their meaning not only ‘through accumulative traditions of discourse, and not only through diverse cultural contexts’ (Freeden 1996: 4), but also in relation to other values and ideas. Here, we take particular inspiration from the political theorist Michael Freeden, who advocates a ‘morphological’ approach to ideologies such as liberalism, arguing that ‘ideologies are distinctive configurations of political concepts’ that ‘create specific conceptual patterns from a pool of indeterminate and unlimited combinations’ (1996: 4). In this view, different liberal ideologies differ not only in terms of the values they promote, but also *morphologically*, that is, in the ways that these values are configured in relation to one another. When taken as part of such configurations, liberal values, and their implications for practice and meaning, cannot be read in isolation from one another.⁴

⁴ Literary scholar Amanda Anderson (2016) traces how many liberal traditions often embrace individual values only partially and sceptically, while locating their moral core in terms of the project of mutual inflections and counterbalances that emerge through morphological configurations.

At the level of morphology, values may be related by different logics, such as hierarchy and encompassment, domain differentiation, or a relative pluralism or monism (cf. Dumont 1994; also Robbins 1994, 2004, 2013; Rio and Smedal 2008; Haynes and Hickel 2016), which may prove more or less durable. For example, drawing on fieldwork in Northwestern Brazil, at the nexus of local political campaigning and a global democratic reform movement, Ansell's article in this issue explores how the creation of distinct domains, each dominated by separate values (such as exchange on the one hand and personal bonds on the other), is a common liberal approach to balancing conflicting values (on 'purification', see also Keane 2007; Latour 1993; on value spheres cf. Weber, in Gerth and Mills 1998 [1946]). In tracing morphologies of liberalism empirically, ethnographers face the task not only of tracing how values interrelate, but also how particular relational logics permeate or connect up various social forms. This is illustrated, for example, by Candea in this issue, who explores the ambivalent relationship between procedural roles and 'thick' social identities in a French free speech court. In the performative interplay between judicial representatives, individual citizens and self-conscious subjects of publics and counter-publics, the appeal to liberal values such as detachment and formality are contested, echoed and recast as each party strives to assert their own legitimacy and authority in a public space. This is no less true of those whom one would expect to be the most secure liberal subjects, the judges, who are deeply aware that procedural form is an achievement rather than a given. Taken together, these considerations allow for a more nuanced and plural understanding of various forms of liberalism, the reach and power they possess, and the different ways in which they are re-worked through practice. For instance, they allow us to situate neoliberalism more particularly as a form of liberalism in which values of economic calculation and individual autonomy subsume and structure others, and where the calculation and exchange of value provides the primary means by which social forms are imagined to relate to one another.⁵

We have noted so far that values acquire their meaning and weight within particular social contexts, and in relation to one another. But they also make demands on thought and practice, requiring actors to work out how best to realise them given their particular circumstances. Such demands, at least partly, stem from conventions, rules and interpretations that develop around values and how they relate. We call these *grammar*, building on Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as a 'grammatical investigation' (developed in *Philosophical Investigations* 2010 [1953]; for a commentary, see Baker and Hacker 2009: 55–67). From this perspective, tracing the grammar of a proposition 'does not involve decomposing [it] into simple constituents, but rather laying bare the web of connections, compatibilities and incompatibilities, implications and presuppositions' that make such propositions intelligible (Baker and Hacker 2009: 59). When it comes to liberalism, then, 'grammar' refers to the implicit and explicit 'rules' by which liberal values, and their configurations, become intelligible *as liberal*. Take 'liberty' as a key value, for instance. As we have seen, liberty might be imagined in

⁵ Historians of neoliberal thought (e.g. Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Slobodian 2018) note that neoliberalism was a reformulation of economic liberalism, marked by a set of principles (such as making things and relations calculable, a particular framing of state–market relations, etc.) that have political connotations and goals, but that are narrower than the wider range of political principles that have historically been central to political liberalism. Slobodian (2018) specifically points out that neoliberalism departed from 19th-century laissez-faire liberalism (hence the self-designation 'neo-') and developed as an exercise of limiting democratic control over the economy.

relation to individuals, markets or collectives (such as the nation). Morphologically, it might be imagined as subordinating all other values, or as tempered or constrained by them. Yet for liberty to remain intelligible as such, virtually all liberal projects frame it in opposition to some notion of constraint – whether imperial oppression, poverty or the dictates of the state – revealing an underlying grammatical rule for how liberty might be re-imagined. As with language, such grammar is not unchanging, but is established through collective patterns of use, which shift gradually and iteratively across different, situated moments of expression. Grammar, too, is a matter of perspective. What is accepted as grammatical by one actor may be dismissed by another as nonsensical; the ‘rules’ of liberalism (and who gets to write them) may appear very different from within the ivory tower, the halls of government or the picket line.

As with values and relations among them, people perceive and reflect on such grammars and draw them into their own ethical projects and political struggles (see contributions by Ansell, Fedirko and Morningstar), such as when they attempt to distinguish the liberal from the illiberal, the democratic from the undemocratic, and so on, and to use such distinctions to stake out political positions. In this issue, Morningstar describes a set of such tensions that are brought to the surface by politically inflected art performances in contemporary Dublin, Ireland, where the question of what counts as legitimate and effective criticism in the liberal democratic public sphere is hotly contested. Here, the artists’ attempts to engage through their work in ‘parrhesiastic’ critique are refused by their audiences, who do not recognise the truth-telling value of artists’ opaque performances, and judge them to have misused their privileged position to make esoteric art understandable only to a very limited public.

The work of the Late Liberalism collective, around the University of Chicago, provides an important – if partial – example of how a grammatical analysis of liberalism might look within anthropology. Focusing especially on aspects of calculative rationality within liberalism, such as utilitarian ethics, they trace the surpluses and outsides created by such reasoning – the necessary abandonment of certain people and beings to violence and dejection as a corollary of projects purporting to be for the common good (Povinelli 2011). In order to remain a credible value within liberal frameworks valuing moral autonomy and pluralism, calculative rationality, then, has historically necessitated a corresponding account of redemption, frequently cast in terms of discourses of sacrifice and sacrificial love, and a future-perfect account of justification – what will have been justified from a later perspective (Vogler and Markell 2003; Povinelli 2009, 2011; cf. Asad 2003). By analysing abandonment and redemption as necessary entailments of liberal values of calculation, Povinelli and colleagues begin to interrogate not just calculation as a value, but its historical parameters of intelligibility within the liberal project. We propose a similar analytical approach, but one that attends to interwoven configurations of values and to a wider scope of variability. In this issue, Fedirko interrogates journalists’ struggle over autonomy in Ukrainian TV news production, where autonomy is valued as freedom to pursue creative work without managerial or censorial interference, even in the case of a self-described TV censor. Fedirko examines how his interlocutor’s pursuit of a liberal vision of journalistic professionalism within an oligarchically dominated political economy of media in Kyiv leads her to practical decisions that are not intelligible as either professional or liberal to those self-avowed liberals whose work is made possible by Western democracy promotion grants.

To address the second question – ‘who or what is liberal’ – we propose that ethnographers investigate the social forms that underpin, express or are shaped by liberal

ideologies. This entails investigating the social organisation of liberal projects, their material culture and infrastructures, and the actors who invoke or who are addressed by liberal values, whether or not they recognise themselves as 'liberals'. Such actors vary, from global capitalist elites, the educated urban middle classes who constitute centrist majorities in hegemonic liberal democracies in the North, to groups on the global periphery who take up liberal values such as liberty or equality to contest or make claims on dominant structures of power. From this perspective we might explore, for instance, how specific elements of liberal ideologies are substantiated (or not) by relations of power and production, and how such relations condition people's differential access to the flow of social value expressed or justified in liberal terms. Such investigations ground liberalism in messy, plural social worlds, and in doing so move our understanding of liberalism beyond a highly idealised or abstracted framework. In this collection, for example, Szymańska-Matusiewicz explores how two generations of Vietnamese activists living in Poland have campaigned for democratisation in the context of post-Cold War Eastern European geopolitics. She reveals how core understandings and values of democracy transform as the particular social networks and geopolitical dynamics that activists are embedded in change over time. These evolving relations, Szymańska-Matusiewicz argues, shape the possibilities and limits of the Vietnamese 'diasporic liberalism' both in relation to Vietnamese politics and an increasingly illiberal Poland.

Provincialising liberalism

In linking these different dimensions of inquiry, contributors to this special collection take a differentiated and grounded approach to actually existing liberalisms, refusing to take liberal ideology for granted as something that necessarily pervades social life. Interrogating values, morphology and grammar keeps the focus on the distinct political claims liberalism makes on the world, while analysing social forms allows us to trace how such values come to be expressed in varied and differentiated ways, within particular contexts. Candea's analysis of the 'bleak liberalism' in a French free speech court and Brkovic's ethnography of gay men in Montenegro demonstrate the fragility and ambivalence of liberal commitments in relation to various situated tensions and constraints. In a similar way, Morningstar explores how the value and effectiveness of critical truth-telling is highly dependent on the web of social relations and mutual understandings forged (or not) between artists and publics in Dublin. Morningstar's analysis demonstrates that liberal values can be highly contingent even in contexts where it is often argued that liberalism provides the 'basic cultural postulates' (Freedon and Fernández-Sebastián 2019: 1) that create the very (secular) political space in which liberal, conservative and other ideologies vie for power (Asad 2003). In contrast, in contemporary Ukraine, Fedirko traces yet another framing of 'free speech', contingent not on the relation between journalists and publics but on those between journalists and oligarchic patrons – in a context where liberal projects are not hegemonic and less 'thickly' institutionalised (cf. Bayly 2011). Despite their differences, however, all these contexts are connected, not least through the historical diffusion of liberal ideas, institutional forms, texts, objects and infrastructures that are imposed, adopted and translated in various ways (e.g. Wedel 2001). Articles by Ansell and Szymańska-Matusiewicz (this issue) explore such processes and consequences of disseminating and 'translating' liberal understandings of democratic politics in Northwestern Brazil and among the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland,

respectively. As an ideology, liberalism can inform explicit institutional design, and also permeate and shape subject-making and intimate personal relations (e.g. Gal 2005); but as the contributions to this collection demonstrate, whether it does, how it does, and how different instances of it doing so differ across social and cultural space are matters of comparative ethnographic investigation. Responding to the programme we lay out in this introduction, the contributors draw on different elements of our proposed framework, demonstrating how it can bring distinct ethnographic studies into the common project of an anthropology of actually-existing liberalisms. In her afterword, Dzenovska offers further reflections on the themes that run across these articles.

The approach developed in this special issue not only pluralises liberalism but also points to the varied political and ethical status such liberalisms might hold. It becomes possible, then, to simultaneously address liberalism as a dominant form of power and as a reflective project, a form of rebellion or an ambivalently received import, without losing sight of the genealogical connections and differences between these different instances. Liberalism can thus be recognised as a vehicle for local change and contestation without its presence in non-Western contexts being read, by default, as proof of a sweeping global homogenisation, or such change being read in teleological terms. In turn, the move to particularise liberalism allows us to put it in its place. Chakrabarty (2008) has famously called on anthropologists to ‘provincialize’ Europe, resisting narratives of linear progress or singular rationality. Anthropologists have largely done so by exploring the richness of life in non-European locales, revealing alternative constructions of history, value and progress, and the ways in which these have been eroded by European influence. However, the inverse move is possible, indeed necessary: we might also provincialise Europe by unpacking the particularity, unevenness and situatedness of its own purportedly universal institutions; we might trace how claims to (liberal) universality are produced as a social fact, and analyse the grounds on which they falter. In doing so, we may arrive at a more nuanced, situated account of liberalism’s power and spread, while also beginning to uncover the ever-evolving grammatical parameters that make this reach and variety possible in the first place.

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Grammaires du libéralisme

Le libéralisme a joué un rôle fondamental dans la construction du monde moderne, façonnant parfois des hypothèses de base sur la nature du politique, et dans d'autres cas, existant en tant que projet politique délimité en conflit avec d'autres. Au cours de sa longue histoire, les projets libéraux ont pris des formes diverses, qui résistent à une réduction facile à une seule logique ou histoire. Cependant, cette diversité a souvent échappé à l'attention anthropologique. Dans cette introduction à notre section spéciale sur les « grammaires du libéralisme », nous retraçons brièvement cette diversité historique, nous interrogeons les approches anthropologiques de la

conceptualisation du libéralisme et nous proposons un cadre general d'étude du libéralisme qui reste attentif à la fois à la continuité et à la différence. Premièrement, nous plaidons pour que l'on s'intéresse à la manière dont les revendications politiques des projets libéraux se déploient au niveau des valeurs, de leurs interrelations (morphologie) et des règles sous-jacentes régissant l'expression et la combinaison des valeurs, ainsi que leur intelligibilité en tant que libérales (grammaire). Deuxièmement, nous plaidons pour une attention empirique à la manière dont les valeurs sont exprimées et les projets libéraux assemblés à travers différentes formes sociales. Nous soutenons que cette approche permet à l'anthropologie de saisir la diversité des projets politiques libéraux et des positions des sujets tout en permettant aux chercheurs d'aborder le libéralisme de manière critique et d'interroger ses logiques sous-jacentes.

Mots-clés libéralisme, valeurs, comparaison, néolibéralisme, idéologie